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The puzzle of Robin Boyd

By DIRK BOLT

THE PUZZLE OF ARCHITECTURE. By Robin Boyd. Melbourne University Press. Price 65/-.

ROBIN Boyd, in his new and most important book so far, pieces together the contemporary puzzle of architecture.

In his clear and agreeable manner of writing Boyd takes us through the development of architecture in this century, following a sequence of architectural philosophies which he names the revolution, the counter revolution and the current "third phase."

Some 160 of his pen sketches illustrate and emphasise the development of argument.

Some sketches, like the one of Le Corbusier's Church at Ronchamp in France, are par-

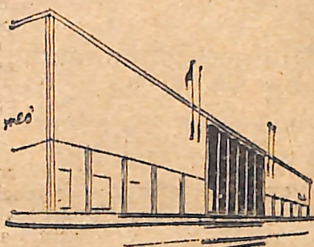


ticularly delightful. In some cases, however, the addition of photographs would have increased the value of the book to those who are not familiar with the examples referred to.

But the book as a whole is not concerned with detailed analysis of individual buildings, although some buildings known to us in Australia are discussed with wit and keen observation.

Canberra readers will be amused (and at a loss to answer) when Robin Boyd asks:

"When the Monaro Mall . . . is given a lofty arcaded entrance with slender columns



Monaro Mall

raising one's eyes above the price tickets to a glimpse of eternity in a high ceiling . . . what is there left for the Houses of Parliament?"

Despite the fun "building is" in Boyd's words, "a serious medium" and the book is a serious search for a responsible attitude towards building. That such a search is valid and necessary is obvious to those who realise how large a proportion of our national energy is absorbed by building activity.

It is, in this connection, surprising to find that Scandinavia, which has contributed more to the social value of architecture than the rest of the world, is dismissed with some fleeting references only.

Finland's Alvar Aalto enters the book via a quotation from Dr Siegfried Giedion which confines Aalto to being a clever and rare genius.

Sweden's Sven Markelius is referred to once and Joern Utzon, the designer of significant housing developments in Denmark, sails in on the Sydney Opera House.

It is difficult to see how an analysis of contemporary architecture can be complete without reference to Scandi-

navia's contribution. The post-war orientation in Australian architecture, of which Boyd's own work and writing form such an important part, cannot be dissociated from the direct or indirect, often anonymous but consistent influence from Scandinavia which in its architectural development bypassed the mistakes of both England's William Morris and the Continental Bauhaus.

Our ideas in planning, the very image Australia works towards in the suburban streets, our dreams of cities in which it is good to live, our aesthetic appreciation, our interiors, our "good" taste, come to us from Northern Europe.

Europe as a whole, however, is the geographic location of less than a quarter of the building and architects referred to in Boyd's book which relies for two-thirds of its examples on North America.

The strong preponderance of American examples is, in a way, a fair representation of architectural information as it reaches us today. And it is a fact that in the USA money is found to back the extremes of nearly every architectural thought, which is useful for purposes of reference and illustration.

Yet one cannot, upon reflection, agree that the American scene provides the happiest hunting ground for architectural understanding. Because such understanding will not be of what is, but of what we want.

This is why the puzzle of Architecture is, in the final analysis, the puzzle of Robin Boyd. Because he, who put the finger on the Australian Ug-

liness, would be the last one to desire that we guide our image of the future towards the American present.

The Puzzle of Architecture must be read by those who have a professional interest in architecture.

It should be read by those who have the privilege and responsibility to be in a position to instruct architects, but reading it will require a fair degree of education and perseverance.

And the book will be read by all those who have the face of Australia at heart.



Architect Robin Boyd, author of the book *The Puzzle of Architecture*.