ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Reexamining Wallace Harrison

As usual, some unfinished 1979 business carries over into 1980; January is a month of beginnings and ends. An exhibition called "Wallace K. Harrison: New York Architect," which opened in mid-December and will run through Jan. 12 at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (8 West 40th Street), is one that should be seen. This is the first retrospective devoted to the architect who did so much to shape the 20th-century monuments of this city, and the impact of work that is at once so well known, and yet so little known, is extraordinary. The show provides a remarkable perspective on both the architect and the period in which he practiced.

The material, a great deal of which has never been seen publicly, or has not been seen for a long time, has been organized by Rem Koolhaas, a Dutch architect who lives in London and is fascinated by New York. His rather amazing sense of Manhattan produced an earlier, offbeat book and show, "Delirious New York." Mr. Koolhaas deals in mythology — his own and the city's. He has a wonderful sense of the rich, dense disorder that makes New York a uniquely vital urban phenomenon. He understands the criteria of power and disposability. But I do not think he understands Wallace Harrison. He sees the man and his work freshly and unconventionally, and that is good when a reputation has hardened into clichés. But he has an oddly distorting lens.

This presentation, he explains, does not deal in judgments as to whether the work is good or bad. At the same time, it is supposed to "rehabilitate" Mr. Harrison's reputation, which has not been high among hard-line modernists and critics, in spite of his involvement with the city's most prestigious architectural and planning projects since the late 1920's. These include Rockefeller Center, the 1939 New York World's Fair, for which he created the Trylon and Perisphere theme, the United Nations and Lincoln Center. As friend and builder for Nelson Rockefeller, he has been the closest New York ever had to an *architect du roi*, with commissions including a number of Rockefeller houses and the mind-boggling Albany Mall.

Mr. Koolhaas has brought together a generous group of drawings and photographs that illuminate both Mr. Harrison's vision and his working methods over six decades. It is obviously time to look at this work again, now that the strict modernist yardsticks against which it was measured and often found wanting have either been bent or broken.

What is revealed is surprising, but it is only in part what Mr. Koolhaas claims it to be. He sees this work as post-modernist, 40 years ahead of its time. What was questioned about it then, he considers a virtue now, and even reads it as a kind of courageous foresight. Pointing to a characteristic display of preliminary sketches in which the architect touched base with a variety of ideological persuasions, he calls the work undogmatic, where others have called it indecisive and uncommitted. He praises the soft, curving shapes that clearly owe so much to the modernist artists that Mr. Harrison has known and admired as hedonistic and voluptuous, where others have dismissed them as superficial and derivative. The houses that he has described as "virtuoso exercises in curvilinear predilections" have been categorized by some as campy.

Times change. Even camp is admired now. But the show is clearly meant to be something of a body-blow to those post-modernists who think they have invented, or reinvented, sensuosity, curves and color. Mr. Harrison is supposed to have done it all first.

What actually emerges is the fact that Wallace Harrison is a supreme romantic. Romanticism, of course, was the architectural love that dared not speak its name for most of this century and the Harrison taste and style is clearly a matter of timing and natural predilection. His education and training in this country predated the acceptance of mod-

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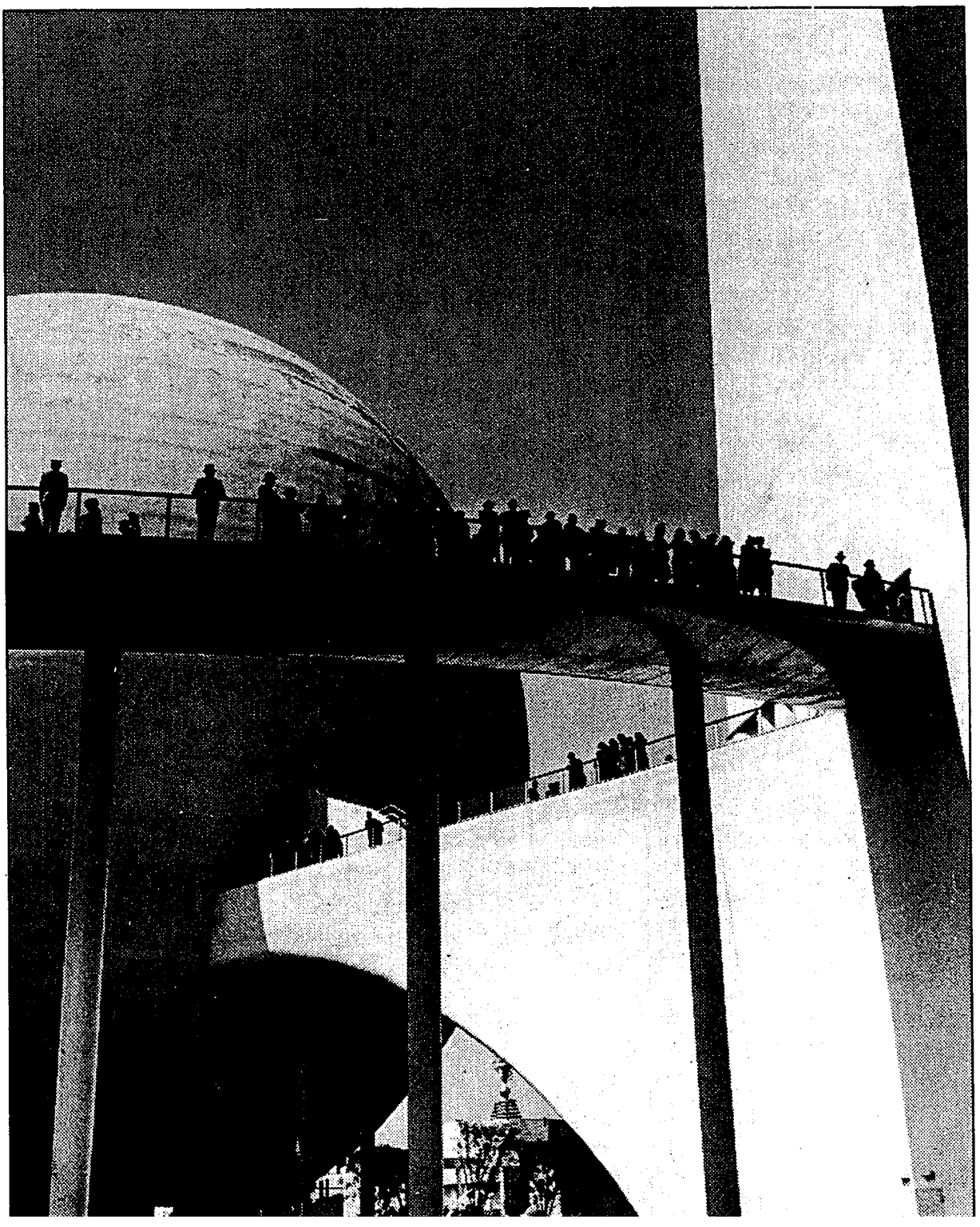

Black Star

Harrison's 1939 World's Fair Trylon and Perisphere

Reappraising Wallace Harrison

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ernism. The year he spent in Paris at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, in 1920, reinforced his traditional concepts of beauty and grandeur, just at the time that the European avant-garde was agitating against them.

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Wallace Harrison has simply sought beauty, consciously and primarily, all his life. He was single-minded about it, when others were involved in the pursuit of a revolutionary modernist, socio-structural morality. When he embraced modernism — and he did so wholeheartedly — he was never fully radicalized by it; he always saw Le Corbusier's towers in a park through a luminous radiance, behind scrim. He was not a little influenced, like others of his generation, by the American architect and delineator, Hugh Ferriss, whose soft, atmospheric charcoal renderings of an ideal, scaleless, romantic city of the future virtually created the American skyscraper style of the late 1920's and early 30's -as opposed to the more austere style developing in Europe. Those soaring and shadowed towers and slabs, gleaming in morning mists or crepuscular half-light, stand halfway between the Beaux Arts and Modernism.

Even when the trappings changed, the mood remained. Mr. Harrison's late, lunar landscape for the Albany Mall is an updated, space-age version of that romantic Utopian architecture that Sheldon Cheney called, at the time, "the poetry of daring."

We can be grateful that Mr. Koolhaas has initiated the process of reexamination. He makes the claim that Wallace Harrison's work has been ignored and misunderstood. He also says that it defies categorization. I only wish that he had tried a little harder. It is not sufficient to indulge in philosophical gymnastics to establish Mr. Harrison as the early breaker of modernist taboos (which was never in his mind) or the originator of the forbidden effects that are currently being trumpeted so loudly. What I find particularly distressing is that both counterrevolutionary camps — those of Mr. Koolhaas's persuasion and those of the post-modernist position — are unwilling to do the research job that is required.

It is not enough to use this architecture to fit a currently popular thesis. What is needed now is some genuine scholarship — the kind of analysis that can only be made in the context of the ideals, influences, objectives and functions of the time — in terms of conscious and unconscious aims — and the esthetic system that these complex factors created. We ought to know the background and interaction of the practitioners involved. And we should try to find out whether the esthetic systems they devised satisfied, or failed to satisfy, those urban, social and emotional needs that architecture ultimately serves. This involves both hard work and the value judgments that it is currently fashionable to avoid.

All this is very troubling, but most disturbing of all is the fact tha art and history are being warped out of shape by those who were not there, and do not understand what really happened. This simply isn't the way it was, at all. ■