ARCHITECTURE VIEW: MASTER BUILDER OF THE MODERN AGE
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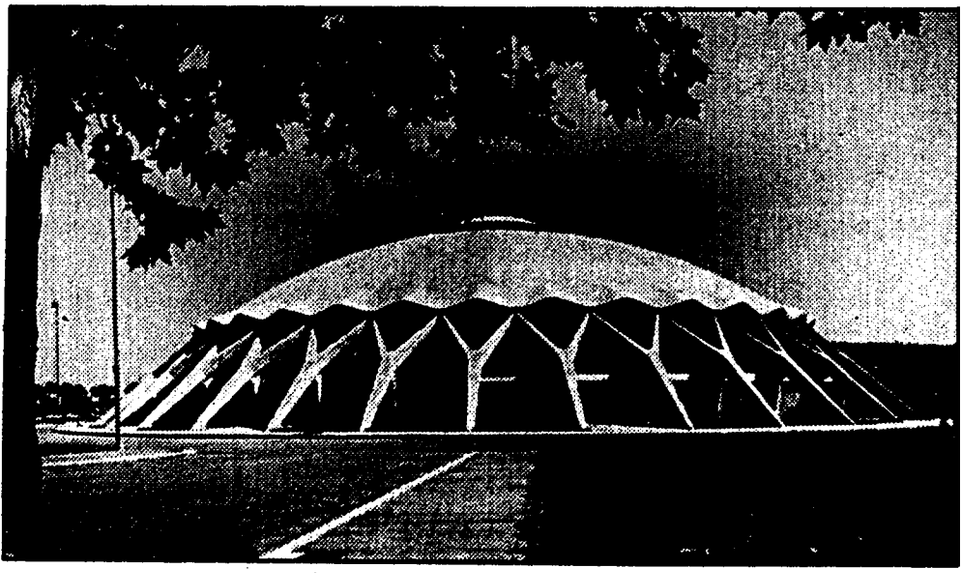

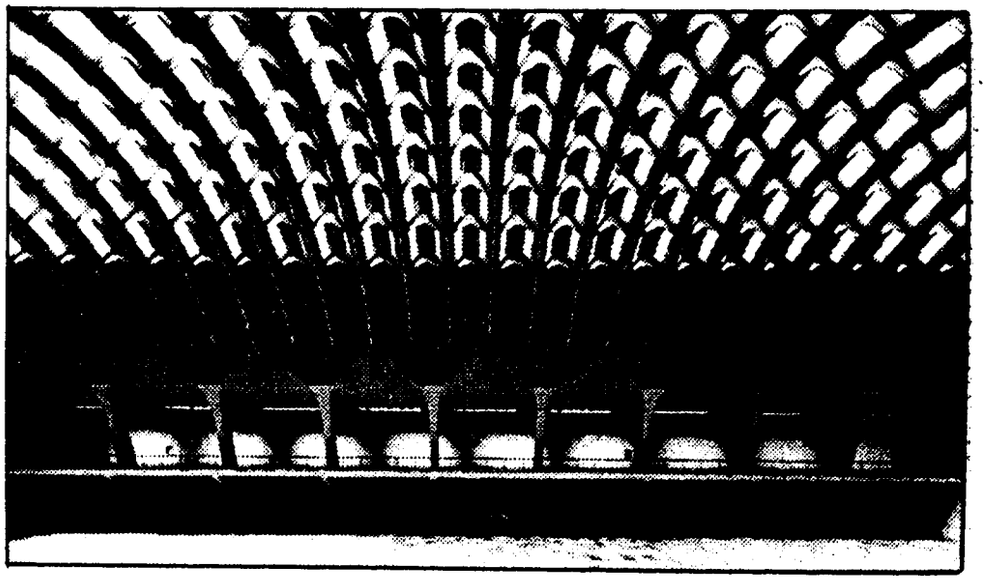

Pier Luigi Nervi's Sports Palace in Rome (left) and the Turin Exposition Hall (right) designed by Nervi and Bartoli

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Master Builder of The Modern Age

Pier Luigi Nervi, the Italian engineer who died in Rome last week at the age of 87, was one of that company of giants that included Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Alvar Aalto and Frank Lloyd Wright; he ranked among the master builders of the modern age.

As an engineer, rather than as an architect, Nervi's lifelong preoccupation was with the use of reinforced concrete, a material of profound importance for the art and science of contemporary construction. No mere technician, he pioneered both its structural and esthetic aspects. There are Nervi buildings where the coffered ceilings unfold like flowers and the supports define stress with a sculptural finesse that is pure poetry. But in no case was he less than a major innovator who produced some of the most dramatic edifices of the 20th century.

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He is, perhaps, too recently gone, and too ambiguous in his role as a form-giver of modernism, to have joined that elite group involved in the current wave of pantheon-busting, or father-bashing, which is helping a younger generation find its way out of the modernist straitjacket into an expressive world of its own.

But Nervi always puzzled architects; his work was one of those enigmas that emerged from his personal mathematics full-blown and beautiful. The fusion of science and art created a clear visual alliance of surface and form with a particularly powerful esthetic impact that more conventional architecture could rarely match. Still, his hangars, exposition halls, factories and stadiums seemed to have minimal application to other kinds of building except for specific advances in the formulation and casting of concrete.

When he collaborated with architects, who were his sincere admirers, something always happened to the results so that the less-than-pure Nervi building was a dispiriting compromise, in which the architects came out looking like the spoilers. That made for some uneasiness, not only among architects, but also among those who would pigeonhole, categorize, or otherwise slot him into orthodox modernism for didactic purposes.

This was of no interest to Nervi, who was a modest, straightforward man. His primary concern was not philosophical; it was expressed best in the title of his book, "Costruire Corettamente" — to build correctly, or properly and logically, which, in his mind, was the only appropriate approach to function and art. He was no critic of his colleagues, but he thoroughly disapproved of much architectural practice of the 1950's and 60's in which concrete construction was being exploited in a furious pursuit of originality for a product that he considered neither appropriate nor logical, and for which he reserved a quiet scorn.

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Nervi was not guilty, needless to say, of this kind of showy acrobatics. Every carefully calculated element of his buildings, from supports to spans, makes immediate visual and visceral sense even to the most uninitiated viewer. The components of his structural systems have a superb integration of rhythm, pattern and line that works both mathematically and as pure geometric abstraction.

The consistent theme that runs through his production, from the Florence stadium and Rome hangars of the 1930's, the Turin Exposition Hall of 1947 and 1950 and the factories of the 1950's and 60's, to the Olympics Buildings of the 60's, is a kind of spirited grace in which mathematical and esthetic calculations are one. The little Palazzetto dello Sport in Rome, with its Y-shaped supports and fluted roof shell, is a bold structure of extraordinary stylistic delicacy.

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As his fame spread, Nervi was invited to collaborate on commissions with other architects in Italy and abroad. Among these are the Pirelli skyscraper in Milan, done with Gio Ponti; the UNESCO Building in Paris, designed with Marcel Breuer, and the Port Authority Terminal Building at the George Washington Bridge in New York. He called New York, with its powerful massed buildings, "unica, enorme, potente." The steel construction of the city's skyscrapers was "una meraviglia," and Park Avenue "una strada superba."

Perhaps the key to Nervi's singularity is the fact that he was an engineer with an Italian sensibility. The Italian sensibility is a rather complex and tricky thing to define; it can range from arrogant chic to the most informed and worldly sense of art and history. Deeply rooted in a sophisticated culture, it carries off flash and novelty with suave panache, or creates an instant timeless elegance. The best Italian design combines an impeccable taste, a sure eye and a refined sensuosity.

There was nothing flashy or transiently fashionable about Nervi's style, personally or professionally; I remember him as having a kind of matched grayness — gray hair and suit, neutral complexion, steel-rimmed glasses and a quiet manner. He spoke only of the need for "patient and passionate work." That work produced buildings of an intense, lyrical pragmatism that grew out of a precise and elegant mind. ■