Anti-Street, Anti-People: Architecture
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Architecture

Anti-Street, Anti-People

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

MORE than ever, it is necessary to write of basic things. Contrary to still-prevalent belief, that does not mean beautiful buildings. And it is not the polemics of design theory. The former are a matter for rejoicing and the reaffirmation of architecture as art and benchmark of civilization; the latter is a luxury for anyone dealing with the awesome and awful nitty gritty of today's urban condition.

Not that design theory isn't relevant. It swings from the extremes of foolishly arcane and blandly self-indulgent doublethink to those flashes of brilliant insight that illuminate a moment in time and its creative conceptualization called style with fearful and wonderful clarity. It is truth, or part of truth, and it represents one of man's highest efforts at the understanding of his impulses and his world. His buildings have the same frightful range. They, too, swing from abysmal to the kind of masterpiece that defines an entire era. And critics will prefer to celebrate excellence whenever it comes along.

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But it is hard to understand why a public drowning in the unprecedented mass of construction of modern times, suffering from the consequences of more terrible building than ever before in history — building that influences or controls both physical and emotional well-being and the mechanics of existence — persists in thinking of architecture as a matter of isolated works of art. And until there is general understanding of what the built environment really is, and does, in terms of purpose, place and people, there will be little attempt here to develop "long lines" of theoretical argument or esthetic analysis. In essence, architectural pollution is what we deal with, as much as with architectural art, a preoccupation dictated largely by the times.

In other times, there have been other dictates. Forty years ago in this country, and a decade earlier in Europe, a highly polemical battle was being waged for something called modern architecture.

This new kind of building was much more than a set of undecorated flat planes and unconventional spatial relationships married to cubism and constructivism and the revolutionary 20th-century arts. It was more than a reaction against 19th-century decorative superficialities and excessive revivalism. It had a great deal to do with structural revolution as well as esthetic theory, which were often united with a tenuous romanticism. Entire new building technologies were being developed and political and social changes were both felt and evident. The movement was one of the most important, and one of the most publicly rejected, in architectural history. It was advanced by pure and simple faith and proselytizing and, at the time, it had to be.

It was perhaps not until 1947, with the Museum of Modern Art's definitive show of Mies van der Rohe, that much of the look and logic of modern architecture began to be accepted. From that point on, it literally changed the world.

Initially, it did so largely through the distinguished work of the firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, which was deeply influenced by the Miesian philosophy. When SOM brought big building and corporate clients into the fold of a handsome and rational expression of modernism, there was much to be thankful for. From that point on, Mies's pragmatic poetry, a most sensitive celebration of the splendors of structure and materials, went on to become a commercial but genuine international vernacular.

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It would be nice if that were the end of the story and we could leave SOM triumphantly showing New York the way in the 1950's and early 1960's with Lever House and Chase Manhattan, and with the later superb skin building at 140 Broadway. It would be even nicer to say that all battles are won and all's right with SOM's architectural world. The firm today is an institution with a reputation for sound design and excellent detailing that brings prestigious clients to its offices across the country and abroad. The style it helped pioneer has become the norm, with better and worse practitioners.

What, then, has gone awry? Because something has gone wrong at SOM, and saying so is a little like attacking the Pope. But what professionals are saying in private, and what should be aired in public, is that there has been an evolution of design needs and philosophy that has somehow passed the firm right by. SOM's consistently quality-conscious buildings are also the increasing source of a persistent, monumental form of environmental abuse that is a growing cause of critical concern.

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I think, personally, that it is a simple case of hardening of the arteries of architectural ideas. The less kind call it arrogance; the more tolerant see it as an inability to respond to changing perceptions of the urban experience. But the basic fact is that the firm's practitioners are singlemindedly intent on the building as monument, or as a splendid piece of technology, with near-total blindness to its environmental side effects, which are often disastrous.

There are still genuinely innovative SOM structures, or bigger and better monuments, such as the John Hancock and Sears towers in Chicago. Regal corporate headquarters in rural surroundings respect landscapes. But such SOM skyscrapers as the curve-fronted structures on 58th and 42d Streets in New York — whatever their ingenious zoning rationale — are slaps in the city's face. They are disdainfully anti-street, excruciatingly awkward in their connections to their neighbors and, in the former case, belligerently disruptive of the skyline seen from Central Park.

It doesn't really matter that the 58th Street building is more soigné than the 42d Street one; the let-them-eat-travertine perfectionism of SOM superstar Gordon Bunshaft is seldom less than belligerently antihuman these days. One can only pity one half of the Hotel Plaza's guests facing that 58th Street black glass wall.

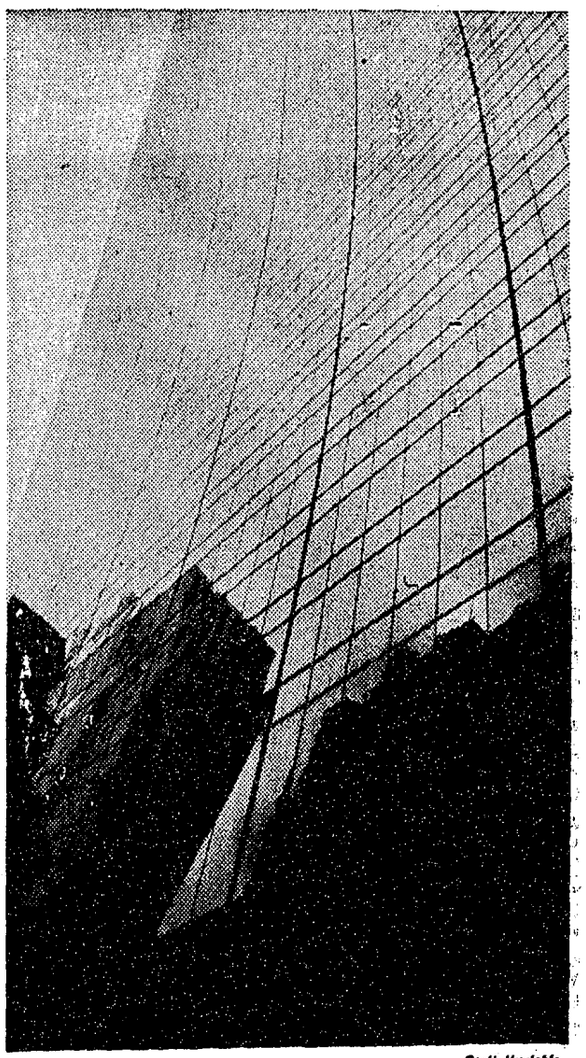
The firm's design of the city's proposed convention center is not saved from concrete bunkerism by rooftop tennis courts. The ground floor detailing of the U. S. Steel Building in Lower Manhattan is positively punitive: stone steps, bollards and chains suggest entrances to dungeons.

The so-called "park" that was the city's negotiated price for this large building on the adjoining site is ruthlessly inhuman, something really incredible at that intimate scale, and lacking in any vestige of imaginative design. Benches will not relieve the dismal regimentation that is the lowest common denominator of SOM's religion of rigid geometry. It should be pulled out and done all over again.

In other cities across the country, SOM has often dropped its excellent standardized product into streets of completely alien scale and character, compounding the sin by what may be the firm's worst invention, the podium, an elevated blank base at street level. The effect is unconcern for the people who use the street, and the disastrous environmental impact is not made up for by yards of macassar in the executive suites inside.

Basically, the trouble is in the buildings' transition to the city and the immediate surroundings. For SOM there are rarely transitions, just break-off points, walled, raised, separated, or terminated with antiseptic plazas, rather than treated as a point of junction with the scale, function and spirit of the setting. Even when a city is in transition, these sensitivities must exist. They are increasingly recognized as the creative essence of much of the art of urban design.

The moral, and there is one, is that good taste, superior technology and impeccable execution are no longer enough. America now builds better than most of the rest of the world. SOM has either failed to move with the increasingly important and complex lessons of total environmental architecture, or has chosen to ignore those lessons, and some clear evaluation of this failure is overdue.



Garth Huxtable

Curve-fronted building between Fifth Avenue and Avenue of the Americas, 57th to 58th Streets, by Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill.

A slap in the city's face