

Functions.

FUNCTIONS of architecture

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The RAlA has just held its annual convention in Brisbane. Here Michael Keniger, lecturer in Architecture at the University of Queensland, reports on the talkfest.

Rodney Sheaves and Penny Hammer offer some observations

Michael Keniger

The 1984 RAlA Convention was hosted by the Queensland Chapter at the Crest Hotel in Brisbane between 16-19 June.

The title of the convention, 'Functions of Architecture', was intended to encourage a return to basics and to suggest that a hard look should be taken at the future direction of the profession. Given such an ambition, the convention was remarkably sedate with little passion or heated debate. This might partly have been due to the fact that all the keynote speakers were from overseas (if one includes the expatriate Haig Beck) and that they were largely in agreement with each other, except perhaps for the redoubtable Henri Ciriani. Australian architecture figured little in what discussion there was and delegates were left to ponder for themselves what relevance the work and statements of the visitors might have for their own practice and situation. There were some disappointments. Hervin Romney's last-minute cancellation altered the whole balance of the issues that were to be discussed and the delegates in the somewhat bland conference suite of the Crest Hotel.

These setbacks were more than made up for by the quality and range of the keynote sessions. The first of these was Ian Athfield's review of his own work, and his aptly wit made an extremely relaxed start to the proceedings. It was clear that he is no longer so keen in being outrageous just for the sake of it and is aiming his barbs at specific targets, the current pet hate being zoning and planning administration. In a later interview he freely admitted that he was now committed to consolidating his practice and to attracting corporate clients. He hopes that such a strategy will help him to attack future targets from a position of strength given by a respect for his skill. In contrast, Ralph Erskine spoke with the benefit of wisdom acquired from over forty years in practice. He stressed the need for architects to design with both an understanding of place and climate and an understanding of the users of the building. His commitment to his beliefs during the whole of his career is remarkable and it was a delight to hear him unfurl the evolution of his larger and more recent projects at the public lecture. Although he stressed the need for participation, it was clear that he enjoys the business of form making and that to a large degree his ideas, images and buildings preempt participation.

Uttam Jain also advocated a responsible and responsive approach to the needs of people and place. He carefully explained the problems of building in India and gave a potted history of the architecture of that country to put his own work into context. He emphasised that his work was conditioned by 'no technology' rather than the low technology advocated by Erskine. The buildings shown included the university lecture halls at Jodhpur and demonstrated a clear understanding of climate and materials whilst encapsulating a formalism that leans more towards Kahn than to Corbusier.

All the speakers were completely upstaged by another Indian, Renathi Kamath, who was invited by the Queensland Women in Architecture group. Together with her husband, Vasant Kamath, she has been involved in extremely low-cost (\$2m²) community projects in and around Delhi. At present she is engaged in the Shirdipur housing project to house the semi-itinerant Co-operative of Neglected and Forgotten Artists. This has involved a careful study of the particular needs and structure of the community. Renathi sees her role as helping the members of the Co-operative to articulate their needs and to help them develop ways that allow them to provide shelter for themselves without being frozen into a community pattern by a rigid planning or architectural idea. Her dedication, commitment and passion were conveyed by her excellent presentation and it was difficult to accept that she had not spoken to a Western audience



Renathi Kamath:

"The psyche of India is rooted deep in the ages of the past — growing and assimilating a multitude of religious, social and cultural streams of migration and influences into being — hardly rejecting, but adapting and absorbing — constantly increasing its richness and vastness. . .

. . . the built form has always emerged from the fusions of the environment into the common consciousness of the mind. It has never been a passing fancy of style or an object fabricated by an individual as something 'new' and imposed on the environment."

before. If for nothing else, she will be remembered for pulling a complete house out of a bag, or rather for showing us a bag that was a house. This was a sort of enlarged satchel with 'rooms' for the male and female possessions and a detachable 'kitchen' satchel.

The input of abstraction and theory given by Haig Beck and David Dunster provided a foil to the architecture of humanism and social participation. They, together with Jackie Cooper, are the editors of *International Architect* and had published a special issue of the magazine on Australian Architecture to coincide with the conference.

Beck provided a condensed view of Australian architecture that demonstrated his editorial ability more than his acuity as a critic. His insistent advice was to develop theory and research whilst in practice and yet he left most practitioners floundering as to what form this research might take. His further encouragement of experimentation with ideas was confounded by lavish praise being given to architects who quite clearly did not experiment at all. Above all, he hit at easy targets, the suburbs, and mediocre towers of Brisbane, for example, whilst advocating a 'culture of congestion' and 'Manhattanism' for that same city. It was clear from his talk that Post-Modernism is dead as far as *International Architect* is concerned which meant that the definition of 'Modernism' had to be stretched to include such diverse work as that of Rex Addison and Andrew Metcalf.

David Dunster also took great delight in dancing on the grave of Post-Modernism and in denouncing the amateur architecture of Charles Jencks and the star status enjoyed by architects such as Robert Stern. Deploing the practice of signature and the rise of authorship of buildings, he went on to accuse Post-Modern architects of having 'lost the balls to tackle the job in a serious and practical manner'. He further suggested that true Post-Modernism was alive and well in the 'thirties, especially in London with such work as High Point, the Finsbury Health Centre and Connell's High and Over being cited. Carlo Scarpa was acknowledged for his control of detail and construction, James Stirling for his creation of a public space (interior of Stuttgart Museum) fit for a democracy and Rossi was embraced for undertaking architecture as an intellectual act with the same rigour and discipline as Le Corbusier. This session received a muted response as Post-Modernism as such has not had a stranglehold on Australian architecture and perhaps there was also a suspicion that here was yet another critic manipulating the work of others for the sake of creating good copy.

The final keynote speaker, Henri Ciriani, gave an excellent account of his work and his obsessions. The severity and megalomania of his various schemes for mass urban housing in and around Paris contrasted completely with the gentler work of other speakers. There were no concessions, 'the function of the architect is to give form' . . . 'architecture must survive the society that creates it', and similar statements underscored his uncompromising exploitation of formalism.

Although accepting the need to respond to context and to the brief, he made it clear that major contribution would be made by the architect's obsessions! He listed his own obsessions as form, elevational patterns, 'bringing in the sky', geometry and colour. He advocated an architecture of 'pertinence' and 'presence' that would ensure 'permanence'. Contrasting his own starting point as one who loves the city with that of Erskine as one who loves the country, he nevertheless included Erskine as being on his side, as being a true formalist at heart. Ciriani's optimism for the future of

architecture and his unshakable delight in his own work made a fitting end to the keynote sessions, although much more debate might have occurred had he been fielded as a speaker earlier on.

Few conferences end with any resolution of their starting point and the Functions of Architecture were still no clearer at the end of the three days of the convention than they were at the beginning. A rather lukewarm final debate gave each speaker a chance to restate his position but resulted in no purposeful conclusion. Attempts from the floor to provoke a more thoroughgoing discussion were deflected by Ciriani as indications of either guilt or barbarism on the part of the questioners. He did, however, offer one final *bon mot*, 'Architects have never ever before been so useful as they are today'.

In addition to the individual contribution of the speakers, the 1984 convention will be remembered for demonstrating how useful architects can be to their society when working with ideas, commitment and purpose. Finally, the organisers of the convention should be thanked for their work in staging the conference and for inviting speakers of such calibre to Australia. It was of some regret that there were so few delegates from States other than Queensland. A positive innovation was the introduction of a budget subscription for student groups which ensured that there were very many more students than at other recent conventions. This can only be for the good of the profession and it is hoped that the practice will be continued in the future.

Penny Hammer

As a relative newcomer to architects and architecture, the convention was an eye-opener for me in more ways than one. For me, Athfield, Erskine, Jain, Beck, Dunster, Kamath and Ciriani were a crash course in the internationalist stance on the 'Functions of Architecture'.

Each raised striking points but as the days wore on golden threads began to emerge from the maze of 'isms', 'functions' and 'forms'.

Threads which as an outsider looking in had intuitively been developing as I sat at my desk at the Institute and mixed with members at meetings and social functions.

Ciriani gave me my starting point with his three P's — 'If your buildings have presence and pertinence then they will have permanence'.

Presence and pertinence, echoes of Haig Beck's address in which he stated that 'buildings must relate to the society it observes . . . to merely induce an emotion in one's work without providing a social functional building is to cultivate isolationism . . . architects must practise social research if the built environment is to move forward'.

Haig's thoughts were again reinforced by Renathi Kamath's address. Renathi is a 29-year-old architect from Delhi who is currently involved in rehousing 400 Indian artists living in a tent squat outside Delhi.

Her work is a reflection of an architect engaged in social research. For over a year Renathi has been at the squat observing the sleeping, eating, storing and individual spatial requirements of each family.

Before sketching her rehousing plan she consulted the different groups of artists from the rat and bear trainers, the puppeteers, the snake charmers through to the poets. Each group sketched the facade of their ideal house and Renathi translated this into a practical and exciting mud brick design. Because the houses will be made of mud brick the people will be able to change their environment as

their lifestyle changes.

Renathi's approach to her work is a direct reflection of Athfield's philosophy. 'My whole design process enables a building to evolve, a building should be able to change if it is to evolve'.

And so from the key thoughts of presence, pertinence, social research, relevance, working with people. Buildings in a constant state of change as people's needs change — the thread emerges — that the architect must be a professional who is in touch with the public and understands how the members of that public wish to be reflected in their buildings.

Through my daily work at the Institute I see young architects struggling to make a living, successful architects who can quote 'isms' but cannot communicate how their design serves their client, architects who are out of touch with their local communities and journalists who despair over architects who cannot translate the purpose of architecture into simple terms for their readers.

Consider this sobering thought from Uttam Jain, 'India has a population of 800 million and 4 000 practising architects'. I say, 'Australia has a population of 15 million and 4 500 practising architects'.

Therefore in my mind if an architect wishes to financially survive in Australia he/she must have relevance to the man in the street. Not only must the architect be known for brilliant non-residential work, but also residential.

How many people do you know who can say what an architect does and how he/she can help them?

My thoughts from the conference are that architects cannot afford to couch 'architecture' in esoteric terms to those outside the profession. En masse they must have relevance to a broader section of the population or perish.

Rodney Sheaves

Brisbane is a delightful setting for a conference. The winding muddy river, the wooden houses on stilts with their wide verandahs and lattice work, the tropical downpours and lush vegetation all could be the location of a Conrad novel — *Heart of Darkness* or *Lord Jim*. An equatorial torpor pervades the city: Brisbane people move slowly, talk less. There is a country innocence about the place.

As expected, hospitality during the convention was generous and Brisbane members of the RAlA opened their homes to the interstate visitors.

The Queensland Chapter faced an impossible task: to host the RAlA convention which would follow the enormously successful 'Conflict' conference in Sydney in 1983. 'Conflict' was a milestone in the history of the RAlA. Inevitably unfair comparisons would be made and one sympathised with the Queenslanders.

'Functions of Architecture' was a different conference from that held in Sydney. It was laid back — concord rather than conflict. However, a conference needs to be provocative, to excite some tension and dispute in order to be stimulating and there was a blandness about the Brisbane meeting which was disappointing. Yet the theme promised much: a return to the heroic period of Modernism, a questioning of the indulgences of Postmodernism, a style war of Mods vs Postmods.

Perhaps the fault lay in the choice of keynote speakers, mostly Modernist, without a strong Postmodernist viewpoint being represented. An alternative view might have been presented from the floor during questiontime and the panel session, but the attitude of most of the conference participants seemed to be one of awed and uncritical acceptance, despite the questionable assertions made by some keynote speakers. The kind of crossfire which occurred between Helmut Jahn and Peter Murray at the 'Conflict' conference was missing.

The keynote speakers themselves were outstanding and the conference organisers must be applauded for bringing together such a collection of talent. I know from experience that this is not easy to arrange.

The usual opening by a politician was deemed to be necessary, and Chris Hurford, Commonwealth Minister for Housing and Construction, gave the

introductory address. His comments about the Hawke Government's concern for preserving the National Estate rang hollow to Sydney listeners aware of that Government's involvement in the destruction of the classified University and Schools Club building. However, his announcement of a program of co-ordinated and focused research for the building industry was well received.

Of the keynote speakers, Ian Athfield from New Zealand gave his usual amusing Fred Dagg, boy-from-the-bush performance. His flamboyant Gaudi-esque houses are establishing yardsticks for architecture in New Zealand. Athfield delights in confronting and winning battles with the bureaucracy in that tight little country.

Ralph Erskine spoke of his work in Sweden. His regional architecture oriented to the needs of the whole community and to the effect of the Scandinavian climate cycle on Swedish living. Unlike Athfield, Erskine welcomes Government planning regulations as essential guidelines for construction. Uttam Jain from India described his as 'no technology' architecture. His work in Jodhpur and Udaipur is also regional and functionalist, drawing on traditional designs and using indigenous materials, in a country where 70% of the people live in a rural setting.

Haig Beck and David Dunster from *International Architect* gave an academic burnish to the conference. Beck, Brisbane's feisty Local Hero, was received by the Queenslanders as a prodigal son made good. He spoke of architecture as a cultural enterprise, with a function to ameliorate the social condition. His swinging comments on the Australian scene had all the signs of being based on a whirlwind visit, and his throwaway one-liners, while entertaining, were often unsubstantiated and revealed the shallowness of some of his observations. Beck referred to the street culture, 'the culture of congestion', and conviviality which emerges from high-density living but could not find any in Sydney or Melbourne. Indeed Beck dismissed Sydney and Melbourne as anti-intellectual hedonistic suburbia, and saw Brisbane as Australia's only hope. This went down very well with the Queensland participants.

Beck of course is a journalist. Dunster by contrast is an academic and his address was witty and erudite, with strong evidence for his assertions. Dunster argued the best case against Postmodernism, criticising its lack of public responsibility, the absence of a theoretical basis, and its imitativeness — consuming all the wiles of the past.

Henri Ciriani described himself as a 'social architect' whose work has been an urban revolution. He cited his public housing projects built in the suburbs of Paris. These are heavy geometric buildings with tiled exteriors and bold use of primary colours. Ciriani is concerned with linear horizontality, bridging and geometry. Massive public-housing complexes are the norm in France, but one wonders about the sociological results of accommodating families in such large projects. Nevertheless, Ciriani's work is very exciting.

As well as the keynote addresses, the conference included workshops on computer practice and Queensland architecture, and a seminar with Renathi Kamath of India whose talk on her housing project at Delhi was probably more interesting than the keynote addresses. Robin Gibson conducted a tour of the Queensland Performing Arts Centre.

The conference was well attended and the Queensland Chapter must be congratulated for their excellent organisation. ●

