Victory By Default
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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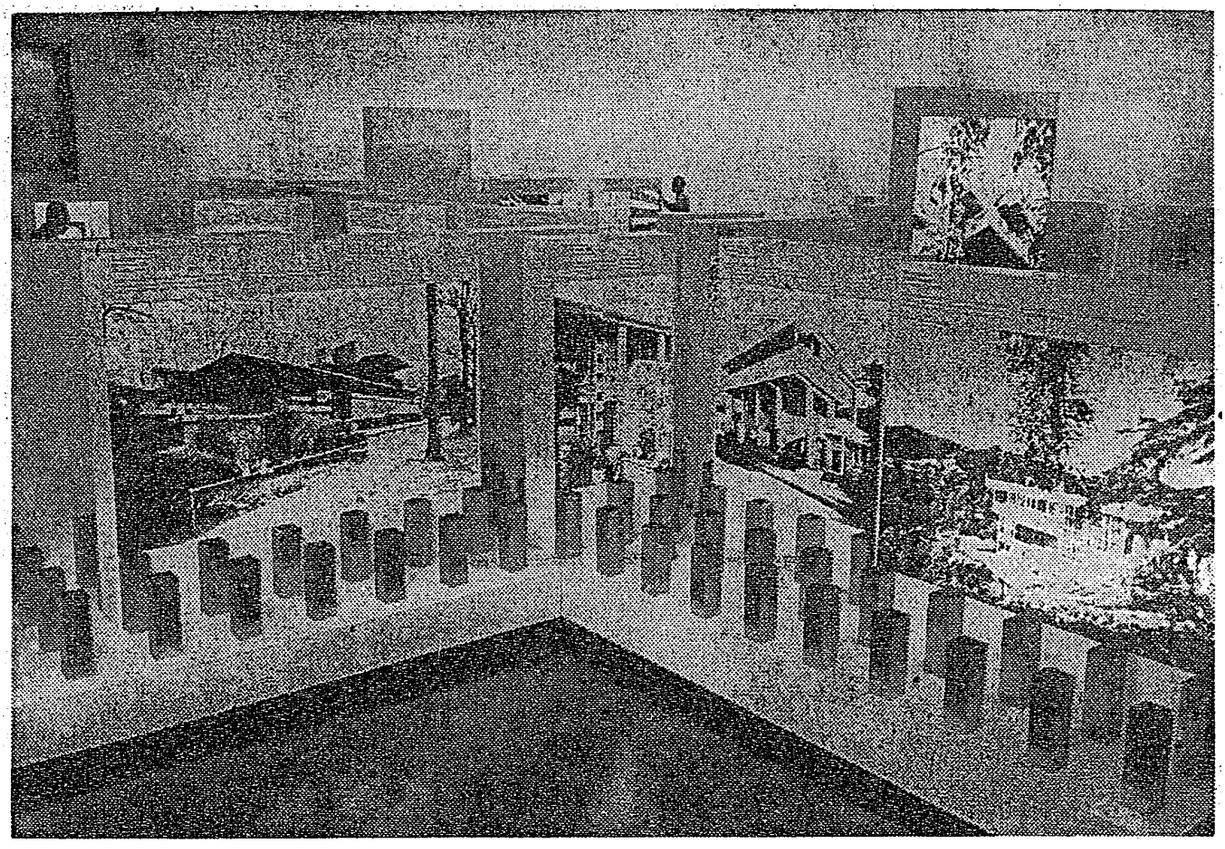
Architecture

Victory By Default

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WANT to know the score for American architecture in the 20th century? Go to the Museum of Modern Art any time through September 6 to see "Modern Architecture, U.S.A.," the selective survey of building achievement in this country from 1900 to 1965, arranged by Arthur Drexler, director of the department of architecture and design, and co-sponsored by the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts.

The museum, of course, is the outstanding scorekeeper of our time. It not only keeps the score but occasionally calls the shots. Understand, then, that you will see only the best, according to the museum's lights, since the exhibition presents just 71 buildings for those 65 years, a microscopic sampling by any standard.



The New York Times (by Sam Falk)

"Modern Architecture: U.S.A." at the Museum of Modern Art
"... full of glorious virtuoso performances"

The Whole Picture

But the best is good enough. The sampling has been done not only with an astute eye, but with a commendable tolerance of diverse styles and trends. The picture that emerges is therefore definitive, on a quality level. It shows the 20th century in the United States as a period of solid, stimulating, wide-ranging accomplishment in the building arts, with high points that have become international landmarks.

This is the museum's fourth survey of the American building scene, at approximately ten year intervals. The first was its introductory architecture show in 1932, the pristine bombshell by Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock entitled "The International Style." That exhibition, which relied heavily on European examples by necessity, introduced modern architecture to the United States.

Pioneering and proselytizing, its message fell on not very fertile ground. But it was, like the museum itself at that time, avant garde, radical, electrically prophetic; the bearer of winds of change. (Ah, the excitement of those days—how quickly innovation becomes nostalgia! Has success spoiled the Museum of Modern Art?)

The second survey, in 1944, was "Built in U.S.A., Since 1932." That show, which this writer remembers as a kind of indoctrination, relied heavily on houses, or the private sponsorship of enlightened individuals who were "with it," and had the means and belief to commission the new work. It was still a small, exclusive club. The modern movement was austerely and firmly intellectual; the property of the initiated; not yet for the masses. But the museum, as usual, was an excellent propaganda showcase.

Trend Setters

By the time the third show, "Built in U.S.A., Postwar Architecture," was presented in 1953, the modern movement had arrived. But it still belonged to a kind of architectural aristocracy.

Its monuments were uncommon buildings like the trend-setting Lever House by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, the first glass tower to breach Park Avenue, and Saarinen's General Motors Technical Center in Detroit, a Versailles of modern industry. To put it bluntly, the hacks had not yet jumped on the bandwagon in any sizable quantity.

The museum continued to point the way by the severe selectivity of its standards.

With the present exhibition there is a subtle but significant change in the museum's role. It cannot pioneer in the old sense. Modern architecture is here to stay. It is no longer a crusade; it is the structural norm, the speculator's tool, the routine designer's rubber stamp, the only practical way to build.

The museum maintains its function as the fingerer of quality, but it has espoused the role of historian rather than of groundbreaker.

The show covers the whole century. All the avant garde works that originally shocked and stimulated are here.

There are the pre-World War I California houses of Greene and Greene, the beginnings of a native, rustic style, and of Gill and Schindler, with their almost clairvoyant cubist purity.

Breuer's bi-nuclear houses in the East share space with the growing West Coast manner of Harris and Yeon in the thirties and forties. Neutra and Gropius represent the influential landmarks of the transplanted International Style at the same time.

With the mise-en-scène established, half of the show is devoted to the last fifteen years. Mies van der Rohe emerges as the star of the fifties and the source of a burgeoning commercial style of glass-walled simplicity. The emphasis shifts from domestic daring to corporate splendor and the espousal of modern architecture by the business establishment.

Fireworks

The late fifties and sixties show a definitive move away from the rigors of the International Style, with an explosion of decorative and historical tendencies in the work of Johnson, Yamasaki and Stone. Finally, there are the fireworks of the most recent innovators: the theatrical experiments of Rudolph and the smoldering, quiet revolution of Kahn.

Through it all, the creative force of Frank Lloyd Wright pulsates as a kind of American leitmotif from beginning to end.

The museum's job has been simply to record, and to separate the gold from the dross. It has done this with its usual taste and competence, and the conclusion is that there is a gratifying amount of construction of 14 carat quality in American building today.

The exhibition is full of glorious virtuoso performances. In the art of architecture, the United States scores high.

But if this country is ahead on buildings as individual works of art, it is woefully behind on architecture as total environment. It has failed completely to deal with the critical problem of controlling the urban explosion through design, of planning the man-made environment for beauty, efficiency and order. This is the great architectural challenge of the 20th century.

In this area, Europe, not America, points the way. European architects have been concentrating on frontiers of design on the community and environmental scale. In close-up, their work may frequently be less attractive and imaginative than U.S. counterparts, but they are not evading the basic issues. These must be dealt with if architecture is to remain the most vital and meaningful art of our time.

The museum show contains some splendid, isolated things. But it is concerned primarily with brilliant non-essentials. For American architecture, this is victory by default.