ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Moving Into a New Realm

HARTFORD, Conn.

Any visitor to the new headquarters of the Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Conn., will have no trouble recognizing the building. This glistening white structure makes its immaculate presence so inimitably clear that there is no question about which building one has come to see. It is just as clearly the work of Richard Meier, who has developed this clean, but complex style with dedicated consistency through a series of recent buildings that have already achieved a special significance on the international architectural scene.

Meier's work, which began in the 1960's with a number of well-publicized, snowy houses of intriguing formal geometry, took on major importance with the larger challenge of the Bronx Developmental Center built from 1970-76 in New York (clad in silvery aluminum rather than white panels) and the New Harmony, Ind., Atheneum of 1975-79. The recently opened Hartford Seminary building will be followed by additions to the Decorative Arts Museum in Frankfurt, Germany; the High Museum of Art in Altanta, Ga., and an office building in Paris. From concept to completion, every project from the office of Richard Meier and Partners receives world-wide, exhaustive analysis in the architectural press.

It should be said immediately that this attention is justified; Meier is surely one of the most accomplished practitioners of a difficult art in a period of controversial transition. This work is assured and brilliant on both the technological and design levels. And while these transitional times encourage diverse solutions — the historial contextualism of Kallmann, McKinnell and Woods' building for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences reveiwed here last week is an example of another approach — Meier's work is moving modern architecture beyond its established achievements into a new realm of formal and functional expression.

The recent institutional structures have given the architect far more scope than the houses that established his reputation. As exquisite as those dwellings were, and are, their demanding esthetic can make severe claims on clients whose living habits are less than totally in tune. Many of Meier's ideas and images have seemed compressed into his earlier structures; the tension between angled and orthogonal planning, for example, sometimes adds confusion to complexity. The New Harmony Atheneum was almost too small to contain its wealth of visual and spatial effects. The Hartford Seminary, which is actually no larger than the Atheneum, refines and simplifies some of those themes and organizes them into a resolved and mature work that confirms the architect's attachment to a meticulously evolving style.

As spectacular as these gleaming white structures are, Meier does not create stage-set architecture. The drama of these buildings is not to be confused with the cutouts or add-ons of the false fronts and pseudo-history currently in vogue. His designs grow out of a strong commitment to the essential relationships of plan and structure. This steel-framed, three-story, 27,000-square foot building is made up of intricately linked spaces and volumes derived equally from the plan and program and an acute awareness of its esthetic and symbolic values.

Ezra Stoller/Esto

The Hartford Seminary, designed by Richard Meier—"a dazzling structure"

The plan itself is surprisingly simple. The ground floor consists of a central entrance flanked by a library and bookstore on one side, and meeting room and chapel on the other. The second and third floors contain classrooms, conference rooms and offices. How the plan is handled, however, is not simple. It is conceived three-dimensionally, with the volumes of the larger, public spaces threaded vertically through the structure, and a circulation system that emphasizes the experience of those spaces at many levels. The white porcelain-enameled steel panels of the exterior set the building's three-foot module.

As in Meier's other buildings, much of this can be "read" on the exterior, where a precise and elegant "code" of architectural components graphically indicates interior uses. The "box" on the wall to the right of the entrance, for example, turns out to enclose a chapel worthy of its exterior abstract sculpture. It also creates the structure's L-shaped plan. Glass block indicates a stair tower. A shallow screen wall suggests an entrance arcade.

But these functions and features are revealed gradually, through studied relationships of solids and voids. The screen wall through which one passes into a partially enclosed court on the way to the entrance provides a cloistered serenity. Other shallow screen walls establish a pattern of receding and advancing planes; sometimes they extend beyond the building's corners to create modifications of space in much the same manner as the devices of Mannerism modulated the formal spaces of the Renaissance.

Once inside, views of the outside are never lost; indoors and outdoors are played off against each other with courts, roofs, balconies and terraces connected by bridges and walkways. Even interior spaces are suggested or revealed through glass walls and partitions. Balconies become viewing platforms of space for art's sake.

At a time when modern architecture is being questioned and rejected, Meier is loyal to the vocabulary of modernism. He uses it in a way, however, that transcends historical precedents. He is much indebted to Le Corbusier and Aalto, whom he obviously admires, but he carries these references to new stages of interpretation only possible at this particular moment of hindsight and technological development.

His effects are achieved through the careful interplay of solidity and transparency, of screen walls and openings, and the complex interlocking of volumes. They are enriched by the interraction of spaces perceived simultaneously and sequentially, at different levels, and the way they are given subtle and luminous life through the sources of daylight. This gives new and extended meaning to Le Corbusier's famous definition of architecture as the calculated play of forms in light.

That is exactly the kind of building that the president of the seminary, John Dillenberger, and his trustees, wanted. In the last decade, the Hartford Seminary has moved from being a training college for the ministry to much broader, interdenominational educational and community activities meant to serve both the clergy and the lay public. There have been no resident seminarians since 1972. The new program needed only one building, and it was hoped that the new structure could express the seminary's changing spirit and functions. The old buildings, a Gothic Revival group that the seminary had occupied since 1927 — its fourth home since it was founded in 1834 — were sold to the University of Connecticut Law School.

The new Hartford Seminary stands close by them, a pristine presence in a level green field about a large city-block in size. Its break with tradition has caused considerable local controversy. But it does not upstage its handsome stone neighbors; white, after all, is not an unfamiliar New England color, and it pays them the compliment of superior design quality and suitable scale. New and old coexist nicely, without false obeisances of style.

Interestingly, the chapel was not originally included in the program. It was added as a result of the architect's persuasive arguments that it would provide a symbolic focus for the building, and while it bears out this belief, it has also provided an irrestible architectural opportunity. In a sense, it is the key to the design. This high, white-walled, glowing, skylit space is constantly transformed in color and mood by clouds and the course of the sun. If it is more coolly intellectual and hard-edged, less gently or deeply sensuous than comparable chapels by Le Corbusier and Aalto, it is still a very special place. Meier's disciplined, rigorous, highly intellectual work achieves a large measure of lyrical beauty. The Hartford Seminary is a dazzling structure on the leading edge of the building art.■