

ARCHITECTURE IN THE EIGHTIES: MOVING FORWARD BACKWARD

by Richard Hunter

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Slick, glassy and still pampered by suitors, mainstream modern architecture idled into menopause before anyone knew it was pregnant. A decade later, amid general dismay, caste consciousness, vehemence, pride, denial and hope, the secret is out: baby is geriatric.

Suffering a tendency to disorient and a morbidity with age, the child is not unclever--some claim precocity--but more surprisingly, it may be fecund.

It likes to play with things, especially itself. It tells jokes and puts on little skits learned from Las Vegas. No one expected it to understand history but it knows mummy didn't like it so it's curious. It's been to a lot of movies and is crazy about special effects in neon and glitzy plastic. Although odd, the kid is a true ism and with a yelp of optimal semantics has named itself "Postmodern."

Governments, banks and other pinnacles of corporate sagacity are falling over their mirrors in a surge to turn Chippendale into concrete or Gothic into glass. Skyscraper penthouses are erupting in prisms and pyramids; walls are stepped in upside-down stairways (architects know their Escher); Rome, lobotomized, has made it into the lobby, as the new style toddles its way from New York to Vancouver amidst ancestors made instantly passé.

By the time Michael Graves' Portland Building and New York's AT&T Building, designed by Philip Johnson, opened eighteen months ago, the furor which had greeted the published drawings a few years earlier had already seeped out forming links with less publicized urges in the pools and eddies of the architectural world. Shards of historical detail, often distorted, enlarged,

set in tandem to some technological fetish, began to appear on facades, themselves often partially cut away to "cue" "layers of meaning" or "metaphor" within a new assessment of "context." Having abandoned the arts and crafts, and with them the hand and heart, the modern movement established itself in the salons of the publishing house literati, where whim and wit are as evaporative of discipline and content as a tray of martinis is to balance and judgement. If the play's the thing, what is the use of conquering conscience when it's cash flow we're after?

Architect Johnson, apparently secure in a flasher's coat, doesn't shy from mixing play with work, caprice with conviction. Together with John Burgee he has this year polished off for the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Corporation an extrusion of black glass towers named PPG Place--designed in a kind of gothic international style deco. The buildings shimmer and shake in a melee of dazzling reflection, dimwitting their neighbors and proclaiming once again two favourite modern urban axioms: man equals art and technology rules.

Yet postmodernism exhibits a humbler side as well--it is not above attempting a regional esthetic on its own terms. Michael Graves' new library for the mission town of San Juan Capistrano in Southern California, is a step back from the lugubrious hulk foisted--with help from Philip Johnson--on Portland. On the outside the little library knows its idiom and speaks Spanish, or perhaps Esperanto, in a manner lacking neither originality, politeness nor charm. But while a concern for demeanor and rapport is evident in the building's exterior, inside, the id of Graves' more familiar Egyptian deco machine guns us with rhythms of rapid rectangles in Pharaonic spaces, suggesting that while architecture may muzzle technology, a repressed megalomania is central to the age.

The totalitarian proclivities of the International Style and succeeding movements began to be acknowledged by critics long after the general public--and many architects--had left the show. Some in fact never entered the arena. It was not possible, or barely so, to revere the hard-won work of Frank Lloyd Wright--an architecture he called "organic"--while lolling about in the technical ease of Mies van der Rohe. "God is in the details," he aphorized, implying, presumably, that God was dead everywhere else.

In North America architects became divided between those who contemplated the machine as a tool and those who conditioned themselves to be tooled by it. There was no middle way. The genius of Wright and his precursors in the American school, together with a handful of younger architects who favoured the organic approach to design, proved no quantitative match for either the technology or the mentality which emerged after the Second World War. Architecture had not only to express the machine, as prominent German architects believed, buildings should actually be machines--for working, for living, according to the French pioneer Le Corbusier. Having been routed by fascism, European intellectualism of the artistic left found fertile ground in universities near those centres of commerce and industry ready to gloss a new image for urban America. As war had catapulted America to a position of pre-eminence among powers, so had "peace" enabled the United States to seed the world with architectural missiles of irony and illogic as inimical to the traditions of architecture and thought as they were to its own original revolutionary intents. Whatever the effects of television, America had internationalized architecture not as the manifestation of a global village, but as the power grid of a boxy city whose formulas equated habitat with cage, community with zoo.

Whether or not the new architecture represents a true "renaissance of architectural thought," as a leading proponent believes, it is at worst an effort to wrench questions and inequalities from a dictum that had become--to paraphrase Louis Sullivan--so narrow as to admit of no exception.

Broken forever is the International Style's unrelieved cage of glass, the first movement in history to apotheosize the tombstone, fact and symbol of an empty container. The real significance of postmodernism may be a new promise for the house of man before the grave--if it survives its own senility.

Governments, banks and other agencies of corporate society are falling over their boards in a surge to turn Chippendale into concrete or Gothic into glass. Everywhere architects are striving to restore the human scale to the urban landscape, to make their cities more livable, more human. They are turning the lobby of the new skyscraper into a place where New York to discover what architecture can do for the city.

By the time Michael Graves' Portland Building and New York's 550 Madison Avenue, designed by Philip Johnson, opened eighteen months apart, the tower which had created the skyscraper had become a symbol of the city. The building was a landmark, a symbol of the city's growth and its ability to adapt to the new world. It was a building that was not just a building, but a statement.