

Architecture

Kicked a Building Lately?

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WE have resolved this year not to be buffeted from one city crisis to another, but to write of other matters also; for one thing, what is happening in the world of architectural esthetics as well as in the world of urban emergencies. Since this resolution is obviously to be broken immediately, let us plunge in and sum up some current trends in the arts of design before the real estate interests succeed in breaking down New York's protective side street zoning, for example, so that no small buildings or historic houses remain and the new densities make the urban sky fall in.

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It is not easy to think about design theory or practice in the face of things like that. But this does not minimize the importance and excitement of some of the current architectural activities of the younger practitioners and students, or reduce the temptation to take a stab at what the new trends mean.

Most architects are quite aware of a new kind of design called Supermannerism or Supergraphics, particularly if they read *Progressive Architecture*, the periodical that has done the most to name, promote, explain and analyze it. Violently pro or con the new style, their battle lines are drawn to suggest one more evidence of the generation gap.

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To the public, Supermannerism is best known in its more psychedelic entertainment or showcase aspects—the multi-media, sound-reinforced, flashing patterns of color and light in designs by the young, for the young, in discothèques and boutiques. It is largely an art of interiors and graphics.

But it is also turning some of the more “with it” architectural schools upside down. Yale architecture students agitated until their notably Supermannerist dean, Charles Moore, aided in the temporary destruction of one of the major areas of Paul Rudolph's Art and Architec-

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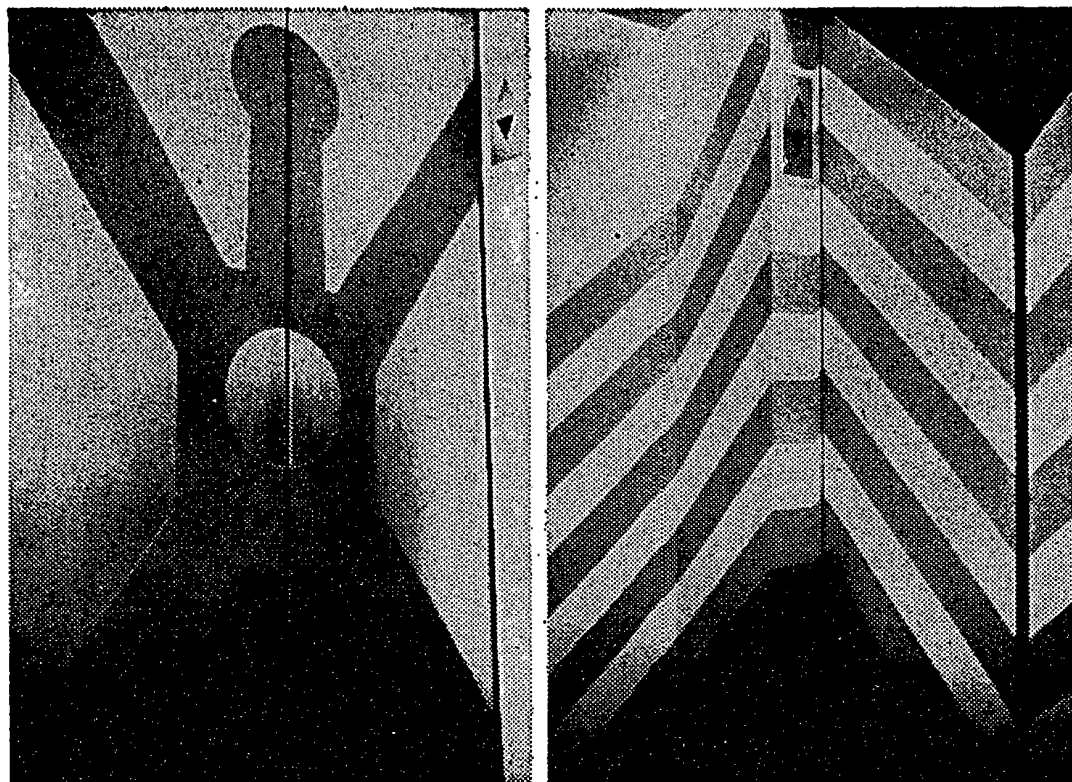
ture Building. They installed a pulsing white light display of fluorescent tubing and silver mylar for a space and mind-bending esthetic experiment and design double *entendre* that practically told Mr. Rudolph to get up on the shelf and stay there.

When young architects do something like The Drugstore in fashionably mod King's Row, Chelsea, it reverberates around the design world until it becomes a cliché. More impressively virtuoso interiors in the same idiom, such as Sergio Asti's incredibly suave tricks with mirrored walls and lights, transparency and reflection in a tiny shoe shop in Milan, are less well publicized.

At its worst, the style is superficial, tricky, repetitive and shallowly ornamental, overusing bright metallic surfaces, plastics, curved corners and liverish colors ad headache and ennui. But at its best, it is considerably more than that. In the words of C. Ray Smith in last October's issue of *Progressive Architecture*—devoted entirely to the style (with irate cancellations from architect-readers who consider it rubbish)—the movement is "a rebellious attempt to expand experience by breaking down the traditions of the Establishment." It has been called LSDesign.

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The traditions of established modern architecture are order, meticulously proportioned lines and spaces, sensitively utilized color and puritanically austere style. All this is broken down deliberately. Basic shapes and spaces are denied and insulted by Dayglo-bright designs of hard-edge geometry that cross right over windows and doors with consummately calculated arbitrariness in stripes, circles and abstractions. Existing elements are further fragmented by applications of mirror and mylar, and dematerialized by light and kinetic effects. They are distorted by diagonal and bias installations and the deliberate camouflage of other materials. Lettering is larger than life-size, suggesting an architecture of its own. "Environments" are created in-



James Richter for *Progressive Architecture*
"Destruction" of Yale Architecture School elevator through "experience expanding" student design exercises in paint and light.
Breaking down the traditions of the Establishment

dependently of their surroundings.

The results range from god-awful to the genuinely revelatory expansion of visual and sensuous experience. Like all other styles that are primarily decorative and responsive to a particular moment in time and taste, this one will quickly be run into the ground. It happened with Art Nouveau, which ranged from the sublime to the atrocious and died of overexposure and overreaching after a very short life-span. That one took half a century to be properly evaluated as more than slightly reprehensible, dismissable surface decoration. This one is being similarly pigeonholed by those who should know better.

The illustrations on this page, part of a series published by P/A, represent an exercise assigned to Yale architecture students by Super-graphicist Barbara Stauffacher. The students were to "explode" the dull box of the school elevator with color and pattern. Their painted designs were executed, two a week, until the end of the semester.

Certainly no one in the building was bored. Designs ranged from a "peace elevator" with stars and stripes inside and the elevator doors sliding together to present the image of a bomber outside, to pure space-expanding experiments in fluorescent paint and flashing light. These are as legitimate exploratory exercises as any of the abstract study courses apotheosized by the Bauhaus as the heavenly road to architectural creativity.

Supermannerism is witty as well as wildly sense-awakening. This is not without significance at a time when black humor is the response to the grotesqueries of the bitterly self-defeating complexities of 20th-century civilization. Maybe it is a form of black art. It is as volatile and fragile as revolution. Call it part of the state of revolution that seems to be the condition of our age.

What is upsetting the older professionals is that the style is an architecture-destroyer—and what is destroyed, or mocked, is their architecture. What is even more upsetting, if anyone cares to face it, is that there is good reason for this. Look at any of the slick renderings of big building complexes by the big architectural offices. That one of Madison Square Garden and its companion office tower, for example, that was kicking around in ads for quite a while, looking like something dispensed from a machine, or like a giant can of tuna and box of crackers (tear off the box top and get Irving Felt). Or take any of those boardroom table-model models of new Sixth Avenue skyscrapers or big new commercial or cultural structures reproduced in newspapers and magazines. A wretched excess of computerized look-alikes. Predictable banality on a supercolossal scale. Overwhelming square footage of nothing.

There is an impulse to kick them (ever tried kicking a building?) or to picket them (that has actually been done). Even much of the better work today has turned into a

kind of Ikebana ritual of approved proportions and sterile relationships. What is really happening is that the upcoming generation, full of beans, talent, revolt and defensible disrespect for the tasteful totems and the huge, hack symbols of the Establishment, is giving them a highly creative raspberry. You could call it productive protest.

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For this is not nihilism, in spite of its blithe self-advertisements to that effect. It is a style going somewhere even if it is to a straight dead-end. That won't matter, because in the process it will have opened important new doors of vision and experience. It is a way of breaking out of the depressingly minimal spaces and formulas that are laughingly called architecture in the name of today's economic pressures and expediency. It is the return of ornament, if you will, or an equivalent decorative enrichment, banished by Adolf Loos and the early modern movement as "crime." It is the contemporary integration of the arts so falsely sought in more traditional terms, with the architect closer to the visual arts than he has been in a very long time.

Most important, it is the addition of still another useful tool to the architect's equipment, for, with the rest of us, he will never see the world in quite the same way again. Nor should he, because it will never be the same world again, and that is the truth behind the generation gap everywhere.