

University of the Air
DESIGN IN AUSTRALIA

Chidley Pt. Golf Club.
by Peter Grigg
House, Indooroopilly
John Dalton

4. Architecture

VIDEO

Studio:

Boyd at drawing
board.

Film clip of

construction scene,
e.g. wheelbarrowing
concrete into a
trench.

Studio: Boyd.

Flips:

Sydney Opera

House site.

Bowling Alley.

Sports Arena.

(try to get all

under construction

AUDIO

Theme

Boyd: For nearly 20 years Australia has
been experiencing a building boom almost
the equivalent of that earlier boom when
the gold was discovered, or that one in
the 1880's when most of our Victorian-age
monuments were built.

And every stick that we are erecting now,
every brick, bar of steel, or spadeful of
wet concrete, is writing our history for
us in a way that is more reliable, more
basic than any historian's account.

If we were to be flash frozen now, if
Australia was to die this moment - a
future civilization thawing us out or
exhuming us would read practically
everything worth knowing about us in the
bricks, tiles, timbers and plastics we
are erecting for ourselves now...

Our preoccupations.

Our pleasures.

Our passions.

with sign in
foreground)

New flats with
advertisement:
"Modern Georgian
... etc."

Studio: Boyd at
drawing board.

But most of what they would learn would
come not from our own self-evaluating
facades but from reading between the
lines. They would doubtless learn a lot
about our insecurity, for instance, from
houses of 1965 which try to look like
1765.

In other words you can often learn more
about a building (or about a man) from
the lies it tells than from the things it
says when it is trying to tell the truth.

But do we have any buildings that try to,
and succeed in, telling the truth about
building in Australia today? And are
they sufficiently unique, and different
from the buildings of other countries to
be called Australian? And are there
enough of them for us to be able to group
them and call them...

Super: AN
AUSTRALIAN STYLE?

An Australian style?

Pick up and flick
through a book of
historical styles.

This is the oldest question in Australian
architecture and it is asked more in the
field of architecture than in any other,
because styles have always been more
firmly associated with architecture than
with other arts.

Flips from Program
No. 2:

We have seen in an earlier programme that

Old Colonial Houses

- 2 or 3.

there was a style of house in the early days, a colonial branch of the English Georgian popularly known as the Old Colonial, which has every right to be known as Australian. - But it was strictly Colonial Australian, and as remote from our lives today as an aboriginal shelter of grass.

For more than 100 years many architects and patrons of architecture have been eagerly looking for an Australian style. Last century architects spent some heat in arguing with each other as to which old style of Europe would best be adapted to an Australian style. Many said the Gothic was in the blood of the British.

Sir John Sulman was one of many who saw on the contrary an Australian Style growing out of the strong, round-arched style of sunny Italy.

Hardy Wilson saw our national style growing from our geographical link with the Orient, and imagined a sort of Greco-Chinese style of horizontal lines growing here. This is Hardy Wilson's own home, 'Purulia', at Wahroonga, built in 1912, with the shingled roof, flag-stone paths, shutters and twelve-pane windows that he loved in the Old Colonial houses.

Sketches on drawing board to indicate Gothic arch and classical arch.

'Purulia'.

Flip:

'Greenway' house.

dissolve

to real

Greenway

building.

Studio:

Boyd at board.

Many charming houses were built in the first half of this century in an Australianised Italian style. This is Professor Leslie Wilkinson's own house of 1922, in Vaucluse. Professor Wilkinson was an Englishman when he came here in 1919 to occupy the first chair of architecture at an Australian university. But he began searching immediately for a valid Australian adaptation of the classical style he knew best. And he called this house nostalgically 'Greenway' - after Francis Greenway, the great first architect of Australia.

These days the desire for an Australian form of building is as strong as ever, for surely there is nothing more flattering to national pride than a building form which symbolizes the land and the people. But at the same time there is now general agreement that any such form cannot be imported, or forced. No amount of enthusiasm of architects whipped up by patriotic patrons will produce it. A genuine national style springs spontaneously from the life of the people.

Nevertheless, its evolution undoubtedly can be hurried along if a sufficient number of laymen and architects wish for it and can come to some sort of agreement as to its form.

Super: AN
AUSTRALIAN STYLE?

Is there - however young and tender and
hesitant - an Australian Style?

Suburban house.

The answer must be yes, not one but
several national styles exist; but they
are neither very strong nor very
interesting. As we have seen earlier,
the ordinary suburban villa with its tiled
roof, boxed eaves and over-coloured
trimmings is one national style. Then
there is the inner-suburban flat block
built to the limit of economy within the
law: bald, but fancy. These are
Australian compromises with modern
architecture which don't appear in similar
shape elsewhere. But the patriots who
ask the question are looking for something
a little more important and praiseworthy
than these things. One thinks of the
national styles of other countries -

Flat block.

Studio: Boyd.

Slides or flips:

Gothic Cathedral.

the inspired Gothic

Georgian mansion.

and refined Georgian of England,

The Parthenon.

the glory that was Greek, of course,

The Colosseum.

and the Roman,

the bleached, bald walls of the
Mediterranean,

Spanish Baroque.

the excitable curves of Spain,

Tyrollean house.

the grotesque roofs of the Tyrol -

the romance and dignity which time has woven into the unique character of buildings in the different regions of the old world. The toughest of Australians is starved, usually without knowing it, for character in his architectural surroundings. Most interested laymen and architects can agree on this much. But when we begin to get down to cases and consider specific forms of character for Australian buildings, it is harder to reach agreement.

Attempts to Australianise buildings have taken several forms. The most popular technique has been the addition of Australian motifs. Many buildings of the late nineteenth century had emus and koalas and native flora worked among the cast iron of their verandahs and the plaster of their interiors. The idea of Federation greatly stimulated patriotism in ornament. About the turn of the century gum-leaves were frequently entwined in the flowing lines of the fashionable 'Art Nouveau'. This is a panel of the old Post Office of 1899 in South Yarra, Victoria.

The technique was revived in a rather more sophisticated form just before the last war, when aboriginal drawings were used as a basis for numerous murals and decorative features. This is the red rubber floor of the Victorian Government Tourist Bureau in Melbourne, a popular hit building of 1939.

Film:

Melbourne cast-iron
terraces - details
of Australiana.

Then the old Post
Office at South Yarra:
long shot, then close
up of panel, then close
up of various details.

Dissolve to

Victorian Tourist
Bureau: aboriginal
floor pattern.

Such fashions in applied decoration may have passing entertainment value, but clearly enough they add nothing to the ultimate creation of an Australian building form.

Studio:

Boyd at board.

Sketches Old

Colonial house.

Anyway, many people ask, how can we do better than copy the first style of building used in Australia, the Old Colonial. Somehow our very first architects achieved a quality of sympathy with the climate in their verandah-encircled homesteads of whitewashed walls, twin columns, slatted shutters and broad, sheltering roofs. They have a strong nostalgic appeal and, when reproduced today in machined bricks and reinforced concrete in Vaucluse or Toorak, a spurious dignity which pays dividends to scholarly estate agents.

Adds T.V. aerial
to sketch.

More seriously: quite apart from the Georgian ornamentation, there were other appealing qualities of Old Colonial building: the four square simplicity of the mass, the light, precise finishes, the structural details, such as the rhythmic spacing of slender white posts around a long verandah edge. These things can be reproduced with complete validity in a modern building. Often a new structure which unpretentiously serves some simple function, which answers the same problems of climate and local materials as those

Flip:

Modern verandah.

the Old Colonial builders faced, may therefore quite honestly echo some of the character of the pioneers' buildings.

We may say that these buildings have a genuine Australian quality. We could suggest that this is the National Style.

Studio:

Boyd moves from
board to desk.

But if it is, there is not much flexibility or future in it. For this style will not bear translation into steel and plate glass and the other materials of today, or into the larger, more complex, building types which our society requires. It is really Australian only inasmuch as it is evocative of early history. Is that enough? Sometimes. But something more vital than this is required.

All architecture today is to some extent inevitably a product of the international modern architecture movement, which began in Europe half a century ago and was, from the beginning, strongly opposed to Nationalism.

Flips:

Functional
buildings - 2
or 3.

The central movement of modern architecture, based on the principle that form is the direct result of the functional and structural requirements, swept in a few decades round the world, from the Continent to England, to the U.S.A., with odd sparks and impulses shooting off at all stages to touch remote countries like Australia.

It became a recognisable movement here, first in Melbourne, in 1934.

This modern architecture is often called today, with great disparagement, the 'International Style'.

It was international because it renounces all ornament - and thus National ornament - and because materials such as reinforced concrete, which somehow symbolises the new structural techniques, are not confined by any regional barriers.

For about 30 years, then, modern architecture was proudly and determinedly non-nationalist in every country it visited. But then the propagandist and the patriot and the dictator got to work on it.

Hitler banished it from the country of its birth, but borrowed some of its techniques when he made his Teutonic oppressive monuments to the master state.

Mussolini tended to encourage modernism at first, for it suggested progress in the new regime. Then he nationalised it. He made what was the first, and undoubtedly the most successful of the bad bunch of 20th Century attempts to force a national style.

He had, of course, a major tradition to work on. His architects produced modernised Roman architecture in concrete carrying statues of Adonis with Mussolini's features.

German building
of 1938.

Roman building.

Stalin arch
building.

The U.S.S.R., which began with enthusiastic endorsement of modern architecture, and now has returned to it, was on a different tack all through the Stalin era: an odd mixture of pomp and peasantry.

All of these unwholesome reflections of mad, dead dictators must come to mind when we talk of an Australian Style, and give us a terrible warning. Chauvanistic architecture is not only morally dangerous but also invariably bad architecture.

Studio:
Boyd at desk.

In fact, the unwholesome chauvanistic turn which this quest for an Australian style can sometimes take is emphasised by the fact that the quest warms up regularly during wartime. Between 1914 and 1918 was the hottest time for articles and speeches on the subject of an Australian architecture:

Reads from
magazines.

'Patriotism in Architecture'.

'Wanted: an Australian School of Design'

- and so on. In one home decoration magazine a house colour scheme of red, white and blue was advocated.

The same sort of thing was repeated in a more sophisticated way between 1939 and 1945.

The warning tells us that what we are

looking for is not national quality but natural quality: a quality which suggests that the building has grown out of conditions set by its land and its climate and its people and its industry.

Start series of

flips:

Of buildings,
interiors and
exteriors. Move
in to some and
roam over
details.

And there are buildings with such quality
in Australia. New buildings.

Music break.

In 1919 when Professor Leslie Wilkinson occupied that first chair of architecture at Sydney University, fresh from the old country, he said:

"It is vain to argue about... a national style. If we but aim at fulfilling every smallest demand which our modern problems make - of accommodation, convenience, comfort, of new materials, of lighting, shading, ventilating and acoustics - if we embody the result, original but heir of the past, the product of the requirements, in the most beautiful way we know how: avoiding lapses, exercising restraint, the summit of refinement: and exhibiting that apparent absence of effort which is always the result of great strength, then we shall achieve an architecture expressive of our national life."

That impressive sentence of nearly half a

century ago rings true still today.

And these buildings on your screen, I feel, do try to follow the truth along the same line, even though they follow also quite a different taste - a different concept of beauty - from Professor Wilkinson's Mediterranean taste of 1919.

But all these buildings we've been seeing come from just one small area of Australia - the Sydney area.

Continue flips:
Sydney buildings.

In fact it is pretty clear that even if true, natural, good architecture is able to develop strongly in Australia, free of commercial or temperamental abuses, it is still not likely to produce one Australian National Style. It will produce several. If it is going to be sensible and suitable for its environment, as were all the national styles of the past, then it clearly cannot be the same in Queensland as in Tasmania. It must be different again in Alice Springs and distinctive again in Melbourne.

Tropical
buildings.

This, for instance, is a new north Queensland building in the new Australian tropical idiom which is developing strongly.

Music to end of Queensland buildings.

But the differences may not often be as pronounced or as potentially exciting as this. In a few decades probably, they may be of no interest to anyone except economists, plumbers and air-conditioning engineers. The artistic and visually interesting things about architecture - the things we really mean when we speak of an Australian Style - are the sculptural and spatial qualities. These can be the same in any part of the country.

Perth

building.

Melbourne

building.

These buildings are as far apart as Perth -
- and Melbourne.

Again, the technical building problems of today are much the same all over Australia, and the world. Science doubtless will eventually level out climatic differences. Planning and structure daily draw further away from the limitations of the past when national differences expressed themselves naturally through the hands of simple peasants and craftsmen.

But the scope for invention, imagination, and sensitivity is no less now than ever it was in the days of columns with different capitals and arches with different shapes, in the days of the solid styles.

Continue flips.

All over the world the word style itself has changed meaning in architecture. We can no longer look for lasting visual, aesthetic styles (although short-lived fashions still come and go).

We may look, however, for an intellectual style or manner of approaching the problems of building. We may look for a sizable body of architects believing in broadly the same things, heading the same way, holding to similar standards, but freely and independently devising their own ways of achieving the common goal of good building.

Studio: Boyd.

I do believe that such a body of architectural thinking does exist now in Australia, and is growing up from the bottom, although it may not yet be quite sizable enough to call it -

An Australian Style.

End titles.

Theme to end.