THE ARCHITECT AS A PROPHET
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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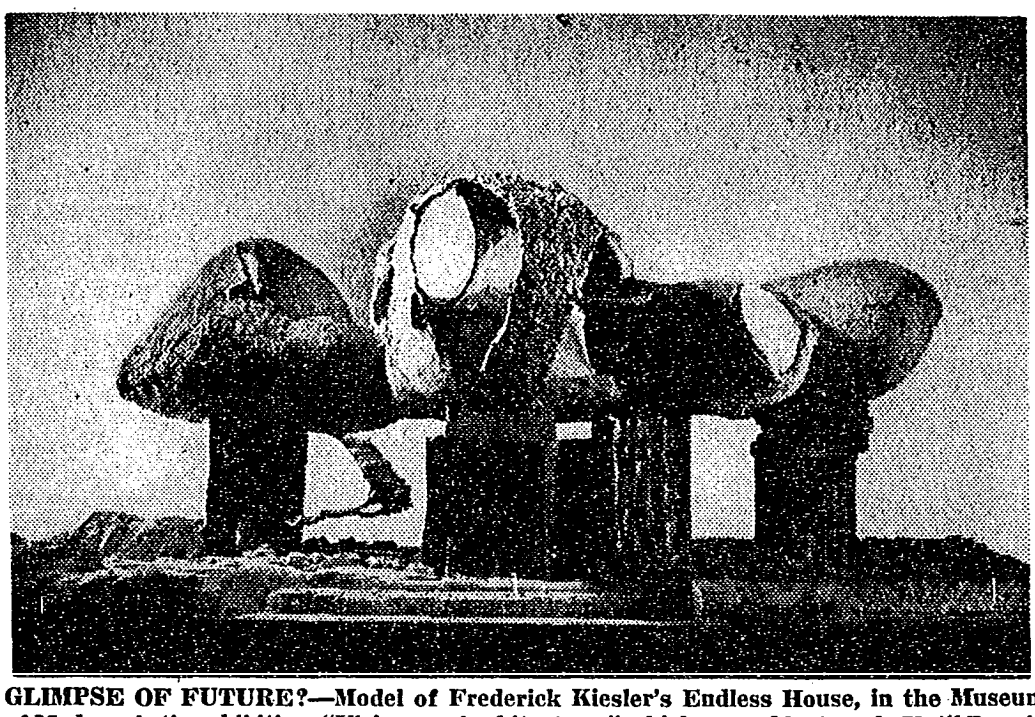

**GLIMPSE OF FUTURE?—Model of Frederick Kiesler's Endless House, in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition, "Visionary Architecture," which opened last week. Until Dec. 4.**

# THE ARCHITECT AS A PROPHET

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A FAR-OUT show has just opened at the Museum of Modern Art that promises to be the season's shocker. For an institution that has led us to expect the spectacular, in a city as inured to sensation as New York, this isn't an easy accomplishment. But "Visionary Architecture," the exhibition that will be on view in the Museum's third floor galleries through Dec. 4, contains all of the necessary elements. It has a dizzying idea, architectural schemes of stupefying scope and murky psychological undertones, and, as usual, a dramatic installation.

## Architects' Dreams

The theme of the show is staggering. "Visionary Architecture" is a round-up of this century's most extreme and esoteric proposals for remaking the world. (Architects have never been noted for false modesty.) It ranges from huge projects for whole cities that would make Buck Rogers blush, to a vast undertaking for remodeling the Alps—a kind of architectural improvement on God. This is the designer's dream-life, the landscape of the imagination, the unbuilt imagery of the conscious and subconscious mind.

If the visitor comes away reeling, he has plenty to think about. For like many of the Museum's shockers, the show also has impressive content. These schemes—none of which, needless to say, exists—are provocative in the most grand and giddy sense. First, they suggest unexplored technological and esthetic horizons. Second, they offer the broadest possible investigation of socio-architectural problems unhampered by society's present standards and solutions, which, in the case of our strangling cities and devastated countryside, are usually no solutions at all. And third, they present patterns of the future beyond any conventional contemporary concept.

## Prominent Theorists

Some of the most respected architectural theorists and philosophers of the twentieth century are present—Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Lou Kahn, Frederick Kiesler, Buckminster Fuller. Moreover, the import of their dreams is inescapable. These men, all of whom are well-versed in practical construction, are here more concerned with the question of what we should build, than with how we should built it. In an age when technology has become an aim in itself and an excuse for everything, including style, they use it only as a means to an end. They fly dangerously high, but they dare to probe the deeper meanings of architectural expression.

At best, however, the answers are never more than abstract exercises. Their frequent pretentiousness and patent impracticability will annoy as much as titillate—an unbeatable combination at the box office. Proposals range from quasi— to absolute, to outrageous improbability. For Algiers, Le Corbusier has designed a nine-mile long, fourteen-story high building that doubles as a superhighway. With the help of life-size photographs, the spectator can enter Frederick Kiesler's world of "endless space," a kind of free-form Fun House, or gelatinous Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. A dramatic series of enlargements present Bruno Taut's 1919 fantasy of classic megalomaniac grandeur—a vista of Alpine peaks cut, polished, faceted and trimmed to suit his own esthetic vision of the Universe.

The dreams of the young, as usual, are particularly dazzling. A "Bio-Technical City," designed by Paolo Soleri for the Arizona Mesa, proposes a series of monumental, plant-like structures connected by underground caverns for churches, museums, or "just beautiful spaces." Not the least of its extraordinary features is the architect's original drawing (not shown), an incredible 200-feet long. A young Japanese, Kiyonori Kikutake, has come up with one of the most intriguing concepts of all—a "Marine City" consisting of floating concrete cylinders containing dwellings with underwater views (the symbolism becomes increasingly terrifying) based on the not untenable theory that future population expansion may force communities into the sea. Significantly, a good number of these projects are concerned with the city—the most pressing problem of our time.

The organization of the exhibition is as remarkable as the material. The architectural images are grouped in two startling, non-architectural categories: Mountains and Roads. "There is a recurrent pattern in this kind of work, a basic consistency," explains Arthur Drexler, Director of the Museum's Department of Architecture, who has conceived, directed and installed the show. "Architectural visions almost invariably follow one of two types," he observes, "mountain-concepts, which are towering, pyramidal schemes, or road-concepts, where road and buildings become one, as a continuous design between two points."

## Idea and Realization

Mr. Drexler, who assumed his directorship at the early age of 31 in 1956, has been responsible for many of the challenging shows that have helped insure the Museum's avant-garde reputation. He feels that "Visionary Architecture," in spite of its "mad scientist" connotations and its accent on sensationalism, is a serious, attention-worthy subject. "The importance of this exhibition is that we show the architectural idea —the image—as it comes from the designer in its purest state. Today, the architect's concept far outreaches what the community will accept. Here there is no gap between the idea and its realization. For the architect, this is the child's idea of bliss—a mountain of ice cream."

The flavors will hardly be to everyone's taste. The effect of this strange, sometimes sinister show, containing equal parts of genius, arrogance and just plain foolishness, is as disturbing as it is stimulating. But if it provides a small, sharp jolt toward more profound architectural thinking, the museum can chalk up another success.