

DISSENTING VIEW

Correspondent Questions Venezuelan Architectural Achievements

To the Art Editor:

MAY I comment on Stuart Preston's review of architecture in Connecticut and Venezuela on the Sunday, Sept. 1, Art Page?

Nothing misrepresents quite as convincingly and glamorously as architectural photography. Caracas is indeed an El Dorado in pictures. Its site is truly lovely. However, continually misled by this superb photography and setting, we romanticize and rhapsodize what is, in many ways, an appalling city and a highly questionable architecture. A few fine monuments are outnumbered and outshouted by some of the most vulgar and brutal building that our age has yet produced. Unfortunately, it is these buildings that are most characteristic, and they are far from admirable.

Caracas is a bulldozer city, where "progress" is being served by indiscriminately leveling the older quarters (except for a few national monuments). With the colonial building, much of the cultural contrast and color that make a city architecturally great are being deliberately scuttled. There is no serious lack of land; this destruction is part of the program. Like many programs sponsored under dictatorship—where political ills are disguised by social reforms— heavy emphasis is placed on complete eradication of slums and older areas, and the creation of a "brave new world." One senses, even in the briefest architectural tour, this underlying ruthlessness.

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Consider, for example, Caracas' famous public housing, one of the boldest and handsomest of the photographers' subjects. True, there were no nineteenth century industrial slums. But there were rural slums. These were demolished so that a primitive people, whose life consisted of a hut, a garden and a chicken or pig, could be transferred to sophisticated, high-rise apartments, a somewhat questionable sociological procedure. However, the buildings are extremely photogenic. The vaunted civic center group is a heavy, aggressive design, disquietingly reminiscent in character of some of the official work done in Italy under Fascist sponsorship in the Thirties and Forties.

As for the Venezuelan use of color, it must be seen—not selectively photographed—to be believed. Like the tinted drinks and ices served in Caracas' most plush hotel, it is often of an incredible fluorescent bril-

liance. It is quite enough to compare the pleasing hues of the old buildings that are being destroyed with the garish colors that line the new boulevards.

There are notable exceptions, of course. Some buildings are excellent. Portions of the University City are very fine; color and art are used outstandingly well. To date, however, I believe that only Lewis Mumford has questioned the general propaganda picture of Caracas as an architectural Utopia. What we need is some well-considered criticism of the design of this rich, growing city.

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE.