MODERN ARCHITECTURE AND THE REBUILDING OF CITIES

The following opinions by Peter Blake, managing editor of ARCHITECTURAL FORUM, were presented at a panel discussion, the second of a series sponsored by the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, Chicago, 1961. We wish to thank ARTS AND ARCHITECTURE for permission to reprint this portion of their coverage of the symposium (February, 1962) and we appreciate Mr. Blake's willingness to be quoted.

I am delighted to find that Philip Johnson thinks the chaos of cities is delicious. I also note that he lives in splendid isolation in the middle of a forest about 50 miles from New York, where I happen to live. As a matter of fact, about 70 per cent of all Americans today live in towns and cities. They live there in environments that are so squalid, so offensive, so foul as to constitute a national disgrace. There are a great many political and economic factors that have contributed to the squalor. There is, for example, the fact that we have never developed a consistent land policy. Unlike water and air, land is privately owned and subject to wild and unrestricted speculation. As a result, no builder of an office building or an apartment house can afford not to cover every square inch of the site with great blocks of steel and concrete, without regard to neighboring structures and other people's needs for open space. There is also the fact that buildings have become machines for making money, and quite legally so. This, I believe, is the first time in the history of mankind that the criterion for success of a building has been its financial return. No civilization has ever been created that way, and no civilization ever will be. And there is finally the fact that the kind of power which built Paris and Florence has passed. Political power has been diluted by popular democracy and economic power by the income tax.

So as we face the prospect of vast super cities, extending uninterrupted from Boston to Washington, from San Francisco to Los Angeles; we have planning commissions without a shred of authority—and this may be a fine thing. We have buildings created merely because there is a bigger profit in making buildings than in making buttons. And we have architecture being shaped not by architects but by tax accountants and mortgage bankers. All this I think is true more or less. But we are concerned tonight with architecture and so I want to ignore these depressing facts and talk about what architecture could, but does not always do, to improve this mess in which we live.

If architecture is anything at all, then I think it is order. If architects were responsible to the crisis of chaos then they would be talking and practicing order above all else. Alas, a good many of them are doing nothing of the sort. Instead of practicing order, they're playing with mud pies; they're creating splinter groups; they're practicing hucksterism. Just look for a moment at all the big and little movements we've had in architecture since 1945. We've had New Empiricism, Regionalism, Romanticism, Neo-classicism, Brutalism and even Chaoticism. We have grilles, and shells and domes and vaults and arches and zigzags. We've had action architecture and symbolism—and what symbolism! There have been oysters and eggs and whales and turtles—and some of them exhibited even at the Museum of Modern Art. And we now have a whole new repertory of symbols which I, for one, will not discuss in mixed company. In short, a great many of the best known architects have been concerned primarily not with statements about order or with the creation of lasting values. They've been concerned instead with making statements about themselves and with being different. And they've been most concerned with being different before any of their competitors could beat them to it by being even more different.

The result is that the image presented by modern architecture today—and you can see I'm beginning to slip into huckster language myself—is an image of chaos. Architecture is not, as it should be, the public conscience of our cities. I don't believe we should really blame the architects for becoming so greatly concerned with being the firstest with the mostest. They're not the only ones. Painters who still paint like the late Jackson Pollock are considered passe; after all, he used paint. I predict that very shortly there'll be an exhibition on 57th St. in New York of nothing but blank walls. And a famous critic will give this movement a resounding new name—inaction painting or Non-painting. We already have non-music, of course. A gifted composer who is very fond of headlines recently performed his latest work, a composition which consisted entirely of four-and-a-half minutes of silence. Some say it was his best work. And so it goes until finally we have Non-architecture. Not the creation of lasting values, but the deliberate creation of shock effects. Not the creation of monuments to order and sanitation, and possibly even to a better world, but the creation of sensations that will make headlines, at least until the next mud pie hits the headlines.

I've concentrated upon a very small but a very vocal and well advertised segment of American architecture and ignored those many architects who have consistently stood for order. It seems hardly necessary in this city of Sullivan, Burnham and Mies, and on this particular campus, to point out how powerful a moral force for order architecture can be. I can only tell you that since the Seagram Building has been built in New York, every building has been judged by its standard. It may be that architecture is a moral force that cannot long hope to save our cities. Indeed, I doubt very much that it can. But if architecture becomes the plaything of a frantic fringe, then I am certain that our cities are doomed.

Later in the discussion Mr. Blake observed that: one of the problems with city planning is not only that we tend to segregate different functions of the city into different areas, but we also segregate different parts of planning and allocate them to different departments. I believe that the man in charge of planning New York City's highways has never talked to the Planning Commissioner of New York City, so that there is a vast high-
way program which is about to string spaghetti all around City Hall, and the Planning Commissioner has never looked at it. This will surround a great complex of new buildings for which there is no master plan. So you have not only a great number of planners, you've got all kinds of planning specialists all fighting their own little battles—one building highways to make it possible to see the waterfront, another one building plazas which no one can reach without getting run down, and someone else building apartment houses with great recreation areas in which children get waylaid.

—Peter Blake

Also participating were:

Ulrich Fransen who had a little to say!
Paul Rudolph who had less to say!
Philip Johnson who said almost nothing!

BOOK REVIEW

THE DEATH AND LIFE OF AMERICAN CITIES, OR WONDERFUL TOWN REVISITED

Remember the Movie, My Sister Eileen? It was later adapted into a smash Broadway musical, Wonderful Town. Both told of the wonderful adventures two girls from the middle west had when they moved into a Greenwich Village basement. Because their only window looked out on the sidewalk, their virtue remained fairly well intact from onslaughts by everyone from the Brazilian Navy on down to the neighborhood wolves. Now this theme has gone full circle and been adapted into a book again. The book is called The Death and Life of American Cities, by Jane Jacobs. Miss Jacobs, an enchanted resident of Hudson Street, in the western part of the Village, may well have been technical advisor on the movie too, for in her book there is a little number called “Ballet of the Sidewalks” that would be a natural for Jerome Robbins. Here children skip and play on the sidewalks, “neighborhood characters” sing out their lines like “Mrs. Moscowitz, there’s a package by the delicatessen for you,” while benevolent truckers guard the children from “outsiders” and chomp on their hero sandwiches, in a nice folksy way.

All this might lead one to believe that the book is just more heart-warming entertainment, and if you’re a slum lord, Robert Moses, or a speculative builder, it’s probably even more than that. However, it’s not supposed to be just that; it purports to be an attack on the gospels of “conventional planning” as laid down by Ebenezer Howard, Lewis Mumford, Catharine Bauer, and a whole host of other arch villains. For once, the movie was better than the book. This ponderous volume can best be catalogued as the latest in the current fad of writing pseudo exposes of current dangers to “our way of life.” Advertising men got theirs in The Wastemakers, suburbanites in the Split Level Trap, the Status