

Quadrant

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Urban Peasant: A Haphazard Chronicle

by Feiko Bouman

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On Thursday at 4.30 p.m., as usual, the Chief Justice Sir Garfield Barwick's car glided through the chain-wire entry gates of the High Court building for his fortnightly inspection. Confronting Feiko Bouman, the site architect and joint designer, Barwick popped the burning question: "Mr Bouman, when will the marble cladding arrive?" Towering over Lake Burley Griffin, the High Court resembled an abandoned Second World War V-2 rocket launching pad.

Barwick's confusion is understandable. Like most Australians of the era, he failed to appreciate the new Brutalism, a style perfected two decades earlier by the French architect Le Corbusier in his High Court building at Chandigarh, India. The marble controversy proved to be one of Barwick's rare defeats. At great expense to the Australian taxpayer, Malcolm Fraser indulged Barwick's every request except this one. The political blowback over a marble-clad Palace of Law was something not even the grazier could have withstood.

Bouman's title *Urban Peasant* is intentionally misleading. Few people have travelled or engaged with the outback as extensively as Bouman, and peasant-like he most certainly is not. The title is indicative of Bouman's deprecatory style, insistent irony, abnegation and self-effacement, an intentional device to disguise a piercingly sharp intelligence. He is a latter-day Dutch Cyrano de Bergerac; words are his rapier. Talking to Paul Keating at a Darling Harbour book launch, Bouman seized the opportunity to ask him the whereabouts of the "Ramrods", a rock band Keating managed to take from nowhere to oblivion.

Feiko Bouman started life in Groningen, north-east of Amsterdam. He arrived in Sydney with his family as an eight-year-old, grew up in Manly and became a champion water polo player while completing his architecture studies at the University of New South Wales. His appearance is disconcerting; a wild spray of red hair crowns a strong wiry frame that might be mistaken for a reincarnated Vincent van Gogh. He inherited from his atheist father strong iconoclastic tendencies, and a quiet contrarian nature, a quality that earned him a reputation as an architectural maverick. Far from being the peasant the title would have us believe, Bouman's ancestor Elias Bouman was the City Architect of Amsterdam in the seventeenth century. Elias Bouman's masterpiece is the "Portuguese Synagogue" or Judenbuurt,

completed in 1667, for Portuguese refugees such as Spinoza fleeing Spanish persecution. Its timber-lined barrel vaults eerily pre-empt Feiko Bouman's iconic Stockman's Hall of Fame of corrugated iron and timber vaults.

Bouman is little recognised, but he is an enormously successful architect. Among his most successful designs may be counted the Stockman's Hall of Fame at Longreach, the High Court in Canberra developed with Kris Kringas, North Sydney Civic Centre for Ted Mack, the transformation of the North Sydney Oval precinct, and a new Penrith Civic Centre precinct including council administrative offices, council chambers and a large regional library. A local history museum for Barcaldine—location of the legendary eucalypt "Tree of Knowledge" and shearers' strike which gave rise to the Labor Party—to compete with rival neighbour Longreach, and a drover's museum at Camooweal, were stillborn but involved Bouman in extended forays into the outback.

Urban Peasant is full of delightful surprises, such as the successful invasion of England by the Dutch Republic by an armada of 500 ships and 20,000 men in 1688, which histories by Norman Davies and J.M. Roberts tactfully ignore; Dutch post-war achievers such as Gerard Dusseldorp who founded Lend Lease; and long before Cook sighted Australia and the British took possession, Dutch mariners had named it New Holland.

Urban Peasant follows the familiar immigrant experience genre of displacement, struggle to find an identity in a new land, return and adjustment. It offers much more; Bouman is an original defiant voice, quirky, insightful and intellectually challenging. The reader might well ask, why another immigrant saga? The reward is Bouman's nonchalant relaxed style and his keen observations of Australian foibles. He is very much an outsider, a long-term visitor with a discerning gaze who sees and entertainingly writes with forgiveness about hopeless political and business leadership, pervasive ignorance of architecture among a self-promoted moneyed elite who fail to put the public interest foremost.

The drawn-out saga of the Stockman's Hall of Fame supplies a continuing thread to *Urban Peasant*. Bouman traces the early struggle to get it up and running, to secure funds and government backing by the original dreamers, the enormously successful occasion of its opening by Queen Elizabeth for the bicentennial in 1988 when Longreach was flooded with 16,000 visitors, an event which put it on the map, and the subsequent takeover and destruction by News Limited Chairman Ken Cowley, with his insane vision of a rose garden in the outback.

Our outback serves much the same role as America's Wild West, as the repository of the nation's unruly unconscious. Bouman has his own term for the syndrome, "Upgrade Madness". He recollects:

This time around, the mantra and the banner for the future was to be known as an "upgrade", "refreshing the visitor experience" and it was to be a disaster. Government grants arrived, for bureaucrats understand "upgrades"; a very useful terminology and it can mean anything you want it to mean.

Much like the Stockman's Hall of Fame, the Sydney Opera House has been subjected to at least two such debilitating "upgrades"—public money down the gurgler. In the Hall of Fame instance this amounted to a further \$5.5 million wasted to destroy the original architecture.

Merely because a person knows what they want doesn't make them an architect. It's a truism few Australians recognise. At the beginning of the project Bouman was confronted, in the person of R.M. Williams, by a tiresome adversary. The arm-wrestling contest between architect and client only ceased when Williams built his version of what he considered was the correct style next to the highway, to serve as a visitor centre. It was a mini-disaster. Bouman explains:

And the directors, recognising that they really had no experience of building other than perhaps some minor house additions, let fellow director R.M. Williams loose on me as they knew him to be a practical man, a hands-on type with some knowledge of construction.

What Williams intended and went on to build, the structure he called a cottage, was a faux-homestead with stone-faced walls, hand-adzed timber doors, frames and columns, a single room replete with marble floor (shades of Barwick all over again). It did little harm, Bouman readily concedes, being admired by many. But then a move was made to relocate the entire main Heritage Centre close by it, bringing it forward onto the highway. Such are the trials of an architect, where the client invariably knows best what is needed. Williams's cottage is a popular cinematic cliché in outback movies.

There is much to enjoy in Bouman's tale of folly and misdirection, the hours spent slaving over projects only to have them discarded, crazy clients, government naivety and ineptitude. This is Australia, settled because it was sufficiently remote convicts sent there might never find their way back to become a nuisance, a penal experiment that, against the odds and all expectations, became a success. Only a Dutchman with a sly sense of humour could be expected to see the absurdity of Australia.

Architecture requires high intelligence, sensitivity and a complex array of skills directed towards a high aesthetic goal. It makes heavy creative demands. Feiko Bouman's approach of threading the eye of the needle with casual indirectness, feigned neglect, and elaborate trickery, is possibly the only method with any likelihood of success.

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