

# The Art of Architecture: The End of the Line

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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**T**HIS has been a depressing week for architectural projects, following a depressing month. It is a depressing time for architecture generally. There has never been more of it; the plans and proposals burst into print vying with each other for size, novelty and status. It has never been more important; it is the stuff with which our cities are being built and rebuilt for unprecedented sums on an unprecedented scale. And it is the culmination of a 20th-century revolution in structure and design based on profound philosophical considerations and technical miracles that should have produced, by any reasoning, one of the greatest periods in the history of the building art.

But a look around shows a distorted dream, a travesty of purpose, an abandonment of principles, a jazzy slide down the primrose path of fads, publicity, structural sensationalism, muzzy romanticism and dubious art for art's sake that has led to a vicious decline in architectural values and a corruption of architectural purpose.

### Pointless Vulgarly

It has also led to some of the worst and most offensive building ever produced, masquerading as architecture behind the best names and the biggest corporations and an obfuscating film of words by architects who should know better, which fails miserably to justify the pointless vulgarity that is rapidly supplanting rational and beautiful construction at a time when the opportunity for both has never been more generously present.

A serious indictment? It is long overdue. The latest local aberrations were available to the readers of this newspaper in the past two weeks: a Stamford, Conn., office center that promises to be an architectural fun fair of corporate flying saucers and ramped, battlemented research centers; a Manhattan branch bank in early Howard Johnson pseudo-Georgian style, complete with classic cupola, computers and infrared comfort for outdoor customers at 18th-century type deposit windows, and, we assume, 20th-century money. The banklet will be in a landscaped parklet, but that is another question to be discussed at another time.

The buildings would be funny, if they were not typical

and tragic indications of the depth to which the great revolution has sunk. These examples represent two extremes of the current malaise.

The first, the Stamford headquarters for the General Time Corporation and a laboratory for the Columbia Broadcasting System (oh, shades of Eero Saarinen!) might be called the space-age-fly-with-the-future trend. The second, Franklin National's "bank in the park" for a corner lot at Broadway and Howard Street, is the stop-the-world-I-want-to-get-off-school, or time-turn backward-in-your-flight-with-all-modern-conveniences.

Given the choice between hot modern and cold colonial one hardly blames Franklin National for settling for ersatz nostalgia. At least Franklin has the dubious distinction of pursuing ersatz all-out.

Billing itself as "the country bank in New York" since it started on Long Island, bucolic paradise of subdivisions, Franklin settled on the country colonial image executed by the firm of Eggers and Higgins, even when it meant disguising a nine-story steel-frame structure as an inflated five-story Georgian mansion on Madison Avenue. Its officers are far from farmers. They have also devised "La Banque," the Franklin National branch in process at Fifth Avenue and 60th Street. This will be solid Louis Seize for a clientele of nonrural sophisticates with a mandatory balance of \$25,000 in dollars, not francs.

### Beauty Versus Bore

As for the little colonial pavilion for lower Broadway, it is only necessary to compare its careful fakery with the genuine elegance of a similar small bank also designed as a kind of pavilion in a park, but created skilfully in terms of its own time. This is the American Trust Company's contemporary grace note on the landscaped plaza of San Francisco's Crown Zellerbach building. It is beauty versus the bore.

The Pop Architecture at Stamford causes distress of a different kind. The architect, Victor Bisharat of James Evans Associates, describes the battered, striated walls of the CBS laboratory as "symbolizing the upsurge of the creative force in research, reaching for the sky with questing fingers." The effect seems more like sticky fingers

reaching for Wright and Saarinen.

This kind of architectural whizz-bang was originally restricted to Miami motels. It was strictly for the spangled sunglasses set. It is now for businessmen, corporation presidents and community cultural leaders. The trend-setting corporate clients of the 1950's established a selective standard that has not survived the building boom and the cultural bandwagon. There is a bank like a split orange in Casper, Wyoming. There is a repertory theater in Minneapolis that adds schizoid insult to its glass curtain wall with superficially artful, aggregate surfaced wooden cut-out screens.

### Bad to Worse

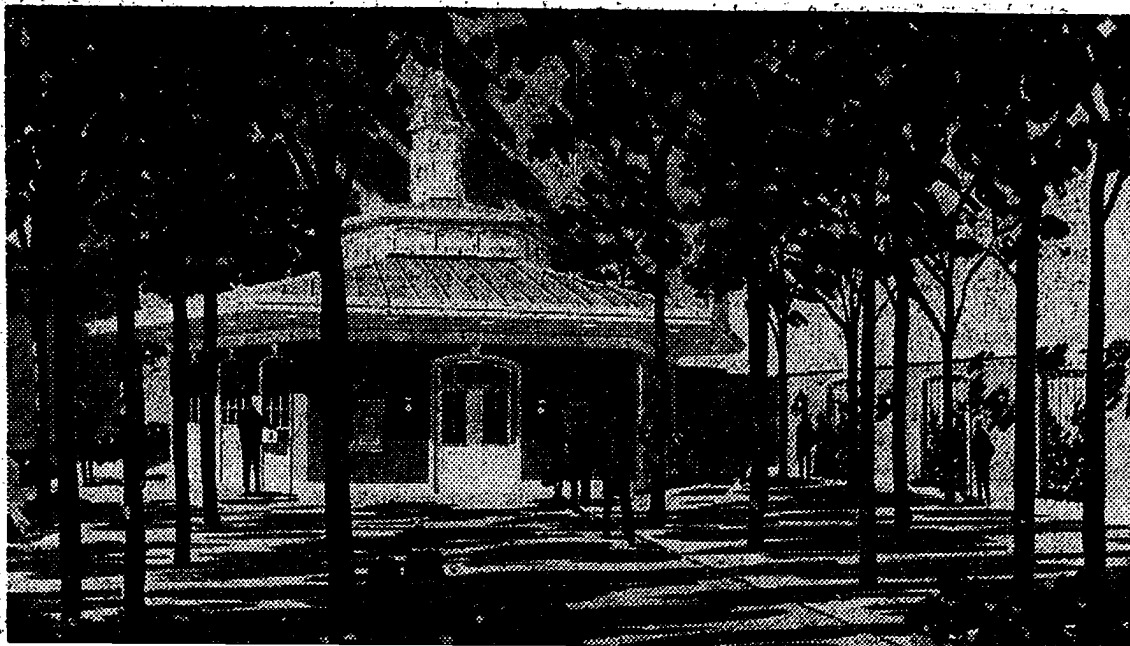
The trend ranges from irrationality, or novelty for its own sake, to dishonesty, or the complete vulgarization of art. It is followed by architects of large and small reputation, with more or less overtly awful results.

The sad fact is that public and patrons will accept anything quicker than rational simplicity, or the logical and sensitive solution to a problem. They are sick to death of plain, cheap, badly constructed speculative building, and their non-professional eyes are not always adept at distinguishing between simple statements of quality and simple junk.

The popular reaction is still largely *horror vacui*. Fill it up, busy it up, distort it, disguise it, make it look arty or different, but don't make it a logical, artistic expression of conscientiously considered structure, function and form. It probably wouldn't get published if you did.

There is no justification for this brand of self-seeking architectural exhibitionism. And yet the architect is asking for a larger share of the responsibility for designing the environment, at the same time that he faults and flouts it by demonstrating a lack of responsibility in his own work.

In Europe, architecture is still primarily a social art, its highest and best expression frequently sublimated with sensitivity to larger human and environmental needs. In the United States, there is no environment, in spite of all the talk about it. There are buildings that strut and fight and turn their backs on each other and the city; advertisements for architects and for a degenerating art.



Franklin National Bank, New York, Eggers & Higgins, architects. Right, American Trust, San Francisco, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, with Hertzka & Knowles.

"... careful fakery versus genuine elegance. . ."

