FOUR MODEL BUILDINGS UNDER MUSEUM REVIEW: EXPERIMENTAL STYLES IN ARCHITECT
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Experimental Styles in Architecture At the Museum of Modern Art

IF, as a distinguished English critic recently observed, we need more raisins in the plain dough of modern architecture, the Museum of Modern Art is currently offering us the ingredients for a fruitcake. "Architecture and Imagery," to be on view through April 19, is a small, exotic exhibition consisting of models and photographs of only four buildings—the proposed TWA terminal at Idlewild airport in New York, by Eero Saarinen and Associates; a completed church in Stamford, Conn., by Harrison and Abramovitz; another church in France by Guillaume Gillet; and Joern Utzon's prize-winning design for the new Sydney, Australia, opera house—all rich, strange fare, quite unlike the austere architectural diet to which the Museum has accustomed us.

Resourceful New Techniques

Nor is the Museum unaware of its departure from its customary tastes in presenting this provocative material. According to an official statement, these buildings are being shown because they represent "sane, important developments in modern architecture." They place unusual emphasis on the elaborate enrichment of the "pure" modern manner, through the use of complex structural techniques. These techniques create extraordinary new forms—decorative, sculpturesque shells and faceted prisms—that are a startling denial of the traditional straight-walled building box or cube, and of the popular design esthetic that rests so squarely on them. In spite of their shock-value, however, these "space-structures" are neither puff-pastry novelties nor the overblown abstractions of some surrealist dream. They are striking and controversial examples of a significant new direction in architectural design.

As such, they must be evaluated seriously. The small but important body of building represented by these four projects is the first meaningful addition to the limited vocabulary of the established modern style. Although there are many excellent things about this style—not the least of which are simplicity, logic, technical efficiency and, at its best, a remarkable, barebones beauty—the fact remains that our buildings, regardless of purpose, look more and more alike. Thus severely restricted by a technology dependent upon the practical economics of large-scale production, the range of architecture is forced into an increasingly narrow mold.

Today, the use of an amazingly versatile material—reinforced concrete—has made it possible to break this mold. By a curious irony, the architect owes much of this freedom to his pragmatic colleague, the engineer. Reinforced concrete construction is a comparatively new technique in the history of building. Daringly developed for utilitarian needs in the late nineteenth century, its unique monolithic, free-form character has not been fully exploited until our own time. These romantic esthetic experiments began with the roofing of factories and the spanning of rivers, in such trend-setting structural innovations as Ernest Ransome's impressive, turn-of-the-century industrial plants in America; the Swiss engineer Robert Maillart's graceful bridges of the Twenties and Thirties, and the noted Italian Pier Luigi Nervi's revolutionary series of stadia, hangars, factories and warehouses which are as remarkable for their beauty as for their mathematical logic. Now, when the architect is faced with a problem for which familiar, look-alike solutions are obviously inadequate, he can devise an excitingly different form—confident that it can be engineered.

He can be sure, in fact, that he is able to transform almost any design dream into reality. Unfortunately, these flights of structural fancy can range from the sublime to the ridiculous, and for every dream there is a nightmare. A giant snail drawn by giraffes, proposed by Salvador Dali as a nightclub for a Mexican resort, has been pronounced practicable by Felix Candela, the eminent and respected engineer. The danger is not that "it couldn't be done," as a current inescapable cigarette commercial chants repeatedly, but that it can. This is the negative aspect of freedom—its potential abuse—with which we will be forced to reckon.

On the credit side, this freedom gives us the custom-made structure in the midst of machine-made conformity; the unique design for a specific use, deliberately orientated to emotional and psychological needs. Considered by some to be the last stand of creative individuality in the face of overwhelming architectural uniformity, it is one answer to the neat, anonymous, omnipresent curtain wall. These buildings are belligerently personal in an impersonal world. They represent the revolt of the architect against standardization; the statement of the artist, in flight from the scientist, and the statistician. Very well, then, they are art; but are they architecture? Is this self-conscious straining after novelty always the best solution to the problem? Does it compensate, in originality and beauty of form, for the inevitable awkward passages, the strident insistence on attention?

In the case of the few best examples, such as those in the show, the answer may very well be yes. Certainly Utzon's opera house, designed as a collection of billowing sail-like concrete shells housing an admirably utilitarian double auditorium scheme (and called everything from an architectural masterpiece to a collection of abandoned umbrellas), is an inspired solution for a civic landmark, particularly since the site is a peninsula projecting into Sydney harbor. Such a building could be unique and memorable.

Saarinen's TWA terminal is an outstandingly sensitive exercise in the creation of a special form, physically and psychologically suited to the purpose of the building. Harrison's church, in spite of deplorably pedestrian details that jolt one unwillingly into a realization of how close to impossible it is to organize all of the elements of these unconventional structures into a harmonious whole, is still an exciting edifice. The soaring "V-piers" of Gillet's church, supporting a doubly curved "saddle" roof, evoke a medieval religiosity.

Common to all is the use of forms that are unfamiliar but strongly evocative—for these constructions are sail-like, bird-like and cathedral-like abstractions that suggest, as the show's title implies, that "imagery" often figures prominently in this type of design. If these buildings have a major fault, it is that they tend to be overly intellectualized solutions, so studiously and arbitrarily "esthetic" and novel that a triumphant tour-de-force air obscures all other accomplishment.

In the hands of sincere, talented architects, such experiments can be a welcome broadening of the contemporary style, in spite of the fact that the many problems they pose are far from solved. Their effects are too easily and superficially imitated, however, and parodies of the new forms have already appeared as cheap roadside shacks, ice-cream stands and jerry-built motels. In the hands of less able men, or at the mercy of publicity-minded clients, poetry becomes prose, art becomes advertising, and genius inspires gimmicks. This spectacular "shape-architecture" is particularly vulnerable, and runs the risk of being summarily reduced to absurdity.

FRENCH—"Anemones and Poppies," detail of an oil, by Odilon Redon, lent by Mr. and Mrs. F. Altschul to show at Paul Rosenberg's.

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