READING PLEASURES

MODERNISM AND AUSTRALIA: DOCUMENTS ON ART, DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE 1917-1987
Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara and Philip Goad (eds).

This is a big book. A doozy. You'd think again about picking up an extra copy if you had to carry it around for the day. Impressively, in the course of over 1000 pages, Stephen, McNamara and Goad present a staggering range of historical writings on, as the subtitle suggests, art, design and architecture spanning the middle decades of Australia's twentieth century.

Modernism and Australia is pragmatic rather than pretty, densely packed and arguably overcrowded. It is difficult to keep a paperback of this scale to shape, and everyone who owns a copy will soon find the spine looking ragged. This is for a good reason: students and academics alike will love this collection incisively. Even those who question the editors' final decisions over the table of contents will find it hard not to take it as a starting point for any survey course on Australia's twentieth century arts. And those who can't pick it up out of interest will be impressed with the way that predictable pieces and questionable choices are far outweighed by surprising, penetrating and challenging selections. The book could have avoided most of the international writings included for context, for example, but the argument for having them there is both transparent and defensible.

The editors clearly organized Modernism and Australia with didactic ends in mind. The volume has three parts, corresponding to the periods 1917-37, 1938-49 and 1950-67, and each of these is divided into four categories: interdisciplinary (concerning culture and "miscellanea" arts, like design, arranging, public art and music), Visual Arts, Design and Architecture. Each entry, then, is prefaced by a contextual entry up to a page long that places the piece historically and situates it in relation to other parts of the collection and, more importantly, to essays that are not included here - a move that ought to prompt much discussion about previously unexplored writings.

"Best in show" on the architecture list, which numbers a hefty 64 entries, is Robin Boyd, for whose influence over postwar architectural discourse the editors thoroughly account. Best Overall follows up, and the third architecture section ends in a crescendo of opinion and reflection on the Sydney Opera House. Among these obvious tendencies, the architecture section reflects Goad's intimate knowledge of the period and its literature, making available a number of fairly obscure writings that will now enjoy a second life. With the book already in second printing, it will be a staple for years to come.

Andrew Latch

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Robert Freestone argues that the focus on urban design since the 1980s, by both government and private sector developers, has back to the City Beautiful and its ideals of visual expression as the generator of good city form. Freestone's book Describing Australia's Cities is not only a useful sourcebook of the ideals that drove Australia's emergent planning and design professions in the early 1900s and their aesthetic and social precedents from overseas, it is also a timely reminder that ingrained ideals of "beautification" still drive many contemporary urban design initiatives.

According to Freestone, the City Beautiful in Australia was not an oversight or sensation, but rather the culmination of utopian visions, concerns over the aesthetic condition of cities and the initiatives of entrepreneurs and individuals intent on city improvements. The characteristics of the City Beautiful were order, harmony, formality and symmetry - its vision was for cities to be not only efficient, productive and safe, but also works of art.

Freestone believes that Canberra stands as our best example. The good ideas evident were focused on open space and environmental improvements, the importance of integrated design, and a commitment to enhancing the public realm.

Griffin is quoted: "It was hopeless to attempt in the old ways to build up a town beautiful with the selected units taken from this, that or the other style at the will of the architect or owner." The success of the Canberra plan is not in the adoption of the City Beautiful ethic, but in adapting, transforming and thereby transcending its principles.

Freestone draws parallels between the ideals inherent in the City Beautiful and the aspirations of New Urbanism - community planning based on compactness, walkability, liveability, mixed uses and high design and development standards, particularly as they are formally applied to residential subdivision. So too, the contemporary rhetoric of "place marketing" or "place marketing", albeit with a more balanced approach to site sustainability, streetscapes and sustainability in general. "The visual appreciation of the urban environment...and the quintessential "built eye view" associated with the city beautiful has made a big comeback."

James Magrath

Today, "beautification" is a popular word for design in their design language. Whether we like it or not, a city's contemporary design projects would sit within Robert Freestone's descriptions. And given the design solutions inherent in international design, we are more familiar with the idea of the City Beautiful than we were. Fortunately, planning has moved beyond the narrow city considerations of beauty, urban aspirations for "livability" and "beautification". To new urbanisms with new production and sustainability. Robert Freestone's book is brilliantly researched and his inclusion of sumptuous illustrations is informative and stimulative for contemporary urban designers with increasing complexity and social imperatives. Far from reminding us that architecture is visually resolved at the City Beautiful are not the only ones in today's context.

James Magrath