

Googie Architecture

By Douglas Haskell
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"We call it Googie architecture," said Professor Thrugg, "named after a remarkable restaurant in Los Angeles called Googie's.

That's one you should see. It starts off on the level like any other building. But suddenly it breaks for the sky. The bright red roof of cellular steel decking suddenly tilts upward as if swung on a hinge, and the whole building goes up with it like a rocket ramp. But there is another building next door. So the flight stops as suddenly as it began.

"It seems to symbolize life today," sighed the Professor, "skyward aspiration blocked by Schwab's Pharmacy.

"My Los Angeles companion saw it differently," continued the Prof. "He said, 'looks funny, but I guess the guy has the right to do it that way if it attracts attention to his business.'"

"Is it a commercial motive?" asked a student, getting out his notes. "Do you mean that Googie architecture is like Mother Goose -- night clubs and gas stations shaped like Cinderella slippers or old-ladies-who-lived-in-the-shoe or stucco pumpkins?"

"No," replied the Prof., "this resemblance is superficial. Googie is mostly houses. And Googie goes deeper. You underestimate the seriousness of Googie. Think of it! -- Googie is produced by architects, not by ambitious mechanics, and some of these architects starve for it. After all, they are working in Hollywood, and Hollywood has let them know what it expects from them.

I refer you to that great popular classic, The Fountainhead. You may recall that every building the mythical hero Roarke created struck his audience on the head like a thunderclap. Each was Original. Each was a Revelation. None resembled any building ever done before.

"So the Googie architect knows that somehow he has to surpass everybody if he can -- and that includes Frank Lloyd Wright.

"You can see why Googie architecture then becomes Modern Architecture Uninhibited."

"Do you mean then," asked the student, **"that Googie is an art in which anything and everything goes?"**

“So long as it is modern,” came back the Prof. “Googie can have string windows – but never 16-light colonial sash. It can have inverted triangle roofs but never a cornice. It may be decked out in what my Googie friends call ‘vertical or horizontal louvers’ but never in green shutters. The first rule of Googie is, ‘It can’t be orgiastic if it’s not organic.’”

“Does it have canons of form?”

“It does indeed. The first is that although it must look organic it must be abstract. If a house looks like mushrooms, they must be abstract mushrooms. If it looks like a bird, this must be a geometric bird. (Nothing so naïve as Mother Goose!) It’s better yet if the house has *more* than one theme: like an abstract mushroom surmounted by an abstract bird.

Paraphrasing Oscar Wilde, the Googie architect declares, ‘When the public can’t make it out, the artist is in harmony with himself.’”

“Does it have principles of construction?”

“Yes, Googie has set modern construction free. You may have noted for some time the trend in modern architecture to make light of gravity, to get playful with it. Googie goes farther: it ignores gravity altogether.

“In Googie whenever possible the building must hang from the sky. Where nature and engineering can’t accomplish this, art must help.

“You note, for example, that a good Googie architect has no fear of starting a heavy stone wall directly over a glass-filled void. Taking his cue from store front designers, he laughs at anybody whom this might make uncomfortable. He knows that nothing need appear to rest on anything else, least of all on the earth; in Googie architecture both the glass and the stone are conceived to float. It is strictly an architecture up in the air.

“Another Googie tenet is that just as three architectural themes mixed together are better than one, so two or three structural systems mixed together add to the interest of the occasion.”

“What about materials?”

“Ah, yes. You may have noted how they have multiplied in modern architecture. First only three materials were considered *truly modern*: steel, concrete and glass – especially glass. Now look at them all! Redwood and asbestos cement and glass block and plastics and plywood and more and more and more and more orchard stone! Need I expand the list? But Googie as I have said treats all issues with generous abandon.

‘Why throw the coal into the furnace?’ it asks. ‘Why not into the wall? Why not build with string? Why not use *anything*?...’

“What about equipment?” quickly interrupted the student.

“Same freedom. To the inventions of the modern engineer, Googie adds all of Popular Mechanics. Walls that are hinged and roll out on casters, doors that disappear into the ground, overhead lights that cook the hamburger...”

“Stop! Wait!” cried the despairing student. **“Just where in the name of Apollo can all this uninhibited incoherence lead?”**

“Ah, well you might ask,” meditated Thrugg, stroking his chin. “Well you might ask. Modern architecture has set building free. For every one good way of building that there used to be, there are now three new ones, with more coming around the corner.

"Almost anything can be done and *is* being done – so what is there for young fellows trying to live up to *The Fountainhead* to do except create this spicy Googie goulash? Even so, they have brought modern architecture down from the mountains and set ordinary clients, ordinary people, free.”

“Is that good – having the people free?”

“No and yes. No, because the people have neither the education nor leaders to guide them. Caught between numbskull appraisers of the FHA on one side and Googie geniuses on the other, how can they know their way? There are no responsible critics in the middle!

“But again, yes, it is good, and for two reasons. One is that sometimes fantastically good ideas result from uninhibited experiment. The other is that Googie accustoms the people to expect strangeness, and make them the readier for those strange things yet to come which will truly make good sense.” Thrugg paused.

“Let me tell you a story. One hundred years ago in Spain was born a strange genius, Antoni Gaudi. He built cathedral towers that resembled weird plants and shocked everybody. Gaudi and his friends were interested in reproducing the more superficial appearance of nature – the beautiful lines of waves, the ever sensitive contours of leaves.

But Gaudi got people accustomed to looking away from the immediate past and toward nature. Soon a more deeply searching generation came. Beneath the changing leaves of plants they discerned the ever constant and ever geometric law of each plant’s growth; and beneath the changing waves the ever constant operations of dynamics.

When *their* buildings were reading, applying these new principles, Gaudi's fantastic strangeness had helped prepare the ground for this sensible strangeness.

"So something better than accidental discoveries might come even from Googie. It's too bad our taste is so horrible; but it's pretty good to have men free...."