ARCHITECTURE VIEW: CHANGES ON THE DRAWING BOARD AND THE SKYLINE CH
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New York Times (1923-Current file); Dec 27, 1981; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. D27

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Changes on The Drawing Board and The Skyline

Architecture is the one art that has charged full speed backwards and forwards in 1981, depending on how you look at it. In terms of ideas and construction, the achievements have been prodigious; whatever the recession may promise for the immediate future, there continues to be an explosion of building marked by radical changes in style.

The controversy about those changes also continues, with the modernists still taking a clubbing from the postmodernists, although the attack has widened and the mood has shifted from the mea culpa treatises of born-again architects rediscovering the classical tradition to the Our Gang conspiracy theory of Tom Wolfe's "From Bauhaus to Our House." Anyone who wonders what the Bauhaus-aborted American architectural dream might have produced without the interference of Mr. Wolf's European design Mafia can find one answer in the November issue of the prestigious Japanese architecture publication A+U. Here is "The American School of Architecture" as seen from the Far East — the heartland school of Bruce Goff and Herb Greene as taught by the Architecture School of the University of Oklahoma.

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These buildings feature non-orthogonal spaces sheltered by undulating shingles, random boardwork and rubble walls — whole-earth fantasies with joinery by Rocky Mountain elves. Not to knock talent and ingenuous originality, this architecture appeals mostly to people who admire skewed geometry and bravura combinations of nature and plastic and are deeply into the more aggressive crafts. No European formalism here, even if the expressionism tends to get a little hairy.

In 1981 the modernist, anti-modernist split moved conspicuously from the pages of architectural publications to the drawing board and the skyline. A new world is bursting upon us, more or less. The message that virtually anything goes now — revolutionary to some, reactionary to others — is sedulously spread by the architectural avant-garde (yes, the avant-garde is alive and well and on the international lecture circuit) that finds overflowing audiences at all the architecture schools. You can't fit a pin into the auditoriums of Harvard, Yale or Columbia when such current architectural stars as James Stirling, Michael Graves, Richard Meier, Peter Eisenman, Robert A. M. Stern or Helmut Jahn come to speak. The word varies, but the work invariably spawns clones in the drafting studios — a reliable indicator of artistic inspiration. In architecture, however, it is the product and not the polemic that counts. If the building requires too many interpretations it may be retrofitting that is really needed. Retrofitting is the structural equivalent of revisionism; both involve changing one's mind and correcting one's mistakes, and both are on the rise.

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Excellence in architecture is elusive, and it is not always the yardstick by which one judges the events that have the most impact on the built environment and those who inhabit it. But standards for the state of the art are still set by its practitioners, and by any standard, James Stirling is the architect of the year. Even if he had not won this year's $100,000 Pritzker Prize for creative contributions to the profession — money speaks in architecture as in anything else — his buildings would speak for themselves. They are a thoughtful and sometimes disturbing blend of past and present that achieve a distinctive synthesis and style.

Stirling's practice is international, but this year saw three of his buildings in progress in the United States: the addition to Rice University's School of Architecture in Houston, an extension of Harvard's Fogg Museum in Cambridge, Mass., and a new structure for Columbia University. If further proof were needed of his ascension to celebrityhood, Big Jim's smiling face, somber suits and purple socks have been appearing in those people pages and gossip items that confer per diem immortality.

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The cult architects of the year — and do not underestimate the influence of cult figures on the profession right now — are Karl Friedrich Schinkel and Sir Edwin Landseer Lutyens. Both are dead classicists; Schinkel is a 19th-century German architect and Lutyens is an Englishman who spanned the 19th and 20th centuries. As classicists, they are the most logical candidates for revival and rehabilitation by a generation now rejecting the modernists, who had, in turn, rejected Schinkel and Lutyens. (Mies, of course, admired Schinkel; Berlin's Altes Museum was a prototype for the serene and orderly proportions of the modernist Miesian esthetic.)

Schinkel has been the subject of two major exhibitions in East and West Berlin this year, where his monuments

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Changing Skyline

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are being assiduously restored, and, as the saying goes, have more architectural visitors than other buildings have mice. It follows naturally that the coffee table book of the year is the superbly produced, full-size facsimile edition of Schinkel's own "Sammlung Architektonischer Entwerfe" of 1866, with its precise and elegant renderings. It has been published by Exedra, Chicago, in a limited edition at $450 plus $10 shipping charge; provide your own table.

Of Lutyens, a great deal remains to be said, in spite of the cascades of praise appearing here and abroad. The best start is the major exhibition that is enlivening the glum Hayward Gallery in London through January. The show has been organized, and the excellent catalogue produced, by Colin Amory. But close to the last word on Lutyens's uniquely personal use of a broad classical vocabulary for the architectural swansong of the British Empire may have been written 30 years ago by Nikolaus Pevsner in an article in the April 1951 Architectural Review called "Building With Wit." This unbeatable example of keen analysis and good writing offers a rare critical balance. The revisionists who are busy putting Pevsner down today have a long way to go to match his insight and erudition.

Closer to home and far from Imperial Delhi and the canonization of Sir Edwin, is the canyonization of Madison Avenue — the architectural event of the year in New York. How good or bad, or innovative or amusing the enormous AT&T and IBM buildings and their giant new commerial neighbors may be as architecture becomes utterly irrelevant in view of what these buildings are doing to the city and the street.

The irony is that the architecture simply doesn't count — a statement I never thought I would make. The sunlight and style of Madison Avenue that are identified with sophisticated luxury and small-scale architectural eccentricities, for one of the world's best shopping streets and some of its most worldly pleasures, have been destroyed in midtown. These blockbusters with their lengthening shadows go far beyond the abuses of the early New York skyscrapers that led to the first zoning controls of 1916. It is too late for Madison Avenue, but changes in the 1960's zoning and its amendments that opened the way for the legal jockeying that permitted this crushing overdevelopment are going through city reviews now.

This trend is continuing unchecked uptown, however, where the overzoned residential avenues permit shattering height and bulk. The damage is less concentrated, but every new structure is a dreaded disaster. Co-op owners, who come in rich and poor varieties in these days of housing desperation, peer fearfully out of their windows for signs of those "sliver" or "needle" buildings that will wall them up, made possible by the sudden profitability of the 30- to 40-foot-wide, condominium tower, give or take a few variances or special permits. In midblock, this creates a blockbuster in a different sense — just large enough to cut off air, light and view and destroy the scale and character of the side streets — East Side now, West Side later.

This year also brought the emotion-charged controversy about the 59-story tower that St. Bartholomew's proposes to build on the corner of its property at Park Avenue and 50th Street. Call it the preservation problem of the year. I would have preferred not to mention it, in deference to the jolly spirit of the season, but the issues, like those in the Grand Central battle, seem to be on the way to the Supreme Court and the struggle between God and Mammon has reached a passionate pitch.

Those who oppose the development, both as the visual mutilation of the Bertram Goodhue church and as the loss of irreplaceable open space, believe that the landmark complex is a rare gift of amenity and grace that benefits all the people of the city. They see it as an urban gesture of demonstrable environmental and spiritual value. But supporters of this idea and of New York's landmarks law are denounced from the chancel as "architectural idolators." The church's arguments are financial need, and a redefined mission to the poor. A dubious alliance between religion and real estate has been struck.

The church sees the proposed tower as several kinds of salvation; many New Yorkers deeply concerned with their city see it as an architectural grotesque and an urban outrage. Much of the blame must be placed, again, on that same overzoning that has permitted such gross escalation of value and exploitation of land. But there are other matters of vision and principle involved. Some leading members of the architectural community have refused to touch the job. St. Thomas's Church, which adds beauty and humanity to an equally valuable, Fifth Avenue site, says that its land is not for lease or sale. The developer's promise of $9 million a year to St. Bartholomew's and the Episcopal Diocese is the sugar plum dancing in a number of ecclesiastical heads.

This year has been one of crisis and conflict for New York like any other. But this is also the moment when it is an enchanted city of glittering trees and towers. Reality will only return in January, when the lights go out. In architecture, the time spans are longer than the seasons, and many of the achievements, events, issues and personalities of 1981 will become the continued stories, like a Dickens serial, of 1982. And the city, somehow, will survive. ■

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