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Students demonstrating in 1968 at Columbia's Low Memorial Library

Architecture: 'Legacies' Of an Era at Columbia

By PAUL GOLDBERGER

WE oppose stylistic and empty form-making. We oppose architecture that is whimsical, or for fun. We do not believe that the goal of architecture is to produce buildings as works of art."

Thus read a portion of a manifesto produced by a group of students at Columbia University's School of Architecture in 1967, just a few months before their entire university was to become enveloped in massive radical upheaval. The manifesto, which was published in a now-defunct Columbia publication called *Touchstone*, summarizes an attitude toward the making of architecture that seems completely at odds with the philosophy prevalent in architectural schools today. In the radical 1960's students rejected esthetics and sought to shift their profession's focus toward social concerns; now, they seem more inclined to do the reverse, to celebrate the making of pure form that has no justification save for its abstract beauty.

The dramatic change in attitude was the subject of a symposium last Saturday at Columbia's School of Architecture, entitled "Legacies of a Radical Era: Architecture at Columbia, 1968-80." The session's subject was far more than Columbia University, and it was far more than architectural education: it provided a keen focus for the dramatic shift in priority that has occurred throughout much of the architectural profession. It is a shift from broader, societal concerns to more personal ones, and it parallels changes in other professions, such as law, where alternatives from traditional methods of practice that had been sought by young lawyers in the 60's seem now to be replaced by a willingness to join conventional law firms.

'A Special Moment'

What was perhaps most remarkable about the symposium at Columbia was how few of the participants, faculty members and students alike, seemed inclined to praise the status quo. The radical upheaval of the late 1960's — which affected Columbia's architecture school dramatically, leading to a sharply revised curriculum intended to better reflect social concerns — seemed to be viewed with an almost nostalgic air by many of the speakers, who bemoaned the attitudes prevalent today.

"The 60's are thought of as a special moment, but the issues raised then go on today," said Max Bond, the New York architect who has taught at Columbia since 1968 and has just been named chairman of the architecture faculty. "Inequality goes on, urban decay goes on, architectural issues unrelated to human need go on. What has changed is our attitude — we feel that these things are less critical now."

"I find myself now more conservative than my students," said Tony Schuman, who received his architecture degree from Columbia in 1970 and now teaches architecture at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. Mr. Schuman worked actively with community groups in East Harlem when he was a student, offering not design skills but technical assistance in such areas as housing-rehabilitation projects and landlord-tenant relations. "I am a housing activist, a social activist," he said.

Romaldo Giurgola, the distinguished architect who was chairman of the faculty at the time of the 1968 upheaval, recalled that the architecture faculty had registered an official protest at Columbia's decision to erect a gymnasium in Morningside Park, one of the events that sparked the disturbances. "The whole question of 1968 was the emergence of an urban consciousness," he said. "The legacy of 1968 calls us as architects to become aware of different cultures, of different ways of life. The idea of pluralism is very important to it, but today that word has been translated into something totally insignificant, something that means no more than esthetics."

The participants in the symposium included faculty members, former students who, like Mr. Schuman, were actively involved in the radical movement, former students who were less active, and also recent graduates to whom the entire event is no more than ancient history. The latter group seemed almost lost at times; one of them spoke of the difficulty of getting a job in today's employment market, and another talked of the need to create an elegant portfolio of drawings to enhance employment possibilities, concerns that seemed a world apart from those of the radical era.

The conference's unspoken theme, if there was such a thing, seemed to be a sense that the pendulum had swung too far — that the architects who are influencing students today, designers such as Michael Graves and Robert Stern, to cite two whose influence is apparent at Columbia, are excessively predisposed toward esthetic concerns. These two architects' work tends to be more directed toward the solving of esthetic problems than social ones, and where it comes to esthetics, they reject the austere, formal tradition of modern architecture in favor of a more decorated style that makes frequent reuse of historical, even classical, forms.

"Post-modernism," the label frequently applied to this style of historical allusionism that has lately become fashionable, was seen by Mr. Schuman as diametrically opposed to the architectural approach favored in the 60's. He recalled that the modern movement in architecture in the early decades of the 20th century had put great emphasis on social concerns, and he juxtaposed its utopian attitude with what he considered the somewhat more self-indulgent approach of many current practitioners.

Austere Towers Also Criticized

It is an age-old struggle, of course — architects have always battled over whether their mission was to create art first and serve social needs second, or the other way around, and the prevailing judgment seems usually to reflect the overall temper of the times. But the irony of Mr. Schuman's admiring references to modernism is considerable, for it was in rejection of the very sterility and indifference to human need of much modern architecture that many radicals argued back in the 1960's. The cold towers of a red-brick public-housing project were a central target of the revolution among young architects, a symbol of how the architecture profession had, in their eyes, failed in its social responsibility.

But these same austere modern towers have also been the target of "post-modernists," who complain not only of the modern buildings' poor social workings but of their stark esthetic, which they feel inadequately satisfies another kind of human need. The young architects of the 1960's looked at the modern tower and saw a social failure; those of the 80's seem to look at the same thing and see an esthetic failure.

The Temper Is Now Romantic

Both are right, of course, and both reactions emerge out of larger currents of their times. What we tend to notice today is what the red-brick tower looks like, not how poorly it serves its occupants. For now, in all fields of culture as well as architecture, the temper is romantic and conservative; form is what seems to matter most, not content, whereas a decade ago content seemed to be everything. It is a mood that is at best introspective and at worst self-indulgent.

It is not likely that such yearning for the values of the 1960's as was seen at Columbia could have been expressed even a couple of years ago, and if there is anything to be learned from it, it may be that it indicates that the pendulum has indeed gone too far, and that we may well see a reaction in the coming years, a move against the set of values that holds that a work of architecture is no more than an esthetic object. Perhaps the message of last week at Columbia is that the romanticism of the last few years, itself a reaction against the ardor of revolution of the 1960's, may be beginning to ebb.