The Black Man and His Architecture
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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IT becomes increasingly evident that there are as many facets of opinion in the black community as there are in the white community and that no one is going to have a very easy time tying them together in a neat ribbon labeled black power—either to wield, from the community end, or to use, from the government end. The biggest stumbling block for public agencies and programs is finding who speaks for whom, and who is representative of what, as if some such magic formula would unlock the answer to the problems of the black and the poor.

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An extremely interesting small show currently on view at the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (20 West 40 Street) not only makes the multi-voiced aspect of black society apparent, but also offers some valuable information on the subject of the minority professional and his community role. The exhibition, which will run to May 20, is called "The Black Man and His Architecture," and even the title is disputed by one participant.

The show consists of a series of statements of personal belief and philosophy of practice, illustrated with photographs of the work of 13 architects or architectural firms in the New York region. Two or three of those invited to exhibit under the auspices of the A.I.A. turned the opportunity down on a fairly flat anti-Establishment basis. But more accepted than declined, and the viewpoints represented range from militant manifesto to businesslike pragmatism.

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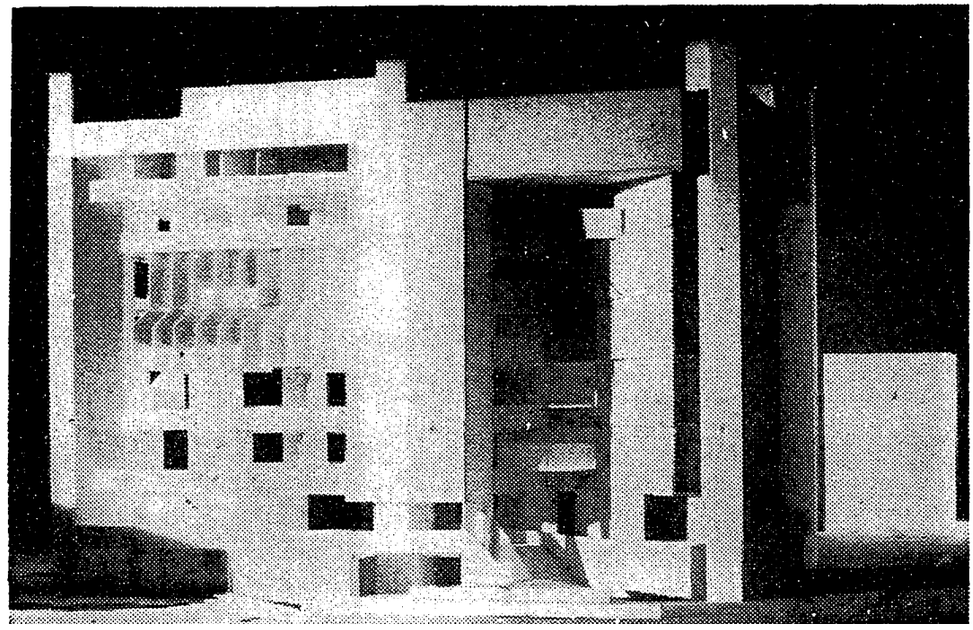
Although the work itself is diverse enough to include public projects, such as housing, and individual churches, libraries and apartments, there is, as yet, a shortage of the huge commissions turned out by the corporate-type architectural offices with the banker-industrialist-big-business client. The black architect is obviously in a state of significant, and critical, transition. He is suddenly in demand after years of token status. In the words of one man in the show, James Doman, he is being "catapulted into the mainstream of the American architectural profession."



Project for Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library, by Roger Glasgow.
"Black people in America have yet to build their world"

The work ranges from pedestrian to excellent, and that, curiously, is almost beside the point. What the exhibition offers, largely through the architects' statements, is not so much a scale to measure talent on, which is the way architecture shows are customarily organized, as a short course on the diversity, quality and kind of thought among black practitioners in one of the most critical professional fields today.

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The need for black architects is, in itself, a professional crisis. In the matter of the urban environment—that tragic condition compounded of inequity and exploitation that is home to 80 percent of Americans now, living in conditions from polluted luxury to ghetto slum—that need is desperate. As planners and builders turn to the environmental problems of the inner city and all of their social consequences (an environment the recent Earth Day observances and the reporting media set a record of sorts for ignoring) the necessity for architects and planners who operate from inner city knowledge rather than from the groves of academia is overwhelming.

But this is not merely a question of numbers. We have had black architects—a few. They have generally gone the road of white education geared to white standards and needs, fitting into, or bridging, the white community. Some still like this role. But schools, the A.I.A., new programs and even architects' offices are trying to train more black professionals, not in terms of use in the conventional white man's world, but to deal with the new clients—the government and the community—on a level of need the white man scarcely understands.

In New York, for example, the Architects Renewal Council in Harlem (ARCH), an all-black advocacy planning group of trained professionals, flushes out talents that would, in an earlier day, never have been found. These young people are started in neighborhood programs and sent on for professional degrees through grants and fellowships, some from the A.I.A.

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This is not enough, of course. The backlog of social, economic and educational repressions has made the gap almost unbridgeable between supply and demand. You find these youngsters now, in ghetto bootstrap programs in most major cities. In converted drafting rooms, they are producing working drawings for turning a few rat-infested tenements into habitable homes (with what investment money?), or they design vest-pocket parks, or tackle local visions of renewal. It is both a heartening, and a heartbreaking, effort. It is so very little, and there is so terribly much to be done.

The pressure of this knowledge of need and crisis is what makes the black architect a special man. He does not, and cannot, see himself as a white architect responding to accepted middle class markets and mores, and that is one reason an exhibition on this subject is neither patronizing nor artificial. It deals with something real—the conscience and artistry of the black man in the field of urbanism, where his blackness is tragically pertinent. It is equally pertinent to note that he can no more discard esthetics, or the art of design, than he can discard his skin, or he would not be an architect. But he recognizes its place in the complex act of building, and its special circumstances today, which must balance art with life.

In the show, he speaks with many voices. There is Barry Jackson, who delivers a manifesto of consciously poetic primitivism and sophisticated knowledge and exhibits a singularly sophisticated prefabricated house.

"Our black souls have come in the hulls of slave ships . . ." he writes. "Being black adds a specific dimension to life: the ability to spring beyond the clichés of our time . . . . We can dig at the soft white underbellies of those who have gone before us. Gore the old bulls and create a new social dynamic and the forms which will contain it. We know the disorder and chaos and can dismiss with no regret the myths that were never of our making."

"Architecture," he says, "is the rhetoric of the past, maintained in jargon in the 'slicks' and juries . . . . The Bauhaus wasn't ours, nor was Wright. There is no past for us, nothing to resist." He concludes, "There is a black challenge for a new America, 'full of the hope that the dark past has taught us.' We still have a frontier."

Roger Decourey Glasgow is far more pragmatic: "Our business is primarily no different than any other service business." He must make a profit, he says, to stay in business at all. He is less concerned with talk of frontiers than figuring out how to translate government legislation into community funds and turning them "into the realities of a physical project." His work, with a strong esthetic, is not pragmatic at all.

Leroy Tuckett calls himself an individualist first, a black architect second. "I judge myself more critically," he says, "than society judges me as a Black Architect."

But the black architect, says Harley Jones, must make an "agonizing" choice. Either he works for the "affluent few . . . because financially one must," or he "lends his technical design talents to solving the pressing problems of our own black community." To do so, he must develop unprecedented technical and political skills. More time is spent on these skills, the firm of Gindele and Johnson points out, and "less time to changing the shape of a roof."

With this the scope of the problem, asks ARCH, not at all rhetorically, "how do we get excited about firmness, commodity and delight?"

Even the title of the show is misleading, according to Bond, Johnson, Ryder and Associates, because it "implies that a few black architects practicing in an environment hostile to them, to their clients, and to their art, can produce an architecture expressive of a people . . . . Black people in America have yet to build their world."

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