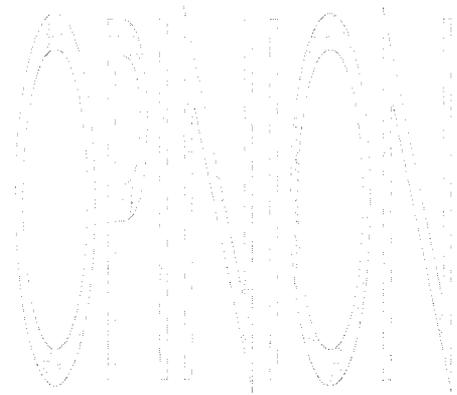
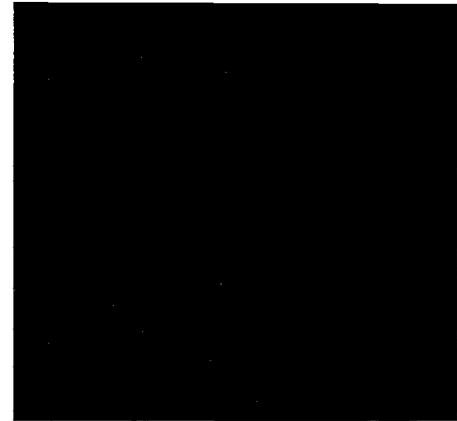


SANSOM ART



test



GOOD TASTE : BAD TASTE

Gareth Sansom: *Test*, 1985, enamel, wax, turpentine and stamp on paper.

Good taste to those who believe they have it, is something they were born with, a genetic present from their parents, a gift of the gods. Good taste is, they are sure, ineffable, immutable, timeless and theirs. This, despite the abundant evidence that all is effable, mutable, of a time and, maybe, not theirs!

Artists are often subjected to this entrenched attitude through critical evaluations of the so-called experts who dominate the media and who frequently have an arrogance and insensitivity to anything that exceeds what they have arbitrarily decided constitutes good taste.

It is not suggested that critics should abandon all standards and pander only to the lowest common denominator, but it is important to recognise that we are all products of our own time, that standards do change, that no-one's opinion is absolute and that other possibilities exist and are valid.

While a gallery owner is perfectly entitled to promote art and artists who adhere to a particular set of theories and beliefs, he or she ought not to confuse these theories and beliefs with something other than what they are - fallible.

Art, like other aspects of life which are prone to fashion, is the subject of overnight sensations and the lure of the latest fad. Remember when neo-expressionism was all the rage?

Remember Julian Schnabel?

And how much does financial advantage inform what is considered good taste?

It is usually in private art galleries that artists who are to become the latest 'icon' or 'demonstrator artist' first appear. The favoured ones are then picked up by public galleries as 'curatorial darlings'. They become part of an entrenched family that appears in all sorts of exhibitions, surveys and competitions.

These are the artists who demonstrate what a select band of curators, gallery owners and arts writers have decided offer the only acceptable style at the moment.

Currently in Australia such luminary artists include John Nixon, Jenny Watson, Imants Tillers, Julie Brown-Rap and Richard Dunn. These artists belong to a group or association, dubbed by critic John McDonald (not entirely flatteringly), an 'Academy of the Avant Garde'. In order to discover who is currently an acceptable demonstrator artist, see any recent *Perspecta Survey* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales - the Australian Bicentennial *Perspecta 87* being a classic example of all that is most blinkered in officially approved Australian art.

Some artists reach star status at a relatively early age and appear in all the major exhibitions, have their work





sent to exotic ports to represent our country, win all the big prizes and are feted and lionised by Society. In recent times such 'lucky' artists have included Susan Norrie and Dale Frank.

The drawback to this seemingly delightful circumstance is that enormous demands are placed on the artist to produce and, sometimes, this can lead to exhaustion on all levels. Then, of course, the moment of glory fades and the artist is left to wonder what happened to his or her brightly burning star.

Public art galleries, you might hope, would see their task as to reflect the great variety of approaches to art, both historically and in the contemporary scene. You would expect that their function is to demonstrate that art is a matter of many questions and responses, all of them potentially valid. If you are to become informed in matters of art you have the right to expect a broad experience and the best place to get that experience should be the public art galleries.

Sadly, we are more often presented with exhibitions that are narrow, repetitive and predictable and in which the 'taste' is pre-ordained.

The Australian National Gallery in Canberra, fortunately, has been

something of an exception over the past few years. Despite its slight Melbourne bias in the choice of artists, it always manages to have a range of exhibitions, at least one of which (though often more), is worthwhile.

Of course exhibitions need a specific aim or a special theme but when survey exhibitions all look much the same from year to year, when survey exhibitions and single artist exhibitions feature the same group of artists, ennui is not the only thing that sets in. Ungenerous thoughts, even dark suspicions, arise.

Probably unjustly, you begin to wonder whether the frequent inclusion in public exhibitions of, for instance, John Nixon's endless reworking of Malevich's motifs or Jenny Watson's little girl 'marks', doesn't represent anything more than a close relationship with the curator and/or other interested parties.

Some arts writers seem to belong to the one club and are fulsome, if obscure, in their detailed expositions of the work of rather much the same artists' works from one exhibition to the next and one magazine or newspaper to the next.

It is interesting to note that even though the names of the writers periodically change, the basic allegiances rarely do. It sometimes appears that one quite busy person is scribbling away under an assortment of names.

One thing does seem clear, however, and that is in recent years arts writers have been dabbling in the arcane mysteries of Semiotics and Foucault and writers of that ilk. These have helped set the standards for good taste in arts philosophy and arts writing. The result of this can be seen in the work of a cavalcade of academically trained writers. It is characterised, as far as I can divine, by a special talent for writing about writing about art rather than writing about art itself.

It is the New Obscurantism.

The upshot of this is the creation of an alienating wall of words, heavily latinized in origin, obfuscating in their application and representative of a pioneeringly intrepid trek into the limitrophe and chthonic reaches of The Oxford Dictionary, Second Edition. This,



Left: Julie Brown-Rrap:
If Hypocrits, 1990.

Above: Jenny Watson:
Self portrait as a little girl, 1987.



Dale Frank: *Title not known, 1987-8, mixed media.*

I gather, is meant to impress, if not the reader, then certainly other members of the group. Examples are especially frequent in gallery catalogues, both public and private.

The cult of niceness arose during the nineteenth century, a period which saw itself as the very height of civilisation, culture and rightness. Such self-congratulatory vision tends to breed hypocrisy rather than honesty. Unfortunately, while we have abandoned many of the firmly held, God-given beliefs that underpinned nineteenth century society, its idea that art should neither question nor challenge or offend, still holds firm sway throughout much of our society. So does the arrogant assumption by the self-appointed that they have the right not only to decide but to suppress.

It continually amazes me that the same mind that can deal with the vagaries and power of the motorcar, can make use of a jet aircraft and can contemplate with equilibrium a world in which nuclear power is a matter of common occurrence, is reduced to frothing outrage and vociferous irrationality by the depiction of the naked human body in the sexual act, homosexuality or any other idea,

whether sexual, political, philosophical, social or historical, which is not in complete accord with its own, usually very narrow and repressive ideas.

The urge to censor in the name of God and good taste is, rather, the urge to repress anything and anyone who does not agree with or perform according to the beliefs of a self-appointed zealot.

If Melbourne artist Juan Davila is not offended by and does not wish to repress the beliefs and acts of the Reverend Fred Nile, politician, why does the Reverend Fred Nile believe he has the right to impose his ideas and beliefs on Juan Davila?

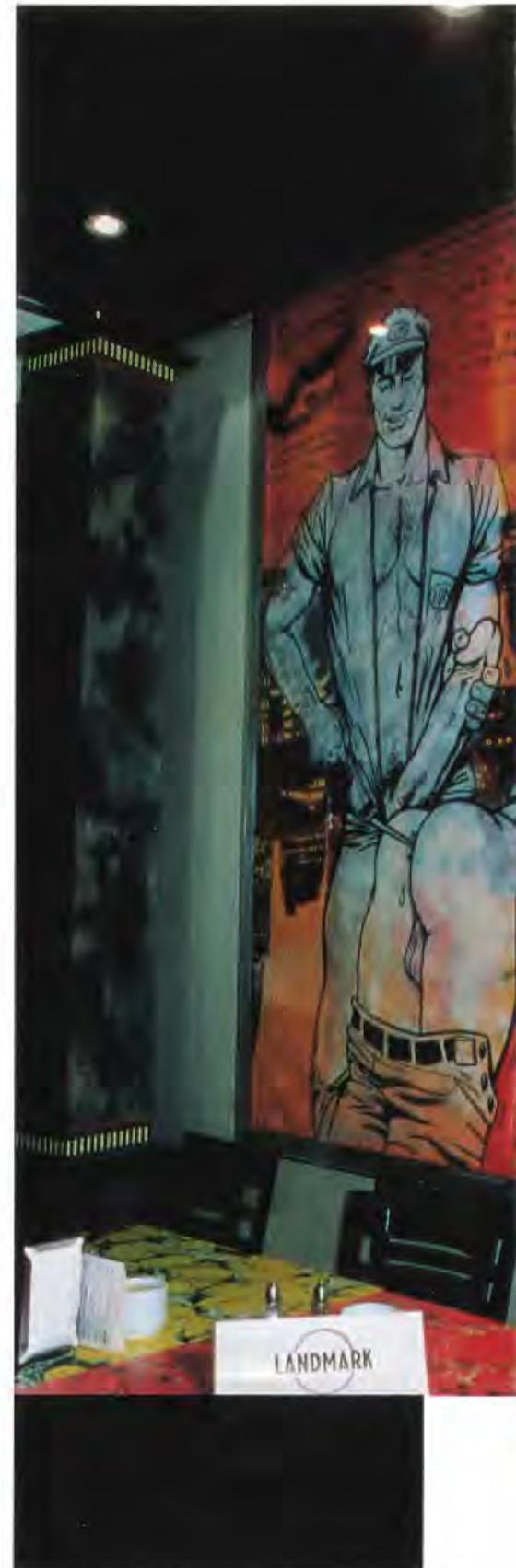
Which, in the eyes of God, is the greater obscenity: Juan Davila's depiction of certain aspects of his sexuality, or Fred Nile's obsessive need to suppress Davila's art?

The cult of niceness is affiliated with religious and political conservatism and intolerance. They make for potent bedfellows in our society. Most disturbing is the belief that if it does not accord with certain ideas then it must be destroyed, removed, eradicated, expunged and terminated. The attendant hysteria, the calling down of the wrath of God, makes you wonder what God must think of these ravener, self-elected interpreters of His word who seem to lack any hint of Christian charity, forgiveness or humility.

The censoring of Davila's painting '**Stupid as a Painter**' during the 1982 Sydney Biennale revealed how wowsership is ever with us. This huge painting was later displayed in the privately owned Roslyn Oxley Gallery in Sydney's Paddington and drew hordes of patrons wanting to see what the brouhaha was all about. It is not known how many innocent souls were corrupted eternally by the experience.

Interestingly, both Oxley's new gallery and Juan Davila became famous overnight. Those of a cynical turn might suppose that censorship can, in fact, be good for business.

Of course, it is not only gay artists who





encounter the antagonism of the conservative reformers. They are simply the more obvious targets should they make their homosexuality overt in any way.

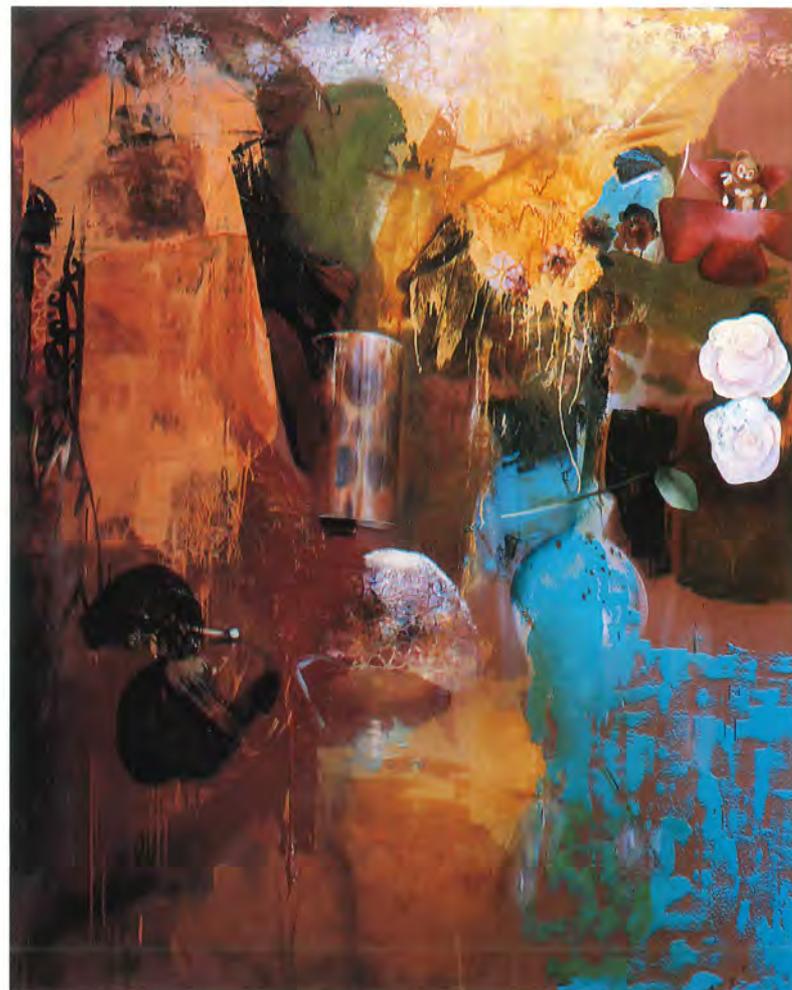
In the *Perspecta* 1985 survey at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, a work by local photographer Anne MacDonald contained a sexually explicit image. It provoked a flurry of controversy. The controversy was not a simple one, it was not solely a matter of those prone to moral indignation having the time of their lives, but also that gallery staff succumbed to so small and noisy a pressure and censored the offending image.

This was a rather ludicrous reaction as it was one image within a larger work. Such behaviour makes a mockery of the whole concept of freedom of expression and the duty of a public gallery to educate and to lead in matters of the arts. It was not overly admirable to allow a few strident voices, especially such wellknown and predictable ones, to deprive the public at large of the right of access and evaluation.

Ironically, if there had been no fuss, far fewer people would have been aware of the work's existence.

Melbourne artist Gareth Sansom 'has consistently defied the self-conscious tenets of good taste in local art' (Arthur McIntyre). His personal explorations of aspects of life that most would seek to hide are deliberate as he believes that 'provocation and shock tactics can lead to enlightenment' (Frances Lindsay). Such perversity has not endeared Sansom to those in our community who prefer a Pollyanna view of life and who find confrontation unacceptable.

In America, the recent celebrated case involving an exhibition of works by the late Robert Mapplethorpe at the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center is an outstanding example of good taste in its most moral and conservative guise attempting to suppress the display of art works. A group who knew in advance that they would be offended took the gallery to court to prevent the exhibition taking place. Would it be too trite and



obvious to point out that in this instance, and all similar instances, if the would-be viewer knows that he or she will be offended then they are free to choose not to see the exhibition?

Left: Juan Davila: *Stupid as a painter*, 1981, acrylic and collage on photographic mural.

Above: Susan Norrie: *Untitled*, 1988, oil on canvas.

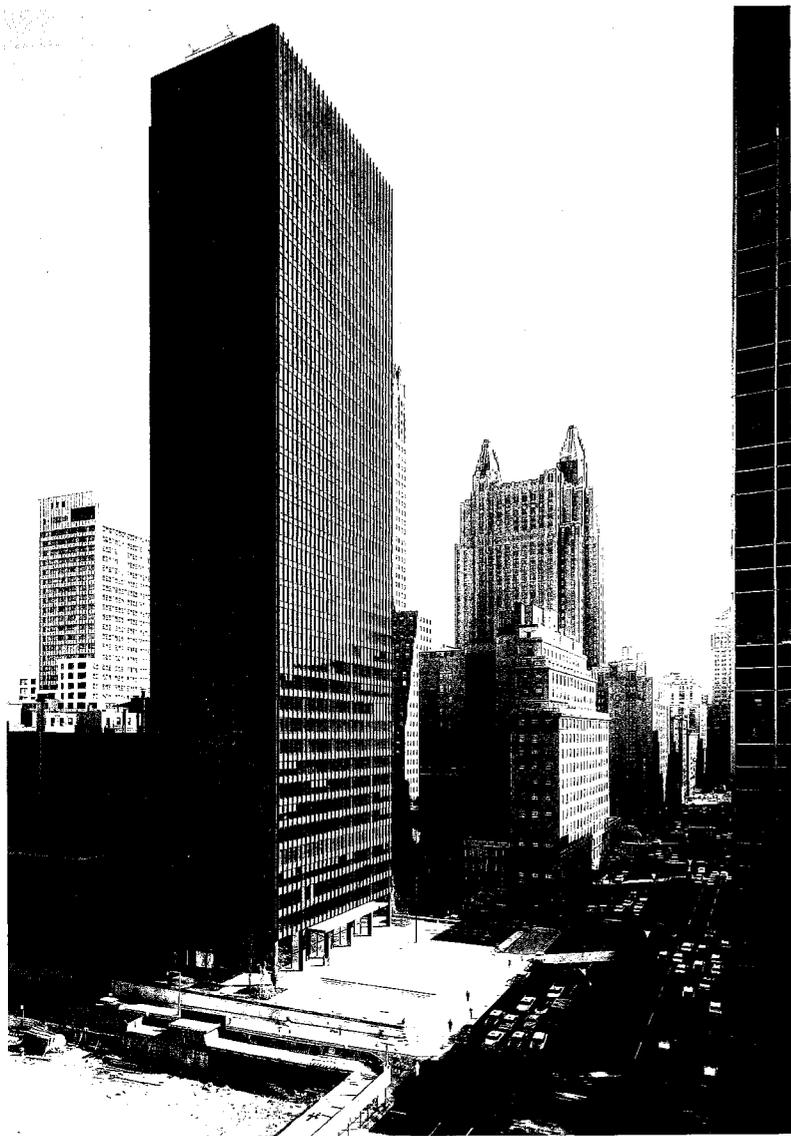
A similar threat of action had caused the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., to succumb. However, galleries in Hartford, Chicago, Philadelphia, Berkeley and Boston stood their ground. So far, none of these cities has turned to salt.

In the Cincinnati trial, the jury of eight, five or whom had never been in an art gallery, was composed of mostly suburban, working-class parents. This jury, which you might reasonably expect to be essentially 'redneck', came down with a decision of the most estimable good sense. In the words of one of the jurors: 'We thought the pictures were lewd, grotesque, disgusting, but ... art doesn't have to be beautiful or pretty.'

Images may not all be 'nice' but that in no way prevents them from being art.

Consider the work of Goya, or Bosch.

In the late nineteenth century, the work of Vincent Van Gogh was not considered 'nice' either. He was thought



Above: Seagram Building, 1957. Architects: Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson. Photograph: Ezra Stoller.

Right: Coopers and Lybrand Building, Rice/Daubney, Sydney.

a madman, nothing more or less; his work was the product of a disorganised and deranged mind. He only sold one work during his lifetime.

A few years later, an eminent critic was so outraged by the paintings of a group of painters, including such talentless artists as Henri Matisse, that he called them **Les Fauves** (the Wild Beasts).

The history of art is full of examples of artists who suffered at the fate of the reigning but fickle standards of good taste of the experts of the day who judged them and found them wanting - nonentities like Rembrandt, Vermeer and El Greco.

After World War II the evangelical style of the architects Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, now called Modernism, took root in the United States and rapidly transformed itself from a style based on socialist principles to the house style of corporate America. The 1950s were its heyday, epitomised in the severe and classical elegance of the Seagram Building in New York.

During the '60s and '70s, the achievements of Modernism were beginning to be questioned. By the late '70s controversy and conflict were raging due to the advent of what is still being called, somewhat inaccurately, Post Modernism.

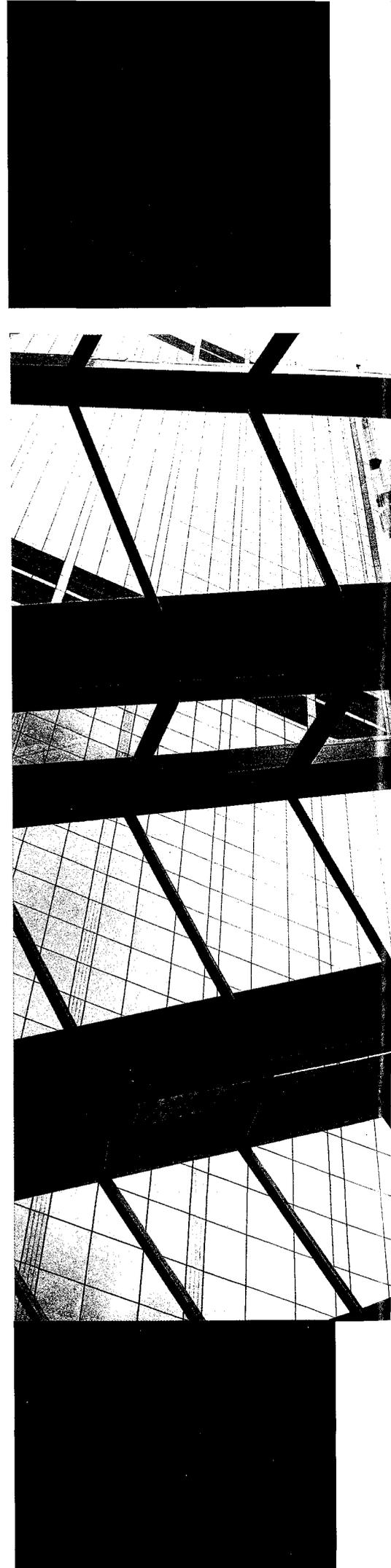
The followers of Modernism were outraged by the betrayal of those architects who had taken not only to historical reference but even architectural jokes. Such frivolity towards the serious business of architectural design was anathema to the purists.

The ferocity of the language in the defence of the good taste and the truth of Modernism and the denigration of all architects and their issue who even hinted at Post Modernism has been quite breathtaking. It smacks more of the extremities of fanaticism than the rationality and pragmatism that supposedly underly Modernism.

Prince Charles, not always known for his orthodoxy, bravely bought into the debate with some fairly trenchant criticism of the failures of Modernism: its coldness, its rational insensitivity, its unfeeling geometry and its treatment of humans as statistics or industrial units. In his book, **A Vision of Britain: A Personal View of Architecture**, he championed a return to past values, values he saw as reflecting a humanitarian benevolence and an environmental sensibility that would restore dignity to man. His ideas seem to be a sort of soft focus, eighteenth century, classicist ideal, utopian, arcadian and misted over by yearnings for an age that never was.

The Modernists, to put it mildly, waxed wrathful, especially those in the *Architectural Review*, who heaped bile and vituperation upon the Prince and his pretty book.

Perhaps the Prince does have his head somewhat *parmi les nuages*, but many of his criticisms of the built evidence of Modernism are perfectly valid. Modernism had high ideals, it sought to improve the living and working environment of workers and society in





general. It staunchly believed it could improve mankind, morally and socially, through architecture.

You do not need to look too hard at many housing estates, industrial areas or city centres built, or rebuilt, since 1945, to see that despite some splendid but isolated examples, Modernism, has, more-or-less, failed.

In fact, some of its failures have been spectacular: the Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St. Louis, U.S.A., has had to be carefully pruned by demolition; in Brazil the new capital, Brasilia, made its proud declaration of Le Corbusier's planning ideals in the early '60s, but is now crumbling beneath its pretensions, shoddy workmanship and isolation; Chandigarh, in India, designed by the master himself, rattles around in its own spacious and dusty emptiness; in Paris the terrifying La Defense precinct is an environment for alien kind only; in Albany, New York, the Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza is as traumatising and as grandiose and bombastic as its name.

You cannot grow ivy over any of these!

Consider the suicide towers of any city's highrise housing for the poor; behold the glittering arrogance of city centre towers in any major city, bereft of all human scale and warmth and with the individuality of metal packing cases.

In Australia during the '60s and '70s, highrise buildings to house the poor went up in Sydney, at Redfern and Waterloo and, especially, in Melbourne where thirty-storey estates, coyly hiding beneath names like 'Debney Meadows', became living filing cabinets of human despair.

One thing for which Sydney can be grateful to the fallen entrepreneur Alan Bond, is that he caused the demolition of the dreary, lumpen Commonwealth Centre.

Every city has its examples of Modernist buildings that its citizens love to hate and every couple of years journalists dutifully compile lists for us to gloat and argue over. Less frequent are lists of

those buildings we love.

Prince Charles may be pipe-dreaming, but he said something that needed to be said by someone who could get some sort of a reaction. The resultant furore has led to some degree of discussion and, once the fury and acrimony have abated, perhaps there will be some rational reassessment.

The Modernist-Post Modernist 'debate' has revolved around idealism versus philistinism, good versus evil. The question of good taste (Modernism), as opposed to bad taste (Post Modernism) has been obscuring the real issues.

What those who would be King - or Queen - of Taste seem always to forget is that nothing in life is static, so how can good taste be forever unchanging?

It is the mavericks of their time who challenge established tastes and who, in doing so, keep the cycle moving. If we were to achieve that perfect state in which good taste were infinitely fixed, we would probably be dead.

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