ARCHITECTURE VIEW: THE CURRENT PERIOD OF REDISCOVERY ARCHITECTURE
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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Current Period Of Rediscovery

Now that the tidy taboos of modernism are gone, the whole of history and esthetic experience is respectable again. Architects are charging off in all directions; like everyone else, they are in search of their origins and identity. Faced with an almost frightening freedom of choice instead of a party line, they have ceased to be evangelists and are attempting to become philosophers. Confusion and revelation have equal time.

Today the perception of the most familiar things is changing. We no longer accept the edited or expurgated versions of architectural history. We are discovering that even the achievements of a formidable figure like Frank Lloyd Wright have been cut and pasted to fit the values of doctrinaire modernism. With words and selective examples, we have subtly warped the reality of the work to fit the values of our time.

Every age does this, of course; the image of classical Rome became the Renaissance in Italian eyes of the 15th century. We keep what we like and discard what we don't. In the recent past, the 19th century has been disdained except for a limited interpretation of "proto-modern" examples suitable to modern taste. In this country, we have cultivated the exotic blooms and ignored the native vegetation.

Now it turns out that Peoria and Dubuque may have been in the mainstream after all. The realization is growing that a great deal has happened in the United States outside of the conventional centers of power and culture; there is a whole world of architecture between New York and San Francisco and beyond Charleston and Savannah, lost in the shadow of the Chicago skyscrapers. It has been there all along, but the tendency has been to write it off and out of the history books.

Exhibitions are being mounted and books and articles written now that explore bypassed achievements and unfamiliar facets of accepted work. The immediate gain is for architectural scholarship. We are undoubtedly suiting our own vision once again, but we are achieving a richer and broader mix, enlarging experience and esthetic response.

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Faced with these unlimited possibilities, architects are acting like children let into forbidden places. There are a lot of lost bearings and some badly mixed results. Self-styled revolutionaries are busy reinventing the wheel. It will take time for assimilation and balance to be achieved, for an architectural belief system to evolve. At some place a point of view will come into focus, creating the discipline essential to art.

In the meantime, the pleasure is in the process of rediscovery. There has been, for example, an effloresence of reconsidered Wrightiana this season. Several exhibitions and a symposium have stressed the total esthetic of Frank Lloyd Wright and its sources and influence. The emphasis has been on the material that is most troubling to modernists. While critics and historians have freely recognized Wright's genius, they have detested his own emphasis on the kind of sentiment and ornament that the 19th century admired and the 20th century banished.

What Wright called "the new school of the Middle West,"

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and what we know as the Prairie School, was the subject of a recent exhibition and meeting at the Milwaukee Art Center, organized by Brian A. Spencer, Curator of the Center's Prairie Archives. Titled "An American Architecture: Its Roots, Growth and Horizons," this show was an important step in the broad and thoughtful documentation of the philosophy and style of a native art movement.

Another exhibition, limited to Wright's work, is presently at the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery in Washington. "The Decorative Designs of Frank Lloyd Wright," directed by David A. Hanks, is a fascinating revelation of Wright's sensual romanticism and love of arty kitsch seen in the perspective of the culture of his time. There is as much period charm as progressive planning here, and the two together are illuminating. After July, the exhibition will travel to New York University's Grey Gallery and Study Center, and then to the David and Alfred Smart Gallery of the University of Chicago.

In a curious way, the door was opened to this kind of serious study, not by scholarship alone, which has been operating quietly for some time, but by the enormous and very fashionable vogue for nostalgia and quality camp. There is nothing so far out, the tastemakers seem to be telling us, that it cannot be embraced. There is nothing so anti-modern that it cannot be accepted by the post-modernists. The Joy of Architecture must be on some publisher's list by now.

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If that one isn't available yet, the long-awaited book by Arthur Drexler that was to accompany the Museum of Modern Art's Beaux Arts show in 1975 finally is—"The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux Arts"($45), published by the museum and distributed by the M.I.T. Press. This beautiful and monumental work contains most of the pictures of the exhibition and three weighty essays on Beaux Arts teaching, practice and politics by Richard Chafee, Neil Levine and David Van Zanten. The chapter by Mr. Drexler, "Engineers Architecture: Truth and Its Consequences," takes apart the structural rationale of modern architecture in a brilliant revisionist essay that ranges from the 18th to the 20th century. Metaphor, image and art emerge as the victors.

On a much smaller scale, but of parallel interest in terms of assessing new evidence and old buildings, is a fine article by K. B. Toker in the November issue of the Carnegie Magazine (published by the Carnegie Institute) on "Richardson's Allegheny County Courthouse and Jail." Professor Toker discusses 58 recently discovered competition drawings for the famous Pittsburgh building, relating all of the competition entries to obvious, but largely ignored Beaux Arts roots.

The Beaux Arts, he argues convincingly, whatever its historical vocabulary of forms, is a design method rather than a style. Using this design method, Richardson's historicism was rational and "unsentimental," while his opponents' was symbolic and ornamental, influenced by the success of the eclectic and elaborate Paris Opera of Charles Garnier. Richardson's austere Romanesque style was chosen for its stark masonry, volume and mass, "its fine ear for compositional rhythms." The other designers "were moving in exactly the opposite direction, toward more history, more symbolism, more surface decoration and more formality."

1884, meet 1978. Those words could be written about what is happening in architecture today. The fact that Richardson's building leaves the others trailing in terms of sheer artistic power is something to think about, too. ■

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