

SOCIAL ART...



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Our built environment is a monument to the fads and fantasies of cultures and civilisations long past and an exhibition of the trends and obsessions of the modern world. Robert Hughes has described architecture as 'a social art *par excellence*' [The Fatal Shore, London, 1987, p 341]. Walter Burley Griffin wrote that 'buildings are the most subtle, accurate and enduring records of life — hence their problems are the problems of life and not the problems of form; but through the form and material of buildings we can gain an insight into the life of the past' [D L Johnson, The Architecture of Walter Burley Griffin, Melbourne, 1977, p 150].

Any study of the philosophy of urban design offers complex and intriguing insights into the relationship between form and function and the social fabric of a community. Urban planners may subscribe to the view that good design generates a highly sophisticated and functional social fabric or, on the other hand, that a mature, cohesive and balanced society begets good design. The best practitioners have a sound appreciation of the elaborate interaction of all these factors. But, whether we have a professional knowledge of the subject or not, many of us have a range of passionate views on the subject of building design.

Former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser recently admitted that his greatest regret about his period in office as the nation's leading statesman was his part in approving the construction of the new Parliament House. Its unfortunate design, its incompatibility with the freedom of the human spirit, its construction cost and its ongoing repairs and maintenance bill are all apparently the cause of Mr Fraser's considerable grief and lamentation.

This new home of our federal government may weigh heavily on the conscience of the former Prime Minister but there are those who celebrate its monumental stature at the crown of Capitol Hill. Indeed there is a spectrum of passions elicited in the voyeur. It is the hope of this humble occasional visitor that, one day, I will not get lost as I purposefully attempt to wend my way from a parliamentarian's office to the nearest exit. At least I now know always to wear

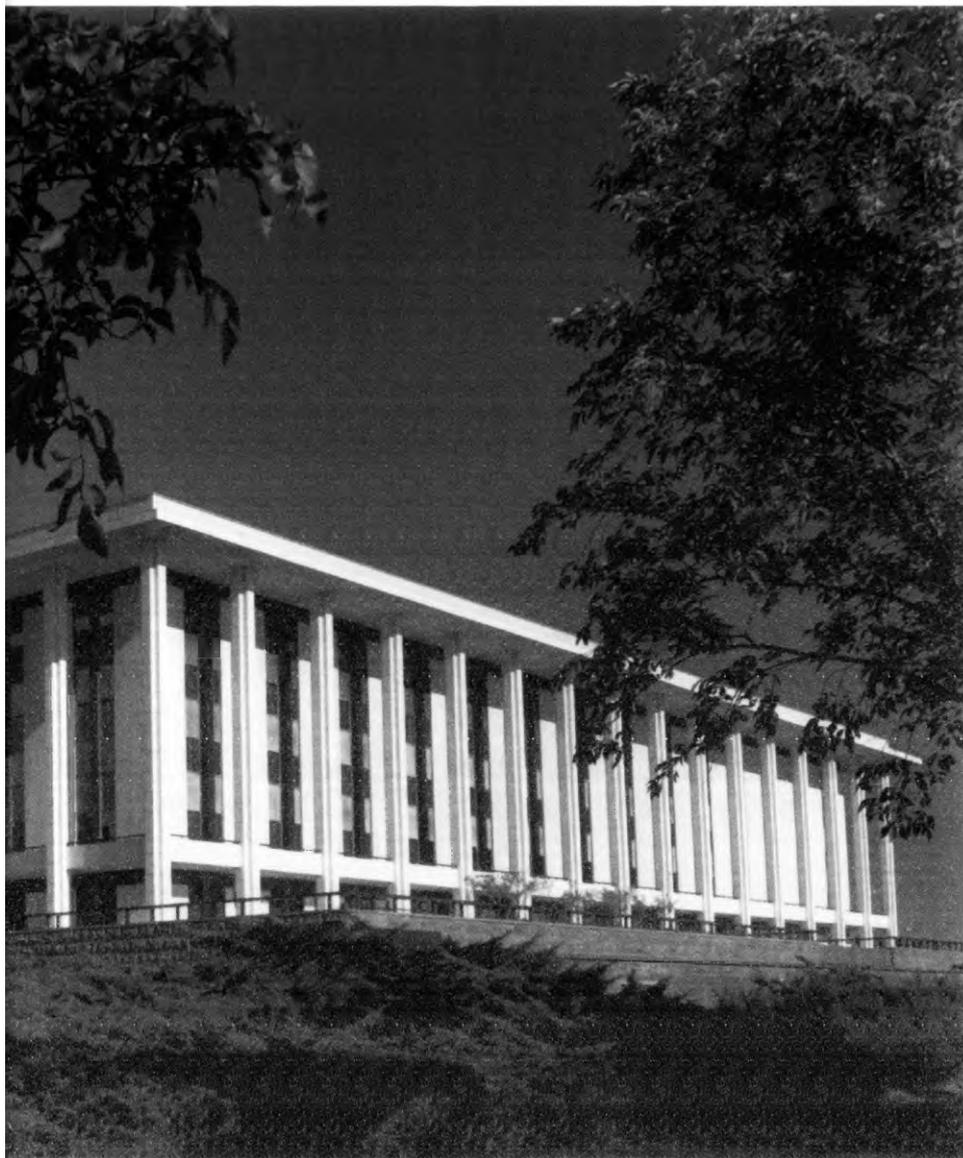


my most comfortable flat shoes for what, inevitably, becomes a long journey.

On the basis of a recent (and completely unrepresentative) survey of my colleagues there is no doubt that the most imposing and impressive of the monumental buildings in Canberra is the National Library of Australia. A neo-classical rendition of the ancient Greek and Roman temples, the Library has a marble facade with magnificent coloured glass windows by Leonard French. But what of its architectural merit?

Another former Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, is quick to point out that the classical formula has been sullied in this rendition of heritage architecture. The Parthenon in Athens, that masterpiece of Greek design, has eight Doric columns at each end and seventeen on the flanks. Our Australian temple to the goddess of information is therefore an imperfect imitation with eight columns front and rear and sixteen along its length. This inadequacy may not detract from the National Library's visual appeal for many of us (including, I hope, Mr Whitlam) but perhaps there is some subtle impact on our sense of artistic balance?

(top right) National Library of Australia, Canberra



The National Library was built in the late 1960s and has since been extended underground to accommodate storage and user requirements. There is limited scope for further extension and some of the collection is now housed off-site. While modern libraries are designed to accommodate technologies not yet thought of, the National Library has to cope with an inflexible superstructure and has increasing difficulty in meeting the space requirements of its numerous and enthusiastic users.

Library design issues include the management of existing buildings to suit new ways. Renovations present exciting challenges for all of us because they involve all of us — users, workers, architects, social planners, computer technicians and other specialist groups.

Modern library design, as David Jones has pointed out in his very informative article in this issue of *inCite*, demands attention to a package of social and functional requirements. The

public library has a recreational and educational role as recent surveys have demonstrated [*Navigating the Economy of Knowledge: a national survey of users and non-users of state and public libraries*, Libraries Working Group of the Cultural Ministers' Council, March 1995].

So too with libraries in the education sector. Libraries must welcome their users and be culturally attuned to the nuances of ethnic and indigenous users. Libraries must accommodate the tasks of their staffs. Libraries must sit comfortably within the urban landscape.

Whether we are grappling with the task of constructing a new building or with suiting an existing edifice to the demands of modern information service delivery, our efforts involve an appreciation of the interconnection between form and function — and much more. We are, in Burley Griffin's terms 'dealing with the problems of life'. I hope that our readers enjoy the many stories about library design in this issue of *inCite*. ■

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