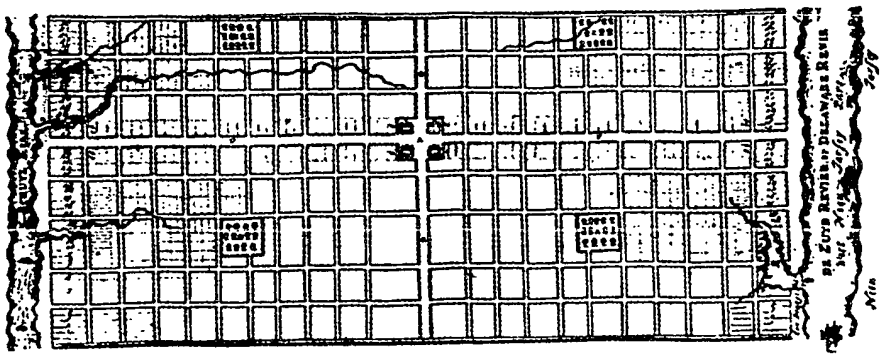
American Architecture And Urbanism: By Vincent Scully. llustrated. ...
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
New York Times (1923-Current file); Nov 23, 1969; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. BR6

Full of perceptions and killing judgments—a brilliant man's lazy book



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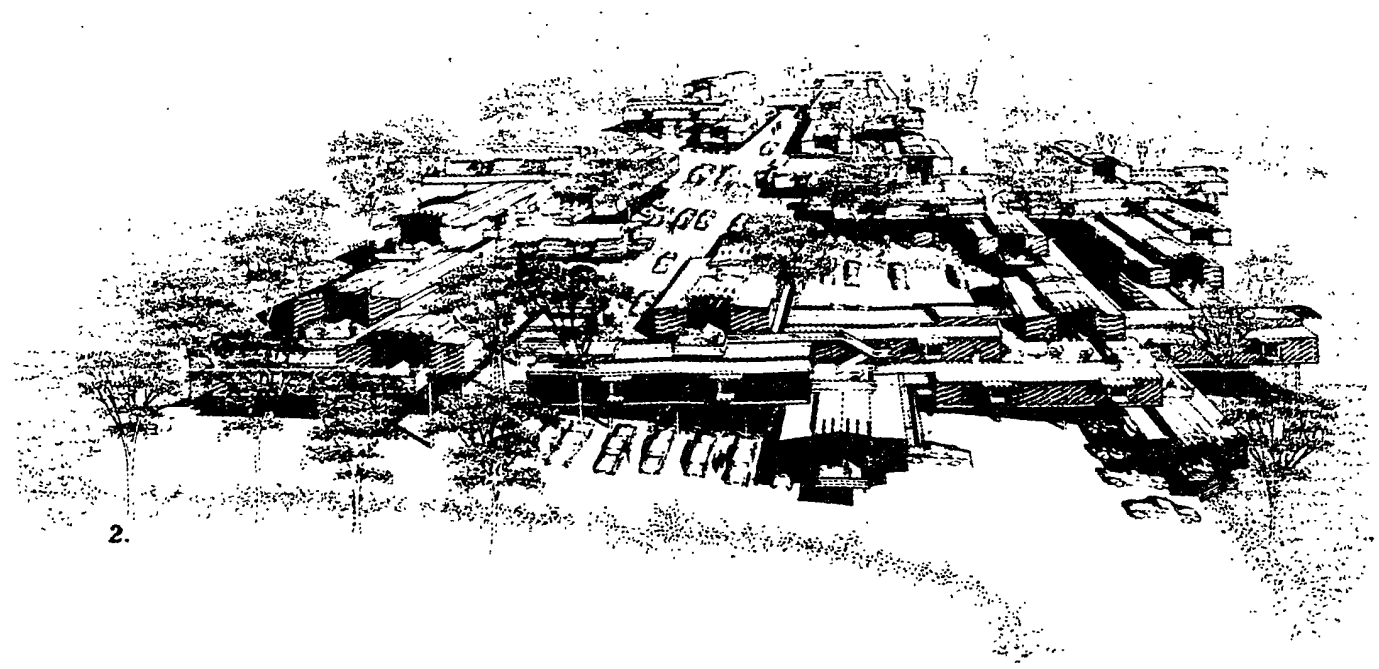

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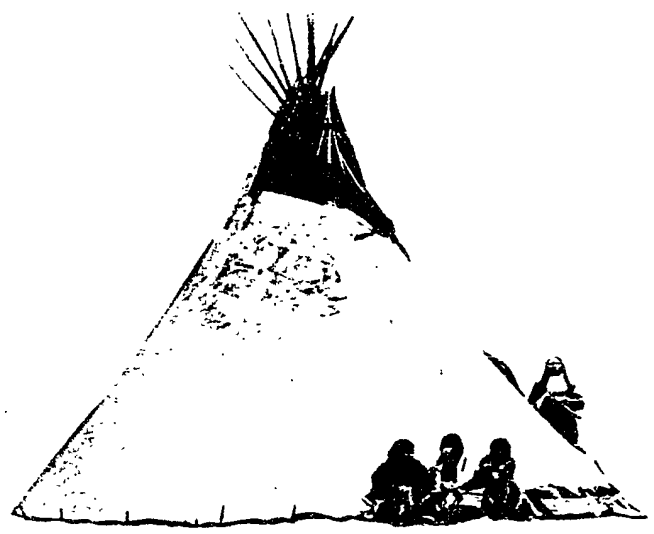

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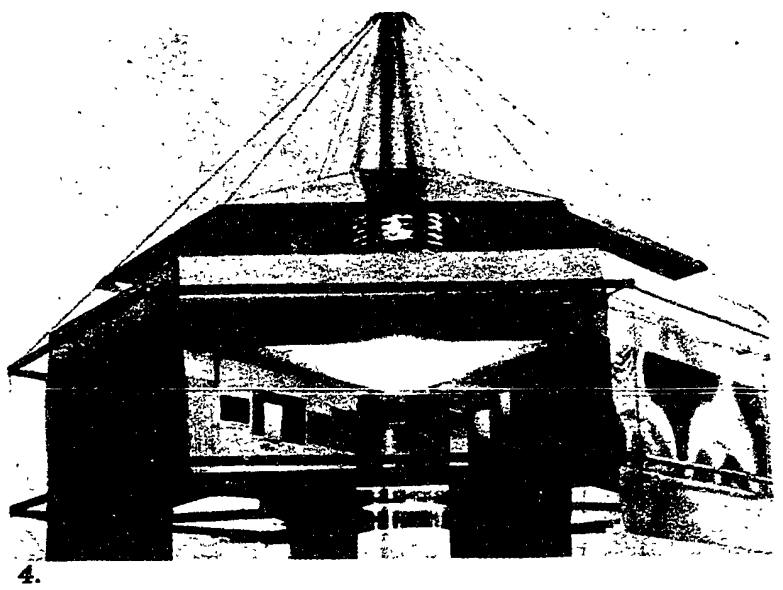

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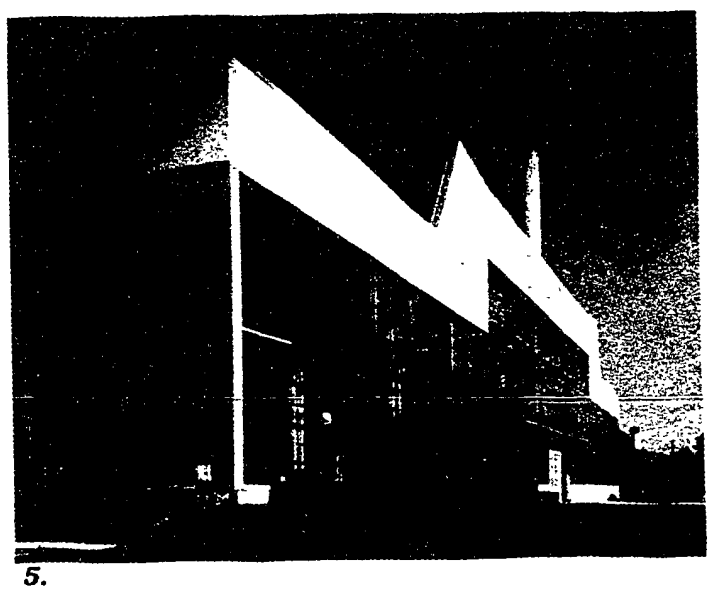

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American Architecture And Urbanism

By Vincent Scully.
llustrated. 275 pp. New York: Frederick A. Praeger. $18.50.

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Vincent Scully's intention is "to push the history of architecture toward a proper urbanistic scale and an active role in society." He states that "this book is concerned with the meaning of American architecture and with an assessment of the kind of human environment it has created." But it does not turn out to be the definitive volume on American architecture and urbanism that we have been waiting for, in spite of the promise of both the title and the author.

In fairness, that comprehensive work on the art of building cities in the United States is quite possibly not the book that Mr. Scully wanted to write—in effect, the result is a highly idiosyncratic critique of some aspects of American building. Beyond that he has attempted to broaden the scope of a conventional architectural history by dealing with the timely aspects of the American city, in particular through the trials and errors of his archetypal home base, New Haven. This is edifying, and often fascinating, as a case history of how a city is shaped or spoiled through urban design or its lack in terms of its people and functions and the sensibilities of its planners. It is equally interesting as a chronicle of how an esthetically and stylistically oriented historian acquires a sense of urban outrage. (Or, as he puts it himself how a religio-philosophical point of view becomes socio-functional.) But his book does not really cover the spectrum of American urbanism or define those American urban qualities that have been abused as much by planners as by the forces labeled progress.

The job, then, is still to be done. Surprisingly, for a man of Mr. Scully's reputation—he is Col. John Trumbull Professor of the History of Art at Yale and author of such definitive architectural works as "The Shingle Style" (1955) and "The Earth, The Temple, and The Gods" (1962)—this is not even a good book until it gets more than half way through. It is not even consistently good architectural history. Only when it comes to the evaluation of current architectural attitudes, personalities and styles does it turn into a fascinating book. At that point Mr. Scully demonstrates both the special insight and critical acuity that have built a richly deserved reputation as one of today's outstanding teachers and historians.

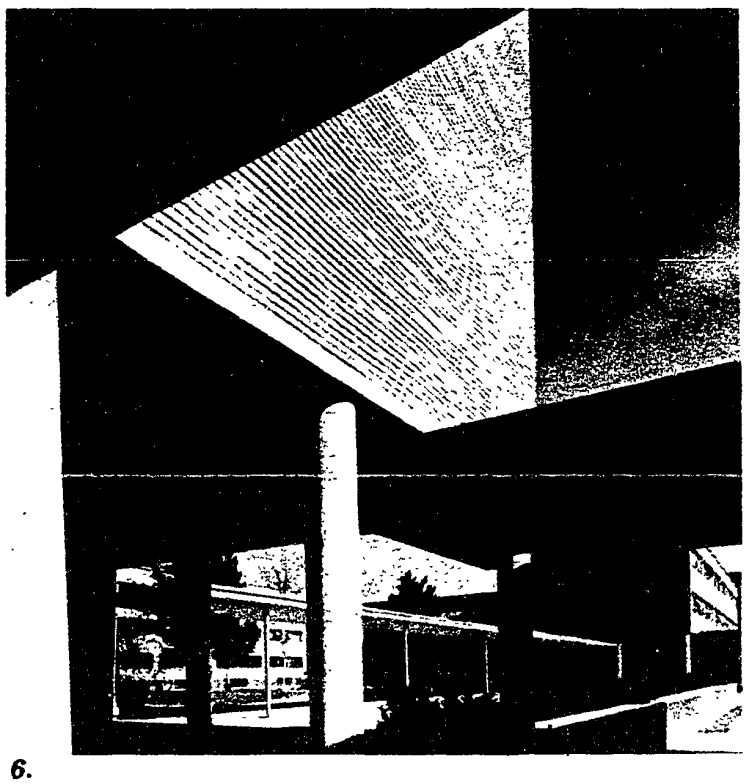
Yet the kind of scholarship to be found in "The Shingle Style," and the inspired perceptions of "The Earth, The Temple, and The Gods," are not here. There is a surprising lack of documentation and synthesis. For synthesis we get alarmingly dubious and facile clichés about the Americanism of the continuity of flat planes and taut skin from wigwams to skyscrapers.

In spite of the really formidable amount of work demonstrated by the undertaking in terms of assembling material alone, this is essentially a brilliant man's lazy book. The impression one gets is that Mr. Scully took all the standard pictures of the standard American architectural history course, arranged them in order, and through a process of free association based on his familiarity with the material, produced a text. One cannot fault their inclusion since they are the necessary touchstones that have been selected and re-selected, front face and profile, by anyone who has ever taught a course or produced an exhibition on the subject of American architecture.

The text that accompanies them is short on facts and long on feeling. Granted that Mr. Scully's feelings come under the heading of exceptional responses, facts are still the bread and meat of history. They provide the most compelling drama and most revealing picture of any era. I do not think that one can, or should, assume that those who are interested

Mrs. Huxtable is architecture critic of The Times.

1. *William Penn's plan for Philadelphia, 1682.*
2. *Mobile home units as drawn by Paul Rudolph.*
3. *An Arapaho camp in Kansas, c. 1870.*
4. *Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion House, 1928.*
5. *A steel factory in Ohio, Albert Kahn, 1939.*
6. *Harvard University Graduate Center; Walter Gropius and The Architects' Collaborative, 1950.*
7. *Kresge Auditorium and Chapel, MIT; Eero Saarinen, 1955.*
8. *Knights of Columbus Hall under construction, New Haven; Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo, and Associates, 1967.*
9. *Project for section Yale University Art and Architecture Building, Paul Rudolph, 1963.*
10. *McGregor Memorial Conference Center, Wayne State University, Detroit; Yamasaki, Leinweber and Associates, 1957.*



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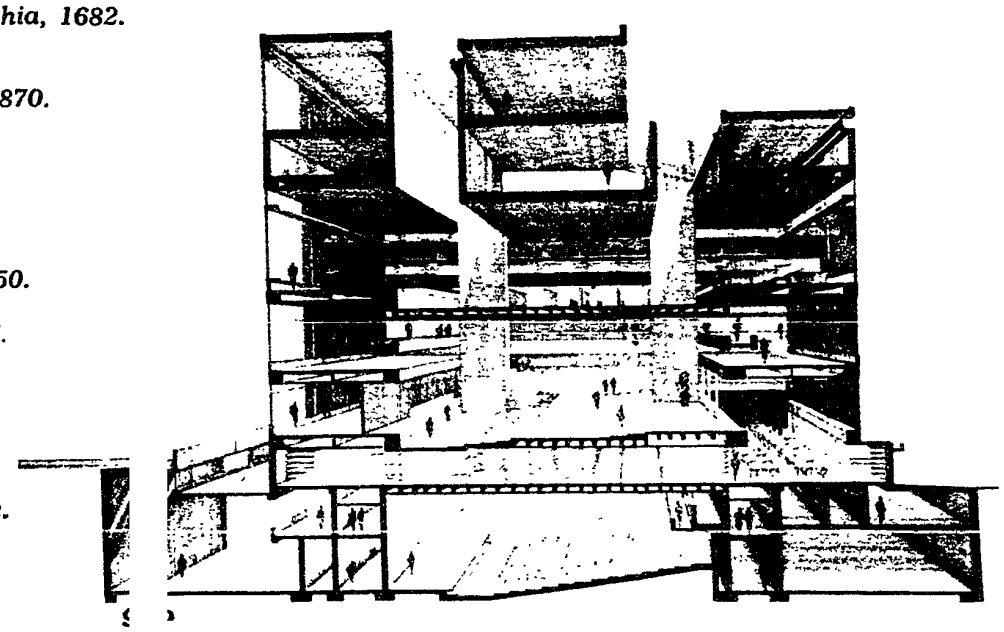

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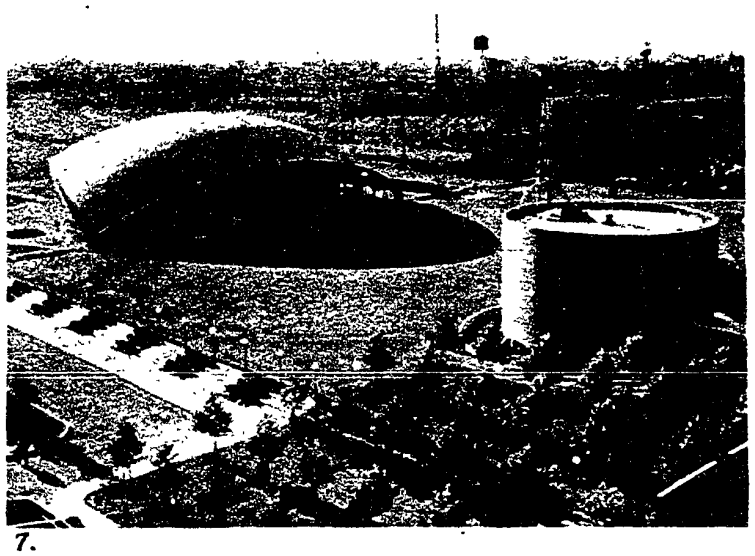

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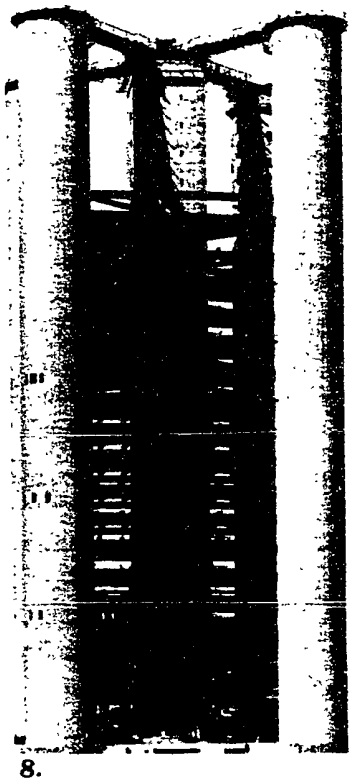

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will go to more specialized sources for the facts. One expects, at least, basic information.

It is hard, then, to tell just whom this book is meant for. It is certainly not the reference book that is still needed on the subject, something comparable to Russell Hitchcock's encyclopedic and irreplaceable text on 19th and 20th-century architecture. Mr. Scully's brand of scholarship is different, but it can be equally informative, as he has demonstrated in "The Shingle Style." The goal here seems to be something a lot of cultural publishers appear to be aiming for—omni-audience—but it is hard to tell, sometimes, whether it is popularization or parody. His style has always been given more to soaring prose than to understatement, reaching its poetic apogee in the sensitive paean to the siting of Greek temples in "The Earth, The Temple, and The Gods." George Steiner recently wrote of Hemingway that those who are genuine stylists eventually parody themselves.

But what is really unsatisfactory is to be offered the kind of slick, superficial analogies that appear as the volume's binding theme. One balks at the familiar esthetic balancing act that ties together the "wind-adjusted flapped tepee of the plains and Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion House, rotating on its mast, mobile both, unfixed to the ground." (That for technology.) One really resists packaging 17th-century and 18th-century New England houses and Albert Kahn factories (of which, incidentally, nothing further is said) in the same box of "linearity, planarity and simplification of mass." (That for austerity of means versus the development of industrial architecture.)

This is stretching taut skin very thin indeed, at the expense of both essential information and accurate analysis. It is an optical and intellectual game art and architecture critics play. The reliance on the sophisticated painterly or sculptural eye is an exercise in flashy but faulty iconology. Even the most disparate buildings exist, of course, within some kind of common cultural tradition, but the isolation of an esthetic symptom is no diagnosis of meaning or style. It simply begs real history and the hard work of defining those functional, economic, structural, esthetic, environmental, philosophical, social or temporal factors that explain what makes a certain kind of building appear at a certain time or place. These are the relationships that produce, and reveal, the art of architecture.

It is lack of information—as if it really didn't matter—that is the most frustrating element of this extraordinarily uneven book. Environmental assessment—its avowed objective—relies as much on information as on instinct. It is not enough, to cite one example, in a discussion of Irving Gill's California work at the beginning of the century to mention that something has been described by Esther McCoy, without a footnote or reference that one can track down short of a bibliographical treasure hunt. Mrs. McCoy has done some of the best documented writing on American architecture of this period and one wants, after the book's teasing sample, to rush to the bibliography—where it is almost impossible to find specific sources. It is a remarkable bibliography, written as an essay; a kind of combined source list and confessional; a beautiful, running - stream - of - architectural - consciousness that weaves philosophy and criticism into an informal litany of definitive references, easily as good a trick as turning a recital of the telephone book into high drama. The bibliography is truly a dazzling performance, often telling, or implying, more about American architecture and urbanism than the book itself. The book's desultory pagination doesn't help.

Still, in spite of all this, when Mr. Scully's book is good, it is very, very good. If it fails in large areas or architectural and urban history, it excels in genuine perception and critical judgement — in particular when judging the present—a talent given to few historians. The judgments are not always gentle, but neither is truth. Whether or not one always agrees is beside the point. I quote, because to paraphrase would be a disservice to the author's gift for expressive summation.

A dissenting view of the Bauhaus influence of Walter Gropius at Harvard: "His antihistorical bias was stronger than ever, and since architecture at its true urban scale is largely history, he helped lay part of the groundwork for the general destruction of American cities which some of his *(Continued on Page 52)*

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Continued from Page 7

pupils were to undertake in the following generation." (One paradigmatic Scullyian sentence combining at least three faultless explosions of the conventional architectural wisdom.)

On Eero Saarinen: "He sought a uniquely, even feverishly, expressive container for each and every particular program," And of Saarinen's Kresge Auditorium at M.I.T.: ". . . neoclassicizing willfulness, where everything is jammed into one scaleless shape, sanctified by structural exhibitionism."

On the buildings of Saarinen's associate and successor, Kevin Roche: "para-military dandyism."

On Paul Rudolph: "a solitary performer, whose buildings always tend to look better than most of those around them, the work of a man with remarkable optical gifts and an unerring instinct not so much for creating space as for positioning objects in it."

On Mies van der Rohe: "His architecture cried on nobody's lapel; it made perfect, technologically appropriate cages, and pure, limpid volumes of air, and that was all . . . the actions of men . . . and figural sculpture . . . could occur in noble volumes of unthreatened space."

Of the work of Edward Durell Stone and Minoru Yamasaki in the 1950's and 1960's: "It is, literally, superficial design, where the volume into which the functions are more or less fitted, is fundamentally Miesian, symmetrical, and not overly studied but the surface is as crumpled and laced as the trade can afford. . . . Such buildings are packages . . . and the package is, after all, one of technology's most ubiquitous products, wherein the illusion of variety, unaffecting fundamental realities, can be most cheaply achieved."

Of new churches: "embarassing displays of financial affluence and spiritual poverty."

And of redevelopment agencies: Their "force is wielded mostly by certain kinds of lawyers and civil administrators, full of lies and dodges, with hearts like small stones."

Every one of these quotations is out of context, and I hasten to note that their value goes far beyond their obvious ability to make the clean, one-sentence kill. Mr. Scully cuts through esthetic and intellectual fashion to relate his judgments to a broad context and philosophical base, illuminating

the nature of the art of architecture today. That is no small achievement and that is the value of the book.

There are now half a dozen ambitious treatises on the art of building in the United States and one has the feeling that the job has almost always been undertaken more from a belief that the book is needed (true), and will sell (it should), than from the conviction that grows from painstaking research with the objective of revealing the life and art of a given period or place. All of them leave one feeling half-informed or half-betrayed.

If one feels a bit betrayed by Mr. Scully's treatment, it is probably only in reaction to one's high expectations, raised largely by the title. Although this may not be the book that everyone has been waiting for, it is still a book that everyone should read—at least, from the middle on. Mr. Scully's next work, on pueblo architecture, will probably make up in scholarship for the weaknesses here, and one can always expect some kind of special performance from the high-wire artist of architectural history. ■