

# Architects in search of truth

"The Puzzle of Architecture," by Robin Boyd.

The 20th century is the ugliest in history, says architect Robin Boyd.

"The industrial-commercial man has grown up to be more calamitously inartistic than the man in any previous era," combining "a flashy taste for artificiality with the most efficient means (technological) of satisfying it."

We can't blame the architect for this, Boyd says. The things that offend him in our towns and streets (hoardings, lights, poles, catchpenny building styles, the tangle of wire) are out of the architect's control.

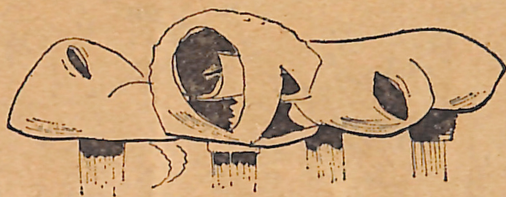
And: "Most houses and flats, factories and warehouses, small shops and schools and service stations are spilled out of the moulds of builders and construction companies or prefabrication factories."

And yet the century started out with "great visual promise." Architects abandoned the old styles and panted after a naked beauty of form based on function.

Their search for universal truth in building threw up dramatic new styles which, as architects raced on, were soon "reduced to commercial caricatures, and eventually finished their lives in disgrace, living on only in second-rate bowling alleys and cheap motels."

By mid-century the truth-seekers had arrived at the glass box only to realise that they had followed a sidetrack that ended in dullness.

Having lost their way, the searchers began wandering off in all directions. Some, profaning, took up ornament again and glued it, tastefully, to the glass house. Others inverted the rule *form follows function* and, ab-



The Endless (Womb) House . . . just the thing for the Flintstones of the future.

andoning the search for a universal style, produced "once-only," monumental forms which were exciting if not always practical.

Saarinen's giant bird-like TWA building at Kennedy Airport, New York, was the most startling example, but inside, says Boyd, "one was merely in the centre of a clever advertisement for air travel."

## Brutally frank

Some faithful, affirming the realistic creed, pressed on, producing variations on the glass-house by emphasising function even more. Service towers, brutally frank, were grafted to the glass towers, concrete and bricks were featured in the raw.

On the housing level the transcendentalists, the purest of the pure, went religiously off on their own and conceived two notable houses: one called The Habitable Woman and another called The Endless House, or the Womb House.

Both were free-flowing, shell-concrete structures; the first, in the words of architect Amancio Guedes: "An anthropomorphic wonder-house . . . a round-eyed house, full of cavernous passages . . . a house with a baby house inside her, a pregnant building."

And Jacque Conelle, who developed the Womb House on the French Riviera: "The floor of the building must be level, but all the rest must be movement. I am disgusted with architecture. My dream is to make an abode of instinct, like an animal's."

Robin Boyd traces lucidly and entertainingly all the confusion of building this century, out of which might yet emerge, he says, but not hopefully, a true 20th century form.

Meanwhile, architects are working against time. A white ant is undermining their splendid efforts at realism and honesty.

He is the technologist, the dedicated leveller of taste, the man skilfully practising little deceits, creating artificiality on a mass scale — who can make plastic sheets, for example, look more like timber than timber.

He is the man, Boyd believes, who will make the architect obsolete, who will ultimately hand us a canned environment, an enclosed, air-conditioned world injected with scented artificial breezes, walls with moving images of the seasons or distant places, all with sound-effects.

**Rod Paterson**

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