WINNER AT YALE

The New Art and Architecture Building Lives Up to Great Expectations

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

RARELY has a building evoked as much advance interest as the new Art and Architecture Building at Yale dedicated yesterday. For six months, the word has gone around that this is architect's architecture at the highest level. Even on a campus rich in big-name architectural experiments it stands out. It has set some kind of a record for being visited, photographed and discussed by the profession during construction. Most unusual of all, in a field torn by polemics, architects at opposite esthetic poles are united in its praise.

Now the pre-dedication rumors can be confirmed. This building by Paul Rudolph, who is also head of Yale's School of Architecture, is indeed an exceptionally handsome and provocative structure, which will set trends nationally and internationally. It will surely be one of the most influential buildings of this decade.

But its importance is not in its newness, novelty, or the enthusiastic parodies that will inevitably follow. Its real significance is that it asks and answers some of the major questions facing the art of architecture today, at a time of crisis and transition in the development of the contemporary style.

Challenge

For such an important building it is not particularly large or extravagant. It covers a small site at an awkward corner, costs less than $25 a square foot, excluding land and furnishings, and will accommodate approximately 350 students in architecture, city planning, painting, sculpture and graphics. They are already installed, producing pop art and probably designing Rudolph-type buildings. But if they respond to the challenge of their environment, they should never think, or see, quite the same again.

The building is a compact package that generates an extraordinary amount of excitement. Its immediate effect is electric. The calculated brutality of its rough concrete surfaces, inside and out, the contrast of smoothly sophisticated color and texture, the eclectic selection of art and ornament, the studied complexity of plan and design, the deliberate combination of the strong and the soigné, all pack a powerful sensuous punch. And they are meant to do so.

Visualize walls in which a coarse concrete aggregate has been hammered into sharp, jagged striations, visualize raw concrete floors next to rich vermilion carpets, entrances through lacy iron gates by Louis Sullivan rescued from the elevator cages of the demolished Garrick Theater building, exits by way of monastic stairwells with wall-size casts of Assyrian bas-reliefs or lit by prisms of color from bottom to top.

Above all, imagine space, space that breaks on the eye and mind in a constantly changing series of remarkable impacts and images, from 6-foot 6-inch ceilings to 28-foot heights, manipulated dazzlingly into 36 levels in a 6-story building. It flows and moves, rejecting conventional separators and doors in floor-through studios subtly divided by steps and balconies and joined by bridges across high, open areas, or it is sealed off tight, as in the small church-like auditorium.

It focuses theatrically on the two-story-high heart of the building—the judging theater and exhibition space through which all must pass to classes or offices. Corners dissolve into glass where solidity is expected; vistas include floors above and below; indoor areas are extended out into courtyards which, in turn, have ground level skylights into below ground studios. This is a working demonstration of what architecture really can do for a totally fresh experience of function and plan, if it dares.

Rudolph dares, and that will be the crux of the argument about a building that is bound to be highly controversial. He dares to question the rules that have become the established basis of most contemporary practice, and he dares to give an alternative answer.

He rejects the universally accepted modern dictum of flexible, modular design, the ban on decorative enrichment, the validity of less is more. In doing so, he may occasionaly sacrifice practicality—you can't add premeasured units as the need arises—and he often contrives his means for his ends, but he vastly enriches architectural expression.

Focus

He proves that art has its place in modern architecture by successfully incorporating contemporary work. A mural of calligraphic waves by Sy Sillman is the focus of the top architectural level and can be seen both inside and out. A strong Ives abstraction covers one whole wall.

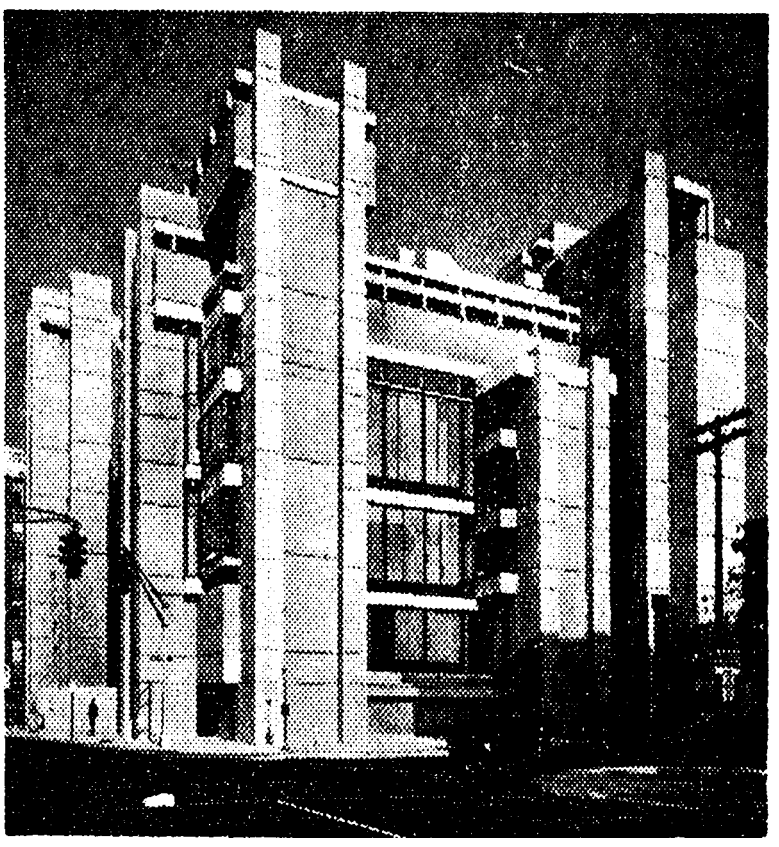
In a gesture that will be hotly debated, he has even rescued Beaux Arts casts of ancient statuary and Renaissance reliefs from cellar oblivion and has installed them, dust and all, with tongue in cheek and an infallible eye. They not only work esthetically, for dramatic decorative emphasis, but they come alive again as art and teaching tools.

Functionally, he takes the building beyond modular design to face the problems of integrating complex modern mechanical facilities with the total architectural concept. In most buildings, they are just threaded through. The massive concrete piers enclose air intake and exhaust ducts; the ventilation system is contained within the structure rather than added to it. All services have their structural rationalization.

What appears austere here is actually elaborately intricate. Where the building seems playful, it is deeply serious; when it offers novelty, it is searchingly experimental.

If there is something of Wright and something of Le-Corbusier in the results, that is as it should be, for the old masters have taught the basic lessons, and Rudolph is the younger generation. His work represents synthesis and exploration, the logical next step.

The new building is a genuine creative achievement and a spectacular tour de force. It is wilful, capricious, arbitrary, bold, brilliant and beautiful, and it may very possibly be great.



Ezra Stoller

TREND-SETTER—The new Art and Architecture Building at Yale University, by Paul Rudolph, dedicated yesterday.