

## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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# The Latest Style Is 'Jeweler's Mechanical'

**I**n 1977 modern architecture was declared dead. I suppose that ranks as the event of the year. The publishers' lists were heavy with requiems and manifestos. Conspicuously buried by, among others, Peter Blake and Brent Brolin, in volumes of mea culpa and j'accuse, the modern movement was also laid uneasily to rest in seminars and symposia and the better architectural schools. The vacuum is promptly being filled by something called, for lack of a better term, post-modernism.

Post-modernism is hard to define. It is something of a misnomer, because it does not reject modernism, or the basic fact and practice of modern architecture; it does not really turn its back on the modern movement or turn back the clock. It is not reactionary in the sense of scuttling everything that has evolved in the 20th century to return to the academy. But it does move beyond the tenets and beliefs of doctrinaire modern

practice. It is an enthusiastically rebellious act, in which the established rules of taste and propriety are jettisoned and taboo areas of art and history are explored. It is rediscovering the world and reinventing the wheel.

The book of the year, therefore, is Charles Jencks's "The Language of Post Modern Architecture," which takes architecture apart and puts it together again with critical wit and a nice bit of scholarly venom—a book for which the approved word would be "provocative." It offers a fresh vision and some new rules to replace the old ones, more up-to-date in their relationship to current styles of thought. The year was also marked by the reissue of the chief opening gun of the revolt, Robert Venturi's "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture," published first in 1966, establishing this act of dissent as a confirmed classic.

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The organization of the year is the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York, because in 1977 this epicenter of the architectural avant-garde (a phrase its members hate and can demolish handily in a few thousand well-chosen, multi-syllable words) reached its 10th anniversary, an extremely respectable age as the avant-garde goes.

The institute has achieved a great deal and had considerable impact in those 10 years: a series of the best courses in architecture, in the breadth and depth of their approach to theory and practice, given anywhere; the most stimulating and perceptive debates on topics of current interest, and the publication of a periodical, "Oppositions," a weighty, often opaque, and occasionally brilliant attempt to come to terms with the more complex and abstract issues of the uneasy art of architecture today. Although its members and students have done design and planning work for a number of government agencies, the chief role the institute has developed in this decade is one of polemical catalyst, partly by research and writing, partly by the exchange of information, and partly by intellectual intimidation. We salute the institute and hope that it does not lose its way in second-hand semiotics and typologies borrowed from other schools of philosophy.

The vitality brought to architecture by this theoretical turmoil is incontestable; not since the beginnings of the modern movement have architects been so actively engaged in reexamining and reshaping the frontiers and parameters of their practice. Those who are building in this spirit, produce stimulating, disturbing, and often beautiful work. Nor can they be lumped together, beyond their relationship to this moment in creative architectural time. I nominate, therefore, no architect of the year.

But one particularly handsome building by one of the most talented of these architects—the Bronx Developmental Center by Richard Meier and Associates—might be called the dilemma of the year. This outstanding structure has been designed with sensitivity and elegant precision of detail for a problem that neither society nor the architect has been able to solve: the nature of the care to be given to the mentally and physically disabled. While the controversy about institutionalization versus "normalized" community care continues,

## 'Jeweler's Mechanical'

and the building is awarded prize after prize, the suave and glistening structure stands empty, except for administrative offices, a symbol of the tragic inability of even the best architecture to provide answers for the unresolved programs of a culture in troubled transition.

On a purely esthetic level, however, the Meier building is one of the key examples of what might be called the style of the year. Sleek and thin-skinned, with almost calibrated meticulousness of joining and sheathing, hard, shining surfaces held flat and taut, smoothly rounded corners, glass and metal polished for gentle brilliance or a soft sheen—this might be called "jeweler's mechanical." It is clearly the style of the year because it has already been appropriated by the leading commercial firms as the latest architectural packaging.

This style also distinguishes New York City's building of the year—the 46-story Citicorp tower, at 54th Street and Lexington Avenue, third tallest in midtown, with its open plaza freed by huge columns that raise the base of the tower nine stories above ground. Designed by Hugh Stubbins and Associates, with Emery Roth and Associates, the building's most noticeable and controversial feature is its slanted top, for which a whole mythology of reasons has been invented, beyond the fact that Citicorp apparently wanted it that way.

## 'Praised and damned, the Centre Pompidou in Paris is the Building of the Year.'

Whatever its novelty value, the top has no particular relationship to the shaft below as a geometric form or esthetic entity, but the building's "jeweler's" skin of aluminum and glass is not only energy-conscious but extremely handsome, particularly seen at close range. The still-unfinished plaza, with its new, freestanding St. Peter's Church and its promised pedestrian amenities, raises the project to a work of genuine urban design.

If there is one structure anywhere, however, that is the building of the year, or rather, the Building of the Year, it is the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the new contemporary art museum and cultural center known as the Beaubourg. Built and condemned, praised and damned, called the first gasp of the 21st century and the last gasp of the 19th century, it is a highly debatable success (so far) as a museum and an equally equivocal success as urban theater. Can anyone really doubt the power of a work of architecture to change the first temperament of a city?

On this side of the ocean, museums continued to create significant architecture this year, most notably Louis Kahn's last work, the much-admired Yale Center for British Art, the addition of a new wing by Venturi and Rauch to Cass Gilbert's Oberlin College Museum and the restoration of the classical St. Louis Museum, also by Cass Gilbert—the replanning carried out by the unclassical firm of Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer—typify the sympathetic handling of the past by the younger modernists and the continuing trend, or avalanche, of recycled older buildings.

But although construction activity in 1977 was up, for many architects this was still a stagnant year, reflecting a depressed and inflationary economy, and apparently when architects don't build, they draw. This may, or may not, account for one of the most striking cultural phenomena of the year—the spectacular surge of interest in architectural drawings, both as subjects for exhibition and as collectable works of art. New drawing galleries opened, and major architectural drawing shows at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, the Drawing Center and the Leo Castelli Gallery broke attendance records and set new price levels. Most of all, they celebrated the esthetic documents of a visual profession exploring the poetry and philosophy of real and imaginary environments. Can anyone doubt the power of art to influence the way we see, and build, the world?