

DIRECTIONS & DILEMMA

I'm wondering if there isn't a tiny bit of intellectual snobbery in our attitude. Certainly in all history there has never been less restraint and less coherence at the level of the creators and the critics. But on the other two levels of design, the professional and the pop, there may be more consistency than we care to admit. The pop level has successfully extracted all the most obvious visual effects of the last two decades of creative architecture and has combined them in a very real international style. The least alert teenager in the western world - well, in the English Speaking World, at any rate - must have a pretty sharp image of modern building, consisting of violent contrasts in colour and geometry, checkerboards, stonework, zig-zags, grilles and plastic greenery.

At the professional level - that is, in the workaday world of a million conscientious, uninspired practitioners all over the world: the level of the advertising pages rather than the editorial pages of the architectural magazines - at this solid level also there exists a remarkable worldwide consistency, of unoffending curtain walls in fairly clean-cut shapes arranged as a reasonably effective diagram of the functional program. Some sort of a discipline must be operating to produce this consistency, and it is not just the discipline set by economy or the component manufacturers. It is also an artistic or ethical discipline inherited from that dedicated avant-garde of the 'twenties and 'thirties: the Bauhaus and CIAM, the Rationalists. The present professional level is still fairly consistent only because that old avant garde was so consistent. What they believed in then is now, sans fervour, an established and involuntary professional behaviour pattern - with one or two technological revisions. For the professional level lives on ideas from the avant-garde, and the calamity facing us now is what happens when the avant-garde has no coherent formal thought to pass down to the professional level.

In a dictatorship or a Utopia it would be good no doubt to encourage a rare architect of high imagination and wit to non-conform and build for fun. What fine entertainment we have all enjoyed lately from the first of the giant birds, the nests of circles, the Gothicky arcades, and the giraffe-size porticos. But when some of these things are repeated for the eighth or ninth time, drained of spontaneity and wit, they only embarrass one like a joke told once too often. And in this day and age we can be sure that each striking new image will inevitably be copied many times. No one can build

a successful folly any more without its becoming a social menace. This threat alone should be enough to intimidate any architect into imposing on himself restraints to counter the freedom given him by the lifting of traditional taste restraints.

But if the architect doesn't feel any need within himself no one else can successfully impose a discipline on him. The only artistic discipline that works is one which architects accept not merely involuntarily and unconditionally but with positive excitement and absolute dedication. If there were no such discipline which the sophisticated leaders of today could accept, then the confusion at the professional level would inexorably grow worse. But I don't think it will get much worse, for I believe that the avant-garde is edging back to an intellectual stand, an unconditional surrender to an idea.

One way of explaining the chaotic 20th C. scene is to say that there were two phases. First a purge, then, beginning in the 'fifties, a new creative phase which is still in a state of experimentation and flux. I would rather divide the century so far into categories representing the major artistic stands. Two opposed attitudes to form, tight and loose, have alternated as artistic visions, over-riding philosophical, structural, economic and social influences. The Functionalist form was, of course, the loose one: broken and open - often to the point where form was lost to sight altogether. But as the revolutionary movement sobered down its buildings became more consciously formed, less diagrammatic, tighter, returning to centre lines and other rather stuffy formalities reminiscent of its earliest works before it cut loose from the old styles and symmetry. Mies proved that all functions could be fitted inside a square box and thus he (of all people) inadvertently launched the Fun season of the last ten years. For, if a square was acceptable, then why not a cylinder, a twisted tent, a bird, or better still a dashing bit of sculpture set with random stained glass? This is the second phase or stand in modern architecture that is still filtering down and threatening to make the whole world a tired sort of World's Fair. Nevertheless this revival of attention to external form did remind modern architecture of the element of unity, which had been rather lacking from the first phase, and which is so essential to any building which aspires to architecture by attempting some communication of ideas.

If the whole story of 20th Century architecture were contained in the Functionalist and Fun phases, the outlook now might be really grim; but happily there is a third phase, or third formal stand. It is not really new. It also existed in embryo at the beginning of modern architecture. It was suggested in the less symmetrical works of Wright and the more formal works of the Europeans. More recently the New Brutalists have contributed to it, and so have the Japanese. It is a distillation of half a century of experience in modern architecture. It is a controlled rather than a compulsive search for a valid architecture between the loose and the tight forms - a new search, of course, with each new problem. It wants intense coherence without forcing diverse functions into an illfitting envelope or an inflexible geometrical pattern. It finds its unity in the consistency of its treatment of materials and its dedication to an overriding spatial idea. It derives all its motivation and meaning from the functional program under consideration

Excesses of the Second, or Fun, Phase hastened the third phase by sparking a reaction back to the "ten-fingered grasp of reality" which Sullivan sought. The third phase is not a style, for it takes many shapes, but it has recognisable characteristics. It is formal but not stiff. It doesn't sprawl incoherently because it is too intent on conveying a particular sense of space. It isn't too geometrical or symmetrical because it is too much alive and conscious of mundane needs, like freedom to grow, which are frustrated by a centreline. It welcomes technological developments, but does not take them as from a grab-bag; it will be happiest when it discovers just one material from which to make an entire building. In the meantime it uses as few as possible as candidly and honourably as possible.

Of course the visual characteristics - asymmetry, fragmentation, consistency, extroversion - will be copied witlessly. Good buildings of the third phase, like Kahn's laboratories, Tange's Kurashiki Town Hall and Paul Rudolph's art school, all have their imitators already; none more than Kahn's laboratories, as we know, which in no time spawned the Random Pylon Style. But I believe that modern architecture as a whole is about to accept a discipline again, and so will ride out these fashions. Most important, it has come back at last from window-dressing and ornamentation to the art of controlling space - not merely opening up space, or hiding a piece of it behind a space-divider, or softening the break between indoors and outdoors, but a wholehearted control of levels, volumes, and the views within and beyond. This third phase returns to the beginning in its rejection of illusions and allusions. It believes that all the

expression and stimulation and fun that any man could ask from any medium is to be found in pure architecture: when a problem framed by a functional program is solved in terms of space. The spirit of the third phase as I see it growing all over the world is an impatience to discover new ways of retaining the monumental, monolithic visual purity of the second phase without betraying or sacrificing the simple truths which the first phase found in rational planning and construction.

Modern architecture is still in a mess, but only because it is still fluid, sorting itself out. But I think that the third phase leads back to a more fixed and durable philosophy in which there will be room for many personal styles. In this philosophy one will find digested traces of Wright and Le Corbusier, Gropius and Mies, and plenty others, some younger and closer to us, of anyone now building who can accept its discipline and stand on the same tripod of realism, space and unity.

Mass taste is capricious indeed, but it never designed anything. It can be capricious only within the scope extended to it by the creators of form. But anyone can create form. Everyone wants to create and, as Wright said, the most dangerous architects are those with the greatest creative urge. I think there are a lot of dangerous architects around today. We're all dangerous unless or until we recognise an ideal bigger than the building in hand.