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POTOMAC VALLEY ARCHITECT

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE POTOMAC VALLEY CHAPTER OF MARYLAND

APRIL-MAY 1964

VOL. 8, NO. 4



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POTOMAC VALLEY ARCHITECT

April-May, 1964 • Volume 8, Number 4

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION • POTOMAC VALLEY
CHAPTER OF MARYLAND AMERICAN INSTITUTE
OF ARCHITECTS

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The articles in this magazine represent the personal opinions of the authors and/or the editor and should not be construed as representing the viewpoint of the Potomac Valley Chapter, A.I.A. A.I.A.

THIS MONTH'S COVER

A mid-nineteenth century advertising poster from the collection of the Library of Congress.

5th BIENNIAL COMPETITION

FOR

AWARDS IN ARCHITECTURE

OF THE

POTOMAC VALLEY CHAPTER

AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

WILL BE HELD IN OCTOBER, 1964

DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSIONS

FRIDAY OCTOBER 9, 1964

DETAILS IN JUNE ISSUE OF PVA

EVENTS and EXHIBITIONS

AIA OCTAGON

April 20th through May 24

Selected School Architecture

CONSTRUCTION SPECIFICATIONS INSTITUTE

Regular Meeting: Tuesday, April 28th at Thomas Somerville Co. Meeting Room, 6th & Buchanan Sts., N.E. Dinner: 5:30 P.M.—Reservations Please. Subject: Division 7—Moisture Protection. National Convention: Dallas, Texas—April 20, 21 & 22

CORCORAN GALLERY

through April 25th

Tony Bader

April 18 through June 14th

The Private World of John Singer Sargent

NATIONAL HOUSING CENTER

April 18 through May 10

Finnish Rugs & Tapestries by Oili Maki

May 19 through June 14

National Society of Interior Designers Show — International Living U.S.A. — by NSID Designers

PAN-AMERICAN UNION

April 13 through May 5

Pre-Colombian Exhibit — Chancay: Neglected Culture of Potters & Weavers

April 13 through May 5

Print Room: Alfredo da Silva of Bolivia

May 5-25

Ernesto Deira of Argentina—Oil Paintings

PHILLIPS COLLECTION

through May 5

Photographs by Cartier-Bresson

May 13 through June 10

Paintings from the Fifties: the Carnegie Institute Collection

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

May 2-24

Photographs, The Nile: by Eliot Elisofon

through May 28

Photographs by Robert Capa

May 3-21

Miniature Painters, Sculptors and Gravers Exhibition

May 4 through June 30

Prints in Various Media by Conrad Ross

May 11 through June 14

Sculpture & Drawings by Juan de Avalo

TEXTILE MUSEUM

through April 25

Peru & Egypt

opening May 16

A Survey of the Museum's Collections

WASHINGTON GALLERY OF MODERN ART

through May 3

The Maremont Collection of 20th Century Art

May 12 through June 21

Paintings by Jack Tworokov

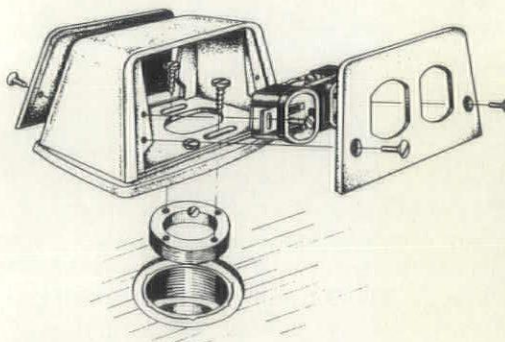


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DETAILS**

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Structural Engineer: Van Rensselaer P. Saxe

Mechanical Engineer: Egli and Gompf, Inc.

General Contractor: Mullan Construction Company

Si STRESCON INDUSTRIES
Sales Service Offices in Baltimore, Philadelphia and Washington

When considering some of the recent comments of the Fine Arts Commission, we begin to wonder just who is at fault for the notably poor designs in the Commission's jurisdiction. In marked contrast are the handsome buildings now under construction in the vicinity of the National Geographic and Rhode Island Avenue, N. W. and the private developments in SW Washington. The Fine Arts Commission may have been correct in rejecting the ordinary design of an office building, a library or a school but their predecessors' attitude hardly encouraged the submission of good contemporary solutions. Consider the precedents set by the Rayburn Office Building, the cubicle facades on Independence Avenue and the new Smithsonian Building as the finest examples of work approved by the previous Fine Arts Commission (the same Commission that rejected the prize-winning FDR Memorial scheme). Did the architects think that they would have to match the quality of those designs to get approval?

The Commission has an important and noble responsibility to protect our architectural heritage in a city blessed with tremendous growth and tradition, but the Commission must exercise its power of persuasion on:

- Congress to remove politics from architectural selection on the Hill.
- On the District to overcome preconceived 19th century school plans, drab libraries and other garage like municipal facilities.
- On the Department of Licensing and Inspection to allow more freedom of design.
- On the Press for permitting publication of quotes of the Fine Arts Commission that should be made in private.
- On themselves not to condemn an architect without finding out the facts of why a building is designed the way it is.

They should become familiar with the frustrating conservative orientation of the building department as opposed to a cultural Fine Arts Commission and imagine themselves not in a position of the selected few who get the finest commissions in the country but a typically good architect in the Federal city without representative government.

We welcome the new members of the Commission to sit in and judge our architectural design and set the example by selecting good architects by their public recognition of good cultural architecture.

P. M. I. — That Powerful Money Image

Few times have we ever seen such a powerful combination of evil money and power seeking to destroy years of work in the culmination of a dream project for those that conceive the development that is Columbia Plaza. From that hotbed of democracy, a Dallas Law Firm has been retained by PMI to lobby against downtown urban renewal and Columbia Plaza. The principal owners of PMI (who must be very confused) are not only suing Columbia Plaza Corporation in which they hold stock, but have also withdrawn from Downtown Progress, regretting putting money in that form of progress too. Apparently, Representative Dowdy, Mr. Big D, would rather see 50 sq. miles of parking pavement and 50 sq. miles of denial than see another phenomenal success on Southwest Washington.

How About A Subway?

Washington subway planners have proposed a new \$300 Million, 12 mile network that would include a major crosstown route serving the Armory and Stadium on East Capitol Street. Of 19 plans studied by NCTA, the new plan calls for two routes mainly within Washington. The new plan is seriously being considered for private operation and we all know who would like to operate it. He might be surprised at the efficiency of modern rail car (Mr. Chalk ironically supports the monorail system). The new plan provides terminals with easy access to express buses from the subway. His latest proposal would be expected to handle the largest number of patrons for its size and could be expanded without great difficulty. The Stadium and Armory service becomes a bonus for the system's acceptance, encouraging greater use for those facilities.

CHAPTER NEWS

The firm of Horowitz Seigel AIA and Associates announce that they are moving into new offices in the Summit Office Building located at 8555 16th Street, Silver Spring, Maryland; phone number Ju 7-3333.

Michael F. Sofranko, AIA, has opened his own architectural office at 816 Thayer Avenue, Silver Spring. Phone: 587-1776.

S. Thomas Stathes, AIA, has become a new unassigned member of Potomac Valley Chapter.

Jack Gruss, AIA, announces the opening of his office for the practice of architecture at Suite 408, Wheaton Plaza Office Building. Phone: 949-7150.

The March issue of C/M, the trade magazine of the National Concrete Masonry Association features an article and cover photograph of St. Matthew's Lutheran Church in Southwest by chapter member Milton J. Prassas.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

John B. Parkin, founder and principal partner in John B. Parkin Associates, Toronto, Canada, will be a featured speaker at the second Architectural Symposium on Stainless Steel Design, sponsored by the International Nickel Company, Inc. The symposium will be held May 4 at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D. C.

Parkin, whose firm is associated with Viljo Revell in the building of the Toronto City Hall, will discuss the elaborate structural problems of the building and show how the structural properties of stainless steel aided in solving many of these problems.

All chapter members are cordially invited.

A national competition is being held for the design of a Monumental Fountain for the terminus of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia. A five man jury including I. M. Pei and Paul Rudolph will award prizes totalling \$35,000. Registration ends June 15, 1964.



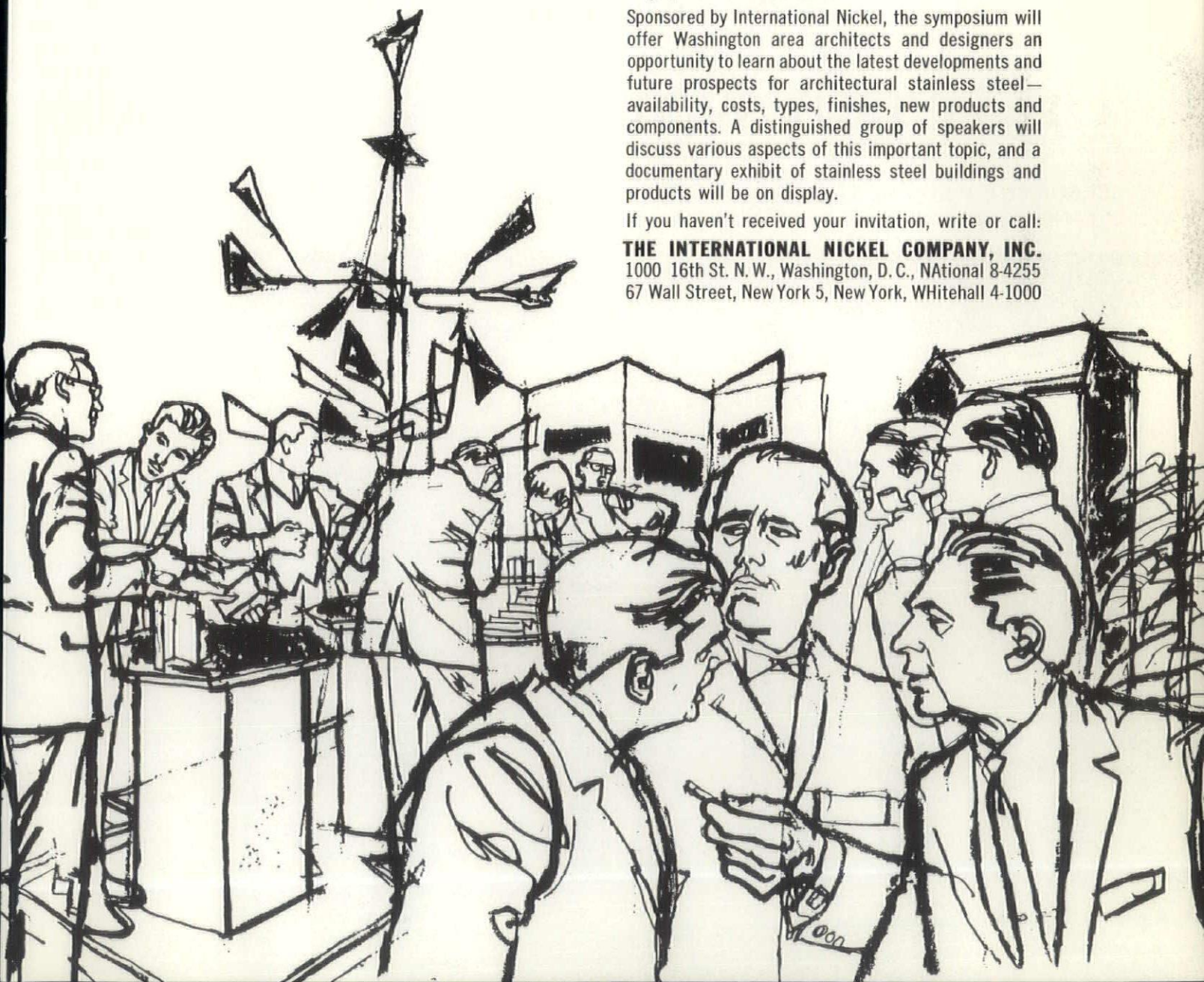
Stainless Steel Designs

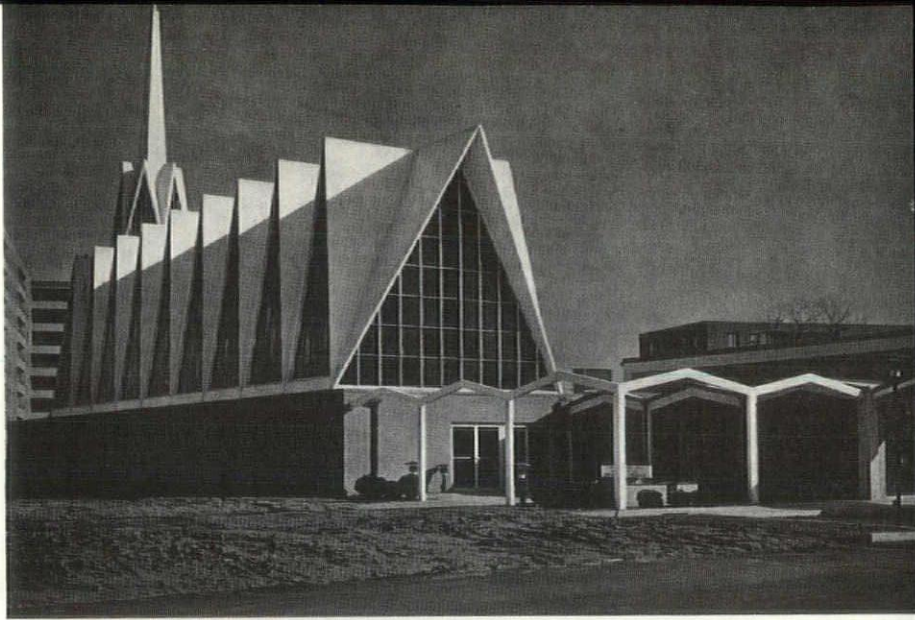
The second in a series of architectural symposiums on the role of stainless steel in architectural design will be held at the Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D. C. on May 4, 1964 at 5:30 o'clock.

Sponsored by International Nickel, the symposium will offer Washington area architects and designers an opportunity to learn about the latest developments and future prospects for architectural stainless steel—availability, costs, types, finishes, new products and components. A distinguished group of speakers will discuss various aspects of this important topic, and a documentary exhibit of stainless steel buildings and products will be on display.

If you haven't received your invitation, write or call:

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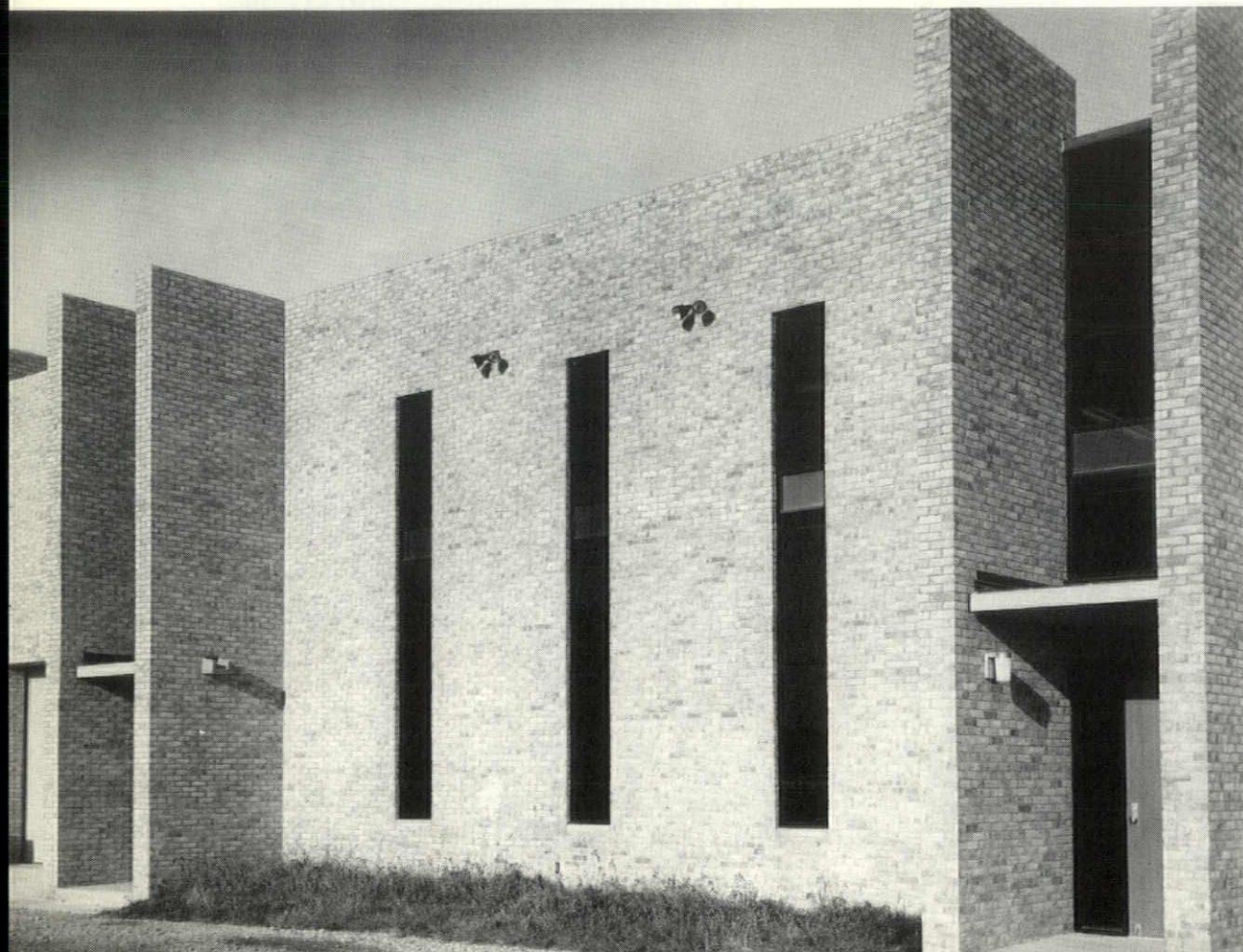


ST. MATTHEWS EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
MILTON J. PRASSAS, AIA, ARCHITECT

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LOCATION: Washington, D. C.

CHAPTER WORK

LABORATORY BUILDING • HYDRONAUTICS, INC.
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comment

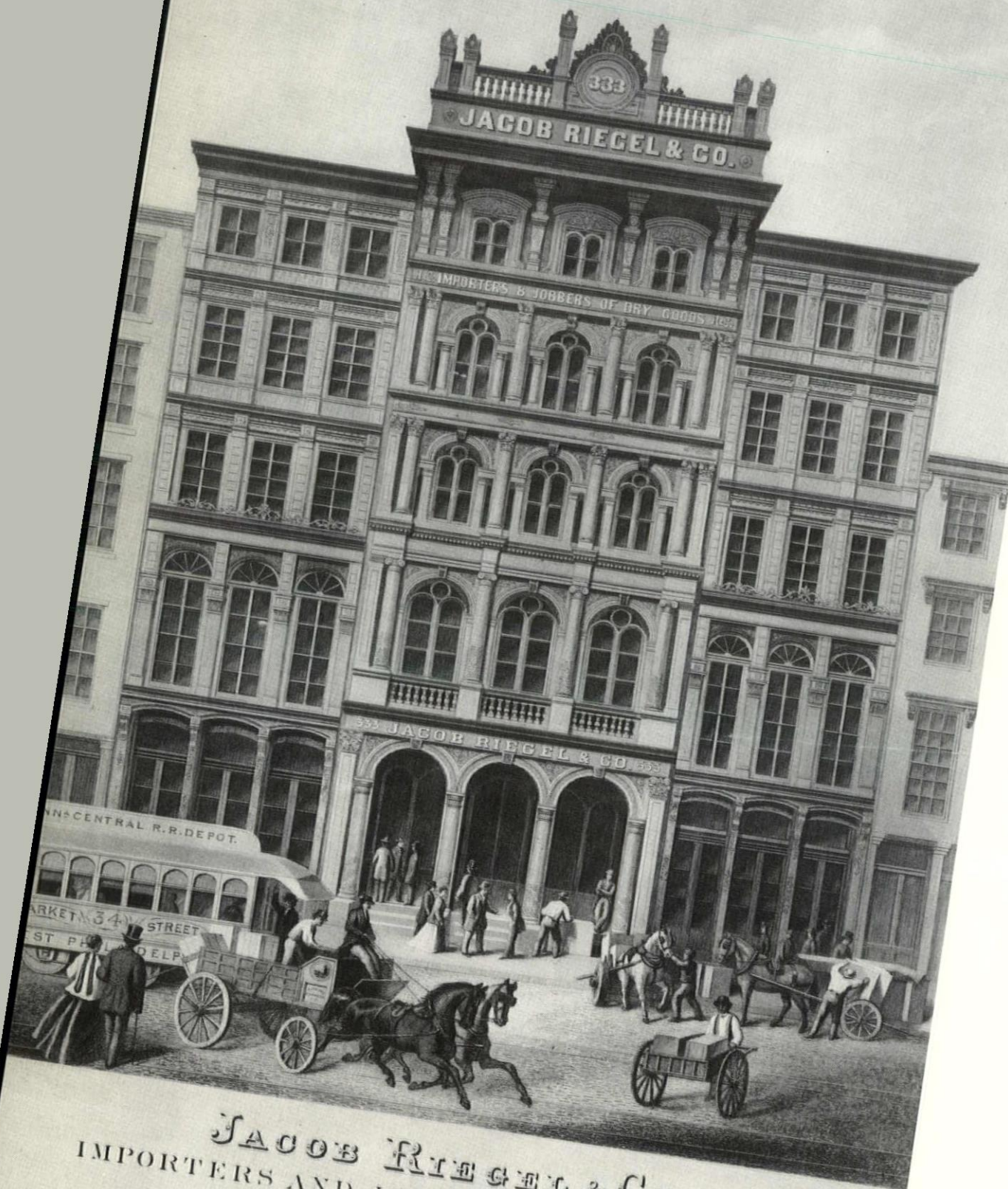
The proposed waterfront site for the Cultural Center typifies the sad state of the arts in America. We scorn culture with one hand and enshrine it with the other. Ours is a fragmented centripetal society, where the almost unbelievable creative ferment among our artists leaves the mass of society untouched, apart from a dutiful semi-annual Sunday afternoon trip to the local picture mausoleum.

The question of whether roads, parking, and apartment developments will destroy the park-like setting is unimportant. The important question is whether the building belongs in that park-like setting at all. It does not. Lincoln Center isolated all of its endeavors in a giant superblock. Washington proposes to go New York one better, and to compress all the functions into one vast building, and to then surround it with a protective moat of grass. I envision plenty of signs reading KEEP OFF THE GRASS, NO SMOKING, and for good measure perhaps a few saying DANGER! CULTURE AHEAD.

The Culture Center belongs in the heart of what is left of downtown—and nowhere else. Whether one building or several it should be in the midst of transit lines, shops, cheap loft space, bars and delicatessens. It belongs where it complements and helps shape the business and social life of the city. It demands a vital environment not a pastoral one, for museum case culture is no culture at all. John F. Kennedy did more to close the gap between life and art than any man in our time, and his memorial should further that aspect of his life, not ignore it.

Mr. Stone referred to the cynicism of linking the Culture Center to urban renewal. The opportunity to inter-weave both cultural and physical renewal in the heart of our city is one of the greatest opportunities we will ever be offered. We will be indeed cynical if we let it pass—RBR.

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advertising and architecture nineteenth century posters

The decades from about 1840 until the perfection of photographic reproduction toward the end of the century represent the best years of the lithographic art in poster design. During this time many businesses proudly displayed their buildings in advertising. The drawings ranged from the refinement of the drawing on the facing page to primitive sketches, but all had in common a naive faith in the power of architecture to influence customers. Regrettably no one on Madison Avenue today would expect a full page spread of Seagram House to sell much whiskey—another reason for lamenting the passing of older simpler times. The posters shown are all from the extensive collection of the Library of Congress.

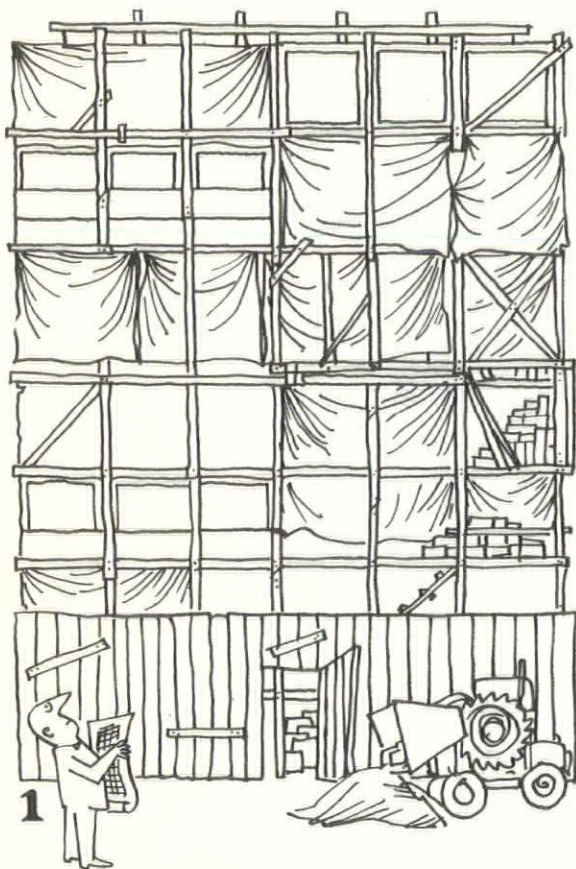
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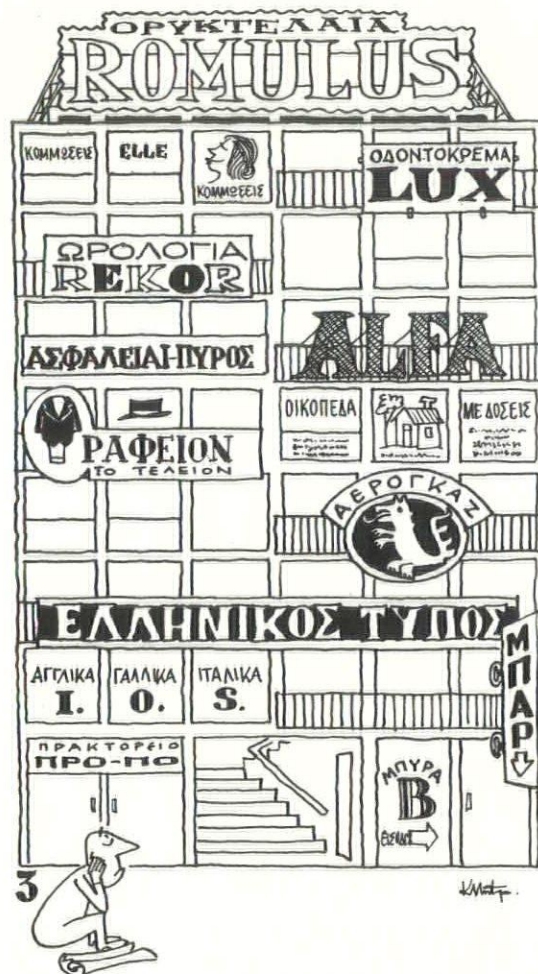
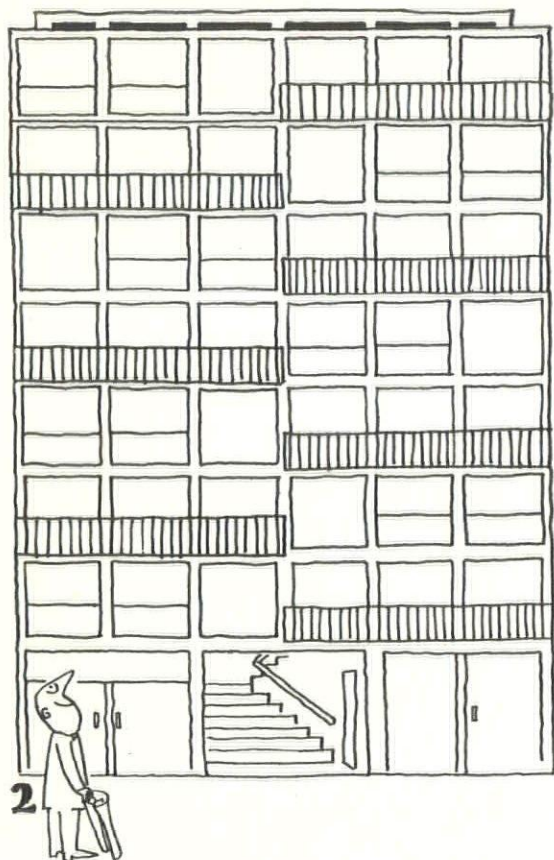
DAILY CAPACITY.
MILL A, 4500 Barrels.
B, 800
C, 2000

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GOLD MEDAL,
000
00
0
SNOW DROP,
IRON DUKE



Architects' problems are remarkably similar the world over. As evidence we submit this cartoon by Kostas Mitropoulos from a recent issue of ARCHITETONIKI, a Greek architectural magazine.



man • nature • ugliness

The current controversy over ugliness portrays once again our unperceptive attitude toward nature. We propose to confine and clean up the works of man, and isolate and sanctify the works of nature. We are urged to do a cosmetic job on our cities, and to preserve in pristine sanctity what "unspoiled nature" is left to us. This approach is a result of our unexamined assumption that the works of man and the world of nature are separate and discontinuous. We seem to believe that man must either spoil the land or leave it untouched. Historically we have inflicted our land with slash and burn, strip mines, and now the billboards and bulldozers. But we have also worried because at heart we have a romantic view of nature and the land, and so we have fenced off forest preserves, and national parks. Perhaps this ambivalent attitude is part of a young expanding society, for certainly it is not prevalent in more continuously settled areas of the world.

Whatever its source the attitude must change if we are to come to grips with our real world, for the world we imagine does not exist. Man and nature are not distinct and opposed, they are the forces in a dynamic interaction. We must understand this complex process and enjoy it rather than deny it. We must realize that man's effect on plant and animal ecology spreads far beyond the last gas station, and that nature in her way invades even the grimmest of cities. In the words of Edgar Anderson "... naturalists who will not face the fact that man is part of nature cannot become fully integrated human beings. A nature study movement which focuses its attention on remote mountains and desolate sea marshes is making a sick society even sicker." We must realize that the ecology of suburbs and city (even to the sparrows, rats, and ragweed) is as much a part of nature as a waterfall; that intelligently grouped and planned high rise apartments are no more alien to the Potomac than miles of two acre lots with zoysia grass and exotic shrubs; that in their place amusement piers and river front restaurants are just as valuable means of enjoying water as sand dunes and trout streams. We must accept the urbanization of our culture and make provisions for the natural world on those terms.

Not only is our traditional preservationist attitude too narrow but it is undoubtedly doomed to failure. As the lines are now drawn our battles for nature are being fought by bird watchers and ban-the-billboards societies, hardly main elements in our society. While these groups have their place, it is surely up to architects and planners to take their proper role in shaping our relation with the non-human world by working from a sound understanding of the principles of ecology.

*For those interested I recommend two introductions to modern thinking in this field. *READING THE LANDSCAPE*¹ by May Theilgaard Watts is a fascinating book, written for the layman and emphasizing the interaction I have spoken of. But the clearest and most stimulating voice is that of *LANDSCAPE*². This small handsome magazine publishes contributions over the entire range of our environment from botany to city planning. PVA has reprinted two of its articles, by Herbert Gans and James C. Rose, in recent issues. This month we are reprinting a thoughtful editorial dealing with the question of man, nature and ugliness. Its unique contribution is the consideration of ugliness in its social as well as visual context, an aspect of the problem most of us have ignored. RBR*

1. MAC MILLAN CO., New York, 1957

2. *LANDSCAPE*, Box 2149, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Published three times per year.

THE HAZARDS OF UGLITIDUNIZING

The Practice seems to be growing in the American communication industry of presenting the public once a year with at least one article, book, photo report, television and radio program describing in some detail the way we are desecrating our countryside. The presentation usually occurs during the late spring, just before the vacation season.

It was probably Bernard de Voto who started the edifying custom in *Harper's* a good ten years ago. Ever since then, with an almost clocklike regularity, we have been told in a variety of styles and media of how the appearance of our cities and our rural landscape is steadily deteriorating, of how our seacoasts and mountains and forests are being defiled, often beyond remedy, and of how, unless this abuse is stopped, America is doomed. What effect these indignant descriptions have on the vacationing public—or, indeed were intended to have—it is difficult to say. Evidently they have been sufficiently well received to make their repetition from one year to the next a matter of established policy. And, in fact, they are almost always good cautionary reading.

One of the latest of the jeremiads, and in some respects the most sensible, is Stewart Alsop's article in the "Speaking Out" Department of the *Saturday Evening Post* for June 23, 1962. It is entitled (almost of necessity) "America the Ugly. Our once lovely land has become a garish, tasteless, messy junk heap."

Strong words! Here the familiar indictment is once again repeated: We Americans were given a magnificent natural setting and what have we done with it? We have built squalid cities littered with garbage, neon signs, billboards, parking lots. Our older suburbs are deteriorating into slums, our new suburbs are monotonous and flimsy, our highways are lined with car dumps, hot dog stands, catchpenny tourist enterprises. Even our national parks and monuments are defaced by the refuse left by campers. In fixing blame for this sorry condition, Alsop provides a welcome variation by adding new culprits to the established roster of real estate promoters, outdoor advertisers, auto dealers—and the inherent sloppiness of the average traveling American. He includes the tax structure with its write-offs for depreciation and its tacit encouragement of land speculation, and much of the dreariness of our cities he ascribes to the low-grade architecture we have—particularly the architecture of state and federal buildings. He also blames the rich for feeling no responsibility to create sites of

permanent beauty, and he has harsh words for business enterprises which, in their eagerness for profits, overadvertize and underdesign. But of course (and here Alsop reverts to the line of thought mandatory in this kind of article) we average citizens must take the chief blame; it is we who tolerate this ugliness, and so on.

Certain aspects of this complaint are open to question. He left out some grievances and exaggerated others. It is simply not true, for instance, that the entire country or even a large part of it is being desecrated in this manner. It is quite possible to travel hundreds of miles, day after day, and never be affronted by the horrors he describes. That is because they are largely urban, and if you avoid cities of over 100,000—it can be done—you will have a much less dismal picture of America. Still, it is obvious that most Americans live in or near a desecrated landscape. And again, if Alsop had spent more time in rural America he would have found other eyesores of a different but no less serious kind: eroded, overgrazed, mis-managed farms and ranches, half-dead villages and towns, plundered and deserted landscapes. And how fair is it to blame the rich, even in part, for the appearance of our cities? In no country have they actually contributed more to the beautification of the environment than in America. Not counting what certain large fortunes have given us in way of forests, parks, museums, art galleries and colleges, the well-to-do (no doubt for selfish reasons) have made the residential sections of most American cities the only slightly areas for miles around. Whether one likes the idea or not, it is the dollars of the rich rather than the public's pennies or federal subsidies which have backed most of our efforts to save or improve our scenic heritage. Of all the reasons for picking on the rich, this seems the least justified. Finally, the American architect has done an excellent job; and since he is responsible for barely 20% of the buildings constructed, it seems unkind to make him the scapegoat for the junky condition of our cities. Nevertheless, most of Alsop's criticism is well founded; much of America is, indeed a mess, a garish, jerrybuilt, neon-lighted mess that grows worse each year.

But before we go into paroxysms of self-reproach (if that is the appropriate reaction) let us bear one comforting thought in mind: every other modern industrialized country has described its own landscape in much the same unflattering terms. England's celebrated "Outrage" and "Counterattack" were directed

against the same evils Alsop and others have written about over here. Some years ago, *LANDSCAPE* published an eloquent lament by Jean Giraudoux over the sloppy condition of the French landscape—a lament originally written before the last war; and though we prefer to forget it, one of Hitler's strongest appeals to the German voter before he took power was his promise to tidy up the German countryside. Bruno Zevi continues to bewail the anarchy which has overtaken rural Italy. So we are by no means alone in our shortcomings, and the causes of this abuse of the environment evidently lie deeper than we supposed.

These expressions of concern are all to the good, and they show signs of multiplying. They indicate that we are becoming more sensitive to our surroundings, readier than we once were to seek pleasure there and dismayed when that becomes impossible. Moreover, dissatisfaction often inspires a desire to do something about the American scene: to save it, or improve it, or restore it in some not very clear but very appealing image. A number of organizations, hitherto little concerned with one another's affairs, are beginning to band together: landscape architects, city planners, conservationists, historical societies, recreationists are now asking how we are to save the landscape.

It is generally agreed that any landscape, no matter how badly it may have deteriorated, can be restored, given sufficient money and energy and purpose. We can see for ourselves how whole country-sides not only in Northern Europe but in the Mediterranean region have been cleaned up, purged of economic and land ownership evils, reequipped and restored to self-respect and prosperity, either by paternalistic legislation or by concerted action. We could do exactly the same in America if we chose to.

But here is the catch: it is not enough to prettify a landscape or a city; it has to be put back into efficient working order. It must either be equipped to support itself by agriculture or industry or by appealing to the tourist trade. This is something we Americans are inclined to overlook when we envy the way some European landscapes, or the landscapes of Israel, have been successfully revived. New forests have been planted, streams have been purified, new villages with market places and parks have been built—not simply in order to produce a picturesque landscape but to encourage a healthy wildlife, or to serve the farmers as efficiently as possible. Even the Nazis' romantic determination to beautify Germany did not prevent them from designing new barns and new farm layouts for a more modern way of farming. Back of every European program of rural or urban beautification there is almost always a hardheaded program of economic and social reform. How much does one hear of this aspect of landscape improvement in America? Outside of some urban renewal programs, not a great deal. When confronted by a region clearly economically and socially sick—like West Virginia or

Northern New Mexico or the coalmining areas of Pennsylvania, the beautifiers are usually content to recommend that it be converted into a "recreational area." The emphasis, all too often, is on the preservation of beauty rather than the preservation of life.

A good part of the blame for this oversight can be ascribed to the magic exerted by one simple word and its derivatives: ugly; ugliness, uglification, and (ugliest derivative of all) de-uglification. In its present fashionable use, the word is undoubtedly a recent importation from England—more specifically from the pages of the *Architectural Review*, long a vigorous crusader against the desecration of the English landscape. However that may be, it has become very popular among those concerned with the appearance of American cities. In the course of his not very long article Alsop used it in one form or another twenty-one times, not counting its use in the title. Nevertheless it is *nothing but a euphemism*. We may find it convenient to speak of ugliness and uglification, but what we mean (and ought to say) is something much more specific: poverty, disease, greed, laziness, corruption. Alsop hopefully calls for a national lobby, "a Committee to Combat Ugliness." Does he mean polluted air and water, fire traps, dust bowls, poorly-designed expressways, uncontrolled advertising, slums? Undoubtedly he does; but that conveniently vague surrogate, unconsciously used, robs his proposal of any seriousness.

And that is the trouble with any emphasis on the visual aspect of the landscape: it is entirely too superficial. Alsop's article might well have been written by a perceptive foreigner, tolerably well acquainted with American culture through books and movies. Glimpsed from behind the windshield of a moving car, a countryside, a town or city is quickly appraised; there is no time for considering its background, much less its quality of living. The esthetic judgment is the easiest one.

Nevertheless, when we try to understand the landscape in living terms, in terms of its viability, our verdicts are not so cocksure. The sordid little businesses which line our highways represent in many cases a last-ditch stand in the field of individual enterprise; tear them down and we have scored a triumph of de-uglification—but at what cost? The neglected farmhouses and weed-grown fields in many parts of America, are we to view them as prospective picnic and recreation areas or as victims of an economic blight which is killing off all small operators? Which point of view is likely in the long run to lead to a better America?

What we need at present in our cities and countryside is not an imposed or a carefully tended beauty, but cities and countryside which are healthy and self-supporting and optimistic. Our older landscape is still there to show what we were once able to achieve in the way of beauty; given the right social environment, we can achieve it again.

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