OPPORTUNITY MUFFED

On Television, Architecture Is Again The Stepchild of Criticism

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

At last the arts have made the big time—television big time, that is. Even more surprising, the art selected for the honor was architecture, which usually trails the field. "The Shape of Things," a coast-to-coast television spectacular on shelter and the man-made environment, was scheduled by the National Broadcasting Company "World Wide 60" production last night, (previewed Tuesday for this review) in prime evening time and living color and black and white, with the assistance of N. B. C. correspondents in London, Paris, Rome and Cairo (come in, pyramids), and cartoons by Abner Dean. Naturally, there were cartoons. It is axiomatic in television that no serious subject shall be presented to the American public without them.

Poor Show

Unfortunately, the show seldom rose above comic-book level. Its theme was important and its scope was ambitious, but its execution was confused and inept. To those of us who are not only concerned with the way architecture shapes our world and our lives, but are also aware that the story of man's cities and monuments is packed with glamour, this was a glorious opportunity missed. It is hard to believe that out of the wonders available the trivia could have been picked so unerringly and the clichés repeated so tritely, while so much of real beauty and significance was passed by.

In Rome, for example, where one falls over the memorable buildings of fifteen centuries, the viewer was cued into a Parioli-like vista of undistinguished new buildings on the Via Veneto and a routine facade shot of the Villa Borghese. Of the incomparable architectural experiences of that great city—the fanciful baroque surprises of St. Ivo or the Piazza San Ignazio, the timeless magnificence of St. Peter's and its embracing plaza, to name just a few—as well as the modern marvel of Pier Luigi Nervi's spectacular structures for this year's Olympics, nothing was shown or indicated. Paris was represented by the Ritz Hotel, for its "dignified air of opulence," although the building's particular distinction is in its orderly architectural integration into that uniquely perfect public square, the Seventeenth-century Place Vendome. London, the city of Christopher Wren churches, was dismissed with a sampling of Labor dwellings.

Passing quickly from the caveman to the present and from Europe to America, the narration moved to the way man lives today. Here again, the industrious democratization of the subject (or was this chummy nothingness just inadequate knowledge?) treated the viewer to the homes of Hollywood stars, the atrocities of a trailer court, the sins of mass housing, and a fuzzy demonstration of an architect-designed house. With the best intentions and the worst possible results, a brief explanation of modern technology and the development of the skyscraper was attempted (with William LeBaron Jenney called William Jenning throughout), experimental shelters of the future displayed, a series of churches flashed on with accompanying inspirational theme, and space planning in cities and the problems of the automobile touched on lightly and uncomprehendingly. There were endless shots of pieces of buildings: corners of curtain walls, chopped-off skyscrapers, towers, steeples and facades at eccentric angles, close-ups of stained glass, clear glass, and vine-wrapped trellisses; only rarely was a building shown properly, as a whole and firmly attached to the ground, to communicate its scale or its relationship to people and setting. In short, there was everything but architecture.

Bright Spots

A few fine moments indicated the possibilities. Architect Philip Johnson's remarks were sudden flashes of clarity in a murky stream; Frank Lloyd Wright's cantankerous, penetrating utterances were spice to the general mediocrity. But a mere mention of Brasilia ignored today's greatest architectural adventure; the creation of new cities out of wilderness in our own time, like the Brazilian capital, and Chandigarh, the new capital of the East Punjab, in India. Nor is any story of architecture complete, or even begun, without the great open rooms of the world—the Piazza San Marco in Venice and the Piazza Navona in Rome are only two—where the masterworks of man become an integral, planned part of his life.

As for N. B. C.'s sincere, but misguided, effort, we can only agree with narrator Hugh Downs' confused comment on one of Abner Dean's patently superfluous cartoon demonstrations: "We'll take your lesson to heart, as soon as we're sure what it is." The riches of art and architecture remain untouched.