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Architectural Response-Ability

Wolf Von Eckardt

It has become fashionable among architects and architecture students to be anti-modern, or 'post-modern' as the code name has it. It is a reactionary sentiment which does nothing to advance the essential social purposes of architecture. It actually negates them to the ridiculous point where architects have been heard to pontificate that "architecture has nothing to do with building." No wonder some people in need of buildings will have nothing to do with architects.

The new anti-modernism is single-mindedly—indeed, mindlessly—preoccupied with style. We do not need a style war. We need an environment that preserves and, if possible, enhances our humanity in a technological and largely irrational mass society. Such an environment does not evolve like jungles and chaos. Nor is it automatically created by market forces which tend to create places like downtown Houston or Newark, caring little about enhancing our humanity. A livable and creative human habitat must be designed and re-designed, planned and re-planned, built and re-built. It must be cultivated like a garden. And the only people who can do this, given support and cooperation, are design professionals—architects, landscape architects, urban planners, and engineers.

The pioneers of the modern movement saw this clearly. Walter Gropius

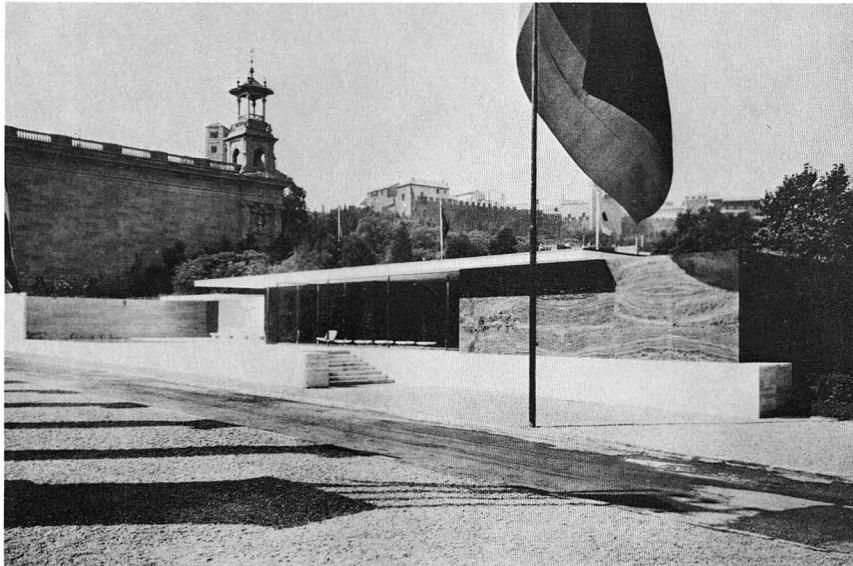


Chapel, Notre Dame du Haut, Ronchamp. Le Corbusier. 1953-55.

and his friends always insisted that they were not out to create a new style. And they did not. Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion looks about as different from Le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp as a Greek temple from a Chinese pagoda. 'Modern' in our present, inadequate terminology, includes buildings as divergent as Gropius' Bauhaus at Dessau (1926), Mies' Crown Hall at IIT (1956), and Paul Rudolph's Art and Architecture Building at Yale (1963). Yet, all three types serve the same function.

Gropius, Le Corbusier, and the other members of the *Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*, or CIAM, set out to marry art and technology (a marriage now called 'industrial design') and to assume responsibility for the design of 'the total man-made environment.' This was new. This was radical. It changed the concept of what architecture was all about. And it was, and still is, essential to the survival of civilized life. Before this declaration, architects designed only the prominent 'foreground buildings,' as Paul Rudolph calls them, the

temples and palaces for deity, princes, and potentates. The rest of the population built their habitat themselves. Like bees and beavers, the folks who built the pueblos in the American Southwest, the Mediterranean hilltowns, the Swiss Alpine villages, or any other vernacular architecture, followed what seems to be an innate building instinct which humans used to share with other animals. Architecture without architects, as we all know, is inevitably functional and beautiful. It is built in harmony with nature.



German Pavilion, International Exposition, Barcelona, Spain.
Mies van der Rohe. 1929.

But then the machine age came, and this beauty disappeared. People could no longer build their own dwellings—at least not in the rapidly industrializing and mechanizing cities. They could not build their own plumbing systems or elevators. The human building instinct gave way to a widespread yearning for *kitsch*. With vernacular beauty also went what I would call environmental justice. The rich got nice views on green parks and the poor got dismal tenements and slums. Also, increasing mechanization brings increased pollution of land, air, and water. Technical improvements are largely offset by declines in the public health, the aesthetic and psychological factors that make up the quality of life, and what August Heckscher calls “the public happiness.” It would be silly hubris to assume that architects, the design professionals, can *build* a happier habitat. Only society as a whole can attempt that, realizing along with everything else, that concepts of quality and happiness keep changing.

But architects, in concert with other designers, can—and, I believe, must—illustrate society’s hopes, and uplift practical visions of how to realize our national aspirations for an

environment that preserves and, if possible, enhances our humanity in a technological mass society. Responsibility for the total man-made environment does not mean, and has never meant, an architectural dictatorship. It means just what it says: architecture must develop response-ability—the ability to respond to the needs of people and a happier living environment. More than fifty years ago, modern architecture stood for this. But lately discouraged by some failures, architecture has abandoned these social aims. In retrospect, the failures were due to what were clearly some bad mistakes. One was an excessive infatuation to the needs of the city; Le Corbusier and others adjusted the city to the needs of the automobile—and all but killed it. Another mistake was the assumption that, like modern art, orthodox modern architecture is abstract. Neither the Barcelona Pavilion nor the Ronchamp chapel evoke the traditional use of a pavilion or chapel. In fact, the new architectural forms, like the new art, deliberately and defiantly anti-traditional; they were anti-historical and thus, of course, inevitably elitist. Ordinary people just did not get it. Abstract architecture, like abstract art, did not play well in



The Portland Building, Portland, Oregon.
Michael Graves. 1979-83.

Peoria, or in Suburbia, or in the inner city, for that matter. People enjoy an occasional shock of the new, but most people need and deserve the reassurance of historic continuity. As Phillip Johnson discovered a long time ago, “We cannot *not* respect history.”

So the anti-modernists try to put history—historic allusions, historic ‘quotations,’ as they were fond of saying—back into architecture. It is a noble aim which is proving to be as difficult as trying to put Christ back into Christmas in our sleazy, commercialized world. You can not do it with gimmicks. Gluing fiberglass garlands on concrete boxes and placing stylized pediments on columns that look like vertical sewer pipes do not seem to amuse Clio, the Muse of history. These bizarre and out-of-context misquotations of the past architectural forms and ornaments have nothing to do with the real historic and cultural context in which they are placed. Post-modernist imagery, in short, is just as abstract, obtruse, alienating, arrogant, and elitist as abstract glass boxes ever were.

It must be said in all fairness, that the new anti-modern, somewhat cynical irrationalism is not unique to architec-

ture. It has pervaded our civilization most likely as a reaction to the broken promises of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Unprecedented breakthroughs in science and technology promised nothing short of utopia. People had a right to expect that twentieth century science, technology, and, yes, architecture would turn barbarism to brotherhood, poverty to plenty, rant to reason. Instead the twentieth century has already seen two world wars, totalitarianism, the holocaust, famines, and persistent unreason.

We live on the brink of ultimate disaster in an age of cynical irrationality, an age full of terrorism; violence; fanatical mysticism; personality cults; air, water, land, and noise pollution; a breakdown of the family and of manners; and escape into drugs and fantasy worlds. Why should we expect architecture to be reasonable? But then, why shouldn’t we expect architecture to be reasonable? Enough new architecture is around to give rise to the hope that the current preoccupation with style for style’s sake, along with image building and ego building, is but a passing fad.

There is a hope that we come to recognize again that architecture is not an art, but a social art. As the Prince of Wales put it recently in a noteworthy speech to the Royal Institute of British Architects: “To be concerned about the way people live, about the environment they inhabit, and the kind of community that is created by that environment, should surely be one of the prime requirements of a really good architect.”