Design Aspects of Today's Architecture

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In talking to you here today I want to talk not so much about the appearance of architecture as about some of the things which are effective in controlling its appearance. I think we all know that architecture, more than any other art, depends for its looks upon the materials of which it is made, which must be put together to make a weather-tight, serviceable and reasonably economic building. Because of certain peculiarities in man's consciousness these mere requirements of sound building are not enough to satisfy him. To Commoditie and Firmsges we must add Delight—a building, to be architecture, must not only serve but it must please.

This business of pleasing is the art of design, and the art of design is made manifest through the technique of construction. Delight presupposes Commoditie and Firmmesse. The reverse is not true: a master of construction is not necessarily a master of the art of design in any creative sense. He may be competent and adequate as a builder and he may be dull and unimaginative as a designer.

Now it is strange that in most of our schools, and to most of the students in those schools, it is a terrible thing to be thought just adequate. To be original, different, a so-called leader, not in competency but in superficial appearance, is the great goal of most young men and some of their elders. I think this is unfortunate because most of us, after all, are neither very original nor very different; and if we are different and still lack the overpowering passion and drive of true genius, it is likely to be so sily an originality and so superficial a difference as to lead only to fashionable eccentricity.

By this I do not mean that one should not stretch one's mind, that one should accept blindly only what is taught. What I mean is that the mind is not stretched by mere repudiation, either. "Examine all things, hold fast to that which is good" is an excellent precept still. From the good comes the better, and in our devotion to architecture we can be content to do better.

For I assume that we all have a devotion to architecture, that it is this devotion which has made us choose this field of effort, rather than another, in which to earn a living. It is, I believe, possible to earn a living and to have devotion, to make a contribution to the art of architecture by knowing it not superficially but in depth. If there is not this satisfaction of knowledge and contribution to be obtained from service to architecture, it is better to do something else for bread. I will try to explain.

You young men are on the doorstep of a new era. Pandora's box has been opened, and the miraculous is become commonplace. This is a new world you are coming into. A new world of art because it is a new world physically and psychologically. Physics and chemistry have brought a final and conclusive end to the Age of Masonry in architecture. This is the era of synthetics, glass, steel, concrete, plastics. The natural materials are relegated to a minor place—brick, wood, stone, marble, these are no longer structural but decorative. Psychologically we no longer build houses, but housing, and our public buildings are not symbols of civic pride and honor but are for filing cabinets and rubber stamps. Even our clients are no longer human—they are faceless, corporations or unresponsive delegates of government agencies. Because these clients have no reality, we design for statistical abstractions. The paradox is that the more we talk about architecture for humanity, the more inhuman it becomes.

In order to meet this situation there has already been evolved a style of building appropriate to it, and it is within this singular style that you will be expected to work. Do not disdain it. Architecture has always been the progressive perfectionment of a series of specific conditions: a greater mastery of these conditions becoming, in time, a series of adequates in the hands of many and eventually a masterpiece in the mind of someone.

It was so with the Greeks: the slow polishing of detail and detail, of delicate refinement until at last from Paestum (continued on page 3)
To the Barricades

We do not live in the best of all possible worlds. Much that is wrong with our society is beyond the power of the ordinary citizen to influence, but here at home in our own community we have the right, the opportunity, and the representative and responsive government to institute the measures necessary to improve our civic life. It is the responsibility of the citizen to be critical, to make suggestions and to insist on the execution of measures to improve the public welfare.

Most of us are in the main too patient, too docile, too willing to bear things as they are. Why is it necessary for every family to have two automobiles? Where is the impetus for public rapid transit systems in the county? Why have we permitted subdivisions to exist and be maintained without sidewalks, so that children walk to school in the streets? Why have we not planned and provided pedestrian walks to shopping districts located within an easy walking distance of every housing district?

We have made the automobile into a monster that strangles our society with its space consuming demands, and for this monster we have sacrificed the needs of people. It has come to be realized that automobile traffic and parking requirements can never be satisfied. Pacify one of the beasts and you breed two.

The bicycle provided interim transportation for individuals, in this country, between the passing of the horse and the development of the cheap car. In Europe the bicycle still serves in many countries as a prime means of transportation for adults. We have permitted this delightful machine to decline in use to the point where only the kids have the pleasure and the danger of its operation in the streets. We could of course plan for bicycle paths and pedestrian walks, but first we would have to recognize the reality of our situation; we are becoming an urban society on our 6,000 sq. ft. lots, suburbia is vanishing in a cloud of automobile exhaust and the imminent danger of big-city smog.
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came the Parthenon, which is not very
different from Paestum except in detail
and refinement. The many contributed
to the one.
Later, in the Gothic time, it was the
same, and so too in the Renaissance.
We see, today, the peaks; and we are
too impatient, too hurried to look down
during our flight and see what is in the
valleys. But if we do look, we will see
that the parish churches are of a piece
with the cathedrals; and that the build­
ings of the Renaissance are all related.
These resemblances are the formative
relations of style. The recognizable archi­
lectual elements which make a style are
not cliches. A cliche is something that
is used only because it is fashionable, like
corner-windows were once upon not so
long ago a time, and sun-shields on the
north side now.
The present style, suitable to the work
and ideas of today, is as you all know
the two-faced shiny slab with the pasted
on ends. It is interesting how these
dead-ends came about. Many years ago
Le Corbusier built some exhibition apart­
ments to explain his ideas. These apart­
ments, although free-standing in the exhi­
bition grounds, were supposed to be
part of a long row. Hence the end walls
had no windows. And so, by a logical
progress, free standing slab buildings
have no windows in the end walls either.
Nevertheless, his basic type of building
is here to stay, because it ideally fills the
needs of contemporary society and tech­
nology. The kind of space it provides is
uniform and impersonal; the kind of ma­
terials it uses are industrially correct; the
economic needs of the building industry
are properly met. It is from the frame­
work of these things that you will find
the architectural forms of the modern
world are derived and not from esthetic
theory. Esthetic theory can modify
structure, but it cannot control it.
The needs which these boxes fill are very
simple. Clear, open floor space which
can be partitioned as desired, room for
mechanical equipment, and that's all.
No subtle specialized areas that confuse
or confine. This simplicity and dupli­
cation applies also to the stacked up living
quarters of urban housing, and conse­
quently the same outward form can be
used for any tall building. This lack of
differentiation, both horizontally and ver­
tically, is perfectly met by the thin skin
covering of aluminum or glass or plastic
which is prefabricated and hung on the
frame. The unit of design and the unit
of construction are the same, they be­
come a module which, without thought
or effort on the part of the designer,
can be repeated up to any height or
along to any length to provide the re­
quired enclosure. Like a sausage, it can
be cut off at any place. It is interrupted
only by an entrance motive which is put
there to make it easy to find the way in.
In extreme cases, as in some of the
newer Scandinavian building, there is
not even that.
Thus, social need, material, the process­
ing of the material, and the form of the
function all become one and an archi­
tecture is born. The theme is estab­
lished, and as in previous great periods
of architecture, there are possibilities for
a great variety of minor changes to be
rung upon it. To the layman there is
little difference between Chartres and
Amiens, and almost none between the
Ecole Militaire and the Invalides. Why
should there be a difference between
one building on Fifth Avenue and one
on Sixth?
What difference there is should be in
the fineness of the detailing, the perfor­
cation of the use of color and of surface
textures; it should lie in the relation of
the first two or perhaps three floors to
the street and to the adjacent buildings.
For the new architecture has become
deeply concerned with the street, which
the last years of the old architecture had
pretty much ignored, or rather had taken
for granted. This return of a concern for
the street provides the architect with a
wider vocabulary. Minor plazas, in­
dentations, covered sidewalks, recessed
showplaces, small plantings, pools, foun­
tains, breakthroughs to the sky, changes
in levels and in paving, all offer ways of
adding to the element of Delight. Here,
quite within the acceptable structural
convention of our time, are the only
variable esthetic motives available to
you.
But, I hear someone saying as soon as
he gets a chance, what about the new
romanticism? — the work of Louis Kahn,
the work of Nervi, the doodling of Saari­
en, the sculptured work of Corbu?
These are specials, these are the build­
ers of the singular building for a par­
ticular purpose and have little to do
with the main stream of architecture.
There have always been such men and
such buildings: the Erechtheum, Antonio
Gaudi, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. Such
contributions have always been impor­
tant, but their importance has been in­
direct. They have introduced emotional
upsets into the academic concepts of the
well-received architects, and they make
young men think. You will do well to
study what Louis Kahn is doing, and
compare it with what Nervi and Corbu
are producing, for this is an exercise
into philosophies and integrities. But
don't for a minute try to apply their con­
cepts to the structure on the Avenue,
for they are not applicable to the con­
ventional use. Kahn's and Corbu's and
Nervi's architecture, like Bucky Fuller's,
comes about not because they see dif­
ferently with their eyes but because they
think differently with their brains. And,
I strongly suspect, they also feel very dif­
ferently than we do about what it is
that they are doing and why. To them
architecture is religion, not a trade.
I once said somewhere that the archi­
tecture of Mies van der Rohe had, in
the Seagram Building, attained a per­
fec­tion beyond which it was not possible
to go, and here I am talking about the
continuation of his architectural con­
ccepts as the only possible ones for the
immediate future. This is not a contra­
diction nor a retraction.
The work of Mies, the classical ideal which has been
his successful attainment, in the Sea­
gram Building, cannot be surpassed. It
happened that the superficial aspect of
his ideal corresponded to the technical
possibilities of the time, to the current
methods of production of the Building
Industry. I said "superficially," and I
mean superficially, on the surface: the
great architects of our commercialism
bought the Miesian concept because it
was easy, in a cheap and superficial way,
to adapt to their client's ideas, the manu­
facturer's production line, and their
own abilities. This has left Mies on the
mountain-top, and I suspect he is pretty
lonely even if he does have Philip John­
son as a sort of Aaron to hold up his
arms. What he did is now being eroded
into fantastic and meaningless shapes.
He has been hoisted on the petard of
the petard of his own passion for rationalization. His
coyly do not know what "less is more"
means: they only know that less is less.
Nor can there be less than least, which
requires no effort at all.
Besides the two major forces which I
have mentioned, there is a third influ­
ence affecting design which I have only
hinted at; that is the increasing impor­
tance of collective building and of Civic
Art. This is a particular, and perhaps
narrow aspect of what is now usually
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called City Planning, although it was at one time its principal aspect. But City Planning, both in concept and in practice, has broadened itself so much that physical design has become a minor matter to it. City Planning is now the realm of all the doubtfull scientific disciplines—economics, sociology, demography and so on. It uses the crystal ball of statistics and the scientific integrity of a Cagliostro its wonders to perform. City Planning is supposed to make our cities beautiful, efficient, economically stable and desirable to live in. It has found a means of doing this by what is called Urban Renewal. Urban Renewal provides for the use of the power of eminent domain to assemble land and, by the use of taxpayers’ subsidy, make the assembled land available to investors at a price they can afford to pay, whereupon they will erect new and beautiful buildings which will repay the subsidy by paying more taxes. Actually, it has turned out to be a process by which property is taken from the Have-nots and turned over to the Haves. Since the Haves do not wish to become Have-nots, they will only erect buildings when they are absolutely sure of a profit. As a result of an insufficiency of absolutely sure profits, the Urban Renewal program is largely a failure, economically as well as socially.

It is highly probable that this state of affairs will change, and that profits will be not only permitted but even guaranteed. This will be a great boon to the architects, and that is why the young architect should take more than a passing interest in civic design. I do not mean that architects should be city-planners. The architect is not an economist nor a sociologist, nor should he try to be one. He is a shaper of three-dimensional things: that is his specialty, but in order to best carry out his specialty he can, and should, have a voice in planning policy. To be an effective voice the man who sits in the room with planners must represent not just himself but his fellow architects. In order to have him represent them, they must have ideas of their own, well-formulated and well-informed. This means all of you. When all has been beautifully laid out by the Planners, there still are buildings to be built, and it is the relationship of those buildings one to another and the shape and feeling of the open spaces which they define, that make for a beau-

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and escalators lead to an upper level of stores opening from a balcony-street, and from this level one sees five immense slab office buildings which rise in a solemn and didactic row from the opposite side, their blank ends facing the street. They are immense, hideous and totally out-of-scale, just like ours are. But until you reach that second level of the Centrum, they are out of the sight-line and, unless you trouble to crane your neck, virtually not there.

Therein is perhaps a lesson for those city officials who feel that Urban Renewal should produce masterpieces, who are filled with an uneasy belief that they are not getting their money’s worth of Art in their projects. They think every project should thrill the beholder like St. Mark's in Venice or, at least, like the first sight of the Palace of the Teamsters Union. Since the masterpiece is, by definition, unique, their squawks will be in vain. I advise you to pacify them by putting as much architecture as possible out the normal sight-line, as in Stockholm.

So one more thing, and I have done for today. I just said that architects have an obligation toward the public. This obligation goes beyond, I think, the negative virtues of a code of ethics and the natural desire to do one’s best. It involves the civic side of architecture, and not only that side of it that requires mutual cooperation with one’s fellow architects and with the purposes of the city planners to achieve splendid and shining goals. It sometimes may involve what might be called positive negativism — refusal to do what the client wants when it is obviously against the best interests of the public. The architects, more power to them, who resigned from the World’s Fair Committee, took such action. The prominent consulting architects who went along with the design of that outrageous building over Grand Central failed, in my opinion in their duty to the public. So somebody else would have taken their place? Of course! But their resignation would have given great weight to a great concern in the part of many layman, and they could have attained greater reputation by this than by their unsuccessful try at making even a nylon purse out of a cow’s ear. It will be a curse and a blight on mid-city for a long time; it may even be the straw that breaks the back of the transportation system and brings ruin on the whole area.

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