

Architecture

The Endless Search

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE current word in architecture is non-architecture. When the structures of such diverse institutions of the top and bottom of society as prisons and cultural centers lead to the same word in the same week, it is more than coincidence.

The ambitious design for a museum or cultural and information center for Paris's Place Beaubourg was won by a building conspicuously labeled, by both the designers and the judges, non-architecture. The word was not meant to be pejorative in any way.

The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington's new cultural showcase, was called here, for its pretentious mannerisms, non-architecture. In this case, it was not praise.

New York State's Attica Correctional Facility emerged as a nightmare on front pages everywhere in which "the max" (maximum security prison) was revealed as a mock-medieval chamber of horrors designed completely of such criteria as how long it takes to cut through steel and the maximum opening through which a man cannot quite get his head. The measurement is 5½ inches; the style is vaguely Carcassonne.

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According to Fred Ferretti, who reported the Attica disaster, the walled courts looked like something out of a sinister fairy tale and in the glare of the searchlights at night one expected to see Peter Pan fly across the cell-blocks. Certainly any structure that relates so little to reality or humanity is non-architecture. That is neither praise nor blame, just a simple statement of fact.

On the other hand, the most severe critics of the prison system are suggesting something specifically called non-architecture — a decentralized kind of treatment facility in existing or temporary structures adapted for rehabilitative use with no massive investment of funds

in permanent prison buildings.

Confused? If you are, that's the point. So is architecture.

But the real point is that the use of the word non-architecture, and even the confusion about it, are part of a serious questioning and even more serious change in the philosophy and practice of architecture at a time when the social institutions it serves are also in flux and change.

The first thing to clarify is that we are actually dealing with two uses of the word non-architecture — a "traditional" and a "revisionist" definition.

Traditionally, the word means something negative. It signifies the failure of the designer to satisfy the accepted, historical criteria for the successful concept and execution of a building as a work of art — the creative manipulation of the relationships of solids and voids, mass and space, materials, texture and light, for a functional and stylistic whole.

This can be predominantly a monumental, or stylistic failure, as at the Kennedy Center, or a failure in human and programmatic terms, as at Attica. These definitions and judgments are valid if one starts with the accepted vision of architecture's aims.

But a good part of the current generation does not accept the traditional definition. They say that you cannot put new wine in old bottles. If architecture is a way of providing for society's

needs, how can today's society and its institutions, in such radical transformation, be accommodated by forms and techniques devised for the needs of a totally different age?

There is no real debate about the question; the conflict is over the answers.

One answer is in the new definition of non-architecture. The English periodical, Architectural Design, devoted largely to new ideas and practice, offers as good a definition as any. Over its subscription form it says: "Architectural Design is concerned with breaking down the notion of architecture as a formal, fine art composition, based on relationships of volume, form and silhouette; and with showing instead that architecture is an organizational framework which should allow and encourage people to develop their own life style to maximum effect."

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That's the new non-architecture. It's full of bugs, but beautiful. It deals largely with volatile things such as process, choice, variety, transmutation and change. It gives the back of the hand to the ordered and the monumental. How else, say its proponents, to deal with problems and values that shift so quickly that a building can be obsolete before completion?

The answers proposed are deliberately insubstantial: tents, inflatables, space frames, expendable structures, technology in the service of all purpose enclosures

and anonymous space, systems that can be changed, discarded or replaced. To the proponents of this mutable architecture, monument is a dirty word.

And so, when the French government holds a competition for a new museum, it is not surprising that a very aware and distinguished jury picks a solution that it calls non-architecture.

As Pierre Schneider points out in a brilliantly provocative critique, the museum has to be an information center now, a set of functions rather than a place. And the winning design, by Rogers and Piano, which I cannot analyze here because I have seen only published accounts, appears to be a glass-enclosed steel framework with spaces for multiple, changing programs, its basic architectural esthetic employing technology and transparency and such evanescent effects as mixed media and projection. Schneider calls it a masterpiece of aggressive neutrality and a project that reflects the jury's double quest for an architecture that isn't architecture and a museum that isn't a museum.

But I think that we can go one step farther, or maybe one step backward.

Who is kidding whom that this is neither architecture nor a monument? That immense glass box will be far more solid than transparent in reality. Its hard brilliance will aggressively dominate old stone. The dimensions of

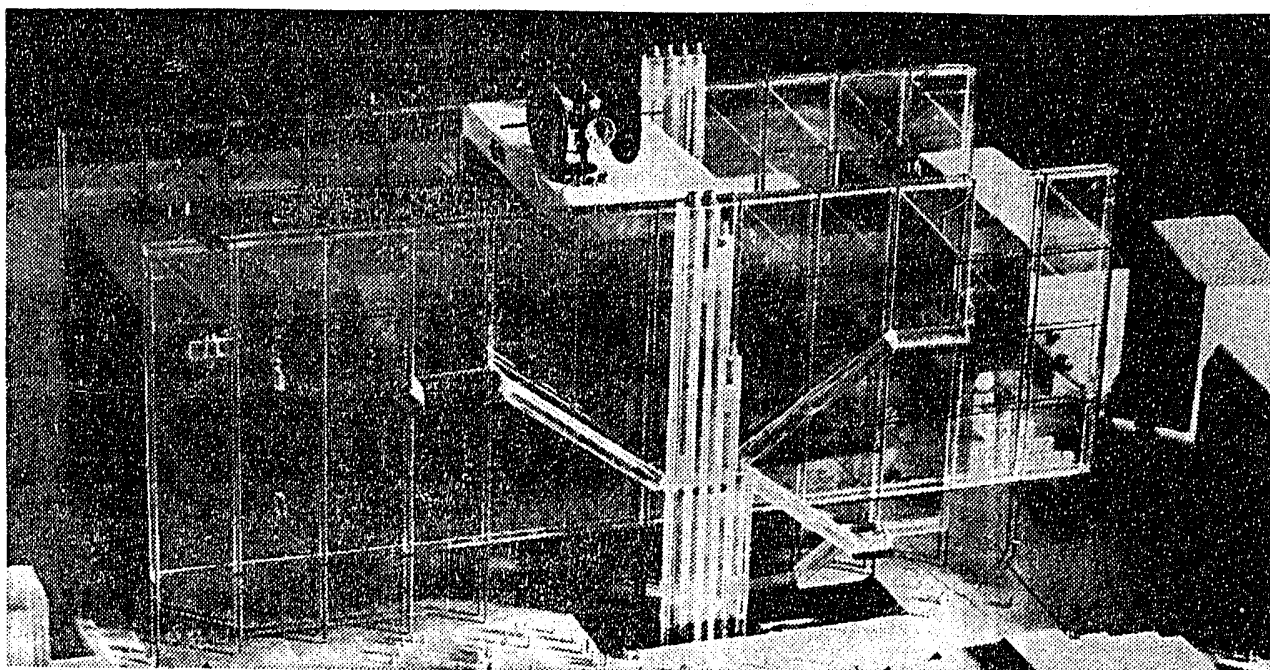
the supporting steel framework will be monumental in themselves. Dropped into a historic, small-scale quarter of Paris, it will be a monument to end all monuments.

I am not saying that this will be good or bad, or right or wrong. But it does seem like a bit of double-think. I suspect that it could be tremendously stimulating and handsome, and in the best monumental sense, a true indicator of our 20th-century soul-searching and quest for new means and forms. I do know that I'd like to see something like it built somewhere. It could even be great architecture.

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But if the Beaubourg Center is not really non-architecture, there is a lot to be said for the real non-thing. There is a great deal of value in the vernacular of any age which grows without pretensions to, or hopes of monumentality, as a basic answer to basic needs.

There is nothing to be said at all for the second-rate "monument" replete with mannerisms denoting "art" and "style" that are largely responsible for turning off so many on traditional practice. They are disruptive, discordant, and even destructive as environment. We could do with a little more sensitive underreaching, including some awareness of the esthetics of function, feeling and place, and a few more options for society. If that's non-architecture, let's make the most of it.



Model for the Beaubourg Center, new museum to be built near Les Halles in Paris
"A true indicator of our 20th-century quest for new means and forms?"