

# POP ARCHITECTURE: HERE TO STAY

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**T**HERE has been a lot of pseudo-profound theorizing about the democratization of the arts in our time, but the only art in which the process has actually taken place is architecture. What has happened in painting and sculpture is, more properly, popularization. The product itself still follows the standards of a small group that might be called the *tive élite*, although it is merchandised to the masses.

The public, in the case of these arts, is merely the consumer, and it is presently consuming at a record rate; but it sets no standards for what is produced. And if it chooses to consume the products of, say, a Washington Square outdoor show, this work, in turn, has little effect on "art." The real thing continues to be produced by a cultural and creative aristocracy, if aristocracy is defined as that portion of the trend-setting minority that operates on a genuine tradition of knowledge, talent and taste.

This used to be particularly true in architecture, where the style and standards of past periods have been established consistently by the creative élite. Today, however, the situation is virtually reversed.

## Democracy at Work

Except for a pathetically small showing, the cultural aristocracy is no longer responsible for most building styles. It is barely holding its own, with those isolated examples that represent structural and design excellence, against the tide, or better, flood, of what we propose to call Pop Architecture.

Pop Architecture is the true democratization of the art of architecture in that it represents not just mass consumption but mass taste.

Its standards are set not by those with an informed and knowledgeable judgment, but by those with little knowledge or judgment at all. It is the indisputable creation of the lower rather than of the upper classes. As such, it is a significant first: probably the only architectural style in history to be formed at the bottom, rather than at the top.

Even more significantly, it consists of the vast, inescapable, depressingly omnipresent and all-too-typical bulk of American building. This includes the greatest part of

## Mass Taste Creates a Mass Art That Reveals Face of America in Sixties

today's construction and capital investment.

In Pop Architecture, the timeless determinants of comparative knowledge and trained evaluation have been supplanted by the typical parvenu love of the novel, the flashy and the bizarre.

The characteristics of Pop Architecture are gaudy misuses of structural effects for aggressive and often meaningless eccentricities of form, the garish misapplication of color and material for jazzed-up facades of fluorescent brilliance and busy metal and enamel panel patterns unrelated to underlying structure, with glittering grilles and appendages that conceal nothing but bad plans.

It is, of course, Miami with its uninhibited monuments to lavish pretentious ignorance like the prototypal Fontainebleau. It is every Miracle Mile in suburbia, offering every new effect in the architect's sample book and a frankly phony, but eye-catching version of every new structural technique. It is dazzling glamor to the optically naive; consummate vulgarity to the visually educated.

Like Pop Art, Pop Architecture shows mass taste at its most cruelly self-revealing. Unlike Pop Art, it is the real thing, rather than a sophisticated, detached commentary. Pop Art is the ironical statement of those who know, being outrageous. Pop Architecture is the straight-faced product of those who don't know, just being themselves.

## Architectural Reality

Pop Architecture may be derided, but it cannot be dismissed. While the Washington Square canvases and all of their kind may not make a ripple on art's surface, the hotels, motels, stores, shopping centers, bowling alleys, restaurants, office buildings and commercial complexes of Pop Architecture, and those churches, community centers, speculative buildings and civic and other structures that ape their style stack up as the country's major building effort, in quantity, size and expense.

This is architectural reality, and an esthetic and historical phenomenon not to be

awesome demonstration of the first truly democratic style and popular art on a scale that the twentieth century only promised until now, but has finally delivered. It will go down in the record with bad generals, decadent states and corrupt societies when submitted to the cool, objective scrutiny of future scholars.

It is pointed, legitimate commentary on our current cultural condition and the general level of architectural practice, even among qualified professionals. And where Pop Art shocks the layman, Pop Architecture does not—perhaps the most terrifying comment of all.