ARCHITECTURE VIEW: THE JAPANESE NEW WAVE
Huxtable, Ada Louise
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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

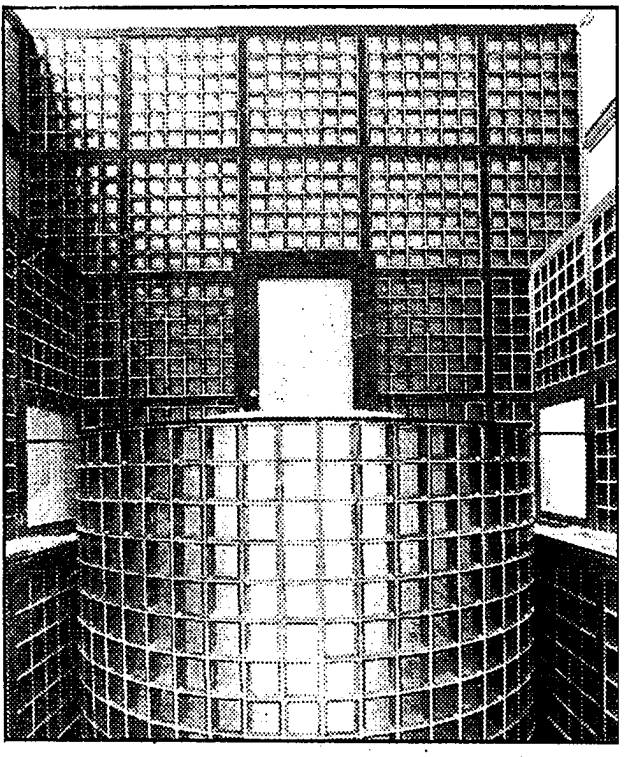
ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Japanese New Wave

As a survivor of modernism, I remember those dedicated, dreary evenings at the old Architectural League, when the subject of the use of the arts with architecture was debated with as much puzzlement as fervor. The League in those days was a Beaux Arts leftover that still counted among its members a number of academic painters and sculptors whose work hung on beaver-board panels or stood on plywood cubes as a mild rebuke during the gray lamb-and-gravy dinners and discussions.

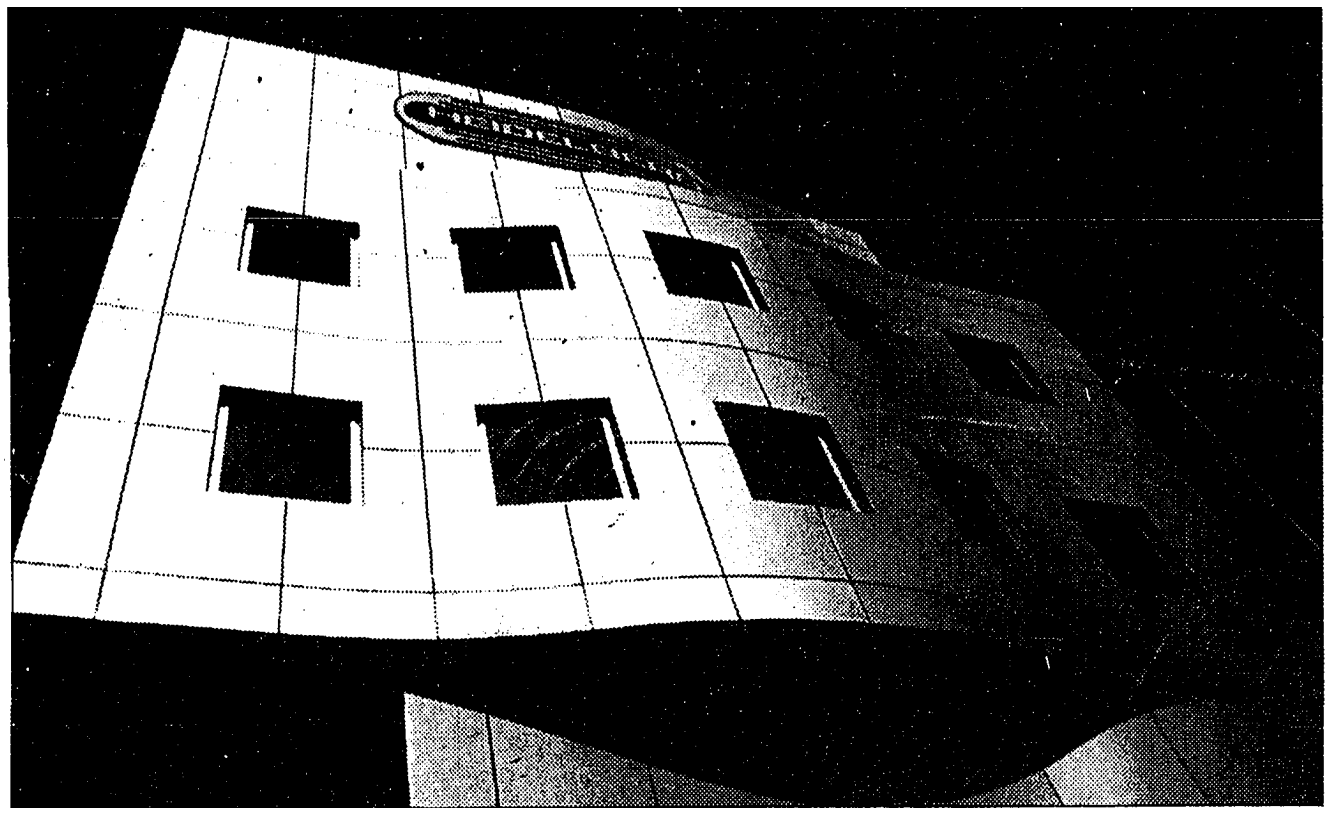
Modernism, of course, had simply forged ahead, and architecture, in particular, had split decisively with traditional art roles and techniques. Art was not lacking in architecture, but it no longer consisted of the intrinsic ornament and the mural and statuary commissions of the Golden Age; the modern architect simply chose, or commissioned, oversized abstractions that complemented his plain surfaces and empty spaces as he saw fit. The traditional arts, including the dying crafts, seemed more like an embarrassment than an embellishment. Those serious, soul-searching evenings at the League provided about as many answers to the problem as a symposium on how to cure cancer.

The sad fact was that the well-meaning participants couldn't do a thing about the matter except talk, and the even sadder fact was that the answers to the questions were already apparent. At that particular moment all the arts were busy crossing lines and changing boundaries in an unprecedented esthetic metamorphosis; the distinction between architecture and sculpture, for example, as well as between painting and sculpture, was breaking down, and definitions were becoming increasingly blurred. Sculpture grew to huge proportions, dealing in the kind of form that was once the exclusive province of architecture, and architecture, stripped of tradition, was using its basic shapes and structure with a sculptural sensibility. Both dealt increasingly in a monumental minimalism that was to have a unique esthetic impact on the art and the environment of our time.



A design by Tadao Ando—"Certain forms appear again and again."

The results have ranged from something as spectacularly good as Philip Johnson and John Burgee's Pennzoil Building in Houston of 1976, or as appallingly bad as the tortured concrete of the 1950's and 60's, to the present Neo-Purist school with its sophisticated reworking of the design vocabulary of the International Style for its own elegant, abstract sake.



Toyo Ito's PMT Building—"collage" or "skin architecture" stressing a false-front

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But the most stunning and provocative expression of this phenomenon in architecture may be the current work in Japan by a group of practitioners ranging in age from their 30's to their 50's who seemed to be producing a surprising amount of building as well as a great deal of heat and light. If there is an active avant-garde today, this is it.

An exhibition of this work, called "A New Wave of Japanese Architecture," is currently at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, 8 West 40th Street, where it can be seen through Jan. 30. After that it moves on to Washington, Chicago and the West Coast. There is a beautifully produced catalogue, one of a series that the institute will be publishing on its shows, with an excellent essay by Kenneth Frampton. The list of assisting institutions includes the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts and a number of specialized Japan foundations and societies.

One of the most interesting aspects of this Japanese work — aside from its often exceptional quality — is the way in which it simply abandons all the sociological and technological preoccupations that were a fundamental theoretical tenet of modernism through most of the 20th century. In their place is a blend of esthetics and philosophy in which the eye, and the idea, are all that count. Gone is the space-age technology of the Japanese Metabolists of the 1960's (although some of these architects span both movements) in which whole cities were proposed for Tokyo Bay and megastructures and capsules assaulted the landscape. What is being done now is almost hermetically personal, combining complex elements of Eastern and Western practice and philosophy. This work contains historicism, mysticism and irony.

There are the terrifyingly clinical abstractions of Hiromi Fujii's hard-surfaced geometry in spaces evoking Satrean existential limbos; the elegant, outrageous anti-dwellings of Monta Mozouna that provoke the mind and spirit with ideal forms and cosmic images; the "sewer type" architecture of Osamu Ishiyama that suggests American counter-culture structures with an impeccable taste the originals never knew. Toyo Ito offers "collage" or "skin architecture" that stresses a false-front superficiality, because he believes we actually see and respond to buildings in cities in terms of surface bits and pieces. Sources are as wide-ranging as American Pop Art, the comic-book style of the British Archigram group, and the machine esthetic of an early modernist cult building, Pierre Chareau's Maison de Verre in Paris. Other eclectic influences come from Wagner, Loos and Soane.

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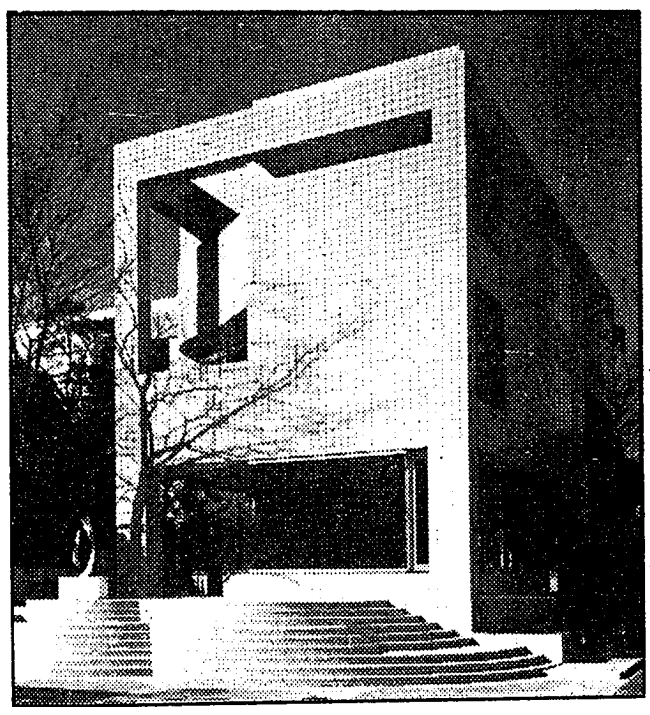
But the star of the show is clearly Arata Isozaki, already a highly respected talent in international circles. Kenneth Frampton writes of Isozaki's "lyrical professionalism and consummate skill evident down to the last detail." No mere theorist, Isozaki has executed an impressive number of suave and successful buildings, from museums and libraries to dwellings, of an extraordinarily sensitive and challenging kind of design.

As disparate as the members of this group are, the one thing that binds them together is a total preoccupation with form for its own visual and intellectual values. Certain forms appear again and again in their buildings — the orthogonal grid, the semi-circular vault, the trabeated pergola, the receding or rising inner space ordered by a strict geometry. The work may be disarmingly simple, but as Frampton notes, it is "both subtle and sometimes intensely disturbing." The way these forms are used carries a powerful esthetic message, but it also conveys a spirit, an idea, or a *gestalt*, that can be as sinister as it is serene.

It is impossible to get much closer to sculpture in building than in this deliberate abstraction of form from content. Surprisingly, this rich and complex architectural geometry makes much sculptural minimalism seem impoverished. There are even cases where this work ceases to be architecture at all.

But it is never boring, whether one likes or understands it or not; it stretches the senses and the mind. The chosen esthetic is so precise, exquisite and threatening that it almost causes pain. There is nothing comfortable or reassuring about any of this work. That kind of stimulation is one legitimate definition of art. ■



Fumihiko Maki's Hillside Terrace Apartments—"Eye and idea are all."