**MIRRORS OF OUR TIME: EXPRESSIONISM:**
By Ada Louise Huxtable
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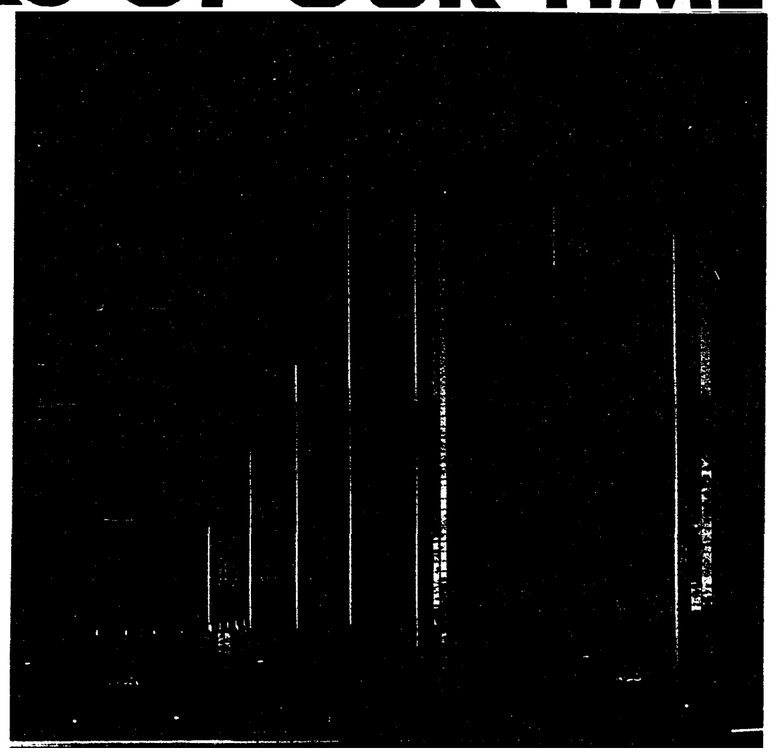
# MIRRORS OF OUR TIME

## 20 YEARS OF MODERN BUILDING



*Transformations of the ubiquitous and versatile "glass box:" Left: Welton Becket Associates gave the Dallas*

**By Ada Louise Huxtable**

The exhibition "Transformations in Modern Architecture," which opens at the Museum of Modern Art this week, is the big roundup of building of the last 20 years that the museum has promised to deliver for some time, and for which the art and architectural worlds have been waiting with *something akin to* bated breath. This listing of trends and achievements, this summing up of styles, these nominations to an ephemeral hall of fame or cabinet of curiosities — all are clearly meant to be the definitive presentation as well as a kind of architectural box score of recent years. Their purpose is to tell us what really has been going on in this time of record-breaking building activity and intense esthetic debate.

The show, which was supported by grants from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts and the PPG [Pittsburgh Plate Glass] Industries Foundation, covers built work only from 1960 to 1980 — in color and black and white photographs — as well as a few completed designs that are about to be constructed. It is, admittedly, a highly personal selection of examples, from one man's point of view, that of Arthur Drexler, director of the Museum's Department of Architecture and Design. But it is not anyone's idea of what-might-have-been or what-should-be. It is a record of reality, of some 400 buildings which have been committed to stone, steel, brick, concrete or whatever material was available or in fashion at the time. And the record turns out, in Mr. Drexler's personal overview, to be not what was expected at all.

It is not so much that this is unfamiliar work, although some of it surprises, but that it is seen in an unexpected way. Many of the landmark buildings are here — the famous skyscrapers, museums, corporate headquarters, urban developments and private houses that define the period, from Skidmore, Owings and Merrill's Sears Tower in Chicago; the Eero Saarinen-Roche-Dinkeloo-designed John Deere headquarters in Moline, Ill., and John Portman's downtown Atlanta — as well as lesser-known structures in this country and abroad. However, one can be quite certain that the way these buildings are presented is not at all the way architects see the work themselves. They may, in fact, be quite astonished to find out what they have been doing, or what

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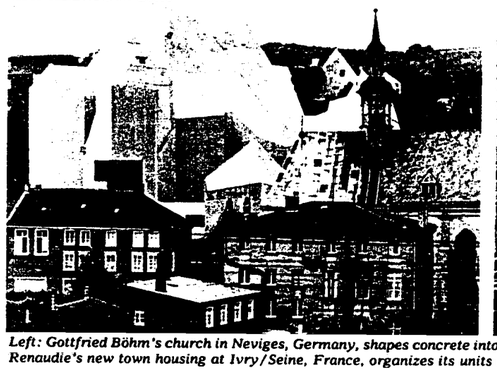
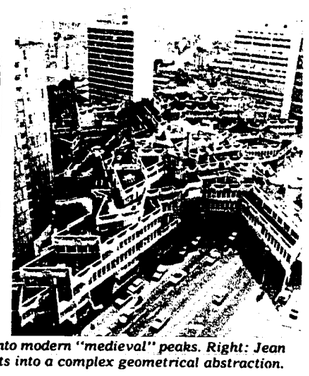
**EXPRESSIONISM:**





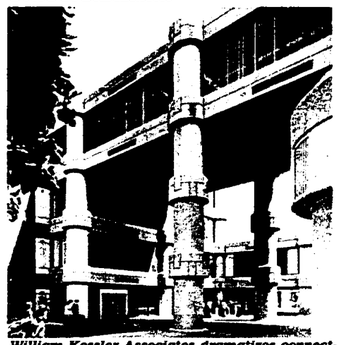
*Left: Gottfried Böhm's church in Neviges, Germany, shapes concrete into modern "medieval" peaks. Right: Jean Renaudie's new town housing at Ivry/Seine, France, organizes its units into a complex geometrical abstraction.*

*Reunion Center stunning, space-age effects. Right: Odell Associates slanted the mirrored box geometrically for the Blue Cross / Blue Shield headquarters in Chapel Hill, N.C.*

**BRUTALISM:**

*Hubert Bennett's Hayward Gallery on London's South Bank stresses massive raw concrete.*

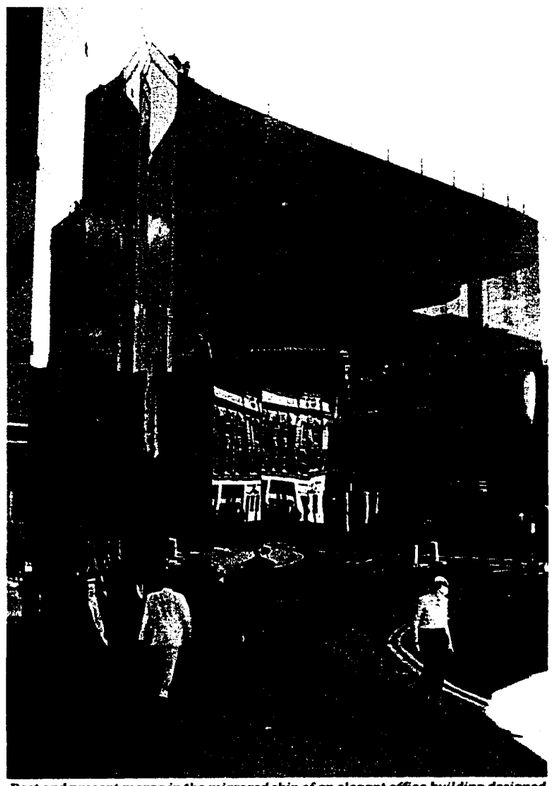
**STRUCTURALISM:**



*William Kessler Associates dramatizes connecting joints of Detroit's College of Art and Design.*

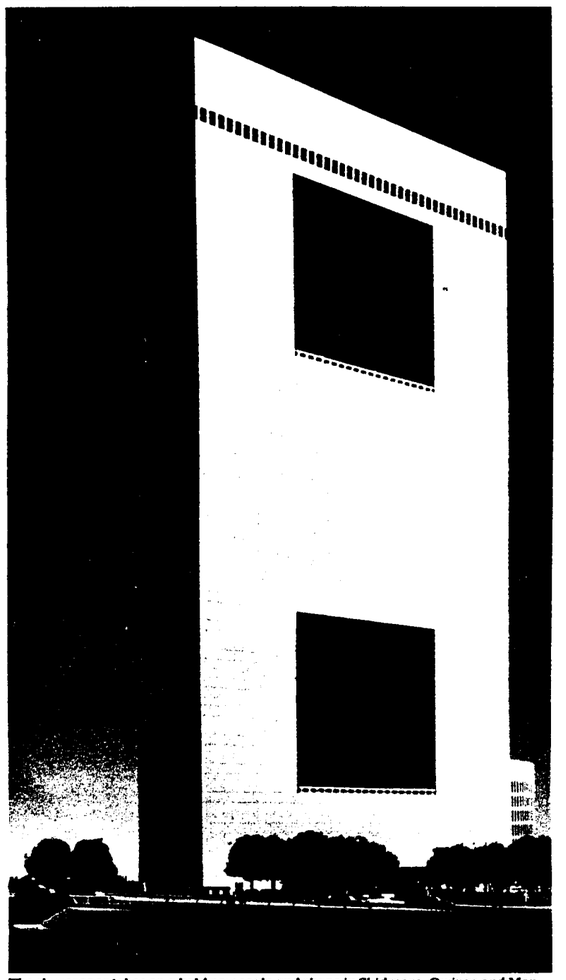
**VERNACULAR:**

*Ralph Erskine's Byker housing at Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England, stresses familiar, traditional, small-scale details.*



*Past and present merge in the mirrored skin of an elegant office building designed by Foster Associates for Willis Faber and Dumas, Ltd., in Ipswich, England.*

**THE SKYSCRAPER TRANSFORMED**



*The skyscraper takes on a bold new scale and shape in Skidmore, Owings and Merrill's model for the National Commercial Bank soon to be built in Saudi Arabia.*

Mr. Drexler says they have been doing, for the past 20 years.

Most of the profession, or at least those with the kind of pretensions to philosophy and art that would make their work eligible for a show such as this one, have claimed to be occupied with carrying out, and on, the theories and practices of the modernist revolution. These are the familiar precepts about form following function and expressing structure and use — a rationale meant to produce a pure, principled, understated esthetic based on technological and utilitarian considerations. Less is more and all that.

This was a reasonable, sensible and restrained approach to building that had the added justification of identifying architecture with certain moral values, including the creation of a vastly improved environment that would promote the general health and happiness. To build well was considered a humane and practical achievement; to build beautifully was supposed to be no more than an automatic consequence of building well. Beauty was not, ostensibly, a primary aim or preoccupation. For most, style was a dirty word.

What Mr. Drexler is telling us is that most of these architects have been closet esthetes all along. That fact had been rumored earlier, but now it is officially confirmed. While they have been paying lip service to any number of admirable social objectives, they have been indulging all of their senses, as usual. Architects have lusted after style.

So the history of architecture in the last 20 years has been the story of the pursuit of the most ingenious and respectable ways to express the most baroque and romantic urges. It is obvious that man does not live by bricks alone, and that he will go to almost any lengths to satisfy his creative needs. But for the modernists, this has had to be done under the cover of social, technical and environmental concerns. Even as architects praised the practical and esthetic virtues of reducing building to skin and bones, or embraced the engineering economy of catenary curves for ostensibly new solutions for 20th-century needs, they were doing strange and sometimes wonderful things with those straight lines and curves. They were consciously or unconsciously transforming structure into a series of expressive visual forms far beyond utility.

Thus the title of the exhibition — "Transformations" — and the emphasis on a series of styles that evolved in the search for more expressive esthetics than doctrinaire modernism allowed — always, of course, in the name of the strictest rationality.

These transformations range from the subtle to the outrageous, from delicate adjustment to zany excess. They include everything from sleek, blank boxes to essays in sculpture and science fiction. There are vast, Piranesian interiors for hotel chains, intricate mirror-glass abstractions for factories and office buildings, instant vernacular villages for universities and speculative housing.

The two decades over which these developments *(Continued on Page 28)*

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are traced is one of the most productive periods in the history of building, and the range and variety of this work, brought together in this fashion for the first time, is something of a revelation. One is struck by how different the most familiar and celebrated examples look within the larger framework, how one thing evolves from another. The sources become visible; examples that seemed like inventive aberrations or isolated phenomena are links in a documented perspective. Even when the selections are disturbing, the tidy scholarship is soothing. We are enchanted to have things explained and put in their proper place.

Certainly, other quite different explanations of what has been happening in recent architectural theory and practice have not been lacking. This is not, as in some other arts, a quiescent time. The last 15 years actually represent a complex, transitional period, during which modernism has been accepted, or exploited (depending on one's point of view), as the establishment style of governments, institutions and corporations.

At the same time, it was being increasingly questioned and even rejected by a younger generation. As the 50-year-old revolutionary fervor waned and its esthetic forms congealed into clichés, a reaction was inevitable. It was hard for recent architectural graduates even to understand what the revolution had been against.

The last five years have been marked by tremendous soul-searching and ferment. Beginning in the 1950's, and accelerating in the 60's and 70's, there has been a preoccupation with theoretical inquiry and exploratory practice. As other cultural and intellectual values were overturned, it was hardly possible for young architects not to become involved, or for architectural values to remain stable.

Manifestos such as Robert Venturi's "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture," published by the Museum of Modern Art in 1968 and reissued last year, argued against the prohibitions of modernism and for a return to the lessons of history and the "inclusivity" of organic disorder (less is a bore). The Pop environment denied by the older generation was lovingly discovered.

Something called post-modernism was chronicled by American architect-historian Charles Jencks in several lively books that offered a multiplicity of ways to break out of the modernist mold in the impressive name of "multivalent" design, meaning anything goes. Taking their

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cues from Lévi-Strauss and other philosophers and linguistic scholars, the post-modernists have made a cult of signs and symbols and embraced all of the visual and cultural baggage that was carefully jettisoned by their predecessors. From the fast-food drive-in of the highway strip to the status symbo's of suburban tract housing, they sought, and found, architectural lessons for a society in flux. They want buildings to be "loaded" with meaning, even if it would be an act of higher prescience or clairvoyant scholarship to figure it out.

Still other attitudes have been struck; in opposition to the post-modernists, for example, there is the neopurism of such figures as New Yorker Peter Eisenman, who attempts to strip all associative meanings and values from architectural form, reducing it to its simplest elements while simultaneously raising it to hermetic complexity. His houses seem closer to Cubist painting and sculpture than to architecture. And there are those, here and abroad, who explore poetic and visionary themes.

These various schools are united only in taking themselves extremely seriously. They all manage to coexist under the currently popular rubric of pluralism. But all of this activity is indicative of a fascinating and genuinely questing and creative moment in architecture, marked by exceptional conceptual vitality and exploratory vision.

Mr. Drexler embraces none of these fashionable attitudes. His is the coolly objective eye of the critic-historian developing his own version of the big picture. It becomes clear, through the choice and organization of the exhibition material, that he does not see these movements as the startling breakthroughs or divine received wisdom that their followers do, and that he puts them all into the art historian's frame of evolutionary development. What he is presenting is the architectural iconography of the 20th century. Revolution and counterrevolution become so much rhetoric. This is a traditional parade of styles; in his view, the art of architecture simply continues to be a historical-esthetic phenomenon, much as the German art historians of the 19th century first defined it.

Mr. Drexler's main thesis might be called radical in its simplicity; it is that every new strain, every direction that has the appearance of shattering change, has been implicit in modernism all along. The seeds of diversity, no matter how startling, are in the early work; nothing has surfaced that did not exist in some phase of the original modern style. Romanticism, expressionism, brutalism, structure stretched to the point of abstract sculpture, the science-fiction spectacular, exposed plumbing, mirrored cubes, vernacular recall were all fathered by the modern movement. These trends have merely unfolded with the unpredictability that is usual in art and history, which loathe consistency and never deliver the expected.

It is Mr. Drexler's conclusion that out of these 20th-century styles, two emerge triumphant: the glass building and a modernized vernacular.

He calls the unpopular glass box — a form developed to an exquisite degree of refinement and precision in recent years — the best building of our time, a conclusion long shared by this observer. The glass box, raised to a level of suave, sophisticated, knife-sharp perfection, is now entering a phase of fascinating permutations — reflecting, disappearing, angled, curved, sliced, slanted and stacked into a provocative geometry. It can take the form of a faceted group of eye-teasing planes with science-fiction overtones, as in the Dallas Reunion Center by Welton Becket Associates, or the box can be sharply angled for a strong new image, as in the Blue Cross/ Blue Shield Headquarters in Chapel Hill, N.C., by Odell Associates. As if to emphasize the point, this part of the exhibition is in color.

But Mr. Drexler also gives regional and vernacular building a much greater role and importance than is currently fashionable. The vernacular — the familiar forms that we recognize as part of local building tradition, such as the New England saltbox house or the natural wood buildings of the Northwest — has never died. This use of tradition has continued to answer many needs simply and directly, and, in addition, it has often been the opening wedge for an attack on orthodox modernism, and for its ultimate transformation into a much freer, more flexible kind of design.

Even more than the rediscovery of the past or today's conscious, stylish historicism, the vernacular has been the most effective means of breaking the rules. Architects have played with elements such as roofs, walls, doors and windows, turning formal compositions of cubes and prisms into rustic shed roofs and arched and angled openings. These forms may barely suggest older motifs, as in Edward Larrabee Barnes's Snell Music Building and William Moore Dietel Library at the Emma Willard School in Troy, N.Y., where a restrained simplicity is enriched by such vernacular references. But this kind of skewed or streamlined tradition has been the route to greater variety and more experimental solutions. The vernacular has not only been a significant instrument of architectural change, but it has, in turn, become a part of today's high architectural style. This has been the quiet revolution, beyond fashionable polemics.

If it is purely in these terms of transformations of style that this exhibition addresses architecture, that is something that the Modern has been doing consistently since it showed, and named, the International Style in 1932. Some will applaud and others will contest Mr. Drexler's groupings and conclusions. But these iconographical divisions are often valid and always fascinating as a kind of game of what-next, or name-the-trend.

The game starts with the movement of the early 1960's called "brutalism," an architecture of oppressively heavy, aggressively articulated, rough-surfaced blocks and hovering masses of dour concrete. In the United States, Paul Rudolph was designing the contro-

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versial Art and Architecture Building for Yale University, Hubert Bennett was constructing the Hayward Gallery for London's South Bank, and Kenzo Tange was creating overpowering new public buildings in Tokyo and other Japanese cities.

At the same time, a smoother and more ingratiating set of boxes was being produced by such practitioners as I. M. Pei, in a line that led from the Everson Museum in Syracuse, N.Y., to the new East Wing of the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. In fact, boxes were being manipulated in endless ways; some were striped, as in Marcel Breuer's addition to the Cleveland Museum, done with Hamilton Smith; others alternated clear and opaque, as in Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum's set of giant boxes for the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. But whether brutalist or constructionist, all of these buildings were directly related to the cubism of the early modern movement, and they were all straining to become something else.

What they were moving toward, according to Mr. Drexler, was expressionism, or the freer use of form for much more varied visual and emotional effects. *Le prisme pur was giving way to romantic* imagery (Eero Saarinen's bird-shaped TWA Terminal at the John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York and Jorn Utzon's sail-shaped Sydney Opera House) or intricately recycled, not-so-pure prisms, as in the neo-Corbusian houses of Richard Meier and Gwathmey-Siegel, or in the work of John Hejduk, which ranges from visionary poetry to the sensitive remodeling of The Cooper Union in New York.

During the 1960's, architecture and sculpture moved closer together. To this end, structure was no longer the blind servant of function. Post and lintel, beam and slab, cage and frame, were exploited for their plastic and rhythmic qualities. It was inevitable that sooner or later structure would be turned inside out to expose ducts, pipes and struts as the building's most artful components — as Piano and Rogers did to the Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou (the Beaubourg) in Paris.

The "skin and bones" buildings of Mies van der Rohe and other modernist pioneers were transformed in the 60's and 70's into a superrefined "skin architecture" in which the bones disappeared and only the taut, slick surface was stressed. In the late 70's this preoccupation reached elegant heights of precision. The delicate, custom joints and gaskets, and the glass, mirror and plastic wall surfaces were superbly adapted from industry for dominantly esthetic ends, with such outstanding results as the Foster Associates' office building for Willis Faber and Dumas Ltd. in Ipswich, England.

At the same time, Louis Kahn was demonstrating the timeless uses of the vernacular tradition, transformed into the hybrid brick and concrete construction and restudied vaults and arches of the "archaic" modernism of his government buildings in Dacca, Bangladesh, and Ahmadabad, India. Once the barrier to the vernacular and the past was down, the way was clear for more playful uses of native and regional themes, such as Charles Moore's pitched roofs at the Sea Ranch Condominium in Sonoma County, Calif., or the Venturis' forays into vernacular populism in Las Vegas and Levittown.

The architecture of the 1970's is increasingly hybrid. The regional and the vernacular continue to expand their reach and their territory. Innovation and change are no longer disguised, feared or condemned. It is no surprise or "betrayal" when one of today's most talented practitioners, the Englishman James Stirling, exchanges the industrial esthetic of his buildings at Leicester and Cambridge Universities for the classical neo-monumental manner of his prize-winning designs for the Cologne and Dusseldorf museums in Germany; or when the American Kevin Roche moves from the abstract geometry of his United Nations Plaza Hotel to the equally monumental vernacular of a new corporate headquarters in New York State.

The picture that emerges from these glass cubes, plumbers' fantasies and instant villages makes most of the pragmatic or idealistic explanations offered for so much of today's work seem like cant. The architect is clearly in passionate pursuit of new ideas and sensations; he is far more concerned with a quite abstract and hermetic set of esthetic standards than with his role as a social healer — a somewhat terrifying conclusion for those brought up on the ideal of social and environmental responsibility. In this exhibition, the architect as artist is quite literally pinned to the wall.

Transformation is the one constant theme. The very nature of transformation is evolution, or process, and the creative dynamism of 20th-century building has been one of its most notable characteristics. These are the styles that have changed whole cities and most of the built world in the last 20 years — the most remarkable transformation of all. ■