Not for City Planners
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
New York Times (1923-Current file); Apr 18, 1971; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. D22

Architecture

Not for City Planners

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THE new architecture show at the Museum of Modern Art is probably not for city planners. "Will Insley: Ceremonial Space," consists of a one-room exhibition of a large architectural model—if that is the way you describe the three-dimensional vision of a mystic and esthetic experience. It will be in the museum's architecture and design galleries, with drawings and photomontages, through May 3. Concerned with something called Onecity and Extended Space, it is best described by the artist-architect:

"In the central plains/of United States/lies buried/the myth of ONECITY/horizontal dwelling of future/the great plateau/of future civilization.

"Inhabitants/descend from skytop grid space/through its layers/to magnetic roots of ONECITY/from there travel underground/in jetube arteries/to distant open country lands/seeking the buildings of Extended Space.

"Extended Space is the center/classic point of art/the philosophy of art/as the sum/and only enduring product/of civilization."

The "building" on exhibition, a structure for Extended Space, is called "Passage Space Spiral." It is one element of Will Insley's imaginary civilization.

The structure is described by the museum as a seven-foot-square model of an open-topped, ceremonial enclosure of concentric concrete walls and wedges and inaccessible sunken rooms. This temple-like, monolithic setting is to be reached by inhabitants of Onecity through "jetubes" and "mind channels," suggesting physical and philosophical distance from the city itself. Arthur Drexler, director of the museum's Department of Architecture and Design, who installed the show, calls the building a vast, roofless enclosure set aside for contemplation, or perhaps a kind of religious observance. He defines it as an instrument of metaphysical speculation.

In the gallery, the viewer mounts a stair to look down on the grid pattern of raised and lowered and angled planes. Three "peep holes" in the base of the model give eye level glimpses of a seemingly endless, straight-lined and right-angled interior labyrinth of high walls and boxlike "rooms" on several levels. One is asked to think of the structure as isolated on a flat desert or prairie.

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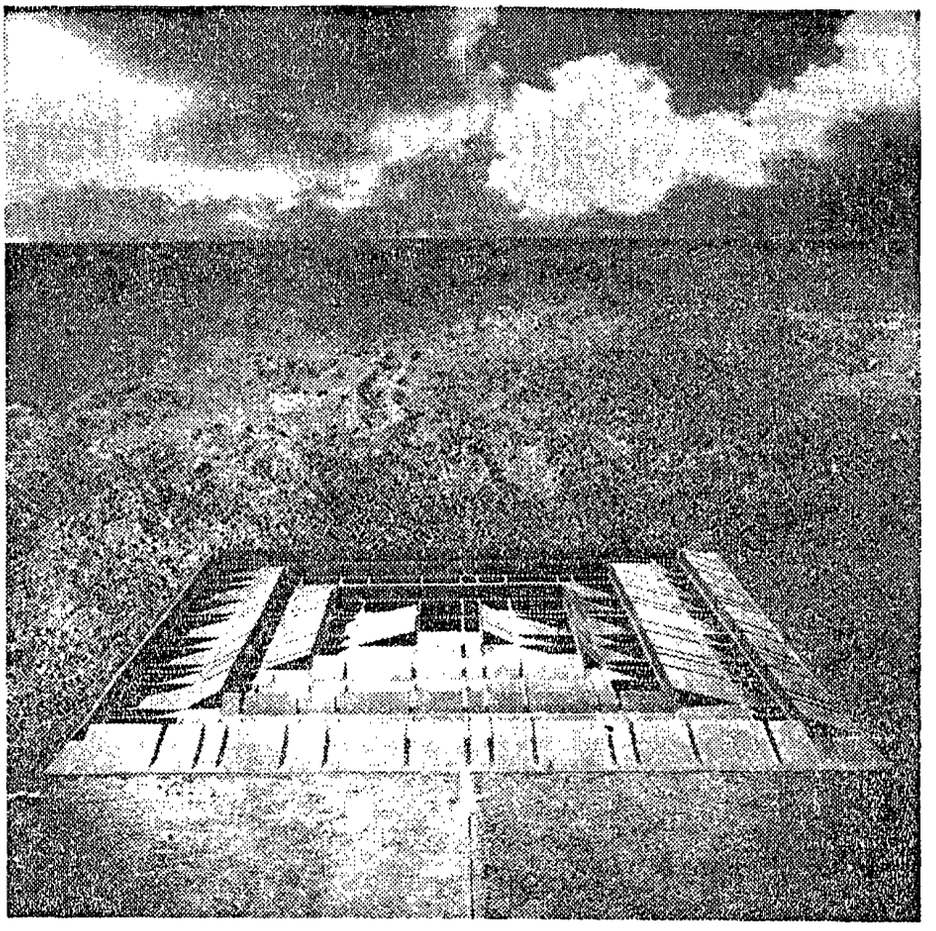
On second thought, I know several city planners who would be fascinated by Onecity and Extended Space. There is one, in particular, who is a devotee of Keats's Negative Capability. I know others, men of urban and esthetic sensibility challenged and embattled by a world they never would have made, who would sink into Insley's sternly lyric world like a warm, restoring bath. They would find his unity and poetry of vision, his exquisite geometrical drawings and the open-ended, infinite forms of his sculpture-architecture a very beautiful thing.

As it is. Totally unreal, yes. But a work of art—something avaricious builders think is to be plonked onto a plaza after you've made a hash of a city. Something planners need like strong drink. Here is a stunning, single-minded exercise in the extension of thought and vision, using structure and space. It is absolute, theoretical abstraction based on premises of mystic order and esthetic inviolability. Repeat, a work of art.

The squared spiral maze would have 12-foot-high walls and be 531 feet square. "In those straight and narrow paths," Drexler says, "no experience is possible except that determined by the architect." There is nothing but the huge intricate structure, intense solitude, and private communion with the physical expression of the "passage from present to future." There is nothing but the "gray silent rim" of the sky. Even a chance encounter with another living being would be trauma.



Photomontage of model of "Passage Space Spiral" by Will Insley
"The gap between vision and reality grows constantly"

In Will Insley's world, Drexler explains, "architecture is eschatology," which sent me to the dictionary. Eschatology is the doctrine of the last, or final things, as death, resurrection, immortality, judgment. In an even more ambitious construction that he is working on now, the artist sees the present as a corridor, flanked by an accessible but impenetrable "wall of information," or knowledge, with a wall beyond, "the other side of the present," which is death. If one journeys to the future through the continuum, one returns to the present through an arc representing the shadow of death. This is metaphysics in architectural form.

The form itself is monumental, classical geometry—a Western tradition beginning with the pyramids. The results are environmental sculpture in scale, impact and function, encompassing the physical and philosophical elements of man, place and time. This is a 20th-century phenomenon.

Without an approximation of slave labor or a complete reversal of human belief and practice, Insley's dream, of course, is unbuildable. Ironically, so is almost everything else today—unless subsidized heavily by state or corporate funds. Housing schemes have become as visionary as Extended Space. Construction costs are as unrealistic as Onecity. It all stays on paper. The gap between vision and reality grows constantly.

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This work will seem to many not only unbuildable but also irrelevant. Drexler notes, with tongue only slightly in cheek, that he is an advocate of irrelevancy. He believes in the importance of theoretical exploration even while Rome burns, and that the monument, when built, will outlive the crisis that makes it seem less than relevant now.

Insley's architecture and Drexler's show certainly have nothing to do with the urgency of the environmental crunch. To leave it there, however, would be to ignore a whole aspect of civilization called art and history—and doing so is currently a very popular exercise in pointlessness. It is equally pointless to argue whether this is abstract architecture or buildable architecture or even architecture at all, or whether or not it has anything to do with problem-solving and city-building men.

Because there is another word—necessity. If, in terms of the urban crisis, this work is irrelevant, in terms of the human spirit it is necessary. To draw a hard line between the two is one of the most difficult and dangerous exercises of contemporary life.