The Architecture Of Destruction
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Architecture

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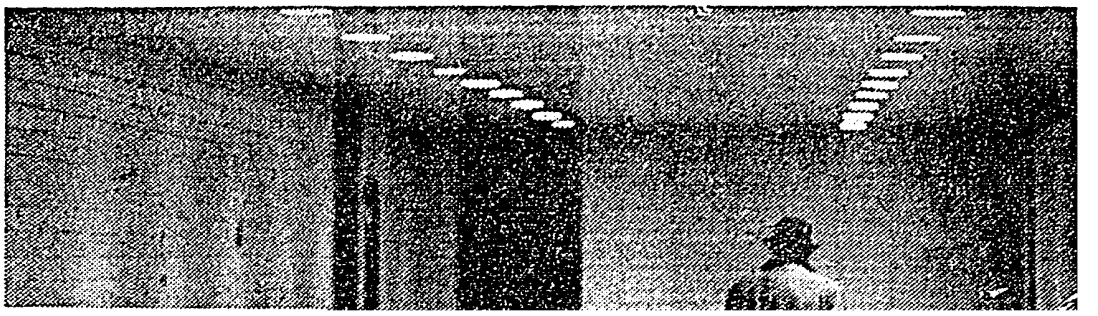

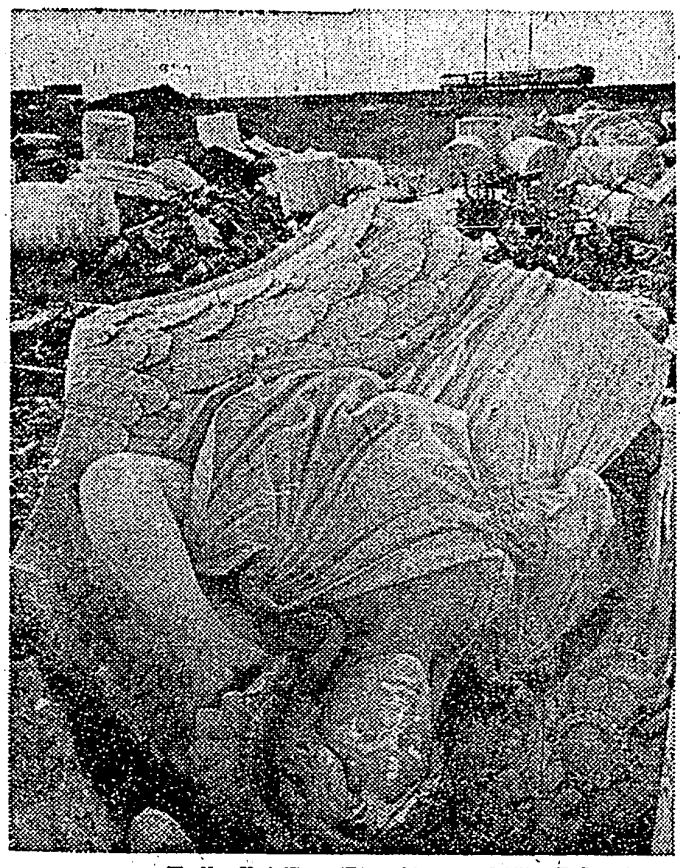

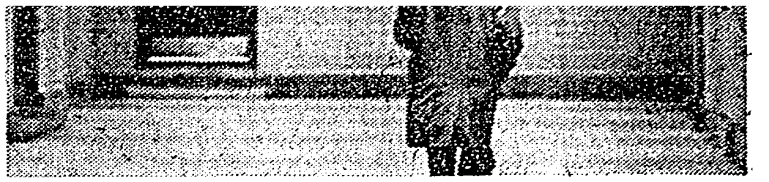

Penn Station wreckage in Secaucus Meadows, left, and new subway entrance on the site of the station. *"The esthetics of economics"*

The New York Times (Edward Hausner, William E. Sauro)

THERE used to be a newspaper game called "What's wrong with this picture?". It was a cartoon in which there were a number of things wrong, from doors without handles and upside-down windows to pictures with mismatched halves hidden in the wallpaper. It was a world of cockeyed domesticity, cozily askew. The game was to find and list all the errors, or deviations from the norm.

What's wrong with the pictures on this page is not quite so simple. To begin with, what they show is the norm, in a world far from cozy and quite askew. They pose disturbing questions and touch problems that go to the core of a culture in which destruction and regeneration, art and nihilism, are becoming indistinguishable. But they say a great deal about how things are, and why, in the world that man is building for himself today.

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The pictures, simply, are what remains of Penn Station in its burial ground in the Secaucus Meadows—a fragment of a classical figure and shards of columns in a setting of macabre surrealist vérité—and part of the vast Madison Square Garden-Penn Station complex that replaced it, here the entrance to the Eighth Avenue subway.

Superficially, the message is terribly clear. Tossed into the Secaucus graveyard are about 25 centuries of classical culture and the standards of style, elegance and grandeur that it gave to the dreams and constructions of western man. That turns the Jersey wasteland into a pretty classy dump.

As for the subway entrance, you could say, in abstract, clinical design terms, that there is nothing very much wrong with it at all: clean tilework, acceptable good graphics, a direct, nonflashy solution to a routine functional problem. And yet—it is a singularly grim picture. It speaks volumes on alienation through architecture. Kafka or Sartre never said it better. That single human figure, equally isolated in a crowd, proceeds through the chill, bleak anonymity of the 20th-century transit catacombs (ancient catacombs softened even death with frescoes) in a setting of impersonal, ordinary sterility that could just as well be a clean, functional gas chamber. The human spirit and human environment have reached absolute zero.

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The easiest indictment to make is that this is a failure of modern architecture. That we have exchanged caryatids and columns for a mess of functional pottage and that Secaucus is the final resting place of our culture.

It would be simple, and false. It is the nostalgic argument of those who believe that recreating the appearance of the past will bring back the reality of the past or the values of the past. Nothing could be farther from the truth. It is the kind of reasoning that makes well-intentioned people think it is a good idea, for example, to build Benjamin Latrobe's unrealized 18th-century theater for Richmond now, because all the drawings still exist.

At the least, that is begging the 20th century; at the worst, it is the denial and corruption of creativity in our own time. No number of archeological constructions or caryatids can put that world back together again. There is something terribly pathetic in the self-delusory belief that it can be done.

Today's architecture is the highest dramatic revelation of changes in technology, structure, style and need in a revolutionary age. It is one of the genuine revolutions in our revolution-high times. Its monuments are superb; its potential develops constantly.

What that subway picture represents is simply the esthetics of economics. The results are, as much as possible, vandal proof, dirt proof, extravagance proof and delight proof—a kind of penitentiary style. The esthetics of economics characterize not only our common commercial construction but also the institutions and public buildings that were once meant to symbolize the shaky nobility of man. The economic standard is as accepted today as the four orders were in Rome.

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Take, for example, the old and new Jersey City courthouses, built side by side as if to deliberately make the point. The old courthouse—a solid, turn-of-the-century Beaux Arts monument of marble, murals and soaring rotunda space—is in the news again because it is close to losing its battle for existence after several years of struggle to save and convert it to contemporary uses.

Its replacement, the new courthouse, says nothing about the majesty of the law (the passion for breaking it right now simply underlines its importance) and a great deal about the society that built it. It says that society is mean and cheap and that it considers excellence a gratuitous commodity.

But the real point is that it is a dead match to Jersey City. This is the kind of city that the esthetics of economics makes: a tawdry, formless limbo of hamburger joints, discount stores, parking lots, matchbox houses, cheap office buildings, automobile salesrooms, jarring signs and disruptive highway spaghetti. It is the environment of expediency.

Today we have politics that preach destruction and art that acts out destruction; perhaps this is the architecture of destruction. As we said about something else, society gets the cities it deserves. The courthouse only underlines the process.

Curiously, it is not the Establishment or the older generation that sees old buildings in contemporary urban terms. It is the young people, the architects and city-oriented intellectuals who have rejected the Utopian idea of an artificially imposed new order of the last professional generation, and who believe in change, complexity, contrast and a multidimensional urban scene. They are not antiquarians. But they are the ones who lead visitors to Victorian monuments, early Chicago skyscrapers, cast-iron buildings in New York, old Texas houses. These are the young professionals who are testing architecture in the shifting values of a world in crisis.

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Values is a word they avoid, but the commitment to values is there. They are not the values handed down by society or the past. They are often the denial of values as conventionally understood. Realists and futurists, the present generation finds some of its values even in the environment of expediency. Art and life always coexist.

If the wreckage of the 19th century is in the Secaucus Meadows, and the failure of the 20th century is in the landscape of alienation, the promise of the art of building is very much alive. It is not in the individual structure as traditionally designed, but in the relationships of people, land and buildings for life and use—it is in the esthetic and human ferment that is currently called architecture.