

University of the Air

DESIGN IN AUSTRALIA

1. The International Blender

VIDEO

In studio: C.V. of smart kitchen blender in operation. Pull out to Boyd at desk. Other appliances, objects, all around.

Track over recognizably Australian products in the studio: other appliances, food packs, posters, etc., some good, some bad (e.g. mulga wood, souvenirs).

Flip cards or film:

Sky-view of Sydney

Country town

Villa

Church

Washing-machine

Holden car

Can of spaghetti

Bottle of beer

Pack of Capstan

Hoardings

AUDIO

Theme

It is intended in this series of talks to look hard at our Australia - that is, our 20th Century, man-made, largely urban Australia - and to try to determine why it looks as it does, and to consider if this look is good, or if it leaves room for improvement, and whether it is unique, or distinctive, or just an anonymous reflection of fashions that have been determined by other people far beyond our shores.

The look of Australia, as of any other highly developed community, is seldom accidental. It is mostly the result of conscious design: professional, commercial or amateur. It is the sum of the shapes and colours of everything we make and everything that makes us.

- of our cities

towns

homes

public buildings

- of the things we use

and move about in

and eat

and drink

and smoke

- and of the advertisements for all these things.

Film: track or pan across family scene in typical suburban room: father reading Sun, mother Women's Weekly, close in on mantle-piece ornaments.

Dissolve to busy street scene, summer clothes. Cut to C.V. man's hair-cut L.S. with savagely pruned tree in foreground.

Dissolve to factory interior. Follow some steps of a production line to a final product that is recognizably British or American in design (e.g. B.M.C. car or Volkswagen or Ford Falcon).

Studio: Boyd indicates globe or map.

The look of Australia is made of such details as the look of the newspapers that some Australians make for others to read,

and the magazines

and the furniture

and the ornaments

- by the way we like our clothes cut,
and our hair cut
and our trees cut.

A great number of things that make up our shelters, our modern environment - the shapes that shape our lives - are made in Australia, by Australian hands under Australian management with Australian money.

But how Australian are they? If, as happens in some cases, the concept and invention behind them, all the thought and ideas behind them, are imported - are they really Australian? And if not, if a great deal of the design of the things we use is thus inherited, borrowed or stolen from our relatives and friends in older, bigger, richer, maybe wiser countries - if we have little or no design character of our own, does it matter?

This is a shrinking globe bound by tightening bands of radio, television

Return to blender.

and jet planes. Despite hot and cold wars, the cultural frontiers are not sharply defined or hotly defended. The 20th Century's mass-production and mass-cultural techniques are like a great kitchen blender, buzzing all international cultural differences into a homogenized pulp in which all differences of taste and tradition ultimately cancel each other out.

No one can tell any more by style alone the nationality of a building.

Slides (provided by R.B.):

Building of

U.S.S.R.

England.

Japan.

Australia

(hold last one).

Where, for instance, do you imagine this was built? Australia, America, England? It happens to be Russian. And this is English - And this Japanese - And this Australian.

Modern building technologies in steel, concrete and aluminium have levelled out the old geological differences between countries, and air-conditioning has levelled out the world's indoor climates.

Studio

That being the case, is there any validity any more in any concept of a national architecture or national design?

Anyway, when one considers the

Flips or film:

Desert scene

Forest scene

Alps scene

differences in the Australian geology and climate, - from a bleached, blistering northern plain to a rain forest in the south - is there any validity in the concept of any overall Australian kind of design for our cities and buildings? In this context does the Australian national concept mean anything? Wouldn't the ideal be several regional styles of design?

And if these doubts apply to the biggest and most permanent things we make, don't they apply also to the smaller things? Is there any room today for national cultural boundaries?

Studio

All over the world the market places or department stores are looking more uniform, the desirable appliances more familiar and standardised in their white enamel suits and chrome trimmings.

Montage of household appliances, all plain, white, boxy: refrigerator, stove, washers, air-conditioners...

Monotonous beat music up.

Technology and mass production have made an International style of household goods. It radiates a promise of efficient labour-saving and fresh modernity to people everywhere: in America, England, the Continent, in darkest Africa,

then smaller household goods: T.V's., radios, fans, chairs, etc.

Studio: Boyd.

Flips or film:

Many views of modern style:

Smart appliances
Glamorous interiors
Cars.

Slide: Bangkok.

in Russia, Asia or Australia. This international style creates its own demand, and helps to create a new taste which extends the style beyond the manufacturers' need for standardisation.

An international style... but how international is it in origin? It may be true that many countries have contributed little devices and ideas to consolidate the style, but at base of course the character, the sense of style here is a product of the most powerful country in the world, the country with the highest development in technology, mass-production and the projection of desirable images.

The international look of today is very largely, if not entirely, the American look: a clean, sharp white look with glamorous touches of gold; a look of bright lights and polished surfaces, smelling of detergents and cigars, and promising health, wealth and air-conditioning.

This is the character and the atmosphere of new popular design through most of the world. Here it is in Thailand: a street in Bangkok; the visual style is as American as

Continue montage of
goods and buildings
- all smart, clean,
U.S. style.

the language in the tourists' shops.

In Australia as in Thailand, England,
or the U.S.A. itself, the modern
style is the mass-produced, assembly
line style that emanates from
Detroit, Michigan, and Madison Avenue,
New York: smooth as plastic, bright
as aluminium, realistic as a plastic
indoor plant.

Only a few of the products actually
available to Australians in their
stores are of direct American origin.
A great number, however - by some
arrangements of contracts, agencies
or plagiarism - are made in direct
reproduction of an American design.

Now, the world has become so small,
and it is so inevitable that the
most powerful country should be a
dominating influence in style, or
fashion, should not we be reconciled
to it? Should we accept the role
of a poor man's America with a
second-hand culture? Should we
feel our position as a little nation
and copy the best we can find
overseas wherever it happens to be?

Studio

But if popular taste today is
dominated by the American influence
as discriminated by television,

movies and magazines, other levels of taste reflect in various products other national influences.

At the level of taste of those people who have the time or money or patience to demand something different, something more interesting or exciting - at the good-taste level, if you like:

- Sweden is inclined to have the dominating influence in furniture
- as Paris has in women's fashions
- and Denmark has in tableware
- and Japan has in gardens...

Stills:

Swedish interior

Paris fashion

Danish ornament

Japanese garden
(hold last).

The truth is that, contrary to all the levelling international influences, these countries - some of them quite as small in population and certainly no richer than ours - have managed to retain a character of their own. At least they have done this quite conspicuously in some field in which they have, by tradition or geographical accident, some special interest.

Studio

In fact many countries have retained some noticable degree of individual character despite the 20th Century super-blender. And this character makes these countries more lively, vital places to visit or to live in.

It makes visitor and citizen more

conscious of region, and thus of reality - For in reality, in truth, of course, world culture is not all one huge tasteless homogenized pulp. It is still a fruit salad containing as well as pulp dozens of distinctly different flavours.

Underneath the levelling international neon-signs and beach-girl magazines and white appliances and chromium-plated cars, people still live different lives because climates and historical backgrounds and social conditions are different. And to accept all internationalizing influences without resistance is one way of denying the need to search for reality, for truth. To accept them all and do no more original thinking for oneself is to die a little.

This is one reason why many people are not prepared to sink down into the warm and cosy international blender and come out as pulp.

There are at least two other reasons.
Music under (Advance Australia Fair (?)).

One is not especially attractive and might even be called dangerous. It is the old chauvanistic, nationalistic reason. "My country right or wrong"

Film:

Montage of cuts illustrating contrasts of people in foreign countries -

Studio

Film:

Australian flag.

- polished or crude, good or bad,
beautiful or hideous.

For very good reasons this sort of attitude is highly suspect today. Yet it exists. It is reflected in Australia not so much in military parades as in the defiant maintenance of old Australian habits even when they are patently inferior to new ideas from outside. This blind sort of Australian design happens frequently enough in fields of production or consumption that have not yet been subject to the hard-selling techniques invariably associated with international-style products.

And there is another reason why some Australians resist being sucked into the international blender. This reason is more emotional, less aggressive, and more difficult to explain. We can call it the Australian mystique: The spell, the promise, of the Great South Land that attracted the explorers even before Dampier and Cook - that excited our earlier poets, and haunts or taunts our artists still today.

The land itself, the great silent heart, the bush: a love and a fear of it acts in the heart, in the

dissolve to

Six o'clock swill
scenes - pandemonium

dissolve to

Crowded Melbourne
trams.

Studio

Stills of Australian
landscape paintings:
Nolan, central Australia,
Arthur Boyd, mysterious
bush...

conscience, of many Australians who never leave nor wish to leave their cities on its fringe.

Studio: Boyd.

The bush has been a sort of pagan god of Australian culture, requiring appeasement before the white man can feel free to pursue his trivial alien crafts.

Only through some kind of physical sacrifice to the outback can we, the interlopers, be cleansed and become real Australians - this was the message of bush balladists like Bernard O'Dowd:

Reads poetry.

"Till we become ourselves,
distinct, Australian
"(Your native lightning
charging blood and nerve)
"Stripped to the soul of
borrowed garments, alien
"To that approaching Shape
of God you serve... "

Shows copies of
Jindyworobak
journals.

Hence such intense Australianistic movements as the Jindyworobaks, between the two world wars, headed by Rex Ingamells, the poet.

Jindyworobak was an aboriginal word meaning to annex or join, and the movement endeavoured "to free Australian art from whatever alien influences trammel it; that is (they explained)

to bring it into proper contact with its material." The 'Jindys' drew their "spiritual sustenance", they said, from the bush.

One of them, Victor Kennedy, wrote:

"We have not yet learned that man cannot live anywhere without adapting himself to the country and its climate and absorbing its atmosphere..."

Good, sensible words. But in their efforts to adapt to Australia the Jindyworobaks fell back on aboriginal myths - not as the sole basis, but as a big contributor to white Australian culture. This didn't really work, and it didn't last for long.

There was no precise equivalent of the literary Jindyworobaks in the visual design field, but all through this century popular decorators leaned quite heavily on bushland devices and aboriginal motives - or rather, fret-work and plastic caricatures of the motives that the aboriginal used to paint in blood and clay on the walls of primeval caves...

Music ("Gundagai" (?) or other nostalgic Australian pop).

Is this Australian design?

Indeed it is no other country's, and no less Australian just because you and I

Reads statement.

Film:

Australiana ornaments:

South Yarra Post Office,
Gum-nuts in Spring
Street... develop
montage sequence to
modern 'aboriginal'
ornaments on modern
products.

Finish with worst
examples.

may not be especially proud of it. But it is not (thank heaven) the only Australian design.

Dissolve to typical suburban villa-cottage...

There are also much less artificial, unself-conscious idioms in everyday design which are recognizably Australian, stubbornly Australian no matter how hard the blender works to rub off their rough edges.

And again there are many vital people in this country creating original, distinctive, imaginative things. These are Australian designs too, in that they are done by Australians in Australia. But can one trace any family resemblance, any national characteristics in them?

Music up to end.

Studio to end.

So the questions which this series of programmes will pursue through different media of design are in essence these:

Super lines of type:

Is it valid?

First: Is the concept of a national style valid in this modern age?

Do we have it?

Second: If so, do we in Australia have it - any visual style we can call our own?

How much is good?

Third: If so, if we have our own style (or maybe styles), how much of it is good?

End titles.

Theme.