

Cooper Union Projects Vary Architecture Show

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The exhibition of student architectural projects from the School of Art and Architecture at Cooper Union opening today ought to have a sign at the entrance, Danger: Fast Curve. Because a fast curve is what this New York school is throwing the architecture profession, edu-

cationally, at a time when the training of the architect is in a state of revolutionary upheaval

An Appraisal

trying to plug into a changing society.

This spectacularly beautiful work, elegant, formal and totally detached from the world around it, represents a kind of counterrevolution in today's educational thought and practice.

Called Education of An Architect—A Point of View, the show is jointly sponsored by the Museum and the Architectural League of New York, under an initiating grant from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. It will run through Jan. 10.

Esthetic Qualities

A symposium on the subject of architectural education in the United States is being held today and tomorrow at the museum.

The word beautiful is used advisedly and with some trepidation for the work on exhibition, because there is also a danger that it will be admired solely for its exceptional esthetic qualities. It is easy to covet. But that is not the point.

What matters is that these remarkable drawings and models by 40 students are the result of a seven-year-old program, under the direction of the dean of the Cooper Union School of Art and Architecture, George Sadek, and the chairman of the department of architecture, John Heiduk, that runs completely counter to the well-publicized "radicalization" of other architectural schools and courses.

At a time when basic skills are considered unessential, at Cooper Union they are learning to draw.

While others rush to embrace sociology and interdisciplinary studies, these students are dealing in complex, sophisticated, abstract intellectual and esthetic exercises deliberately divorced from "meaning" and social issues, with a meticulous, exquisite draftsmanship that sends shivers up one's spine. There is not a magic marker anywhere.

When students at other schools set up ghetto workshops, at Cooper Union they learn how to put buildings together. They believe in the well-made joining as well as in the dignity of man.

These are city students, many from less than affluent homes in deteriorating neighborhoods, and they know a lot about the dignity of man. No one has to teach them urban problems.

They are dealing with training and tools as much as with ideas, and they have learned one eternal truth. Somebody has to be able to file the drawings for a better world.

A Step Backward

Most revolutionary of all is the style of this work, or what looks, superficially, like its total irrelevance. It is a radical step backward.

With schools beginning to turn toward today's world and the pop environment of the 1970's for lessons, at Cooper Union they have gone back to fundamental, abstract problems of form and space and the masters of the modern movement. Here are Le Corbusier dissected, Rietveld resurrected, De Stijl exploded, Cubism and Constructivism redefined.

"The work at Cooper Union," says Ulrich Franzen, the New York architect, in a book to be published during the show, "can be described as out of sequence."

Right now, by a not totally uncalculated coincidence, the prophets of the opposition — the antiarchitectural "real world" of the roadside strip and the hamburger stand — Venturi and Rauch, are having their own exhibition at the Whitney Museum.

You might call the two shows a confrontation, or a dialogue. The 30 blocks between them could be the Grand Canyon.

The Cooper Union program also begets a product, something currently as unpopular as a skill.

Hazard in Method

The product may be a brilliant inquiry, such as a house devised from the possibilities of a cube, or a building "in the intention of Juan Gris." Or it may be a full-fledged solution, in the case of a high-rise building or city housing.

The hazard of the method is that a program of such inexorably defined and rigidly abstruse theoretical restrictions can turn into a formalistic straitjacket, producing Tiffany objects. Ideally, after mastering it, the student should be able to tackle anything.

At present, there is a spirit of purpose and pride at Cooper Union that has a lot to do with the program's achievements.

Never underestimate a student who takes the assignment to "design and construct a utilitarian object" as a challenge to build an electric car, and builds it with no speeds backward. Or one who upends subway trains for an entrance to New York's transportation netherworld.

The exhibition leaves no doubt about the techniques and sensibilities acquired. After problem solving in a silver-lined vacuum, however, there will be an equal need for sociological, environmental and humanitarian skills.