San Francisco Offers Its Inhabitants Much That New York Is Losing
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CITY FOR PEOPLE

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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

SAN FRANCISCO.

THE more than 2,000 architects who attended the recent American Institute of Architects' annual convention in San Francisco were offered new technological, sociological and philosophical horizons in length, breadth and depth. Distinguished speakers gave thoughtful addresses, and their general exposition was related to specific professional problems by panels of architects. The addresses were informative, the discussion serious and the program admirable. But the best architectural lesson of all was to be found outside of the meeting hall, on the streets and hills of San Francisco.

Much has been written of San Francisco's charm, freshness, character, sophistication and cosmopolitan culture. It is internationally acknowledged as one of the world's great cities. And yet it has very little individual building that can be called good by even the most remote stretch of sentimental imagination. Its streets run boldly over its precipitous hills to break all accepted concepts of contour planning. Its houses are crowded together in speculative patterns that have proved disastrous to lesser communities. Outlying post-war developments are the nadir of builder-monotony and its slum-clearance program, only recently implemented, is long overdue.

Wonderful Town

What San Francisco has, however, is beyond architecture, and beyond price. It has light, air and intimate human scale, abetted by cleanliness, color and a breathtaking view. To today's architect, concerned almost exclusively with abstract design standards and sociologically approved planning, San Francisco is a city that breaks all the rules. And because it does break rules, its point is as clear as it is disturbing: a city can be good even with bad or anonymous building; and the quality of a city is far more than the quality of its architecture alone.

What makes this so is well worth the architect's consideration. The slightly less-than-picturesque hodgepodge of San Francisco's bay-windowed frame houses, even its generally undistinguished commercial structures, retain a personal scale, a direct and pleasurable relationship to people, that is the city's greatest asset. There are few skyscrapers, and they are advantageously situated. Whether this is because of limited population, less stringent economic pressure or the character of the terrain is immaterial; the lesson is potent.

Wonderful Town Lost?

The features that attract the visitor to San Francisco and that make it one of the country's most desirable places to live are exactly the same features that are being eliminated daily in New York. These are the small-scale structure, the building of local character, and the neighborhood. For it is the humanity of a city's architecture, and the extent to which it serves and pleases its people, providing them with sun, air and areas of interest, that add up to civic success or failure. If the present country-wide wave of urban renewal is not to produce results as disastrous as the blight it replaces, the architect must look beyond currently popular intellectual esthetic and sociological theories. He must produce more than correctly sterile housing projects and vacuous master plans.

The second lesson that San Francisco offers the architect, and every urban dweller as well, is the example of the awareness and concern of its citizens for their city. Improbable as it seems, the community's architectural future is as important to San Franciscans as the Giants' latest score. (The games are played in architect John Bolles' handsome new Candlestick Park.) San Francisco has the unique record of fighting the hideous, encroaching freeways that threaten the visual and physical dismemberment of every major American city. A special attraction for the visiting architects were the entries in the Golden Gateway Redevelopment project competition, which has drawn submissions from some of the best local and out-of-state builders and designers. Characteristically, the competition has been accompanied by an efficient program of public information.

Great Exceptions

Nor is San Francisco completely without great buildings. There are four that alone justify a cross-continent trip. The small, sparkling Hallidie Building of 1915, probably the first office structure with an all-glass facade, effectively ornamented with ornate cast-iron, is a one-of-a-kind masterpiece. Frank Lloyd Wright's V. C. Morris store, precursor of the spiral Guggenheim, is in the same category. Crown-Zellerbach headquarters, designed in 1959 by the West Coast office of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, a glass tower placed on an open, wood-railed travertine platform raised above a pebbled garden, is superbly detailed with a surprisingly Oriental finesse. Finally, the recent, remarkable John Hancock building, also by S. O. & M., of gray granite pierced by bronze-framed gray glass windows, rises from boldly shaped, wood-faced reinforced concrete supports of almost Italianate elegance. Such exoticisms — unparalleled in the firm's more restrained Eastern practice — are particularly suitable to the the temper of the city.

But San Francisco's chief architectural feature is not to be found in design, technology or the excellence of isolated works. It is in the proper and primary relationship of buildings to people. And is that not, after all, what architecture is all about?