The Case for Chaos
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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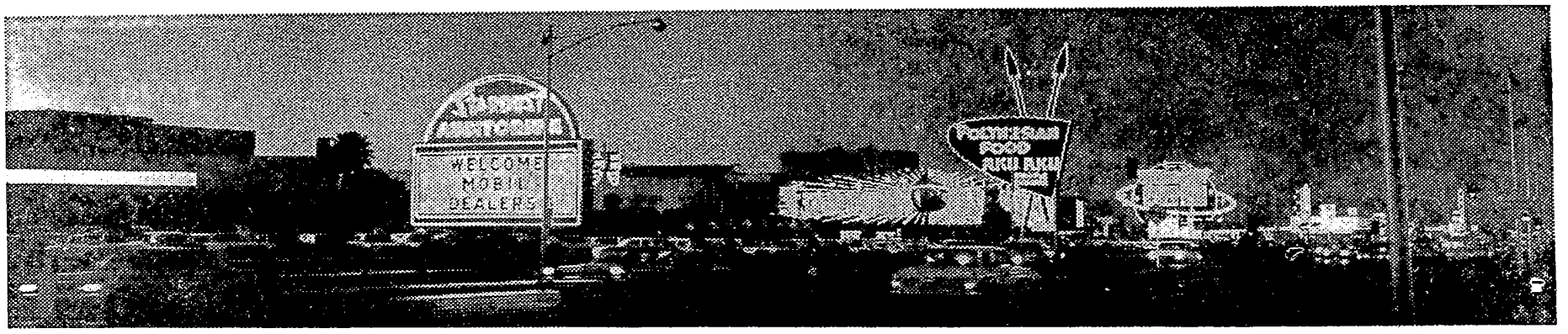

The Strip at Las Vegas, today's substitute for the pilgrimage to Palladian villas

Architecture

The Case for Chaos

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

JUST when the bandwagon gets rolling to neat up the environment, along comes the case for chaos. To a public learning to look at its surroundings critically and seeing the physical effects of the confusions and vulgarities of modern life, the drive for order and elegance seems an irreproachable cause. Moreover, it has been the cause of concerned architects, planners and intellectuals representing the avant garde of social and esthetic thought for the past 50 years.

O. K. Turn it upside down. Like everything else today. And you have the social, esthetic and intellectual attitudes of the latest avant garde: the case for chaos.

One can react in two ways. The first is to express indignation and horror at the perverseness of such an idea. Call it backsliding nihilism, part of a currently fashionable denial of existing standards and values. Or it is possible to look at it carefully and find some eye-opening observations on the urban scene. The eyes of the observers (youthful, of course) are being used with a surprising historical objectivity. At the same time, they are examining the phenomena of the present, not with the sweeping a priori attitudes of condemnation that have become pious clichés, but with a cool, analytical acuity.

In writing about this, we are not wasting your time on abstruse architectural theory. Today's theory is tomorrow's practice. With the speedup characteristic of our age, it has a way of becoming today's practice. Any thinking, feeling citizen involved with his environment in this latter part of the 20th century (that's right — latter — with all the "projections" to the once awesomely remote year 2000 no more than comfortable middle age for the present generation) must know the wave of the future or succumb to the undertow of the past. Another generation gap.

The new theorists point out that there are sound sociological, technical and practical explanations for the look of today's world, like it or not. We are asked to examine the mess again. They claim that we can deal with the chaotic environment in constructive and even creative ways by admitting its conflicts, analyzing its components and recognizing the purposes they serve and the contributions they make to our way of life.

Is chaos really so chaotic, they ask? Does it not contain valuable elements of vitality and variety, complexity and contrast? Can we not learn from the organically evolving environment? What about planning by adaptive processes? Is there an esthetic of the Pop landscape? From this point on, you may have your choice of embracing chaos on any step of the scale from an instructive demonstration of contemporary realities to great art form, depending on the length of your hair.

Chaos may even contain an order of its own, we are told. It is an order of "inclusion" and "the difficult whole," rather than an order of "exclusion," or "rejection," which has been the teaching and operation of modern architecture to date. It offers a pluralistic esthetic of "both and" rather than the selective "either-or" decisions enforced by orthodox architectural theory. This is a far more complex approach to the environment than we have been taught to take.

Rejection or exclusion has been a basic tenet of the modern movement. Its pioneers preached against the chaos of the contemporary environment with the same breath in which they called for a new architecture. If they could not eliminate the setting, they turned their backs on it. They were fighting for release from an accretion of smothering, pseudo-arty Victorian clutter and to them slob city and the landscape of the superhighway were just updated versions of the old enemy. It has now become terribly clear that they rejected too much. There are lessons of sterility wherever their reductive principles have been scrupulously carried out. That prescription for order didn't work. The present search for order calls for acceptance of the irreconcilables of our complex existences, new values and a new vision.

This is fascinating, heady speculation and the best of it is to be found in a slim book called "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture," by Robert Venturi, published in 1966 by the Museum of Modern Art in association with the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts.

Mr. Venturi is the guru of chaos. The book is, as he calls it, a gentle manifesto. Its illustrations of great buildings of the past are rich demonstrations of ambiguity and complexity. Where the early modern architect turned to the simplicities of the anonymous and the primitive, this generation turns to the most sophisticated examples of history. In the present, Mr. Venturi finds Roadtown, U.S.A. and the Supermarket-Supermotel - Superhighway landscape, commonly inveighed against in the primers of a more beautiful America, exhilarating esthetic experiences. He takes his Yale students to Las Vegas, much as an earlier generation made pilgrimages to Palladian villas.

He teaches a new scale created by the automobile and a new, bold architecture of communication grasped by the car in motion. The new architecture is the little building and the big sign on Route 66.

Learning from Pop art, the conventional is accepted and given character by change of emphasis and context; the "valid and vivid" banalities, that are so much the reality of the American scene, are the new icons. Mr. Venturi is witty, brilliant and challenging; for a short course read "Learning from Las Vegas," written with Denise Scott Brown, in the March 1968 Architectural Forum.

All right. You don't buy it. Brought up on America the Beautiful you find Pop landscape an affront. Reyner Banham, in lively critical essays, may embrace the fluorescent plastic environment but you still suffer vertigo in motels. Everyone to his own lifestyle. No significant proportion of Yale architecture graduates has moved to Las Vegas. And even if it is doctrine that every son reject the values of his father, there are circumstances in which the elements of the Pop landscape become outrage. There is always a dangerous tendency for reason and judgement to abdicate to fashionable ideas.

Still, one cannot sell this strong-stomached generation short. Quite aside from the controversial Pop art aspects of the theory and the patent dangers of dogma, it is clear that a whole generation is rediscovering the umbrella. It is not just apotheosizing the Strip. It is bringing back into building and vision a challenging richness and complexity that has been lost through the ritual purification of the modernists.

At present, as in all beginnings, the new doctrine is being pushed too hard to prove the point. In practice, it shows every sign of becoming a codified set of mannerisms. Its more arcane applications must be explained to the non-initiate, and that introduces the problem of the architect, like the artist, being reduced to talking to himself. Orthodox modernism could turn into orthodox ambiguity.

The very real promise, however, is of an architecture of adaptation and accommodation, two words that have been taboo in the modern movement. It would embrace existing contradictory realities, systems and programs, the complexities and conflicts of modern life, the growth and changes in physical form, taste and needs. It would, in a sense, roll with the punches.

Another, even gentler cultural guru of our time than Mr. Venturi, August Heckscher, has made the telling point that the doctrine of rationalism proves inadequate in times of upheaval. "Such inner peace as men gain must represent a tension among contradictions and uncertainties." This is true, say the rebels against orthodox modernism, of outer order, as well. The revolution is dead. Long live the revolution.