

Architecture

Politicalizing Architecture

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THERE was an architectural "confrontation" recently — a meeting of the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (Establishment) with representatives of the architecture students of Columbia University (Revolution). It was held, in part, as a result of last year's "events" at Columbia, in which the architecture school participated conspicuously and which led to the "restructuring" of the school's aims and curriculum.

The simply stated theme of the evening was that "The American Institute of Architects is Irrelevant." By the end of the evening the students had made it quite clear that they considered not only the A.I.A., but architecture as practiced by the A.I.A., irrelevant. More of that later.

The meeting was called by the Student Chapter Committee of the A.I.A. Since the Student Chapter Committee finds that it has no student chapters, it has "restructured" itself as the Student Affairs Committee of the A.I.A.

The meeting's announced purpose was to "let the members of the Chapter know what is happening to student and faculty attitudes, ideas, ideals and current thoughts." It was noted that in previous encounters the generations had "talked past each other." The suggestion was made that those members of the A.I.A. wishing "to stay in touch with the 20th century attend."

Panelists were Percival Goodman, long-time liberal, practicing architect and professor at the Columbia School of Architecture, a man who has scrupulously steered clear of the Establishment; Mario Salvadori, a pioneer of modern reinforced concrete technology and chairman of Columbia's Division of Architectural Technology; and two Columbia architecture students as spokesmen for revolt and relevance, Peter Szego and Alan Feigenberg.

It was Hair versus Sideburns. This is a society that dresses for the part—even for throwing itself over.

The students were tieless, wash-'n'-wear revolutionaries, blue-jeaned or corduroy-panted and luxuriantly hir-

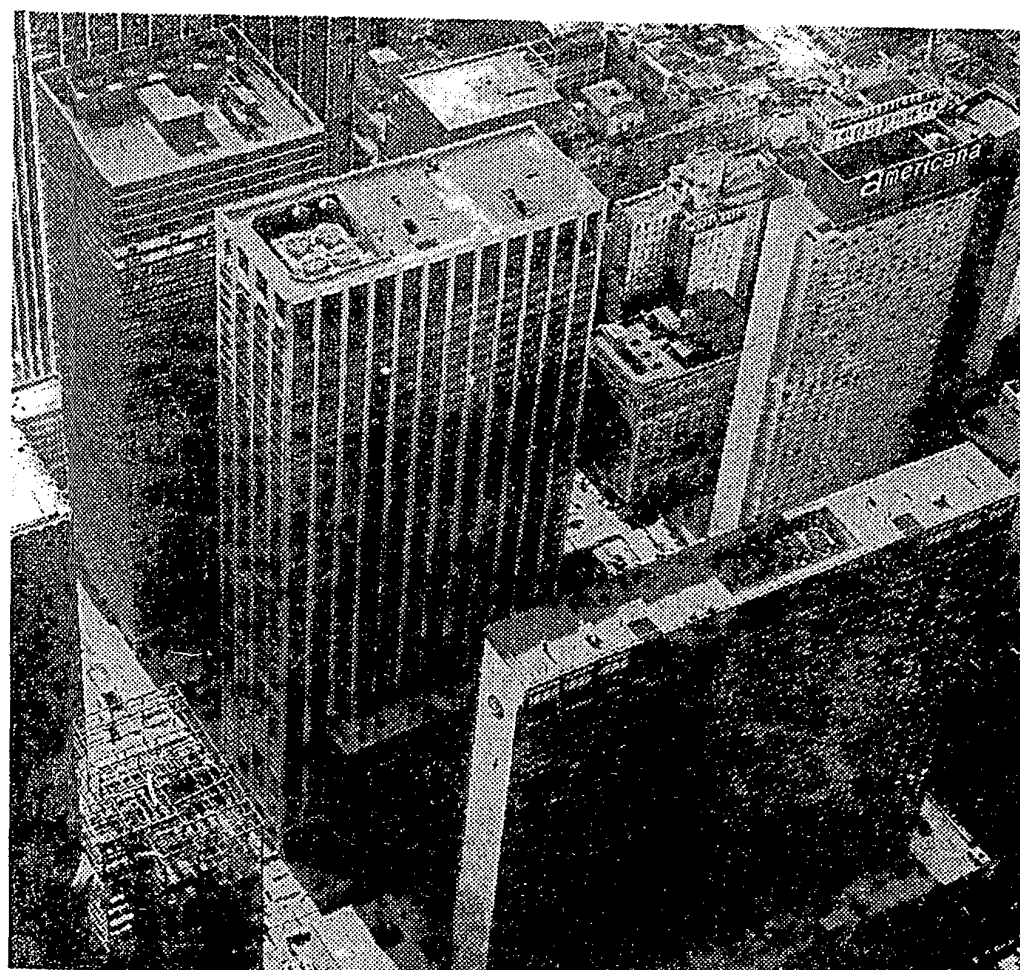
sute. They carried themselves with that slim, hard ease that none of the rewards of mature success make up for the loss of in middle age. Part of the generation gap is envy.

The architects, known for years for their button-down oxford personalities, dark knit ties and tweed jackets, have acquired a new image: modified Cardin-Edwardian with suppressed waists, discreetly rich silk ties and handkerchiefs, hair curling toward collars and, naturally, sideburns. Clothes may or may not make the man, but they are a dead giveaway of political and social stance.

To no one's surprise, the two groups talked past each other. The occasional, tangential breakthrough in which feelings or attitudes touched briefly seemed, somehow, sadder than no contact at all. A low-keyed bitterness built up in the paneled clubroom as the old groped toward the young (we are not all bad; accept us and what we have learned so painfully from life), and the young rejected their elders (what you call your knowledge is only fatigue and corruption and we do not want your world).

The Columbia students explained that as a result of restructuring the architecture school they were setting their own projects and defining their own goals, while working as advocacy planners in the ghettos. "But a restructuring device doesn't do a damn thing if attitudes don't change," said Peter Szego. The implication was clear that their elders had achieved no particular relevance or absolution by educational co-operation. The revolution was not called off.

Professor Goodman delivered a lengthy "J'accuse" to his fellow A.I.A. members. The Institute was irrelevant, he said, because it took no moral or political positions; it fought for no causes; it had no stands, for example, on master plans, expressways, preservation. Politicalize architecture, he said, to support issues. This was the familiar, rational intellectual liberalism of the 1940's and 50's, not the gut-ghetto radicalism of the 1960's. It sounded, *horrible dictu*, irrelevant. It was no longer on the student wavelength.



New York's postwar construction on the Avenue of the Americas
"Irrelevant architecture by accountants"

Professor Salvadori offered his credentials: a son in the S.D.S.; a tacit, warmly personal humanitarianism; an open mind. He had been teaching a class about one of his structural triumphs—the tallest concrete building in the world. "What's so good about the tallest concrete building in the world?" a student had demanded. "There's nothing so good about it," he had admitted, forced to a radical re-evaluation.

A beard-and-blue-shirt rose on the floor. "Where is the tallest concrete building in the world?"

"Johannesburg," replied Professor Salvadori.

"Where the blacks are held in bondage by the white power structure," rejoined beard-and-blue-shirt. "Architects lack a sense of human decency." The professor stood impaled. He explained that as an anti-fascist he had made the hard moral decision to leave family, country and livelihood before beard-and-blue-shirt was born. He suggested that hues of gray shadow black and white. "What's wrong with me," he said, "is that I'm 61."

A young stand-up comic from Cooper Union took the floor. Tension abated. "A builder named Arthur Roseman (name changed here) came to class and told us, 'The cities aren't decaying;

I'm building half of New York right now.'" (Laughter) "I use architects. I go to Emery Stone.'" (Laughter) "Why don't you go to Lou Kahn?" (Laughter) "The point is" — pause for the point — "it wouldn't make any difference. Arthur Roseman makes the difference." (Relieved, cathartic laughter.)

"That kind of architecture isn't by architects," said Alan Feigenberg. "It's by accountants."

"Your kind of architecture is irrelevant while we need housing," said Columbia to the A.I.A.

"Are you going to build 10 million houses?" asked Cooper Union. "No, you are not going to build them because no one is going to give you the contract to build them. The enemy is the social system that will not bring you the contract for 10 million houses."

"You're a gentleman's club," said the students. "Labor union." "Job insurance." "You're nowhere."

Stung, chapter officials cited a \$10,000 grant given to Howard University by the A.I.A. Executive Committee for experimental low-cost housing for black communities to be carried out by an architect of the university's choice. A study committee for advocacy planning was described.

"Irrelevant," said the stu-

dents. "You can only be part of the times by being part of the times—not by study committees. We're action freaks."

"Patience, gentlemen," said a gentlemanly senior architect.

"Power," said the students, with the sublime intolerance of the idealistic young. "You have abdicated your power by prostituting yourselves to businessmen and you have lost the public, your constituency. Politicalize. Radicalize."

"History has only one direction and it moves at a very high rate," Professor Salvadori cautioned the obviously disturbed architects.

At the end of the evening the gap was wider than ever. The young knew, with messianic assurance, that they were right about where the world went wrong; some of their elders knew they were right, and the old knew that the world beyond the ghettos would suffer terribly for their rightness.

Values of civilization measured in hundreds and thousands of years and through just and unjust societies would suffer, and the keepers of those values would suffer from the omissions of youth's non-negotiable crusade. Relevance was short-changed.

For the revolution is non-negotiable. And this column, of course, is irrelevant.