

ARCHITECTURE VIEW
ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Retreat
Continued

In architecture, this has been a year of "consolidation," as they say in business and politics. The heroes have familiar faces, and the manifestos have a familiar ring. No bright new stars have suddenly shot across the horizon; no world-shaking events have upset the established order. This year there has been as much interest in where we have been as in where we are going; the perspective is through the rear-view mirror.

This is a time of transition, in which the much-heralded trip from modernism to post-modernism continues to be made in small buildings and large talk. The year has produced more gambits in the power play among the profession's intellectuals than revolutionary additions to the build-

ing art. One might characterize 1979 as a plateau in the post-modernist debate; nothing really new, folks, just a slightly larger crowd on the head of the pin.

For the second year in a row, I.M. Pei is the architect of the year. He, too, has been consolidating his position. Mr. Pei received many honors in 1979, including the prestigious Gold Medal of the American Institute of Architects, a recognition that went last year to Philip Johnson, who was also that year's architectural media event. Mr. Pei is this year's media event, an odd distinction that his work has managed to override.

The two buildings of the year, notable for their combination of architectural quality and public impact, are both from the Pei office — the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston and the design for New York City's Convention Center. The Pei firm's East Building for Washington's National Gallery, which opened in 1978, has been a hard act to follow; it is not often that private money, Government sponsorship and the art establishment come together for a monumental work that sums up the theory and practice of a significant period in the history of a major art.

Both the Kennedy Library and the Convention Center project have appeared after a decade of site and design changes and a touch-and-go struggle with politics, economics and fate. For the Library, it was a decade when the concept of monumentality lost face, inflation took its toll, and the image of Camelot grew dim. Never fear; Mr. Pei's un-

paralleled talents for design and diplomacy have created a building of integrity and grace. He has performed the difficult feat of translating the extremely questionable presidential libraries program into a dignified structure consistent with his own stylistic development. Inside, the exhibit designers have combined history and myth with seamless skill; it will take a long time in the archives to straighten them out.

The Convention Center scheme will be on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from Feb. 21 through March 30. This institution is also responsible for the exhibition, or exhibitions, of the year. Certainly the most controversial show of 1979 was the Modern's big spring offering, Arthur Drexler's "Transformations in Modern Architecture," which managed to unite the warring modernist and post-modernist camps in violent disapproval, revealing the naïveté of the former and the sometimes surprising pettiness of the latter.

Surely Mr. Drexler could have expected no less. In effect, he told the modernists that they were pious fakers, chasing form for its own sake under a social and structural cover, and some of the horrendous examples that he chose to show with obvious delight hardly helped. At the same time, he informed the post-modernists that they were not the instruments of divine change, and that, in fact, they were hardly worth including.

A central thesis of the show — that such arbitrary exercises in form freed one of the most important developments of modern architecture, the glass building, for a period of remarkable esthetic exploration — turned out to be this year's major stylistic trend. Tricks with mirrors are expected to go on well into the 1980's. Two prime examples are Pei's Con-

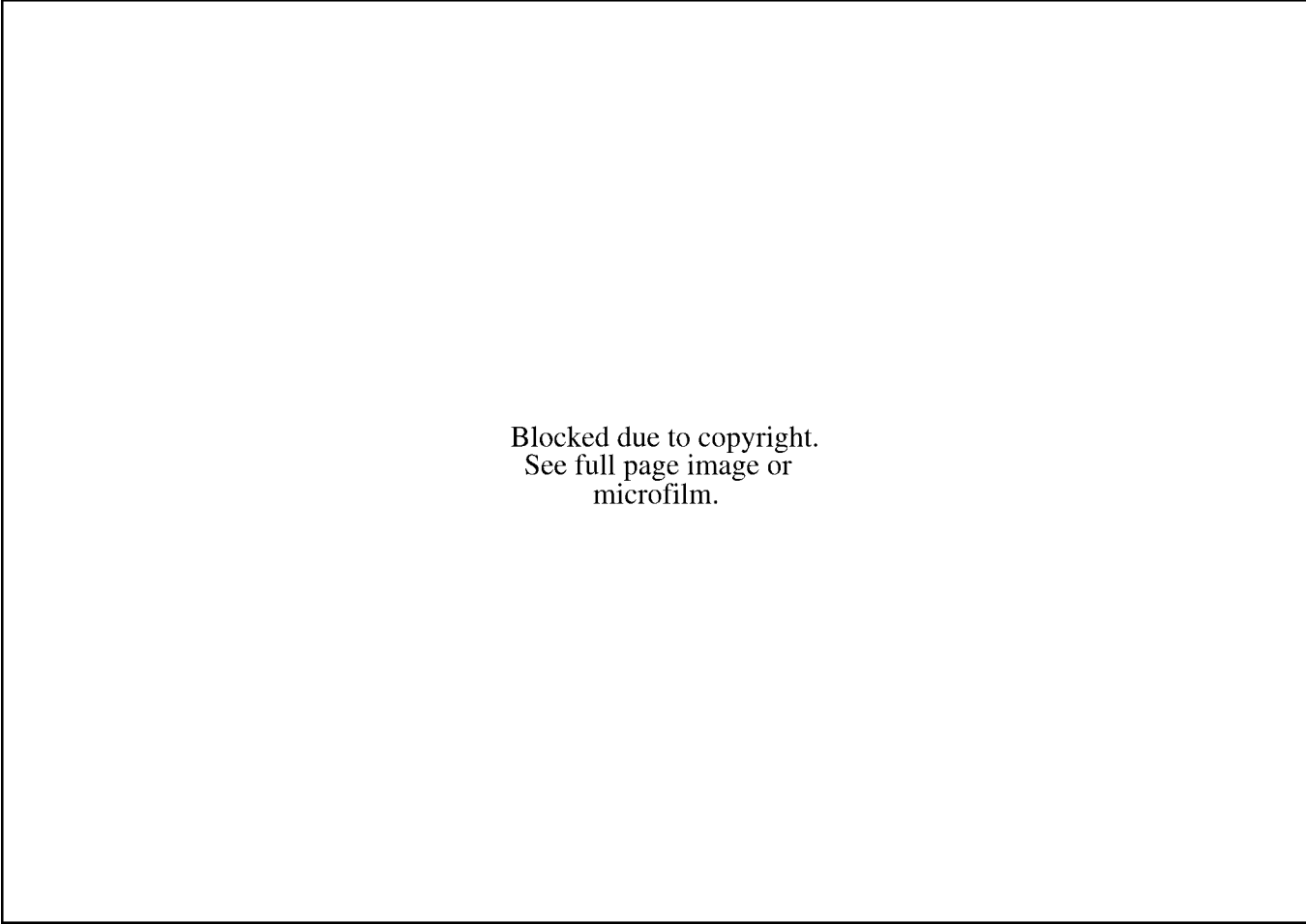
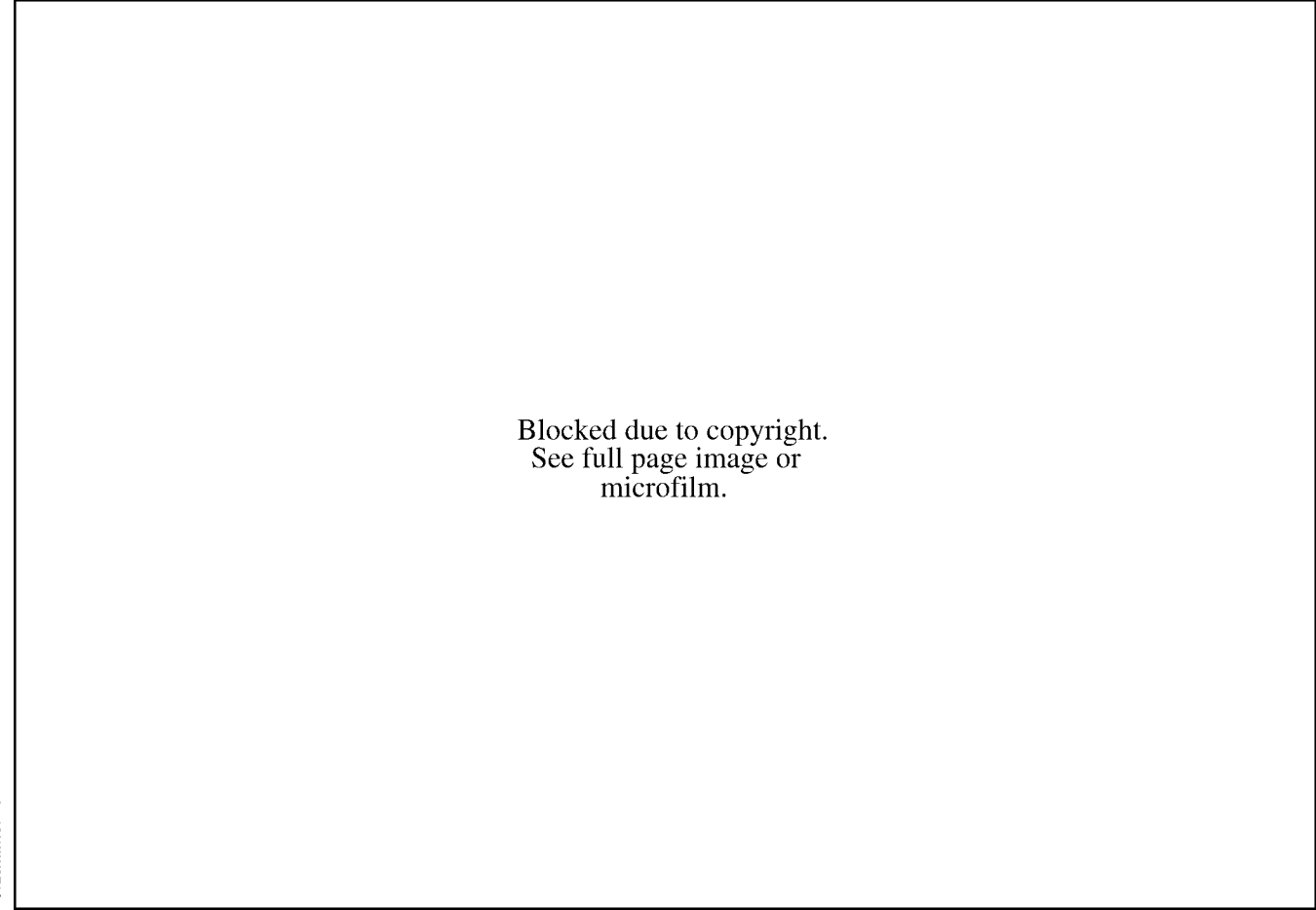
vention Center for New York and Philip Johnson's headquarters for PPG Industries in Pittsburgh; they span the poles of vitreous invention.

The other trend of the year is the continuation of the now-familiar stance of facing firmly backwards. The retro kick goes on undimmed. Nostalgia and trivia are to be found everywhere, dearly beloved by those too young to find re-treads tiresome. On balance, however, much is being seriously rehabilitated that is good and interesting, and scholarly research is placing a great deal that was previously discounted into the proper historical context.

The retro events of the year are two important, ongoing exhibitions: the Museum of Modern Art's "Art of the Twenties," arranged from its own collections by William S. Lieberman, and "The Great Thirties Spectacular" at London's

Continued on Page 31

I.M. Pei's John F. Kennedy Library in Boston—"integrity and grace"



Kusakabe Kimbei's "Umbrella Maker" at Japan House—"a beautiful selection"

Fernand Léger's "Umbrella and Bowler" from the Modern's "Art of the Twenties"

Continued from Page 23

Hayward Gallery, which deals with the art of the 30's. If the Hayward is big on nostalgia, the Modern's display, which includes the architecture and design landmarks of the period, is a rich and splendid show of the finest work of a remarkable decade, and an incontrovertible best of 1979. Half a century of hindsight makes this art and architecture more impressive than ever.

In the spirit of the year, one of the main events was an ending rather than a beginning. With almost no publicity and only an intimate dinner for a few hundred people to mark the event, Gordon Bunshaft, of the architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, retired. Mr. Bunshaft and his firm set the standards and raised the sights of corporate and commercial architecture in the 20th century. Together, they turned

modern architecture into the style of the establishment, and one might even add, of the world.

Mr. Bunshaft gave us the pace-setters — Lever House and Connecticut General — and a host of extraordinarily handsome urban and exurban corporate palaces that are prominent in the architectural history of our times. He is rumored to have removed more travertine from Roman quarries than was used in all previous centuries. His way with a stainless-steel joint is breathtaking. His detailing is uncompromising.

He is still making history with his National Commercial Bank Building in construction now in Jiddah, Saudi Arabia — the most daring and dramatic design of his career. As a member of a generation that looked forward, not backward, Mr. Bunshaft may not care for a comparison to early 19th-century Romantic Classicism, but

this is a building of a scale and impact that puts Etienne-Louis Boullée's spheres and stylography to shame, and would make him green with envy.

It has been a year of milestones and landmarks. Le Corbusier's Savoye House, the building that has symbolized the modern movement more than any other, reached the half-century mark, and Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion — a structure that existed for only seven months and left an indelible imprint on the century — also recorded its 50th anniversary.

In New York, the year saw the 66-year-old Woolworth Building restored with the care given to Gothic cathedrals, while the 40-year-old Chrysler Building had its face and rents lifted. The city held designation hearings on the most famous landmark of them all, the Empire State Building. Backwards, oh time and art. ■

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.