Next Crisis: A Loss of Faith
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
New York Times (1923-Current file); Jul 4, 1971; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. D20

Architecture

Next Crisis: A Loss of Faith

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE British tend to plant bombs, intellectually, in scholarly publications. The fallout can be deadly. Right now, the fallout is all over the architectural profession. Have you heard about "the breakdown of the architectural belief system?"

You have if you've read a book by Martin Pawley called "Architecture Versus Housing," just published by Studio Vista, London. Or a June, 1969, article in the British Journal of Sociology called "The Architectural Belief System and Social Behavior" by Alan Lipman of the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology. In the blunt, dull, "objective" documentary prose affected by scholarly investigators, of which the British are deadpan masters, the article draws real blood.

It says that the architect must have an "architectural belief system" to respect himself as a professional and to have the respect of others. Such a system, made up of tenets and myths, is a tool for survival; it helps to define his role in contemporary Western society, creating a self-image and imbuing it with status and value.

*

The architect used to believe that he was an artist. But in the 20th century he has moved from artist to technician. The pressures of technology and economics and the overwhelming shift in emphasis to a non-art, pragmatic kind of building in enormous volume pulled the comfortable esthetic rug out from under him. So has the rising pressure of social problems on an environmental scale.

The hard truth is that the architect's role has changed from arbiter to servitor. He is not able to build much more, or much better, than the strictures of cost, technique and multiple restraints permit, which makes him the victim of a set of circumstances that generally produce adequacy at best and undistinguished or even bad building as the rule. He is neither the master of an art, nor of the environment. It's a shabby comedown from previous centuries, and he can't face it without some kind of soul- and face-saving rationalization.

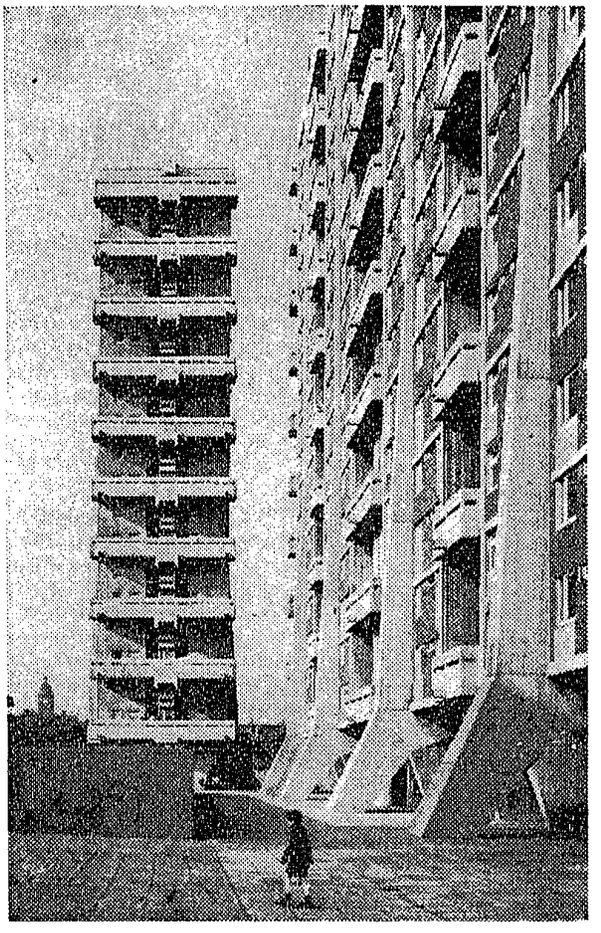
Rationalization came, thanks to the masters of the modern movement. "Functionalism," the declared new doctrine of the 20th century, announced that by building practically one could also build beautifully. Form was to follow function in the new art of architecture.

*

In the light of reality, this was compellingly convenient. It also made considerable sense in terms of direct and logical building. But it didn't make a lot of good buildings, because form following function becomes art automatically in theory only. Still, the thesis saved a lot of architectural souls.

But not enough. The architectural belief system of functionalism proved to be full of holes. It imposed rigid doctrinaire restraints, willfully limited choices and frequently made the environment an adversary. It may have been the beginning of alienation. Never has the architect so totally divorced himself from public preference in the name of "living solutions" for the masses. Never has there been a more arrogant, detached disregard of all that went before and all that people desired. Housing was built on the revered, abstract models of the Deutsche Werkbund, even when the economics of land and construction and the social patterns of the users failed to justify it. And the architectural beliefs were stated with tyrannical paternalism.

It became noticeable that some "functional" buildings seemed to be serving people rather badly. And so the architectural belief system was revised. "Retreating from the uncompromising moral pronouncements of their peers," says Martin Pawley in a chapter on "The Breakdown of a Theory" in "Architecture Versus Housing," "a later group of theorists seized upon the demonstrable truth that a relationship exists between context and behavior and developed a kind of superfunctionalism based on scientific evidence . . ." The new thesis: "The built environment must influence or even control the actions that take place within it."



Henk Snoek

Government-sponsored housing, The Gorbals, Glasgow
For theories or for people?

This gave the architect a handle on the age of science and the future. And it gave him a new role—savior-technician. But his claim that design directly affects or can change human behavior is pseudo-science, and in its attempts to humanize earlier modernist theories, it introduced new fallacies.

Mr. Pawley may be the Jane Jacobs of architectural theory. In addition to exposing these scientistic fallacies he indicts "the blindness and deafness of the architectural belief system to the mass client." He points out how the unpopularity of the current housing models based on this belief system needed only the collapse of one unit —The Ronan Point housing explosion in London that destroyed a single industrialized model of the architectural belief system—for the collapse of reluctant public acceptance. Resentment was not restricted to safety; it included style.

The irony is that the architect has come to his new humanitarianism at a time when the profession is farther away from the people than ever before. Today the architect rarely serves a client directly or has first-hand knowledge of his life style. He usually works for government, for corporations, for boards or committees. There is an insuperable gap between him and the "masses" he builds for; they are unknown to him, through lack of direct contact, and across unbridgeable social, educational and behavioral barriers.

The naive faith that a certain kind of design will result in a certain kind of human response is simplistic nonsense. For confirmation we have only to look at the vision of America's "safe and sanitary housing" (now there was a belief system) that has turned into some of our most vicious slums.

Still, it is equally true that the kind of design that builds high-rise housing for unsophisticated families with small children, without ground floor toilets, is asking for behavioral trouble. It invites anti-social actions including fouled elevators, and through the inability of mothers to supervise their children from hundreds of yards in the air aggravates still other social problems.

There is obviously a connection, a kind of chicken-egg relationship, between design and the environment and human response, and even between design and such abstractions as self-esteem and social hostility. The small matter of no showers and no closet doors is cited constantly by public housing tenants as "demeaning."

*

I believe, with the new theorists, that the architect is on dangerous ground when he claims that he can remold society. There is no such thing as simple environmental determinism. The architect cannot determine human patterns any more than he can control the society that produces the multi-problem family. He has no real answers.

At the same time, I believe that he must work constantly and conscientiously in a sociological framework. And I do not believe, as the theorists do, that the character of the man-made environment in no way affects the kind of man we make.

A great deal of irreparable damage can be done to the complex human psyche, and even to patterns of human behavior, by bad building. Non-neighborhoods that are the amenity-less residue of speculative greed reinforce the sense of worthlessness of those who cannot escape. You can create desolate wastelands of the spirit as well as of the environment. You can scar people as well as land.

But these are value judgments that social scientists shun. Fortunately, environmentalists go where scientists fear to tread.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.