

# ARCHITECTURE ON TV

## 'Greatest Non-Building Architect of Our Time' Expounds His Ideas

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

**T**WO swallows do not make a summer, and two TV shows on architecture can hardly be called a trend. But it is both surprising and gratifying—just one week after the National Broadcasting Company's ambitious fiasco, "The Shape of Things"—to find the Columbia Broadcasting System courageously tackling an architectural subject on last Sunday's "Camera Three" program, a weekly half-hour television show devoted to laudable experiments in presenting ideas on an adult level.

The subject of the program was architect-sculptor Frederick Kiesler, theatre and gallery designer and originator of a novel form of shelter, the "endless house"—a man Philip Johnson calls "the greatest non-building architect of our time." The show was sincere, straightforward, competently conceived and produced. What it lacked in excitement, it made up in tasteful, intelligent handling of Mr. Kiesler's exposition of unorthodox architectural theory.

This theory has become an almost legendary canon of progressive thought among professionals, but is still largely unknown to the public. Mr. Kiesler is one of the more picturesque personalities currently practicing—and talking—in the architecture field, for articulateness is not the least of his abilities. His ideas are important, influential, and to some degree, maddening.

For Mr. Kiesler has a singu-

lar talent. He is a master of intellectual persuasion, an esthetic salesman on an almost evangelical level. He uses this talent to promote a fascinating, but dubious article. Hearing him speak of his "endless house"—a free-form space enclosure of reinforced concrete, described as having endless continuity of space and endless possibilities of shape—one is temporarily convinced that all houses as we know them today are old-hat. We are sure that the post and beam has had its day, that the right angle is dead, that square shelters are square, and the people in them, squarer. We need only to open our tight little minds to see the blinding vision of a bright new world. He promises the "liberation of the personality" and the sensuous satisfactions of life in eggs, cocoons and nameless sculpturesque shelters.

But unfortunately, Mr. Kiesler has another talent—not quite so rare. He continually disproves what he says by what he does. Put into practice, his theories tend to be refuted by their execution.

In Mr. Kiesler's settings for art displays, for example, his continuously curved, freely-flowing walls and ceilings (carried out to a limited extent in his design for World House Galleries) and the use of eccentrically shaped, all-purpose chair-easels for art and customers (as in the Peggy Guggenheim gallery of 1942) lead not to a "free-

ing" of the work of art from its conventional setting, but to chaos. The techniques of liberation, meant to insure comfort and freedom, become instruments of interference. To this observer, entering a Kiesler creation provides the momentary pleasure of being inside an updated, abstract Easter egg, followed by the frustrations of unnecessary and unjustifiable disturbances and distractions, and a longing for the simplicity and logic of plane surfaces and straight lines.

The basic fallacy is that Mr. Kiesler's concept of architecture is not really architectural. He is primarily interested in sculpture, for which he has exceptional sensibility, and he camouflages abstract sculpture as a kind of building. Sculpture becomes structure, by a slick, expertly rationalized, unpardonable reversal of legitimate architectural procedures. Enchanted by the limitless possibilities of large-scale, three-dimension-

al shapes, he creates models of houses before plans, and fits uses to them, supposedly in accordance with re-studied "basic life functions." But the sophisticated rituals of twentieth-century existence are far removed from basic functions.

Although Mr. Kiesler has been carrying on his "endless house" studies for a good many years, only today, with improved techniques in reinforced concrete construction, can these projects be executed with any ease. Significantly, Mr. Kiesler has not been the one to develop these structural techniques, which would be the primary justification for his experiments.

Even if Mr. Kiesler's thesis is debatable, it is stimulating, and C. B. S. is to be applauded for presenting his esoteric talents to the television audience. But we are still waiting for the "big" program that will reveal the full beauty, drama, and importance of the art of architecture.