# ARCHITECTURE VIEW: A VISIONARY AND A CLASSICIST ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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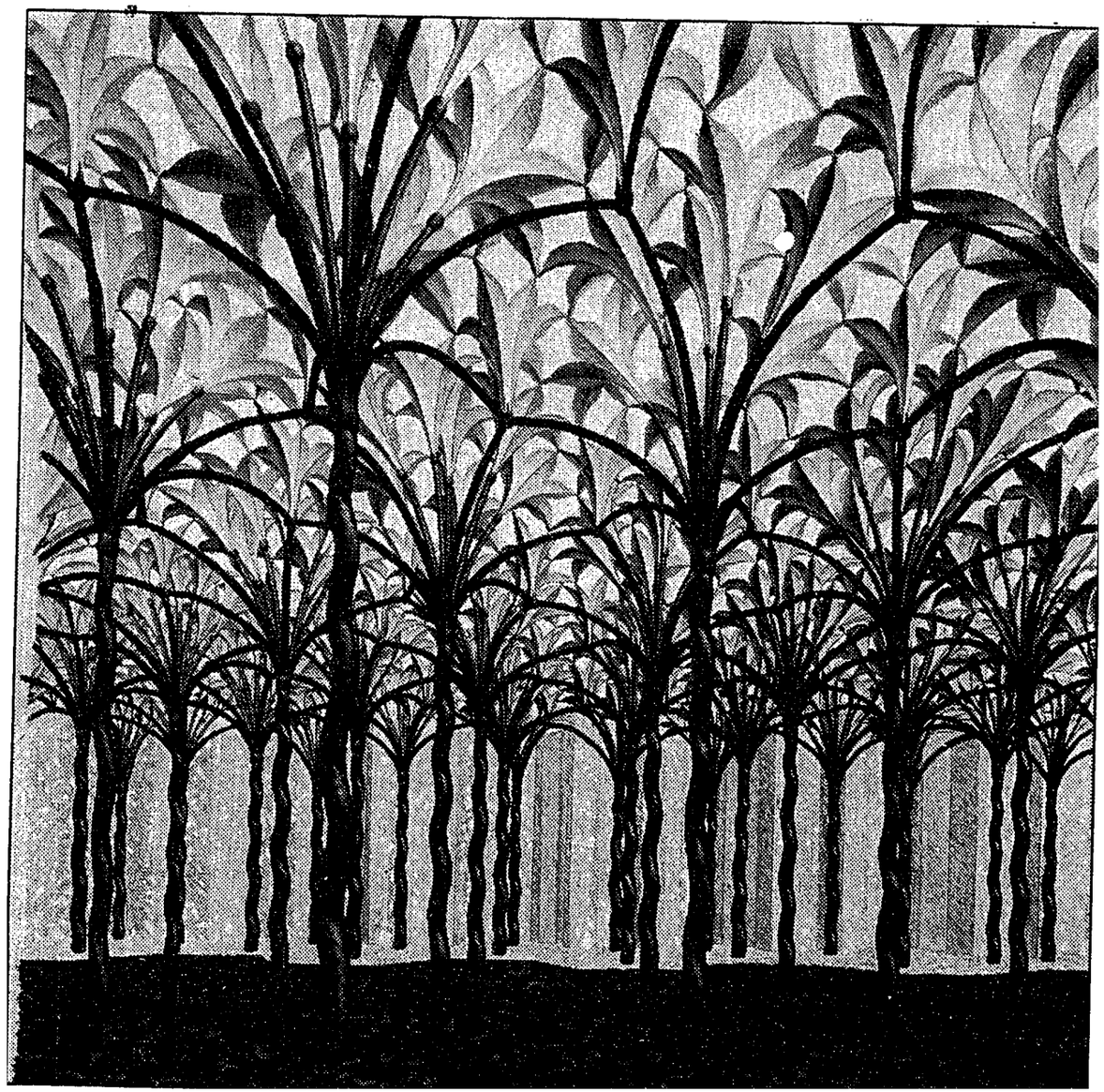

Roger Ferri's "Pedestrian City"—"Buckminster Fuller turned into a field of flowers"

**ARCHITECTURE VIEW**

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# A Visionary and A Classicist

Two projects that were specially commissioned for the Museum of Modern Art's recent exhibition on "Transformations in Modern Architecture," but were not shown with it, are now on display in the Goodwin Galleries of the museum (11 West 53d Street), and will remain there through July 15. Both designs, one by Roger Ferri and the other by Allan Greenberg, deal with public space. They also demonstrate what the museum calls "alternate approaches to architecture," a polite way of indicating that the two schemes are so unlike that they might have come from different ages or planets.

"Transformations" was Arthur Drexler's blockbuster treatise on design trends in the built work of the past 20 years that kicked up a lively controversy between practitioners, who saw it as a failure of nerve and judgment, and historians, who viewed it as a documentation of recent history in inclusive, rather than qualitative, terms. Drexler seemed to choose to be a traditionalist in his narrowly art-historical presentation of stylistic iconography, at the same time that he denied tradition in the exclusion of any guiding yardsticks of design or development.

The result was a rather personal and somewhat perverse method of dealing with the art of architecture, essentially coming up on it from the rear (or more accurately, the front). By stressing the common denominator of commercial construction over the exceptional example, the show satisfied neither those who have embraced schlock as art, because it included too much of the wrong kind of schlock, nor those for whom the high art of architecture is corrupted the moment anything gets built. At times, the debate reached the heights of vitriolic silliness, but passions run high in the architectural world.

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The two projects currently on display were obviously out of context with the show's theme of tracing stylistic lines — a concept that jelled after work on the exhibition had begun. As hypothetical, unbuilt schemes, they tell us more about where architecture is right now than about where it has been. (A third project, by Gaetano Pesce, was exhibited separately in March and April.) All were designed in answer to the museum's provocative question, "What would you do if you were free of all emotional and intellectual commitment to modern architecture?"

Roger Ferri's answer puts modern structural geometry into the service of naturalistic forms for a totally visionary romanticism. Allan Greenberg's response goes back unblushingly and uncompromisingly to classicism, rejecting modernism entirely.

This makes for an unexpected kind of show, with a surprisingly large quotient of visual delight. But the significant point is that both of these solutions are considered possible, and valid, today. With the demise of all the rules governing modern architecture, from anti-historicism to the functional esthetic, the only real criteria left are the quality of the artist's imagination and the richness of his invention.

These two projects are particularly striking in their different approaches and imagery. All that they have in common is some very beautiful, painstakingly devised and detailed work and an extremely polished execution. The quality of the drawings — whether pastel floral fantasies or precise ink renderings in the academic tradition — is superb.

The shock value, and even a considerable degree of the pleasure, of Allan Greenberg's project for a park in midtown Manhattan comes from its unexpected site: He proposes an ambitious classical redesign of the corridor and plaza that run from 49th to 50th streets behind the Exxon Building on the Avenue of the Americas — the kind of zoning-mandated space that usually houses predictable plumbing jets and concrete planters. Greenberg offers Roman grandeur, filtered through Renaissance splendor and the sophisticated manipulations of Sir Edwin Landseer Lutyens, for a formal composition of portals, arcades and treillage centering on an opulent fountain.

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Paired limestone pilasters line the corridor-alleé, roofed with an open, gilded-wood trellis recalling Italian baroque ceilings. A 20-foot-high topiary hedge enclosing the plaza defines a semi-circular space that would contain an octagonal fountain pavilion of brick, limestone and travertine. The fountain, in the shape of a waterdome, spills over its basin into pools. There would be benches, statuary representing the city's rivers, and a surrounding colonnade.

Greenberg's explanation of this imperial stage set in the lap of overscaled and featureless contemporary skyscrapers is simply that he is working in "the tradition of classical architecture from the ancient world to the present." He uses no witty pinups and plays no erudite private games with academic details. It is clear that he feels that he has just picked up where Luytens left off in the 1920's, returning to a rich, and only temporarily interrupted, Western architectural tradition. It is as if no modern movement had intervened.

The fact is that any architect who did this either pre-

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or post-World War II (Greenberg is too young, of course), would have been ignored as a Neanderthal dummy or attacked as a traitor to his times. He would certainly never have been exhibited at the Modern. Clearly, the times have changed.

Roger Ferri does not turn to the past. He starts with the structural technology of modernism. But where modern practice would use that structure in the most direct and diagrammatic fashion for a mechanical, or abstract, esthetic, Ferri turns the engineering into striking representational forms.

The project shown is for the architectural centerpiece of an ideal, pedestrian city, quite marvelously titled "A Proposal for an American Architecture and Urbanism in the Post Petroleum Age." An ordered and poetic public space features a "Dome of the Three Races," with colossal figures representing Europe, Africa and Asia swirling into a spiral galaxy on cerulean blue tile walls, an imagery evocative of both William Blake and Ledoux's Cenotaph for Isaac Newton. The dome is surrounded by a series of "Hypostyle Courtyards" that are absolutely sense-shattering: These courts are halls of giant lilies, each stem and blossom 42 feet high.

Actually, Ferri's naturalistic forms are an extremely efficiently engineered structure. The six-petalled, blue-violet flowers that top the spiral green stem-columns make up the hexagonal elements of a geodesic dome. This is Buckminster Fuller turned into a field of flowers. The lilies are Brodiaea, native to the Western United States, where, naturally, the city of the future would be built. Ferri's design is part of an ambitious philosophy that seeks "a symbiosis between the built environment and nature." To achieve this synthesis, he tells us, architecture "must speak to the emotions."

Greenberg pursues no visionary future. He turns to the past and the richness of the classical tradition that developed over centuries of Western civilization.

The two projects are worlds apart, but they are both liberating exercises meant to destroy the strictures of modernism. And they both speak to the emotions and to the eye. ■