notes on readings

In examining the virtual barrage of architectural books which has bombarded the profession and the public since 1945, it would be worth while to pause for a moment and somehow to assess this phenomenon. In merely analyzing the titles of these many publications it is apparent that they fall into three rather distinct groups. Probably the largest number of these are the purely technical studies, addressed exclusively to members of the architectural profession or allied fields. These books discuss problems such as acoustics and new structural systems, and outline various solutions which have been arrived at for various building types: motels, parking garages, schools and the like. Although books of this type contain a certain amount of text and occasionally mathematical formulas, they are primarily picture-books, and as such they have obviously replaced the office files of old, which held drawings and photographs of Classical, Medieval or Renaissance buildings which could serve as sources of "inspiration" for the eclectic architecture prevalent in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The second group of books are popular picture-books basically addressed to the lay public. These picture-books of houses and other buildings carry on a long tradition of such publications, a tradition which in America reaches back into the eighteenth century. As in the more technical books, textural matter is of little importance and probably is very seldom read. The story is told almost exclusively with dramatic color or black and white photographs and accompanied by only a minimum of architectural drawings. This reliance on photographs and the consequent exclusion of writing is the one facet which distinguishes these books from similar publications of the nineteenth century. These popular picture-books are obviously geared to the time-worn slogan, "a picture equals a thousand words."

The last category of contemporary books on architecture are critical and historical studies of architecture, past and present. Needless to say, the number of books published in this area is extremely limited, and even of the few which are finally published there are, perhaps, only a dozen or so which are worthy of serious attention. One does not have to search out the reason for the limited quantity of critical studies of architecture in obscure nooks and crannies. The dearth of such writings is due to the general lack of intellectualism which seems to pervade our contemporary American society. It is unfortunately a rare individual who has been trained to comprehend and critically appraise any such studies. Yet, long after the technical publications and picture books have fallen by the wayside, the significant critical studies of our contemporary architectural scene will retain their value through their essential significance and vigor.

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Whether we really like to admit it or not this general lack of intellectualism has had a tremendous effect on our architectural scene. One outcome of this has been the influence of photography on architecture. It is not at all unlikely that in future years men will look back on our present architectural scene and label it "photographic." A large percentage of our current buildings seem to be designed not as places to live or to work in, but as objects which will appear at their best in a photographic plate. Even in those organic buildings which basically deny the importance of the camera are presented in our publications by photographs which have been taken from certain positions and angles that under normal circumstances would never be seen, even by the architect himself. A new client, then, has arrived in the architectural scene, and this client is the photograph, printed and circulated in our many national and regional books and magazines. Perhaps in the end they who have said that "a picture equals a thousand words," are correct, but in architecture they have been proved correct in a sense far different from what they had ever envisaged.

It could be suggested that a creative and human orientation for architecture might better be served by the media of the word, spoken and written, for in the end, there is less likelihood that one would confuse the needs and goals of the language of words with the language of architecture. — David Gebhard

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