ARCHITECTURE VIEW: SHOWS WITH A PERSONAL VISION ARCHITECTURE VIEW
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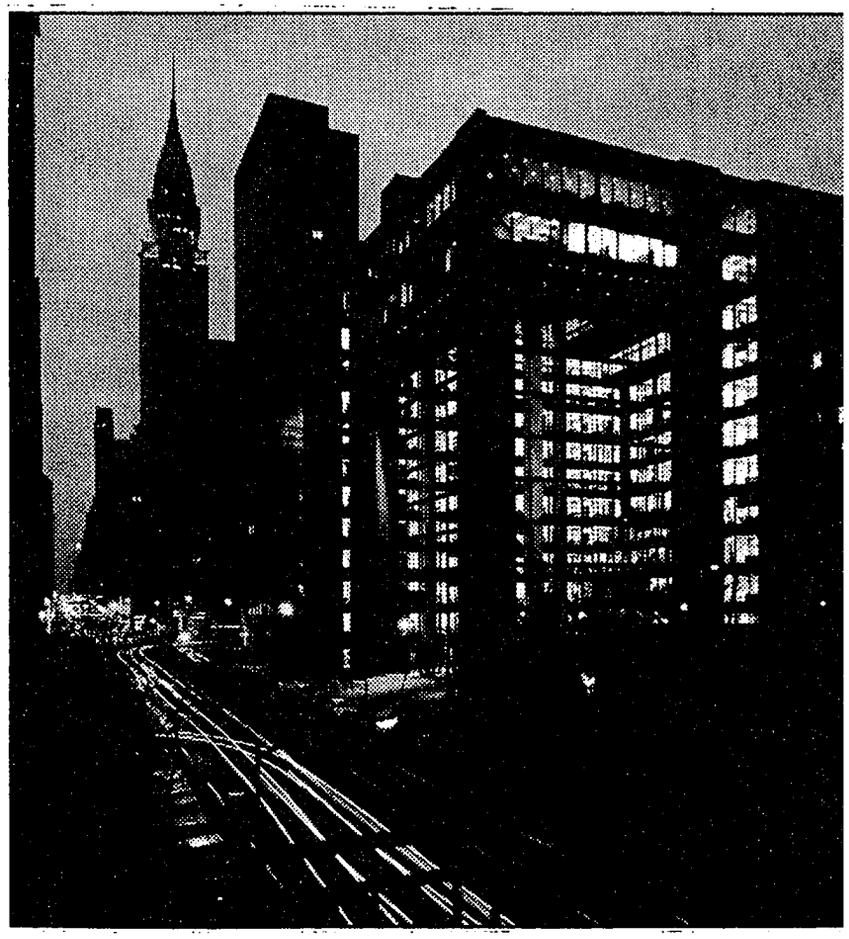

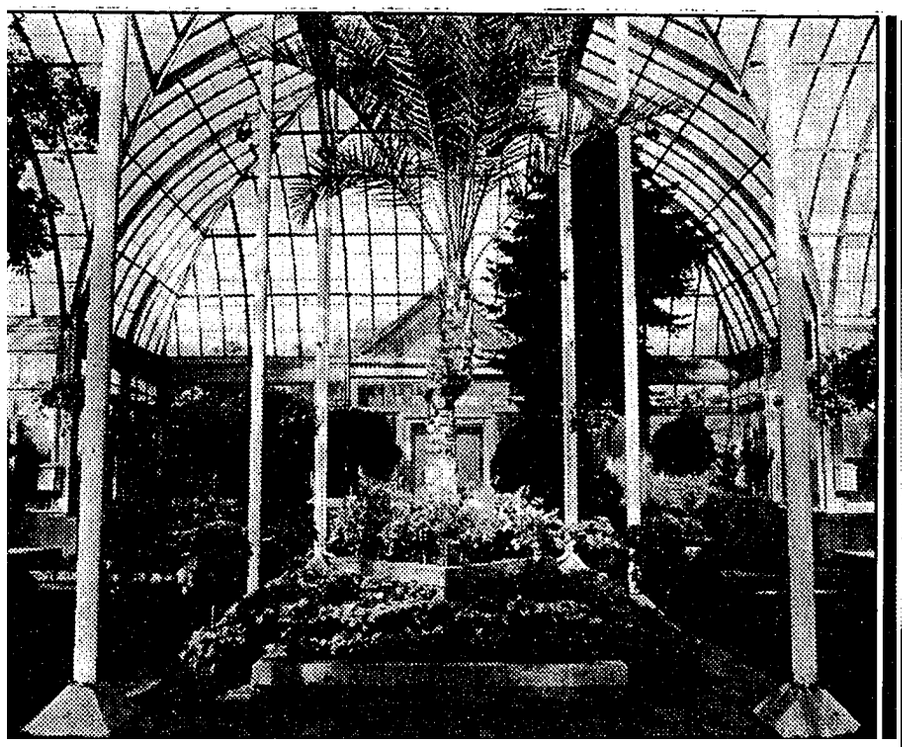

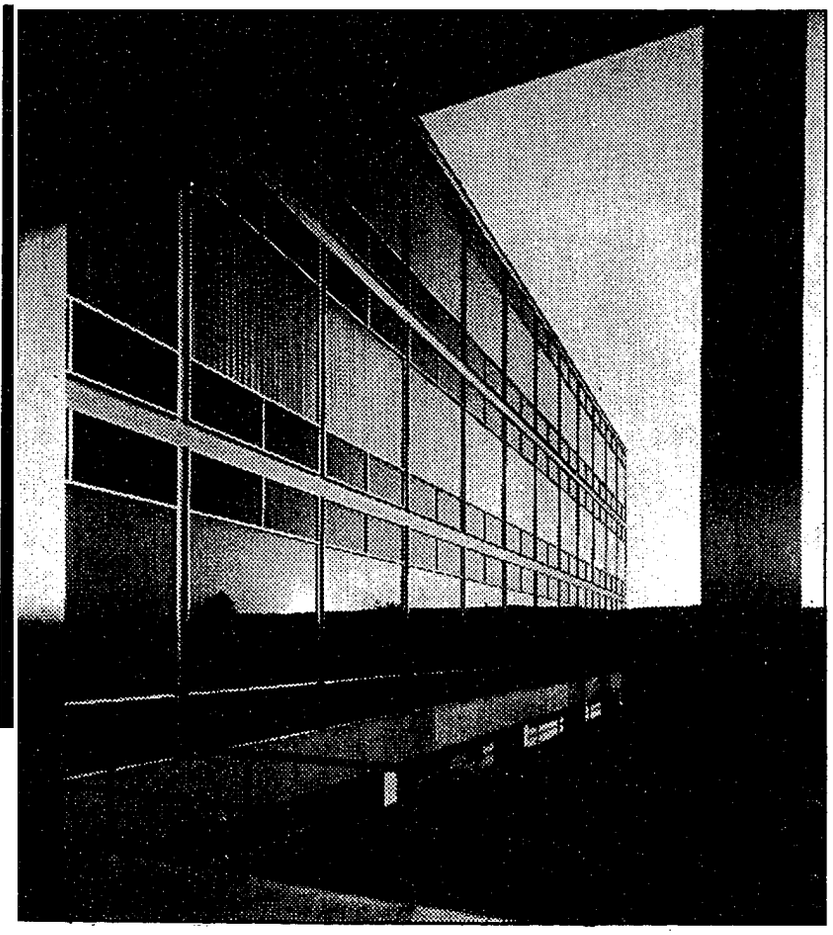

Ezra Stoller's photographs of the Ford Foundation Building, left, and the Connecticut General Life Insurance Building, right. Above, the recently restored Conservatory of the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx.

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Shows With a Personal Vision

Architecture and design exhibitions are starting strong in the new year. I have not visited all of those noted below, because it takes a certain stoic heroism to get around New York at the height of the season; there are times when only Hillary and Tenzig could make it across town.

Two are of particular interest, because each represents the summing up of a life's work, and in both cases that work is based on a personal vision or attitude that has had a substantial impact on our times. "Ezra Stoller, Photographer of Architecture: 1939-80" was a retrospective show devoted to the master photographer of the modern movement, organized by the Max Protetch Gallery, 37 West 57th Street. The display came and went in a shorter time than it would have taken to get there, but prints can still be seen at the gallery and a catalogue with an introduction by Arthur Drexler, director of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art, is available. The exhibition will go to the Philippe Bonnafont Gallery in San Francisco from Feb. 4 to March 7, and it will be featured at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts from May 16 to June 21, at the time of the annual meeting of the American Institute of Architects.

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The second show, "Now I Lay Me Down to Eat," continuing through Feb. 22 at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 2 East 91st Street, has been conceived and executed by the master iconoclast of the modern movement, Bernard Rudofsky. Mr. Rudofsky has spent a lifetime analyzing and challenging all of the conventional and received wisdom about the arts of living and design. In this wrapup approach to the basic functions of eating, sleeping, sitting, cleansing and bathing, he is as delightfully provocative and contentious as ever.

Ezra Stoller's photographs cover a 40-year career. They are, in themselves, a history of modern architecture. It is currently fashionable to be partonizing about them, saying that he flattered buildings to favor the architects' intentions, expertly faking things and relying heavily on clouds and trees. But the images that most of us retain in our mind's eye of the architectural touchstones and monuments of the recent past are, more often than not, Ezra Stoller's pictures.

If these photographs manipulate their subjects, that is exactly what they were meant to do. Their objective is as much polemical as pictoral. And in so doing, they reveal a great deal about the aspirations, ideals and eye of a particular creative moment, based on, and expressed through, a succinct understanding of the architect's aims and beliefs and the zeitgeist of the times. They provide the signals and the messages by which we recognize modernism. Since it is these signs that turn off those members of a younger generation who are rejecting modernism, they reject the pictures as well.

A different set of signals is being given now. It is clear how subjective and interpretive this photography is — and what view of architecture it embraces — when one looks at a recent Stoller photograph of Richard Meier's 1979 Atheneum in New Harmony, Ind. The architect's multi-dimensional, post-modernist spatial vision, defined by an intricately delicate and evocative framework, is turned into a deceptively monumental and primarily structural modernist statement. A beautiful picture, but it "sees" the building in the wrong way, turning it into something else.

But most of the pictures are, deservedly, classics. Stoller's arrangement of the sweeping wooden trusses and desert boulders of Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West in Scottsdale, Ariz., are fixed forever for us under equally sweeping, striated skies. The impeccable, glossy sleekness of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill's Connecticut General Life Insurance Building of 1957 is the definitive expression of Gordon Bunshaft's enormously influential corporate style. The romantic and dramatic esthetic of structural power, as in the soaring concrete pylon of Eero Saarinen's 1864 Dulles Airport, is a recurring theme.

These pictures are now being shown as examples of photographic art, recognition they richly deserve, but they raise some provocative questions about architectural photography. How much of the idea and influence of architecture is transmitted by the building, and how much by the interpretive image? Is what lives on less the architectural substance than the iconographic record? How much is real and how much is "edited" reality? At what point do the actual and the ideological merge? The value of these pictures as carriers and definers of architectural culture and history is as great as their obvious skill and beauty; they will be another generation's prized documents.

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Bernard Rudofsky has never ceased asking disturbing and illuminating questions about the logic of the ways in which we conduct our lives, and the design of the objects we use for our daily needs and rituals. In half a century, more or less, he has moved from enfant terrible to elder statesman of the modern movement. In books and shows like "Behind the Picture Window" (1955), "Architecture Without Architects" (1964) and "The Kimono Mind" (1965), this architect-turned-critic has been telling us that whatever it is, primitive cultures, indigenous builders, or the Japanese, do it better. It was he who asked the shocking question "Are Clothes Modern?" way back in 1947 at the Museum of Modern Art, demonstrating the ways in which we fastened, constrained, deformed and discomforted ourselves in the spurious name of fashion, and sent us all out in Bernardo sandals and bare feet.

For the past year he has been scholar-in-residence at the Cooper-Hewitt, the Smithsonian's National Museum of Design. The present exhibition, subtitled "A Salute to the Unknown Art of Living," fills two floors of the old Carnegie Mansion with strange and wonderful and beautiful things, from cannibal forks to cradles.

Reminding us that Christ and the Apostle ate the Last Supper lying down, he provides the appropriate illustrations, utensils and commentary. If he seems obsessed with the euphemisms and subterfuges, esthetic and otherwise,

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for some basic bodily functions, that is due equally to his passion for reason and his unabating wish to shock us. Alas, we don't shock so easily anymore. But Mr. Rodofsky's critical acumen is as sharp as ever, and we don't mind being scolded as long as we are enlightened and delighted. His fine eye and quirky reasoning expand our design horizons enormously. A book accompanies the show.

Other shows, briefly noted. Designs and drawings for the new Parliament Houses in the Australian capital of Canberra, by Michell/Giurgola and Thorpe Architects, are on display at the new Urban Center, 475 Madison Avenue, under the sponsorship of the Architectural League, until Jan. 16. The Urban Center is a coalition of civic groups that occupy the North Wing of the recently restored Villard Houses; the South Wing has been incorporated into the new Palace Hotel. The Parliament Buildings are the result of an international competition won by the American firm of Mitchell/Giurgola and they promise to be some of the most significant public structures of our time. Another American architect, Walter Burley Griffin, won the competition for the design of Canberra itself in 1912.

If, like me, you have had your fill of New York right now, try the display of 17th- to 20th-century prints called "Rome Sweet Rome" at the Spaced Gallery, 165 West 72d Street, through Feb. 28. But the best antidote for fatigue and frustration is a trip to the recently and beautifully restored Conservatory of the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx. The poinsettias are as high as an elephant's eye in glorious masses of hot pink, red and white, and the setting is a soaring, sparkling, elegant Crystal Palace revealing every luminous nuance of a frosty sky. After years of decay and vandalism, this superb building has been returned to New Yorkers through the architectural skills of Edward L. Barnes, the horticultural skills of Carlton B. Lees, and the generosity of Enid A. Haupt. You can get your fix for the winter there until the end of January. ■