Poetic Visions Of Design For the Future: ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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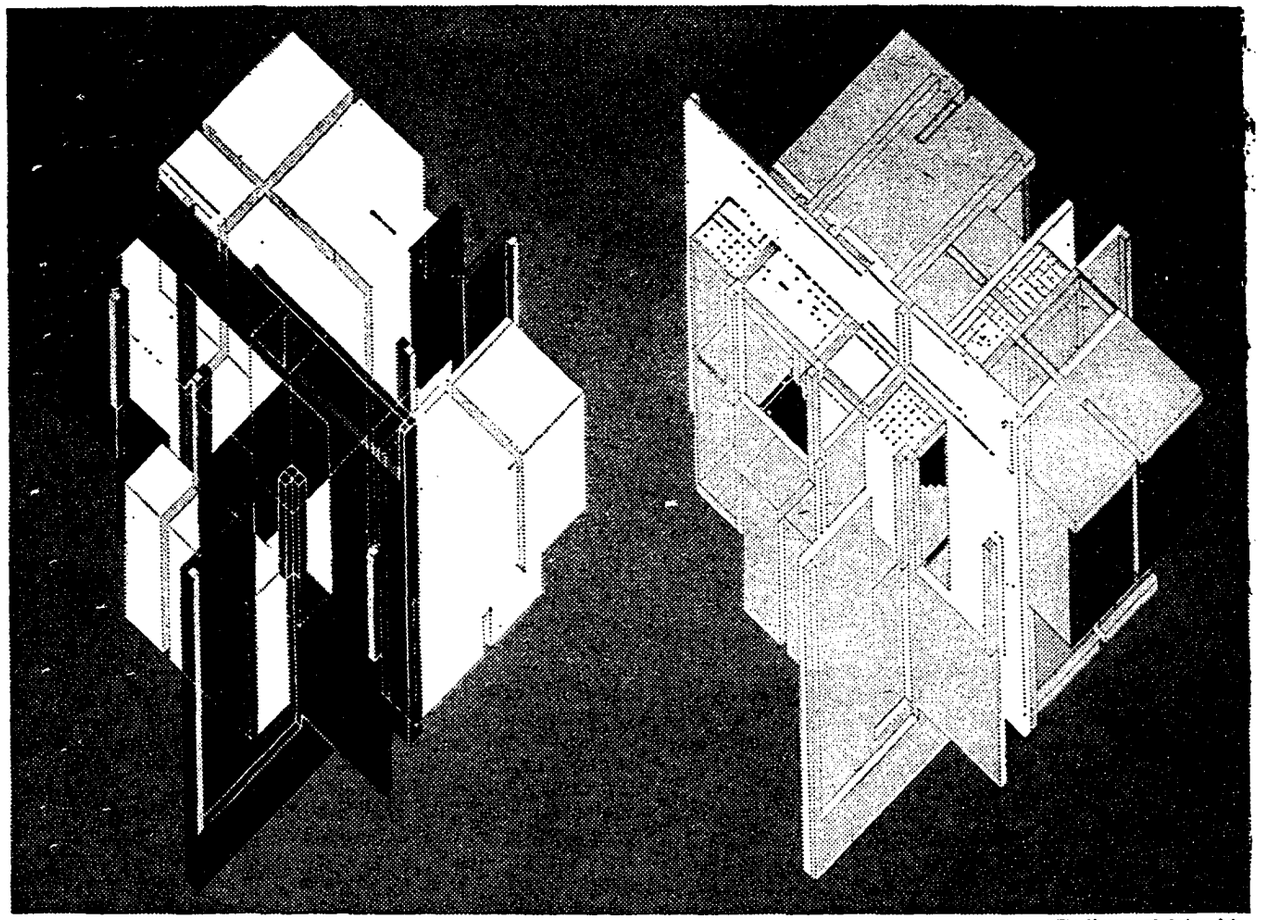
Poetic Visions Of Design For the Future

In a sense, the essay that follows is a personal confession. For years, I have dealt with the urban environment—a grim, demanding world of constant crisis and catastrophe. The search for an impossible balance between society (imperfect) and art (equally imperfect) has been my steady theme. The visionary architectural project, the intellectual or esthetic exercise, held little allure, since fantasy is not much use in the desperate battles with reality. The critic involved with the facts of disaster doesn't wait around for brilliant ideas to prove themselves with the hindsight of history.

And so by any measure at all, the informal exhibition of "Architectural Studies and Projects" in the penthouse of The Museum of Modern Art has absolutely no relevance to the serious business of building anything. There are 50 drawings by American and European architects on view, and they have all been selected by the architects themselves as most representative of their work or as examples that they particularly cherish. The show has been directed by Emilio Ambasz, Curator of Design, and sponsored by the Museum's Art Lending Service, and most of the drawings are for sale at prices ranging from $200 to $2,000. Provocative and frequently baffling, they are often quite beautiful. But all are profoundly suggestive of philosophical and esthetic values that go beyond the obvious talents revealed.

All of the drawings, in Mr. Ambasz's words, are of "imaginary creations never intended to be built . . . an expression of an idea, or an attitude toward architecture." There is the usual ritual bow to the belief that such paper projects can influence the course of architectural history. You may take that as Calvinist truth (nothing should be useless or without redemptive value) or pious claptrap. Sometimes it may even be correct. Abstract exercises invariably reflect the convictions and directions of a historical moment with a singular purity that looks like prescience.

But that is not really the point. Released from the restraints of programs and clients, from engineering and economics—in fact, from any kind of reality at all—these architects have expressed, or groped toward, their inner convictions about the nature of late 20th-century art and life. What we get is not a picture of a buildable building, or anything remotely resembling it except in the most lyrically perverse way. The architectural forms that appear are used as icons or symbols. This work has nothing to do with the basic design mandate of problem-solving. It is a kind of poetry.



The Museum of Modern Art

Complex geometrical games: Eisenman's "House Six: Transformations #14"

And my confession, after years of struggling conscientiously with the social and practical aspects of the art of architecture, is that I now find poetry essential. Something is required to pull one out of the quagmire of the political-bureaucratic, economic pragmatism of the built environment. Cities decay and regenerate, buildings are replaced, history heals or destroys; only the spirit is eternal. Poetry is the gossamer absolute that transcends the vicissitudes of a flawed and impermanent world; it endures, while almost everything else disappears. Perhaps it is the only reality.

Obviously, architects need it too. Some of these drawings are sheer poetry. What else does Raimund Abraham's "House with Flower Walls" say to us except that walls, freed from the humdrum business of holding up buildings, become simple, unattached planes with a cutting-edge beauty of their own? The drawing is refined, sensitive and very elegant: a trompe l'oeil three-dimensional, mock-architectural composition evoking a delicately ironic, insubstantial world.

Friedrich St. Florian, in "Himmelbett, Penthouse Version (with Holographic Heaven)," gives us an ethereal open pavilion of dematerialized arches containing a crisply levitated square of sky plane touched by floating clouds. The base and floor of strict, single-point Renaissance perspective provide the kind of formal reality that makes the whole even more unreal. In Rodolfo Machado's "Fountain House," the architectural elevation is liberated into pure fantasy. It is a carefully constructed "found object" composed of the scraps of architectural practice and history. Or the fantasy may be more illustrative and obvious, as in Ettore Sottsass's "Temple for Erotic Dances" and "Rafts for Listening to Chamber Music."

Sometimes the vision becomes darker. Gaetano Pesce's haunting "Project for the Remodeling of a Villa" leaves a 19th-century classical villa as a hollowed-out, dead shell, the floor replaced by a colossal flight of steps spanning the entire structure, angled deeply downward to a crypt-like underground addition. There is Surrealism here, and necrophilia, and a Ledoux-esque love of the crushingly inhuman.

The most magical of all the drawings, for me, at least, create their fantasies in terms of pure architectural geometry. Peter Eisenman's handsome "house transformations" play complex three-dimensional games with aloof isometrics suggestive of the 1920's. With the same sophisticated architectural nostalgia, John Hejduk transforms Corbusian motifs into a very special kind of lyricism. He calls his pastel-hued rendering of an impossible house "Villa of No Consequence." It is designed only to delight the senses with a sweetly witty use of the forms of near-history. And for controlled, aristocratic, consummate end-of-the-line intellectual passion, I would buy, if I had the $1,700, Richard Meier's superbly intricate "house" studies that translate the vocabulary of the International Style into a pure system of linear and spatial esthetics—particularly the red one that isn't for sale.

At the other extreme of expression are the fantasies of the avant-garde groups with names like Eventstructures, Inc., from Holland ("Sea Ruins," a watercolor photo-collage of inflated columns anchored in the sea with ruined ancient columns pictured on them) and Superstudio, from Italy (mankind photographed naked on a ruled grid representing a world-wide network of energy and interrelations). This section includes work by the now venerable British Archigram and an Austrian contingent.

The sources of all this are fairly clear. There are echoes of Surrealism and Pop Art and waves from the prophetic (or dead-end?) radical "anti-architecture" school, which believes that the system—from architectural practice to the cities themselves—must go. Their weapons are visual ironies and glorious generalities and the refusal to perpetuate the system by producing any architecture at all. They seem to have a very good time. (An American group, SITE, actually erects some of its inspired environmental commentary.)

Historically, there has always been "visionary" architecture. Among the most striking and enduring examples is the innovative, megalomaniacal version of late 18th- and early 19th-century romantic classicism by Boullée and Ledoux—paper projects that genuinely prefigured the modernist esthetic. They dealt in strictly structural fantasies (today's visions are clearly post-Freudian). But they were men, according to the historian J. C. Lemagny, who "began to sense that there was poetry in a smooth surface, in two lines meeting at a right angle."

Poetry and protest are a 20th-century architectural alliance. Both are conspicuous in the present show. Protest against the restraints of mediocrity and necessity is implicit throughout. Poetry is a synonym for another suspect value in today's culture: beauty. Architectural fantasies can be a lot better than building in a bankrupt society.