Distress on the high seas

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Mutations in the Modern Movement

A model for the New York State corporate headquarters designed by Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo & Associates

The Museum of Modern Art has begun the celebration of its 50th anniversary with a major new show on a subject it introduced to the American public shortly after the museum was founded — modern architecture. The exhibition, called "Transformations in Modern Architecture," will run through April 24.

The passage of half a century has turned youthful revolutionaries into elder statesmen. It has also seen modern architecture significantly transformed, as the title of the show implies. Today there is no longer one movement so strong that it can sweep everything else aside to impose a narrowly restricted esthetic with single-minded conviction. Nor is there a universal polemic such as modernism supplied in its early years.

The purpose of this exhibition, therefore, is not to crusade or break new ground, but to show how the rules of revolutionary modernism have been bent and broken as the new architecture evolved. Probably nothing could make the transformation of the museum itself clearer than the fact that the descendants of the handful of shockingly radical buildings in the museum's 1932 "Modern Architecture" show have literally taken over the world. Not bad, for 50 years. And quite indicative of where the revolution, and the museum, stand now.

The exhibition, which spans the years 1960 to 1980 and presents over 400 buildings, covers only the last two of the museum's five decades. Those 20 years coincide with the total triumph of modern architecture as the official style of our time, and with the acceleration of change.

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Public acceptance, developing technology and esthetic restlessness led architects into a variety of paths that moved away from orthodox functionalism into something as deliberately expressive, and nonfunctional, as sculpture. Once out of the straitjacket of modernism, the mutations have proved endless.

How this happened, and what the results have been, is the theme of the monumental survey put together by Arthur Drexler, director of the Museum's Department of Architecture and Design. The exhibition embraces no particular school, style or development. It avoids judgments, an omission that can be extremely unsettling to those who believe, like this viewer, that the amenities of design are as important as its curiosities. But it does offer shrewd insights and telling observations, such as the obvious celebration of the brilliant "skin" esthetic of the glass building as one of the most stunning achievements of our time, and the fact of the superiority of much "off-the-peg" technology over the "architected" version. The show unblushingly mixes good with bad in its determined documentation of trends and practices.

The approach is fiercely didactic and intellectual, based on the tradition of the art-historical listing of iconographical, or esthetic characteristics. The job of compiling, organizing and interpreting such a sampling covering one of the most active periods of the building art, done for the first time here, is an impressive achievement in itself. I, personally, dislike many of the examples on display, and find Mr. Drexler's "objectivity" almost herculean in its forebearance and avoidance of tough critical questions. But the result is still a thoroughly fascinating and extremely valuable show.

However, the exhibition inevitably raises the much larger question of what has happened to modern architecture in the 50-year period during which the museum's existence has paralleled its development. The "transformations" actually began very early and insidiously, through the ways in which the new architecture was presented and publicized. It is quite possible that the most critical transformation, as it affected the understanding and practice of modern architecture in this country, took place in the Museum of Modern Art's "Modern Architecture" show of 1932.

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This exhibition did more than merely introduce the pioneering new building to the United States. It presented it in terms that deviated significantly from its basic intent.

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Under the heading of "architecture," there was Hitchcock and Johnson's display and book on "The International Style," probably one of the most influential events in the history of criticism and connoisseurship. This presentation reduced a complex, idealistic, revolutionary movement to a set of esthetic exercises, or a manual on style.

But there was also a section on "housing," carefully divorced from "architecture," prepared by an equally distinguished group of enthusiastic protagonists of modernism, Catherine Bauer, Clarence Stein and Henry Wright, with a separate catalogue introduced by Lewis Mumford. That part of the presentation survives only in archives.

What became modernist practice in this country is the purified "architectural" style from which all the sociology and politics that infused the revolutionary ideology of the European modernists were removed. Those socio-political aspects of design were to prove, soon enough, incapable of realization. But the American tastemakers didn't wait; they scuttled them immediately as uninteresting or nonessential. Philip Johnson, in his post-war years as Director of Architecture at the Museum of Modern Art, frankly labeled them a bore. An occasional small housing or planning show discharged a vestigial debt of conscience.

The informed historian realizes today that housing was virtually the heart of the modern movement. It was regularly featured in expositions and demonstrated in model developments. The human condition was a prime concern of European modernism, inextricably linked to radical architectural change. This was preached even when it was not practiced; surely no one could have been less sociologically oriented than Le Corbusier. But when it was practiced, as in the Frankfurt housing of Ernst May, it remains architecturally and environmentally valid to this day.

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It soon became clear, however, that there was very little housing, beyond those demonstration projects, for the Museum to show. A few remarkable examples of the 1930's were quickly bowdlerized by government agencies into designs for disaster. The failure of the dream was as much to blame as the lack of interest of the tastemakers. Only now are scholars such as Robert Pommer, in his revealing article on American housing design in the December 1978 Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, beginning to reexamine the subject of modernism on its own terms, rather than those subsequently manufactured for it.

What really doomed the most challenging aspect of modernist design was the awful reality that architecture simply could not cope with the spread and severity of the social problems that accompanied the changes of the post-war world. Least of all, could it cure them. And by trying to do so, with too large claims and too little understanding, it lost its credibility.

How easy it then became for a younger generation to announce that modernism didn't work, that modern architecture was dead. How simple to blame it all on the sanitized, stylistic version of modernism that had been so assiduously promoted by the leaders of the profession, or to turn inward to even more hermetic esthetic concerns. The ultimate transformation of modern architecture is the total abandonment of the idealistic, over-ambitious, but thoroughly admirable dream that tried to define the role of architecture in modern society, for an esthetic dandyism being practiced today. One can only fear for the art of building now. ■