Reviews


To review three publications in one burst, is perhaps being a little unfair to each of those publications as individual documents. However, these share so much in common that it is difficult to consider them separately. They were prepared by the same author, Mr. Peter Lovell; they were prepared in the same place, within a period of two years, and were all initiated by the Commonwealth Government at a time when their interest in housing and building extended a little beyond its economic impact. The first two publications really saw their origins in the government initiatives of early 1975, whilst the latter largely came as a follow-on and it was supported by similar sources.

One of the most significant aspects of these documents is that, for perhaps the first time in Australia, the problems of old buildings are assembled together and the fact that old buildings have special problems, needing special solutions, is brought home. It is a myth that a working knowledge of modern building techniques is all that is necessary to deal with old buildings. Those few who have specialised in repairing, restoring or renovating old buildings have known this for a long time, unfortunately, however, the greater part of the building industry, in this country, has not been willing to appreciate this with the result that an endless stream of disasters occurs to old buildings, both large and small. In the preface to Part A, it is revealed that some 20% of Australian homes were built prior to 1900. This fact, coupled with the fact that the greater proportion of these houses has been the target of substantial renovation over the past ten years, points clearly to where the problems lie. Consequently, Peter has essentially used the nineteenth century building stock of the inner areas of Australia's cities as his subject material.
Structural Cracking and Dampness; deals with the two perennial problems of old, (and new), buildings. At first glance the table of contents seems appropriately boring and could undoubtedly be dismissed with an, "I've seen it all before". Of course most architects and engineers have had contact with the subjects of swelling and shrinking soils, shear failure, filling, vibrations, roof plumbing and flashings, drainage, damp-proof courses, etc. etc., but have they ever seen this whole subject area dealt with in the same place? Most of us know of a number of texts which will guide us into these areas, but this document manages to do it within the space of a mere 94 pages. The text, of course, cannot claim to be much more than a comprehensive introduction to the subject areas and I doubt if the author ever saw it as being anything else. As the bibliography tells us, he relied heavily on the sort of reference material many of us may have turned to anyway, (with the addition of a number of interesting overseas references), but has used those volumes of reference to considerable effect. It doesn't set out to open up new research ground in the subject areas, (with perhaps, the possible exception of some damp-proofing techniques), but rather sets out to ensure that the uninformed or poorly informed knows why a Tasmanian Bluegum will damage his terrace house or why electro-osmosis may not be the solution to their rising damp problem. The presentation of the document is basic, (as befits a University research publication). The text is simply typescript, the diagrams simple line drawings and the photographs rather blurred distortions of the originals. No doubt great debate can occur over the validity or workability of certain architectural details, however, what is important is that the material has been assembled in such a way that the debate can get under way.

Stonework Decay and Preservation. Stone has become something of a mystical building material to most architects and engineers today. This document does not set out to train people in these things, but does set out to give architects, engineers, designers and renovators a feel for the subject in such a way that they may be able to more effectively handle existing materials constructed in stone - and we do have a lot of them. It manages to dismember some of the myths about stonework and quietly puts down some of the current popular practices. The one that quickly came to attention related to techniques for cleaning stone buildings. The message in simple terms is to avoid abrasives and chemicals. Water is cheaper and better. Like its predecessor, this document really sets out to bring the variety of available material together in a summary form and for that it is useful. There are more comprehensive technical documents and the bibliography directs you accordingly.

The Renovation and Rehabilitation of Older Australian Dwellings. Takes off where the former two finished and launches into those other familiar subjects of fungus, borers, termites, etc. However, it also launches into some more esoteric and, therefore, interesting subjects such as degradation of paint films, slate delamination, (rather than lamination as stated in the text), and terra cotta tile deterioration.
Once again this document is a generalist introduction to the subject areas, and this probably comes home more strongly because of the greater variety of subjects dealt with in it. It strikes me that the relationship between borers, roof defects and paint deterioration is exceptionally vague and perhaps this document should have really been replaced by three or four more specific smaller publications. However, in understanding the means by which it was produced, one can appreciate that the end suited this means.

The presentation of this document is similar to the former; the photographs are no better, however, the line drawings have disappeared.

In summary, these documents are an invaluable addition to the library of every architect, engineer, builder, student or would-be-renovator. They hopefully would assist people in avoiding the renovation and repair solutions which are putting our older building stock at long term risk and would assist all of us in being able to lay our hands on the right answers at the right time.

It can also be hoped that exercises like this will encourage further research into the problems of old buildings in this country and not leave the older building stock purely at the mercy of the economy and commercial enterprise.

_Dwelling Repair and Renovation_ 'Parts A and B' are both available from the School of Architecture and Building, University of Melbourne, Parkville, for $5.00 each, (plus $1.00 postage). Renovation and Rehabilitation was produced in limited numbers for the Australian Housing Research Council and they are currently anticipating publication of the documents by the end of 1980. Enquiries with respect to this should be addressed to Department of Housing and Construction, Central Office, Canberra.

RAY TONKIN

To this reviewer anything to do with school history, and with Education Department History in particular, tends to smell from afar of insufferable tedium and banality. Burchell's Victorian Schools is a different proposition for, detailed and exhaustive though it is, it is definitely a book on architecture, and in many respects the best ever published in Victoria. It includes a range of schematic plans which permit typological comparisons between buildings, numerous reproductions from original architects' drawings, and a number of useful illustrations of the English schools which influenced colonial thinking.

For a non-architect Burchell seems remarkably at home bandying about technical terms like 'bartizan', explaining the operation of the Tobin Tube, and analysing the mannerist features of Johnson's 'Italian' design for the Model Schools in Spring Street. One may be unhappy with his account of the appearance of the 'balloon frames', but he has relied upon sources which he was entitled to trust. To describe St. James's as a 'Regency classicizing cathedral' is certainly unacceptable, but not worse than other published references to the building, which cannot begin to make sense without distinguishing the sources of Russell's nave from those of Laing's tower. One may criticise a somewhat mainstream selection of overseas sources: it is good to find appropriate references to the general influence of Pugin, and of Ruskin, but there are other and more specific sources. Diaper patterned brickwork, as used at Vaughan, at Eastern Road, South Melbourne, and at Vere Street, Collingwood, goes back to Philip Hardwicke's work at Lincoln's Inn and, for educational buildings, to S.S. Teulon's St. Michael's Schools, Pimlico, of 1846.

Is it reasonable to assume that everything springs from England? There is one most interesting group of schools, beginning with Horsham, Avoca and Macedon, of 1876, 1877, and 1879, characterised by double jerkinhead roofs, bell-cote fleches, and initially by extensive verandahs roofed at a lower pitch, so as to give the picturesque broken-backed profile. Burchell rightly suggests that they may have been an influence in the development of the Australian Queen Anne, (that is, Federation Style). But they have certain antecedents locally in the work in which Edward La Trobe Bateman seems to have been involved with the Reed & Barnes office, (Herronswood, Barragunda, Kolar), and certain American antecedents in the designs of Andrew Jackson Downing and Calvert Vaux, and perhaps even the early works of H. H. Richardson.
VICTORIAN SCHOOLS
A Study in Colonial Government Architecture
1837–1900
One of the pleasant surprises of the book is that it identifies and illustrates some designs by fairly shadowy early architects on the goldfields, Arthur Hartley, Frederick Poeppel and R. A. Lawson, (who later emigrated and practised for many years in New Zealand before returning to produce such surprising works as Lowther Hall, Essendon). This makes it seem odd that Poeppel is not named as the architect of the Maldon school, at least in its rebuilt form, or A. J. Derrick of that at Ararat. Burchell is peculiarly churlish in not acknowledging the theses of architecture students, or even the monumental analysis of Public Works Department architecture by Bruce Trethowan, upon which he appears to have drawn substantially. On one occasion, he is trapped into referring to a document which has gone missing and survives only in an architecture thesis, and this seems to be the only one to attract any acknowledgement in the notes, much less the bibliography.

But minor carping should be set aside. The book is a very thorough, well illustrated and generally well-documented account, reliable, and as readable as can be expected of a work on such a subject - indeed enlivened by not a few flashes of wit. It is a significant improvement on the M.A. thesis form which it derives, and will stand as a model for architectural historians concerned with particular building types.

MILES LEWIS

Ararat Common School
High St., Ararat
Built 1868
(Burchell, p. 80)

Maldon Church of England School
Built 1856
Architect: F. Poeppel
(Burchell, p. 57)