What the Japanese Think of Us—page 22

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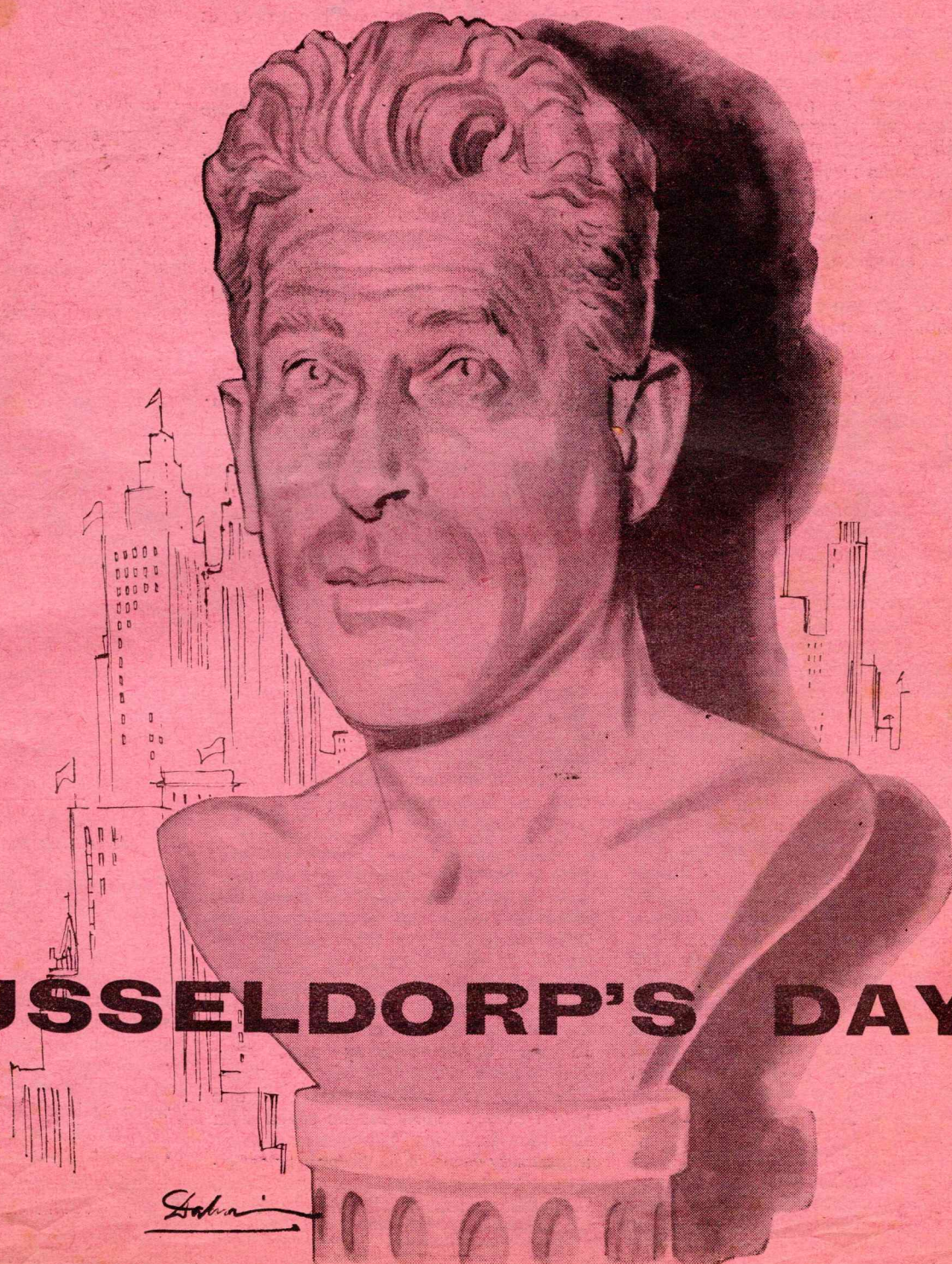

DUSSELDORP'S DAY

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DUSSELDORP'S DAY

By GORDON BRADLEY

IF anything since the war has changed in character more than the population of Australia, it is the sky-line of the cities. And it seems appropriate that our newly cosmopolitan communities are receiving their most striking face-lift from a New Australian with steam-shovel and concrete-mixer, a Dutchman named G. J. Dusseldorp.

At present directing £15,000,000-worth of construction, ranging from the tallest residential block in Australia to the most remarkable opera house in the world, this newcomer to the local scene has not only revolutionised our current approach to the techniques and financing of building, but has managed, somehow, to create an almost mystical *rapport* with that pillar of pre-stressed independence, the Australian worker.

The public image of the man is of a powerful and steel-reinforced tycoon, a speculator in sky-space who has ridden the building wave right up the beach. But is Dusseldorp really like that? And how has he achieved his mastery of labor relations, unparalleled anywhere else in the industry? How will the threatened collapse of land speculation affect him? Will he ever have as much effect on the way people live as he is having on the way their cities look? What, in fact, is really going on behind those hoardings labelled "Civil and Civic" and "Lend Lease," the two companies that Dusseldorp controls?

The best way to find out seemed to be to meet the man not in his office in Caltex House (which he built), but on the job—to go round with him and see just how he operates. But his public relations counsellors were at first doubtful. "He's extremely busy," they said.

Finally they called back. "How about the end of Christmas week?" they said. "Mr Dusseldorp's visiting the sites to wish the men a merry Christmas. He'll be at Toohey's new office block in Surry Hills at two o'clock."

At a quarter to two, two days before Christmas, work had stopped on the Toohey's site. About fifty men, riggers, steel-fixers, concreters, carpenters, and laborers, were gathered on the ground floor, eating prawns, sausages, and sandwiches, and drinking beer and whisky—all on Civil and Civic.

"I heard of a firm charging thirty bob a head to go to the Christmas party," said one man, drawing another glass of beer with relish.

Sharp at two the head-office party arrived: the general manager, the N.S.W. manager, the construction manager, and Dusseldorp himself.

Dusseldorp is a well-built man in his early forties. He has a strong, handsome face and a cool, direct look under a broad brow. His dark hair is cut boyishly short, but grows down his neck in a way unmistakably European. On this occasion he wore a light grey suit, a white shirt, and a blue tie. The only decorative touch was a pair of opal cuff-links. He headed straight for one of the men around the barrel of beer, greeted him by name, and shook hands.

As Dick, as they all called him, began peeling and eating prawns in the middle of a growing group of men, the site foreman, watching from the sidelines, explained some of the secrets of Civil and Civic's success.

"They know what every man is doing, all the time," he said. "Every man on the site is fully occupied, all day. I've never seen anything like it in this game. In most building jobs, work just goes on until the job's finished. Half the time there'll be men doing nothing, or sweeping-up, waiting until some part of the work is ready for them to carry on. A

firm like that never knows how much the job really costs.

"Here, everything that every man does is listed by the leading hand on time sheets, jobs across the top, hours down the column, and totalled up both ways. The site managers from all Civil and Civic jobs meet every Monday night to discuss progress and hold-ups. First they try to find work on their own site for anybody with nothing to do. If there are concrete form-workers doing nothing, we'll get them fixing steel, and so on. And if work can't be found on the site, they'll switch men from site to site. This way they can spot a loss before it happens, and then it doesn't happen.

"Every man on this site is paid two pounds fifteen a week over the award—a straight eleven shillings a day proficiency money. They're expected to work for it, and they do."

The foreman emptied his glass of beer. "I was seventeen years with other firms before I came here. This is my first job with Dusseldorp. I've got less authority here, but I don't mind. We'll be out of this building in six months instead of nine. What's wrong with that?"

Dusseldorp's men did not seem to hold his full-employment policy against him. Many of them wanted to shake his hand, and in the odd moments that it was free someone shoved a glass of beer into it.

"Remember that fight we had in the office?" Dusseldorp said to one man, a powerful worker with a red face and a loud voice. The man laughed. "We had the ——— gloves off that night, Dick," he said. "But when it was over we all knew where we stood," said Dusseldorp. "You told me that what I suggested didn't agree with past experience, remember? And when I said I still wanted to do it, you said we were a most unusual firm. And I said I hoped it would stay that way." They both laughed.

Dusseldorp, despite his characteristic air of watchfulness, seemed at ease among the laborers, and let them talk more than he did. After about 20 minutes, someone hammered for silence, and the boss. Dusseldorp moved into a small clearing in the crowd. His various managers stayed at the back.

"There seem to be some compensations in working on this site," he said, looking at the dripping beer-barrel. There was an appreciative laugh. "I remember another site that was popular. When the job got above the fence you got a good view into a girl's school." There was another laugh. Then Dusseldorp looked more serious. "I don't have to tell you that this has been a close job, in many ways."

"Put it down to experience, Dickey," said someone at the back, and everybody laughed again. "That's right," said Dusseldorp, a smile appearing and just as quickly disappearing. "It's experience that we count on. This is the kind of job in which a man's service is counted in months, not years. You finish here, and go on to another shore. But on all our sites we've got men who know what they're doing, and who stay with us. They show the new men what to do. So let's drink, this Christmas, to the men of experience, and the new men."

"Good old Dickey!" shouted someone, and the beer barrel spurted eagerly. Someone from head office touched Dusseldorp's sleeve. "I'm afraid I have to go," he said, as the men crowded round him, "we've got four other sites to visit."

SITTING between his lieutenants in the back of the automatic Chevrolet as it slid through the Christmas traffic, with his plant manager, a young man with a neat black beard, at the wheel, Dusseldorp relaxed, and looked out at the city, and recalled his first job in Australia.

"It was in 1951. An Australian mission had been going round Europe looking for companies interested in construction work out here. When they got to Holland, Civil and Civic took on a contract to build two-hundred houses at Cooma for the Snowy Mountains Authority. They sent me out to do it. I brought only thirty-five workers with me, and found the rest here. Half those original thirty-five are still with us. That job was worth half a million. This year we're doing fifteen main jobs, worth about a million each."

Dusseldorp's voice is soft, but firm,

with the slightest trace of an accent. The relationship between him and his managers seemed free from strain. They listened when he talked—but he listened when *they* talked, and never interrupted them.

At the Opera House site on Bennelong Point the party picked its way through puddles towards the first stage of the building, rising from the centre of the cluttered site. As Dusseldorp went ahead, one of his managers ventured an opinion of his boss's outstanding quality of success.

"It's his mind," he said. "He can think broad, and think big. He makes the rest of them look like brickies. And he never tries to show his power."

Dusseldorp led the way up a gangway of sloping planks. The wind from the harbor carried the hoot of a ferry and the hum of traffic crossing the bridge. It was easy to see, as Dusseldorp looked keenly about him at the site basking in the warm sunshine, that this was his favorite child, his baby.

"Look at that," he said. "That's the most difficult concrete work going on in this country. It's the roof of the main concourse, the main entrance to the place."

The wooden form-work stretched back towards the road, ready for the pouring. It lay in swelling and narrowing curves, like Viking longboats excavated from some peat bog.

The noise of the party came rolling through the scaffolding. A piercing Italian tenor, greatly amplified, cut through the hubbub of talk. There must have been nearly 200 men, drinking beer out of paper cups. "That'll cut down on breakages," said Dusseldorp's general manager approvingly.

Dusseldorp was immediately surrounded by workmen. He knew many of them by name, and could tell them without hesitation what had happened to old Paddy or Stanislaw. From time to time someone with the microphone bellowed an introduction to yet another Italian singer. Here the proportion of New Australians seemed very high. "Almost eighty per cent. of the laborers would be New Australians," said the general manager, "but it's not because it's a Dutch firm. It's the same everywhere."

A carpenter dragged forward three grinning apprentices and presented them to Dusseldorp. They were very young, and slightly drunk, but, bolstered by each other's company, defiantly non-obsequious. Dusseldorp shook their hands gravely and leaned forward to make himself heard above the tumult.

"Remember what you learn here," he said. "In all your lives you'll never see another job like this one." (Dusseldorp has a teenage son of his own and four other children, but he doesn't think he is fitted for the construction business—"perhaps something in the newspaper business or television would suit him better.")

A short, fat man pushed his way to the microphone, and shouted for silence. "Communist union-organiser," murmured the general manager.

"QUIET!" bellowed the speaker. "I want to say that although we've had our differences, if it wasn't for people like Dickey here we wouldn't be having this party and this booze." A mixed burst of laughter and clapping greeted this, and the microphone was offered to Dusseldorp. After some energetic shouting by various authoritarian voices the rear ranks were quiet enough for him to speak.

"At Toohey's site I just told them they had compensations working near a brewery," he said. "Here all you can do is jump in the water." The laugh was quick to come. "But what I really want to tell you is this," continued Dusseldorp, his voice ringing from the bare walls of the skeletal building. "When I go overseas and say I'm Dusseldorp, nobody takes any notice. When I say I'm from Civil and Civic, there's silence. But when I say we're building the Sydney Opera House . . ."

There was a roar of laughter and cheering. A beer barrel blew dramatically offstage.

"The eyes of the world are on this job," said Dusseldorp. "On this site, and what you're doing here. You will never work on another job like this. Nor will I. None of us will. So good luck."

The crowd closed round him again. The Communist union-organiser put a cup of beer into Dusseldorp's hand, and poured out a tale of how a friend of his reckoned Dusseldorp was a "smooth operator," and how he agreed with this. He then gave Dusseldorp a verbatim account of a recent meeting that Dusseldorp had attended. Dusseldorp must have been surprised, but he didn't show it. He listened amiably, and laughed occasionally. He looked like a man who wanted to be friendly.

Walking down the gangway of planks half an hour later, Dusseldorp waved his hand back towards the hubbub and the singing. "They talk about the lazy Australian worker," he said. "That's who they're talking about. They're all right. What you have to do most of all is to give them a fair go—and not just in money.

"When there's a dispute—and there are plenty in this business—you must give the benefit of the argument to the man who is weaker, socially or economically. This is something they have never had. In this business the weaker man has always gone under. But if you don't use your power to overcome him, even in small things, he'll work for you, and really work."

WALKING across the site, Dusseldorp thought for a few moments before he would specify which of all his jobs had pleased him most.

"You work in this business for two reasons," he said finally. "First, to make money. Well, that's obvious, otherwise you couldn't stay in the business. Personally, I'm not particularly interested in the money any more. And then you work for the other reason — for kicks, you know? I've got most kicks out of the Opera House, and the Academy of Sciences in Canberra, the copper dome."

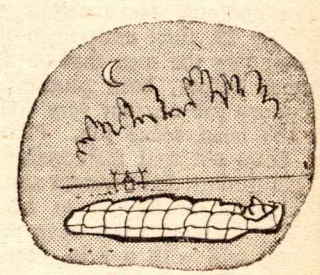
As the car swung across lower Macquarie Street to the slim new building that has risen between Unilever House and the I.C.I. building, Dusseldorp explained the link between the signs for Civil and Civic and Lend Lease that hung from the facade.

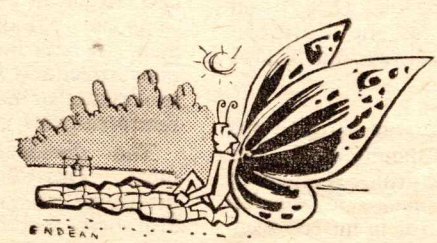
"We offer something new in Australia —a complete package deal. Lend Lease is our financing company, Civil and Civic the construction company. If a client wants a building, we buy the land, design the building, put it up, supply consulting engineers, and finish it off, right down to the air-conditioning."

"We do everything but supply the secretaries," said the general manager. He looked as if, given time, he would do that, too. Dusseldorp has central design and costing offices in Sydney, which service his operations in New South Wales, Victoria, Canberra, and, soon, in Queensland. The advantages of keeping in the family all the percentages due to estate agents, finance companies, architects, consulting engineers, and builders seem fairly clear.

In the lower basement of the Macquarie Street building about 50 men were sitting at long tables, drinking beer. "Here's Dickey!" shouted somebody delightedly, and the barrel wheezed happily as fresh glasses were drawn off for the visitors. As Dusseldorp plunged into the thickest knot of men, a guest from another company watched him curiously.

"I've known Dick for nearly ten years,





although not closely," he said. "I've worked with him, and I've sailed against him, but I've never seen him smile." As he said it, Dusseldorp joined in a loud general laugh over a joke. "Yes, I know," said the guest, "but it's not what I call a smile, you know what I mean?" His voice trailed off. He could not explain the enigmatic quality about the laughing Dutchman.

This party was going well. And yet over it hung the knowledge that the job was nearly finished, that within a few weeks everyone would be paid off (even though many would probably go on to new Civil and Civic enterprises). There was a feeling, in that basement, of being shut away, isolated, lost. Dusseldorp didn't have to be told this. And in his speech he changed his approach.

He stood up and told the men, at some length, a story about an experiment in the United States to find out just how much effect the improvement of working conditions in a factory would have on productivity. After extensive surveys, one department was chosen. The lighting was improved, the walls repainted, the machines rearranged. The productivity curve immediately began to go up and up. The case was proved.

Then, said Dusseldorp, while the men listened intently, someone suggested a simple check. To make certain of their findings, they should revert temporarily to something like the original conditions, and then return to the new look—just to see if the productivity curve fluctuated accordingly.

So the survey team, explained Dusseldorp, began reducing the level of the lighting. When it got so dark in the factory that the workers could hardly see what they were doing, the productivity curve was checked again. It was still going up.

"In the end," said Dusseldorp, as a low murmur of amusement rose from the men, "they realised that it was really the men who had changed, not the conditions; the very knowledge that the management had taken some interest in them and their surroundings was enough to stimulate them."

And with that reminder, which seemed to reach its mark, of Civil and Civic's interest in its labor force, Dusseldorp stepped back, to steady applause. His newly appointed construction manager, aged only 29, then underlined the point by reminding the men that he had, only a month before, been plucked from a supervisory job on that very site to take over the head office job. (This young man, crew cut and fashionably dressed in a plain, dark light-weight suit, seemed still slightly bewildered at his promotion. "Somebody must have picked me out," he said with a grin, "but I don't know who.")

"Getting behind schedule, Dick," said the general manager as the Chevrolet slid under the Quay railway and headed for the next site.

As his team led the way through the scaffolding into the new Anchor House, in George Street, Dusseldorp answered without hesitation a question about what he looked for in his top men.

"First of all, commonsense," he said. "And then they have to be big enough so they don't have to keep proving that they're the boss. It wasn't always easy to find good men," he said, bounding up a dark, unfinished stairway towards sounds of celebration, dodging twisted steel and dripping water. "But we happen to be the firm of the moment, you know. That's attracting the ones who want to get on. They come and have a look at one of our jobs and they meet somebody they used to be at school or college with. So they apply to us for a job, too. We get them now, all right."

The small gathering on the first floor of Anchor House—a building that will soon pass the twentieth floor—had been celebrating, it seemed, for some time. The afternoon was creeping on, and the beer had run out. While extra supplies were urgently sent for, Dusseldorp climbed on to a bench and, raising his voice above the roar of the George Street traffic, admitted that this was his first visit to the site.

"Unfortunately, I have to spend too much time these days listening to people talk about money," he said. The men listened. They seemed prepared to give him a go—even if the beer had run out.

"But even if I haven't been here, I've watched the building go up," said Dusseldorp, "and I can tell you that you're working on a very unusual job. It's going up on land that nobody could afford to buy. It's owned by the Bank of New South Wales. Recently they found that their building was so old and gloomy that customers were staying away. They asked us if we had any ideas. We said that this was just the kind of job that interested us. We said, tell us what kind of a bank you'd like and we'll build it for you—if you let us have the space *above* the bank for our own purposes."

And the men finally laughed at the boss's way of describing how Civil and

Civic had thereby obtained nearly 20 floors of prime office space to sell in the highest-cost part of the city.

"On behalf of the carpenters," shouted a man, climbing on to a table, "I'd like to thank Mr Dusseldorp for coming here and showing an interest in us."

"How long will that keep you alive?" said a man loudly. Dusseldorp eyed him speculatively, and bent to the general manager to ask who he was. "He's the best rigger in New South Wales," said someone. "Fair go!" shouted several men. It was impossible to tell whether their solicitude was for the carpenter's spokesman or because of the anticipated reinforcements of beer.

The dissident mumbled something more. Dusseldorp walked over to the group he was with, shook hands with everybody and then with the heckler, who was swaying slightly. The man shook Dusseldorp's hand with a sheepish grin. Then the beer arrived and all was forgotten.

Driving over the bridge in the late afternoon sunlight for the final visit of the day, Dusseldorp pointed across the inner harbor to what was obviously another of his favorite projects, the Blues Point skyscraper of home units (a conception as different from the A.M.P. building as a rapier from a club).

"It took me a long time to get that site," he said, staring across the water at the promontory thrusting into the harbor from North Sydney. "It's the finest site I have ever seen. Water on three sides. From there you look straight down the Harbor. Ships coming into Pyrmont look up at it. It would be a crime to cover it with low buildings. So we decided to go straight up; twenty-six floors, with six flats on each floor. Prices from three thousand-odd up to eight thousand, and you wouldn't find a finer place to live anywhere in the world."

As the Chevrolet swung through the trees that have been left in the park-like area surrounding the slender, half-built tower, a voice boomed out from the group of men round the beer barrels: "Here he is! Me old mate and sparring partner!"

"That's Banjo," said Dusseldorp. "I met him first in Canberra, years ago, when he was secretary of the Building Laborers' Federation. He got beaten in an election. Now he's in charge of our laborers here."

Banjo came to meet Dusseldorp. A wide grin split the lean brown face above the green shirt. "Have a spot of the old pearl, Dickey boy!" he shouted, holding out a bottle of Barossa Pearl. "You know I'm off the beer. I've lost four stone!"

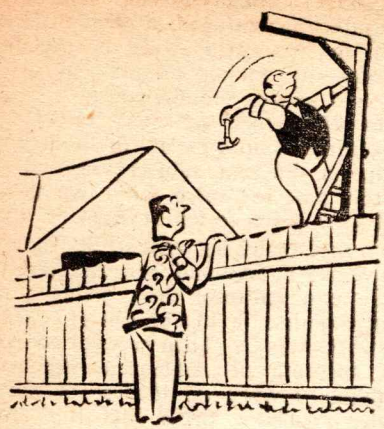
Dusseldorp accepted gracefully. "He's a beauty, this one," shouted Banjo hoarsely, looking round the group of men. "When I ran up against him in Canberra I thought: Here's a tough one, but I'll toss him before I'm finished. When he offered the building laborers a rate we turned it down. Then we thought it over and we accepted it. It's better than the award, so we'd be —— mugs if we didn't, wouldn't we?"

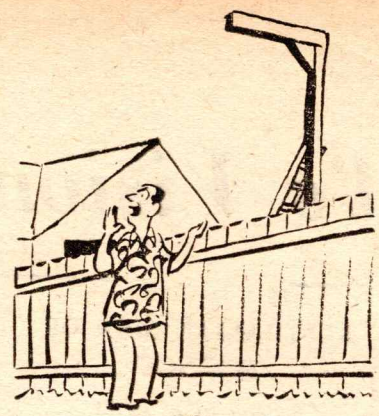
The men laughed raucously, and Dusseldorp smiled. After some cajoling Banjo was pushed up on to a table. He planted his feet firmly among squashed sandwiches and rolling glasses.

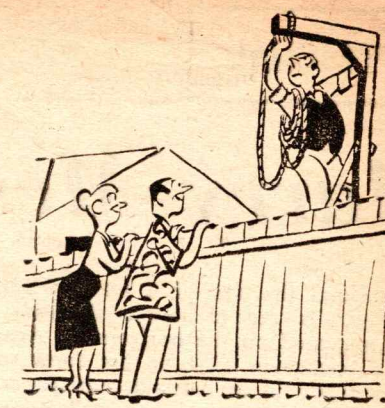
"Oh, I'm descended from Banjo Paterson, all right," he shouted, looking out across the crowd challengingly. "I wrote a poem myself once, about the building laborers. Some feller up at the Journo's Club's got it now. And if you want a speech I'll give you a —— oration that Mark Antony never made in 'Julius Cæsar'!"

There was some laughing and catcalling. A worker in sunglasses watched Banjo sourly. "Who put that loudmouth up there?" he said to nobody in particular.

"There was a time," shouted Banjo dramatically, his eyes closed, his arms







outflung, "when the building laborer in Australia was nothing but a donk! Donks, that's what they were! Pick it up here and put it there. Dump it here and dump it there!"

"You're a rabbit, Banjo," said his critic near the table. "Nothing but a —— rabbit."

"The building laborer has come a long way since then," shouted Banjo, "and it's because of people like Dickey! I'm talking to all of you, including the —— Abyssinians!"

This reference was apparently to a colored workman, happily drunk, who was trying to climb on to the table to support Banjo. Dusseldorp and his managers listened quietly.

"No, don't applaud!" shouted Banjo. "Only fools listen to flattery. But I tell you Dickey Dusseldorp is the greatest Australian you ever met, even if he is a —— Dutchman!"

(And the word he used wasn't "flying," either.)

As the laughter died down Dusseldorp said he wanted to go up in the lift, whose framework rose high above the 11 floors already completed. The lift-driver was found and the power switched on.

Slowly the open cage rose, through the completed floors, into the open and on up into the blue. The harbor and the city unfolded all round. "We only go up to the thirteenth floor-level at the moment," said the lift-driver. "I've been up to the twenty-sixth," said Dusseldorp calmly. "I sat up there in a helicopter. You can see over the deck of the bridge, right down the Harbor. It's unbelievable."

As the lift climbed into the sky, supported only on four steel tubes, Dusseldorp leaned on the rail and looked round the Harbor and talked.

"Look at that—the most magnificent habitation on earth. It's being ruined, and nobody is doing a thing about it.

"What's my biggest problem? Government. Small men in big positions. People who make their fifteen-hundred a year and make decisions that affect the lives and the amenities of millions. Take this block. The fire department has ladders that go up to a hundred or a hundred-and-twenty feet. Above that level they say nobody can be safe. So this is the only residential block in the world that has sprinklers in every room.

"At one time the objections from the local authorities to the height we wanted —it was the height that frightened them —got to such a pitch that everybody in my organisation said to hell with it, let's cut the building in half and put two side by side, ninety feet apart. It would have saved all the trouble. But I felt it would be wrong. This site deserves something better than that. So I said that we would hold out for the single building. And we won in the end."

A liner below hooted mournfully and slid slowly under the bridge.

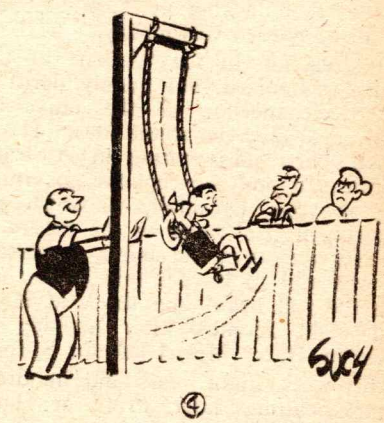
"I went to sea when I was a boy," said Dusseldorp, leaning on the rail and watching the liner. The lift had come to a halt, hanging motionlessly in the sky. "My father was a merchant, but I wanted to go to sea. I did two years as a deckhand. They made it tough for me because I was big for my age. So now I know what goes on in men's minds." He smiled briefly. "But I also know that you can't do much with one pair of hands."

He pointed down to the trees and the grass that carpeted Blues Point all round the building. "We've asked the council if we can make a park down there for all the people to enjoy. We've got plans to landscape it and everything. There are so few places where the people of Sydney can get to look at their harbor. Originally there was a council storage depot down there where you see that lawn near the water. We asked them if they'd shift the old sheds and they did. But not the Maritime Services Board. Look at that mess."

Dusseldorp pointed to piles of old rotting timber at the waterside, almost at the foot of the building. "We asked them to move it. You could put that stuff anywhere. They don't do any work down there. It's an eyesore. But people like that don't care about how things look."

Dusseldorp raised his eyes and gazed across the Harbor towards the south end of the bridge.

"Look at that Rocks area over there. The City Council is advertising in the United States for proposals to redevelop it. I've got a plan for that. It would cost us fifty millions. I will probably put it in next year. Area development is what I'm really interested in. But the conditions! They say you have to make provision in the area for bond stores. My plan would keep some of the fine old buildings—but bond stores!



"And take the density of people. The authorities are terrified of this. They think of slums, or something. They don't know what you can do by going up. In this block we're in the density per acre is about a hundred and fifty. Over in the Rocks area they think they're doing wonders by permitting three hundred per acre. This is ridiculous by overseas standards. I could put sixteen hundred people per acre on the Rocks and they'd be better off, freer and happier, than crammed into fibro houses at twenty to the acre."

Finally Dusseldorp came round again to the idea that really obsesses this remarkable builder, in the fulfilment of which he may yet alter the pattern of Australian urban living.

"I want to build for people to live in, not just for them to work in," said Dusseldorp, his eyes roving across the smoky wastes of Pyrmont, Gladesville and Glebe. "We've got a big area in Campbelltown. When we get round to that you'll see something different. I've got ideas for the future—but I can't talk about them just yet."

But as we hung there, suspended between heaven and earth, it became clear that it is to men like this, from the new Europe, that Australia may have to look for an escape from the blight on the landscape, the sprawling wastes of unserviced, unsewered, unattractive camp sites—for they are hardly more—that have soured the relationship of man and nature in this last great area of occupation and settlement.