A rendering of a proposed library building in Canton, Ohio—"A dazzler right out of the 1940's. But the Forties Future is pure nostalgia now, like 40's films."

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Futurism's Direction Today? Full Speed Backward

Whatever happened to the future? I mean, the world of the future, as it was envisioned in those future-happy days just after World War II. The promises and visions began, actually, during the war, when the architecture magazines were filled with dreams that were supposed to become reality as soon as the fighting stopped and construction could begin. The illustrations featured boldly cantilevered and streamlined saucers and spirals connected to other futuristic wonders by skyways and bridges. There were always bubble-domed automobiles of the future in the streets.

Most of these proposals were the brainstorms of the promotional geniuses of the building materials industry, who frequently co-opted war-idle architects to give them form in concrete, metal, glass or plastic, depending on the manufacturer. The style was immediately recognizable as pure, ingenuous space age. The buildings looked like Frank Lloyd Wright gone berserk, with overtones of Norman Bel Geddes and suggestions of Buck Rogers. This, we were told, was the look of the future that would be firmly established by the 1960's; by the 1980's, a Martian would feel at home.

What really happened was enough to give futurism a bad name, but that is never a very hard thing to do. A few flying saucer-type structures have appeared in provincial cities as disparate as Stamford, Conn., and Bordeaux, France, their space-age imagery tempered by more picturesque materials, like boulders and rubble, or tarted-up with wall-to-wall carpeting for corporations, banks and bureaucracies. Somewhere along the way the space age was dumped. The direction today is full speed backward. Architecture is rushing pellmell into the mists of history; galactic symbolism has given way to the trappings of tradition. Younger architects, and some more mature ones, too, are retreating bravely into academic convention and nostalgic revivals. The wave of the future has turned out to be the wave of the past.

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The newest thing in the 1980's is anything that's old, and the hottest trend of all right now is classicism. I have seen the future — in buildings, books and exhibitions — and this time it is not courtesy of Captain Marvel; it is straight out of Quatremère de Quincy and Bannister Fletcher. (For non-students of architecture, the first was a godhead of the Ecole des Beaux Arts and the Academy, and the second was for years the standard academic reference for the history of architectural styles and orders.) Bannister Fletcher was bumped by Sigfried Giedion's revolutionary text on modern architecture, which now languishes on the shelves or is being attacked by revisionists, and Bannister Fletcher has just been reprinted. The trick today is to know a string course from a spandrel, a plinth from a piloti. By some neat trick of fate and futurism, the avant garde is busy reinstating the centuries-old Western classical tradition that the modernists so vehemently rejected.

"Post-Modern Classicism, the New Synthesis," a book-length issue of the English periodical "Architectural Design," edited by Charles Jencks, treats the trend as an international phenomenon. An exhibition, "Speaking a New Classicism: American Architecture Now," devoted to examples in this country, is at the Smith College Museum of Art in Northampton, Mass., through July 12 and will be at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Mass., from July 25 to Sept. 8.

In the face of this fashionable about-face, I admit to a sentimental pleasure at finding that the old future was not dead, but had survived in Canton, Ohio. It still has a certain rakish charm. The picture accompanying this column came over the transom, so to speak, apparently with some material from the Canton Art Institute. I am still not sure of its purpose or provenance, but it seems at some point to have been used in the Canton newspaper, because there are cryptic notes on the back that say, "For Monday's Canton Notes" and a caption that reads "Top-on-a-Tripod Could Make New Library Old-Fashioned."

But there it is, a dazzler right out of the 40's — whatever its real date — straining relentlessly toward tomorrow. Nothing old-fashioned about it. With fins instead of finials, it threatens to revolve or take off; the inverted, vine-draped rings rise like Venus from the sea out of the canted, glassy base — shades of Wright's Guggenheim studies and desert clamshells. The Forties Future is pure nostalgia now — like 40's films.

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At this moment, all over the country, the future is being repealed. Two reversals of time and taste have been sitting on my desk, prompting not very profound thoughts and a small, distinct sense of perverse pleasure. Pleasure, because I have always championed the honor of the past against its rape by the future, and perverse, because my single consistency appears to be running against the tide of accepted, platitudinous assumptions about what is good and bad, or in and out of fashion.

The first of these items is from Casselton, N.D. It consists of before and after pictures of the Casselton State Bank. One view shows a typical, late 19th-century, small-town, main-street building of arcaded red brick; the other shows the same building refaced with a "modern" front. For years, one could reliably conclude that the old building was "before," and the modernized building was "after." Not so now. Shuffle the pictures. "Before" is the refaced 1959 version, when the bank embraced, in its own words, "the Space Age and the modernistic style." "After" is the restoration of the original facade, in 1979, when the bank was remodeled again. This time the "modernistic" front was stripped off and the handsome old brickwork that had been covered over was revealed and restored. The bank has come full circle — from its modestly stylish, nicely detailed, Sullivanesque vernacular of the 19th century, through the faceless anonymity of the Great Manufacturer's Coverup of the 1950's and 60's, to the blinding rediscovery of its institutional roots and architectural history today.

If the Casselton Bank's rehabilitation is a tribute to the past, those postwar remodelings were a tribute to the hard sell. The advertising pages of the architectural journals were full of before-and-after advertisements by Kawneer, Johns Mansville, and other instruments of destruction of the Main Streets of America. This was the kind of modernization that gave modern architecture a bad name. You, too, went the four-color message, can update your old, outmoded, stubbornly unmodern Victorian storefront or other honest and interesting bit of Americana by covering it with truly nondescript panels sold and applied by the shoddy, characterless and highly profitable mile. "But before is better," I used to object silently and angrily to the glossy pages. "But after is progress," said the text. Progress — constantly invoked in those days for architectural sabotage and bulldozer demolition — should have sued.

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No one pretends to know what progress is anymore, or whether the conventionally accepted premise of change for the better means looking forward or backward. A much more provocative before-and-after sequence is of a building in Manchester, Conn., remodeled by Allan Greenberg. The before picture is of a supermarket — one of those suburban shopping-center boxes with an asymmetrical glass facade and a cantilevered roof canopy. Without its weekly-special signs, it bears an uncanny resemblance to some examples of Italian modernism in the 1930's. In the after view, the supermarket has become the State of Connecticut Superior Court Building. Same box, different facade: a pedimented entrance and arched windows in a brick front, with impressive stone quoins and courses. Inside, there is a marble-paneled

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