ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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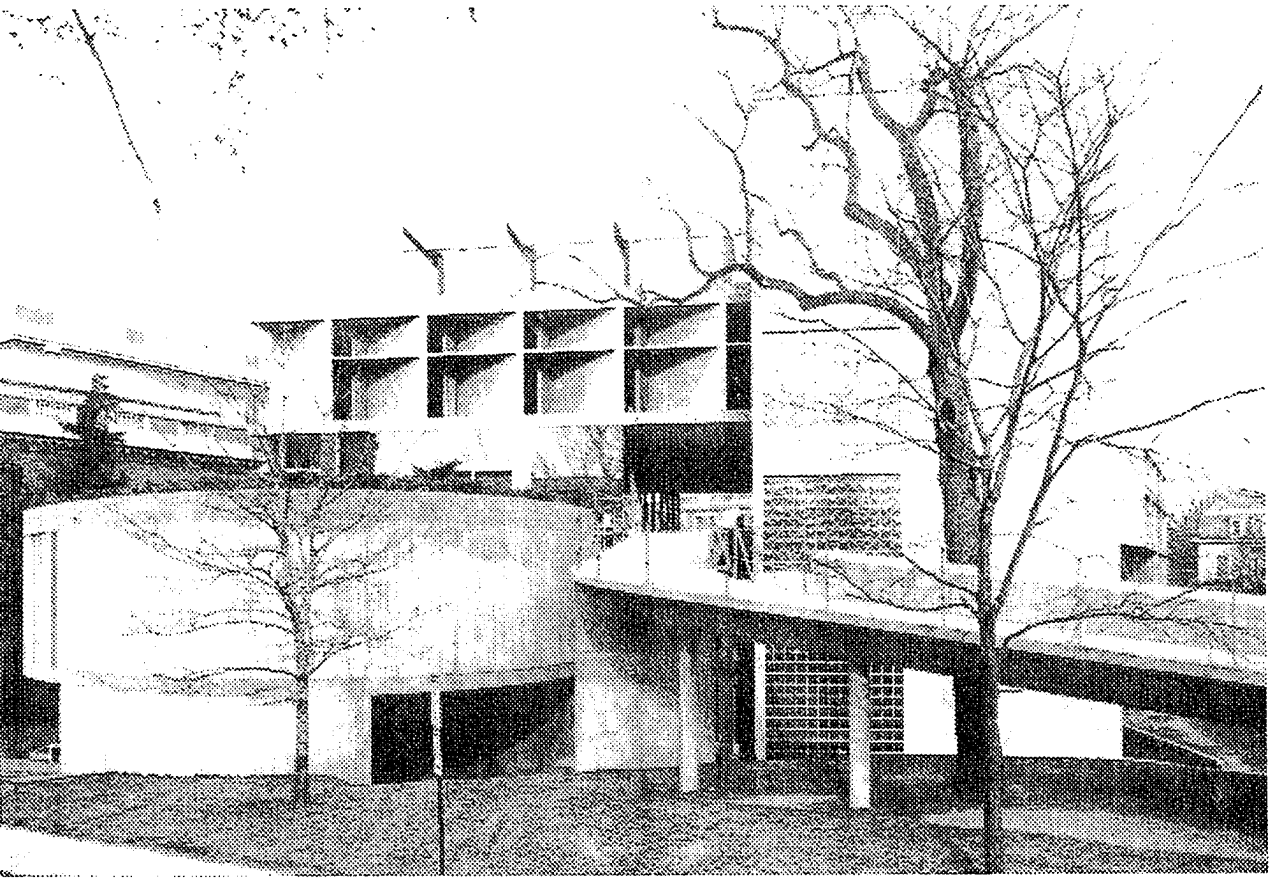
An Architectural Shot Heard 'Round the World



Le Corbusier's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard

BOSTON

Boston may be known as the cradle of liberty, but it is also the cradle of modern architecture in this country. It is a city where ideas have always flourished; the tradition-conscious conservatism and sense of continuity of its cultural establishment have been coupled with a delight in open inquiry and a high priority for the life of the mind. Come to think of it, that is probably a perfectly good working definition of civilization. And while Boston is subject to a good measure of today's problems of race relations and urban rot, it remains a singularly civilized city, from the nature of its planned and skillful regeneration over the last 20 years to the quality of its physical and intellectual environment.

As one of the final events of the city's 350th birthday celebration this year — an occasion marked by everything from a voyage of the tall ships into Boston harbor to a Great Cities of the World conference last week and a bit more promotional civic hoopla than was strictly necessary by proper Boston standards — an exhibition called "Boston: Forty Years of Modern Architecture" opened recently at the Institute of Contemporary Art (955 Boylston Street, through Oct. 26). It is an intriguing show for anyone interested in the landmarks of modernism in this country, and the leading role that Boston played in the practice and dissemination of a movement that changed the face of the 20th century.

For a city identified with Bulfinch, this espousal of modernism where it mattered is surprising. There are only 22 projects on display, in photographs, drawings and models, but it is possible to re-create through this handful of structures — and to relive, if one is old enough — a unique chapter in art and architectural history.

The list is a litany of familiar icons: the tradition-shattering houses of the 1930's by Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, Alvar Aalto's 1947 Baker House dormitory at M.I.T., Eero Saarinen's 1955 M.I.T. chapel, and a flowering of 1960's work that includes Le Corbusier's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard; Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles's competition-winning Boston City Hall; Philip Johnson and John Burgee's Public Library extension, and the design of I.M. Pei and Henry N. Cobb's John Hancock Building. Most of the examples, including those by the "native" firms of Hugh Stubbins and Benjamin Thompson, are in the doctrinaire modern tradition, something currently being attacked as full of flaws and failures — among them,

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The Shot Heard 'Round the World

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the inability to deliver Utopia or to improve the nature and condition of the human race.

They may be flawed, but they still measure up as pretty fine buildings — often as creative milestones and even as works of art. Aalto's dormitory, for example, which looked strange to almost everyone in the 1940's and disappointed many by its lack of bombast and modernist mannerisms, looks extraordinarily good in 1980. The subtleties of a design that outstripped current clichés and the architect's easy mastery of a style that is both personal and universal is far clearer today than it was then.

It is fascinating to be able to see these buildings as a group; they reward hindsight. By affirming the excellence of what is now unfashionable the exhibition becomes something of a counter-revolutionary gesture; it takes courage to be out of step. But once we are free of the polemical restraints that produced these structures, we can understand them better. They have their place in history at a very high level of innovative art. To reject the period and the product on the grounds of "failure" lacks perspective, judgment and taste. People have successfully resisted salvation by architectural or other means for centuries, and civilization feeds on the process of rejecting and remolding the past, creating rich layers of cultural mulch.

The point is proved by the latest example in the show and the note on which it ends — the recently completed Knoll headquarters on Newbury Street by Gwathmey Siegel and Associates. This suave and sophisticated reinterpretation of the International Style brings modernism full circle as innovative force, established orthodoxy and creative renaissance. The story of modernism continues.

William Curtis, the organizer of the exhibition and the author of the accompanying catalogue, takes the long view. From the perspective of the 80's, he tells us, "Boston has something of the character of a museum of modern architecture"; it offers "changes in philosophy and fashion, attitude and form over nearly half a century."

Most of the buildings that he has chosen were brought to Boston by something else that the city's intellectual leadership has specialized in — enlightened patronage. Strictly speaking, Boston's great educational institutions, Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, were the real crucible in which American modern architecture was formed.

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When Walter Gropius left the Bauhaus in the late 1930's in response to Joseph Hudnut's invitation to head the Harvard Graduate School of Design, he brought the International Style with him. Marcel Breuer followed shortly, and the houses that the two men built for themselves in Lincoln, Massachusetts, in 1937 and 1938 had an extraordinary impact. Although the style already existed on the West Coast in the work of such emigrés as Neutra and Schindler, it was the conversion of the Eastern establishment to the new architecture that determined the course of serious building in this country from then on.

It was in the Harvard-M.I.T. crucible that several generations of architects were trained who became the leaders of the profession and the setters of the style. Nor was that style exclusively orthodox. The same sources produced the monumental corporate manner of Gordon Bunshaft, the elegant formalism of I.M. Pei, the precisely defined understatement of Edward L. Barnes, the raw, romantic concrete brutalism of Paul Rudolph and the literate, gadfly practice and catalytic patronage of Philip Johnson. It is a long, impressive list.

Today, these buildings have a different look. In the early houses, the conscious effort of the European pioneers to blend the radical import with native architectural traditions produced an intriguing hybrid that is not nearly as "pure" as previously assumed. Functionalist doctrine was soon overcome by a desire for monumentality — an instinct that is hard to kill.

But what happened in Boston was the architectural shot heard round the world. In a fitting gesture for the cradle of American culture, and a testament to the passage of time, the once-shocking Gropius House has been acquired by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. And the new Gwathmey Siegel building continues the local tradition of civilized controversy. It is handsomely at home in the Back Bay. ■