The Gospel According To Giedion and Gropius Is Under Attack: The Gospel Is Under Attack
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Modern architecture is at a turning point. A half century after the revolution that ushered in the modern movement and changed the look and character of the built world, we are in the midst of a counter revolution. Although the streets of cities everywhere are lined with the glass and steel towers that testify to the genius and influence of Mies van der Rohe, and the sculptured concrete forms of Le Corbusier have transformed our surroundings, from public buildings to housing, the theory and practice of modernism are under serious attack.

There is no controversy about the monuments themselves. Such structures as Le Corbusier's Marseilles apartments and chapel at Ronchamps are among the ranking prototypes of 20th-century high-rise and symbolic construction; the prophetic vision of Mies's post-World War I glass skyscrapers have been fulfilled handsomely in Chicago in the 1960's. The equally prophetic humanism of Alvar Aalto, the early work of Walter Gropius, and all of the landmark examples of the leaders of the International Style remain among the icons of the profession.

But other icons are being broken. The beliefs and tenets of the modern movement that created these buildings—the gospel according to Giedion and Gropius that preached functional and formal purity and rejection of the past—is being increasingly debated and denied. There is in process now a complex, provocative and generation-splitting restructuring of what Martin Pawley and other writers have called the "architectural belief systems" of the 20th century. The philosophy, art and practice of architecture are changing.

The evidence of these changes is clear. Last fall, the Museum of Modern Art, which introduced the International Style to the United States in 1932 and retained its ideological fervor for 40 years, staged a huge Beaux Arts show—a literal exhumation of the specific style and teaching that modernism rebelled against. This spring, at the same time that Chicago has honored its celebrated skyscraper heritage with a major exhibition, a counter-show of "what the Chicago School left out" has been causing furious comment. Both the New York exhibition and the rebel show in Chicago lean heavily on a change of heart and eye that rejects accepted doctrine and "rediscovers" what the modernists discarded.

Among architects, a group of "young Turks" has embraced this "radical" re-viewing of the past, and much more. In Philadelphia and at

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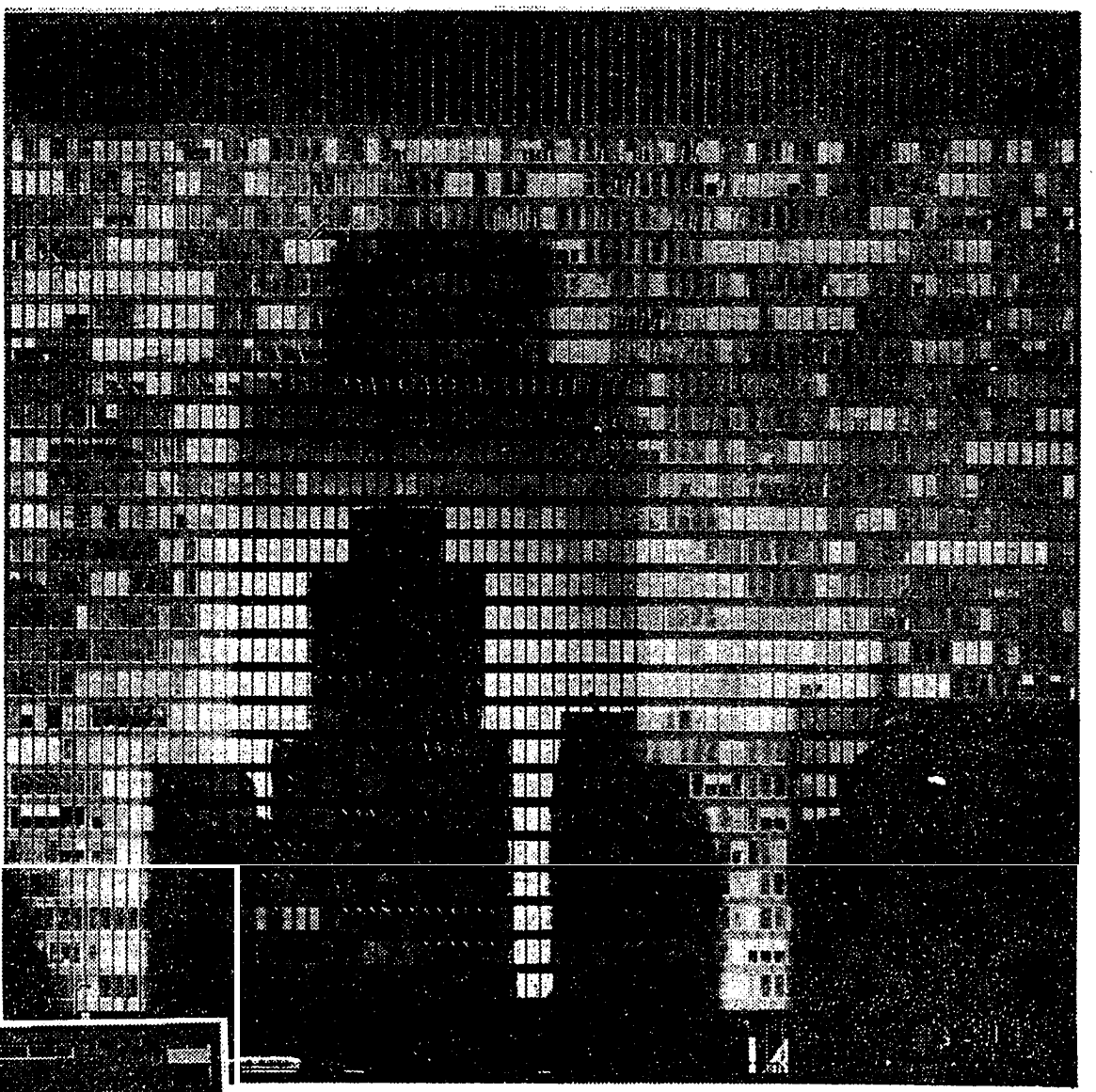

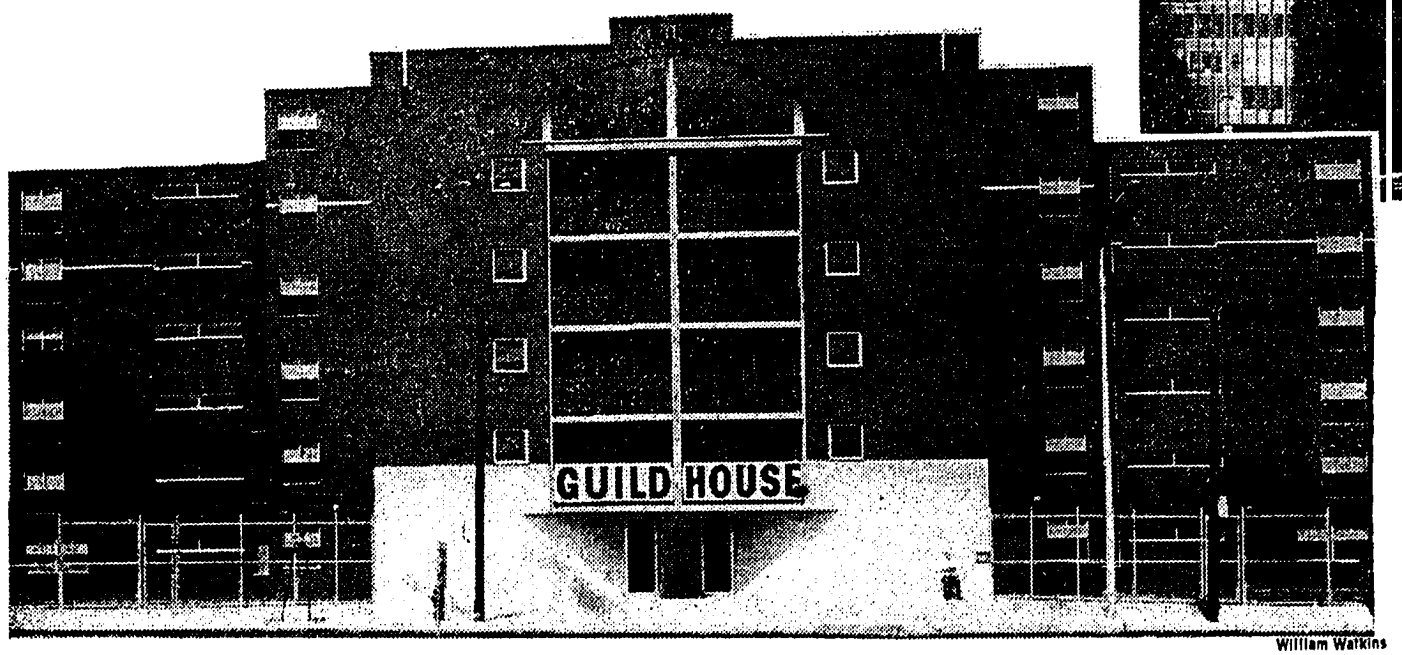

William Watkins

A new school of young architects whose work is "romantic, eclectic and fiercely intellectual," as represented by Robert Venturi's Guild House, are in revolt against the "pure functionalism of such masters as Mies van der Rohe, whose Federal Center in Chicago is a modernist icon.

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Yale, academic movements strongly influenced by architects Louis Kahn and Charles Moore and historian Vincent Scully, have produced a generation of heretics. Their approach is romantic, eclectic, and fiercely intellectual, a far-cry from the hard-line, functional esthetic of the 1920's and 30's that was to save society as it created art.

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Today, New York architect Richard Meier builds houses of exquisite Corbusian nostalgia that are anything but "machines to live in." The Philadelphia firm of Venturi and Rauch draws equally from the near and distant past and the vernacular scene for low-key designs that are viewed by some as leg-pulling satire and by others as serious innovation. The New York firm of Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer uses the "industrial esthetic" of the early modernists with the same tongue-in-cheek delight that it applies to the inclusion of camp details. The younger Chicago architects are reviving local 1930's modernism with aesthetic nostalgia rather than with functionalist doctrine.

This work is being forged out of new ideas that incorporate everything from visual irony and scholarly exercises in historical revisionism to a powerful disillusionment with the failure of the dream of the world of the future promised by the modernists. The broad outlines of the new architecture—for there are diverse and interlocking trends—are part of a culture that is currently rejecting or questioning older values, discovering a new populism and pluralism, and is increasingly informed and selective in its taste.

The result is neither static nor stagnant; this is a period of vital exploration. But there is little agreement about what is going on. The older generation sees the new directions as blasphemous and the younger generation sees them as the creative reopening of the limits of design.

The counter revolution had to happen, not just because history and art never stand still, but because so much else has happened in these fifty years in which the modern style has become the established way of building. Modern architecture is acknowledged to be an immense, incontrovertible and and often magnificent fait accompli, paralleled in importance and achievement by only a few periods in civilization. It glorified new structural materials and systems, and developed a style based on the expressive use of these elements.

At the same time, it was closely allied to the growth of abstraction in the other arts, with its insistence on flat surfaces, simple geometric shapes and primary colors. There were laws, written and unwritten. Ornament was crime. Form followed function. Industrial processes and materials, or the machine esthetic, replaced handcrafts. The break with the past was to be total.

But rules are made to be broken. The present generation of architects, using the advances in structural technology freely, detours significantly from the earlier functional straitjacket. It is no longer considered essential to reveal or express basic structure; the best recent work of Kevin Roche, for example, conceals it with a flat glass and metal skin whose elements express a quite different scale, without sacrificing a rational relationship between the two. There is a rising emphasis on the use of structure and technology to create an esthetic of formal drama for its own sake, related to function, but quite independent of it.

The forms that once followed function are treated as abstract sculpture. Elements of technology — industrial trusses, exposed ducts, factory glazing—are used as a decorative vocabulary of symbolic objects and intrinsic ornament rather than as objects of utility. The English work of James Stirling carries this practice to an expert high.

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The idea of a building and its uses expressed with basic simplicity and clarity is often replaced, in the work of younger practitioners, by ambiguity and playfulness. The kind of complexity and even arbitrariness in the way the components of a building are combined and the calculated effects that result suggest the architecture of Mannerism or the Baroque rather than the puritanical pieties of modernism. In fact, an eclectic mannerism that would have the modern masters turning in their graves is replacing the "purism" and "functionalism" of the 20th-century architectural revolution.

The new approach requires skill and carries a high amount of risk. At the same time there is a careful questioning of everything the modern movement has promised and delivered.

And we can see now the limitations of modernist doctrine. The modernists promised Utopia; their vision was of a cleaner, brighter, more efficient and orderly universe in which architecture and technology would create healthful and happy housing for all countries and classes. It was to be free of all hypocrisy and cant and any reference to history.

Le Corbusier proposed tearing down part of Paris for towers in a park and shocked no one; the Deutsche Werkbund built model housing that housed very few; Hugh Ferriss drew "future metropolises" that never came to pass. But it was truly believed that architecture was to be a social tool in a marriage of morality and art that would have confounded even Ruskin, and architects were to be the missionaries of a new and better world.

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It did not work because it promised too much, and what it promised was unreal. Modern architecture is perhaps a classic case of the disappointments — no matter how great the very real accomplishments—that go with too-high expectations. The question asked by a new generation of students is how such high ideals could have produced so much inhumanity.

The dream of modernism was caught in other 20th-century revolutions, in racial, social and moral upheavals far beyond the architects' control that made their panaceas seem touchingly naive. It was crushed by economics, which reduced a reductionary esthetic still further, from the bare beauty of the new technology to the cheap, stripped expediency of businessmen and bankers. It was distorted and turned into clichés by speculators and jerry-builders.

The basic belief that functional and mechanical logic led naturally to elegance and beauty was disproved in a million sterile downtown "renewals." And the kind of architectural sociology that replaced the 19th-century row houses of the Gorbals in Glasgow, for example, with modern high-rise towers, simply exchanged one kind of slum for another.

There were, in addition, theoretical blind spots that courted disaster. If modernism rejected history, it also rejected reality. It still retained the traditional idea of the building as monument, ignoring great masses of lesser construction, and imposed its monuments on their surroundings with a stunning lack of environmental empathy.

Environment, in fact, was the important missing concept. There was little concern for the need to relate building elements to each other in a social, functional and esthetic pattern beyond the most abstract planning diagrams. The organic strengths and accretions of the ad hoc environment were anathema.

All this—the perversion of the modernist ideal, the failure of its social aims, the explosion of the myth of progress, the deadly spread of the commercial cliché, the disruptive impact on the receiving environment, plus the poverty and rigidity of design from which any allusion to the past has been expunged — led inevitably to disenchantment. And then came a new generation, which had no bad associations with history, for whom old buildings did not mean oppressive ideas or conditions, and who did not share the taboos of their fathers.

Looking for enrichment, both visually and emotionally, this generation has indulged in a romantic revivalism that accommodates both the most superficial nostalgic kitsch and the most informed historicism. It is an orgy of rediscovery.

Architects have developed a new set of attitudes and interests based on new perceptions of history and the environment. The two are inextricably linked. To see the environment whole, one must see history whole, and it has become necessary to deal sensitively with older buildings and values. It has become equally necessary to acknowledge the rationale and the result of disorderly, but vital organic growth.

Today's architect, therefore, does not find history expendable; this is one profession that went through the "history is irrelevant" bit half a century ago. In fact, historicism, and in particular, historical revisionism, is one of the leading factors in the new architecture. But history is seen and used very differently now. There is a selective preoccupation with those periods that serve the almost perverse complexity of the contemporary condition: Mannerism, the Baroque, Romantic Classicism. There is great interest in those styles that were declared despicable, dead, or non-existent by the modernists: the Beaux Arts, Victoriana, Art Deco and all the products of the near-past that were deleted by revolutionary taste or doctrine. There is a fascinating rewriting of recent history to restore suppressed styles and periods.

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Fringe figures, not-long-buried or still alive, are being revived and reinterpreted: George Howe, George Fred Keck, Andrew Rebori, Barry Byrne and Ely Jacques Kahn among the modernists; Ralph Adams Cram, a "modern" medievalist; Frank Furness, the most exuberantly outré of the Victorians. Continuities and sequences are being filled in and rearranged, and all of this work is being given fresh meaning.

But this process, too, is not without its own architectural belief system. The philosophy of eclectic revivalism was synthesized by Robert Venturi in a slim, catalytic book called "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture" published by the Museum of Modern Art in 1966.

(When the Museum opened its "scandalous" Beaux Arts exhibition in 1975, it signified the official acceptance of the new respectability of the Academy and put its official stamp on the broadening of modernist horizons through the examination of the past. The expected shock waves never materialized because historical eclecticism had already been embraced by the architectural avant garde.)

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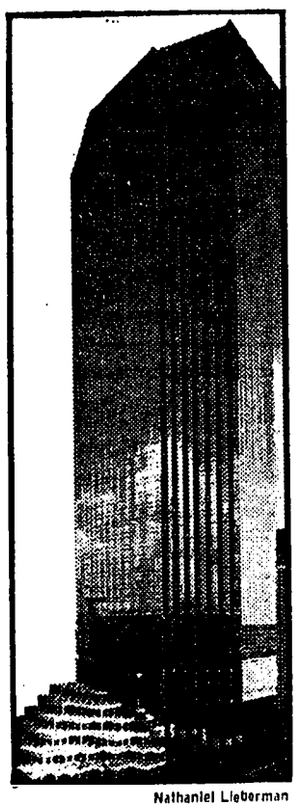
Venturi's point, now generally accepted, was that the art of architecture was an inclusionary whole, made up of all of history and all of the elements of the environment, and that examination of this continuity, with its contrasts and intricacies, had much to teach the designer about the richness of esthetic and functional relationships. He called strict modernist doctrine exclusionary in its renunciation of these models and effects. He endorsed a vital and messy disorder over an orderly sterility, and suiting his own taste for a sensitive, suggestive esthetic, incorporated mannerist elements of symbolism and ambiguity into his style.

An even earlier eclectic precedent is to be found in the frankly sybaritic borrowings from Soane and Ledoux and other 19th century Romantic Classicists in the work of Philip Johnson in the 1950's and 60's, to an obligato of embarrassment and abuse from the righteous. The buildings weren't always very good, and some were even quite bad, but these experiments led to Johnson's liberated, crystalline geometry that is in the front ranks of today's creative work.



Nathaniel Lieberman

Sculptural abstraction—Johnson and Burgee's IDS center in Minneapolis

The liberating example of Louis Kahn, puzzling at first but increasingly understood and hailed as architectural horizons widened, is now seen to be of paramount importance. Kahn, trained in the Beaux Arts, never scuttled its lessons; his underlying love of classicism and solidity created a unique modern style. He managed to incorporate a sense of the timeless qualities of architecture, from antiquity on, in his striking contemporary work, opening the eyes and minds of an entire generation of students to the universality of the building art.

A young New York group has taken closer historical models. John Hejduk plays on Corbusian themes and motifs; Richard Meier, Charles Gwathmey and others ring changes on the nostalgic and formalistic elements of the International Style. This is an expert game of almost instant recall, totally divorced from the theories and conditions that shaped those forms in the first place.

In a sense, this is modern architecture turned inside out, its basic elements transformed into an arcane but elegant vocabulary for a tour de force kind of building based on special references for those in the know. This rearranging and incorporating of motifs becomes a style in itself, abstract to the point of sculpture, aggressively and hermetically esthetic at a time of declared emphasis on social utility and human needs. This is consummate mannerism. And it is also an élite style when élitism is a pejorative word. It is producing some of today's most skilled and handsome building, as well as some architectural navel watching, and there is the danger of an exotic dead end.

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What is most significant about this kind of history is that it is being transmuted into something totally new. It is all revisionist, whether it is a group of architects rewriting the history of the Chicago School, or another group using rediscovered design principles in an uncommon or unusual way. No one intends to engage in conventional revivals; there will be no neo-Gothic or neo-Baroque or copies of medieval or mannerist monuments or traditional systems of ornament. But architects raised on "less is more" are hungrily groping for a little more.

They are avid for the revelations of space and facade afforded by the classical Beaux Arts; they are admiring of the picturesque use of light, level and surface enrichment as tools of functional purpose and sensuous response in High Victorian styles; they can fall in love with a 1920's facade. The recycling of old buildings is no accident at this time. But these lessons are not being taken literally, and their interest comes from much more than nostalgia. What is being sought are ways to achieve an enlargement and elaboration of modern vision, technique and effect.

Interpretively, everything is "in" that the modernists threw out. This principle of inclusionism, or almost anything goes, extends to another parallel new interest: the vernacular or Pop environment. The architectural avant garde is equally intrigued by the rediscovery of history and the new discovery of the popular landscape—the hagiography of signs and symbols, motels, fast sales and fast food, of the highway, the suburb and the city. Chaotic commercial accretions are carefully dissected for function and symbolism.

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Here, too, Robert Venturi and his wife, Denise Scott Brown, must be credited. They achieved the apotheosis of the "dumb and ordinary" building and environment—an event that has a clear parallel in Pop Art. The architectural message was delivered in the 1960's through articles and a book, "Learning from Las Vegas." This was a much harder bullet for most architects to bite than the rehabilitation of history in "Complexity and Contradiction."

But this perception of the vernacular environment adds another valuable chapter to history. Its insights and evaluations are revealing. Beyond that, however, the Venturis have translated their observations into debatable, didactic principles for the practice of architectural design. These principles not only turn architecture inside out, they turn élitism inside out. In their kind of inversion, the builders' economic and functional justifications for junk become the architect's guidelines for art. A stunning contradiction is produced: élite populism. What is most significant, however, is that this intellectual exercise, too, is a form of eclecticism, with an input into the design process similar to neo-historicism. It is, in fact, part of the same architectural package.

A particularly quixotic kind of élite populism can be seen in the work of the firm of Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer, which incorporates elements of kitsch, dumb-and-ordinary and near-history into a product frequently distinguished by urbane wit and skill. Simple industrial materials and mechanical elements are celebrated as high art. But the ultimate example of this popular mechanics approach is probably Paris's Centre Pompidou, the prizewinning design by Piano and Rogers, now in construction for the new museum (more correctly an information, entertainment and cultural center) that will be Paris's contemporary cultural showplace. Described in Architectural Design (a British periodical that regularly feels the pulse of the avant garde) as an "urban machine, fluid and flexible," it is to be a place where specialists and laymen "design their own needs into the building, as free as possible from the limitations of architectural form."

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Old dreams die hard. We have come full circle. Here again is the modernists' wonderful machine for living and doing other things in, married this time, with remarkable ingenuity, to the new populism: everyone is to share in giving the building its identity. Since its identity has already been firmly established by the architects, in a *macho* structural steel-and-glass esthetic of elaborate, mechanistic symbolism and indelible style, this may be paternalistic populism. And we are back to the monument again.

All of these trends represent attitudes and styles only possible at a time of the near-total reevaluations that are currently running through most of the institutions of contemporary society. This new architecture is a part of its time. Its polarities of subject and style are due to another current concept, the idea of "pluralism," an already overworked word that implies a permissable and desirable cultural diversity. And its products are only possible in the hands of extremely able, acutely well-educated, worldly professionals of highly developed sensibilities.

The words that tie these many directions together are revisionism and romanticism. Austerity is now a matter of economics more often than of taste, and never of decree. History and hedonism are back. Architecture is admittedly not going to save the world and it has a far gentler moral stance. It may still improve parts of the environment noticeably, and it has developed a commendable social awareness.

But two things are being reordered radically today: the history of the modern movement and the theories and principles upon which the contemporary practice of architecture rests. The nostalgia, the revivalism, the symbolism, the arcane and arbitrary uses of the past, the canonization of the recent and the ordinary, bespeak a cultural sophistication rather than a cultural copout. These references are being employed carefully and creatively, with immense calculation and rigorous intellect, for a cool and challenging art. ■