

Architecture

The Building You Love to Hate

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THIS is a bit of revisionist history. It is the story of the rehabilitation of the Yale Art and Architecture Building.

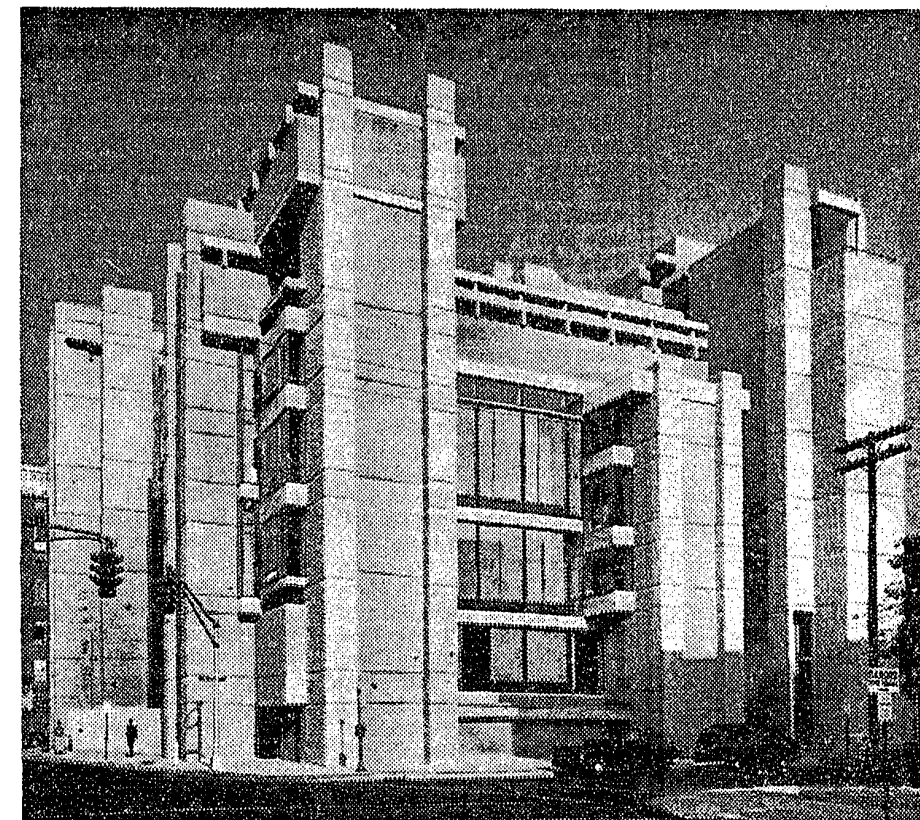
The Art and Architecture Building has been a symbol and cause célèbre in the revolution of the consciousness of man. When Paul Rudolph's celebrated structure burned on the Yale campus two years ago it became a super-symbol. While the official verdict was accident, not arson, it was generally assumed that either an act of God or an act of man had destroyed, with uncanny prescience for the moment and the mood, a monument that embodied the despised Establishment standards and values that the radical young were rejecting on moral and social grounds.

As happens with symbols, it had become an object of hate. And as happens with hate, violence struck, and some called it just. It had become, in fact, the building you love to hate. Its destruction was looked on with an attitude approaching awe. The proof of its wrongheadedness was supposedly in the burning. It was offered as a lesson to those architects lacking in consciousness, who would finesse their deeper social responsibilities to impose their vanity on man.

Not any more. The day of rehabilitation has come. The instrument of rehabilitation is, of all things, a calendar published and distributed several times a year by the Yale School of Architecture. The final 1971 segment for November and December bears a drawing of the Art and Architecture Building and two messages.

The first announces the appointment of Herman Spiegel as Dean, a position vacant since the expiration of Charles Moore's term last year. The second concerns the building. It is a deeply felt statement by the student editor of the calendar, Henry Wollman, involving much more than a report on reconstruction since the fire. It reinstates the structure in the architectural pantheon with the skill of a Soviet manifesto raising reputations from the dead.

Never have a building's fortune and reputation gone up and down so far and so



Yale's controversial Art and Architecture Building
On second thought, you might learn to love it

Ezra Stoller

fast. During construction, the A & A, as it became known, was one of those word-of-mouth pilgrimage points for architects. When it was finished in 1963, it was an object of almost universal praise. Critics, including this one, welcomed it.

This column called it "willful, capricious, arbitrary, bold, brilliant, beautiful and highly controversial." We held that the architect "occasionally sacrificed practicality . . . and often contrived means for his ends," but judged it a powerful and handsome generator of excitement that would be influential for decades. With a peculiar premonition we remarked that if the students responded to the challenge of their environment they should never think, or see, quite the same again.

That happened, but not the way we thought. After the bouquets of the opening, the building proved, in use, to be full of bugs. There were serious functional faults. A strong design, in intent and

result, it forced its occupants to live with it on its own terms. There was nothing formless, and very little that was flexible, about it. The students reacted to the challenge of the environment all right; they rejected it in no uncertain terms.

The painters and sculptors, in cramped, poorly lit and ventilated studios, rejected it totally. The architecture students, unwilling to be bound by Rudolph's atelier ambience—he had been Dean of the school when he designed it—attempted to reshape the spaces for their own philosophical needs. When this observer visited again, they had built, inside of those spaces, what can only be called a rat trap of enclosures and semi-enclosures that resembled nothing so much as those tar paper and cardboard Depression villages of the 1930's. It was expression of a sort, and expression was paramount. Denial of Rudolph's style and spaces was essential. They

were, of course, irrelevant.

Although there was a great deal wrong with the building in terms of physical facilities and working spaces, it was also a legitimate experiment in enlarging architectural experience and expression.

The two aspects, however, became immutably tied in students' minds as evil, and it was not long before the structure was being reviled for more than its real, or imagined, errors. In the oversimplification and slick superficiality of revolutionary rhetoric, it became the archetype of the imposition of a false value system by an architect on an anti-people ego trip. In the architectural division of the revolution, that was the cardinal sin.

If you remember Yale at the height of the movement, it was a busy place. The air was full of adrenalin. Much of the spirit of change was, and is, necessary and admirable, and some essential rethinking of aims and objectives has been done. But paranoia was not absent.

There were the usual threats, including an ambiguous reference to destruction by fire. Then, mysteriously, the building burned. Student work was lost. Classes had to be disbanded and moved. The school was in a state of dislocation and shock.

That was two years ago. In the reconstruction, some of the building's physical faults have been corrected, and changes have been made in the art and architectural quarters. The building has apparently risen from the ashes, in more than one sense.

"Burnt, closed, walled off, in tumult, A & A carried a legacy of confusion and overwhelming sadness during the restoration process," the calendar tells us. And then comes the kicker, the surprising reevaluation. "But not even the holocaust of fire could in any ultimate way tear the heart from this monument of American architecture, this presence on the Yale campus. The terrifying, ferocious nobility and grandeur that are so much the fabric of this building remain.

"It is, for these reasons, not an easy building to live with. Physically it is often uncomfortable. Fundamentally, however, it is the emotional demands of this building that are the most difficult. In this sense the cliché 'the building is too strong' rings true: too difficult to live the humdrum student life; too aware of itself; too much concerned with an ideal; not concerned enough with the reality of everyday.

"Yet somehow we manage to live with it; richer because of it. We are aware that we are in confrontation with more than structure, more than function. We are aware of the fact that we are in confrontation with the heart of monumental architecture, a statement of human spirit and a material manifestation of an ideal of human culture."

That was what we meant in 1963. How quickly time and passions pass. How the human condition and consciousness change. How arbitrarily are reputations made, destroyed and revived. How short is history today.