ARCHITECTURE VIEW: REDISCOVERING CHICAGO ARCHITECTURE
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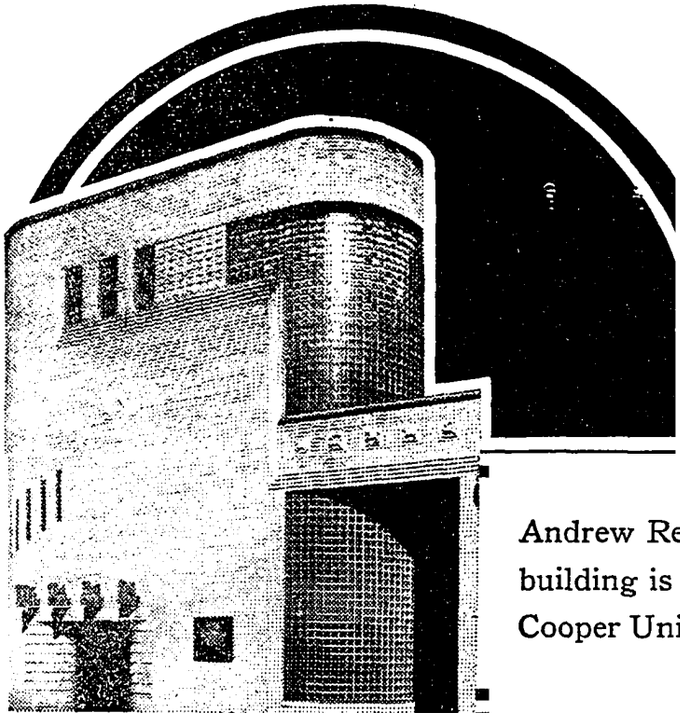

Andrew Rebori's apartment building is one of the finds in Cooper Union's show of "revisionist history."

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Rediscovering Chicago Architecture

The exhibition at Cooper Union called "Chicago Architects" is full of uncelebrated, quirky and sometimes dramatic buildings, most of which are unknown. There is only one example of a famous Chicago School "skyscraper"—D. H. Burnham and Co.'s curtain-walled Reliance Building, designed by Charles Atwood in 1894-95—and it is paired with the same architect's totally traditional Beaux Arts Hall of Fine Arts for the Columbian Exposition of 1893. Modern critics have lauded the former and ignored the latter.

This is, in fact, the point of the show. The two pictures are a deliberately loaded juxtaposition. The catalogue states immediately that "the organizers of this exhibit of Chicago architecture wish to pay tribute to all those architects who were passed over by the first generation of historians of modern architecture." And the subject matter consists of the work "left out" of orthodox accounts of the Chicago School and its role in the modern movement.

What we are dealing with, then, is revisionist history. As such, the show is both an iconographic feast and an exercise in provocative scholarship. And it is important at a time when serious revisionism is on the rise in assessments of the modern movement, and official theory nd history are being attacked on all sides.

The aim of the sponsoring Chicago architects—Laurence Booth, Stuart E. Cohen, Stanley Tigerman and Benjamin Weese—reinforced by Stuart Cohen's knowledegable catalogue, is to explode and expand the doctrinaire view of the Chicago contribution. That view, canonized by Sigfried Giedion, divides Chicago architecture into two schizophrenic parts: the small-scale, personal, domestic developments of Frank Lloyd Wright and the Prairie School, and the technological development of the structural frame and the tall building, known as the Chicago skyscraper. The palm of modernism was then supposed to be handed to Europe in the early years of the 20th century for the International Style, while Chicago languished and waited until the 1930's for Mies van der Rohe to revive its progressive structural tradition.

All that happened, if not exactly as recorded. No one disputes or denies Chicago's skyscraper contribution; the confirmed achievements and monuments of modern architecture are not being rejected or downgraded. But a lot of other things apparently happened as well—particularly in those supposed doldrum years—that have either gone unrecorded or been consciously suppressed because they did not fit into accepted theories or timetables.

"Chicago Architects" combines rediscovery and re-evaluation with irony and a bit of hubris. It is both history and polemics. There is the sound of an axe grinding quietly. But the material contains genuine implications for a broader, more objective understanding of modern architecture than the hygienically edited standard texts provide of what went on here and abroad. In fact, history and architecture may never be quite the same as this and similar rediscoveries unfold. We are finding a pluralism of ideals and styles that makes 20th-century architecture far more intricate and dramatic than doctrinaire modernism has allowed, as well as perceiving an American contribution and continuity that may prove to be increasingly significant.

"Chicago Architects" was organized as a response to a larger show of more traditional skyscraper-engineering emphasis, "One Hundred Years of Chicago Architecture," which will open at the Chicago Art Institute on May 1. Most of the work in this "countershow" does not begin from engineering considerations. Mr. Cohen, in his text, charcacterizes it as romantic rather than pragmatic in approach. The buildings are almost all intimate structures closely related to personal experience—houses, schools and churches rather than commercial construction, in a galaxy of styles.

Mr. Cohen also points out that it is quite logical for society to want different styles for its churches, museums, libraries and civic buildings than the style produced commercially by engineering and economic expediency, no matter how elegant that expression may become. This actual variety is a more accurate reflection of American culture than those isolated examples where a structural rationale has been promoted by modernist doctrine as the only "appropriate" solution.

But even the structural rationale can be romantic. George Fred Keck's remarkable "Crystal House"—all-glass with delicate metal trusses—built for the Chicago World's Fair in 1934, and Buckminster Fuller's original (Chicago-born) Dymaxion House of 1927 were both perfectly capable of being produced. They were simply romantic-technological visions whose time had not come. Immediate offshoots appeared in Bertrand Goldberg's mast-hung gas station and ice cream stand—precursors of Marina City's round-towered, world-of-tomorrow-look.

There are clearly traced lines presented here of International Style and Art Deco in Chicago in the 1920's and 30's, from Keck, Holabird and Root, Paul Schweikher, Barry Byrne and the Bowman brothers. (I found many of these in the research files of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the 1940's, and they are probably still there.) There are fascinating aberrations, such as the 1930's work of Andrew Rebori, which suggests both the Russian Constructivism of Constantin Melnikoff and the Parisian chic of Art Moderne. Early Shingle Style-Frank Lloyd Wright houses are selected as forerunners of the angular mannerisms of Harry Weese and Walter Netsch.

Specifically, what is dealt with here is ideology, as much as history. There is an increasingly recognized, profound ideological split between the structural-functional esthetic of the orthodox modernists and the "formal, spatial and consciously symbolic issues" that preoccupy a considerable group of young architects now. This is fueling a revival of eclecticism, not as conventional, academic borrowing, but as a means of image-making—and all is grist for the mill. This urge for style and symbolism has been minimally addressed by the historians of the modern movement.

That is why this kind of history so intrigues the present generation of practitioners; it is with a special eye that the past is being re-examined and, for better or worse, used in their own work. Today's eclecticism is a creative, cannibalistic combination of erudite nostalgia and extremely sophisticated esthetics. It needs revisionist history to feed on. The results are acutely artful exercises in cultural memory and personal value projection—but these are not simple or innocent times.

Nor is this a simple or innocent show; it contains much to debate. Image-makers are not going to supplant problem-solvers, and technology can be as elegant as symbols. Right now, history is being revised as a polemic for style, which is where we came in. But in this case the near-past is being raided rather than discarded. In the process, a great deal is being learned, much of value is being restored to the record, and a sound and necessary input is being gained. The rewriting of history is part of the continuing historical process.

"Chicago Architects" at Cooper Union, 7 East 7th Street, through March 22. Open 1 to 7 P.M. Monday through Friday; closed Saturday and Sunday.