Architecture

The Tower, the House, and the Park

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT is not without a certain parochial pleasure that we point out that major architectural shows have been part of the centennial celebrations of both New York's Metropolitan and Boston's Fine Arts museums.

The first was the Fine Art's "Back Bay Boston: The City as a Work of Art" (Nov. 1, 1969-Jan. 11, 1970), for which William Alex assembled the urbanistic and esthetic story of the remarkable creation of a sizable chunk of proper Boston on landfill in the latter part of the 19th century. This act of visionary pragmatism was paralleled by the accumulation by Boston's leader-builders of those treasures that have since settled comfortably into the museum's exceptional collections. There was also a catalogue with essays by Lewis Mumford and Walter Muir Whitehill, and the centennial got off to a solid esthetic-environmental start.

And now — at the Metropolitan — "The Rise of an American Architecture." This large show, which complements the museum's centennial exhibit, "19th-Century America" and will run to Oct. 4, is co-sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. It has been conceived and directed by Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., helped by Morrison Heckscher, Assistant Curator of the American Wing. Its range, roughly, is from 1815 to 1915, when "the development of an American architecture paralleled the growth of our country."

It must be said, first, that the exhibition is a high wire tour de force. And, we hasten to add, a success. As a documentation of the rise of American architecture it could not be more arbitrary. It could be called "Mr. Kaufmann's 10 best American buildings." (Or nine, actually, and three of them are parks, not buildings at all, which is really hanging from the trapeze by one's teeth.)

But Mr. Kaufmann, a collector and historian who teaches at the Columbia School of Architecture, pulls it off because this high-wire act is backed by a great deal of careful thought and scholarship that ultimately justifies it.

Elliott Erwitt

The Providence Arcade, 1828, from "The Rise of an American Architecture"

The exhibition as highwire act, backed by scholarship

The studied, deliberate, almost tortured limitations imposed on a century and a country of profligate building production are based on the selection of just three categories of American design—the commercial building, the small house and the city park. For each category there are just three fully documented, specially photographed (mostly by Elliott Erwitt) examples. There is a great deal left out, but you can't fault what's in. Each selection stands solid as a rock in its catalytic relevance to the mainstream.

Moreover, this concentration packs a tremendous wallop. Displayed in immense, backlit color enlargements and massed series in color or black and white, it gives a sense of architecture, of being with great works of building art, that seldom comes from an exhibition dealing with two-dimensional images indoors.

What comes across, miraculously and expensively in the photographic installation, is a uniquely American architectural achievement. Even more miraculously, the suggestion is made that the three areas treated mesh into a related totality, in terms of art, life and urbanism. And somewhere, not far from the surface, is the message that we have lost the know-how. That is a lot to say in nine examples, even with rich background material. Mr. Kaufmann flies through the air with the greatest of ease.

"As a trio," the text states, the office tower, the small house and the city park "spoke for a central sector of city life. Some severe problems of cities today are closely related to the decay of this three-sided achievement and the failure to develop it after a healthy start, to extend it to more citizens."

Today, the office tower is doing better than ever. The small house is in serious trouble. The Department of Housing and Urban Development, charting inflationary trends in 1969, has pegged the soaring small house cost at $20,563 for the moment, which leaves a lot of citizens out. (The H. H. Richardson house in the exhibition cost $2,500 in 1882.) The vision of the park "as the fulfillment of the city" has been forgotten.

This vision was environmental in its productive interplay between urban man and nature, sociological in its release from the city slum, cultural and educational in its insistence on horticulture, zoology, institutions of art and science, provisions for music and recreation. The park section, for which Albert Fein was consultant, is the most brilliant, revelatory and poignant passage in the show. It is also the most important.

This is partly because Professor Fein's scholarship, as park design historian and Frederick Law Olmsted biographer, gives new material and insights with a broad orientation which the traditional, one-building-at-a-time architectural historian has lacked. And it is also because the American achievement in this field, which has touched 19th-century cities with greatness and ameliorated their 20th-century horrors, is a major, still largely misunderstood and misused contribution to the history of urban design.

But that is the end of the show. It begins with "Great Buildings for Commerce." The three chosen are the Arcade, Providence, R.I., Warren and Bucklin, 1828; the Auditorium Building, Chicago, Ill., Adler and Sullivan, 1889; and the Flatiron Building, New York, Daniel H. Burnham, 1903. There is supporting material that takes the development of the arcade back to Rome and up to the present, and a stunningly succinct history of the skyscraper.

The small house section contains an 1852 "cottage" survival near Pittsburgh, Evergreen Hamlet, in the manner of Andrew Jackson Downing, the landscape architect who shaped mid-19th-century American taste; H. H. Richardson's Rev. Percy Browne house, Marion, Mass., 1881-2; and four versions of Frank Lloyd Wright's "prairie" house.

The parks illustrated are the park squares of Savannah, Ga.; Olmsted and Vaux's Central and Prospect Parks in New York; and the lake shore and parks in Chicago by Olmsted, Burnham and others.

The range of the show is enlarged by an accompanying book with essays by Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Professor Fein, Winston Weisman and Vincent Scully. It is further supplemented by a selection of 19th-century architectural drawings nearby, with some gems from the museum's collection and the Avery Architectural Library at Columbia.

The generally excellent installation, which has been done by architect James Polshek and graphic designer Arnold Saks, suffers from a few circulatory and visibility problems, perhaps the result of preoccupation with layout niceties. The less initiated, to whom the buildings are not immediately familiar, may find some subject boundaries confusing. Stunning building fragments lurk, unemphasized, in dark corners; one assumes the lighting is still to come.

But the dramatic display of a carefully limited amount of material evokes an immediate and sensuous response from the viewer—and that is the proper response to any art, including architecture. At the end, a series of small film screens record landmark demolition in action, a bit understatedly. But the message is clear. The ball swings, towers topple, rubble cascades. This is a significant and disturbing show, as it is meant to be.