

STATE OF THE ARTS: ARCHITECTURE

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Classicism in a Contemporary Context

The art of architecture is alive and well; it is neither in the doldrums, nor retreating into the neo-conservatism of the new esthetic right, nor suffering from creative block. If its practitioners seem to be subject to fits of pettiness and pique, that might most charitably be attributed to growing pains as modern architecture matures and moves toward a more complex style, or styles, and the beliefs and values of orthodox modernism collapse. The art of building at this moment is full of angst and uncertainty. But it is also showing all the signs of a very lively art in a provocative period of development and change. It is easy to believe that a significant chapter is being written in its history.

Architecture-at-a-crossroads has become a favorite theme of the popular cultural press; the state-of-the-art articles are advertised interchangeably as a crisis or a breakthrough. Actually, practice at the level where styles are set and trends are put in motion has been moving away for some time now from the strict, single-line, reductivist esthetic that the world has come to know as modern architecture. This has been accompanied by the regrets and alarms of those who have been dedicated to that esthetic for the last half-century, and the hosannas of those who were neither born into, nor a practicing part of, the modernist revolution.

In this atmosphere of ferment and change, there is an explosion, not only of new building, but of exhibitions, books and professional journals — suave, glossy publications with a heavy emphasis on the new theories and practice of architectural design and the rediscovery of periods and styles long out of favor with the modernists. Architecture and planning schools are being restructured in a way undreamed of in the 1960's; policies and curricula are being painfully reshaped for the 80's. The excitement everywhere is esthetic and polemical; and the emphasis is on the art of building, as much or more than the act of building, or even with the building itself. In those rare cases where theory and practice meet, the results are expansively published in the international press.

There is absolutely no way to view the architecture of the 80's as static, reactionary or out-of-steam. Even the rediscovery of history — so long outlawed by the modernists — is infused with the spirit of radical change. The "retreat" to the past is either a total break with modernism, or a new and unprecedented kind of eclecticism. This is taking the form of a return to a literal, impeccable classicism, as in the work of Alan Greenberg, its forms updated by subtle twists of use and meaning. Or it can draw on history and the vernacular for very personal and broad manipulations in a contemporary context. The Venturis, for example, have established the canons of pop culture as a system of signs and symbols which they translate into refined details. Michael Graves organizes a historical stream of consciousness into buildings that can be viewed as fantasies or follies, depending upon one's hangups about what a building should look like. His tend to have small, square windows, oversized keystones and totemic volutes, colored Pompeian red and green.

Carrying conservatism full circle to radicalism, the brothers Leon and Robert Krier have renounced the forms, materials and construction methods of modern society to embrace traditional, pre-industrial building types and urban configurations. Their drawings, which are far more visionary than nostalgic, are as exquisite as they are unsettling, and their influence is international. In the work of the Italian architect Aldo Rossi, the familiar can become sinister, calling up totalitarian and surrealist images. When traditional or historical references are distilled to their most abstract essence they are treated as "typologies," or ideal solutions, in the projects of such architects and teachers as Giorgio Silvetti, Diana Agrest and Lauretta Vinciarelli, or the poetic and allegorical exercises of John Hejduk. Each group has its devout and faithful followers, who are highly critical of all the rest.

But make no mistake — not all of this activity moves the art of building onward and upward. Architecture is not escaping the dead ends, the enchantment with trivia, the narrow, narcissistic vision of an incompletely educated generation that has invaded other arts. An art in turmoil

Continued on Page 26