

ARCHITECTURE PRIZES AND A PRIZE ARCHITECT

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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THIS is the time of year for the passing out of architectural prizes, which, like the first crocuses of spring, are meant to herald a brighter day. Whether the prize-winners are the best of all possible buildings, however, is relatively unimportant. Their real significance lies in what they reveal of current American architectural practices and tastes.

American architecture today is active, ambitious and influential. It is changing the face of the nation and the look of the world. It ranges from acknowledged masterpieces (far too few) to dismal mediocrities (far too many), and includes some monumental blunders that may charitably be laid to misguided creative enthusiasm.

The annual awards are an attempt to separate the good from the bad, to isolate healthy trends. This year, the over-all picture reveals a solid, conservative, technological "modern" classicism, which spreads like a blanket over every imaginable kind of building. It is opposed by a strong counter-trend, a romantic preoccupation with experimental, eccentric, one-of-

a-kind shapes and structures. The Architectural League of New York reflects this growing passion for variety and enrichment in its six engineering citations for innovations in structural designs, and a Collaborative Medal of Honor, won by Mario J. Ciampi for his Westmoor High School in Daly City, Calif., roofed by delicate vaults above a glass facade dramatically incorporating the work of the muralist Anne Knorr and the sculptor Ernest Mundt.

Recognition for Mies

The really gratifying result of the annual prizes is the belated, but unanimous, recognition given to one of architecture's elder statesmen, Mies van der Rohe. In his seventies, Mies has finally been accorded the League's highest award, the Architectural Gold Medal for his Seagram Building in New York (designed with Philip Johnson). And the American Institute of Architects has awarded him its Gold Medal, the highest honor of them all.

This overdue double-salute acknowledges the incontrovertible fact that Mies is the single architect most re-

sponsible—for better or worse—for the appearance of the man-made world today. From the Seagram tower, one of the few works of architecture in New York worthy of the name, to the mass uniformity of the endless commercial curtain wall, the influence of Mies is clear in good buildings and in poor ones. He is the man who turned the science of modern construction into an art, by revealing the revolutionary esthetic possibilities of steel and glass at a time when most architects were hiding the new technology (and their own confusion) behind a wrapper of false masonry.

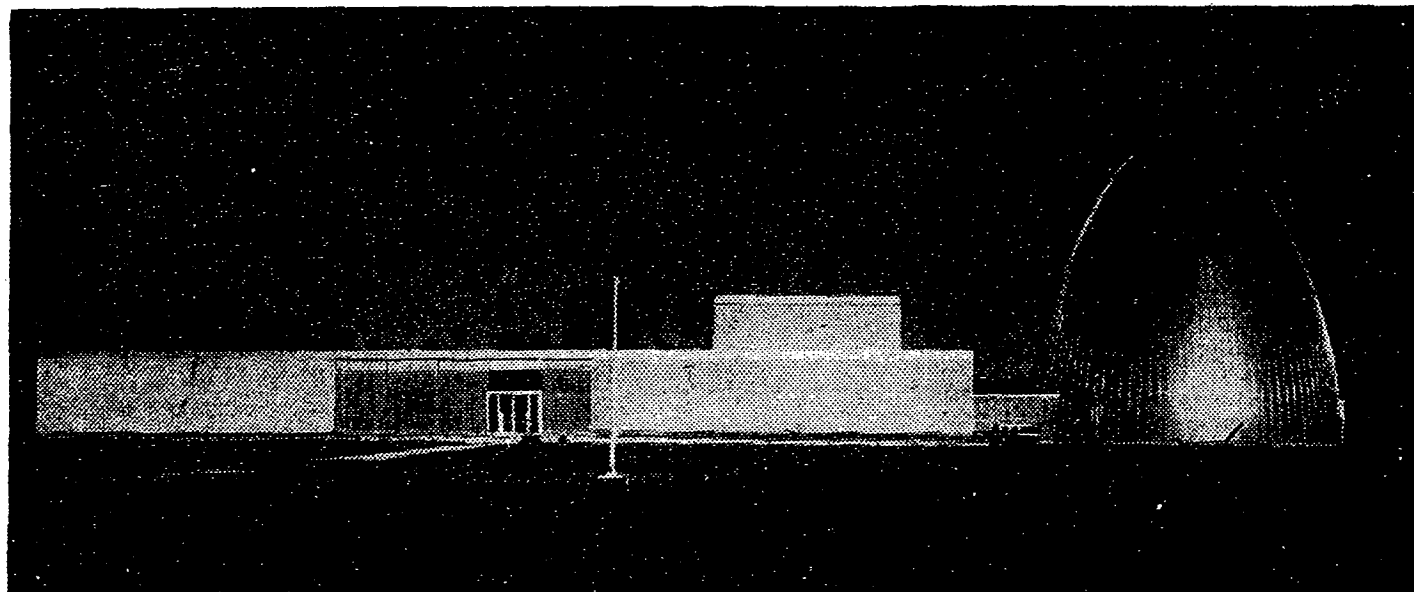
Mies' precise, painstaking perfection, his superb sense of materials, form, color and proportion—these perceptions are the basis of all art. If the function of his buildings is too often sublimated to the sleek niceties of mechanical modular rhythms (people and their needs, unfortunately, tend to be lumpy), the lesson is no less important. If commercial builders, using the same materials and processes, have failed to learn the lesson, the teacher is no less great.

Commerce and Industry

Firms like Skidmore, Owings & Merrill have profited by Mies' example to parlay his ideas into the most impressive body of commercial buildings in America today. S. O. M.'s elegant office and industrial buildings (Lever House in New York, Inland Steel in Chicago, among many others) point up the formless chaos of their routine neighbors in the massive business construction of our cities. This, too, has been emphasized by overlapping prizes. S. O. M.'s Industrial Reactor Laboratories in New Jersey were premiated by both the League and the American Institute of Architects, and its Connecticut General Life Insurance Building received the League's Landscape Gold Medal for the collaborative efforts of

the architects and the sculptor Isamu Noguchi.

Is there a warning in this year's prizes? Perhaps, in the rising emphasis on decorative enrichment. The invention of new effects is desirable only when the effort is logical; simplicity is infinitely preferable to the forced, the superfluous or the second-rate. The self-conscious desire for variety and ornament, coupled with the latent horror of a vacuum that still lurks in many hearts, threatens us with a new era of esthetic clutter. The "modern baroque" may be no more than an insidious prophecy of return to Victorian excesses.



PRIZEWINNER—Industrial Reactor Laboratories, Inc., Plainsboro, N. J., by the firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.