The Editorial Notebook Selling Cities Like Soap
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The Editorial Notebook

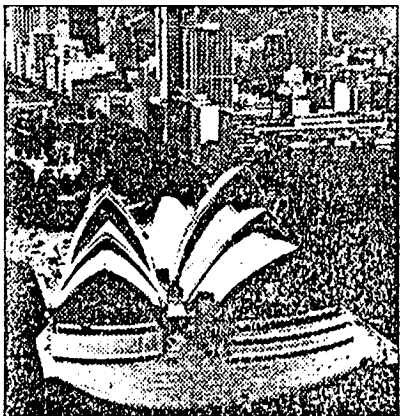
Selling Cities Like Soap

Melbourne, Australia, is having an identity crisis. The city has announced a $100,000 prize for the best idea for an image-making landmark — like the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the Empire State Building in New York. There are only two provisos: the concept should be able to pay its way, and it should become famous around the world.

Melbourne is clearly suffering from a second-city complex. There is Sydney, only slightly larger, with its instantly successful symbol of the new Opera House in the harbor. Those sail-like roofs have already taken off in the public mind. In second cities, a kind of municipal malaise seeks monumental redress. They are convinced that they can be restored to health, or at least put on the map, by devising a symbol.

Oakland, Calif., tried by building a landmark museum designed by Kevin Roche and John Dinkaloo, but that never achieved the magical identification of city and structure that unites San Francisco and the Golden Gate Bridge.

Long Beach, unhappy in the shadow of Los Angeles, has failed to get a beached Queen Mary off the ground as a tourist attraction, and is now proposing a spaceship structure to house a hotel, offices and shopping center, to be called Space Tower 2000.



Chicago claims the skyscraper as its invention, and has the tallest in the world with the Sears Tower. But more Empire State Buildings are still sold in Woolworth's than any other souvenir. And Manhattan's ensemble of glittering spires, the skyline romanticized by incoming ocean liners, has never been surpassed as the image of urbanity.

City images are the result of planning, art, history, type and accident. Cairo borrows the outlying pyramids and the Sphinx. San Gimignano thrusts its medieval stone towers into the Umbrian sky. The picture of a New England town is a white church spire and a village green. The innocent pottery and glass bricolage of Simon Rodia became the Watts Towers that now identify that California community more than the 1965 riot.

St. Louis, Mo., made its mark on the international skyline with the Gateway Arch, a soaring parabola at the Mississippi's edge. This, like Melbourne's bid, was entrusted to a competition, won by the late Eero Saarinen. Something had to be found to fill the gap once St. Louis had destroyed its waterfront and rendered the old stone levee invisible.

As pure promotion, Seattle devised its Space Needle for a forgotten World's Fair, and Judge Roy Hofheinz created the Houston Astrodome, a monument to High Kitsch, and spawned imitators in New Orleans and Seattle. California's Long Beach has hired a marketing expert to locate its image (the professional conclusion is that it has none) and to "sell it like soap."

But cities of character don't come with boxtops or slogans; they are not the result of underestimating the power of architecture. Every civic symbol of importance since the beginning of time has drawn its singularity from the creative urge to build both distinctively and well. Cities get the images they deserve.

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