Architecture: Seen Any Good Buildings Lately?
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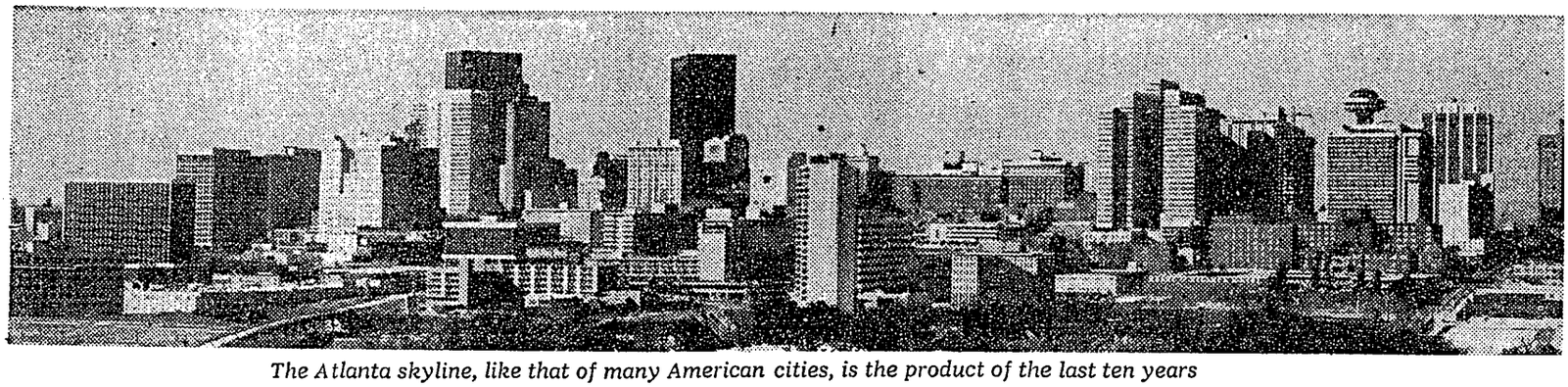

The Atlanta skyline, like that of many American cities, is the product of the last ten years

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

END-OF-THE-DECADE appraisals are already out of date, and we have no intention of offering another. But we have been writing for this paper for a coincidental 11 years, with the job of architecture critic since 1964 (if we may be permitted one parochial backward glance, the job of staff architecture critic was a first for The New York Times among American newspapers), and what has happened to architecture in that period is explosive and shattering.

First, it simply isn't architecture any more. Certainly not as it was conceived then — as another of the arts to be grouped for review. Up to that time there had been a conspicuous hole where the architecture critic should be, and an increasing awareness of that hole among people of sensibility as the wave of postwar building transformed American cities. Even the title of architecture critic is now a vestigial misnomer and anomaly.

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What the job soon became was virtually the first full time, public scale critical comment on the urban scene — a domain previously the inviolate preserve of real estate, commercial builders and speculators in the private sector, and of political pork barrel, patronage and bureaucracy in the public sector. It was the conventional wisdom, grown out of accepted practice, that building was a personal, financial matter for investors and their accountants no matter how it scarred the cities and the countryside, and no matter what the social costs might be. The only ones who shouted "outrage" were the specialized professional journals and those architects who were willing to flout the self-imposed A.I.A. code of non-criticism of fellow practitioners.

It was becoming increasingly obvious that the outrage was not just to the eye and the more educated and arcane senses trained by knowledge of the art of architecture, but that irreparable damage was being done to the environment — a word that had not yet entered the popular vocabulary; and to people — a concept involving a still-dormant sense of conscience and humanity. Architecture, then, has moved irrevocably out of the restricted and rarified purlieu of the arts. It has had to extend its values and its input far beyond traditional esthetic considerations.

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After the realistic redefinition of the boundaries of architecture, the second shattering change in this short span of time has been the awakening realization of the immense impact of architecture on the human condition. This double "revisionism" has put the architecture and planning schools into a state of turmoil. The lines between architecture, planning and environment can no longer be drawn, and new, "environmental" curricula now attempt to unite them all. The ferment has sent students, steeped in environmental concerns, out of the classroom and into the ghettos as advocacy planners even before they have received their degrees, in a search for architectural "relevance." None of this is to be ignored or downgraded; the implications are immense.

And so to all those kind people who have been writing sadly over the years that this column is a voice in the wilderness crying for recognition of social, humane, esthetic and cultural values in the building and rebuilding of our cities, we offer assurances that this is not so. Or more accurately, we have not been a lone and ineffectual voice for some time. It started that way, but fortuitous historical timing has meshed our efforts with the moment when the environmental awakening was overdue, and we have a good deal of company now.

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The nature, quality and effect of the physical environment, or man-made world, has become appallingly evident in these ten years, coinciding with the social and racial and population explosions with which it is still intimately linked. The subject draws no lines of color, class or locality, even though the crisis conditions are clearly in the sprawling slums that made cities tinderboxes in the 1960's, and in the developers' destruction of land.

These facts still surprise and disturb many who saw the field of architectural criticism as plugging a genteel gap in the arts, and elude others whose vision of the relationship of culture and current events is stuck somewhere back in the 40's. What has taken place, essentially, is a revolution in the philosophy and practice of architecture today. It is one of the most important, pervasive and far-reaching revolutionary aspects of a revolutionary decade. It is a revolution in the understanding of the nature and consequences of what is built everywhere, on everyone; the manner in which construction solves or exacerbates human problems and diminishes or increases the human spirit.

We have watched the other arts become increasingly introspective and private although they are no less essential spiritually and no less reflective of a particular moment of man's thought and being than previously. But they have withdrawn further and further into a deeper personal vortex, as in literature, and more willful limitation of experience, as in painting and sculpture. In these same years architecture has exploded into universality.

It has done so — and this is the third important point to be made — because there is a full understanding that the art of architecture is, and must be, a universally social art, and can only be practiced as such in today's world. Any "pure" concept of architecture for art's sake is a quaint 19th-century hangover — still visible in the 1960's. To youth and some of us who are considerably overage, this kind of practice can be professionally irresponsible. Depending on one's degree of conscience and breadth of overview, some building can even be interpreted as a crime against society — a crime for which there are not only no penalties, but which carries the rewards of tax shelters. Today, architecture, too, has been "radicalized."

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But the art of architecture as a creative act is neither obsolete nor expendable. The process of design is more important than ever, and in that fact lies the danger of the next decade. Social concerns alone will not produce a better physical world. The critic who has helped promote the awareness of architectural change must also continue to fight for the standards of creative design that are so poorly understood, and that are often the thin thread of sensibility and quality on which the success or failure of socially based programs depends.

The failure of American public housing in the past 20 years, in spite of "safe and sanitary" standards, has been a bitter lesson. Urban renewal is the decade's most conspicuous urban disaster. The battle to save the fabric of the past has been recognized, but it is waged with more losses than gains. The appalling figure of 26 million new dwelling units needed in the next ten years still stands, with production at present less than half that amount annually. We must be doing something wrong.

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The esthetic-functional element of design, shaped by taste, talent and an improved sensitivity to human use and response, must be better comprehended or we are in for another decade of environmental fumbling. The design process is not a kind of pasted-on beautification like wallpaper, or an optional extra like white-wall tires. It is an intrinsic element of better building, and frequently, the critical determinant of environmental excellence.

The problem is not architectural. Architecture is alive and well in the 70's and growing to meet its challenges. What it cannot cope with are entrenched, crippling governmental and industrial procedures, restrictive codes and regulations, out-of-this-world construction union contract settlements, the no-exit spiral of inflationary costs of materials, money and land. It cannot deal with bureaucrats and builders and decision makers with tunnel vision and short-change values. These are the shadows of the 70's, when we undertake 30 years of building that will double all of the previous construction of this country by the end of the century.