Nothing Is the Way It Was': Architecture Nothing Is The Way It Was' Architecture

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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One of Anshutz's newly discovered photographs

An occasional holiday from the closed world of academic art



Architecture

'Nothing Is the Way It Was'

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

E are late with this yearly assessment. courtesy of flu, but the questions facing architects and society in 1973 are going to be around for a while—longer than some of their buildings. These are years of loudly publicized doubts and confusion in the profession, which is faced with a world it has only made in part, and often made badly, and problems and changes never visualized by the gentlemen of the Beaux Arts.

There is virtually no architect who has not broadened his image of his work. All

think of themselves now, in some way, as environmentalists, involved in the manmade aspects of the places we live and function in for better or worse. The intraprofessional arguments revolve mostly on whether solutions are to be achieved traditionally through design or radically through social action; basic objectives are generally agreed on. For some, the new attitudes are not much more than a convenient bandwagon; for others they provide a kind of trial by fire out of which a purer and more dedicated professional faces the needs

of a society in crisis.

In theory, that is. Because reality is never so pure, and because the recession that has quietly turned into a permanent depression for many jobless architects has winnowed with the greatest efficiency exactly those small offices dedicated to principle and certain standards of social art. These talented groups of ten to 20 have been a notable, casualty of expanding scale in building and the economic crisis that continues in architecture, no matter what statistics and the Federal Government say about

Continued on Page 27

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Continued from Page 25 the economy generally.

Meanwhile, the debates continue, in offices large and small. For whom does the architect build today? What is his responsibility? What does he do in the current scheme of things? And why does he do it at all?

The answer seems to be that nothing is the way it once was, in a world where architects produced buildings as art works for businessmen or private clients and magazines published glossy views of stunning structures with polemics to match. They still do. Architecture as this kind of art is not dead; it is just discounted by much of the younger generation.

Such firms as the redoubtable Skidmore, Owings & Merrill continue to produce superior corporate masterpieces that coolly survey the chaos of American cities or stand elegantly isolated in some pastoral paradise. Such buildings are definite parameters of our culture and of at least one important aspect of our society. But some of our ablest young architects are moving beyond the sure place in the corporate office that they could easily command to take on what they consider to be the real architectural challenges of our time. And they are thinking hard about what they are doing.

Sometimes-and this in itself is revolutionary - these young professionals go directly into the public sector. They see it as the field of practice with the greatest social impact. The city of New York, for example, has attracted a great deal of the best talent in its relatively new thrust toward progressive planning and greater sensitivity of urban design.

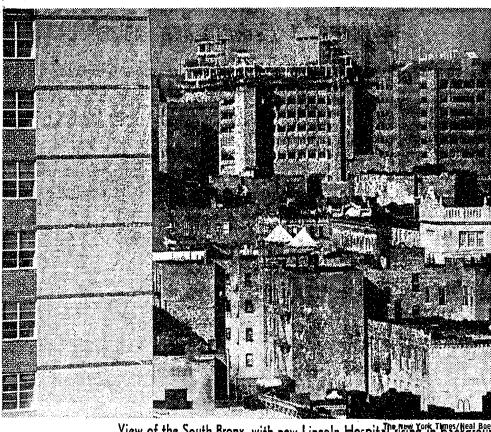
Such practitioners as Richard Weinstein, director of the city's Office of Lower Manhattan Development, and Jaquelin Robertson, until recently director of the Office of Midtown Planning and Development, and their colleagues in other special city planning offices and the Urban Design Group, have quietly put an indelibly progressive stamp on the physical city. They have done this with the backing of the Mayor and City Planning Commission Chairman Donald Elliott, though trend-set-ting new zoning and sophisticated, strong-arm design review of the it-couldn't-bedone variety.

But they don't all stay with the city very long. Jonathan Barnett, who formerly headed the Urban Design on the architect by society. Group, now runs the Urban or what makes him run, is Design Program at City Col-not as clearly monetary as it lege. Mr. Robertson has gone, is for the businessman, Mr. after an exceptional career Robertson claims, although that initiated the real estate money is never an inconseestablishment into a new car-quential motive. Even with rot-and-stick, community-cap-the businessman, he points italist relationship. It is not out, the "game" and how disenchantment that sends the well he "plays" it is often young architects on to other most important; money is the fields; they love the big score. Witness rich men who stakes and challenges and keep playing when money have become diabolically has passed having meaning. skillful at the Machiavellian political infighting. But it is For the architect, the "re-

the nature of bright young ward" is to be able "to build. people to move on; their hor- or shape, or change the phyizons are wide and under-sical environment in a way standably they look for the that his hand will show and next step and the next ex-remain - literally leaving perience.

Just before leaving the ad-reward is to precisely impose ministration, Mr. Robertson to some extent his reality did some serious thinking on the world around him." about the questions architects Therefore, he says, the are asking. His conclusions ambitious architect seeks as took the form of an explana-his client the center of the tion to a sympathetic, non-power structure in his soarchitectural professional inciety at any time - the public affairs, who had asked church, the banker, princes, him about the architect's popes, railroad barons, the role in the "reward struc-modern corporation. The architectural product thus acture."

"The "reward" bestowed curately reflects the "struc-



View of the South Bronx, with new Lincoln Hospital rising in background "Faced with a world the architect has only made in part"

ment.

one's mark. The architect's

ture, priority and will" of any society at a given mo-

The client - the power structure — is changing today. It is the public sector rather than the private sector, Mr. Robertson believes, that counts most now - government and the community. Society is restructuring its institutions, rebalancing its powers, and the confusion in architecture reflects change; important new clients are coalescing, with new needs and programs.

He lists the new clients as government, something amorphous called "community," and something very tangible, the real estate-industrial sector. By this he means the corporate-industrial giants that are "now focusing on large-scale development as a profitable enterprise." Huge projects under this aegis are appearing in many American cities.

The architect, Mr. Robertson says, is going to join these clients, in a much changed relationship. He will not only serve them, he will

be one of them. In some cases he will be, and already is, part of the entrepreneurial group, as John Portman of Atlanta has successfully demonstrated. The architect may play an advocacy role for a community client. He can move into government, or quasi-government positions; this is already the rule in Britain. He will build different things-not individual "masterpieces" but whole commercial. educational. housing, or environmental complexes.

He will have to change philosophically, organizationally, professionally, to deal quantitatively, rather than just qualitatively, with his art in large-scale socio-technical terms. The painful, significant process of adjustment is going on now, reflecting much of the times in which we live. Ultimately, all this recognizes society's real priorities, and no profession can have a more important role than that in the social structure. The "rewards" are potentially the greatest in history.