

ARCHITECTS EXAMINE NEW DIRECTIONS AT SUMMIT MEETING

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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FOR six weeks and ten sessions, in an unprecedented, intensive series of public discussions, architects have been examining with serious, soul-searching ardor the burning questions of our time: "Where are we?" and "Where do we go from here?" The projects themselves, and the purpose behind them, can only be praised. But it is likely that never have so many great names produced fewer answers or more massive *ennui*.

Columbia University's homage to "Four Great Makers," Walter Gropius, LeCorbusier, Mies van der Rohe and the late Frank Lloyd Wright, was advertised as a "program in celebration of the great founders of contemporary architecture, a call for critical re-examination of the central issues facing us today, and a plea for a new formulation of principles and perspectives for the future." The March-to-May event conferred the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters on Gropius, Mies and Le Corbusier, and the discussion-meetings billed enough stellar names to fill this column.

International Gathering

Mies, unfortunately, could not leave Chicago because of ill health. Gropius came, however, and Le Corbusier arrived from France for one of his infrequent but memorable appearances and an enchanting demonstration of the Gallic temperament that more than equals the legendary public relations artistry of our own man, Wright. (His acceptance speech at the convocation in his honor was a star performance—he diagrammed it in the manner of an architectural Uncle Wethbee.)

Speakers at the "cycles," as the symposia were designated, included Deans of Architecture

Charles R. Colbert of Columbia, who headed the program, José Luis Sert of Harvard, and Olin do Grossi of Pratt Institute; museum director James Johnson Sweeney, who recently left Wright's controversial Guggenheim Museum for Mies' monumental addition to the Houston Fine Arts—an exchange recognized in architectural circles as a voyage from the frying pan to the fire; architects Serge Chermayeff and Philip Johnson; architect and critic Ernesto Rogers from Milan; planners Edmund N. Bacon and Henry S. Churchill; and a glittering lineup of historians, writers and editors in the field.

Concurrently, two additional symposia sponsored by The Architectural League of New York were held; evenings that emphasized thoughtful subjects dealt with by equally thoughtful speakers. In March, the top English critic, Reyner Banham, flew from London to engage in a genteel debate with Philip Johnson on the subject of "The International Style: Death or Metamorphosis," during which Mr. Johnson offered the intriguing idea that esthetics may

not be merely in the mind, since a chair is comfortable to sit in to the degree that it is beautiful to look at. Mr. Banham departed from the role of polite guest only once, to characterize the elegant austerities of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill's Pepsi-Cola Building as "the architecture of conspicuous abstinence."

In April, the question of "Individual Expression Versus Order: The Issue in Architecture," was dealt with firmly by critic Aline Saarinen, who pleaded eloquently for order, and Yale architecture head and practicing architect Paul Rudolph, known for his own highly individualistic work, who convincingly called for order for everyone else.

Discussions Wander

If the intentions everywhere were noble, the results were considerably less impressive. It was obvious that both audience and speakers were awash on a sea of directionless, unfocused verbiage. The outstanding exception at Columbia was Peter Blake's excellent analysis of Mies' dedicated attempt to create a new architecture in the

very real terms of modern technological resources and changing human needs, with a sincere, and all-too-rare attempt to answer the basic questions of the place of this kind of building in today's and tomorrow's world. (The program's subtitle, "The Next Phase in Architecture," was generally ignored for anecdotes, tributes and platitudes.)

Equally obvious was the fact that a record amount of unproductive talk about architecture was going on at the same time that architecture itself was in a singular state of vital and positive productivity. The impressive statements being made by contemporary building were unparalleled by any of the statements from the platform. Most discouraging of all to the faithful auditor was the inescapable observation that few of the illustrious names provided new material or new insights on any of the designated subjects—the skyscraper, the city, the house, the esthetics of modern technology—offering only a routine, and to a professional audience, not very complimentary rehash of familiar facts and attitudes.

Could smugness be setting in among the architectural elite? Would some equally soul-searching re-evaluation be in order for distinguished members of the profession, as well as for its aims and activities? Except for George R. Collins' and Edgar Kaufmann Jr.'s informative presentations of Wright's ideas on city planning and the use of the arts, or Thomas H. Creighton's clear-eyed evaluation of Gropius's high aims and low score in the integration of painting and sculpture with contemporary architecture, much of the rest might have been left unsaid.

What of those basic problems bothering every observer of sensibility today, of which so little was mentioned? What about the stimulating and confusing new forms now appearing in such profusion? What is their meaning and justification? Have the "great makers" taught us how to build for the future? Will we find a way to reconcile human scale with the mass needs and the mass architecture that are the inevitable accompaniment of an exploding population?

Concluding Words

Possibly there are no answers, and no solutions. Jacques Barzun implied in his closing address on "The Architect and the Intellectual Aspirations of His Day," that the answers will be found in practice, rather than in words. "In art, truth does not reside in propositions; it resides in objects."

"Architecture," said José Sert, earlier, "is an act of faith—faith in the future, and faith, in a better world."

But perhaps the most telling comment was once made by Mies at a lengthy office conference. "Gentlemen," he announced, "We are not lawyers. We are architects. Let's stop talking and draw."