

## NERVI IN—AND ON—NEW YORK

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

NO one carries the label "form-giver" or "taste-maker" more lightly than the noted Italian engineer, Pier Luigi Nervi. While others try on the title for size with appropriate statements to the press (this is an age when pedestals are built of newsprint), Nervi shrugs it off with just a touch of grim rejection. Although he speaks no English, he manages to make clear that he has little time to pose for publicity or posterity—a matter of some confusion, anyway—because he is more concerned with the work at hand.

The work at hand within the past fortnight was an inspection tour of the new bus terminal that he has designed for the Port of New York Authority on the Manhattan side of the George Washington Bridge. Since the "form-givers" have moved into the ambiguous public world of real and synthetic celebrities, the press was present. Nervi could not have been more gracious to reporters who were brave enough to follow his rapid, precarious course up massive roof trusses and through jungles of scaffolding, nor could he have given them much less information. His attention was devoted solely to the professional examination of the execution of the striking reinforced concrete structure that is the latest in the series that has established him as one of the significant architectural innovators of the age.

During his short New York visit, he spoke more freely in a private interview. Nervi is

now an astonishingly young, agile, modest, and productive 71. Although he courts anonymity and cultivates a kind of median grayness—conservative gray suit, dark tie, neutral complexion, white hair and a total lack of colorful eccentricities—his kind courteous face becomes firm and his eyes flash quietly when he speaks of the beliefs and principles that have guided his fifty-year career.

"Our way of life is changing. Its scale is becoming grander; its problems are greater. Its structural needs are expanding."

## Age of Technology

"We live in a superb technological age. We see so many magnificent, perfect technological things around us—airplanes, ships, bridges. Why shouldn't this same technology apply to the way we build? Our architecture must have a logical and reasonable technical base. It must be *reale, sostanziale, economica*. This is my faith—*la mia fiducia*." He adds simply, "*Insisto*; I am convinced of it."

Nervi responds to the dense and continuing construction of New York as to an engineer's vision of the new Paradise. His deepest respect is reserved for the structural prowess of the city's builders. To stand on a corner, something New Yorkers do with impatience, is an opportunity for Nervi to look down straight streets with huge buildings ranged endlessly ahead, for an "overwhelming impression of architecture in the mass." For him, this is the city's "*grand' effetto*."

New York is "*unica, enorme, potente*;" it must be judged *entiere*—as a whole. The rising bulk of the immense, controversial Pan Am Building is "an expression of power." Its facing of precast concrete aggregate sections is a technical departure that attracts him as a specialist, as does the similar system of window framing for the new Bankers Trust Building at Park Avenue and Forty-ninth Street. But his interest is not confined to the concrete in which he has pioneered so many revolutionary developments. The city's steel construction is "*una meraviglia*," an awe-inspiring achievement.

He fails to understand the average New Yorker's dislike of the "glass box." His praise for the Union Carbide and Seagram Buildings, Lever House, the Pepsi-Cola headquarters and the Chase Manhattan tower downtown is extravagant and professional. From the "structural point of view," they represent a "new building technology." Park Avenue is a street of wonders, "*una strada superba*," a phrase that has the proud, glittering sound of the avenue's new look.

## Structure Purity

For Nervi, engineering goes beyond structure to a kind of architectural morality. Only the most fit and economical means are to be used for the most suitable ends; there must be no muscle-flexing acrobatics, no virtuoso displays for their own sake. To exploit the new techniques for primarily esthetic effects flouts Nervi's moral and structural logic; it is like adding two and two to make five; bad arithmetic, bad technology, and bad architecture.

Asked about buildings in the news, like Wright's Guggenheim Museum or Saarinen's T. W. A. Terminal at New York International Airport, he remains silent. Reluctant to criticize his colleagues, he confines his comments to compliments on their talent and integrity. He sidesteps gracefully, "I am not an art critic." But his face darkens when he speaks about current architectural trends, and his general observations are more pointed than specific attack: "There is great danger at this moment. Architects everywhere are engaged in the furious pursuit of originality."

Would he consider it a fit climax for his career to design a great building for a great city—a Nervi skyscraper for New York? He raises his hands to ward off the presumptuous idea. "You have the finest builders in the world. You should be very proud."

He pauses, puzzled, to ask a characteristic question, "Why would you need me here?"



PURITY: "Assunta," bronze, 1921, by Georg Kolbe, in sculpture show at Gerson's.

contributes easily the two best paintings in the show. Elsewhere we have the angel children, the matron and the maid, "images" of today's ideals that show a respect for the commonplace and a love of the world.

## Anthology of Sculpture

The apparent purpose behind the exhibition, "Monumental Sculpture," at the Gerson Gallery, 41 East Fifty-seventh Street, is to illustrate the potentially important role to be played by sculpture in modern architecture, and specifically the need for free imaginative work to accentuate the visual impact of a structure. Variety of styles here proves that this can be done in many different ways, challenging builders to animate and humanize the Trappist austerity of the glass box.

Picasso's recent painted iron maenad should brighten up many a bleak foyer; Wotruba's cliff-like figures seem part of a wall already, and geometrical sculpture by André Bloc and by Emile Gilioli insists that free form can be vitally functional. However, none of this work absolutely demands an architectural setting for proper appreciation. The classic repose



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TOUR OF INSPECTION—Pier Luigi Nervi, the Italian engineer, photographed on the roof of his bus terminal now under construction for Port of New York Authority.