Humanation . . . slums . . . nibblers . . . structuralism

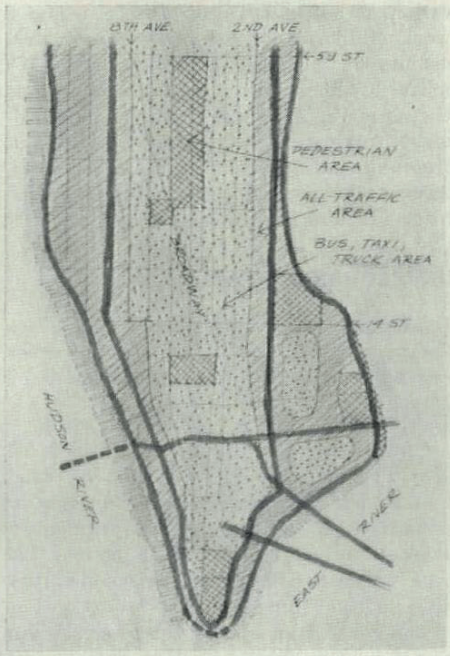
NOW, HUMANATION?

Architect Charles Luckman, when addressing the Massachusetts Building Congress, used a phrase that may mark the apogee of a certain architectural rhetoric.

Today's grotesque and unplanned suburban sprawl must give way to plans for space and grace in cities which reflect the 'humanation of architecture.'

Surely we, as a culture, are not to be judged, or judge ourselves, merely by our capacity to use brick and mortar, glass and steel. Rather, our use of materials, like the use of our skills, should be measured only by the yardstick of human needs and aspirations. Unless these are served, a building, no matter how beautiful, will deny the importance of the human being by failing to consider that buildings are for people—and must therefore be planned, designed, and built to embody the visual and esthetic values of the human scale.

While I will have nothing to do with a project which is deficient in fine design, I do insist that fine design alone does not suffice either today or tomorrow.



PEDESTRIAN ISLAND

Manhattan traffic would assume this pattern if a proposal by Victor Gruen and Herbert Askwith were adopted. Private vehicles would be restricted to a narrow circumferential area. The plan was set forth in the January 10 issue of The New York Times *Sunday supplement.*

RENT CONTROLS BEGET SLUMS

This theorem was ably demonstrated by Gerald Burns, writing in a recent issue of The Reporter.

In retrospect it seems clear enough that the meaning of rent control has changed since the war. Rent control was then one of the many emergency devices to combat the rapid general inflationary trend of the economy, to ensure a reasonably fair distribution among a reasonably homogenous population of a commodity in short supply, and later, during the years immediately following the war, to help make a gradual adjustment to the realities of economic life possible for both tenant and landlord.

During recent years, however, the meaning of rent control in New York has become, literally, the control of rents at the lowest possible level without regard to the realities either of the market or of the city's special housing problem.

In these circumstances a landlord is under great pressure to devise ways to reduce maintenance costs and increase rents. Ordinarily he will conduct this battle according to the rules laid down by the law and the Rent Commission, and ordinarily he will survive; but often enough—especially in housing where the tenants are transients (e.g., in furnished rooms) or ignorant (e.g., recent arrivals from Puerto Rico), or where rent control and fortune have both been hard—he may be sorely tempted to cheat.

Indeed, almost all landlords of buildings in which most of the housing accommodations are subject to rent control are turning them into slums as fast as the tenants, the Rent Commission, and the Department of Buildings will let them do it.

One might expect that all owners of rent-controlled apartments would favor abolition of rent control, but this is by no means the case. In order to obtain the maximum possible return of their investment, many such owners have already turned their buildings into irreclaimable slum dwellings. To these people, rent control is a shield and sword—in short, their very best friend.

Some attempt should surely be made to arrange for an orderly rise in the general level of all rentals to reflect more realistically the economic facts of life today. Under the law we have seen that wildly differing legal rents often exist for identical accommodations. This, in the name of "rent control," is more than a little absurd. The effect is merely to allow someone to capitalize upon good luck at the expense of others.

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BEWARE OF THE NIBBLERS

New York Architect Robert Cutler, a partner in Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, warned against the voracious we-can-do-it-cheaper fraternity, when speaking before the Texas Society of Architects' 20th annual convention.

As a professional, I believe that improvement in the quality of architects' business practice is mandatory. The effort to better educate the client must be constant. To coordinate and completely check contract documents, to maintain a realistic relationship between budget and actual construction cost—these are but few of the traps which plague us every day. Beware the nibblers, those who profit by our mistakes. They take over gradually, and we may have no clothes at all before long.

The niftiest nibbler of all, the "package dealer," has done well—in fact so well that we are squeamish, sterile, and stolid in our approach to the problem. We reason that we can't serve two masters at the same time, i.e., designer and builder. We complacently console ourselves that the nibbler does not produce first-rate design, but is primarily interested in the easiest and cheapest methods to produce the turn-key job. Who's lost the control? We have. The nifty one can control the number and size of every commodity which is needed in a given product.

We can assume that control, but it means improved design, a genuine application of better business practices, and a workmanlike approach to properly coordinated construction procedures. We must broaden our base and offer our clients more. We must tighten time schedules through an entirely new set of contractual relationships with the contractors. Above all we must retain control or the nifty nibblers will nibble and nibble.

DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS

William H. Whyte Jr.'s notable plan for the preservation of valuable rural areas was summarized in the latest number of Jersey Plans.

Outside the city limits the problem of providing open space is stalled on dead center. It's been stalled, and it's going to remain that way, until some community or state breaks the ice with action—the type which can be copied by communities all over the country.

The core of an open-space program can be set up through an ancient common-law device enabling a community to conserve key open space by the purchase of development rights from the land owner.

The citizens would say to him: We know you like this land. You are a good farmer, and you want to continue farming. At the same time you're worried about rising taxes, for as these developments come in you are being taxed to

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This $5,000,000 fire might have been prevented with a **steel pipe** automatic sprinkler system

There wasn't much left when this $5,000,000 industrial property in New England burned to the ground. Yet how different the ending could have been if a *steel pipe* fire sprinkler system had been installed and the fire checked at its inception.

Yes, it pays to have an automatic sprinkler system in any building—store or warehouse, hospital or hotel, theater or school. As to cost—insurance premium savings often more than pay for the fire protection system's installation.

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build the new schools and other facilities to provide for the children and adults that these developments bring.

You don't want to give up anything that is rightfully yours without fair compensation. We don't want to zone away from you the right to sell your land to a developer. What we want to do is to buy away from you the right to cover the land with a subdivision. You keep the title to your property, and as long as this restriction is observed you can pass the property onto your heirs or sell it.

From the community's point of view, a key area along a beautiful stream valley is thus kept open at a very reasonable cost. Just as important, the land is kept *alive*.

The body of precedent that already exists shows that where development rights have been purchased, the price is usually much less than any combination of outright purchase and lease-back would be.

Let us say we are negotiating a price of $50 an acre for the development rights of a 140-acre farm in a rural area. The land owner still wants to farm the land; he has not yet become a land speculator. Yet he might say: Why should I settle for $50 an acre? Right now I'll admit that this land is only worth $500 an acre as farmland, but five to ten years from now developers will be coming who might offer $2,000 or $3,000 an acre.

What do you say to that? I think, first you could point out to him that he gets the money *now*, $7,000 cash on the line which would not be taxed as income but as capital gains. What he has got to contrast is not $7,000 versus a possible killing five, ten, or 15 years from now, but what that $7,000 would be worth at that time, decently invested in farm equipment, in land, or in common stock.

IS RENEWAL LEGAL?

The dangerous gap between urban-renewal theory and urban law has been narrowed to some extent by Realtor-Lawyers James Scheuer and Eli Goldston, who conducted a major study on the "Zoning of Residential Developments" for the Harvard Law Review.

The generalized requirement that the city have as part of its workable program a "Comprehensive Community Plan" including a zoning ordinance is not sufficiently exacting—from either a planning or a legal point of view. A significant number of U.S. planning and zoning officials are expressing concern as to the adequacy of their existing zoning ordinances to cope with the growing number of privately owned projects and, in particular, with the very large projects they expect to see built in urban-renewal areas. Several cities are presently preparing new zoning ordinances which will

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include some form of planned-development provision.

It might be thought that the modernized zoning ordinances with their more flexible bulk controls would eliminate the need for special planned-development provisions. Even the newest ordinances, however, deal primarily with single-lot units, since most of the city is still so divided. Thus Denver and Pittsburgh, in their very modern ordinances, and San Francisco, in its proposed ordinance, still find it desirable to make special provisions for large-scale projects. There is a fundamental reason for this: In older areas in which many buildings were constructed before the area was planned, zoning can only be the negative tool of a plan which has been conceived too late to dominate the development of the area. In this situation, zoning is used only as an expedient or as a corrective when damage has already occurred or may come about for lack of a plan. In redevelopment areas, or in other open areas for which the planning precedes the construction, zoning can arise from and be integrated with the planning, and many zoning goals can be achieved without the rigid rules needed when individual lots are separately owned and under no general planning control.

There is increasing recognition that the concept of general welfare is broad enough to include a public interest in community appearance and that planning laws can properly include beauty along with the traditional objectives of safety, health, and morals. Law cannot, of course, compel community beauty; it should not, on the other hand, produce ugliness.

STRUCTURALISM TRUE AND FALSE

The master Italian engineer, Pier Luigi Nervi, recently attempted some advice to pseudostructural architects and antistructural critics in an editorial in Casabella.

A big structure always represents a victory over contrasting physical facts, a victory which is all the more complete when it is obtained through the exact proportioning of the means available to the forces which have to be overcome; in other words, when it is technically perfect.

In the attempt to establish whether there exists a relationship between technical and esthetic quality, and if so what kind, I have examined the greatest possible number of meaningful structures of the past and present and have come to the conclusion that for all great structures, without exception, the indispensable premise for architectonic beauty is correct technique.

This is probably due to the fact that the intuition and sensitivity to statics which in a more or less confused form may be found in all people, including the layman, are satisfied by those structures which immediately reveal the play of

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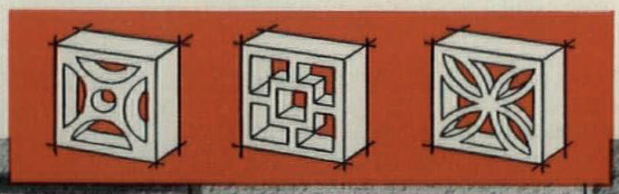
Great new things are shaping up in concrete block



Atlas Masonry Cement measures up to the new masonry

whose range of patterns, shapes and textures is suggested in this block grouping by Architects D. Wallace Benton and Donald G. Park of Los Angeles. To lay up these striking new concrete block, Atlas Masonry Cement continues to be the preferred cementing material for mortar. It provides a smooth, workable mortar, assures a stronger bond, gives weathertight joints that are uniform in color. And Atlas Masonry Cement complies fully with ASTM and Federal Specifications. For information write: Universal Atlas Cement, Dept. M, 100 Park Avenue, New York 17, N. Y.

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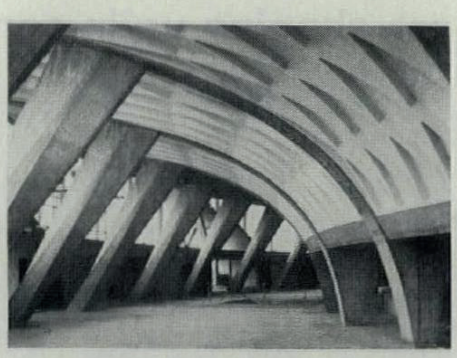
forces and resistance which define its equilibrium.

The difficulty which architectural criticism faces today for the most part lies in the fact that most critics neither have nor seek to have any clear ideas about structural statics. As a result, they attribute to structuralism in general the faults of works characterized by such false and artificial structures that they might be called true examples of anti-structuralism in modern architecture.

By contrast, the pillars of the Palazzo dello Sport (FORUM, Feb. '60; photo at right) are not the modern interpretation of the long-dated column (which, however, in the true architecture of the past had a clear static function), but essential elements in an organic complex, appearing as a structural unit, both the whole and parts of which perfectly fulfill a precise static finality.



Even the form of the rotunda does not spring from a more or less rhetorical architectonic premise, but from the circular form of the sports field (which is chosen for functional purposes) and, above all, from the fact that the most spontaneous and efficient covering for an area of almost 8,000 square meters of surface is the dome with circular ground plan.

The dome with an elliptical ground plan would have involved serious construction and economic problems, and the pavilion or cross enormous static difficulties, while a solution with a flat covering (which I have studied with fascination for many months) would be on the very limits of present-day architectural knowledge, and to try it would be dangerous.

Technical reality—just as soon as we slightly scratch below the surface—shows that with every step forward we take we meet new difficulties inherent in the increase of size; and to try to take too quick a jump is not to be bold but irresponsibly rash. A rashness which, unfortunately, often appears in projects which, owing to the authority of their natural progress of their designers, are confusing and work against the natural progress of constructional technique.

Thus, two recently criticized structures, Eero Saarinen's TWA terminal and Joern Utzon's Sydney Opera House, are eloquent examples of the most open antifunctionalism in statics and construction, a consequence of the arbitrary nature of their forms, which clearly run against the laws of static construction.

One can easily imagine the brilliant feats of calculus, technique, and the waste of materials which will be necessary, even if they succeed, without substantial formal and other modifications, in keeping them standing.

The increasing importance of supporting structures requires that architectural criticism keep in mind, by separating them, the two fundamental aspects of every large work—the structural body and the architectonic spirit—and that judgment of constructional statics be based on a certain minimum of competence.

It will then be seen that, in by far most cases, the technically best structures intrinsically possess all the elements for also becoming excellent architectonic expressions. END