ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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It's Stylish, But Is It Art – Or Spinach?

Oh taste, oh fashion, can thy name be architecture? Well, yes. Architecture follows the whims of style and change more than any of us who have been taught to believe in building as an act of timeless truth and enduring art would want to admit. Fashion is spinach, and so, alas, is a lot of construction. Much of it belongs in Women's Wear Daily rather than in the professional press.

The fact is that people want to be fashionable, whether they are buying clothes, cars or corporate headquarters. Chiefly, they want something that is impressive and different, and how that difference is established is a matter of client taste and architect sophistication, from flashy to far-out. The truth is that architecture can be as transiently trendy as any other consumer product. A building is just a bigger package, and it takes up more of the view. So much for enduring values.

Let us take the example of Stamford, Conn. In the 1960's, Stamford was a corporate comer; businesses fleeing the city looked on Stamford and found it good. Buildings and the tax base rose rapidly. The approach was newness, boldness, stylishness — a kind of venture architecture.

Among those who shaped the new Stamford image was Victor Bisharat. Over a period of years Mr. Bisharat sired tapered towers, space-age saucers and stacked, mirrored boxes. His buildings were, and are, inescapable. This observer, writing of an early, energetic crop in 1966, thought they were spinach.

Mr. Bisharat was quoted at that time. He described the striped and sloping walls of a CBS laboratory as "symbolizing the upsurge of the creative force in research, reaching for the sky with questing fingers." This reviewer's response was that the CBS and General Time buildings "seemed more like sticky fingers reaching for Wright and Saarinen." Mr. Bisharat was not at all pleased by the observation. The letter that came by return mail was aggrieved. Questing or sticky, he clearly felt that his own fingers had a stylish grip on the future.

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Well, the future was yesterday, and today Mr. Bisharat has regrets. In fact, he has renounced his earlier work. His mea culpa appeared recently in the real estate pages of this newspaper, and I quote from the article. "I hate how it all looks," he said in a recent interview. "I try to block it all out of my mind. I even look the other way when I go by on the highway." Funny, that's the way I felt a decade and a half ago.

But while confession may be good for the soul, it doesn't do Stamford much good. Dated buildings can't, like out-of-style clothing, be packed off to a thrift or resale shop. Mr.

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Bisharat must just be patient; the failed future has a way of coming back as nostalgia and architectural dissertations. Anything so hopelessly out as those Stamford gymnastics is bound to come back in. It won't happen as quickly as the Women's Wear Daily in-and-out lists, but the taste for kitsch is escalating. Fashion cycles apply to architecture as well as to more ephemeral things.

What is in right now with architects and developers, according to the same real estate article, are "old mill motifs ... that evoke a village setting." Architects who were reaching for the sky in the 1960's are now reaching for the past. This is the new "contextualism," which means that the fashion today is for structures designed to blend with their surroundings, rather than to punch them in the solar plexus, using motifs and references extracted from the local building idiom.

That sounds just fine. But I wish that someone would explain why something that is meant to evoke the spirit of a particular place looks exactly the same everywhere. Exposed brick and wood and hanging plants and real or ersatz Victoriana have spread coast to coast, a trend skewered neatly by Calvin Trillin in The New Yorker. The candle and specialty shops with arch names, selling what the British call up-goods (trendy and costly) have been immortalized in Joseph Epstein's American Scholar piece, "Boutique America." Quiche is the new American apple pie. If Stamford was architectural spinach, this is spinach salad.

Architects may vow fealty to lasting values, but they are terribly susceptible to passing styles. In the 50's and 60's, there was Brutalism, which looked very much the way it sounds — a macho flexing of architectural muscles in reinforced concrete, with fiercely articulated joints and great rough slabs — a kind of pumping-iron style. In the later 60's and 70's, Brutalism was followed by High Tech — a style that emphasized sleek glass, aluminum or porcelain enamel panel skins held taut and flat in metal frames with mechanical details celebrating a refined technology.

There is no really convincing esthetic or structural logic to explain the shift from one to the other. The fact is that most jobs can be done both ways. But each style has its distinctive "look," and when it is a "new look" it sweeps the scene the way Dior's New Look swept fashion in the 40's. One can date a building by its stylistic idiosyncrasies almost the way one can tell a year by the hemline.

There are always examples, or models, of course, to start things off; architecture is a profession of avid architect-watchers, and some have better antennas than others. The sources of Brutalism are in Le Corbusier; High Tech became associated with the early buildings of James Stirling, and bloomed later in other British work, like that of Norman Foster. Its most symbolic expression is Paris's Beaubourg. If one digs, there is always a chain of influences to be found. Every style gets knocked off in its own time, so that the avant-garde inevitably moves on. Once the innovators have worked out the structural-esthetic concepts the copiers simply ape the surface mannerisms.

The General Telephone and Electronics building, right, and the General Time building, below right, both in Stamford, Conn., designed in the 1960's. At left, Detroit's Center for Creative Studies designed by William Kessler and Associates. "One can date a building almost the way one can tell a year by the hemline."

Fashions in building have some interesting side effects. When Brutalism was at its height, supply and demand made concrete scarce and expensive. When the same problems arose with the availability of High Tech components, delays in fabrication and construction sent building costs up — often where the escalation was least needed, as in a New Jersey justice center.

The most obvious explanation of the ease with which styles are donned and shed in this country is that American architecture is essentially packaged building. Packaging is really presentation; it stresses appearance and the outer wrapper. Since ours is a media, consumer, and promotional society, it is not surprising that architectural packaging has also become a national specialty, taking precedence over underlying structure and program.

Oddly enough, this is both the strength and the weakness of American architecture today. It downgrades the meaning of architecture as a high and complex art of related and expressive structure and space, at the same time that it raises the design of the skin, or wrapping, to a high art form of its own. Observers from other parts of the world are fascinated by the extraordinary skill and sheer beauty with which this packaging is often done.

Some practitioners, like the Venturis, offer elaborate theses and philosophical explanations for the packaging process. Others, like Philip Johnson, have simply jettisoned all traditional apologia. Office buildings, after all, are just a package of floor space, and for many of today's building types, conceptual rationales become strained. For Johnson, who has the sharpest antenna in the business, the fun of the game is the swift passage from one idea, and effect, to another.

There have always been styles, of course; the history of art is the history of styles. Their sequence is the catechism of scholars. But past styles endured for a century, not for a decade or two; their forms had more lasting cultural weight in terms of the society that produced them. Styles have never been so transient and insubstantial as they are today, so geared to novelty, publicity and turnover, so quickly discarded for something new.

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It can be argued, correctly, that the 20th century has moved faster than any other; that we are crowded by changes in technology and taste that require continuing experimentation and escalating sensations and satisfactions. Those same forces have produced more building than ever before in history. For reasons that are the province of economists and cultural experts, there is also the highest spinach index in history.

It is the fashion now to treat all of this production as a pluralist and populist phenomenon. That is true, as far as it goes. But the most disturbing fashion, and the only position of any current intellectual standing, is the denial of the existence of good and bad, calling it simply a matter of changing needs and preferences. That evades the issue of what, if anything, is constant, universal, enduring or valuable about our buildings, or for that matter, any buildings, in any time or place. It fails to come to terms with the fact of a specific and characteristic architectural expression in the 20th century, and any understanding of the qualities of excellence, originality and uniqueness that distinguish the results. It ignores the strength and identity of our age. That is style as art. ■

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