Two in Trouble
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New York Times (1923-Current file); Jun 22, 1969; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. D30

Architecture

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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

LONDON

WE have paid a second visit to London's Hayward Gallery — the new museum in the South Bank cultural complex — for a second look at the Italian frescoes that jammed New York's Metropolitan Museum last year. It would still be a great show, if anyone could see it. But a combination of extraordinarily bad lighting and inept installation leaves its beauty to imagination or recollection.

Even more depressing than the installation of the show is the gallery itself. This would not be a great building, even if anyone could find it. Few can, according to complaints in the London press.

"If you want to see the frescoes," says Lord Goodman, chairman of the sponsoring Arts Council, implying that you can see them if you can find them, "you have to go out with a search party under Dr. Livingstone."

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The unfortunate Hayward is a demonstration of how the best planning principles go wrong. Built for the Arts Council, it opened in July, 1968, as part of the important group of three new buildings on the South Bank that includes the 1967 Queen Elizabeth Hall and Purcell Room, for music.

The three buildings are treated as one in concept, style and circulation. They are the work of a coalition of architects in the Greater London Council, formerly the London County Council, and one can only suspect that the architects coalesced differently for the Queen Elizabeth Hall and Purcell Room, which are infinitely more successful than the Hayward Gallery. Their older neighbor, the refurbished Royal Festival Hall, remains a pleasant, spacious classic.

Because we had been to the Hayward a few months before to see the massacre of Van Gogh by the gallery's super-scientific lighting system (anything that can cancel out that color and vitality is an achievement of sorts) we vaguely knew our way. You start by directing your bewildered taxi driver to the nearest familiar landmark, the Festival Hall. When you get out, you are on your own.

First, you must find the non-entrance. The dearth of signs is matched only by the reticence of their graphics. You gamble on some steps that at least promise relief from the grim forest of columns of the roofed-over parking that create a concrete netherworld below. (Planning principle number one: separate cars and people.)

You have now left the forbidding ambience of the lower level for the windswept, rainswept pedestrian promenades on which you can walk indefinite distances in wrong directions to any of several cultural objectives. (Planning principle number two: provide pedestrian routes and connections to all buildings.)

Let's say you've popped up the right hole. You are now confronted with a non-facade. Yes, it is the Hayward. You are facing more walkways and a limbo of unidentifiable surrounding concrete. (Planning principle number three: make the buildings integral with the circulation system and reduce their mass to avoid conflict with the existing environment.) Homage, perhaps, to that old London skyline spoiler, the adjacent Shell Building?

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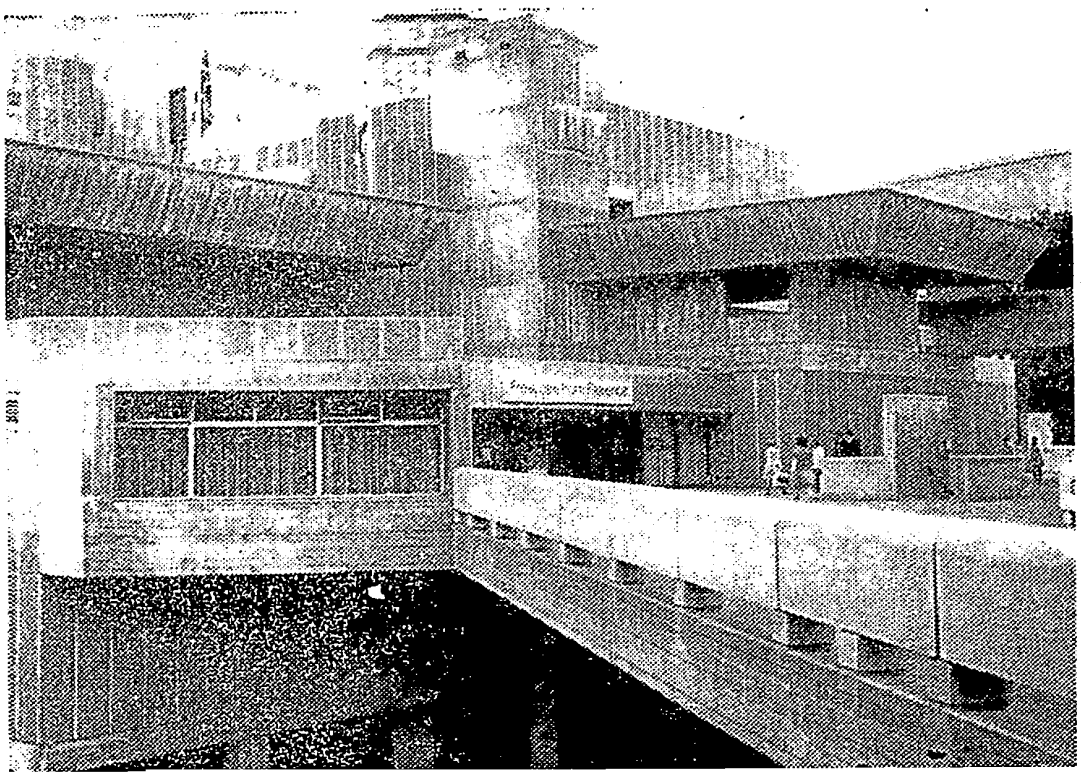
Bits and pieces of the building that you have so cleverly discovered project and recede in the latest fashion with a singular lack of dynamism. Open stairs fly off corners without any particular conviction. It all goes pip-pip instead of pow. Call it Bland Brutalism. (Planning principle number four: articulate and express the structure's parts and functions.)

The entrance to the building is through a too-small foyer with unclear functions labeled, by necessity, entrance, exit, tickets, etc. Inside, there is an absence of anything that makes architecture. There is no progression or dramatic definition of related spaces. The main, 20-foot high gallery has neither presence nor scale for its size. The ascent of a free-form concrete stair that stands facing a corner like a bad child is interrupted by toilets. Arrows are absolutely essential. You go where you are directed as a purely sequential exercise, never as an architectural experience.



Garth Huxtable

London's Hayward Gallery. First prize to anyone who finds it

Natural light in the top galleries is controlled by an intricate arrangement of self-regulating, computerized, motorized blinds, activated by light-sensitive cells and reinforced by fluorescent and tungsten fixtures. The system is the last scientific word.

Unfortunately, it seems to have the effect of deadening whatever is displayed. A superb sepia series of the life of St. John the Baptist by Andrea del Sarto, a marvel of tonal luminosity and lustrous white highlights when seen in New York, is drained of richness and glory. You are lucky, in more than one sense, to find the way out sign.

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If you can't find the Hayward, you'll have no trouble finding the Tate. It is across the river and it has an unmistakable late 19th-century classical portico with huge columns that are bowlegged with entasis, topped by a proper Victorian idea of cultural deities.

The Tate has had a tempest in its temple this spring. Desperate for space, it came up with a $4.8 million expansion scheme by the distinguished firm of Llewelyn-Davies, Weeks, Forestier-Walker and Bor (it sounds like an architectural conglomerate) which started a remarkably spirited controversy. The proposal adds gallery space and the standard museum amusement area, a restaurant, by boxing in the front and back of the existing building.

But the portico would have to go. Its substitute would be a colonnade in Lincoln Center Characterless, which would be akin to trading farina for splendid, lumpy, stick-to-the-ribs Victorian porridge, and losing a recognizable landmark in the bargain. The river view from the proposed terrace restaurant would be a vista of new buildings of awesomely matched mediocrity on the other side.

The plan was exhibited for general discussion. With few exceptions, the critics took 40 whacks. Londoners waxed wroth in letters to the Times. The fate of the portico became a cause célèbre.

At the moment, it seems that the plan has been politely shelved. The most interesting result of the fracas has been the fact that the Tate trustees did an extensive rethink as the controversy mounted.

For the first time, the crux of the matter — the nature of the Tate collection — was faced. The question was finally and properly raised as to whether the Tate's great grab-bag of modern foreign painting, modern sculpture, and historical British painting should remain a gloriously inviolate jumble, with temporary half-measures taken to house it. The proposal was admittediy stopgap at best, based on a program that obviously needed restudy.

"We have come out of this much better off," says Anthony Lousada, head of the Tate trustees. "We have gone through some hard soul-searching and arrived at some difficult conclusions." The thinking now seems to lean toward a new building for the modern collections, on adjoining army land, if the proper negotiations can be undertaken.

These conclusions were encouraged by that remarkably constructive British institution, public debate — something that enriches the life of the intellect and raises the standards of public design. Press comment has been pompous to brilliant. Our favorite is the Daily Telegraph's suggestion that the Tate Gallery and neighboring military hospital be combined with the less serious cases moved to the Tate and the more far-out shows put in the hospital, the whole to be renamed the Tate Hospital and Queen Alexandra's Military Gallery.

Nothing is non-negotiable.