Illuminating Show Of Breuer's Work
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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It is probably the most photogenic architecture in the world. It occasionally promises more than it delivers, and sometimes lives up to its promises. It is building as art—strong, stylish and preoccupied with form, rich in dramatic contrasts, proudly insistent on structure as sculpture—concepts treated with extreme suspicion by today's young cultural philosophers who prefer a Salvation Army esthetic.

This is the life work of Marcel Breuer, covering a half century, a retrospective on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art through Jan. 14, in models, photographs, furniture and structural mockups. It shows not just where he has been and is going, but where he is taking a considerable part of the civilized world.

Because whatever controversies rage about the art of that time, there is no argument about the architecture of the last 50 years. The status of modern architecture is assured both in the traditional terms of stylistic innovation and identity and by the less traditional measure of functional and technological breakthrough.

Partly by timing and partly by talent, Marcel Breuer is one of its leading figures. Born in Hungary, in 1902, he was a young man at the Bauhaus, that legendary incubator of "modernism" in Germany from 1919 to 1928. He carried the "revolution" with him to England in the nineteen-thirties and then to the United States in 1937, where he joined Walter Gropius at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

In the New England of the thirties and forties, a small, élite group knew his houses—shelter as simple, expressive geometry in fieldstone, glass and taut white surfaces, cantilevered over the countryside or precisely placed in fields and on hills, eloquent windows cut into walls with surgico-esthetic skill.

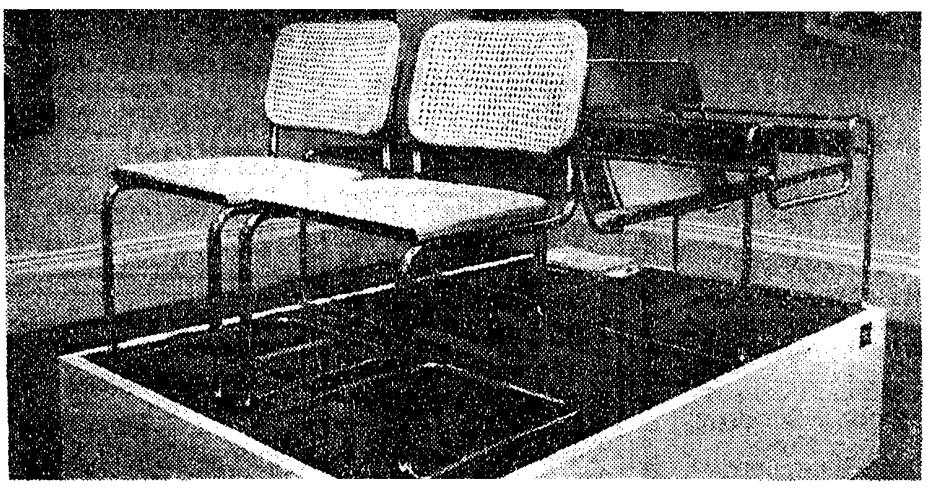
But in recent years, Breuer has had a lion's share of the big, prestigious commissions: UNESCO in Paris, I.B.M. in the south of France, H.U.D. headquarters in Washington, a new resort town in France, corporate headquarters in the United States.

The now-familiar Breuer trademarks give the show striking impact—the powerful, repetitive patterns of precast facades, the artfully sculptured columns, the Y-shaped buildings, the folded and fanned concrete, the elevated, sculptural shapes. They push reinforced concrete technology into the realm of abstract art.

Like so much innovation, these forms have inevitably been imitated and debased by others into contemporary clichés. But their thoughtful genesis as early as the nineteen-twenties and thirties is demonstrated in the exhibition, which devotes part of one room to beginnings. The model of the Civic Center of the Future, a London project of 1937 done with F. R. S. Yorke, is a kind of mother lode of future forms.

No one has ever surpassed Breuer's furniture, examples of which are included in this section. Now approaching the age that is some people's definition of antiques, these superb chairs of tubular steel, wood, canvas and cane are still in production, increasingly popular and timelessly elegant. They will continue to be "classics" when the punching-bag novelties of current camp chic are gone.

The New York Times/Jack Manning
Marcel Breuer and a mock-up of a column at St. John's Abbey and University, in Collegeville, Minn.



Chairs designed by Mr. Breuer during the 1920's

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As for the buildings, it is hard to judge them by photographs, particularly when they lend themselves so brainwashingly to a kind of theatrical, abstract imagery. They are just *too* photogenic. In my view, there are wide variations of quality and success.

New York's Whitney Museum, for example, which photographs less well than other buildings, continues to be—in spite of museological criticisms—an extremely rewarding structure.

A rare combination of strength and subtlety, it celebrates a small, awkward site and turns it into a rich variety of spatial, visual and tactile experiences. Details such as the stairs, with benches and views, warm wood and somber stone, are infinitely revealing of the architect's sensibilities.

In contrast, the I.B.M. Building in the south of France looks like a modern Parthenon. But once past its stunning exterior with its sweep of sculpured columns —one of which is mocked up at reduced scale in the show —the interiors are ambivalent, patchy and ill-related to the spectacular show. The Y-plan is so disorienting that finding one's way is like being given three blindfolded spins and told to pin the tail on the donkey.

Equally strong forms, however, have been spectacularly successful for churches, convents and chapels. Breuer's structural expressionism serves religious ends well.

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It is probably heresy to say so, but the philosophy of much of this work is a kind of structural and sculptural overreaching. One suspects that this is a dead-end, dangerous theory that soon reaches a perverse point of no return.

Certainly in lesser hands this is true—form becomes ornament, which is questionable and vulgar stuff. In at least one Breuer building not shown, it has led to dubious and off-putting gymnastics. But more often than not the architect pulled it off superbly well.

This is a timely and appropriate show. The Metropolitan has provided the kind of illuminating perspective that is achieved only by the active definition of a man's work and times. It is an act that illuminates the 20th century, as well.