

'Megalopolis' Show: Artists and the Urban Scene: Hans Haacke's ...

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Hans Haacke's Exhibit Looks at Real Estate

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Artists, they say, are not like you and me. Among other things, they react differently to the problems and frustrations of the urban environment, as evidenced in the New York Cultural Center's current show, "Making Megalopolis Matter" (to Nov. 9), billed as an artists' response to a previous show at the center called "Making New York Understandable."

The presentation is a mixture of trivia, irony, sight gags and a few items of impeccable commentary. The best of these is a work by Hans Haacke that was banned from the Guggenheim Museum in 1971, a highly publicized act that resulted in the cancellation of what was to have been a one-man Haacke show.

The excluded exhibit shown here, based on facts, is a marvelous black real estate joke, deadly serious, like all good black jokes.

Called "Shapolsky et al Manhattan Real Estate Holdings—a Real Time Social System as of September 1, 1972" (updated version), it purports to trace in charts and diagrams the ownership, transfer and mortgaging of approximately 145 properties of mostly older, miserable, minor Manhattan building types over a 20-year period, an operation that proceeded under more than 70 corporate names, with a Shapolsky always involved.

The connecting "theme"

and only stated requirement was that one member of the Shapolsky family be included in every deal. An equally clear theme is real estate as social destiny.

Other principals in the transactions ranged from individuals to church groups. According to the artist, the material for this network of environmental sophistry has been culled from public records at the New York County Clerk's office.

Three walls of the room are covered with meticulously recorded photographs of the tenements, taxpayer structures and vacant lots that were the subject of the transactions, with their valuations.

The Shapolskys may be model realtors. But through these graphic devices, the artist defines the world of incestuous real estate relationships, transient and dummy companies, slumlords and sleazy property hide-and-seek against which planners and mere people are powerless. Presented as a succinct visual phenomenon, it may or may not be art, but it is superb social analysis and it's boffo.

The rest of the show relies heavily on some tired and increasingly tiresome exercises in esthetic environmental modification and fantasy, largely from an earlier show at the Everson Museum in Syracuse called "Environvision."

The only thing that really stands up in this genre is Claes Oldenburg's familiar, outrageous monuments, The Colossal Faucet for Lake Union, Seattle, and the In-

verted Fireplug as Skyscraper for Chicago offer definitive imagery and comment on the urban scene.

Missing, unfortunately, is his giant cube for plugging up the intersection of Canal Street and Broadway, turning the permanent traffic jam that the monument would create with a kind of insane rightness into an art form. These are proposals of unimpeachable cultural significance for our time.

Also missing from the examples offered by S.I.T.E., the group that describes itself as dedicated to "sculpture in the environment," is the project that would run a red stripe down the marble side of the General Motors Building, perfectly puncturing the solemn, cut-rate pretentiousness of its design once and for all.

They show, instead, wooden dock-like beams undulating down the backside of Binghamton, N.Y.'s Old City Hall and across one of those delinquent, leftover voids in which cities abound, and the actually executed, Venturi-esque, "peeling corners" brick facade of a building on a commercial strip in Richmond.

If one understands the immutable political and economic processes that turn our cities into catastrophic environmental absurdities, these seem like reasonable responses.

Familiar Pictures

At Columbia University, in an environment of unspeakable banality called the International Affairs Building, there is a Walter Gropius show (through Nov. 15).

At Columbia, Work of Gropius Is Displayed

Sponsored by the Columbia School of Architecture, it was organized by the architect's widow, the Architects Collaborative, and the Bauhaus Archive of Berlin, with Graham Foundation support.

The exhibition is a sizable, didactic, chronological presentation of the architect's life work from 1906 to 1969 in photographic enlargements, with the curious omission of all collaborative credits. Fortunately, this is corrected in the catalogue.

If you've seen the familiar pictures, the exhibition offers nothing new.

It raises all kinds of naughty questions about why some buildings were so much better than others, and to what degree established and essential physical and psychological relationships of people and buildings, developed over centuries, were scuttled for the messianic promise of a new technology and the great esthetic revolution of the International Style. The price we are paying today for those intellectual miscalculations, perverted further by time and economics, is awful.

With all due respect to the master and his achievements, it is no longer possible at this troubled moment in time to look at this work with the uncritical awe with which we were indoctrinated in school. An objective and thoughtful re-evaluation of the period has become a historical necessity.