

THE CITIES ON OUR ROOFS

PHILIP DREW, in a bird's eye view of Sydney and Melbourne rooftops, finds a charmed world of cupolas and minarets.

THE OCTAGONAL room is surprisingly small, with three round-headed windows punctuating each wall. The floor is a mess of building remnants and pieces of timber. In one corner, an old metal chair rests at an odd angle and a television aerial sprouts from the floor boards like some artificially pruned Japanese pine tree.

Spread out before me, Circular Quay and Sydney Harbour are framed in a triptych, the grime on the outside of the glass lending the scene a soft unfocused look. The Harbour Bridge snuggles beneath the arched head of the central window.

It is an exhilarating place to be in, this, the front sitting-room of Sydney, above the Lands Department in Macquarie Street. Beyond and to the north, Macquarie Place makes a green frontyard, leading on to the Quay as its piazza.

Above my head is a copper-clad cupola supported around its edge on steel balls which allow it to rotate. The telescope has long since been removed, the viewing slot has been filled in and all that remains is the empty copper dome. Halfway up, a single shaft of glowing

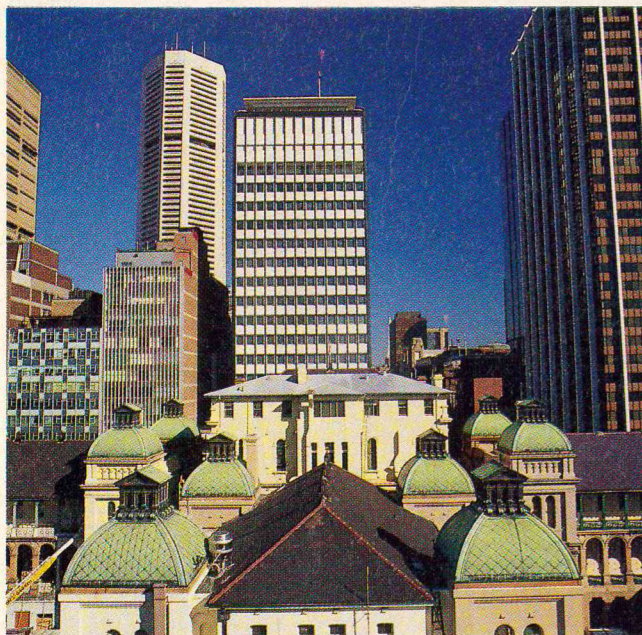


The magnificent roof garden of the State Bank building in Sydney has been deprived of afternoon sunlight by the Capita tower. The bank is an effort to recapture the romance of the 1930s US skyscrapers.



MICHAEL RAYNER

A common terrace links the twin French-styled pavilions crowning Melbourne's Windsor Hotel entrance.



ANDREW RANKIN

Miniature Greek temples astride green cupolas surmount Sydney Hospital: dressed in High Victorian manner.

sunlight lances through the gloom from a small, square aperture.

I have entered the enchanted, seldom visited realm of rooftops. High above the bustling streets of Sydney there exists a second city of gorgeous cupolas, antique Greek temples, majestic royal pavilions, medieval tournament tents of hammered copper, mock mosques, and futuristic cream terracotta Art Deco lanterns.

Melbourne, too, has its own sitting-room; the equivalent of the Lands Department's idiosyncratic cupola observatory. It is quite different, with its own distinct outlook over Parliament

House and the Treasury Gardens. The twin French-styled majestic pavilions which crown the flanking towers of the entrance of the Windsor Hotel are linked by a common terrace. They regard one another from a distance like large saltcellars. In Melbourne, the outlook is of social and political man and cultivated nature; in Sydney, the view is of nature, the physical frame and ground of the city and people at play.

Two hundred years ago the German philosopher Goëthe discovered the roof of St Peter's Basilica, Rome. He described it as a miniature copy of a well-

built town, with houses, shops, fountains, churches and a large temple — everything in the open air with beautiful walks between.

If Sydney and Melbourne rooftops are less extensive than those of Goëthe's Rome, they are no less exciting. In the practical world of the chopped-off modern skyscraper, the rooftop is cluttered with an assortment of cooling towers, water tanks, lift-motor rooms, ducts and ventilators. What little we know about rooftops comes to us from that cinema cliché, the rooftop chase, though recently Woody Allen added a further dimension, in *Radio Days*, with rooftop coupling, (even here, however, he was anticipated in Aldous Huxley's 1921 novel, *Crome Yellow*).

From a rooftop it is easy to see what is going on in a city or should I say, what is going wrong with it — to observe the dying of the light on the city floor, how Grosvenor Place in Sydney has blocked out the winter sunlight from Australia Square, or the Capita tower deprived the magnificent State Bank roof garden of afternoon sunlight. Once important markers of the most prominent buildings, the rooftops caught our attention, as spires, clock towers and domes, rising out of a broad base of uniform-height High Victorian and early 20th-century building. In recent years Sydney and, to a lesser extent, Melbourne have been hit by a building boom — I almost said, with greater accuracy, a building bomb.

Disorder has intensified. As each new city tower staggers upwards, the older



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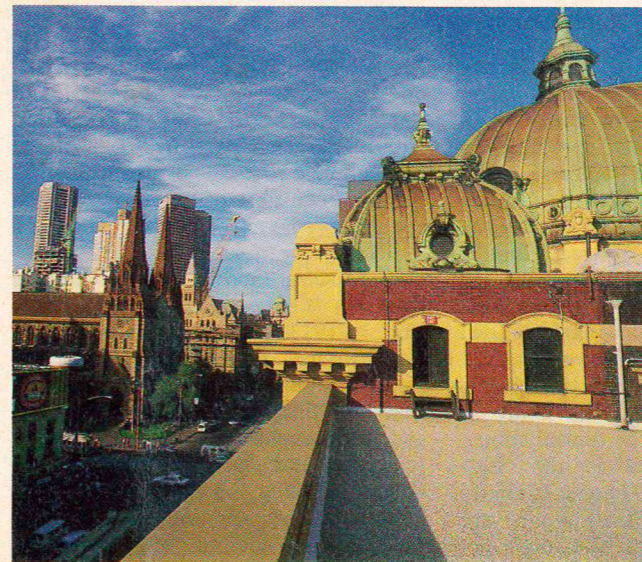
The Queen Victoria building, Sydney.

roofscape takes on a new significance; seen not from below as was intended, but from above. In the 19th century it was the railways which exposed the backyards of the city. Now, the new office towers are exposing the rooftops.

In the Sydney and Melbourne of 100 years ago, when the architect was more of an artist, when the pumped-up wealth of the day showed itself in High Victorian dress, roofs were invested with all manner of fantastic invention. How many people are aware that Sydney Hospital is surmounted by a host of miniature Greek temples which sit astride green cupolas? From the other side of Macquarie Street, all you can see is a Grecian acropolis. The towers of Melbourne's Queen Victoria Medical Centre in Lonsdale Street are similar, without the temples.

More a delicately iced confection than a building, James Barnett's Lands Department Building in Sydney carries two large Greek temples on its roof. Next to them is the clock tower looking up Bent Street in line with the State Library. Like some primitive version of a NASA space shuttle, its onion dome sits on top of a sandstone booster rocket.

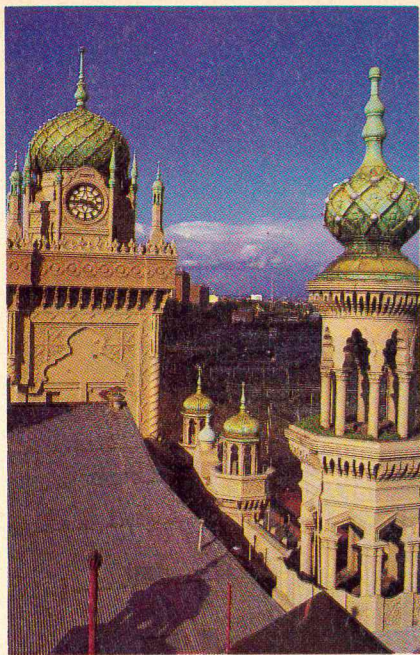
The exuberance of the Lands Department is exceeded only by George McRae's 21-dome salute to Queen Victoria in Sydney's Queen Victoria building. Domes can become boring: what counts is how they are arranged. Flinders Street Station, Melbourne, has a number in a long line from the clock tower end. They run along the



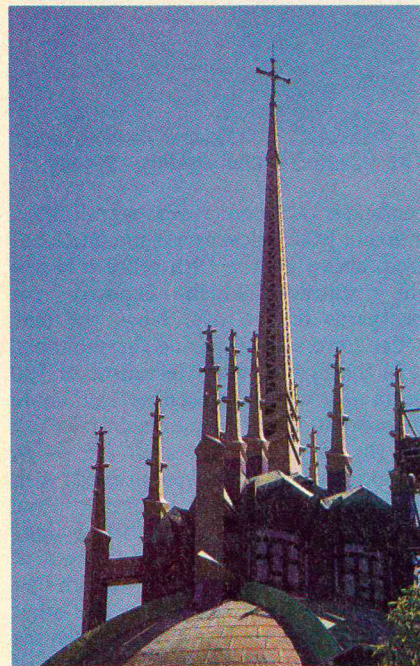
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The onion dome of the clock tower above the Lands Department building in Sydney: a delicately iced confection.

The domes of Flinders Street Station run in a long line from the clock tower end to the Swanston Street entrance.



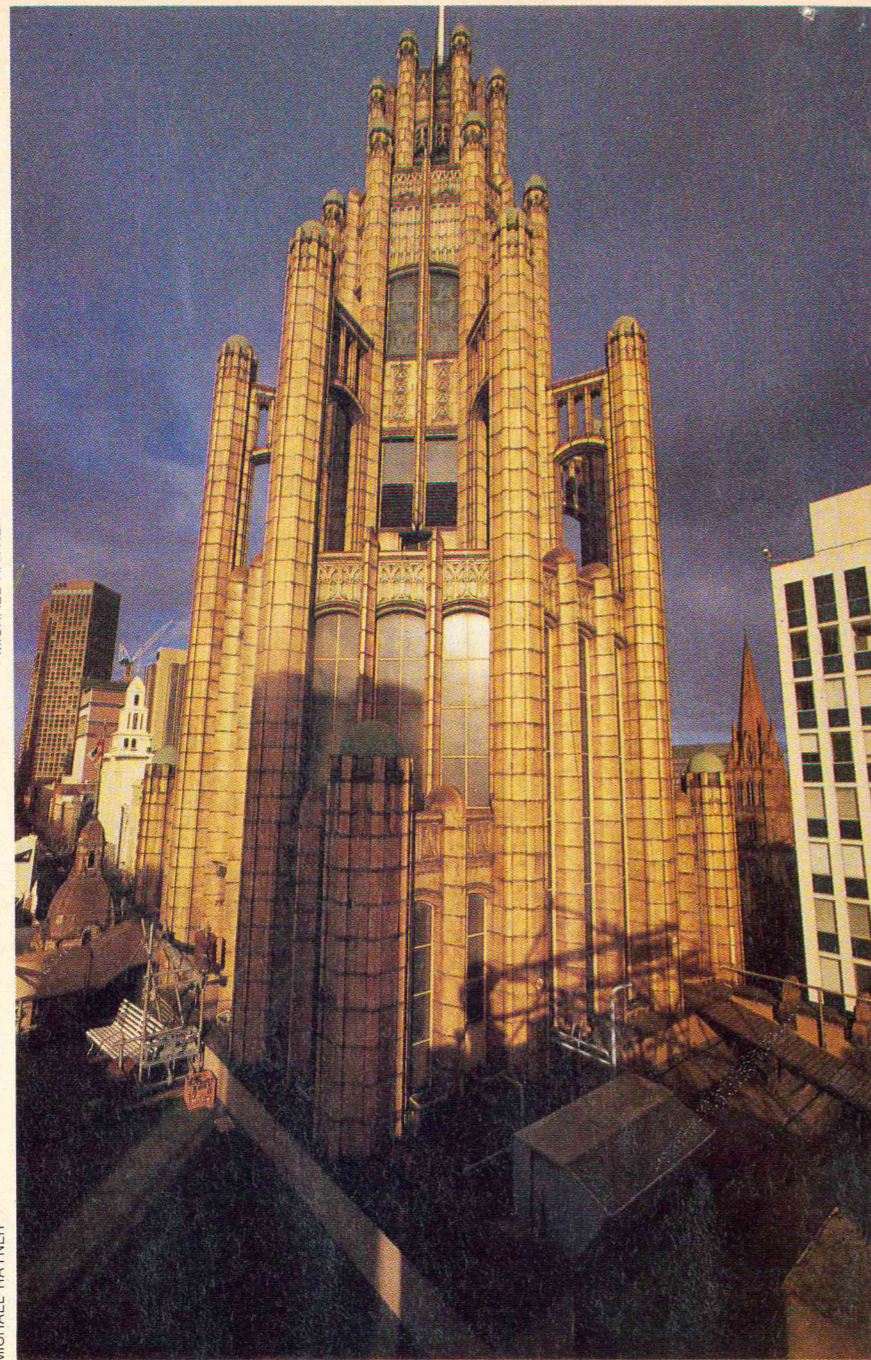
Forum Theatre building, Melbourne.



The pinnacles of Newman College.

roof, building momentum for the grand leap of the principal dome above the Swanston Street entrance. It is an impressive linear rhythm and the domes set on bases on the long roof terrace are sculptured copper objects, but it nevertheless lacks the thunderous effect of McCrae's cloud of billowing domes and lanterns, an early hint at the shells that were to dominate Utzon's Sydney Opera House.

The Opera House is quite special. It was intended to be seen from above, from the road deck of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, and increasingly these days from aircraft flying overhead. The roof is, effectively, the building facade. To walk between the shells while following the downward lines of the



Manchester Unity Building, Melbourne: smaller version of Chicago's Tribune Tower.

white tiles is like being in a narrow gorge.

Whereas Sydney is in many ways conventional in its roofscapes, Melbourne can be bizarre and unexpected. Take Walter Burley Griffin's Newman College at Melbourne University, with its abstract Islamic pattern of ribs freely combined with the Gothic. Recently restored, and looking quite stunning, Newman's low, concrete, helmet-shaped dome is spiked with a dozen Spanish pinnacles. Twelve disciples, they surround the figure of Christ represented in the central spire.

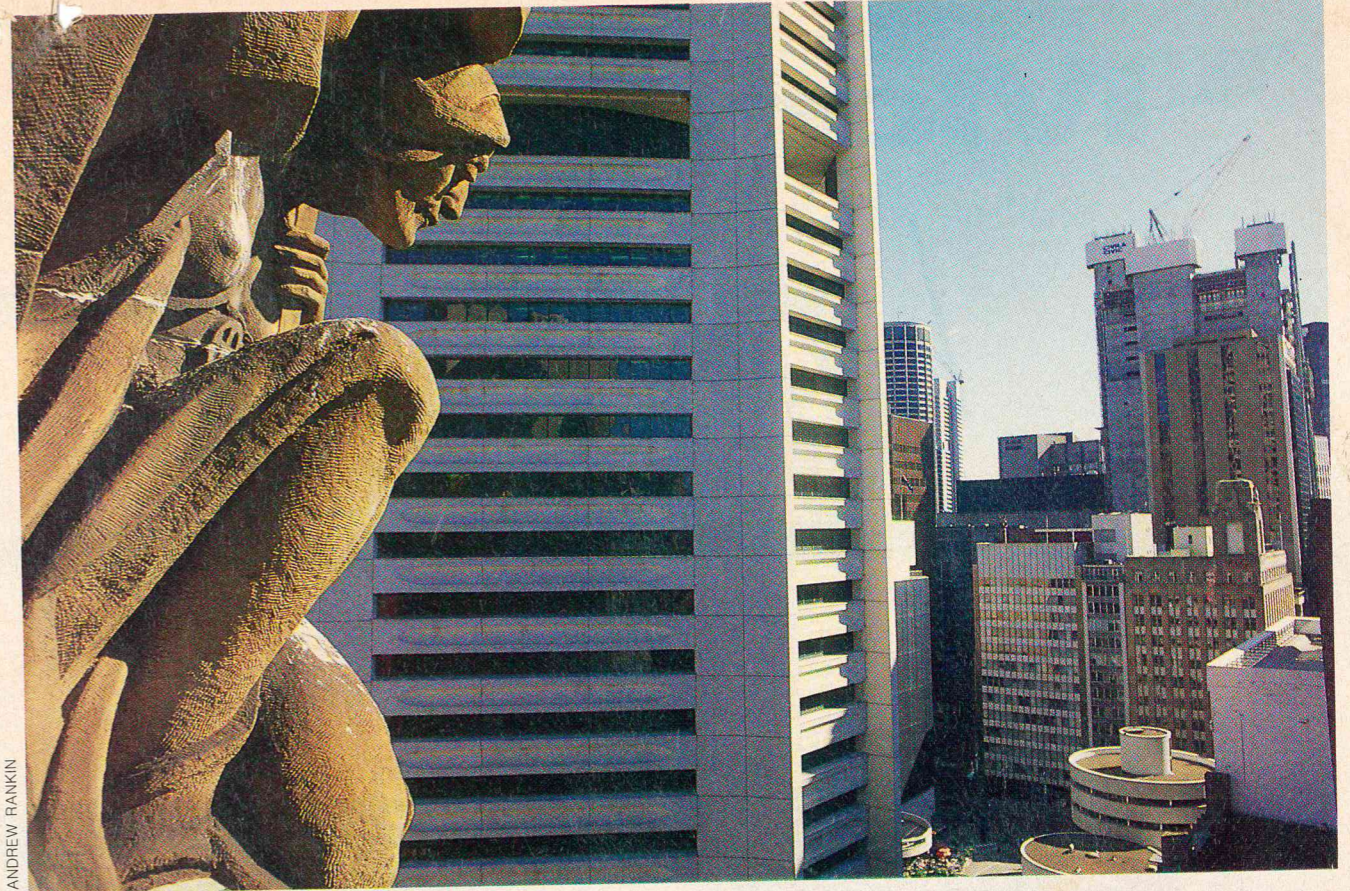
Even more unusual is the State (Forum and Rapallo) Theatre, formerly the property of the Thring family and now a born-again church. Wearing mock

Moghul dress, it has a ripe copper cupola on the street corner, a minaret, and slender pillars. The huge auditorium, with more than 3,300 seats, was enclosed by a humped roof which rises whale-like behind an insubstantial stucco shell on the street — an exotic chocolate box of a building.

In Modern Gothic, a style derived from the Woolworth Building in New York in 1913 and later smartened up in the Tribune Tower in Chicago, the facade is moulded into numerous vertical shafts, or fins, which shoot skyward to end in an explosion of stepped towers, pinnacles, and elaborate lanterns. The Grace Building on King and York Streets, Sydney, and Manchester Unity Building on Collins and Swanston

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streets, Melbourne, were direct, if half-scale, versions of the Chicago Tribune.

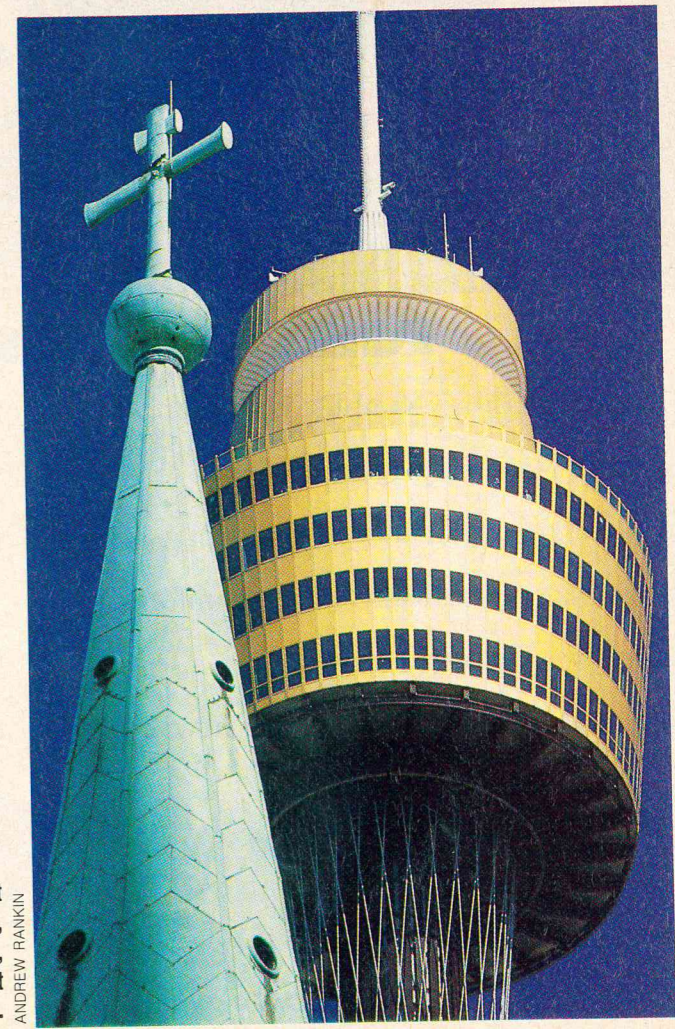
The Manchester Unity lantern, octagon rising on octagon, is fairytale Gothic encircled by flying buttresses. You can move around it on the roof and experience it as sculpture.

Sydney developed a more irregular pattern of streets than did Melbourne — the odd angles and diagonal intersections creating interest at the street corner. Before modern architecture, designers often sought to mark the corner with a significant form, to lend it greater strength — perhaps with a pavilion, turret, or circular classical temple. The 10-storey Wales House, formerly the Sydney Morning Herald Building, at the corner of Pitt and O'Connell streets, is dominated by a finely rendered circular temple. At present it languishes as a store for carpenter's materials.

Similarly, the Trust Building on the corner of Castlereagh and King streets opposite the MLC tower, consists of a group of three smaller pavilions which genuflect to a more prominent fourth on the corner. The spire of St James Church in Macquarie Street peeps provocatively between the two easternmost cupolas.

If the State Bank and Carringbush Tower are a belated attempt to recapture some of the romance of the 1930s American Art Deco skyscraper, they are, at best, faint-hearted efforts. Much more is required: a genuine interest in, and desire to rehabilitate, our city rooftops. □

The pavilions of Sydney's Trust Building: marking the corner with a significant form.



The spire of St James Church, Macquarie Street, set against Sydney Tower.

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