Architecture: Chaos of Good, Bad and Joyful: Grotesque Contrasts, ...
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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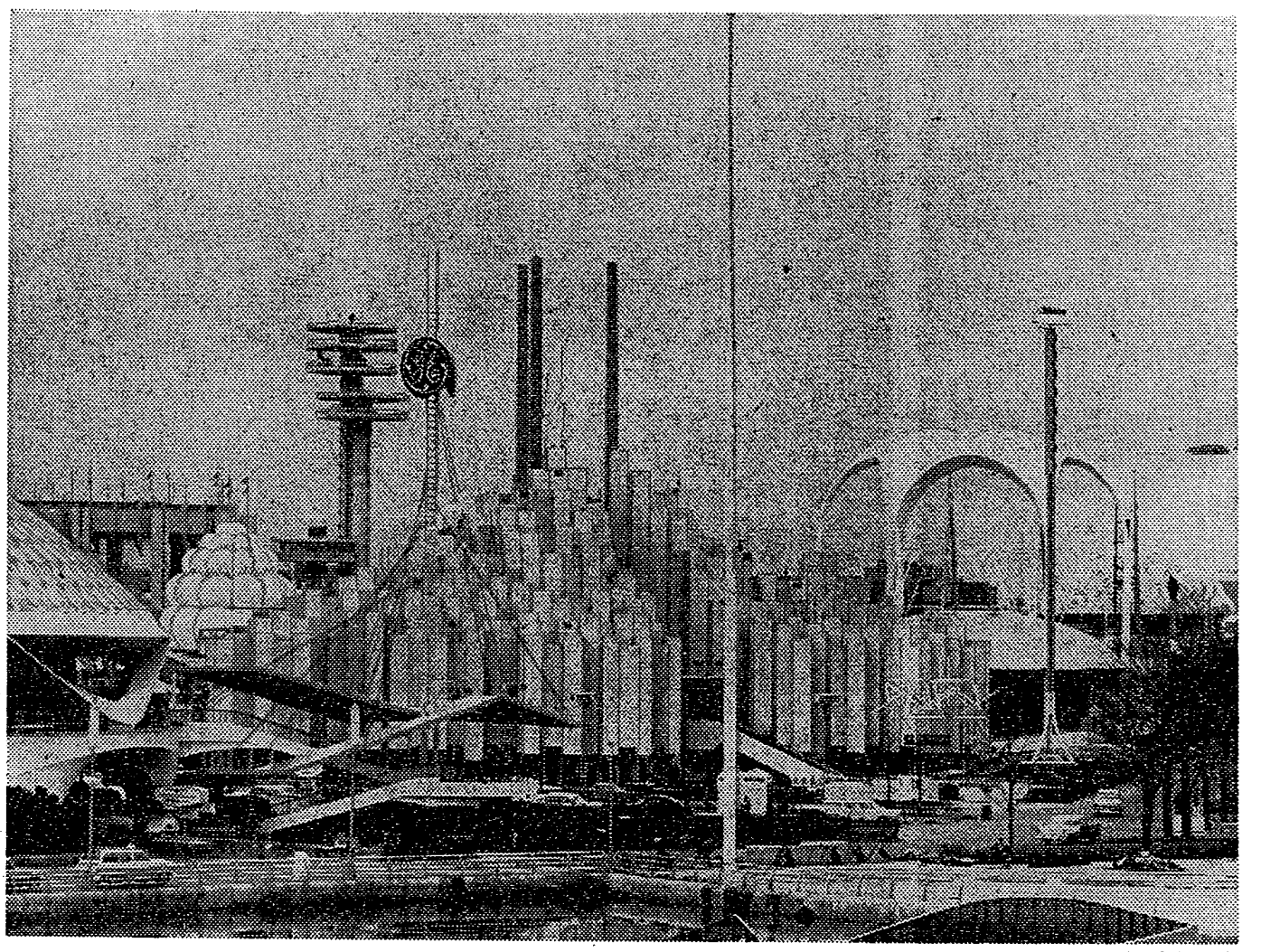

The New York Times (by Edward Hausner)

In the fair's industrial area, an inadvertent juxtaposition creates an abstract vista: "Soaring prisms of the Electric Light and Power Building smack against the inflated balloon grapes rising above the Brass Rail snack bar, backed by the petal-roof of the Johnson Wax dome and the triple towers of the New York State Pavilion."

Grotesque Contrasts, Wholly Unplanned, Give Fair Charm

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The New York World's Fair is an architectural happening, in the sense that happening is a currently popular art form in which the objective is unpremeditated chaos achieved through a series of unplanned acts with unrelated consequences.

It is everything the critics predicted it would be—disconnected, grotesque, lacking any unity of concept or style. And it is just those accidental juxtapositions and cockeyed contrasts built into the fair that give it its particular attraction and charm.

For it has both, if you don't look too closely. Too closely to discover, for example, that all is not gold that glitters and all that looks like thin-shell concrete is probably plywood sprayed with plaster. The attraction and charm are particularly evident for visitors who head judiciously for enchanted corners like the Danish outdoor restaurant with its Tivoli lighting and luminous butterflies in the trees.

One vista alone can't be licked for pure fantasy: the soaring prisms of the Electric Light and Power Building smack against the inflated ballon grapes rising above the Brass Rail snack bar, backed by the petal-roof of the Johnson Wax dome and the triple towers of the New York State Pavilion. It's a never-never skyline worth at least one trip.

Shades of '39

It all seems dazzingly different, except for a sneaking feeling that you've seen it all before. Because in spite of the new look, it's the same old plan. The flag-lined, pool-punctuated avenues of the 1939 World's Fair persistently impose their formal Beaux Arts layout on the moon-world confusion, and trick the visitor into an ambivalent '39-'64 state of mind. This sensation is reinforced by some very dated sculpture and the timeless banality of the Unisphere.

Each pavilion, previously seen in pictures and models as an independent, isolated design, is now jammed next to its neighbor, creating some marvelous pop-art contrasts. Thailand's wedding-cake eaves crowd Mexico's ponderous modernity; Hong Kong's intricate pagoda in full living color is a backdrop for Denmark's chaste natural woods.

Facing a Belgian village of vaguely medieval character is a row of incongruous Doric columns fronting the Hall of Free Enterprise with the graven motto, "The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number," which might be freely translated as "Every Man for Himself," or the credo of the fair.

Fascinating Mediocrity

It's a fascinating free-for-all and good clean fun, but it's rarely good architecture. Fairs have always been the proving grounds of architectural advance, and their temporary buildings offer unparalleled opportunities for exciting experiments and daring demonstrations of dramatic new construction.

Architecture is a form-maker, problem-solver and environment-creator, and the international exposition is its laboratory. The textbooks contain a definitive progression of trend-setting structures from the Crystal Palace on.

There are few new ideas here. What this fair offers, with some notable exceptions, is trick-or-treat architecture —a full range of the current jazzier clichés. At a time when the possibilities for genuine innovations have never been greater, there is little real imagination; most effects are just conventionally carpentered simulations of the more eye-catching gimmicks of new building techniques. What looks like structural fantasy, isn't.

But the real stars of the show are not sham, and they give the whole enterprise a standard that it would otherwise lack. Fantasy and integrity need not be mutually exclusive, and when they unite, the results make everything else look shoddy and thin.

Few Ideas Are New —State Pavilion Is Star of Show

The Gems

Surprisingly, the architectural successes are not gargantuas like Ford and General Motors—both of which are overstyled commercial packages of closely guarded costs, estimated at $25 million to $50 million each for building and contents.

The Brass Rail's inflated white balloon-flower canopies by Victor Lundy, based on an experimental "aero-structure" design, do what was not done officially: Spotted about the fair they unify the scene by their repeated grace notes, cloudlike in daylight, glowing at night.

But the runaway success, day or night, is the New York State Pavilion, a sophisticated frivolity by Philip Johnson, seriously and beautifully constructed. This is "carnival" with class.

The Scandinavians walk off with top design honors, as usual, in the Danish and Swedish Pavilions, by Erik Moller and Backstrom and Reinius, respectively. At one-hundreth the probable G.M. price, the Austrian Pavilion, by Gustav Peichl, utilizing superbly laminated wooden A-frames and beams, sets a coordinated design standard to shame more extravagant entries.

Japan offers craftsmanship, quality and clarity in two of three related structures, particularly in a mast-hung, stone-faced building by Kunio Maekawa for which the magnificently sensuous stonework was done by the sculptor Nagare.

Theme Is Big Sell

All of these pavilions create a national image, a time-honored objective of the international exposition that has lost out to the commercial image in New York. The official theme of the fair is "Man's Achievements in an Expanding Universie;" unofficially it is the big sell.

The Electric Light and Power Building, a fanciful complex of modular space-frame units that ranks as one of the most interesting structural ideas, turns schizoid inside with department-store décor and an elaborate musical equating free-enterprise electricity with Christmas and the Fourth of July.

I.B.M., an imaginative fun-fair of information by the office of the late Eero Saarinen with Charles Eames, proves that the corporate message can be put across as an integrated architectural-design concept, and without Walt Disney. Otherwise the marriage of Disney and Industry is complete, with Audio-Animatronic, or artificial people — what hath Disney wrought? — delivering extended commercial messages in incredibly expensive and intricate, mechanized settings.

Never has so much technology and so much money had so little to say. Like all fairs, this one is a mixture of creativity and corn.