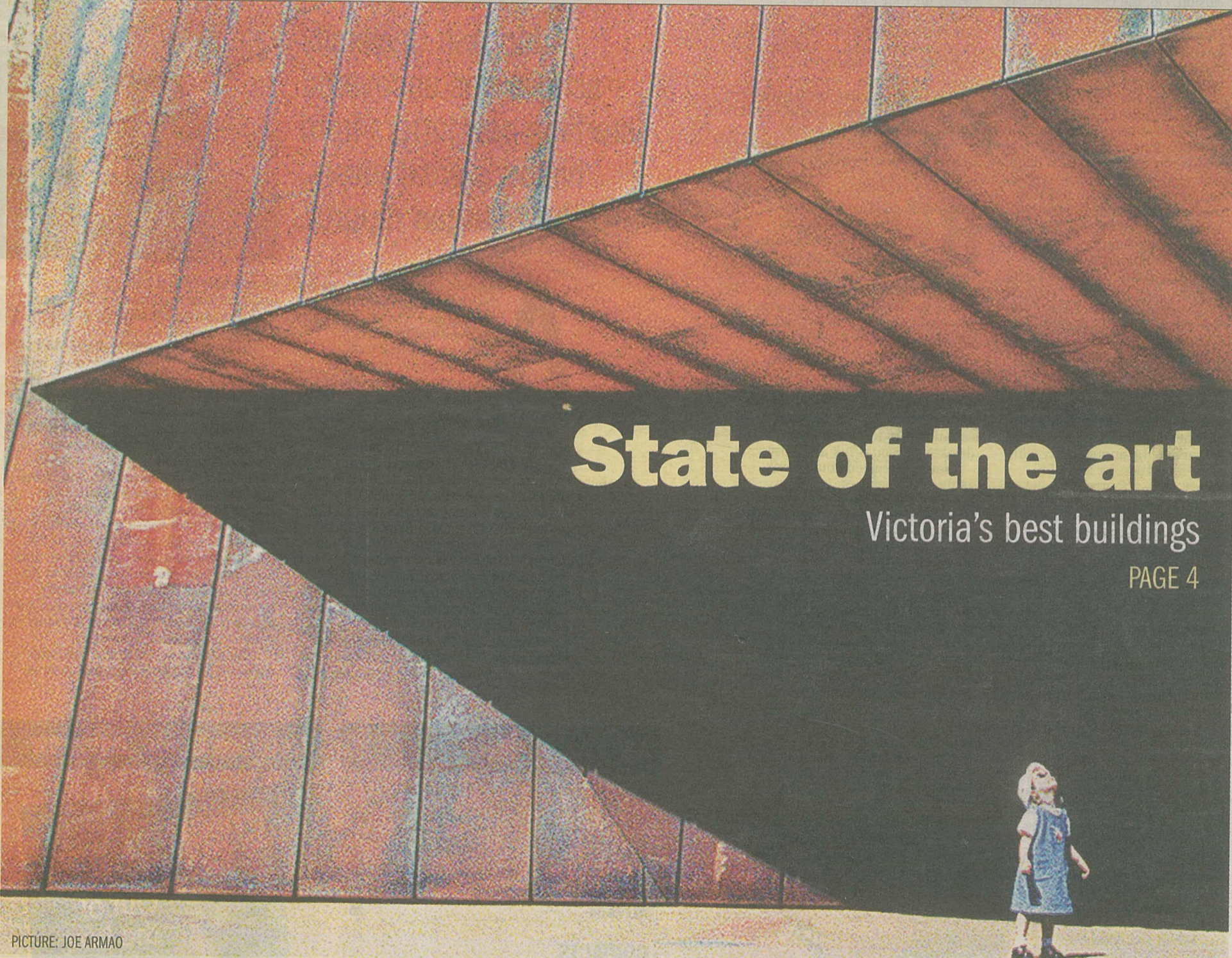


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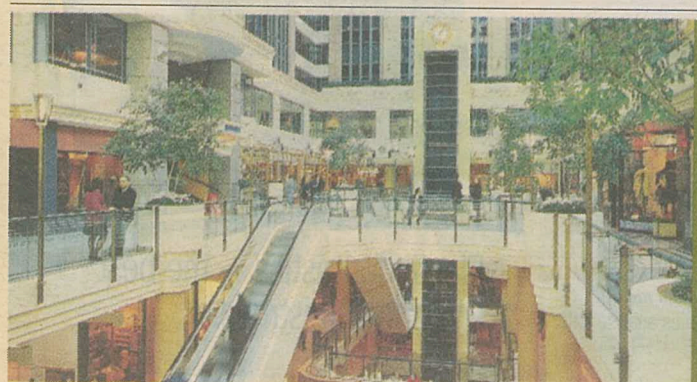


## State of the art

Victoria's best buildings

PAGE 4

PICTURE: JOE ARMAO



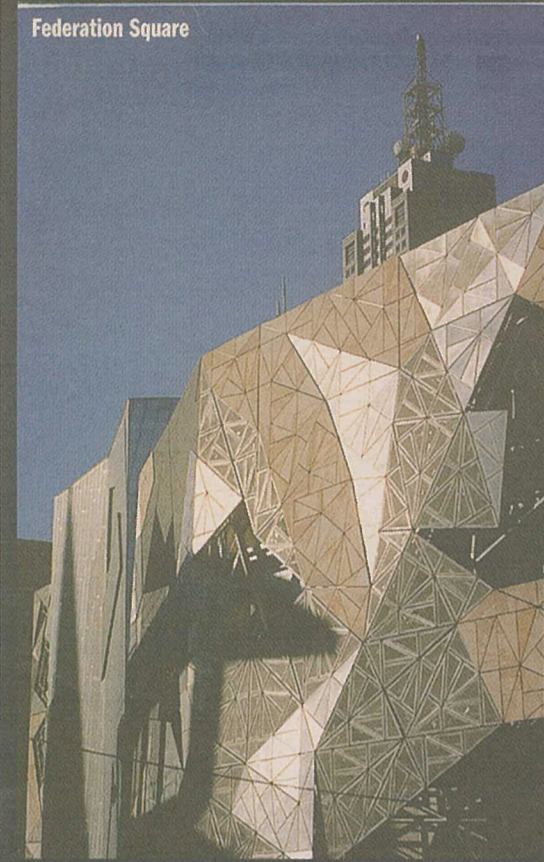
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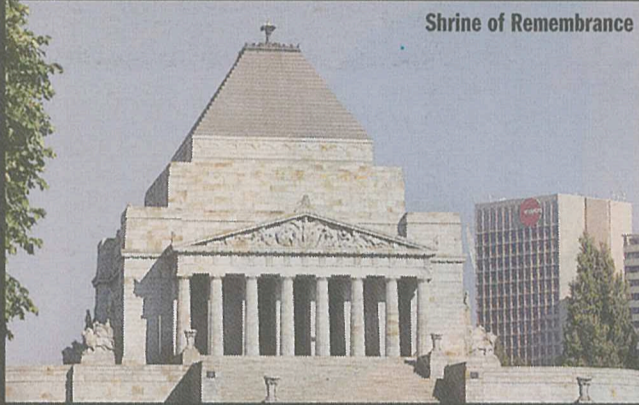
Melbourne Museum



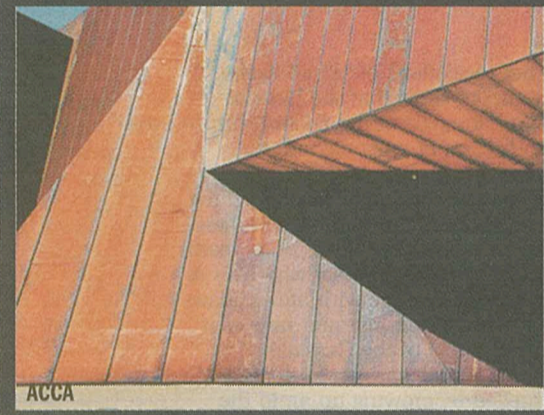
Newburn



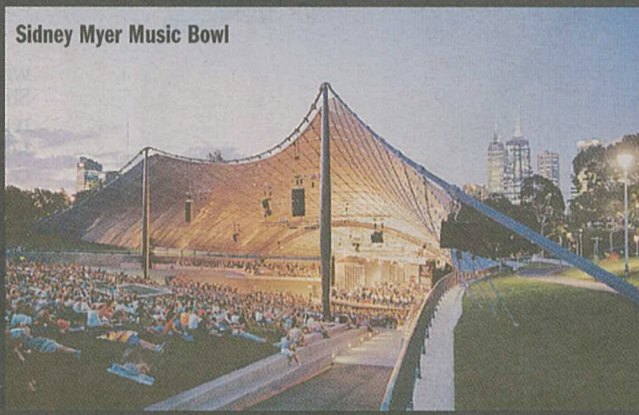
Roy Grounds' Round Ho



Shrine of Remembrance



ACCA



Sidney Myer Music Bowl



Former BHP House



Melbourne Terrace

# Building sight

What do a shrine, a church, two schools, two art galleries, apartments blocks, government buildings and an incinerator have in common? A panel of experts has chosen them as some of the best buildings in Victoria, a testament to the state's bold and experimental approach to design. **Sonia Harford** reports.

**F**or a city once considered the demure bridesmaid to the trumpy bride of Sydney, Melbourne has snatched the bouquet to become Australia's boldest, most experimental city of design. And it's not just about daring to let an Italian meddle with "our" National Gallery of Victoria. Architects and academics point to the classy and the kooky in many of Victoria's recent buildings as evidence of the state's openness to change.

"Melbourne's an architecture laboratory, a real centre for experimentation compared to other cities," says Dr Doug Evans, associate professor at RMIT's School of Architecture and Design. "It's terrific. The buildings are not always successful, but they're all interesting."

His bullish confidence comes as the Victorian chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects celebrates 75 years of giving awards to what it judges to be the state's best buildings.

To mark the occasion, the RAI A revisited some of the controversial judgements of the past: the year when Southland Shopping Centre beat the National Gallery of Victoria (then the "Cultural Centre") to the top prize, and the night the severe BHP House took home the award, provoking an uproar.

In re-assessing buildings from a contemporary perspective, the RAI A has tried to capture "a snapshot of our time". Thirty of Melbourne's leading architects and academics were asked to submit a list of their

## THE JUDGES

- |                               |                               |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Neil Clerehan<br>architect    | Ian McDougall<br>architect    |
| Peter Corrigan<br>architect   | Clare Newton<br>academic      |
| John Gollings<br>photographer | Barry Patten<br>architect     |
| Conrad Hamann<br>academic     | Allan Powell<br>architect     |
| Peter Lovell<br>architect     | Dimity Reed<br>academic       |
| Randal Marsh<br>architect     | Kerstin Thompson<br>architect |

favourites of the past 75 years. Eventually, a panel of 12 threw themselves into a fervent debate to come up with a list of Victoria's 36 best buildings.

The Victorian list has been published, with the judges' comments, in the book *Judging Architecture*.

While its editor Philip Goad admits judging is "a fickle process", relying on the subjective choices of the RAI A's juries, he nonetheless values each year of the awards as "an instant recording of history, or at least an instant assignation of value, made not by one person, the historian or critic as is usually the case, but by a jury of professional colleagues".

The juries are changed each year to keep the peer-assessment fair.

During the judging, there were fierce arguments, icy silences and even a walk-out. The titans of Melbourne architecture were there — Neil Clerehan, Peter Corrigan, Ian McDougall — judging their peers and predecessors. Finally they came up with a list that included a shrine, a church, two schools, two art galleries, office and government buildings, apartment blocks and even an incinerator.

Beginning with Walter Burley Griffin's Essendon municipal incinerator of 1929, with its stylish triangular decorations, and leading perhaps inevitably to Federation Square, the list includes many of Melbourne's most recognisable buildings, loved or loathed by the general public.

The range of styles mirrors a changing Melbourne that gradually looked towards Europe and the United States, and the new century's modernism. Even during the Depression, builders worked around the clock to create the streamlined grace of the Manchester Unity building.

The elegant Newburn and Stanhill flats in Queens Road were brought to life in the 1940s by Frederick Romberg, a Swiss emigre whose partnership with Roy Grounds and the spirited modernist Robin Boyd became one of Melbourne's most influential.

Post-war, the thrust and height of the former ICI House, and the Victorian state offices, designed by Yuncken Freeman, hurled Melbourne into the glass-and-steel

office-block boom that either blessed or blighted the city.

Generational change came when Melbourne's architecture shook off its respectable modern-Georgian bias, and the city learned to have fun with buildings.

"People often come over all po-faced when they talk about architecture," says Chris McAuliffe, director of Melbourne University's Ian Potter Museum of Art.

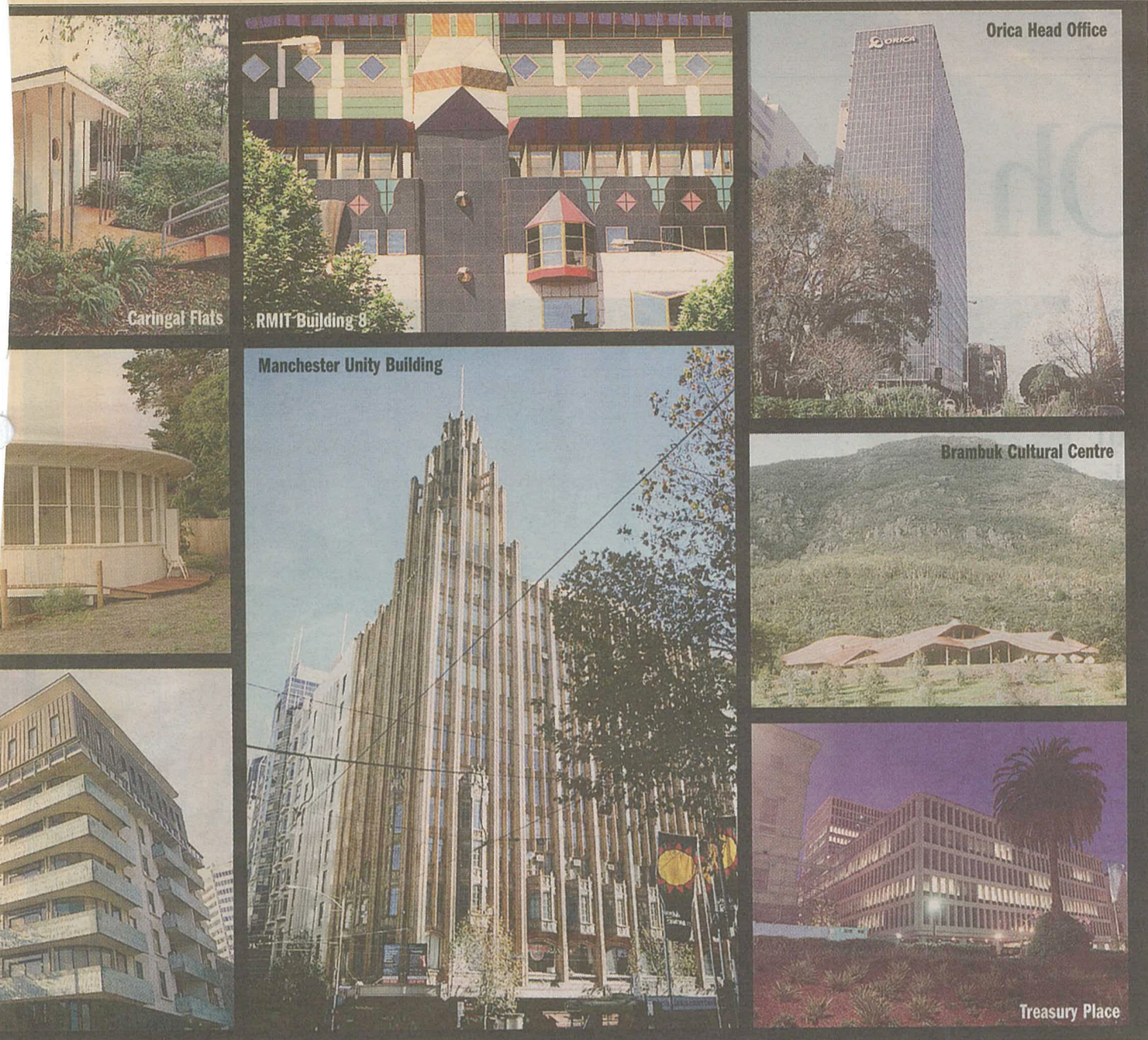
"In the past, many people couldn't cope with the early Biltmoderne buildings, and the Edmond and Corrigan stuff (RMIT's Building 8) — because this architecture was fun."

Author of the book *Art and Suburbia*, McAuliffe has explored the ways in which ordinary Australians live, regardless of how architects idealise their discipline. The beach house, omitted in the RAI A's list, is a key genre in his view.

"Architectural theory, in general, over the past 50 years, has had a love-hate relationship with vernacular architecture. But there's something to learn from the fact that car ports, garages, sun decks, patios and barbecue areas all came up from people's behaviour, rather than down from a high style mentality."

Other favourites of McAuliffe's that didn't find their way on to the list, draw on a "public memory and community mythology": the power station on Lonsdale Street, Luna Park, Flinders Street station, Junction Oval and the St Kilda sea baths "before they were travestied".

You won't find a triple-fronted, brick-



## Victoria's best buildings (1929-2003)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| Essendon Municipal Incinerator  | Former Plumbers and Gasfitters Union building, Victoria Street         |
| Manchester Unity Building   | Former BHP House, William Street                                       |
| MacRobertson Girls High School  | Winter Park cluster housing, Doncaster                                 |
| Shrine of Remembrance   | Murray Valley Private Hospital, Wodonga                                |
| Cairo flats, Fitzroy  | Chapel of St Joseph, Box Hill  |
| Former McPherson's Pty Ltd building, Collins Street                                   | Resurrection Parish (church, school, presbytery, housing), Keysborough |
| Former Sanitarium health foods factory, Warburton                                     | Athan House, Monbulk   |
| Newburn flats, Queens Road  | Brambuk Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Halls Gap                          |
| Stanhill flats, Queens Road   | RMIT Building 8, Swanston Street                                       |
| Caringal flats, Toorak  | Melbourne Terrace apartments, corner Franklin and Queen streets        |
| Roy Grounds' house and flats, Toorak  | RMIT Storey Hall, Swanston Street                                      |
| Peter McIntyre's River House, Kew   | Melbourne gateway (Bolte Bridge and sound tunnel), Ascot Vale          |
| Former Olympic Swimming Stadium   | Melbourne Museum, Carlton  |
| Robin Boyd House II, South Yarra  | Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Southbank                      |
| Orica Ltd head office (former ICI House), East Melbourne                              | Federation Square, Flinders Street                                     |
| Former ETA factory, Braybrook   |  |
| Sidney Myer Music Bowl  |  |
| Heide II, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Bulleen   |  |
| NGV International   |  |
| Preshil, Kew  |  |
| Victorian state offices and Premier's Office, 1 Macarthur Street and 1 Treasury Place |  |

vener home on the RAI's list, either. It's hardly surprising, given the historic intellectual disdain towards the average home, stretching from Boyd's contempt for suburban mediocrity, to Barry Humphries's satire, and George Johnston's protagonist in *My Brother Jack*, who despaired at life in the "mental desert".

So, when you grumble to your companion as you pass a particularly offensive structure scarring your visual landscape, do the professionals really care? Evans acknowledges architects and lay people often judge buildings quite differently; yet he insists most architects are conscious of their role in contributing to the community.

"The fact that the average punter might look at (RMIT's) Storey Hall and say, 'That's a bit funny; I don't like that', doesn't indicate architects are fundamentally out of step with what's going on in society."

He credits Edmond and Corrigan (RMIT's Building 8) and Ashton Raggatt McDougall (Storey Hall) with revitalising Melbourne.

"The colour and movement of their buildings pushed the limits of public expectations," he says. "That's not their motivation, however. They are conscious of the cultural dimension of their task."

Architects might hope to be judged by their peers at awards time primarily on aesthetic grounds — as creators of art works — but, in reality, their designs are always subject to clients' demands. Budget and time constraints and heritage regulations often

make a project architecture by committee. McAuliffe sympathises: "Imagine trying to write a novel with several government agencies putting in their two-cents worth, or a reader telling you to put that chapter in, or make it bigger, or take it out to make the book cheaper."

In compiling its list, the panel has perhaps fudged the Greatest Hits approach by not ranking the buildings in any order. There's no *Citizen Kane* or *Sergeant Pepper* topping the list to fuel a more emotional public debate. Yet the selection still narrows down many thousands of buildings to the bold and the brave who were before their time.

"A building may be flawed, but it was courageous and cutting-edge at the time,"



Architect Peter McIntyre at his home in Kew.  
PICTURE: SIMON SCHLUTER

commented McDougall, championing innovation. Groundbreaking Sydney architect Harry Seidler once said he created buildings to be judged in 500 years, not in the present — to transcend fashion.

Perhaps time confers status. As actor John Huston's evil character Noah Cross says in the movie *Chinatown*: "Politicians, ugly buildings and whores all get respectable if they last long enough."

Which is good news for Graeme Gunn's notoriously squat, grey union building in Victoria Street, Melbourne. Acclaimed by his peers and included in the list of 36, its concrete charms elude many.

Among those who know the term "brutalist" is fine in design is architect Zahava Elenberg, 30.

"I like the brutalist fire stations around town. They're strangely, quietly ugly."

The partner of architecture firm Elenberg Fraser says she likes to vary the designs of her own buildings, but, in her personal choices, she seems to favour the bad and the bold.

"I loved the National Gallery of Victoria, before it was recently manipulated. It represented more about the city than just good looks. It was brutal and modernist with that impenetrable moat around it, and it was a Victorian building made out of our stone," says Elenberg.

Elenberg admits her resentment at the changes is based partly on sentimentality — an NGV remembered from her childhood — and she says with some grit: "Retrospectively,

we'll all regret what we've done to that building!"

For other emotional reasons she does not care for MacRobertson Girls High School — included among the 36 best — because, as a pupil, she was asked to leave. And the roof leaked.

Similar personal associations probably colour everyone's opinion about many of Melbourne's best-loved buildings. The serene Shrine of Remembrance for veterans, Preshil for former students, Heide Museum of Modern Art's sense of romance, for picnics probably as much as exhibitions.

Newer buildings haven't had time to build up this bank of memories, and rely on instant controversy, or sudden bulk, like Federation Square.

Observing the transformation of Melbourne over many years, from his splendid River House in Kew, is Peter McIntyre. In the 1950's, McIntyre and Boyd seduced their generation with lyrical, light-filled houses that merged with their environment — and challenged the monotony of Melbourne's suburbs.

A former student and colleague of Boyd, the tireless reformer, McIntyre is perhaps more open to change than most, epitomising Melbourne's restless spirit of reinventing itself. At the age of 76, he now has the chance to do what Grounds could not at the NGV — re-work his original design.

McIntyre and his team designed the Olympic Swimming Stadium at Flinders Park in 1952. The stadium's change to a concert hall was unsuccessful, so, 50 years on, McIntyre was asked by the trustees to alter it to become a gym and training centre for Collingwood Football Club and the Victorian Institute of Sport.

In a "nervous operation", he says: "I felt we were extending the original new building to give it life, while retaining the original design."

He says emphatically that Melbourne has changed for the better, through new ideas and new materials.

"Robin would still be disappointed. He believed the suburban sprawl of Melbourne was illogical. But we have made some inroads."

*Judging Architecture: Issues, Divisions, Triumphs* is published by the RAI Victorian Chapter. Photographs from the book are included in an exhibition at Heide Museum of Modern Art until February 22.

## What Melburnians say

### Amy Wilson

Eltham, Pharmacy assistant

"I think the Rialto is really nice. When you go inside and up to the top, it's great to look out. All the tourists go there. I think it's elegant, whereas some tall buildings aren't at all attractive."

### Stuart McGougan

Mornington, Program manager, Salvation Army

"My favourite's a modern home in Mornington. It's a Graeme Jones-designed house in Balcombe Street. It uses corrugated iron for cladding, and Australian stone. That's how our architecture should be, not like something from overseas. It looks Australian: it looks like it's supposed to be here."

### Desiree Jacobson,

Brunswick East, Arts services organisation events manager

"I like the new Australian Centre for Contemporary Art because, strange as it sounds, it reminds me of Uluru. The color is an amazing red, but, like Uluru, it changes through the day. When there's a blue sky, the red is incredibly bold. On a grey, dull day, it's a more subtle colour, although the building is still imposing. I think it works when you walk inside, too."

### Joel Shortman,

North Carlton, Video rental store manager

"I really like the Queenscliff Hotel. Victoria doesn't have so many grand hotels that epitomise that style and seaside luxury. I like modern buildings, too, but I think modern architecture is better represented in other countries. We don't have anything quite as exciting as the (Guggenheim) museum in Bilbao."

FRONT COVER IMAGE:  
Australian Centre for Contemporary Art