ARCHITECTURE VIEW: ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS AS ART GALLERY ART
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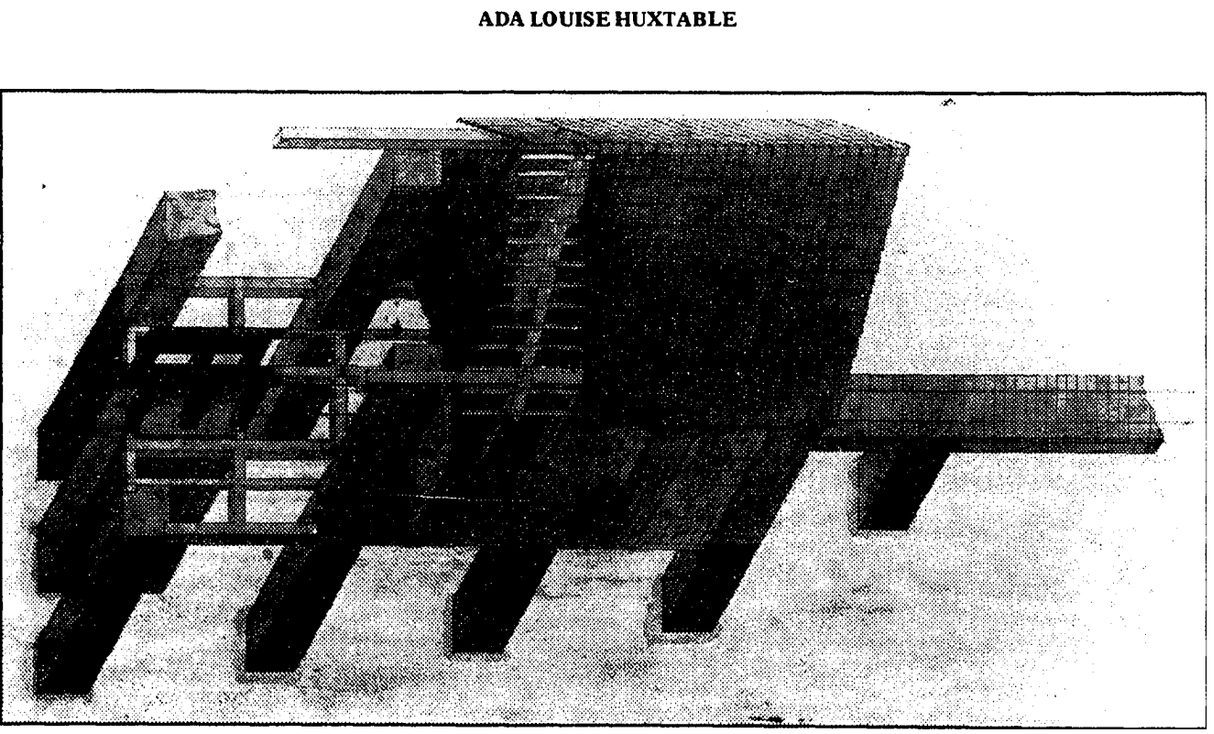
ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE



Walter Pichler's "Barn" in Castelli Gallery's first architecture show

Architectural Drawings As Art Gallery Art

There is a very beautiful and challenging show at the Leo Castelli Gallery (420 West Broadway, through Nov. 12) called Architecture I—so named because it is both the first architecture exhibition at Castelli and the first of a projected series on the subject.

This interest in architecture on the popular high art circuit is relatively new, reflecting dramatic changes in today's theory and practice, and even in the state of architecture vis-a-vis the other arts. Architecture is being perceived as an important art form now, equal to and intricately connected with painting and sculpture, sharing with those arts much of the troubled philosophy and arcane esthetic of our time, representing a creative force with implications deeper than the obvious aspects of the built environment. And its artifacts—drawings and models—are being viewed as collectible items, which buildings are not, except for a handful of corporate Medici.

This realization that something of special esthetic and theoretical significance is occurring in the field has gone beyond architectural aficionados to the general gallery-going public. What started as a simple reappreciation of architectural rendering has proceeded from the drawing as art object to its role as an interpretive tool of a creative act—to the subject of architecture as a whole. Because this exhibition deals with a cross-section of today's most innovative and problematic practice—the frontiers of architecture, in a sense—for a public beyond specialists it is probably the most important show of several that have opened this fall.

The subject of architecture is an immensely troubled one at present, as it breaks with the constraints of doctrinaire modernism to enter a transitional phase of exploration and experiment. The seven architects being shown at Castelli—Raimund Abraham, Emilio Ambasz, Richard Meier, Walter Pichler, Aldo Rossi, James Stirling, Venturi and Rauch—represent varying types and degrees of unconventional thought and practice that push beyond the definition of architecture as we know it now. (That redefinition is also true for art, and this fact is important.)

These architects are not new to exhibition. They represent an international group, in origin and impact, and their work has already been seen in small shows at The Museum of Modern Art, The Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies, and at the Cooper Union Gallery, among others. They will have a different audience now. That audience will not find this art easy, or even always accessible, to use the current cliché. There are no dramatic photographic blowups of finished buildings. There are only the codes of conceptual sketches, axonometric drawings and models closer to sculpture than to environment—often stunning sensuous objects in themselves. The material ranges from executed structures to the most subjective visions. It is excellent, difficult and disturbing work that both distresses and delights.

Some of the constructed buildings by these architects—such as those by James Stirling at Leicester, Oxford and Cambridge in England—have been among the most watched by the profession, and the most widely influential. At least one of the more remarkable drawings—Aldo Rossi's Boullée-like vision of a haunting scheme for the cemetery at Modena in Italy that has become a "post-modernist" icon since its appearance in 1971—is about to be built. Others, such as Emilio Ambasz's "Housing in an Agricultural Setting," are brilliantly outrageous inventions masquerading as real solutions to pragmatic problems. Still others pose totally unreal problems in the most pragmatic terms—as Walter Pichler's endless, introverted concentration on the creation of his own primeval house and its timeless adumbrations of space and sculpture—minimal architecture that is part dwelling, part shrine and part tomb.

The exhibition catalogue, by Pierre Apraxine, who organized the show as guest curator, conscientiously explores the relationships and larger meanings of the group. Mr. Apraxine states that the purpose of the show is to present the diverse esthetic and philosophical attitudes prevalent in contemporary architecture, and "to illustrate the notion of architecture as a vital art form which derives its often contradictory meanings from the strictly private domain as well as from the larger sociocultural context."

That means that this is very personal, metaphysical work, rather than a primary concern for functional purposes. For most of these architects, anything as restrictive as environment, or context, does not exist. They create their own images; in fact, they create their own worlds.

It is beside the point to argue whether this is architecture. There is some architecture as we know it in the show: buildings designed by Richard Meier and Venturi and Rauch and James Stirling are very real responses to specific programs. Although Mr. Meier's pristine and subtle variations on the early esthetic vocabulary of Le Corbusier and Venturi and Rauch's refined interpretation of Pop art and taste are considered recondite by ordinary standards, in this company they are models of clarity and logic. Mr. Meier's Olivetti project and Mr. Stirling's Düsseldorf museum scheme are potentially beautiful structures by any definition.

The rest is ambiguous—and deliberately so. Aldo Rossi's world can be built, and occasionally is, but it is a powerful imagery of scaleless classical geometry and surreal mystique that denies all human needs. It is *architectura assoluta,* and the imagery touches genius. Raimund Abraham's designs are as poetically evocative as the name of his projects: "House Without Rooms," "Seven Gates to Eden."

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Much of this work is transitional—somewhere between architecture and the other arts. It is testing the meanings and boundaries of architecture, as those boundaries have been tested in painting and sculpture. There are tints of Marxist philosophy and tinges of angst and despair, echoes of conceptual art, minimal sculpture and earthworks, among its debts and credits.

Today the lines between all of the arts are becoming less firm; the divisions between painting and sculpture are disappearing and the nature of drawing is being re-examined. The same thing is happening in architecture. While the cultural establishment calls for more art with architecture in the traditional sense—an unfailing rallying cry of art world do-gooders—art and architecture have come closer than at any time in history. In these examples, they merge and dissolve.

But the eye and the approach are always that of the constructor and the problem-solver; only many of the problems are philosophical and the results are calculatedly and purely esthetic. Within the range from the practical to the visionary, the one factor in common among these architects is that everything breaks out of the conventional, or "normal" way of building, to a greater or lesser degree. The question one asks is how much of this is obsessive self-indulgence, and how much is the opening of new architectural frontiers. It is a mark of our time, of course, that the two are not mutually exclusive.

This is an unfamiliar architecture; some of it is almost a new art form. What kind of building it will ultimately produce, and how it will serve us, is terribly unclear, but its creative vitality is extraordinarily high. Much of this work troubles the mind and the heart with its beauty and remoteness, which it is obviously meant to do. It is both art and commentary on the culture of our time. ■