ARCHITECTURE VIEW: WASHINGTON ELITISM VS. PARIS POPULISM ARCHITECTURE VIEW TWO MUSEUMS
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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Washington Elitism Vs. Paris Populism

PARIS

Now that the new East Building of the National Gallery in Washington has opened with appropriately restrained fanfare and to general critical acclaim, comparisons beg to be made with Paris's Centre Georges Pompidou, or Beaubourg. The new French national center of art and culture has not ceased to be a lively focus of controversy after 18 months of operation.

These two startlingly different buildings represent opposite poles of style and intent. They are also probably the two most important institutions of their type of the 1970's and perhaps of the second half of this century. Both have been constructed in capital cities, under government auspices, at extraordinary expense (public money in France, private funds in the United States) and both are meant to stake an important claim in the national and international cultural sweepstakes.

But beyond these facts, they could not be more unlike. Beaubourg, with its brilliant oil-refinery esthetic of highly colored, exposed pipes and ducts and structural steel frame, its glass walls and plastic tubes, its highly visible escalators and skywalks, its suggestion of space-age, bubble-domed futurism, is avowedly experimental and unconventional in its program and design. It is the result of an international competition won by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, which drew 681 entries from 49 countries.

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The building's striking appearance is tied to an equally unusual idea of use. Meant to be a "people's palace," it is aggressively populist in its appeal, from the slightly tatty, mostly fringe-vaudeville acts of the continuous, spontaneous entertainment in its otherwise barren and infelicitous plaza to the programming of its contents and activities. The Beaubourg has been billed as a creative, changing, multi-media, kinetic, cross-cultural presentation of the arts of our time, in which the viewer is to be an active participant. The buzz-word for this kind of institution, which has grown out of the activism and experimentalism of the 1960's, with strong ties to a Marxist philosophy in Europe, is "polyvalent." Such a facility is supposed to supply esthetic interaction on many fronts, rather than the single, predictable formula of the conventional museum.

In the persuasive words of the Beau-

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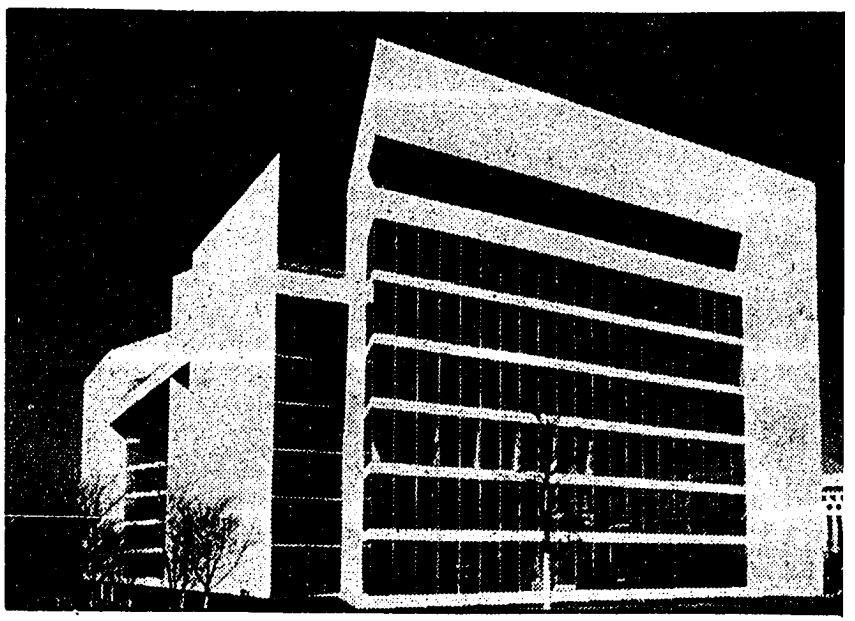

Gavin Hoxtable

The Pompidou Center, or Beaubourg, in Paris stands in marked contrast to the National Gallery's East Building

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Two Museums

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bourg's director, Pontus Hulten, this building is not meant to be "a catalyzer of collective memory, a beautiful fossil of a bygone time," limited to a collection of objects "sanctified by bourgeois taste." Both its physical form and its philosophy are to be "totally open . . . emphasizing life and the event."

The new National Gallery building leaves nothing to chance. It is as elitist as the Beaubourg is populist, as calculated as the Beaubourg is casual. This is the formal, elegant, highly polished statement of the most carefully prearranged marriage of art and architecture that money and "sanctified" taste can put together. The building, by I. M. Pei and Partners, and the collection now being formed are conceived as a showcase of modern classics.

There is another critical difference between the two institutions: The National Gallery is consolidating United States leadership of the international art establishment, while the Beaubourg is making a daring bid to bring creative leadership back to Paris again. The American aim has been instantly realized; the French has not. It will take a good deal more time and effort to turn sensation into substance.

But the Beaubourg is already firmly established as a huge popular success. Thousands of visitors jam into the building every week, riding its plastic-enclosed escalators and exterior elevators to a roof with spectacular views of Paris framed by the structure's Meccane-set steel struts. Sundays bring an overwhelming mass and mix, from jet-set culture addicts coming for their French fix to sightseers from the provinces for whom this is obviously the new Eiffel Tower. The roller-coaster route to the rooftop restaurant appears to have doubled the traffic of the inside of the building with its assorted displays.

Clearly, maintenance has lost the battle with the crowds; carpets are spotted and ripped and surfaces are grimy. And the building's extraordinary vitality is accompanied by a surprising tackiness; there are improvised, hand-lettered signs on odd bits of paper to indicate exits where traffic patterns are unclear or denoting areas barred to the public that would seem to be normal points of entrance. At best, the graphics are poor, and the space dividers of panels and planters are unattractive.

Above all, the Beaubourg is a paradox; it is a dramatic visual knockout that poses and does not answer all kinds of questions and dilemmas about the forms and functions of art and society. It is loved or detested with equal passion, although most Parisians still consider it an affront to the historic sanctity of their city. The building is as handsome as it is startling, and it works surprisingly well with the 19th-century streetscape around it. The colorful abstractions of its industrial forms are an effective foil for classical gray stone, and its esthetics are as sophisticated as the technology it displays. Only from the city's rooftops can it be seen as an immense mass looming taller than its neighbors. From any height, the Beaubourg dominates Paris like a great blue whale.

But the most curious paradox of all is that the Beaubourg is a success and a failure at the same time. French intellectuals are so enchanted with the relatively new phenomenon (for France) of cultural populism—something the United States has been experiencing for some time—that no one will admit that the Beaubourg has been unable, so far, to deliver what it promised. Paris's first public library, which is one of the building's features, is an unqualified smash. But the building's avowed intention of creating a new kind of cultural supermarket of shared and interacting experiences in all of the arts has not been remotely realized.

The Beaubourg is, in fact, currently a disaster in its programming and installation. It has not developed the new relationships "between life and art"; it offers no fresh interpretations of art and space; the expected innovations have failed to appear. What is being offered, except for some excellent modern art, is fairly stale and second-rate. The polyvalent philosophy remains an unexecuted manifesto.

The basic displays include an atrociously installed National Museum of Modern Art, moved from its former quarters in which some fine painting and sculpture is so badly presented (is it the building or its use that is at fault?) that it does both the art and the public a disservice. There are also some less-than-inspired exhibitions (mostly fashionable and unintelligible) and industrial design (mostly dated clichés). The usual films, theater, restaurant and sales areas are present.

There are no miraculous esthetic revelations within this extravagantly engineered space. In fact, the high ceilings with their dramatically exposed services are not high enough so that they do not interfere with the building's contents in the sensitive areas of painting and sculpture. The Museum of Modern Art installation masks the ceiling with hung panels, but it suffers from clumsiness and bad lighting. The all-purpose space is divided awkwardly and inelegantly for its quite unextraordinary uses, an effect to which calculated impermanence adds nothing at all.

It is not enough to bring in the public in droves; populism does not foreclose the need for design standards. From graphics to exhibitions, the Beaubourg fails to communicate its esthetic message.

What is conspicuously absent at the Beaubourg, except for the vertical circulation on the face of its building, is any sense of direction, relationships or focus. Those visual and spatial experiences, both functional and poetic, that are the way architecture gives meaning to a building's purpose and conveys it to the visitor, are totally missing. In this sense, architecture is the most participatory art of all. But Beaubourg's containerized culture disposes of all such considerations, just as today's architects are rediscovering them. Polyvalence has become chaos.

The building's design is, therefore, perhaps the greatest paradox of all. The common debate about whether the Beaubourg's industrial esthetic is the last gasp of something old or the start of something new is quite beside the point. The entire purpose of these forms is to serve as signs and symbols of something new; it is not newness but the appearance of newness that counts. The visual message is that this is an art-experiment, a trip into the esthetic future.

If what is meant to look like a "ready-made" is really a custom-made object, that apparent contradiction is also unimportant; the symbolism works. If the building will be profligate with energy and difficult to maintain, that, too, is secondary; it is clearly intended to be a monument. And if the idea of a monument for an activist, populist, impermanent kind of art is also a paradox—well, that is the real puzzle and problem of Beaubourg.

In sum, the National Gallery has risked nothing and the Beaubourg has risked everything. Although it hasn't won its gamble yet, the future is not foreclosed. This still-unfulfilled, admirably ambitious and dramatically handsome structure could turn out to be André Breton's "dream factory" after all. ■