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Architecture

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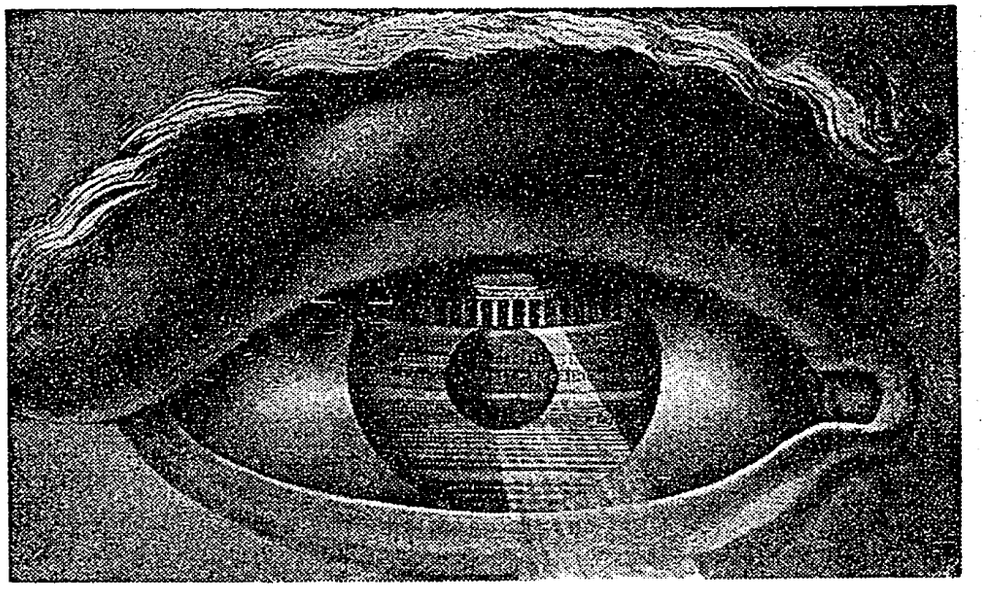

Theater at Besançon, 1775-84, reflected in an eye. Engraving and building by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, from Visionary Architects at Metropolitan Museum. *"Architecture puts upon the spectator the spell of the marvelous"*

VISIONARIES of the 20th century, architects of the cosmic dream, artists of the Pop put-on, manipulators of the surreal landscape, move over. Meet your masters, Etienne-Louis Boullée, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux and Jean-Jacques Lequeu, three turned-on Frenchmen of the late 18th century currently in residence at the Metropolitan Museum in an exhibition called "Visionary Architects" that will run through May 13.

Here is a monumental, megalomaniac, mind-expanding architecture that flouts every contemporary rule and ideal. Human scale? Humanity is crushed by the sheer size, severity and strangeness of these forbidding, Euclidean concepts. Environment for people? This is a morbid landscape of death, of funerary fascination, of cenotaphs, cemeteries and monuments on a scale to dwarf the planets and belittle the gods. It is an imaginary world of fantasies that push creative reason to the vertiginous edge of beauty and understanding. Styles in thought and feeling change as radically as styles in art.

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"The architect's mission," said Boullée, "is to orchestrate nature." That particular trick was not attempted again with comparable grandeur until Bruno Taut redesigned the Alps (on paper) in 1917. "Architecture puts on the spectator the spell of the marvelous," wrote Ledoux, and he did not mean fun places like Disneyland. What he and his colleagues had in mind were temples and tombs, a superhuman scenery of the sinister and the symbolic.

Some of the most extraordinary of these late 18th- and early 19th-century projects, Ledoux's scheme for a saltworks city at Chaux, for example, are familiar from standard architectural histories. Each succeeding generation has looked at these works with awe and differing interpretations, depending on its particular hangup. But few have looked at them in actuality.

The 148 drawings and prints, which belong to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris—three were added for this show by L'Ecole Supérieure des Beaux-Arts—have never been seen in this country before. They are being circulated by the Art Department of the University of St. Thomas in Houston, which has also produced a very complete catalogue.

The experience of the exhibition proves that this remarkable *oeuvre*, in its technical, esthetic and conceptual aspects, is unreproducible. Its actuality is overwhelming. Installed in the Metropolitan's print galleries by Thomas J. McKendry, Associate Curator of Prints, this is the biggest small show to hit New York in a long time.

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In an age that favors instant shock, its impact comes slowly. The drawings are precise architectural renderings in somber black and gray washes; the style is neoclassical and formal. Many examples are much larger than reproduction ever hinted, containing details that have never been visible. All stretch the mind.

There are pyramids that make Cheops miniscule. Cemeteries are cities of the dead. A stadium for 300,000 is approached only by Leningrad's 100,000-spectator stadium today. Leningrad's stadium is built relatively cozily into an earth embankment; Boullée's would have been raised as a masonry monument to a kind of insane stylography of non-stop colonnades. (Only totalitarian vision has embraced this numbing excess. Massed spectator humanity hovers at about 50,000 in the United States.)

In the world of Boullée and Ledoux, lightning flashes from lowering clouds and illuminating shafts break through *grisaille* gloom to strike across gigantic walls and endless steps and columns repeated to infinity. The "architecture of shadows," Boullée named it; of shadows on flat surface planes that banished currently popular Baroque rhythms and decoration as "sterile riches," for the "immutability" of independent masses and a new "poetry of architecture."

Newton's cenotaph as conceived by Boullée in 1784 is the earth's sphere itself, the sarcophagus inside miniaturized by a soaring, celestial replica of sky and stars at night, an artificial sun by day. Ledoux also used a sphere for a suggested caretaker's house at Chaux. To both men, its continuous contour was "the expression of the sublime."

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This eerie landscape of giant geometry, with clouds floating across the tops of pyramids and cones, was not propelled, as today's visions are, by a revolutionary technology. It stretched the limits of classical elements and traditional masonry construction. In the words of George Collins, who has written a fine, perceptive article about the show for the Museum Bulletin, it "defied both man's comprehensions and his building techniques." Its scale also defied economics, even in pre-revolutionary France.

But if these visions remained unbuilt, their architects were not non-builders. They produced lesser, but still quite splendid works, of which few stand today. Boullée was architect to the Comte d'Artois, brother of Louis XVI. Madame du Barry became Ledoux's patron, and with royal help he even got started on his saltworks at Chaux. After the revolution, he was reduced to editing and engraving his lifework.

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Architecture parlante, these strange and symbolic buildings were called in the 18th century. They ranged from Boullée's tomb for a soldier in the form of a supercolossal sarcophagus and Ledoux's bold house for the director of a waterworks, designed as a cylinder or tube through which a river flows, to Lequeu's stable in the shape of a royally caparisoned cow.

Lequeu's more intimate never-never-land is tinted with pastel pinks, blues and greens. His *délices* hover between dream and nightmare: the columns of a gardener's cottage are in the process of transmutation from stone to decaying treetrunks; a gate to a hunting park is a strange abstraction of obelisks topped by realistic animal heads with disturbingly human expressions.

His is a world much closer to Disneyland, but infinitely more elegant and erotic, of Gothic dairies and chicken houses with onion domes topped by delicate spires and roosters, underwater salons to delight de Sade, Indian pagodas as temples of thought.

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There are several ways to look at all this. One is for just what it was: a revolutionary moment in architectural history when top talents rejected the prevailing Baroque and Rococo styles for a fantastically enlarged vision served by a radical reshaping of the classical vocabulary. The new style, Romantic Classicism, was enormously influential.

The second way to look at it is as the forerunner of modernism, and this has been extremely popular in our time. Emil Kaufmann's "From Ledoux to Le Corbusier" is a basic text. "This was a turning point in the history of modern architecture," says J. C. Lemagny of the Bibliothèque Nationale. "A handful of men began to sense that there was poetry in a smooth surface, in two lines meeting at a right angle."

It can also be looked at as a kind of psychedelic experience, or just as art. These are wonderful pictures; masterpieces of draftsmanship and rendering, expressionistic marvels of stone, light and landscape. It will be a long time before they are seen again. And it will be a long time before the 20th century matches the poetry of the 18th.