**How We See, or Think We See the City: Architecture 'What we have been ...**
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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**Architecture**

# How We See, or Think We See the City

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WE have a rather special interest in an exhibition of photographs called Landscape/Cityscape at the Metropolitan Museum (through Jan. 6) and our concern has very little to do with photography as art. That primary aspect of the show should be dealt with by the appropriate critics.

But photography as art has had a lot to do with the way we perceive the world and react to it, and to some extent the accepted image of our environment is one that the art of photography has given us. This thought was not absent from the minds of the show's organizers. "Because of continuing interest in our environment, both natural and man-made," the introductory text by Phyllis Dearborn Massar reads, "it seems timely to present an exhibition of 20th-century photographs by American photographers whose chosen subject matter has been the land and the city." What is involved, therefore, is the characteristic way in which the photographer chooses to record these surroundings, and whether that process actually involves environmental as well as esthetic responses.

On the evidence of this one show, it usually does not. As a survey of photographers' images of the 20th-century land and city, the exhibition documents what might be called a significant trend of philosophical vision—a vision primarily poetic and abstract.

For the city, in particular, and for an urbanist, this vision seems disastrously deficient. Even at its most elegant and effective, it is seriously disappointing. To anyone who sees the city, quite apart from its role as a human heaven or hell, as one of the richest and most complex art forms of history, the selectively narrow preoccupation with formal pictorial elements that dominates these works leaves a sense of something terribly important missing. Life, substance, structure, the city itself—call it what you will. As lovely as these pictures are, and they are consummately skilled, to one who has spent a lifetime trying to grasp the life and art of the city, they are sometimes very thin art, indeed.

Those thoughts are prompted, of course, by this one show, which is dominated by what is probably, historically, a legitimately idealistic approach. The early observers of the American scene in this century tended to be less critically aware and more art-atelier-oriented than those of more recent years, a time of mutilating change. Or the emphasis on the abstract and ideal may be due to Mrs. Massar's personal selection.

It is hard to put it down to any particular aberration of the art of photography, since there are as many potential images of the world as there are eyes and minds to frame and interpret them. There is virtually no such thing as uncolored observation, or objective documentation, as long as there is an intelligence behind the camera. The so-called documentary photography of the 1930's consists not of objective records, but of some of the most impassioned polemics in the history of art. Those sagas of the Federal Works Programs burn with the sense of the land and its people in desolation and the city in neglect and despair. They are magnificent commentary.

This exhibit emphasizes the classic landscapes of Edward Weston, Walker Evans and Ansel Adams, and the classic cityscapes of Alfred Stieglitz, Charles Sheeler and Berenice Abbott, with other equally impressive examples of the period and style. They have taught us a way to look at the world, and in turn, we see the world their way.

And that is the rub. The curious thing about images of the environment is that they inevitably structure reality. Our perception is trained by them. What we have been given by these photographers of the American land and the American city — which most people call up for their definition of both — is exquisitely observed and romantically unreal. Even the so-called "realism" is restrictively romantic — set pieces of patterned perfection — the farm furrow, towers in mist, the shining skyscraper in the shadowed street. There is so much more. Does not the depth of interpretation relate directly to the quality of art?

In both literature and art, the image of the city has always been subject to philosophical and emotional manipulation. American literature has traditionally treated the city as ugly and evil, the country as beautiful and good. American photography treats them equally as art objects. Everything was grist for the popular mill of abstraction. It never was quite enough.

Andreas Feininger's "Midtown Manhattan from Weehawken, N.J.," c. 1945
*Architects as form-givers and photographers as image-makers*

***'What we have been given by these photographers is exquisitely observed and romantically unreal.'***

This is important because in architecture and urbanism the photograph has become as valid as the thing itself. Our urban concepts are defined by certain key photographic images. Thus Andreas Feininger fused for us in the 40's the sense of the city's multidimensional complexity with his use of the telephoto lens in such studies as the legendary "Rush Hour, Fifth Avenue" of 1949. He said it again about space and humanity in "Coney Island Beach." Those pictures in the exhibit that turn urban experience into a revelatory pictorial expression are the catalytic documents of environmental vision.

The process is still going on. Elaine Mayes's "Autolandscapes" of 1971, views seen from the moving car, perform a similar innovative function. Bill Arnold's "Lower East Side" of 1972 says as much about the trauma of today's urban scene as it does about the subtleties of pictorial composition. It probes reality instead of merely settling for extracted esthetic effect.

But the photographer who saw the city most truly, and whose work is still unequaled in the field, is Berenice Abbott. She sought not one selective aspect, but the city whole. Her views of the 1930's and 40's never lose meaning—if anything, they gain. This is because they do not stress the romantic or abstract image as their overriding aim; they are primarily and penetratingly real. There is an extraordinary sense of the urban essence, of the entire physical and human conurbation rather than of something skimmed off the top. "Changing New York," the Federal Works Project of the 30's, is no set of decorative arrangements or evocation of passing mood. These pictures give you New York the city's cycle and substance, magnificently observed.

The critical point of view expressed here in no way negates other kinds of photographic accomplishment, nor is it meant to do so. It is a judgment undeniably fed by specialization and hindsight. But the implications are large, in that we deal with what we see, or think we see, in facing the problems of the environment.

The architects are the form-givers and the photographers are the image-makers and the relationship is more incestuous than one would think. With Mrs. Massar, we await "the next significant photographs of our surroundings."