Cultural Shock, Anyone?
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Architecture

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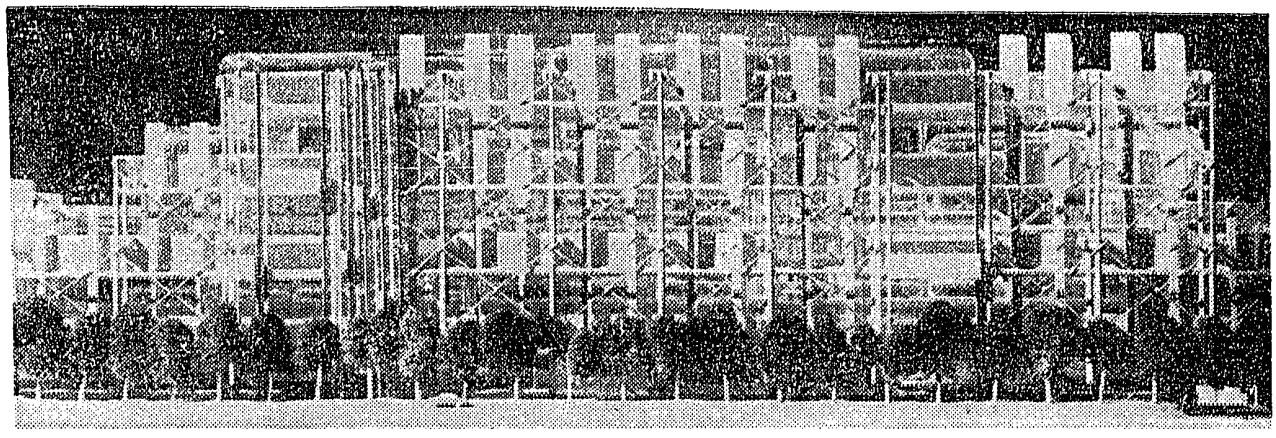

Model of Le Centre Beaubourg, prize-winning design for a new modern art museum in Paris
"A cross between a computerized Times Square and the British Museum"

FOR an instructive, comparative view of architecture of the 1970's and the 1870's, the places right now are a small show of the prize-winning design for Le Centre Beaubourg in Paris at New York's Museum of Modern Art (until Feb. 20), and the just opened, restored Renwick Gallery in Washington.

Both are buildings designed for the arts, and both represent the most advanced architecture of their time. But a warning is necessary. To go to the Renwick, complete with reinstallation of mid-19th-century paintings tiered on wine-red walls to a 38-foot-high skylight, and to visit the Modern's presentation of the electronic Centre Beaubourg in the same week, as this reporter did, is to suffer some kind of cultural shock.

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Nothing could demonstrate more graphically how radically thought, feeling and society have changed in a hundred years than these two examples of the art of architecture, a century apart. They make extraordinary cultural history.

The project for the Centre Beaubourg, the product of an international competition, is for a new museum of modern art for Paris, to rise, in part, on the site of Les Halles. It has been approved by President Pompidou and construction is to start this year.

The Renwick Gallery, newly rehabilitated and named after its architect, James Renwick Jr., after 55 years of use as the U. S. Court of Claims, was built originally as the first Corcoran Gallery for William W. Corcoran, Washington banker and art patron. It was constructed in 1859-61, but not opened until after the Civil War, in 1871. Its Second Empire form, a mansarded pavilion, was the architectural *dernier cri* in the United States, following closely the architectural *dernier cri* in Paris, the "new Louvre" of Lefuel.

Today, the restored Renwick is nostalgia, remembrance of things past. The Centre Beaubourg is the future, or at least how the younger architects of the present visualize the immediate future.

Stylistically, the Renwick could not be more 19th-century substantial. Very avant-garde in the late 1850's, it was one of the first American manifestations of the vogue under Napoleon III for early French Renaissance filtered through Second Empire high-style sensibilities. Its sandstone-trimmed red brick has been considered an interloper to this day. The building's preservation is a triumph for the Smithsonian, which will use it as a showcase for the arts of design.

Corcoran thought of the building as modern, and of himself as a collector of modern art, receptive to the latest esthetic ideas. He was delivering to Washington, willy-nilly, the "best" of the new French taste.

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French taste has undergone some heavy changes in the intervening time. One assumes that acceptance at the highest official level of the results of a government-sponsored competition makes the Centre Beaubourg French taste. It is really international taste, and a prime example of how some of today's most progressive architects are thinking.

What is proposed for the Centre Beaubourg is a huge building that is hardly a building at all. Architecture no longer means solidity. The structure has demountable exterior and interior walls made of clear plastic, tubes running up and down the outside to house elevators and escalators, and a system of massive trusses for skeletal support. Virtually everything is meant to be moved, changed or modified.

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Unfortunately, there is no model with the drawings and photographs that make up the show. There has not been an ice temple like this one since the Crystal Palace in 1851, another Victorian breakthrough.

The architects of the Centre Beaubourg are Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, a young Italian-English team working in London, with Ove Arup and Partners, consulting engineers. Their large, transparent box is to be a flexible receptacle for activity. The walls, in the words of Arthur Drexler, director of Moma's Department of Architecture and Design, are to "incorporate moving images so that the building would serve as a gigantic TV screen relaying art information and news of the world." This includes, according to the architects, "the latest disasters." There is something terribly vivid about that link between art and disaster, the acceptance and programing of the esthetics of violence.

The architects have indeed created a program, as well as a building, and the two are inseparable. The arts, often projected on the walls, are intended to dematerialize the architecture. The building, according to the British press, is to be a cross between "a computerized Times Square and the British Museum."

Thus it becomes an indication, as building has always been an indication, of existing states of consciousness and culture. At this time, these are the values, or nonvalues, of mobility, impermanence, throwaway standards, the medium as message, the cults of communication, cinema, the electronic image, and involvement at the nerve end of the emotions, rather than through the intellect, in a total sensory package of light, sound, color and form.

It includes, by extension, the mutability of lives, appearance and feelings, a sense of irony and cynicism about what used to be considered impressive or beautiful, a compulsion for novelty and the stimulus of continuous change. It is art and life, and theater, as Mr. Drexler points out; it is the museum as stage or bulletin board. (Shades of the Venturis.)

These are not just the affectations of youth; they are in many ways the realities of today's existence, even for those who protest them most. Call it breakdown or call it metamorphosis. But these are the terms, and the record, of a society in radical transition as that wrenching revolution is taking place.

Beyond that, the concept is full of bugs. The building is a total paradox. It wills itself to deny monumentality, insisting that its form is transient, and yet it will inevitably be the most inescapable thing on the landscape. The massive metal armature, the glinting skin, with or without the pictorial light shows, make an immensely powerful esthetic statement. There is a lot of talk about the art of architecture being obsolete, but don't you believe it.

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The paradox of solidity and fixed construction and fluidity of structure and effect creates insoluble contradictions. The design locks in dilemmas. Its professed flexibility arouses visions of herculean maneuvers with those demountable exterior walls that raise questions of value or need versus effort, to say nothing of what the unions would demand if the concept ever makes it to the United States.

As the design is being worked out, permanent arrangements are sneaking in. Galleries are being fixed, with the addition of internal stairs, with the formality of vintage Le Corbusier. "Conventional works of art might perhaps be housed in another, less active building," says Mr. Drexler, with obvious misgivings. What is being exhibited at the Modern now is an approximation of what may actually get built, and it could be a lot more conventional before it's through. Architecture as happening is leading to a maze of ambiguities in which theory is undone.

But art does not get undone. Art manages to transcend paradox and theory and even the intentions of its creators, as long as it speaks accurately for its time. The Beaubourg project has that reality. Architecture has a way of becoming a substantial record of the history of man.