

Architecture

All of the Arts but Architecture

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ATLANTA.

THE dedication of the new Memorial Arts Center here raises issues that will have to be faced, not only in Atlanta, but in every city that has succumbed to the cultural center epidemic. Atlanta is one of the first communities to complete its version of the new breed of omnibus arts center of the 60's — the ambitious cultural catchall meant to serve a complete range of performing and visual arts with facilities of elaborate professionalism and sometimes stultifying nobility.

In some communities, the new theaters and museums are obviously needed. But assuming that creativity and the audience for it are bottomless, an assumption totally without validity, there is still the perpetual care and feeding of these expensive, money-eating plants and the nagging matter of what will keep them filled when they are done.

The current justification for putting all of one's cultural eggs into one monumental basket seems to be a childlike confusion of the monument with the product, of the container with the contained. The building itself is seen as a proclamation of the cultural virtues of the community. As some justification for this, it is a legitimate mark of culture for a community to want the enrichment of monumental architecture in an era when architecture has become a catalogue selection of manufacturers' substitutes for it and public sculpture has been supplanted by the Holiday Inn sign. This makes it all the sadder to see the best intentions go awry.

It is significant that most of the centers seem to be going awry in the same way. To anyone getting the model photos and releases, they look as if a cultural center computer had designed them all. The computer has been programmed with everything anyone else has done, and with the classical nostalgia of an older generation that provides the money and sponsorship for the centers and is looking for a "palatable" modern style; something that is not "too modern" and reminds them of conventionally admired effects of grandeur, measured by traditional, unchanging standards of material and appearance.

This is, of course, a guaranteed way of missing the grandeur of our times — bold, rough, sometimes brutal,

technologically marvelous, genuinely expressive of an age that is not smooth or classical at all. It has its own beauty, its own magnificence, as does the vital and troubled era in which we live. This moment in time is a unique point in every kind of history, including art history. In building for it, a miss is as good as a mile.

The reason for singling out the Atlanta Arts Center as a case history is that it is complete and it is typical. This is not to hold it up as undeserving of respect. One respects the conscientious, intelligent, wellmeaning people who work hard to make a dream come true. One simply questions the dream.

In the case of Atlanta, the result is representative of the current school of cultural center thought and design. It is the product of a community marked by gentility and courage. Atlanta lost 122 of its top cultural patrons in a tragic plane crash six years ago as a chartered art tour flight left Paris for home; the Center is a memorial to them. The city has not only picked up the pieces and developed new leadership, but it is clear to any visitor that there is a quality of mind and heart that few other communities can match.

The design process, however, offers a certain unhappy enlightenment that is applicable to almost any other case history one might care to choose. Atlanta decided on a monumental box to contain its High Museum of Art, the Symphony Guild, the Municipal Theater for drama, opera and ballet and the Atlanta School of Art. (They have it; the structure is 232 feet wide

by 294 feet long and 50 feet high and covers six acres of Peachtree Street.)

Because the High Museum was already on the site and was to be incorporated into the new structure, the architects, Toombs, Amisano and Wells, associated with Stevens and Wilkinson, decided to bridge the existing building with giant trusses, from which other parts of the structure would be hung. This was a strong engineering concept that set the building's esthetics, as well. But the estimates came in too high.

There was a model and rendering of the scheme, and the sponsors liked some of the surface effects — what appeared, for example, as white exterior walls. They were interested in retaining the effects that pleased them even when the structural rationale was gone and change was indicated.

For financial reasons and pressured by sponsorial taste, a daring engineering solution became solid concrete walls — white walls. The transition was not accompanied by any understanding on the part of the patrons of the esthetic of modern concrete construction and it was gradually disguised, paneled and painted for a more acceptable "classical look."

One donor saw a newspaper photograph of the Atlanta Stadium with its handsome, exposed concrete supports and mistook it for the Arts Center, reading the supports as an enclosing colonnade. He refused to give up that image, and since he contributed a substantial part of the \$13-million cost, after a while the building got the

colonnade. It holds up nothing except exterior lights but it does provide a pleasant promenade.

Ludicrous? The same thing is going on everywhere. These curious, backward-looking standards are being set and the debilitating compromises are being made by architects wherever cultural centers are going up. The design decisions are controlled by a respected and powerful generation that is completely innocent of the architecture of today. The last art that is being encouraged is the art of architecture.

The result is Caricature Classicism or Running Scared Modern. Then, having gotten a building signifying little except tasteful pomposity, the question still waits of what will be done with it in operation. It can be successful as a showcase of popular performances of a largely non-innovative character for a wide audience, with an occasional arts festival thrown in. In that respect, it does bring a lot of some kind of art to a lot of people. But art is based on creativity, and that is usually going on somewhere else.

The Atlanta Center hopes specifically for a lively interaction of the arts that have been housed together. The greatest chance of that happening may be through the students in the art school, who could, if their responses in other schools are any indication, tear the carefully programmed place apart.

The only certainty is that there will be a large operating deficit every year that must be met by the unending commitment of the business community and annual fund-

raising campaigns. Every one of the new centers will have to face the realities of continuing deficit financing on a very large scale.

It seems quite obvious that when all of the resources for culture are being channeled into one monumental effort that can absorb more than is ever available, the chance diminishes for support of other, non-affiliated, more experimental, non-Establishment arts. These enterprises never break even. All they do is provide the talent, style, and new forms and meanings that are what culture is all about.

In Atlanta, for example, there is Theater Atlanta; known for its high calibre, free-ranging productions. It has just put on a wonderfully sharp, witty, irreverent, biting and pertinent revue, a political satire called "Red; White and Maddox." (If you didn't expect it in Atlanta, you don't know Atlanta.) The show nearly didn't open. There were no funds. They were raised, at the last minute and only as stopgap, by radio appeal. Now Theater Atlanta is being evicted for arrears in its \$50,000 rent, reckoned from \$15,000 to \$30,000 by the owner. Its season is over before it has started.

The question that is not being asked or answered anywhere is whether the encouragement of culture has not been sadly confused with its memorialization. Will the expensive new Establishment showcases subsidize the arts that are most creative or pull the rug out from under them? There are signs of the latter already.



The Atlanta Memorial Arts Center, one of the new breed of omnibus cultural centers of the 60's
The classical taste of an older generation looking for a palatable modern style

William F. Diehl for The New York Times