

## **The More things Change - the relevance of Molnar Today.**

Talk presented at Customs House, Sydney , 13<sup>th</sup> June 2001, to coincide with the exhibition of George Molnar's cartoons *Human Scale in Architecture*. Exhibition at City Exhibition Space, Level 4 Customs House, until July 15, Level 4

Initially, when I began thinking about this question, I thought that I had better find out something about Molnar. Colleagues nominated certain friends and relations whom I should talk to. But the first tentative forays did not bode well. Molnar? He was a fantastic lecturer... Inspiring... Molnar? He was a complete nut case... He challenged our thinking... He was a reactionary... 'Incapable of joining the 20<sup>th</sup> Century', as Geraldine O'Brien claimed someone said of him in a SMH piece written a few years ago. But she went on to say that his retirement called forth many comments from readers who thought he was anything but irrelevant. When you call forth such divergent reactions it's a safe bet you are saying something interesting.

### **Molnar 59**



Here is a man conscious that in order to make it into 'History' you must leave a trail, a record. She is not looking at him, but at what he writes/draws. A little knowledge of the man, I decided, was a dangerous thing. And besides this image is instructing me to remember that my task is not that of biography. The historian's task is to confront

the material, and to decide what that material tells us about the man and his times. Mostly the times.

But, firstly, the man (briefly to give the context): Molnar arrived from Budapest in 1939, worked as a architect in Canberra ('which was virtually non existent at the time ' - Farrelly); back in Sydney and in 1945 began a career lecturing in architecture at SU and as a cartoonist in the Daily Telegraph. Eventually he became Professor of Architecture, and from 1952 to 1984 his cartoons became a fixture in the SMH.

The times: For a fair bit of it, Menzies always seemed to be Prime Minister. There was an explosion of economic growth after WW2. Most people believed they were experiencing a raising standard of living. This was accompanied by extraordinary social conservatism. Everyone expected to own a house or at least a mortgage and have a secure job. Indeed it used to be said that any government that presided over an unemployment rate of more than 2% would fall. Visually, here in Sydney, the city was exploding upwards with the new high-rise and spreading outwards into endless suburbia, which you got to by car.

These images will remind you of the inner city experience of that time









As the fifties turned into the sixties and seventies that same economic security permitted a widespread radical critique of everything to flourish, an outpouring of social upheaval, a questioning of dominant values and increasing criticism of the inequalities inherent in the expansionary economy that was delivering city buildings that blocked once lovely views at the end of every street, and endless affordable houses in suburbs that were not provided with the necessary infrastructure of sewerage and schools and shops and community support services.

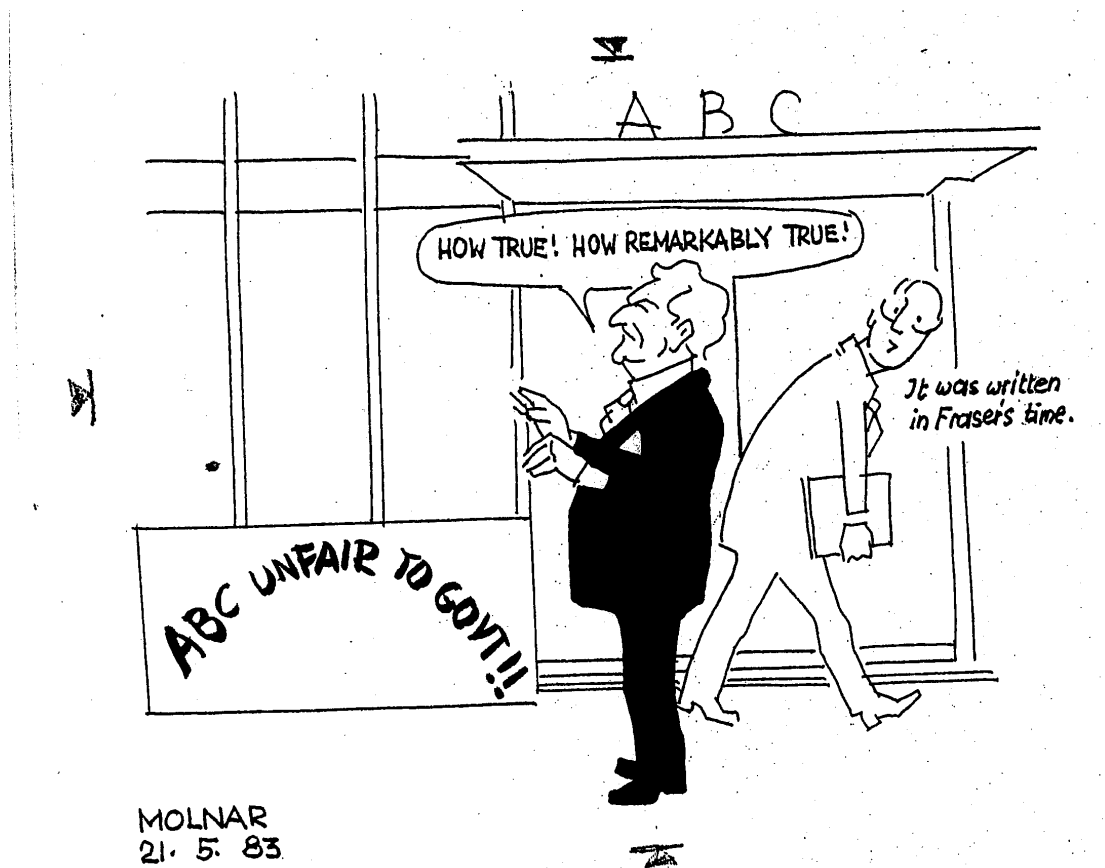
Molnar's experience of early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> C Europe left him deeply antithetical to any form of totalitarianism. He was anti mass-production, uniformity, grey sameness, mindless centralism. This placed him in a critical relationship to much of what was happening in Sydney- built form and society- and led to his rejection of much that the mainstream found new and exciting in architecture and planning as well as in society in general.

As an historian I tend to be in awe of the cartoonist. There can be no more opposite ways of telling the story. The historian develops the arguments, slowly builds up the case. Spends a lot of time saying 'well on the one hand this' and 'on the other hand that...'. The cartoonist's craft is immediate. To the point. He or she must communicate with a few strokes of the pen, and convince or educate through one liners and engage the intellect right now. And do it with humour. There are many readings that can be made of this particular carton. One of them contains the idea that in the long-winded story of telling the past, the historian could do worse than look to the cartoonist for insight into the essence of things. ]

So is he still relevant? Some cartoons are relevant because some issues never change:

- We don't like Canberra: In Sydney you can always get a laugh by slinging off at Canberra. You can see in the exhibition an image of planners with a diagram of the flooding of Lake Burley Griffin. The caption says '*the waters rise ...A lake...They rise ...And still rise... Oh the temptation is too great,*' as they contemplate the waters slowly covering Canberra altogether.

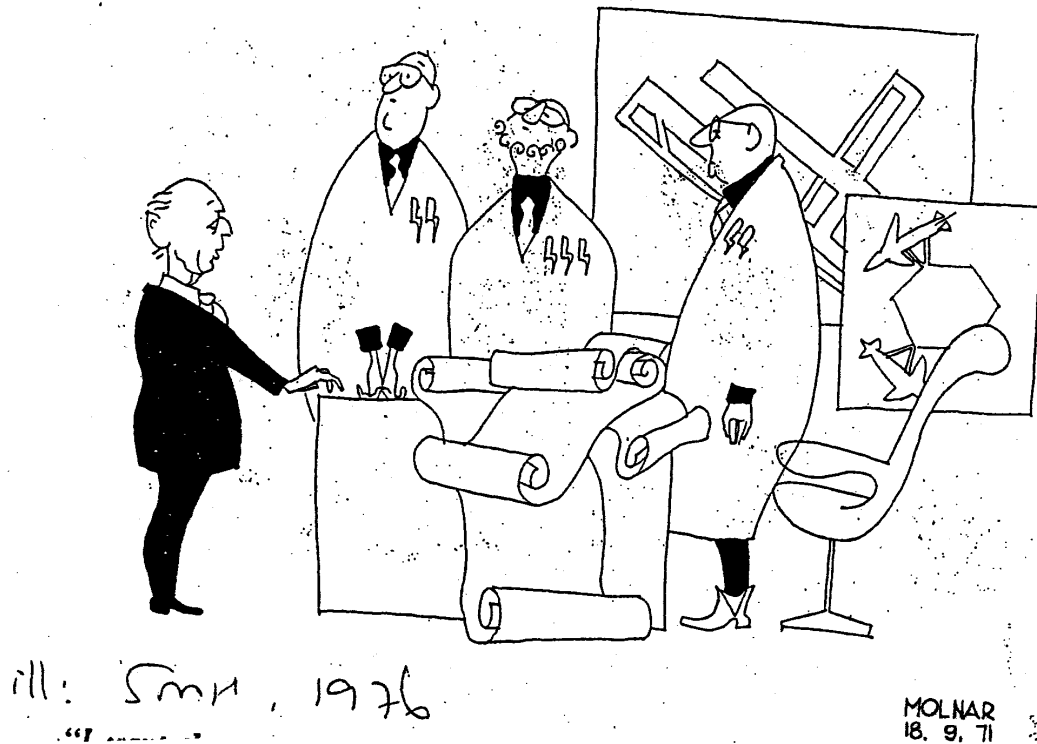
Politicians don't like the ABC:



- Other images deal with the themes of 'Nobody wants politicians to have salary increases', or 'Parents don't like the music their kids play.' These kind of things are perennial fodder for the cartoonist



- No one likes airports:

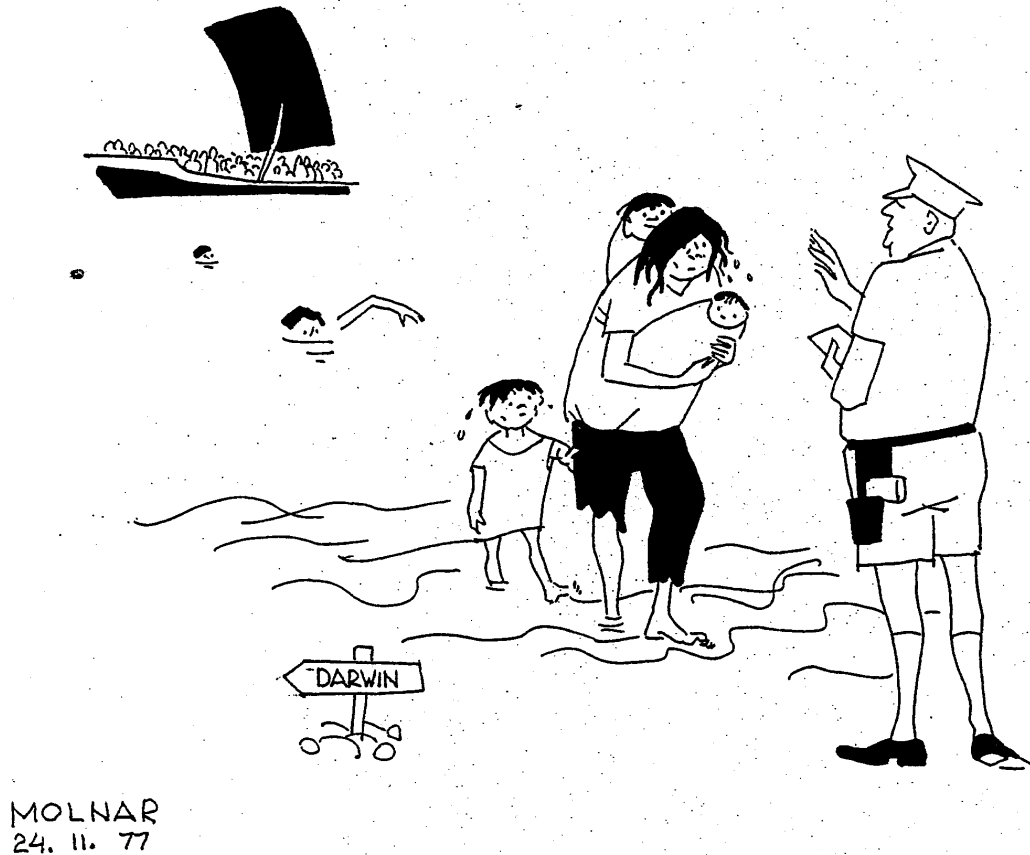


**I want the exact figures on airport noise  
in Gosford and Richmond. No, not in  
decibels. In voters.**

. note the date - 1971.

Of course Molnar might be found to be relevant today simply because we haven't confronted issues now that were issues then. This airport cartoon falls into that category.

So does this one:

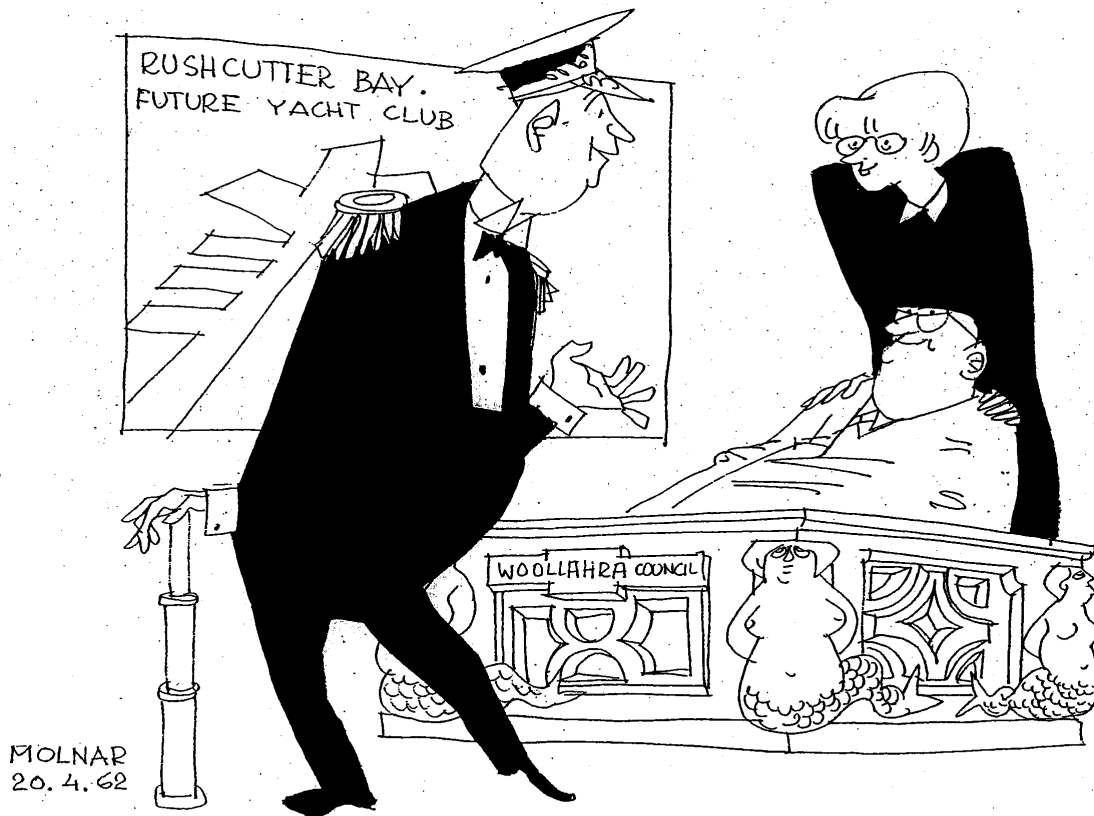


## **Have you proof that you're a genuine refugee and not just an illegal day tripper**

The date *that you're a genuine refugee and not just an illegal day-tripper?* This poignant image of so-called boat people from Vietnam was drawn in 1977, but the bureaucratic insensitivities on this issue are no different today.

And some of the issues he confronts are far more of an issue today than they were when he first raised them.

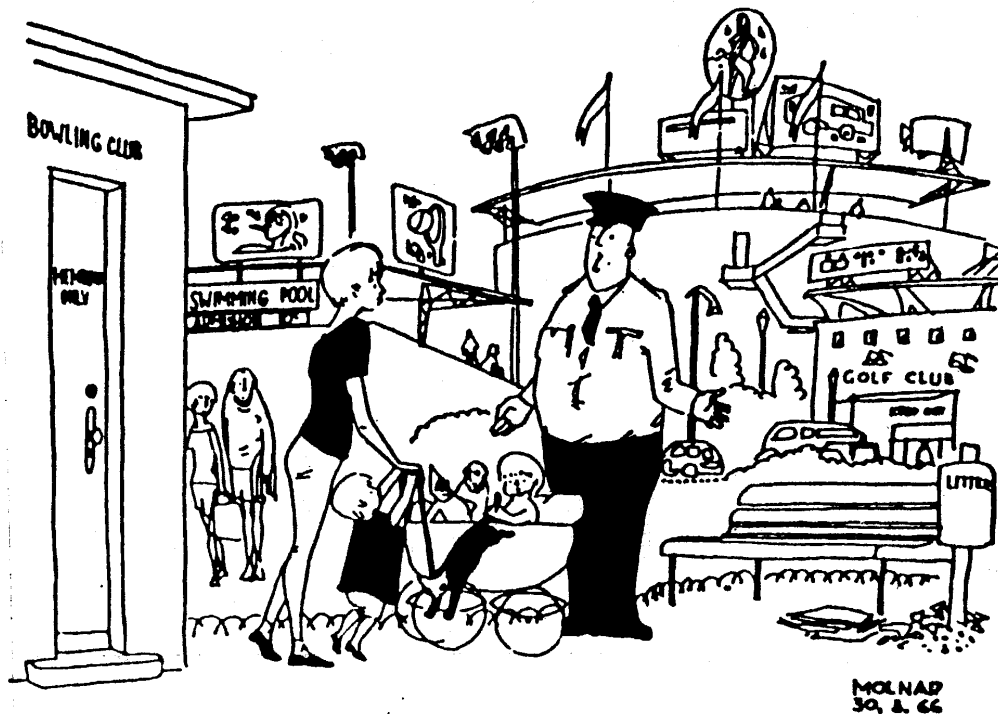
Consider this.



## **But what harbour are we encroaching on? By the time we finish there won't be any harbour**

Did he know then about the 2000 Olympics and what they would do to Rushcutters Bay? . Today the future development/protection of Sydney Harbour is a huge issue. The very real issues of ever more numerous, more bulky and more ugly craft, and of ever bulkier, ever uglier housing around its endangered foreshores, issues of run-off and of environmental degradation - the list is long.

Or this.



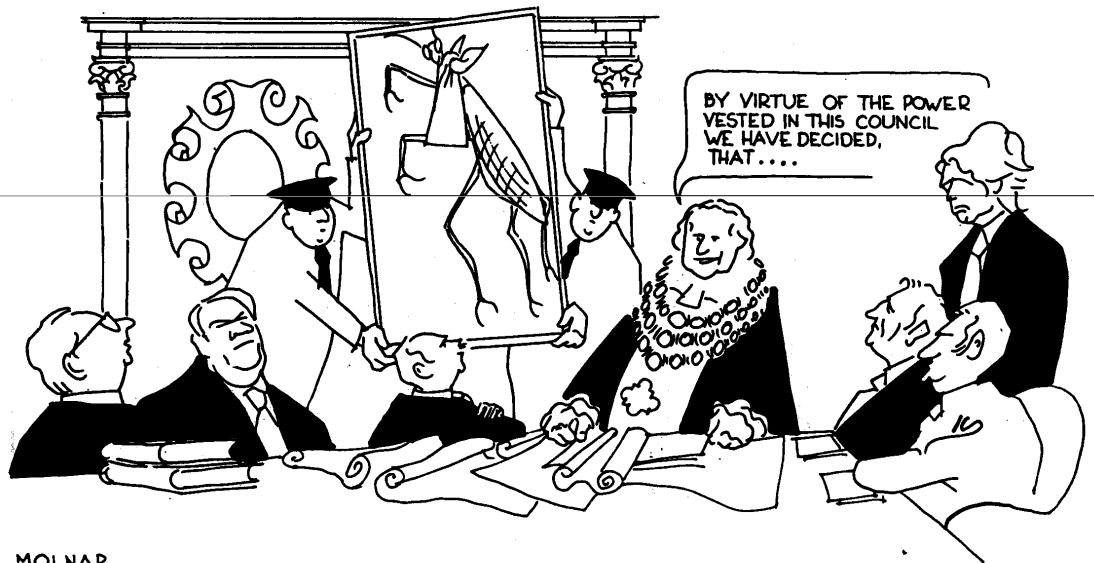
**All this is public park madam. You can recognize it from the bench. SMH 30.3.1966**

... The encroachment and alienation of public land... Dare I mention the question of 'active v's passive' land use? Or Cook & Phillip Park? Or Callen Park? The issue of the fate of public land has never been more topical. And with the sell off of public property and the own sizing of government the issue is currently acute.

Far too much of Molnar's work remains relevant, for comfort, I fear.

Molnar says on the video in the exhibition that a cartoon often started with an incongruity.

Take this cartoon:

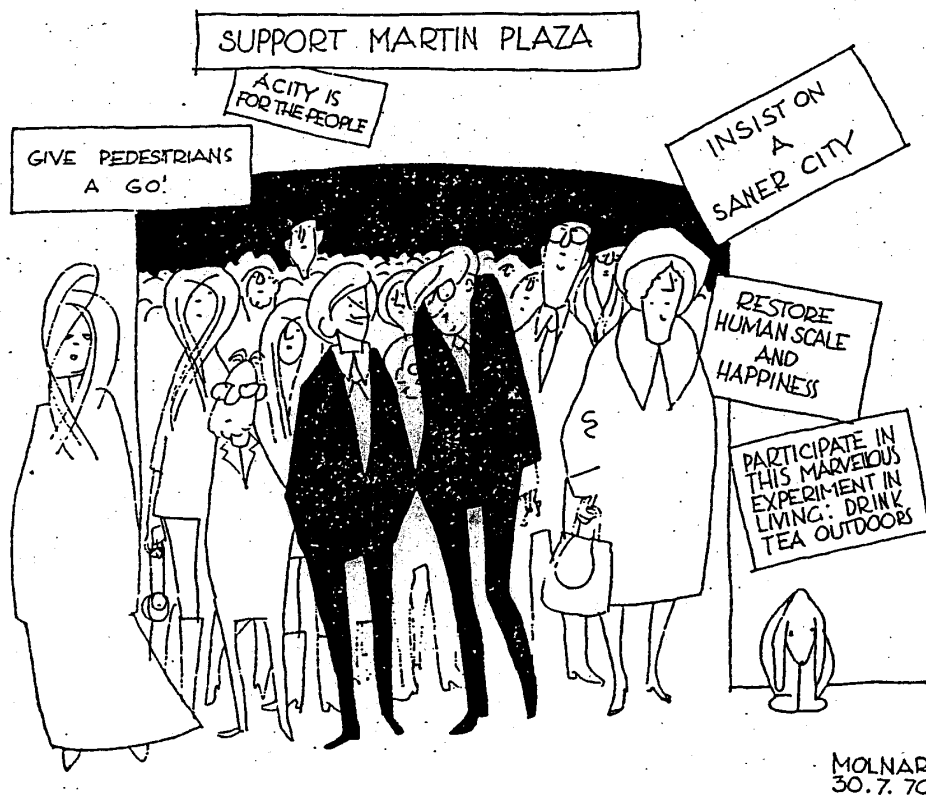


The words were Premier Wran's in 1977. 'The city council has no more power as a crippled praying mantis'. Wran was politician as performer. He was adept at plucking the appropriate powerful image from the air at the right moment. Politicians do it all the time. What shifted this image into the collective memory - and it has appeared in several publications that I am aware of - was not that Wran said it - Wran said many clever things- but that Molnar put it into black and white. It's one thing to dream up the image of a crippled praying mantis. It's something else to draw it, leg in sling, poor thing. Poor powerless City Council. I understand that Molnar drew this cartoon at the suggestion of George Clarke, planner extraordinaire who was at the time the driving force behind the new City Strategic Plans in the 1970s. This plan and its successors did not carry statutory authority, and according to the letter of the law the City Council was indeed powerless. However the reality was that during the early seventies the planning parameters espoused by the powerful State and its Department of Planning for high rise - in the Rocks and Woolloomooloo, for instance - never did come to fruition.

Or at least they haven't yet, though they are beginning to creep down Kent Street, and the redevelopment of the finger wharf at Woolloomooloo has upped the ante there. The reasons for halting all this in the seventies were complex. They involved community resident action groups and trade union green bans and so on, but within the planning fraternity many of the voices arguing for a different kind of city were on

the City Council. So here Molnar captures the so-called powerless City Council. Wran is right in saying so. But not quite right. Here is Andrew Briger and Leo Port, credited with turning around the way a lot of people thought about urban issues and design issues. Here is Leon Carter - and nobody ever dared say he did not have some kind of power. And George Clarke who many today would acknowledge as one of the pivotal planning thinkers of the 1970s.

Leo Port gets the Guernsey and the brass plaque for turning Martin Place into a pedestrian zone and a ceremonial public place. I always accepted this as one of the 'good things' on the positive side of the Port ledger.



*"As long as the attention is on the plaza they'll not notice the skyscrapers we're building around it."*

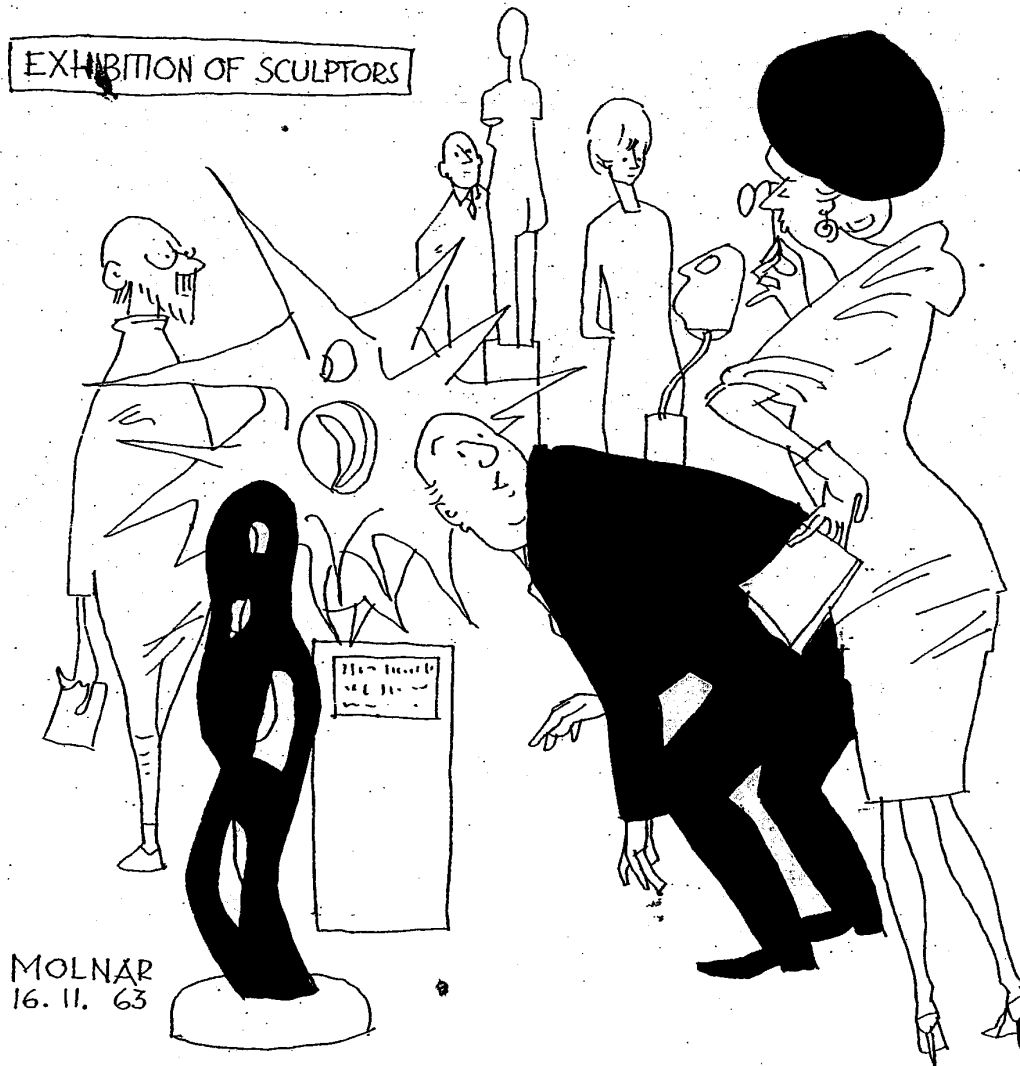
But having looked at this Molnar take on Martin Place, I think I had better think again, and I should go back to the records and do some more rummaging. And another of the same ilk.



**We're not kidding Mr Greenway. This is your Sydney Square and those buildings were planned together**

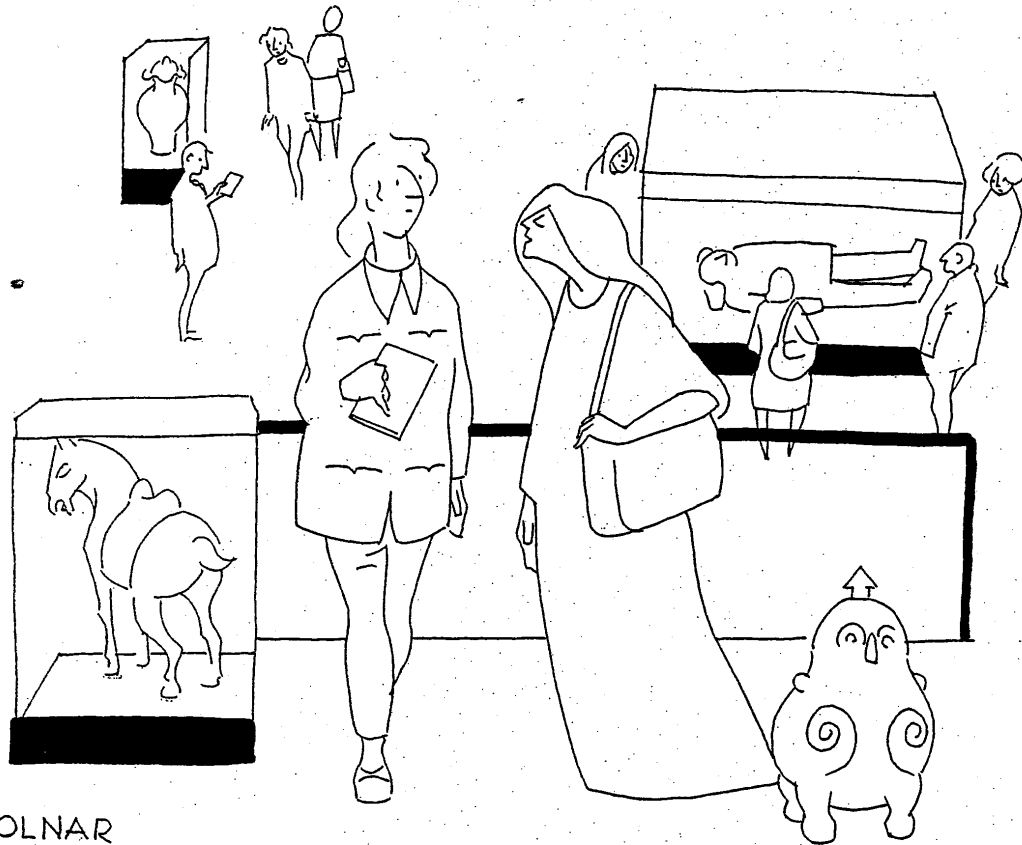
The creation of Sydney Square was much lauded, but...And of course both those cartoons could very easily be transferred to East Circular Quay - you'll grow to love the buildings once we give you a nice place to drink coffee.

Molnar claimed that 'I don't think by nature I am a funny man.' In fact he could be very funny. He was funniest when he was sending up the art world and all its pretensions.



**Oh, no its representational. It's called  
Large Spiky Thing.**





## **But ideology wise, what is the message?**

Molnar was sceptical of the message, and we can only surmise that he would have had a field day with the topic of the moment, the MCA - building, proposed schemes and present use. Many many cartoons. One of them shows crowd at a gallery exhibition opening. People are chatting. One man says to his companion 'this gallery has the highest standard in Sydney. Just taste this wine.' The characters may be significant. The cartoon may have related to a specific event. I don't know. But the enduring aspect of this cartoon, for me, is that the pictures on the wall are all blank. This was just part of the simplicity of the image, perhaps, but not likely. In his 'postcard from...' series that ran in the Saturday Magazine of the SMH, 'Postcard from an Exhibition' reported on an exhibition of contemporary art at the Grand Palais in Paris in August 1972.

*The exhibition is of modern art of the last decade. It started well. First the police removed some exhibits. There were riots. Small scale riots, but photogenic. Now the*

*exhibition has empty wall spaces over names of some artists, which the public takes for exhibits and looks at with interest.*

His writing on the Opera House is impassioned and informed, but sometimes it is also funny. And humble. In his 'Reminiscences, Occasionally Indiscreet', he wrote:

*I entered with Stephenson and Turner. They were to supply the draftsmen. I the concept. ...For the sake of posterity, let us recall my design. It was exactly the opposite of Utzon's. He was inspired by white sails and blue water, I by the lights of the Manly ferry scurrying across the water. [He describes it]...stage tower like a giant smokestack ...too high... a floating island of light. It was not a good design. The fateful day of announcing the results at the Art Gallery came. Steam gave way to sail. Rightly, I thought, and went back to the Herald to do my cartooning.*

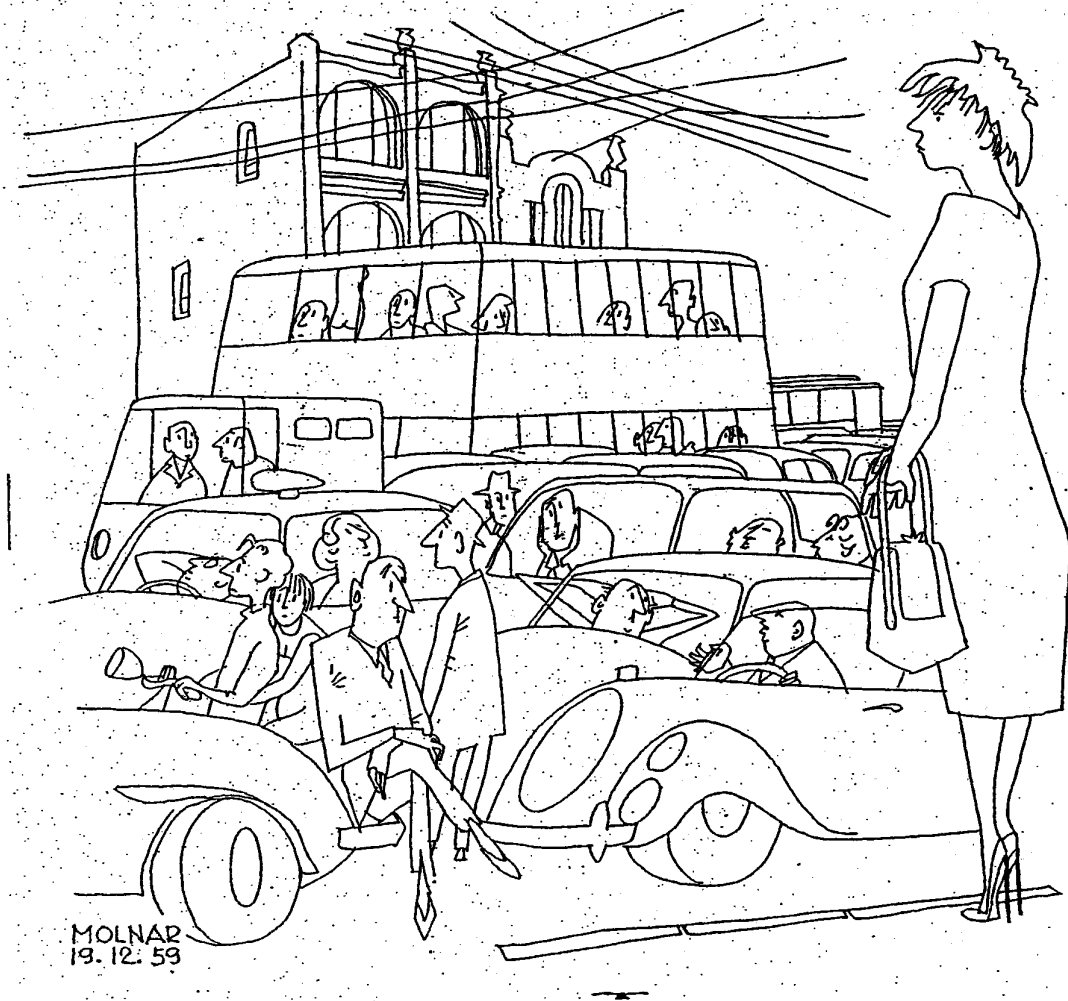
But Molnar was right to say he was not a funny man. Some cartoonists are very funny people. Anyone who heard Bill Leak speaking at one of these forums heard a funny man. But funny or not, all political cartoonists are by nature serious commentators on society, and Molnar's eye was critically a-tuned to the issues of planning and design as well as to the pretensions of his times. And what we did and still do is often just not funny. It is often ridiculous, or sad or just not good enough. Many of his cartoons show the ridiculous or the sad or the just not good enough.

One of his bete noirs was the car.

**No No! We must resist the temptation.  
We must.** **SMH 27.5.1966**



' That's just about the degree to which we are in thrall of the car.



**This simply means we are enjoying a  
high standard of living.      19 Dec, 1959**

This one bites a bit harder. Note the date - 1959. Not that there haven't been cartoons

about traffic congestion since the beginning of the car society in the 1920s.

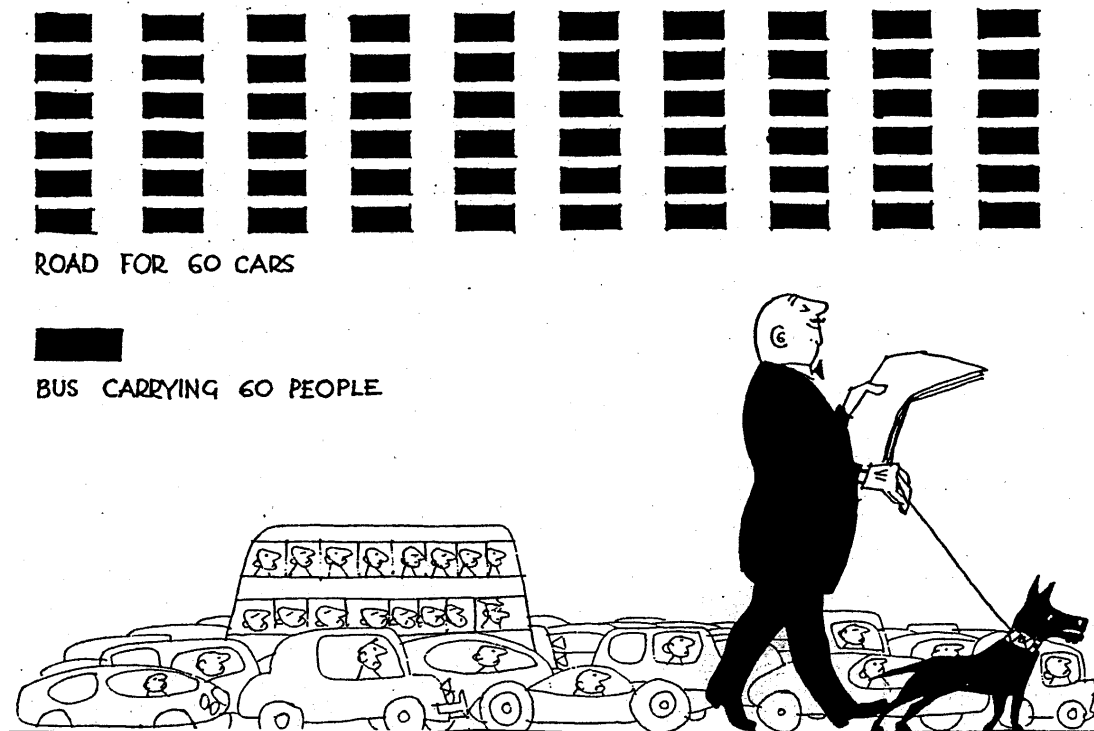
**THE GENTLE SPIRIT OF TRAFFIC CONGESTION**



**He wont be happy till every mudguard  
in the Commonwealth has a dent in it.**

**Finey, Smith's Weekly, 1928**

Molnar was also the didact, the teacher, who gave us the facts.



And I can't think but that this issue is as relevant or more relevant today. Even if we leave aside the major issue of the contribution of fossil fuels to the degradation of the planet and concentrate on the immediate impact of traffic as simply as traffic. After doing the sums on the costs of cars, petrol maintenance, garages, parking spaces, road surfaces etc., Molnar comments 'the results of this extraordinary expenditure is the complete chaos that strangles our cities. 1964. Our response - more freeways, more congestion. And we have to ask where are the so-called economic rationalists when it comes to this question? We must have efficiency and best practice, we are endlessly told, but not in relation to the car. There are too many other forces at play.

I want to quote from lecture on 'Technocracy: the Enemy of Architecture,' written in 1964. By technocracy he means 'the management of a country by technical experts'. He's talking about the new medium of television:

*A television technician is only interested in producing better and better television sets. What is show on the screen interests him only as far as the clarity of the reception goes. If more sets will be sold by appealing to the public's lower taste and larger sales will produce greater funds for research, so be it. His aim is the better set.*

What is observed here for television can be multiplied a thousand times to take in computers, virtual communications, the WWW and all its doings.

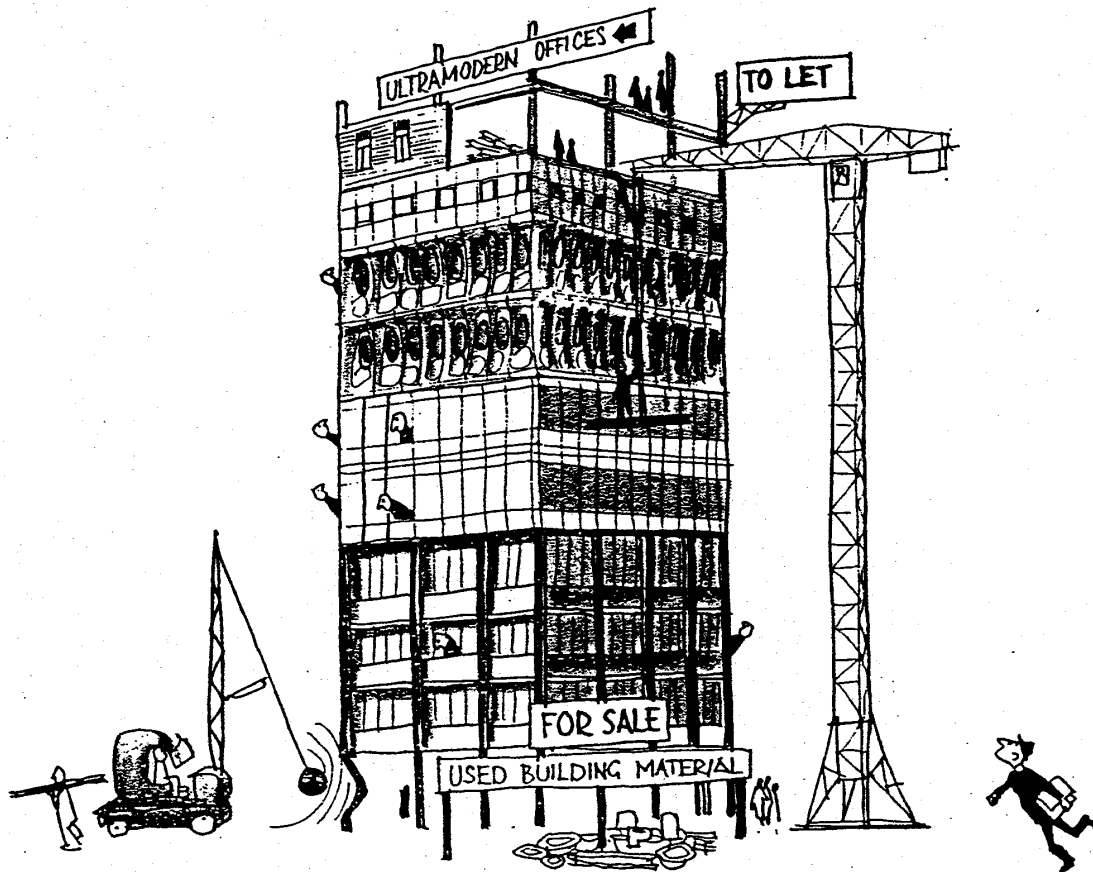
Content comes a poor second to better technology. Indeed content must be pared down, spun out, dumbed down to meet the need of the lowest denominator, the passing hit, the merest connection.

He goes on:

*we accept its (technocracy's) lead more and more because we somehow have a notion that technocracy is efficient and economical. Yet technocracy is not interested either in the most economical way of production or in the conservation of our natural resources.*

And he demonstrates why. Written in 1964.

One of the manifestations of technocracy in architecture was what he called Gigantism. (Not giant toasters and giant coffee tables, though they would have brought forth some interesting Molnarisms). But size for size sake (or for profit) which produced inefficiencies and wasteful design in office buildings. 'Glass to trap heat, requiring air-conditioning instead of walls to protect us from the elements'.  
Obsolescence.



**Obsolescence is another characteristic of technocracy**

. At the time he was writing this the buildings were just going up. Now they are coming down, with the Chevron in Macleay Street the first. The Woolly State office Block. Today, finally there are the beginnings of practices towards the ecologically sustainable in architecture, but the massive waste of energy in any city remains an urgent issue. The world cannot afford the wasteful architecture it created in the last four decades, and Molnar was saying so in the 60s.

But Molnar never confused genuine efficiency with the fake version that rated technology above humanity. In fact he celebrated genuine human chaos as a milieu in which creativity could flourish. Suspicion of planners and rules and regs comes through again and again. 'Sydney is spoilt. It is chaotic. It is mad. Yet there is beauty in chaos and madness. Any town-planning scheme must be based on the acceptance of this.' 1964. In the 1960s urban planners struggling for standing in the community needed this kind of thing like a hole in the head.... But today there are many who would argue that the rules and regs have gone too far -Or more precisely, are not



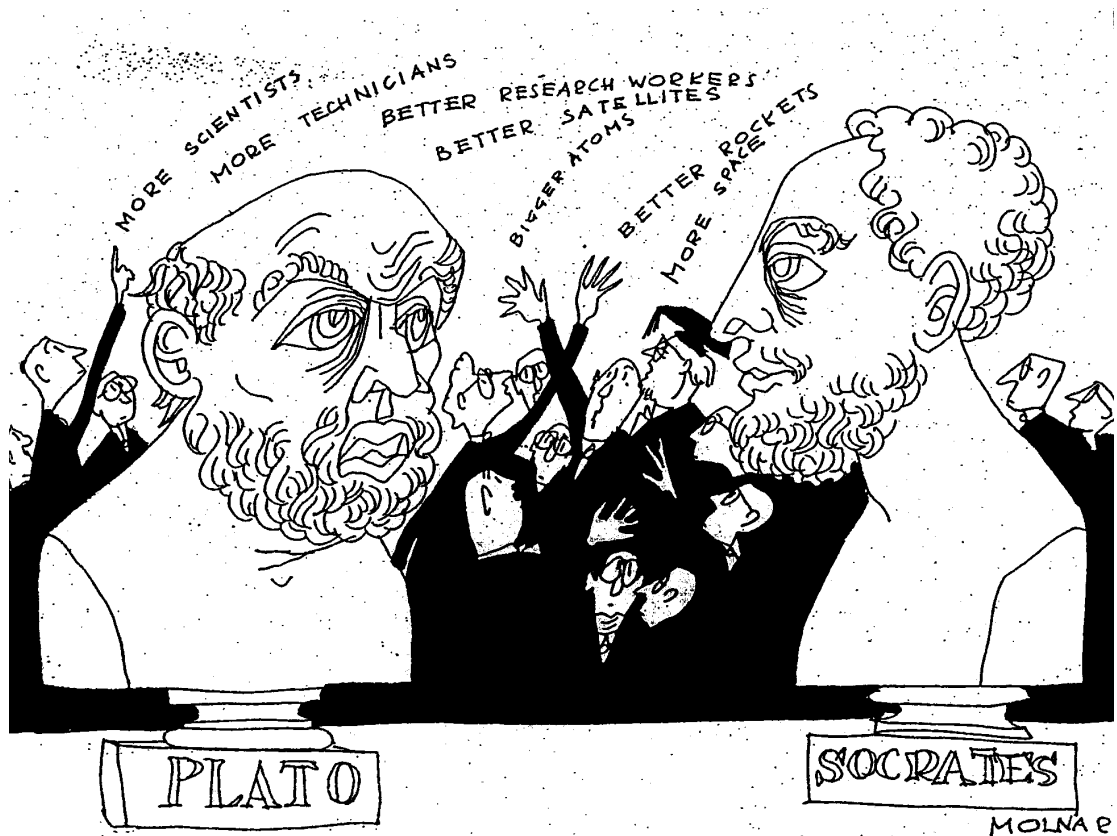
flexible enough to take on board genuine creative madness. The Opera House was almost a debacle then. Would it have got off the drawing boards at all today?

At the time Molnar's anti mass production, uniformity, grey sameness, his wariness of centralisation -all these 'obsessions' (and that is how some saw them) may have had had their roots in the political experiences of the Europe of his youth. But today it does not sound so obsessed. Yesterday's Herald had a reprint of an article by Salmon Rushdie warning that the Big Brother of George Orwell's 1984 was becoming a reality, and it reminded me of the early cartoons that Molnar did to illustrate a review and excerpts from this book in 1949, a year after it was published. Cartoon:

Oceania...and tell me a major organisation in this town that isn't having to deal with the mega bites of porn that clog up the electronic system? Remember Winston Smith who worked for the Ministry of Truth, which shredded history and replaced it with propaganda. At the time it was viewed as a story aimed at critiquing state-dominated dictatorships but today it can easily be read for the here and now. The 'telescreens' that were everywhere in Winston's life. 'Newspeak' (read spin doctoring) and so on. Anyone who argues that we have more freedom today do so against a backdrop of increasing standardisation, of McDonaldisation, of a media concentration far and away beyond the one that Molnar criticised, of a world where perhaps we could still think thoughts if anyone had time.

So maybe in the end the most important relevance of George Molnar is as role model. He was Molnar, Professor of Architecture AND he was a cartoonist. And he wrote journalistic articles, and he gave public lectures. He did many things. He was a communicator across a wide range of audiences, and that kind of intellectual life is all but disappeared in a society that is by and large the technocracy that he feared so

much.



**We're outmoded. We only wanted to  
produce better men.**