ARCHITECTURE FOR A FAST-FOOD CULTURE
By Ada Louise Huxtable
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Jane O'Neal

Pop food shops and museum villages have something in common, according to a Cooper-Hewitt show. A Los Angeles McDonald's (above), which presents itself as a glittering disco, and Colonial Williamsburg (below), which offers reconstructed buildings as packaged history, have each created an image that can be marketed.

ARCHITECTURE FOR A FAST-FOOD CULTURE

Some say it's junk, but more and more experts are finding aesthetic merit and cultural meaning in the vernacular environment. A show at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum spotlights styles and symbols of the Pop scene.

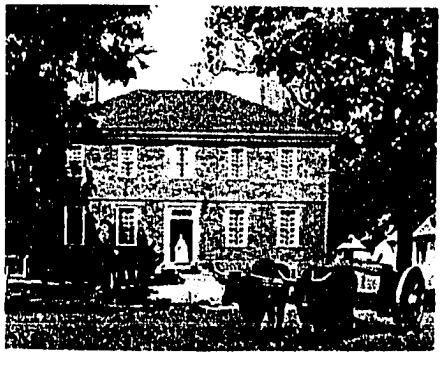
By Ada Louise Huxtable

Tired of the New Nostalgia? Had it with the 30's, 40's and 50's? Been through camp, kitsch and all the stylish ghosts of the recent past? Too bad, because we're in for more of the Brave Old World. The fascination is still with the artifacts of near-history. Those who set the esthetic and intellectual fashions—and this is not to denigrate the seriousness of the intent or the result—are still engaged in an orgy of rediscovery of the familiar. The vernacular environment, the transient buildings of the highway, the Pop visions of the Strip, the signs and symbols of suburbia, Main Street then and now, the commercial world of fast food and service and the esthetics of expediency are being spotlighted with increasing seriousness.

This new architectural vision can be looked on as the revelation of great truths or a cultural disaster, but it should come as no surprise. It is closely related to the ascendancy of Pop Art and the development of those ironic sensibilities that have changed the way we look at the everyday world.

With the antihero now in fashion, could the antimonument be far behind? The current philosophies of populism and pluralism have found easy echoes in the multiple movements of the architectural world. This is a world that exerts a peculiar fascination, with its visual one-liners and genuine insights into sociocultural history. And the understanding of this world is reinforced by the 1960's' discovery of the environment, a real place that includes unplanned chaos and "antiarchitecture," in addition to more conscious efforts at art and order. That this architectural underworld with its esthetic and intellectual perversities has become the focus of the taste makers who ignored or reviled it for so long is a significant cultural irony of our time.

There is one important change, however, in the present excursions into the Pop environment and the recent past: They are no longer just a sentimental journey, a fashionable



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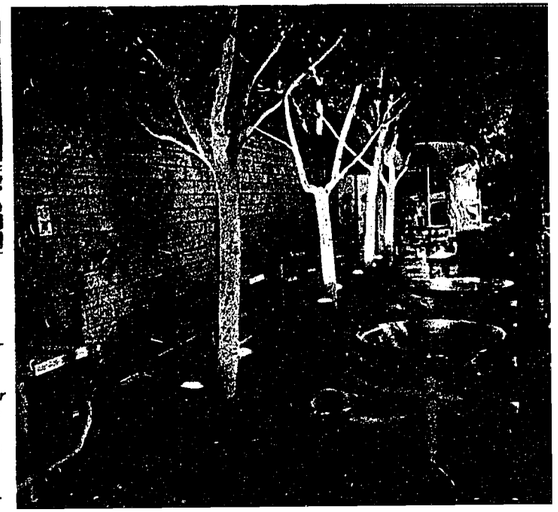
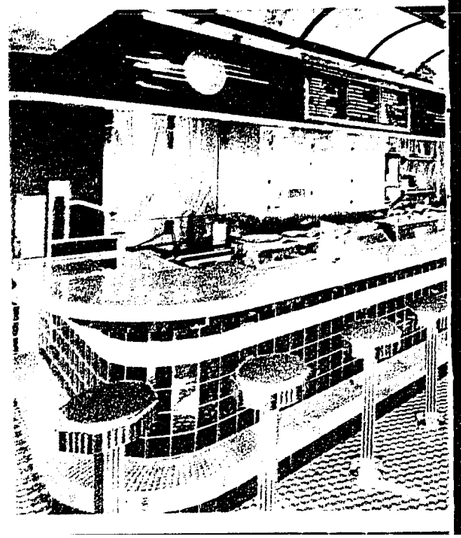
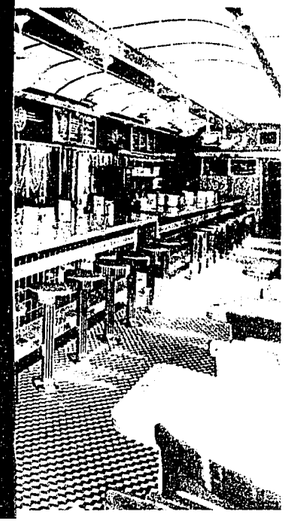
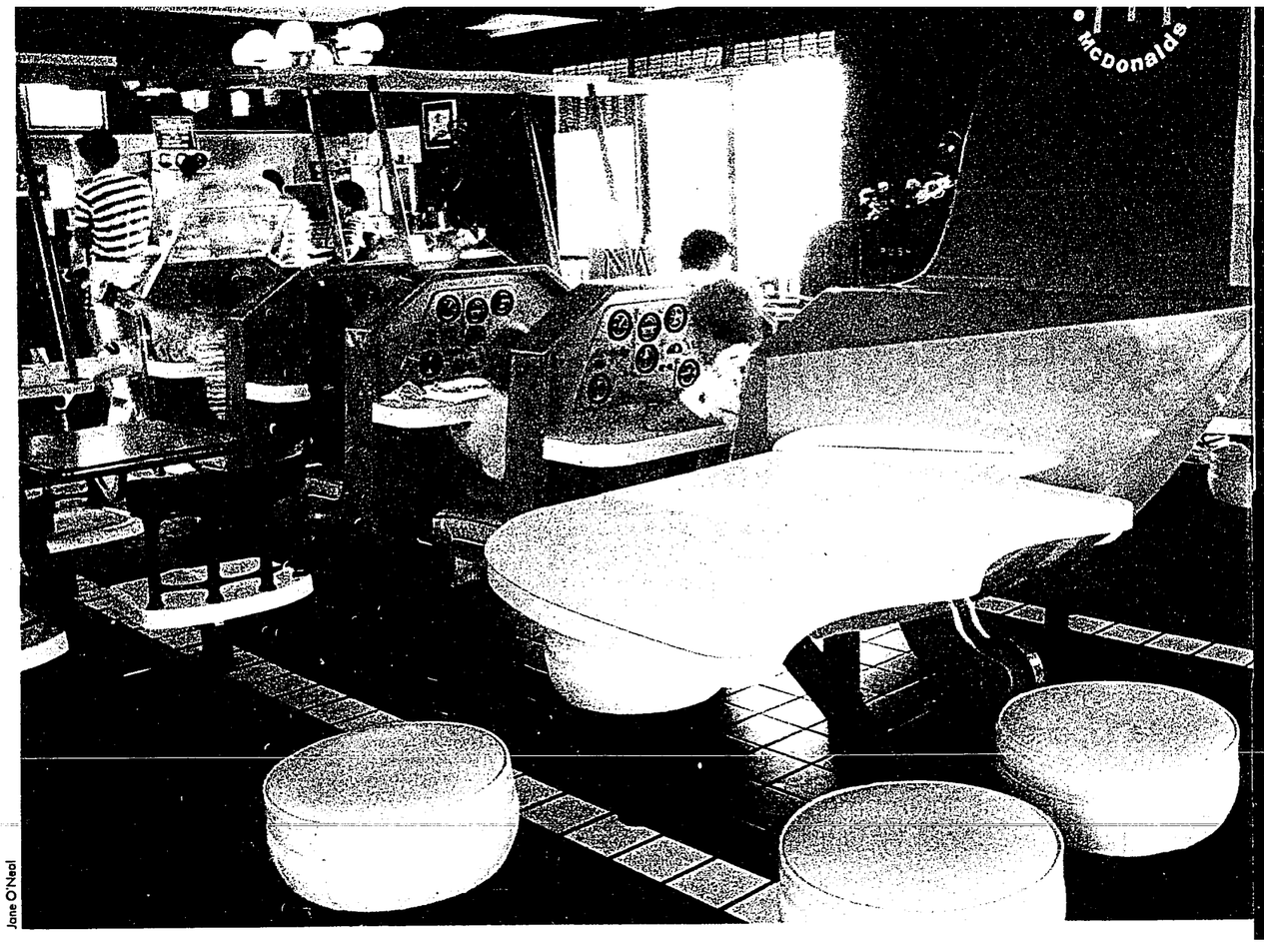


"Theme" design is the "in" style for the 1970's. A McDonald's in Chula Vista, Calif. (above and near right), goes in for "nature" with anthropomorphic trees and mushroom stools. In Garden Grove, Calif. (below), customers munch their Macs in cockpit booths or at the wing and tail-fin tables of a biplane. Such Pop-fantasy effects make "eat shops" of the 1930's, such as Herbert's "streamlined" diner in Los Angeles (far right), look positively classic.







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trip, or a skimming of surface sensations. We are treating the Pop scene now as serious art and history. A few pioneers have always seen it that way, but there is a growing movement to try to sort things out, to decide what is art, and what is history in the world we have built in the last half century. There is increasing scholarly analysis, an attempt to establish perspective, to evaluate intent and result, and to apply standards of judgment. Some thoughtful critics say Pop architecture is neither all art nor all junk, and others believe that its degree of qualitative success can be determined rationally within a given pragmatic and esthetic framework.

The process began a dozen years ago with Robert Venturi's seminal book "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture," published by the Museum of Modern Art, which made an erudite plea for an "inclusionist" rather than an "exclusionist" view of architectural styles and asked for the recognition of the diverse components of the real environment. More of Venturi's proselytizing appeared in "Learning from Las Vegas," done with Denise Scott Brown and Stephen Izenour, and also in "Learning from Levittown." If you could not learn to love these Pop phenomena — and, by extension, the Strip, Miami and the clichés of suburbia and the shopping center — you could at least learn to see them as a valid cutural manifestation.

Today there is an established body of documentation in the field: John Margolies has become the apostle of the gas station with his articles and lectures on "Pump and Circumstance"; Jeffrey Limerick may be the leading historian of resort architecture, from spas to motels; John Baeder has made a perceptive career of photographing and painting diners; Françoise Bollack and Tom Killian have amassed an epic collection of photographs of "everyday masterpieces" on the streets of New York.

There have been fine collections of the commonplace for some time, from Berenice Abbott's superb photographs of New York in the 1930's to today's photo-realism. But most of the earlier essays on the ordinary were filtered through refining sensibilities to be seen as high art. Today the banal is supposedly presented on its own terms. Actually, it is being transformed into a sophisticated set

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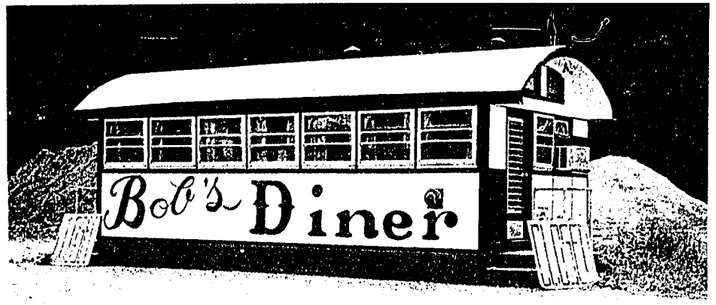
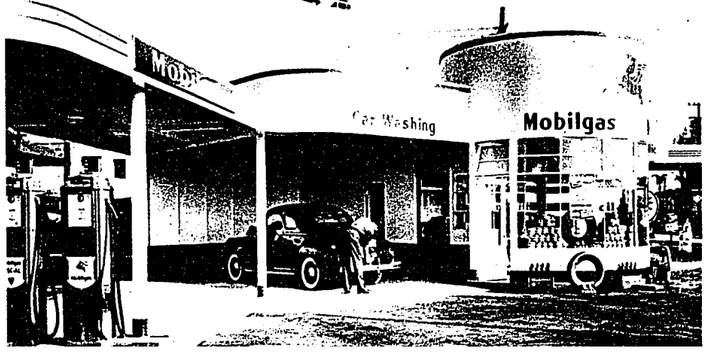
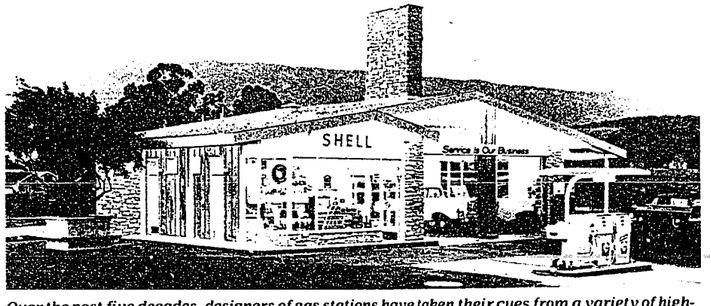


The look of the ubiquitous diner has kept up with the taste of the times. In the 1920's, a diner such as Bob's (top) in Massachusetts, resembled the real thing. By the 1960's, the historic look was à la mode, thanks to "museum villages" like Williamsburg, so the Fireside diner (bottom), on Route 1 in New Jersey, acquired the prerequisite columns and colonial-style entranceway.





Over the past five decades, designers of gas stations have taken their cues from a variety of high-style architectural models. In the late 1940's, the International Style of modern architecture was applied to Mobil stations across the country (top). In the 1960's, the "environment" style became popular, so Shell gave its gas stations a suburban ranch-house look (bottom).

Like an upstart in the fast-food trade, Jack in the Box tried to attract attention, back in the 1950's, with a checkerboard design, lights, arrows, pennants (top). Today it uses a mansard roof and prim porticoes (bottom) to denote established respectability.

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of cultural and esthetic symbols.

Architecture exhibitions have been bringing this subject and this point of view to public attention for the past decade. The Architectural League of New York outraged its members in the 1960's with a deadpan show of Morris Lapidus's Miami hotels, and, at about the same time, the Whitney Museum made a brief excursion into the vernacular world of Venturi and Rauch. Pop architecture finally made it into an official Washington showcase, the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery, in 1976, with Venturi and Rauch's "Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City." Meanwhile, the Museum of Modern Art has served up Shinjuku, the multilevel underground rail and subway concourse in Tokyo, complete with plastic samples from its fast-food restaurants. Shinjuku features four huge department stores, thousands of shops and restaurants, and diversions ranging from movies to "love" hotels. Admired as an "ad hoc" environment, it covers the whole range of newly discovered "Process" architecture and design.

Right now, the chief outpost of this burgeoning architectural concern is the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York, which reopened in 1976 in the renovated Carnegie Mansion at Fifth Avenue and 91st Street as the Smithsonian Institution's official Museum of Design. Lisa Taylor, director of the museum, and Richard Oliver, curator of architecture and design, have sponsored a series of small, lively exhibitions in the contemporary-design gallery housed in the basement. The themes and insights are far bigger than the shows that contain them.

The latest exhibition, which will be on view through March 19, is called "Place, Product, Packaging." It is subtitled "A look at four popular American building types: fast-food restaurants, diners, gasoline stations and museum villages."

That's right — museum villages. Something else has been added to the Pop environment. Mr. Oliver — with his assist-

ant, Nancy Ferguson, who has worked with him on the show and catalog — puts Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia (not to mention such historical complexes as Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts) in the same frame as McDonald's and Texaco. The point being made is that all of these architectural examples, from the restored village to franchised fast food, are essays in style; each is a highly successful exercise in packaging and selling a specific product and place.

Every one of these building types, whether it be a historic house-museum or a diner, presents a characteristic image through design. The product being packaged and sold may be commercial, cultural or educational. The line can be crossed easily from Williamsburg, with its real ties to history, to Disneyland, which makes up history out of whole cloth, at slightly less than life size. But salesmanship through design works equally well in the identification of the product, be it packaged history or packaged food. All are supreme examples of the American design and merchandising talent, and ultimately, of a unique architectural phenomenon.

The individual design is prsented as a calculated totality through skillfully related architecture, artifacts, graphics and costumes. The ladies in mob caps and sprigged muslin at Williamsburg have their counterparts in McDonald blazers and Mobil jumpsuits. (The theme of vernacular types and traditions in American architecture is being explored in a series of lectures related to the show at Cooper-Hewitt, through March 29.)

This thesis, of course, has shock value; to compare a gas station and a diner with Williamsburg is a kind of heresy, even though all three may exhibit "colonial" forms. The museum village is a sacrosanct and authoritative culture icon. But influences have ricocheted from the museum-village reconstruction—Williamsburg was a powerful design force in this country from the 1920's on—to the highway and the shopping center. The ultimate Williamsburg statement may be the colonial A. & P.

What is becoming increasingly clear as time passes, however, is that the museum village is a creation, a rebuilding to a pattern, with immense attention to "re-created" history and something called, with sublime scholarly ambiguity, "authentic reproduction." This ranges from measured copies to educated guesswork and wishful thinking. But the result is essentially a stage set, an evocation of the past as we wish to see that past today, for our present tastes and needs. It is all seductively unreal. The very title "Colonial Williamsburg" immediately sets an artificial image and an arbitrary cutoff date. The museum village is a most artfully packaged place, a product that satisfies our craving for high-class cultural and educational entertainment and instant roots. After 50 years of evolution and success, it is beginning to be recognized as legitimate 20th-century architectural history.

The style and packaging of most vernacular architectural forms have been profoundly affected by changing tastes in every decade. Only the museum village established a rigidly controlled character and stayed with it for obvious reasons, the idea and style fixed in false time, the game marvelously well played.

Commercial buildings, however, all show significant stylistic changes from the 1920's on. They modify both their look and their presentation techniques with perfect pitch for changing taste and fashion. In gas stations, designers of the eclectic 20's and 30's dealt equally facilely with American Colonial and Spanish Colonial types, often applied to the same basic building form. There were also Moorish, Elizabethan and classical models for the stations, just as there were for domestic architecture of the time.

The 30's also brought streamlining and visions of the future from the Chicago and New York World's Fairs. The "modernistic" gas station sported "fast" curves, sleek baked enamel, and chrome trim. It was the High Period of the streamlined Art Deco diner. Building was at a standstill during World War II but the 50's saw an explosion of free-wheeling eclecticism in suburbia, as well as the conversion in official circles to the moral and esthetic imperatives of modern architecture. At that time, the oil companies got architectural religion and began to invest in "good design," with emphasis on modular prototypes that could be used across the country. The much-publicized efforts of industrial designers Norman Bel Geddes and Walter Dorwin Teague were probably the first examples, but other architects of stature were called on for prestige purposes, from

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Frederick G. Frost, who designed the International Style Mobil station of the 1940's (see Page 25) to Eliot Noyes who produced a national model for Mobil in the 1960's.

But as these buildings moved from the highway to the suburbs and the city, and as environmental awareness became a popular movement in the 60's, protest mounted against their aggressive or disruptive presence. Gas stations conceived as independent stylish objects were a problem in older residential neighborhoods. The 1970's model is therefore "environmental." It stresses "suitability" over style. When possible, it resembles a ranch house, or at least suggests a rustic romanticism; it wins prizes for landscaping.

The fast-food restaurant has gone through a similar metamorphosis. Designed in the 1950's to catch the motorist's eye at a minimum speed of 50 miles an hour, it stressed the most raucous visual images it could devise. Boldness and garishness were the design criteria. McDonald's and Jack in the Box unfurled their neon and Day-Glo banners and architectural containers against the endless sky.

These, too, have been toned down with the changing taste of the 60's and 70's. Increasingly domesticated, they now feature an overlay of a shingled mansard roof, or at least the vestigial, clip-on mansard trim that is today's universal vernacular motif. Jack in the Box, for example, has "Mark II" and "Mark III" models with progressively subdued signs and shapes and growing mansards.

Scholarly exercises in the iconography of these building types is based on the techniques of conventional art history. It is not unrelated to the study of the stylistic development and facade changes of cinquecento churches. Such objectivity inevitably leads to the conclusion that it is possible and proper to judge vernacular and Pop architecture as "good" or "bad" examples of the type—a competent Williamsburg theme, for example, versus an inept one, instead of a scathing dismissal of both.

In the Cooper-Hewitt presentation, Mr. Oliver cultivates a cool and quietly delighted aloofness; he prefers not to puff this kind of architecture as "art," although it is currently popular to do so. But though he does not treat it as high art, he takes it very seriously as a legitimate vernacular expression, while carefully avoiding either an elitist or a populist stance. He acknowledges that there are esthetic standards involved, however, saying that the Cooper-Hewitt show uses examples that "seem well designed," and that act "as mirrors of our culture." That happens to be a pretty good definition of art.

Among the more striking examples of "good" design are some of the "theme" interiors of McDonald's in California or Texas. Outstanding are a biplane motif with cockpit booths in Garden Grove, Calif., designed by Al Gordon; anthropomorphic trees and mushroom seats in an outdoor eating area in Chula Vista, Calif., by Setmakers, Inc., and a revolving, giant, plastic, see-through hamburger in a setting of disco glitter and mirrors in Los Angeles, by Sharon Landa Associates. Theme architecture is clearly the new eclecticism of the 70's. Significantly, while themes change, the standardized, formula food is unvaryingly the same.

Theme architecture is in fact the universal vernacular today, from instant American "English pubs" and stagily ethnic or overdesigned restaurants (where the food rarely matches the stylistic aspirations) to "old" fishing villages newly built for tourism on the Sardinian coast. Inevitably, these styles are a trickle-down from some form of high art, as they always have been. But they are unique in that everything from hard-sell, high-style and stage-set romanticism to genteel historicism is used in the service of predominantly American marketing skills.

The results are no longer being viewed as universal travesties; they are considered to be an art phenomenon that is the result of legitimate cultural and esthetic interaction. Today we are revising, and rewriting, contemporary art history, and in particular the history of the uses of art and taste. It is a little like a trick with mirrors, because we are also making history in the process. What has evolved in this country in particular is a contemporary consumer esthetic in which art is co-opted for a marketable product, and its packaging and merchandising are done with consummate expertise.

Is today's "environmental" theme just another style or is it the final triumph of this ingenious exploitation of the creative act? Stay tuned for the next American decade, and see. ■