New era in architecture?

Recent articles in some of America's leading periodicals have suggested that a new era in urban architecture is upon us. With the completion of major design competitions in Houston, New York, Portland, Louisville, and Chicago, architects and architectural critics alike are urging the public that the urban decay that has been variously attributed to Federal urban renewal programs, improperly designed urban tax structures, and incoherent zoning regulations has ended. Mayors, corporate chieftains, city planning commissions, and local business and citizen leaders are being told by the doyens of the contemporary American architectural community that the worst excesses of the International Style are behind us. Ideas such as the glass box, the reach to greater heights as an end in itself, and the search for a new kind of American architecture have been discredited by the public that the urban decay that has been variously attributed to Federal urban renewal programs, improperly designed urban tax structures, and incoherent zoning regulations has ended. Mayors, corporate chieftains, city planning commissions, and local business and citizen leaders are being told by the doyens of the contemporary American architectural community that the worst excesses of the International Style are behind us. Ideas such as the glass box, the reach to greater heights as an end in itself, and the search for a new kind of American architecture have been discredited.

It is hard to understand how America's architects can believe what they are saying. Not one of the major designs completed in the last six months (Helmut Jahn's 82-story Southwest Bancorp/Century Development Corporation office tower in Houston, the Philip Johnson and E. H. Ford tower on Madison Avenue in Manhattan, Michael Graves's 240-room building in Louisville and his municipal office structure in downtown Portland, Oregon) evidences any understanding of the fundamental flaws in American architectural thinking over the past fifty years.

John Houston's creative license more of the Third Reich than does of lesser-fame Texas the combination of side lighting, a vaguely neoclassical base and a black-and-white color scheme are reminiscent of some of Hitler's wilder speculations about post-war Berlin. Johnson's New York creation, while cognizant of the oppressiveness of yet another tall building in Manhattan, is really nothing more than a 1930s design streamlined, pitched up some 60 floors, and capped with the backboard of an 18th century English bed. Graves's conceptions of the modern urban structure are squat panel constructions that have all the makings of a birthday cake decoration: the one successful (or, at least, interesting) use of this sort of style would be the Torre Velasca in Milan, Italy. These three architects and their designs are representative of the continuing American tradition of unimaginative and brutal punctuation of urban skylines.

Since architecture has such a fundamental influence on the ambience and, therefore, success of major urban areas, it is not foolish to ask whether architects in the United States have demonstrated any originality or civic sensitivity in their work since the days of Frank Lloyd Wright. They have not; the school of thinking that has prevailed in this country since the 1920s has been almost totally derivative from the socialist Bauhaus movement in Weimar Germany and Le Corbusier's urban fascist idealism in France during the same time and later. Architectural geniuses like Wright, John Portman (creator of the spectacular Hyatt Regency hotels), Edward Durrell Stone, and Eero Saarinen (of Kreege Auditorium fame) have been systematically ostracized, ignored, and mocked by the holders of this faith, by gentlemen like Walter Gropius, Johnson, and E.M. Pei '40. As was the case in the fields of physics, history, and music, any sort of an attempt at creating a new tradition of Western architecture or speculating about the perfect city of man was stymied by the insistence on the part of American architectural stasis.

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