



The New York Times/David Wallis

The abandoned \$5.7-billion missile tracking station in North Dakota—"Our senses are shattered."

To the long list of ancient and historical ruins that figure in the annals of architecture, the United States has added a stunning example of instant 20th-century archeology: the abandoned ABM site near Grand Forks, N.D. The announcement that this \$5.7 billion investment in the miscalculations of the cold war is to become a dead installation virtually on completion could keep social commentators busy and bitter indefinitely. But as architectural commentary it is even more intriguing. The implicit message of this group of structures as design and symbolism could occupy a generation of polemicists.

First, the stark engineering composition of severely abstract forms, grimly silhouetted against open sky and flat land, upstages architecture totally. It is without doubt one of the most peculiarly impressive built groups of our time. Architects trying consciously for impact and meaning might just as well call it quits in the face of this kind of brute esthetic force. Non-architecture wins over architecture, hands down.

The newspaper description of the installation's deactivation delivered the message succinctly. "The huge missile-tracking radar structure that is Safeguard's major landmark—a majestic concrete pyramid with the point sliced off, visible for miles—will become as much a relic as the pyramid of Cheops, and its air intake vents as abandoned as the Stonehenge ruins they resemble." One thinks also of those giant geometric instruments that the Indians erected to the heavens, or some sinister Necropolis. The effect is singularly, appallingly dramatic, as much by pure esthetic imagery as by chilling evocation.

The modern movement, of course, puts a great deal of faith in pure esthetic imagery. And as every student of modern-architectural history knows, engineering was praised and promoted over architecture, with particular emphasis on American examples of the early 20th century such as factories and grain elevators. They were invoked as the models of the new architecture, their rational forms equated with truth and beauty. The engineer's esthetic, Le Corbusier told us in "Vers Une Nouvelle Architecture," was "at its full height," while architecture was in "an unhappy state of retrogression." A new kind of world was to follow the lead of the engineers and of industrialized technology; its artifacts were to be light, airy, mass produced, and somehow morally superior to anything that went before.

"Styles" were to be supplanted by the sphere, the triangle and the cube; Le Corbusier's description of building as "the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light" was basic to the modernist revolution. When these abstract forms have the power to evoke emotional response, the reasoning went, then true architecture has been achieved. "The sight of these forms affects us immediately by their delicacy or brutality," Le Corbusier explained; "elementary or subtle, tractable or brutal, they work physiologically on our

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A Bizarre Monument to Non-Architecture

senses" We are, in a word, moved.

In the case of the ABM structures, we are assaulted; our senses are shattered. The architectural power, the imagery and the symbolism, are overwhelming. "Passion" said Le Corbusier in the same seminal treatise, "can create drama out of inert stone." So can fear and loathing—a more popular set of emotions 50 years later—create drama out of concrete.

The ABM installation seems to offer a satanic twist to history—prophecy perverted rather than prophecy fulfilled. The abstract forms are all there and we are moved by them, but the values represented seem poles away from those intended. What has happened is simple enough; time has provided one of those unexpected twists that turn theory into irony, that reveal truth and destiny to be considerably grimmer than expected. We are dealing with the death of optimism rather than with the death of art. All of that engineering elegance and efficiency born of rational, industrialized solutions that was to make a better world—led by the architect—did not bring a new dawn. It brought an era of more gigantic problems in the nature of life and survival than history has ever known.

Next to the reality that produces an ABM, the monuments of architects often seem like arbitrary toys. They know this, which accounts for a lot of desperate posturing; they are increasingly uncomfortable with their unresolved relationships to the social and symbolic realities of the age. This has as much to do with a current professional malaise as the fact that so much building, in speculative or specialized technological hands, can get done quite efficiently without them. There has been a tremendous upsurge of non-architecture.

Whether the architect is being one-upped by the engineer or bypassed by the investment builder, he is being pushed increasingly from the stage by non-architecture of every kind. He is less central to the scheme of things

than when architecture was an academic art and his place as social and esthetic arbiter was secure. On the pragmatic level, almost every professional meeting in recent years has dealt with the threat of non-architecture in terms of jobs. To compete, the architect has tried to turn himself into a deliverer of computerized commercial services—a role and a set of values more easily understood and more highly prized by society today than a good building. Most recently, he is trying to get it all together by acting as developer.

On the intellectual level, paradoxically, non-architecture has had a noticeable vogue. First there was the anonymous, ethnic, geographic building recognized and promoted by people and publications like Bernard Rudofsky and *The Architectural Review* for so many years—really another aspect of the modern movement's rejection of academic style—from Italian *trulli* and Dogan huts to the blinding whitewashed shapes of Greek island towns. The "natural," or peasant production, as well as the engineer's contribution, was enshrined by the Museum of Modern Art show "Architecture Without Architects."

Later came the definition of the spontaneous, American pop landscape and the non-architecture of the highway, the strip and the tract house and motel by Robert and Denise Scott Brown Venturi and Herbert Gans. This is the architectural counterculture in which the dumb-and-ordinary is celebrated and the monument is taboo. It is not accepted by the modernist establishment. But both establishment and anti-establishment non-architecture have an elite cachet.

On still another level, those who see architecture primarily as a social act have espoused a kind of non-architecture that deals more with qualities of amenity and environment than with art. The way a building serves the processes of life takes precedence over sophisticated esthetic skills.

Non-architecture has come a long way since it was raised as the antithesis of academic style and the banner of revolution more than a half century ago. It would no longer be possible, in the name of non-architecture, for Bruno Taut seriously to redesign the Alps, a perfectly acceptable exercise at a time when improving nature was as legitimate an aim as improving life, and all you needed was a manifesto to make it so. Who now would have the innocent architectural arrogance to recrown a peak or remake a valley with "walls erected on hillsides out of colored glass in rigid frames, light shining through a variety of changing effects, as much for those in the valley as for the pilots of aircraft overhead?" Christo wraps mountains today, but it's not the same thing. And a less-than-earth-shaking avant garde issues manifestos denouncing any form of architectural practice at all.

In 1919 Bruno Taut could say, "My torch dazzles me, but I am determined to carry it." In 1975 the austere and awful geometry of the abandoned ABM is an architecture of nightmare, not of dreams.