A Sense of Crisis About the Art Of Architecture

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The noise made by last week's International Conference of Little Magazines in Architecture on the subject, "After Modern Architecture," could well be likened to the proverbial sound of trees falling in solitude in a forest. Who, except the Almighty, hears it, and does it make a noise at all?

The question really translates into what importance, if any, does architectural theory have for the world at large? Is it just a game intellectuals play? Or does it have some recognizable impact on the world around us?

The answer is that theory is indeed a game of ideas, played with extraordinary skills and perceptions, and it is profoundly influential in both the making of architecture and the eventual shaping of the built environment. And so a conference of this kind, for all of its preordained obscurantism, is part of the process of understanding the relationships among art, culture and the way we live. It is not an understanding arrived at easily, or ever really arrived at, in terms of neat conclusions and action programs. There are no such certainties in the world of ideas.

There are bad conferences and good conferences, and the bad ones, which far outnumber the good ones, bore you to death with pomposities and platitudes, while the good ones leave you with an enlarged and exhilarated vision. The Little Magazines conference achieved that end.

The architects and editors of small, specialized journals from France, Italy and Spain, who met with their counterparts and hosts at New York's Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies from February 3d through 6th, came with a sense of mission. They were, in the way of architects and intellectuals, properly sweatered and booted, intense and mildly disheveled, with the women, in the present mode, predominantly henna-haired.

The discussion was brilliant, abstruse, concerned and crotchety. It dealt with the creative practice of architecture in its most "pure" manifestations—those paper projects and

> 'The present period is marked by confusion, uncertainty and even fear.'

realized seminal schemes that are inevitably knocked off over the next 20 years in the urban marketplace. The present period, defined by the "After Modern Architecture" of the conference title, emerged as a period of confusion, uncertainty, and even fear, marked by a rising recantation of the "modern movement" as it has held evangelical sway for half a century.

The host organization, the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, is a research and educational center supported by grants, devoted to the exploration and dissemination of cosmic and progressive trends in the art and theory of architecture. The people who run little magazines (circulation 8,000 to 12,000) deal in large ideas. The institute's own little magazine, called Oppositions, is published with the assistance of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It is a periodical as important as it is unreadable. That is a shame, because what it is saying should be understood.

The European participants were Arquitecturas Bis from Spain, AMC from France and Controspazio and Lotus from Italy. The setting was the Institute's offices, one of those white-walled lofts beloved of architects, found at the tops of old skyscrapers, with breathtaking New York views and a casual esthetic disarray. The language was horrendous and the talk was marvelous. Discussion abounded in code words and current icons; there were "typologies," "anthropocentric built forms," and references to Durand, Quatremère de Quincy, Foucauld and Rossi tossed like handfuls of herbs into an intellectual salad. (No, I will not explain them; I would be here all day.) Every statement engendered passionate controversy. Every idea was taken apart like a watch.

What came out of it all was a sense of crisis, anxiety and frustration, internationally shared, about the present condition of architecture—as art, not as professional practice. Rafael Moneo of Arquitecturas Bis pointed out that the modern movement is looked on now as a "dream of reason" that failed. Kenneth Frampton, the English critic

Continued on Page 36

Architecture In Crisis

Continued from Page 33

and an editor of Oppositions, made a point of the loss of Utopia, that illusion of the ideal world inherited from the Renaissance. The avant garde, he stated in a position paper, has been "the continual assertion and postponement of Utopia."

In fact, the modern movement is not only dead, but a true modern architecture is yet to be born, said Peter Eisenman, an architect and another Oppositions editor. What we have had so far is a "modern style" based on a faulty polemic. Today's reality is complex, fragmented, episodic, disordered, incapable of unification. Is that not also the real nature of architectural art? Should its spatial perceptions still strive for a traditional ideal of classical unity and wholeness? "We are," he said, "in the moment of destroying the model."

"It has already collapsed," added Joseph Rykwert, historian, critic, and Lotus representative. "We are sorting out the fragments." "Reality is not preordained," said Alessandro Anselmi of Controspazio. "We must find alternatives." "The modern movement is a point of reference only," concluded Rafael Moneo. "We go on from here."

My own preparation for the conference had been a rereading of Hitchcock and Johnson's "International Style," the bible of the modern movement that introduced the new European architecture to the United States in 1932. It had seemed, in my student days, to be the book of revelations. Now it reads like an exercise in traditional, 19th-century Germanic art historical methodology; its narrowly iconographic analysis could be transposed without a quiver to Mannerism or the Baroque.

The book was a brilliant eyeopener, but as a guide to radical perception, it probably set modern architecture back 100 years. Because it codified a set of esthetic mannerisms, the style was quickly translated into an effective pattern for corporate symbolism. (This is not a criticism, but a cultural reality.) The creative life of the modern movement was stunted by the need to repeat and institutionalize the signs of status in building for the corporate client.

Will today's architectural theorists lead us into a similar trap of codification and symbolism in their search for new models and principles? It is a fear I suppress, as the architectural Punic Wars continue, one set of theories pitted against another.

A different and most basic fear was expressed by Kenneth Frampton, who felt that without coherent models, without the impulse and conviction and theory of art, the architect loses his reality, his role and his influence. He then loses his power to shape the physical and cultural environment. When the architect fails in his self-perception, society will also fail to perceive his work and its meaning, and he will be increasingly ignored and impotent.

We can believe, optimistically, with Mario Gandelsonas of Oppositions, that because "architecture is part of culture, it generates culture and transforms culture" with historical inevitability. Or we can watch with uneasiness as today's architecture becomes so sophisticated and hermetic that the gap between public and practitioner, and theory and reality, steadily widens. The only inevitability is man's timeless urge for building and for art. ■