



Frederick Schall
Frederick Schall, architect

West From El Dorado

James V. Schall

The notion of "the frontier" is a profound one in European and American history. From the Rhine-Danube line of the late Roman Empire, to the eastern medieval German forests, to the Indies beyond the seas, to the New World and the Far West, the frontier has been, as Frederick Jackson Turner once suggested, as much spiritual as geographical in nature. We are a race that has, in a very real sense, been continually shocked out of our cyclic, stability tendencies by ever new horizons, each transcending and revolutionizing our cultural visions and expectations. The early voyages of Diaz, da Gama, Columbus, John Davis and Magellan, along with the later ones of Francis Drake, Abel Tasman and James Cook, were of a piece with Peary's and Amundsen's discoveries of the two Poles, with the search for the Northwest Passage, with Hillary's conquest of Everest and Neil Armstrong's walk on the Moon.

We are at a moment of history, I suspect, when our whole concept of "the globe" is being radically altered and expanded. In one sense (as Hannah Arendt rightly remarked in *The Human Condition*) the mere fact of charting and measuring narrows and demystifies. Then there are the constant and grave warnings we receive that the earth is a small, tight, parsimonious little "spaceship." But those who

accept this latter description too literally—and they are surprisingly many these days—are merely the latest candidates for the famous "ashcan of history." In fact, as John Maddox has cogently argued in *The Doomsday Syndrome*, we are upon a rather vast and complex planet whose incredible dimensions and potentialities we are only beginning to comprehend, let alone utilize and humanize.

I recently flew back to San Francisco from Sydney—both cities of haunting beauty, cities on opposite shores of a single sea. Once in flight there was little to see below except blue water. But when we finally came in sight of Mauna Loa in Hawaii, the Quantas pilot remarked—in an accent C.L. Sulzberger once described as Australia's "special form of English, a kind of stiff-lipped cockney"—that this mountain, if measured from the bottom of the surrounding sea, would be the highest in the world, higher even than Everest itself. When we reflect a bit on Buckminster Fuller's fertile notion that the earth's land masses are merely mountaintops and plains jutting out of a single enveloping ocean, we will soon begin to grasp that the islands of the sea take on a new contemporary meaning. Man is not only a land animal, but amphibious both in the encompassing air and water. The striking obviousness of this latter fact, however, has been obscure, for it has led too automatically to internationalist assumptions at a time when, for better or worse, it is probably contributing to a new kind of nationalism.

The notion of the "high seas" is rapidly becoming

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obsolete. The newest frontier, the newest world, is the ocean and its islands, which are well on their way to becoming new power centers and new objects of power. Technological, economic and political ambitions and evolutions have made sovereignty over the ocean itself about as feasible as over the land— notwithstanding, as Jacques Maritain once pointed out, how dangerous the concept of sovereignty itself might be. We may lament this with nostalgia, of course, but to ignore its political fact borders on sheer national suicide for any given country (cf. G. Arbuckle, "The South Pacific: The Forgotten Part of the Third World," *World Justice*, No. 2, 1969-70).

State after state, then, and not always the largest or most developed ones—Iceland, Peru, Morocco, Canada, Ecuador—are pushing the limits of their sovereignty outward, twelve, fifty, seventy, two hundred, four hundred miles. The logical limit of such a process becomes not technology solely but another power's counterclaim. So this process is only beginning, and it is the most momentous thing going on in the world today, next perhaps to the voyages to outer space. Clashes over control of the seas and its floor, such as we are beginning to witness, say, in the North Sea, portend even greater turmoil. The resources of the oceans, alongside their communications paths, are no longer insignificant factors in our economic and political calculations. Indeed, the very concept of "resources" is largely relative to our knowledge and capacity to use something hitherto considered nonexistent. Realization of this is making once unknown or insignificant powers commence to challenge the rest of the world.

So when the New Zealanders, for instance, start to speak of themselves as "Polynesians," as they are beginning to do, to point out that Auckland is now the largest Polynesian city in the world, to speak of the Cook Islands, Niue, Fiji and Samoa as belonging to their national sphere of interest, we need only to consult a map to realize that they are claiming interest over an ocean area at least as large as that of neighboring Australia, which itself, as the largest and most important of the islands of the sea except for its huge neighbor to the South, has begun to manifest an astonishing new aggressiveness. It should not surprise us that the states of the western coast of South America should also seek to find some mutual interest with the two large island nations of the South Pacific.

Thus the conflict between Britain and Iceland over fisheries, or the New Zealand-Fiji-Peru-Australian protests over French nuclear tests on Mururoa, or the growth of the Russian and Chinese naval potential, or the emergent island nations such as Tonga and New Guinea, not to mention the shadow of Japan, or the need of a U.N. Conference next year on sea law in not disinterested Santiago—all these are not isolated items but part of a new

frontier and a new power complex. We have come to look with disdain on the way the older European powers divided up America, Asia and Africa in recent centuries. But there is little doubt that our times will witness a further, probably more far-reaching, dividing up, a dividing this time of the seas themselves by powers very different from the classic European ones. Already geographically huge nations, like Canada, will become ever larger, while small island states will stake their claim to a new greatness. And the vision of the largest "island" of them all, Antarctica, already must figure large in technological-political considerations. "The ancient idea of the sea as an international place," *The Economist* wrote in a perceptive essay last June, "is giving way to the assertion of national rights. The competition is on; and it is a competition that could lead to some very vicious little conflicts along the new frontiers being staked out in the waters. The biggest worries are not going to be in the northern seas, either."

The most patent fact of this newest world, then, is clearly that the seas are no longer merely "out there" beyond the shoreline to be sailed upon. They are rapidly coming to be conceived as subject to sovereignty by an aggressive and new kind of state. Both from a military and from a resources aspect, a refusal to participate in this scramble for water will mean relative decline. Furthermore, we know that not only the political and military elements of this evolving situation are important, but that the spiritual context also requires attention. It is in this sense that the newer antigrowth, restrictive moods that are emerging in the United States and parts of Europe are on a collision course with hard political reality.

In a comment written, significantly, for people on a shore diagonally opposite to distant California, Art Garcia has noted that there is a growing concern

over too much growth on what is left of the great wide open spaces.

That is the way in which American expansion has been going since the end of World War II.

Now California and other western states are leading the efforts to slow what has become unwanted growth and the population and pollution problems it brings ("Conservation on the U.S. Pacific Coast: Oregon Invites You to Afghanistan," *The Australian Financial Review*, August 3, 1973).

El Dorado—California—in other words, has decided it has found the exclusive promised land for its mere twenty millions at a moment when the world of geography gazes out beyond its warm beaches. The broader question is more elemental: Has the frontier spirit also finally left America, perhaps forever deserting these same western shores?

In his brilliant *America and the California Dream* (Oxford, 1973) Kevin Starr wrote:

Whatever else it was, good or bad, it was charged with human hope. It was linked imaginatively with the most compelling of American myths, the pursuit of happiness. When that intensity of expectation was thwarted or only partially fulfilled, as in the nature of things was bound to happen, it would backfire into a restlessness and bitterness. It could surface in a thousand forms of indulgence and eccentricity with which Americans tried to recapture and to vindicate lost hopes. California would never lose this symbolic connection with an intensified pursuit of happiness. As a hope in defiance of facts, as a longing which would ennoble and encourage, but which could also turn and devour itself, the symbolic value of California endured. . . .

California in world historic terms, however, is not so much the end of the North American continent as the beginning of the vast, amazing Pacific Ocean. California's current mood of population and growth restrictions, especially as practiced in Marin County and about San Francisco Bay, is reminiscent of the 1930's legislation which, in the Edwards case, the Supreme Court had to overturn because California once attempted an exclusion of Dust Bowl victims from its dreams. Does this current mood imply a drying up of nerve and a rejection of destiny?

If we recall, furthermore, that up until recently California was seen by many European intellectuals as the epitome of a world expanding rapidly, technologically and spiritually into the twenty-first century, this change of atmosphere is of more than passing significance (cf. E. Morin, *Journal de Californie*, Paris, 1970; D. Garric, "Los Angeles, une ville de l'avenir ou une ville qui n'existe pas?" *Figaro*, June 1, 1971). The curious announcement that happiness has now been sufficiently pursued in California, that, as at the end of *Candide*, we wish to be left alone to tend our gardens, will strike anyone aware of what is happening beyond California's golden shores as merely backward. The descendants of the "tired and huddled masses," on reaching El Dorado, have come to believe, in defense of political realities, that they can turn in on themselves and enjoy it all.

In such a context, the great islands of the Pacific portion of a single world ocean, above all Japan, Australia and the two great islands of New Zealand, acquire the mantle of the new frontier, even spiritually. Japan, of course, has already proved herself the phenomenon of the later twentieth century. With a land area somewhat smaller than California, she has come close to being the dominant power in the Pacific, if not in the world itself. But it is probably Australia rather than Japan that will inherit the frontier destiny, in the long run, though undoubtedly it is Japan's rise that

has caused Australia twice to stir in recent times. Right now there is perhaps more interesting social experimentation and political ambitioning going on in Australia than in any other part of the globe. Some sort of Canberra-Tokyo axis would be formidable indeed.

"Suddenly Australia has roused herself," Jacques Decornoy recently observed in *Le Monde* (June 6-7, 1973). ". . . It remains true that Australia, which was probably at the beginning of this century one of the first nations for social legislation, had fallen back in certain regards." Gough Whitlam, surely one of the world's most interesting if also worryingly enigmatic figures on the political scene, aims at nothing less than to make Australia into something advanced, positive, worthy of her potential. "The central aim of my Government's foreign policy will be to do all we can as a medium-sized power to help all nations including the great powers and not less our great ally [USA] to make the most of new opportunities presenting themselves" ("Australia's Foreign Policy," *Australian Foreign Affairs Record*, May, 1973). To suspect that there are more flickerings here than there are modest medium-power hopes would not, I think, be too far from the truth.

Australia has, of course, unlike the United States or even New Zealand, distinctly secular origins. Australia was mainly a prison colony and imperial outpost about which a nation—in C. L. Sulzberger's quaint phrase, "an early commonwealth of thieves and bastards"—grew. Australia's spiritual origins were those of remedying the crimes of Englishmen (not their sins) and the social control of human nature. Though the religions were strong and present in Australia from the beginning, in her origins there is little of the New Zion of the Puritans, nor even any comparable Dunedin, no City of Eden, of the New Zealanders. In its place there exists a kind of rigid secular messianism in the Australian intellectual (cf. W. J. Hudson, "Wanted: Amoral National Historians," *Quadrant*, March-April, 1973).

All of this has had, as Professor R. M. Crawford noted in *Australia* (London, 1970), a curious effect on Australians:

But how often has the essence of this experience been reproduced in our history! As colonies in the making, we invited the attention of experimenters and theorists who too often assumed a perfection in both governments and citizens which can never safely be assumed. Uncomfortable experience of the result of theories of "systematic" colonizers bred in the colonists a distrust of theory which has probably gone too far; for it might be argued that the fault was not in theorizing, but in theorizing badly, by leaving out of account such important facts as the normal fallibility of human beings.

So while the presence of formal religion in Australia is very evident, as can clearly be ascertained

from the lovely gothic Anglican and Roman Catholic cathedrals in both Sydney and Melbourne, not to mention Melbourne's beautiful Scots Church nor the myriads of smaller edifices, still, Australia has not been primarily a religious creation, even though its good citizenry seem to bear all the signs of fallibility found elsewhere in the species. Few came to Australia either in the last century or in this precisely to escape religious persecution or to found a New Jerusalem, though some did, to be sure.

It was Jessica Mitford who pointed out recently that the prison is being looked upon by some rather dangerous researchers as fertile ground for "social experimentation" ("Experimenting Behind Bars," *The Atlantic*, January, 1973). Is it too wrong, I wonder, to suspect that some of this incipient belief in the efficacy of human social planning is somehow rooted in the heart of many an Australian intellectual and politician? And while Australia may have lost its prison origins soon enough, still immigration into Australia even up to now has had overtones of social experimentation and control as part of its unspoken reality. The dechristianized world has been looking for a religionless Zion, a thoroughgoing rationalist and humanist home, ever since the modern age began. While in Australia I had the feeling that not a few there would like to lay such a claim for this southern island.

In this context the experiment of the City of Canberra itself takes on special importance. The Australian federal system has been much more stingy in granting its central governments national powers than has the American. As a result, there is a tendency to see in Canberra, the place where the central government does have full authority, a sort of model city and a model society. "Mr. Whitlam has often said that he saw Canberra as being the laboratory for social improvements which could be copied throughout Australia" (R. Ackland, "Controls: Canberra as a Social Laboratory," *The Australian Financial Review*, August 3, 1973). There are many who see Canberra as a sort of toehold from which to force centralist policies on the rest of the states.

Yet Canberra, for all its admitted charm, is as close to being a man-made noncity as any I have seen. Surely its vast vistas—strikingly like L'Enfant's Washington in so many ways—its distances, make it the world's most unwalkable city. The very fact that it is an instant city that refuses to see much value in concentration, that has no immediate history of a thousand years of human living and wisdom, seems to make it symbolic of a kind of Australian penchant for political-social experimentation outside the mild and mad and mysterious lessons of religion and history. For Mr. R. Prowse, an official in the Bank of New South Wales, it is also outside the pale of simple economics:

Please don't tell me Canberra is either a good

example of true decentralization or a good example of anything else other than a pretty little city built and maintained at enormous expense with money taken from the productive areas of the economy.

Canberra is a synthetic. If you took away the Public Service, it is doubtful if it would be one-quarter its present size. It has no industry to support it ("Canberra's Politicians Live 'In Isolation,'" *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 10, 1973).

It is difficult not to sympathize with this view in many ways. For it would be very easy for a politician in a spread-out, neat place like Canberra ever to think about political and human realities in a complete vacuum. Western political thought in some sense has always been a conflict between the dwellers of Canberra and the strictures of Augustine, between perfect social planning and the realities of sin and fallibility.

In any case, this combination of a very pragmatic origin, social experimentation and planning, all in a dazzling future, makes Australia a prime candidate for a new kind of frontier along the pathways of the sea. When Anthony Trollope was in Australia in 1871, he made a prediction:

It was believed of Australia, when Great Britain first planted her colonies there, that she would prove to be a country almost blank and barren in regard to minerals. It seems, however, now, that few countries on earth are richer in ores than she is. If iron can be found on her hills, and worked, she will probably become as populous and as rich as the United States (*Trollope's Australia*, Selections, H. Dow, ed., Melbourne, 1966).

As anyone knows who has been following the international commodities markets, ores—along with that other kind of current riches found in wheat, beef, wool and mutton—have been abundantly found. And Gough Whitlam's "middle power" is found almost daily confronting, say, the United States or France with a newfound Australian confidence.

Australia, moreover, by the very fact that she has not yet been settled on any large scale, may find that she will be able in the next century to build a power and a civilization that will simply bypass much of the agonies, turmoil and mistakes of the modern era. In what is perhaps the most recent in-depth survey of the island-continent, Peter Duming and Anthony Martin concluded:

Lastly, Australians do have a feeling that the future is on their side, though they wisely do not take it for granted. There is a recent change here. Australians used to be utterly profligate in the slaughter of wildlife, the ruination of the landscape and the destruction of buildings irrespective of architectural merits. No longer. Buildings are being saved, conservationists mass to protect their

countryside, and now the government has stayed the execution of the kangaroo. This is a permanent feature of the new Australia. It means that if the right balance is struck between conservation and growth, Australia's attraction as a place to live, already considerable, will be ever greater by the end of the century ("Gough Whitlam's Australia," *The Economist*, June 23, 1973).

Such an attractive, potential place has every feature of the next frontier.

But for whom will it be a frontier? Australian officials from Mr. Whitlam down have often stated recently that they see no major conflict or enemy on the horizon. A former assistant in the Defense Department stated frankly "the danger of invasion of Australia by major powers was 'almost non-existent'" (*The Australian*, July 31, 1973; cf. P. Samuel, "Defence Down the Drain," *The Bulletin*, August 4, 1973). The Chairman of the Australian Joint Chiefs recently stated that a front line army of 6,600 men would be sufficient (*Sydney Morning Herald*, August 1, 1973). This relaxed posture of Australia has led Mr. Harry Lee, Singapore's frank Prime Minister—whom Denis Warner has called "perhaps the most brilliant leader of any country in the world today"—to see but another example of Australia's penchant to underestimate human fallibility (cf. D. Warner, "Lee: Australia Is Bemused," *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 9, 1973). At the recent Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference, Mr. Lee warned:

Nothing we can say or do here in Ottawa will exclude the Soviet navy from the Indian Ocean, the straits archipelago, including the Straits of Malacca, or the South China Sea.

When the Prime Minister of Australia [Mr. Whitlam] said that because Singapore had a large ethnic Chinese population therefore the Soviet ships could not come to Singapore, the Soviet navy immediately diverted four Soviet tenders for repairs to Singapore to see whether we were Chinese or Singaporeans.

We repaired them ("Singapore PM Lashes Australia," *The Age* [Melbourne], August 6, 1973).

There are some in Australia who believe that Mr. Lee's acid further remark that Australia is doing splendidly every place except near at home is not without its validity.

What, rationally, can be said for a foreign policy which delights Africans and Caribbeans but which is distrusted, to put it mildly, by our near neighbors and former friends? Which antagonizes—and is meant to antagonize—a power like Britain? If Mr. Whitlam is to become the statesman he wishes to be, he would do well to digest much of the bitter medicine Mr. Lee dealt to him. For what

Mr. Lee exposed was not merely Mr. Whitlam's "optimism" but the vagueness, wooliness and naivety of the more unworldly kind of do-gooder.

So the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorialized the situation last August 9. In one sense Australia is free to go its own way today, not so much because she is strong, but because there are hopefully no other powers with immediate designs on her. Yet Japan's was probably not the last "coprosperity sphere" into which she may fall. At least Mr. Lee does not think it is (cf. also L. La Daney, "The Common Interests of the USA and China," *20th Century* [Melbourne], Winter, 1973).

But it is not Australia as outpost of the Russian navy or potential homeland of the overseas Chinese or Indians that interests me here. It is another kind of Australia. Like Carey McWilliams I believe Australia is the logical leap, as it were, that the spirit of the frontier, the search for El Dorado must take:

Australia is the most likely—and by all odds the best—outlet for Californians in quest of "a new California." And California is the logical jumping-off place for renewed westward immigration.

Nevil Shute once suggested in an offhanded way that Australia could absorb a hundred million immigrants. Appalling as that may seem, the estimate is realistic. Not all these immigrants will be Californians or other Americans by any means, but many will be. For better or for worse—assess the significance as you will—Australia is to California what California has always been to the rest of the United States ("Australia: America's New Frontier," *World*, October 10, 1973).

So there she is, a source of ore and beef, an object of power, a new reality in the oceans and a dream continued.

Can Australia and the islands with the surrounding waters she has come to symbolize bear the spiritual mantle of this new frontier? Australian novelist Patrick White sees an unsuspected depth to this land. "Life in Australia seems to be for many people pretty deadly dull. I have tried to convey a splendour, a transcendence, which is also there, above human realities" ("A Conversation with Patrick White," *Southerly* [Sydney], No. 2, 1972). As one strolls by the Garrison Church in Sydney, by the charming iron-grated, terraced houses now being elegantly restored beneath the ever present, ever walkable, ever magnificent Harbour Bridge that spans what is surely one of the world's most lovely sights, going along to the gardens filled with such noble trees along the shores of the ever present bay, it is difficult to deny that White is right about this land. Sydney is not the continent, of course, but that does not change things. Trollope's words now seem to me to be some kind of a vision, some presentiment that somehow

the next frontier west from El Dorado would be the frontier of loveliness.

Sydney is one of those places which, when a man leaves it knowing that he will never return, he cannot leave without a pang and a tear. Such is its loveliness.

The pursuit of happiness against all odds, the fallibility of human nature, the splendor above human realities—are these what I had seen there sitting in a green park on a luminous day watching the ships and ferry boats go by?

When I returned to San Francisco, I found I had received a letter from a young friend of mine who had recently graduated from a university in Southern California, a letter designed to reach me before I had departed. I read:

It's chronic; all of my friends are variously employed as bar girls and typists and are weary, sad, confused. I once wrote you some lightweight garble on the meaning of the absurd. At the moment, I would say absurdity is quite palpable. Any motivation subjected to this sense of absurdity falls apart, and it becomes not only easy but obvious to do nothing. Your mad capers around the globe and through the hemisphere are enviable. Travel is the ONLY thing I want to do. Go to Ayers Rock in the dead center (literally) of Australia, a few hundred miles from Alice Springs. It is a monstrous boulder as big as a mountain which the aborigines consider the navel of the earth. Sounds Mecca-like to me. One of my dream spots of the world.

As I said, these lines did not reach me before my departure, so I did not know about Ayers Rock, one hundred miles from Alice Springs, at the navel of the world. The farthest I penetrated inland was to Bathurst and the gorgeous Hawkesbury Overlook, not very far by Australian standards.

But this is not the point. The incredible thing, in the light of what I have been saying about El Dorado, is that a young no-longer student from our western shores knew of Ayers Rock and thought it Mecca-like. This says, I think, something disturbingly spiritual about our land. And yet I know it is true, there is a splendor, a transcendence to Australia somehow. And you do weep, as Trollope said, on last seeing the loveliness of Sydney's harbor, knowing you will perhaps never see it again. To this there is only one thing to add. On my first day in Sydney, as I walked through its parks along what must have been Mrs. Macquarie's Road, I could barely keep from weeping on seeing it the first time, never knowing such a place existed. I have had such feelings before, as I have been privileged to see many beautiful things in this world. But I am always astonished when I suddenly discover that there is ever something more, something new I did not know about.

When I was in New Zealand (in many ways so different from Australia, and much more distant than one might think), near Hawkes Bay on the North Island, some young Marxist seminarians said: "Come, take a walk with us up the hill, the view is beautiful. Perhaps we can see some new lambs and the place where Halley's Comet was first sighted in 1910." During the walk in that incredibly green winter land, they spoke enthusiastically, as young men often do, agreeing that I should know of the poetry of James K. Baxter, about whom I had previously known nothing. His collection, *The Rock Woman* (Oxford, 1969), which they subsequently gave me, is of great power and beauty. I found his poem, "Haast Pass," about the mountains above the fjordland of the Southern Alps, almost as far south as man can walk on this planet, to be one of the best things I have discovered anywhere.

In the dense bush all leaves and bark exude
The odour of mortality; for plants
Accept their death like stones
Rooted for ever in time's torrent bed.

Return from here. We have nothing to learn
From the dank falling of fern spores
Or the pure glacier blaze that melts
Down mountains flowing to the Tasman.

This earth was never ours. Remember
Rather the tired faces in the pub
The children who have never grown. Return
To the near death, the loves like garden flowers.

Yes, there is a depth to these islands of the sea, a constant reminder of what is central to our being.

We shall, then, hear more of these sovereignties in the single sea, especially of the one so vast and so empty and so beautiful, with its ever present gum trees. We cannot mind too much that the spirit of the frontier may have discovered a new home, especially when we can now look out our own window to discover that the City of Saint Francis by the Bay somehow, as her Mayor often insists, becomes ever more lovely as the years pass. For loveliness is one of those things like grace—when you have more of it, more even than your just share, it does not necessarily mean that someone else has less. So contemplate the newest world, the islands of the ocean seas, a splendor above human nature, an earth that was never ours. If the new frontier is now West from El Dorado on the way to Ayers Rock, by Fiji, Dunedin and Sydney Harbour, as I suspect it may well be, what is important for mankind is not so much that we have lost it, but that someone else has discovered it. As the letter from my friend told me, at least some of these will be people who have lived and dreamed in the old El Dorado.

And yet there are the weary faces in the pub, the friends who are tired, sad and confused. James K. Baxter was right. Even amid the splendor above human realities, this earth was never ours.