

Architecture

Heroics Are Out, Ordinary Is In

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

LAST week we offered a subjective summary of the architecture exploration—or how building has turned into environment in the last ten years. For the architect-planner-environmentalist in 1970, this means that he must be a combination of gut-sociologist, Olympian form-giver, esthete, humanitarian, economist and oracle, with an equal grasp of systems technology, zoning regulations, people hang-ups and that elusive thing called quality of life. Gentlemen (and ladies): lots of luck.

Nothing could illustrate these generalities better than the results of the 17th annual design awards of Progressive Architecture magazine, a yearly happening that offers concrete examples of where-we-are-going each January. This particular selection is made by a professional jury, for a professional publication, of seriously sponsored professional projects still in the design stage, but about to be built. You can't get a closer ear to the architectural ground than that.

This year's group of winners has a singular message. What these projects are telling us, essentially, is that the monument is dead. The big preoccupation is with the subtleties and urgencies of urban design, or architectural answers that can contribute to the improvement of the way men live and how their cities work. No eye-blasting esthetic super-whammies. No structural acrobatics. No knock-em-dead-technology-of-the-future. No "statements" or symbols. If they were entered, the jury rejected them.

The word this year is that heroics are out. The emphasis is on increasingly "invisible" features of social programing and tentative, unspectacular innovation aimed at human needs. Anonymous, look-twice-to-find-its-virtues, unprepossessing building is in. "Style" is becoming a dirty word. The Age of Anti-Architecture is here.

And why not? It is the age of the anti-hero. Man has been found to be less than perfectable, and so has his world, and the dreams of planners have turned to urban renewal dust or desolation. Do we need monuments to chaos, to man's manifest inadequacies, to his destruc-



Model of award winning dormitories for Pembroke College, Brown University
Using "dumb and ordinary" elements in an extraordinary way

tion of his environment, or his ability to make money, to the housing shortage, to the consummate 20th-century failure to deal with shelter and cities?

The definitive modern monument is Claes Oldenburg's proposal for a giant concrete cube memorializing war heroes that would permanently plug the intersection of Broadway and Canal Streets. It says everything necessary about heroicism and the real world. Answers, not monuments, are the architect's overdue concern.

The highest award, for example, went to dormitories for Pembroke College to be built at Brown University, by Moore, Lyndon, Turnbull.

Characteristically, the design is singled out for its "broader implications for an urban vernacular." Citation of New York City public housing by Gruzen and Partners notes particularly that it is "destined to retain neighborhood scale and character." A citation for a new town in the Washington, D. C. area by Keyes, Lethbridge and Condon specifies that it "mixes classes, races and types of architecture."

Another citation, for studies of low to middle income housing by Conklin and Rosant, to be built in Rochester by the New York State Urban Development Corporation, emphasizes that these are "proposals to combat pri-

mary concerns of cost." Even the inevitable premiated executive office building for a manufacturer in Bloomington, Minn., by Hammel, Green and Abrahamson, moves toward a more consciously environmental, rather than monumental solution. (The corporate client is not dead; money not only talks, it builds.)

Jury members were Thomas Vreeland, William Brubaker, Bruce Graham, William Mouton, and Robert Venturi — practicing architects and educators. All derided stylistic retreads of the masters and "high-style heroicism." Still, the masters were not thrown away completely. "Probably the biggest lesson that Mies was trying

to teach was to think simply and to think about simple things," said Bruce Graham in a perceptive and pertinent reappraisal.

Robert Venturi, architectural prophet of the 1960's and apostle of roadscape, the spontaneous 20th-century scene and the selectively mundane, was an articulate spokesman for the current trend. (He may yet be honored in his own time with the standard experience of seeing his tenets accepted, distorted and misapplied.)

"This architecture is using conventional, non-heroic elements in a somewhat unconventional way," he said of the first-award winner. "It is, on the one hand, dumb and ordinary, and on the other hand, very sophisticated, sensitively and unusually done. In one sense it is symbolic because it is ordinary. But in another sense it is anonymous and fits in very beautifully with the programatic way of living of college students who really want to do their own thing. There is no reason why the architect should be doing his personal thing."

In its magazine presentation, Progressive Architecture sums up: "This is the genesis of a new vernacular, the search for a straightforward, reality-oriented architecture."

That reality, in the United States today, is overwhelmingly economic. It is the realization that the cost of the building package (construction, money, land, materials, labor, inflation) is high and going so much higher that heroics, either esthetic or technological, can only be classified as obsolete or paranoid. The doctrine of the "ordinary," or using what one can, with design emphasis on environmental sensitivities, is now a no-choice decision. The planners' Utopia — sterile, hard-edged, abstract — has proved to be not only impractical but undesirable. Corbusian *villes radieuses* have been revealed as the monumental fallacy of our time. The reaction to the abuses of architecture for art's sake is long overdue. The human and urban crisis demands solutions.

"We shouldn't be so damned individualistic as architects," says Bruce Graham. "We should be civilized." Architecture could yet become the most civilized of the arts.