

Australian architecture is now so vital, diverse, prolific and rich that any attempt to give a general picture of it within the confines of one issue of a magazine must be skimpy and superficial. Instead, the AR has decided to look at the architecture of Australia's two most potent cultural centres, Sydney and Melbourne, and to try to discern the different sensibilities of the architects in these two cities. We have concentrated particularly on younger architects in whose work the differences between the two sensibilities are most apparent. Hence the emphasis on small buildings — houses, schools and the like. Australia does, of course, produce many big buildings but they are not usually very different from similar structures elsewhere in the developed world.

It must be stressed that in choosing to focus on Melbourne and Sydney, we do not wish to imply that these are the only important centres in Australia, or that the architects whose work is shown here are the only interesting ones. On the contrary, the continent is bursting with architectural energy and talent and, in future, the AR hopes to show new Australian buildings on a regular basis.

Rory Spence

REGIONAL IDENTITY

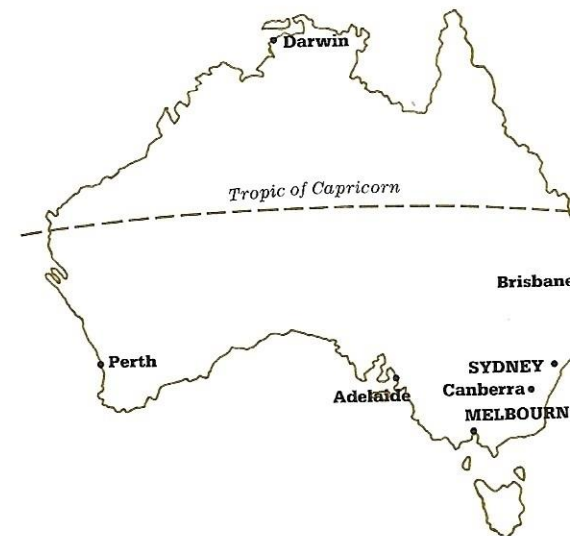
In Australia today, the question of an appropriate Australian architecture rears its head with the same remarkable persistence as the question of an appropriate contemporary style in Victorian England. Australia has still not entirely broken free from what Daryl Jackson refers to as 'the umbilical linkage' to Britain.¹ This has led to a cultural inferiority complex, known colloquially as the 'cultural cringe' and exacerbated in the past by Australia's background as a penal colony; it has at times provoked the defensive reaction of chauvinistic nationalism. For this reason, however, the country is correspondingly more determined to establish its own cultural traditions, and is therefore a particularly interesting context for a discussion of architectural regionalism.

True regionalism can only be seen as a subversive tendency in today's world, dominated as it is by the insensitive and cynical internationalism of big business interests, often in the guise of power politics, which generally operate against local self-determination and regional differences. In *The Culture of Cities*, Mumford refers to regionalism, in a broad cultural sense, as 'a protest against . . . excessive centralisation'. This is echoed by Frampton's characterisation of its architectural manifestation as 'an architecture of resistance'.² It is nationalist in the best sense, related to Herder's concept of 'cultural nationalism' — a sensitive response to the geography, inhabitants and traditions of a particular region, expressing and reinforcing its uniqueness, but implying an equally sensitive respect for the culture of other regions³ — quite the reverse of xenophobic political nationalism.

In a continent the size of Australia, therefore, organised on a Federal basis, it is of limited value to speak of a national 'Australian' architecture. Though there are some characteristics common to Australia as a whole, most Australians identify largely with their separate State or Territory, each dominated, culturally, by its capital city, or with their immediate locality. The capitals are so far apart that their cultural development has been remarkably independent from one another — notably in the case of Sydney and Melbourne,

where more than one third of the population lives.

Regionalism in architecture is part of a whole orientation towards *quality of life*. The danger is that it becomes either superficial kitsch or abstruse and elitist, failing to communicate or to reinforce positive regional characteristics that have some life-enhancing quality. This is easily avoided in more traditional societies, where an architect can work with familiar, living traditions which are not a nostalgic recall of a dead past. The problem in Western societies today is that they suffer from a lack of such traditions held in common. As in the nineteenth century, there will probably always be stylistic diversity. Relative cultural unity in the past was not so much by choice, but an inevitable consequence of the pre-industrial, pre-enlightenment state of awareness. In Western society today, it can only be reborn through deliberate self-limitation, a conscious reversal of the whole concept of material progress.

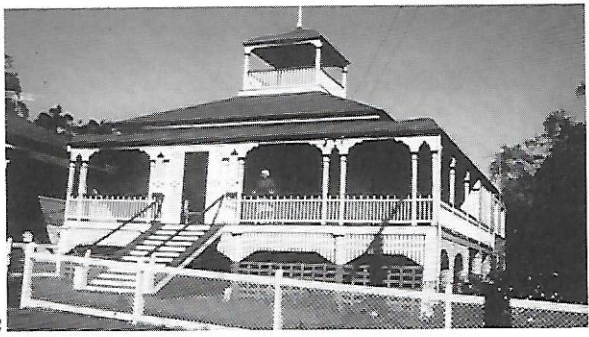


Opposite: house at Glenorie by Glenn Murcutt. In the middle of the bush north of Sydney—a poetic Miesian abstraction of attributes of traditional Australia—and of the bush itself. A celebration of the open-air Australian lifestyle. Compare to the house at Traralgon, Victoria, by Greg Burgess on the cover—a much more programmatic and consciously Romantic building. In the map of Australia, 1, Sydney and Melbourne are shown in relation to each other. Northern Hemisphere readers should note that in Australia the sun comes from the north—though it still rises in the east.

and economic growth at any cost. The only Western cultural consensus at present is a lowest common-denominator consensus, based largely on cultural insecurity and the profit motive, and represented architecturally by the international uniformity of office buildings and suburban

traditional Queensland house—on stilts to avoid floods and termites and screened by lattices to give shade. In fact, fundamentally an English four-square rural type with external passage which forms the verandahs.

'Quambi', Stroud, New South Wales, c1840. Repairs and reconstructed porch and verandah by Peter Myers, 1983. A Georgian house with clipped-on verandah.



2

Myers Rock—centre of Australia and Australian consciousness. There is no landscape feature of equivalent importance in European cultures.

Aboriginal bark shelter, Myyn, Arnhem Land, Northern Territory. Corrugated iron has been adopted by Aborigines as an interchangeable alternative to bark. Myers' Tiwi Keeping Place (1942) and Murcutt's work both echo the form of these shelters, using corrugated iron in lieu of bark.



3

Traditional shearing shed: simple rural buildings . . . have now achieved the status of cult objects'.

suburban housing in Melbourne. Typical 'brick veneer' (timber frame) bungalow with tiled roof. Appropriately, brick veneer, together with prefabricated plasterboard, were Australian inventions.



4

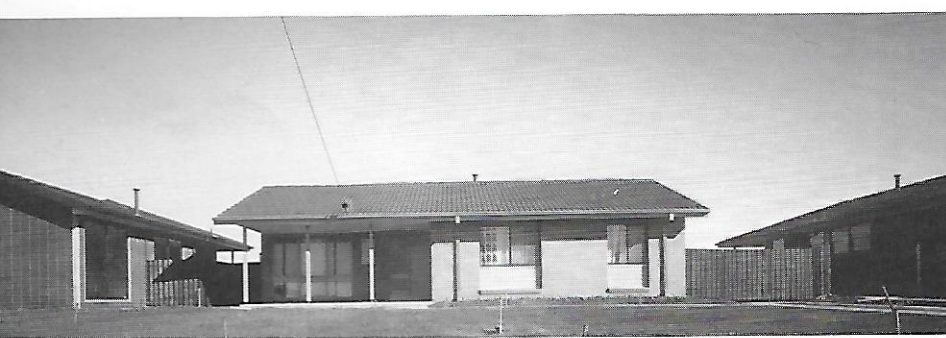


5

REGIONAL IDENTITY



6



housing. A culturally deeper, more responsive architectural regionalism must, therefore, be a conscious, personal response battling against the current.

In Australia, the problem is exaggerated because the lack of traditions is especially acute—even the USA is seen to have more established, indigenous traditions, which have had time to evolve prior to the confusing diversity of the mid-nineteenth century. To some extent Australian architects are under a delusion that the situation is clearer and easier elsewhere. The contrary may in fact be true—that the great weight of historical tradition, particularly in Europe, with its wide range of available precedents, makes the architect's problem of selection even more confusing and encourages the superficial relevance of much Neo-Vernacular and Post-Modern work. The sense of freedom from European tradition in Australia has been felt by many commentators from the nineteenth century on. In *Kangaroo*, D. H. Lawrence referred repeatedly to the feeling of release from 'over-upholstered Europe'. . . 'ponderous with ancient authority and ancient dirt.'⁴ The major restriction in Australian architecture has been a lack of self-confidence, and hence the need to borrow indiscriminately rather than selectively from abroad—notably, at present, from the USA. Increasingly, however, Australian architects are demonstrating that while selectively drawing on overseas sources, they are able to distance themselves from them (physically and metaphorically), incorporating indigenous elements from the Australian context that can be considered in some way significant, so that imported ideas are transformed and given new meaning. The same phenomenon began to be recognised in the USA from the late nineteenth century onwards, producing architects of the stature of Richardson, Sullivan and Wright.

These indigenous elements, which have only recently begun to be fully accepted and explored as legitimate sources for a regional Australian architecture, can be categorised as follows, bearing in mind that such categories are always an arbitrary convenience, disguising a more complex reality:

- Natural elements*
- Climate
- Natural landscape and materials

- Cultural elements*
- Aboriginal culture
- White Australian man-made landscape and products
- White Australian lifestyle
- White Australian characteristics, attitudes and myths

The increasing proportion of Asian immigrants had not as yet had a discernible influence on Australian architecture.

The climate has had surprisingly little influence on design. Except for the traditional Queensland house with its cross-ventilation, raised floor, roof ventilator and lattice sunscreens, Australian colonial buildings were little more than English types with added verandahs.⁵ More recently, the suburban house has typically been an introverted