When Life Is Stranger Than Art: When Life Is Stranger Then Art
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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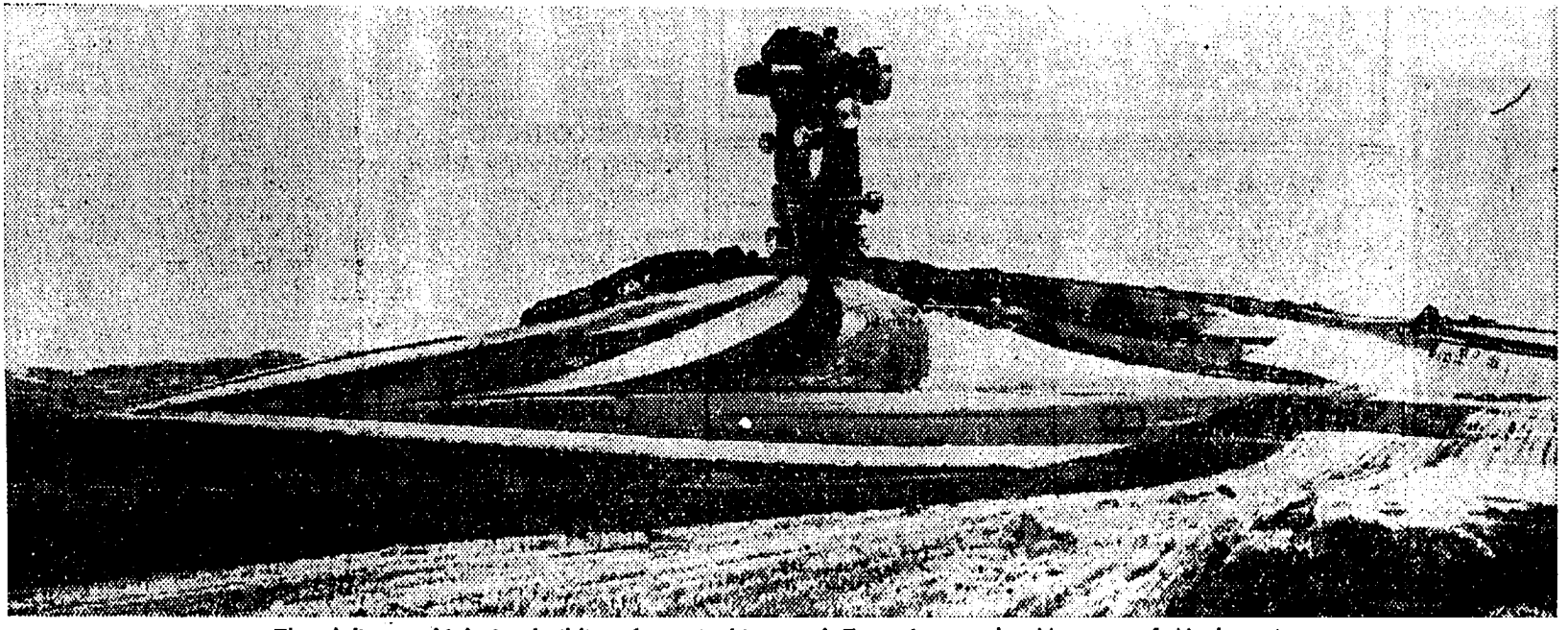

Theodolite as high-rise building from Architectural Fantasies at the Museum of Modern Art
Visions of machines turned into colossal structures with vaguely sinister overtones

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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

ARCHITECTURE is a schizoid art. It has a long tradition of those who are engaged in theoretical speculation and those who are engaged in the solution of practical problems. There are the gurus and the doers, the visionaries and the pragmatists.

This observer of the architectural scene has just returned from the Soviet Union, where the urgent social crisis of one of the most severe housing shortages in history is being met by the large-scale industrialization and standardization of building. You can't get more pragmatic than that.

Back in the United States, the Museum of Modern Art has just opened a summer show called Architectural Fantasies, to run through September 23. It consists of drawings and photomontages of imaginary cities and structures based on the metamorphosis of machines into colossal buildings or taking the shape of architectural abstractions of industrial and engineering forms, all with vaguely sinister overtones. You can't get more visionary than that.

Going from one to the other has put this reviewer into a kind of cultural shock. Allowances may have to be made for the following remarks.

First, I suppose, one should say hurray for the U.S.A. for its willingness to believe that today's shocker may be tomorrow's Main Street. Not only do we encourage the far-out, but we go out of our way to promote the latest *frisson*. As something of a *frisson* expert, Arthur Drexler, director of the museum's Department of Architecture and Design, has been acquiring the drawings on exhibition for the museum collection for the part four years. They are the work of three Viennese architects, Raymond Abraham, Hans Hollein and Walter Pichler. All are in their 30's, and Mr. Abraham teaches part time at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Perhaps it is a Russian hangover, but I find that I cannot take this work all that seriously. It is derivative, much obviously inspired by actual engineering constructions, such as the observatories, petroleum cracking plants, earthworks, underwater installations and space equipment that were featured in an earlier museum exhibition, Twentieth Century Engineering, as well as by the *objets trouvés* of Pop Art.

Admittedly, a spark plug or theodolite (surveying instrument) or battleship raised to monumental architectural scale in a sweeping landscape as suggested by Mr. Hollein's montages—he calls them high rise buildings and cities—takes this form of vision to its ultimate drama. And A *(Continued on Page 26)*

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kind of vision it is, for looking at these things wrenched into a new, aggressively *outré* context is a way of wrenching the eye and mind into new patterns of sight and thought. As such, it is an excellent student exercise.

Its shock value, however, is only in the immediate identification of the unlikely object in its unlikely role; London and Moscow's telephone and TV towers easily outdo the spark plug. The form of many new buildings, following a functional program, is as exotic as Pichler's drawings. They are lovely drawings, incidentally, somewhat reminiscent in character of the 18th century renderings of another fantasist, Claude Ledoux.

I am aware of the important historical tradition of visionary architecture; I have genuflected with genuine respect and wonder before the drawings of Ledoux and Antonio Sant'Elia, and realize that time has given them a greater rather than a lesser degree of interest. (Students who thrilled to Sant'Elia's *Città Nuova* of 1913-14 a generation ago should look at it again; some of it is so close to today's reality that it has little shock value left. Its quality is now historical and architectural.)

Today, even before the ink on the vision is dry, imagination has been outrun by technology, which is prepared to execute anything the mind can conceive. Reality passes fantasy's most ambitious visions. They are virtually stillborn. The only thing left for the fantasists are megastructures to infinity and those sinister overtones.

The pipes, tubes, concrete bunkers and mechanical systems cooly abstracted without reference to humanity, the battleships as cities and boxcars as monuments that make up the exhibition are sinister indeed. The architect has joined the chorus saying that this is the inevitable and ominous form of the most menacing of worlds through accidents of history and technology over which we have lost control for the good of mankind.

Once again, reality is either infinitely more awful than the fantasy or it defuses the imagery of nightmare. The near-reality of the Queen Mary as a superschool, for example, currently being considered in New York City, pulls the punch of the battleship Forrestal in the landscape. The idea becomes plausible and benign. The spontaneous atrocities of American suburbia, identical box after box from the car-eyelevel of the superhighway; of Soviet housing, identical row after row like a scaleless white mirage in flat fields; the crushing, superscaled inhumanity of urban commercial mediocrity; all this makes these studies games architects play. It is schoolboy prophecy.

Certainly these are works of sincerity, skill and a certain chilling poetry, and the architect must be poet as well as builder to survive. But whatever his concern, whatever his fascination with the negative psychology of super-technology, however he responds to the curious and dreadful landscape of the present and future, the architect, unlike the artist, is not just an observer. His job, in the environmental nightmare, is the even more chilling prospect of doing something about it. He is one of the few who can.