



NEW BUILDING AT CAMBRIDGE: View of Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, dedicated yesterday at Harvard. It was designed by Le Corbusier, the French architect.

Bold Harvard Structure

Le Corbusier's Carpenter Visual Arts Center Collides With Colonial Charm

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass., May 27 —This New England stronghold of tradition was the setting today for the dedication of one of the country's most unconventional new buildings. Harvard University's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, the latest work of the architect Le Corbusier, was officially accepted this afternoon by an academic community that, unofficially, either does not accept it at all or is sharply divided on its merits.

The new Harvard art center is the only structure in the United States by the 76-year-old Swiss-born French leader of the modern movement, whose real name is Charles Edouard Jeanneret. He directed every detail of the building's design and construction from Paris but has never seen it. Its assured, nonconformist rejection of the university's carefully nurtured Colonial charm, both real and synthetic, is the source of most of the criticism. The building could not have been put down in a less sympathetic setting if it had been dropped from the moon.

Impetus for a New Program

Situated in Harvard's neo-Georgian heart on Quincy and Prescott Streets, its concrete-and-glass hulk rudely elbows the ivy-draped brick of the faculty club and the Fogg Museum on either side. Architecturally speaking, it virtually thumbs its nose at both from its obviously inadequate site. To proper Bostonians, this is bad manners, esthetically and otherwise. It has been said that Le Corbusier's buildings violate the street, and this one violates the street and scandalizes the neighborhood. At the same time, the new building manages to make everything around it look stolid and stale.

It does this not because it is brash, or novel, but because it is so remarkably rich in bold ideas. The building itself is an idea—the kind of creative idea that universities traditionally are supposed to deal in. The architect's commission was for an "inspirational building" that would give impetus and direction to a new, experimental program in visual arts. The objective is "the perception of quality," and the first eye opener is this extraordinary structure.

What the visitor, approaching from Quincy Street, sees is a curving ramp that invites him into the heart of the five-story building and carries him through it and out again on the Prescott Street side. To the right is a concrete-and-glass-block stairwell, to the left, the curved projection of a studio workshop, behind it, a series of sunbreaks fronting the upper floors like narrow, angled balconies.

Where the open ramp rises and enters at the third floor, the whole building is suddenly revealed through glass walls that turn studios, workshops and exhibition space into show-cases — both of the visual arts and of the architecture itself. The effect is electrifying, for in one sweeping view it becomes apparent that this is indeed a new world. The many typical Corbusean devices — sunbreaks, balconies, roof gardens, bubble domes, curved walls, angled panels — contribute substantially to the design studies and progress, and provide a superb setting for them. The walk "through" Carpenter Center has become Cambridge's favorite Sunday stroll.

For the stroller, much of the building's quality is, unfortunately, difficult to grasp. From the street, he sees only strong shapes and raw concrete that ivy will never hide. What he cannot sense immediately is the ingenious interplay of indoor and outdoor areas in studios and terraces. His is not aware of the remarkable manipulation of plan and space that creates the striking curved and angled elements so skillfully dramatized, inside and out. Nor does he see the painstaking craftsmanship in the deceptively crude, but expert, use of concrete. (Shipbuilders from Nova Scotia executed some of the curved wooden forms that shape the structure).

Frankly a Workshop

Le Corbusier's buildings are a curious and characteristic blend of the deliberately rugged and the artfully primitive, from a mind of unusual subtlety and sophistication. This one is frankly a workshop; there are no slick finishes or rich materials to seduce the viewer. New England should not object; it shares, with the French, the tradition of austerity.

But with all of its virtues, and with due credit to Harvard, the Cambridge architectural firm of Sert, Jackson & Gourley, which executed Le Corbusier's design with dedicated fidelity, and Alfred St. Vrain Carpenter, who gave the \$1,500,000 for its construction, this is not the architect's best work.

Its weakness is in its aggressive complexity, its over-busy profusion of element that borders dangerously on the chaotic. Barely contained by the uneasy site, it produces a kind of visual nervous indigestion. Some choices of interior finish can only be called unfortunate. At present, the ground-floor terrace looks more like a prisoner's exercise yard than an esthetic retreat, an impression reinforced by the overuse of cheerless gray gravel in too many areas. Proper landscaping, particularly on roof terraces, is still urgently needed to complete the building's concept.

Nothing will be complete or measurable as a success or failure, however, until the courses and the building are in full operation. The center's reception, right now, is cool and cautious. But if its educational attack on "visual illiteracy" works, things may get fair and warmer.