Anyone Dig the Art of Building?
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
New York Times (1923-Current file); Apr 11, 1971; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. D26

Architecture

Anyone Dig the Art of Building?

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

I WISH people would stop asking me what my favorite buildings are. I have favorites, because I believe quite passionately in the elegance and beauty of an appropriate solution to a problem. Quality, while almost a lost art, is never obsolete. The new false gods of cheapness and expendability bring more problems than they solve. Excellence always has, and always will, ennoble man and his surroundings if it is properly combined with a sympathetic involvement with the human condition.

But I am not that wildly attached to my favorite buildings, even though I will champion the new ones or fight for the old ones—to the death, naturally. I do not think it really matters very much what my personal favorites are, except as they illuminate principles of design and execution useful and essential to the collective spirit that we call society. For irreplaceable examples of that spirit I will do real battle. It has been too long ignored, with increasingly disastrous human consequences.

The reason the question turns me off is because it demonstrates such a profound misunderstanding of what architecture in the 1970's is all about. There is a tragic lag from the historical definition of architecture to the definition and comprehension of the art of building today. That lag can defeat us in the search for a better environment.

The problem is as basic as the definition of the word architecture. The history of architecture has been taught as a progression of monuments. Thank God for them. Without them, we would have a hard time claiming a civilization. As a consequence, however, most of us think of architecture as a series of isolated great structures, related only by style, country or sequence in time, which are the historian's tools for order and classification. They have little to do with the building of the real world, of which masterpieces are such a small part and "non-architecture" is such a large part, for very tangible better or worse. I find myself talking about that world to people who are thinking about monuments, with a disturbing communications gap.

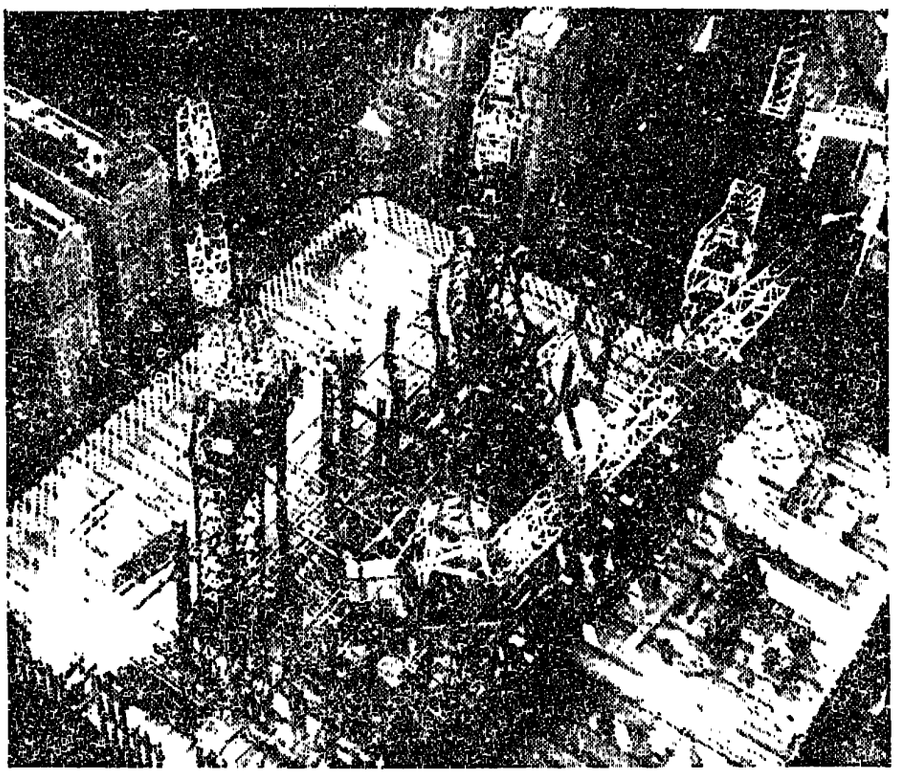
Architecture is the art and science of building the entire man-made environment, in terms of the way it works as much as the way it looks, and like everything else it is in a state of metamorphosis and revolution.

If you follow this corner you know that the subject is only occasionally the consideration of a building as a work of art. I am not suggesting that works of architectural art are obsolete. That would be ludicrous. So please, no indignant letters. The point is that we are in the midst of an extremely important shift in emphasis, in the perception and consideration of the critical relationships between a building and its surroundings and the people who use it or are affected by it, with emphasis on effect.

The effect can be salutary or catastrophic; it can even have a chain reaction over a large area. It can help shape or destroy anything from a neighborhood to a society. That makes architecture, correctly understood and practiced, almost frighteningly important. And it is.

The architecture critic is dealing only tangentially with the production of beautiful buildings. What counts overwhelmingly today are the multiple ways any building serves a very complex and sophisticated set of environmental needs. What is it part of? How does it work? How does it relate to what is around it? How does it satisfy the needs of men and society as well as the needs of the client? How does it fit into the larger organism, the community? What does it add to, or subtract from, the quality of life?

In these terms, even a very beautiful building can be very bad architecture. And what Robert Venturi has indelibly dubbed the "dumb and ordinary" building may serve cheerfully and well. It is a matter of measuring by the priorities and values that a critically changing world not only requires, but demands. We have not, until recently, subjected architecture to this yardstick, and that is in some part responsible for our environmental debacle.



Garth Huxtable

The World Trade Center—the second tower seen from the top of the first
"Gleaming like new-minted money—the architecture of power"

The new architecture is a humanistic equation for which creative and qualitative standards are absolutely essential. I part company with those who find it intellectually fashionable to jettison these standards for a kind of cosmic sociology. The results of the lack of qualitative standards are all too clear in the junk around us. Creative poverty has a lot to do with poverty of the spirit, which is a direct by-product of poverty of the environment. The architect has a lot to answer for.

So has the client, the administrator, the banker, the lawmaker and a host of others. But spare me those letters about how economics, law, zoning and rent control are the true determinants of our environment. Appalling results are not justified by fingering the faulty machinery that cranks them out. Every one of these institutions is being questioned today, along with a lot of other institutions as well.

Like every profession, architecture is indulging in considerable soul searching and self flagellation with social issues. It is groping toward a redetermination of purpose and practice in a revolutionary period that has left conventional practice behind because it provides no answers — or the wrong answers — to environmental questions.

Our cities are polarized. Architecturally, they consist of formless masses or tremendous statements. We build the impressive, overtly costly behemoths of the affluent commercial society while abondoned housing, without replacement, turns into architectural and sociological disaster by the mile. Building is for the rich. Think about that. In New York, the towers of the mammoth World Trade Center rise aggressively over everything else, gleaming like new-minted money—the architecture of power. But what is built for ordinary people and ordinary purposes, like a place to live or the pursuit of happiness?

These are the complex issues of architecture today. They were the ones left unexplored by a convocation of the country's leading urban writers brought together last week at Harriman, New York, by the Columbia School of Journalism and the American Institute of Architects.

It was, generally, an excellent meeting. But although the subject was "Rebuilding America, the Next National Priority," only two speakers, a white architect from Baltimore, Archibald Rogers, and a black architect from Watts, Eugene Brooks, addressed themselves to the difficult subject of the art of rebuilding it. One spoke on the level of ideas, the other as an advocacy planner in the ghetto. Both asserted the need for new institutions; both were talking about a new breed of professionals.

Rogers called for a reversal of traditional architectural concepts. He spoke of the need for "upgrading" the "architectural skeleton," or the physical network of neighborhood and regional functions, as a flexible framework for societal change. He advocated the "downgrading" of the "architectural flesh," or the individual building, as no longer of unchallenged, isolated primacy. It should be noted that he neither mentioned nor meant downgrading of architectural standards. Brooks spoke of the training of new skills in urban workshops for the challenge of inner city design.

Both made it clear that sensitive response to human, environmental and community needs, on the highest creative level, is the true art of architecture today. It cannot be achieved without a great deal of institutional and attitudinal reform. But an unusually well informed and concerned group of journalists obviously equated these ideas with unreality. It was a clear demonstration of the architecture gap. It had better be bridged, or no resources can help the city or urban man. We will continue to build instant physical and spiritual slums.