

Has success spoiled modern architecture?

BY ROBIN BOYD

Modern architecture, like nearly everything else in this age, is in crisis. At the precise moment when its principles have reached their greatest power and public acceptance thus far, so many new elements have been flooding in, so many innovations, experiments in structure, and crosscurrents of ornamentation, that the principles themselves are in serious question. (Nuclear physics, with its embarrassment of new "fundamental particles," is in an analogous fix.) Until some new unifying principle for modern architecture is worked out there will be a furious fermentation and debate, which FORUM will cover from time to time as some compelling issue is well stated. The following article, by an articulate Australian critic, makes a good beginning.—ED.

Any revolutionary movement changes its character after the decisive insurrection has been won. No one would go so far as to suggest that modern architecture grew as coarse and corrupt as George Orwell's pigs after it gained control. Nevertheless, success has changed modern architecture, though not immediately in a way that was noticeable on the surface to its supporters. Gone with the hot eyes and manifestoes was the brightness of the white light in front.

The simplicity remains. The love of industrial processes and the attraction of mathematics are as strong as ever. But the spirit of the architecture is transformed, the motivation and the disciplines are so altered, that only sentiment stops most contemporary architects from denying outright the masters of the early twentieth century. Already with a terrible air of self-righteousness they have renounced functionalism and practically the whole rationalist philosophy on which it was based. Yet the manner of their renunciation is interesting. It is not yet fashionable to admit purely esthetic motives. Grilles are justified on the grounds that they reduce air-conditioning loads—as tail fins stabilize a car. Nor is it popular yet to embrace symbolism publicly and un-selfconsciously. Churches shaped like fish are said to get that way inadvertently. . . .

The only article of faith which the new modern architect can state with any fervor is that functionalism was not enough; it was materialistic, narrow, dull, even undemocratic, because it reduced man to a sack of flesh and bones and denied him psychological demands, let alone spiritual aspirations.

Furthermore, the old argument which cites a rose or a cat or Miss Universe as evidence of the involuntary beauty of functional design is spurious pseudologic. Granted that a perfectly functional thing may automatically be beautiful, architects are not God, nor

even Mother Nature, and they have only a fraction of the knowledge required to duplicate the natural processes of creation.

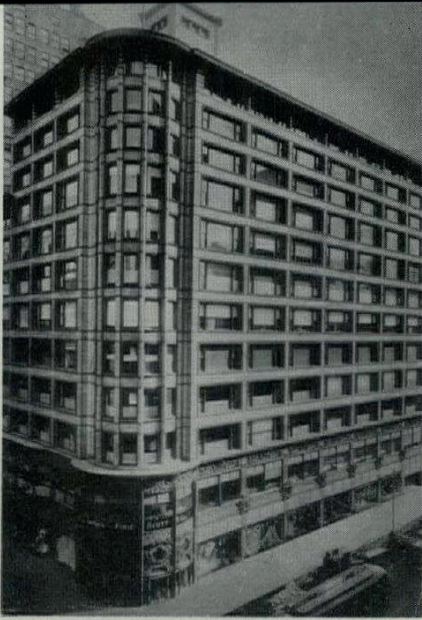
With these arguments (and more emotional ones) a conception of functionalism was demolished. But whether it was really the original conception or the best interpretation is another matter. In fact, what the new modern demolished was a myth of an architect who designed purely to suit functions, and then deluded himself that the un-gainly result was rapturously beautiful. Such a man is rare enough in architectural circles (if more familiar in real estate) at any time; certainly he was not to be found in De Stijl group or at the Bauhaus. The early masters of the *old* modern did not fit this image for three reasons: 1) They were no more obsessed with the desire to satisfy the physical demands of their clients than any other reasonably conscientious architects. 2) They were about as concerned with appearances as any architects can get. 3) Most importantly, their concern with appearances was not esthetic.

Now, in these heart-warming days of McCall's and Billy Graham, it is hard to reconstruct the thoughts of a less-righteous period when there was more questioning about the nature of goodness, and reality seemed more important than beauty. In the battles fought by Sullivan and Behrens and the little Loos army, the opponent was not dull and callous commercial utilitarianism, but estheticism.

Early modern was against the esthete

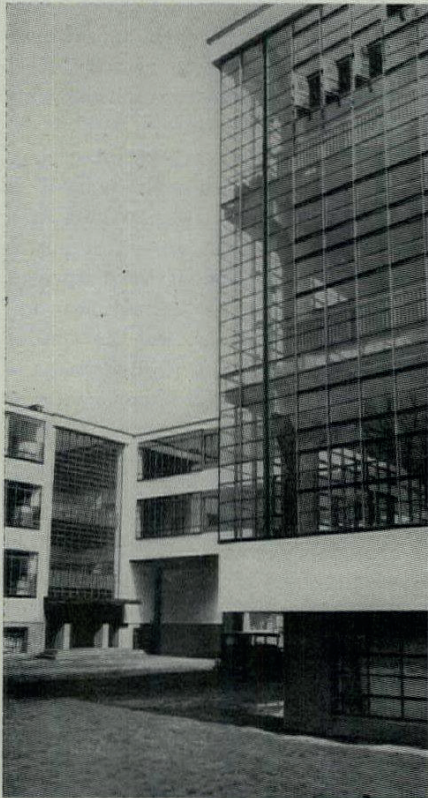
Though Sullivan built some decorative buildings, what really mattered to Sullivan was not the beautiful diversions of his ornament but the realities beneath it, the "ten-fingered grasp of things." The arch-enemy of the European pioneers was the esthete.

Looks were important to the early moderns, of course, but not what



"What really mattered to Sullivan was not the beautiful . . . ornament, but the realities beneath it." Schlesinger-Meyer Department Store in Chicago, Ill. Designed by Louis Sullivan and built in 1900.

"The aim of the old modern was clear and unconfused"—Bauhaus buildings in Dessau, Germany, built in 1926 by Walter Gropius. "But as time went on . . . the discipline became merely a nuisance—especially restricting and irritatingly austere in a rich, expansive era."



COURTESY "WALTER GROPIUS," BY S. GERSON

would be called good looks. They wanted the look of a functioning thing, the look of a naked, guileless thing. They wanted in seeing to be intellectually convinced of the necessity of every part of the thing. They knew of nothing smaller than an architect who thought he could improve on the necessary minimum. And on this concept of physical necessity they built up a moral code for building, demanding "honesty" in expression of functions, "truth" in construction, and "integrity" in the whole—the first secular architectural theory in history.

Here is the crux of the whole situation in architecture today. The classical esthetic code, for instance, was pagan, with its exacting gods of orders, proportion, and ornament, which would sanction almost any delinquency if they were appeased. *Present-day* architecture on the other hand is moving toward theism, without concern for a moral code but sustained by a blinding faith in the unerring rightness and self-justification of one god: Beauty. But the very idea of any sort of deification was anathema to the early moderns, who were brothers of the religious rationalists. They may have been agnostically unable to describe the actual shapes into which their architecture would eventually turn, but they would have snorted at the thought of introducing a mystical riddle to cover the unknown.

There was nothing new in the old moderns' demand that every building show integrity, wholeness, and devotion to its own idea; every architectural or esthetic code requires as much. There was nothing new in "truth": some of the maddest excesses of the Gothic Revival were done in the name of Honest Architecture. Even the application of science to design was as old as Pythagoras. Indeed, the past was littered with mathematical and geometrical systems intended to guide the designer from plan-shape to proportioning. There was, in short, nothing of world-shattering novelty in the old moderns' theories of design practice. What *was* revolutionary was their concept of principle, of the aim and the end of design. For the first time a definable goal was substituted for the indefinable qualities hitherto referred to as "delight" or, with varying de-

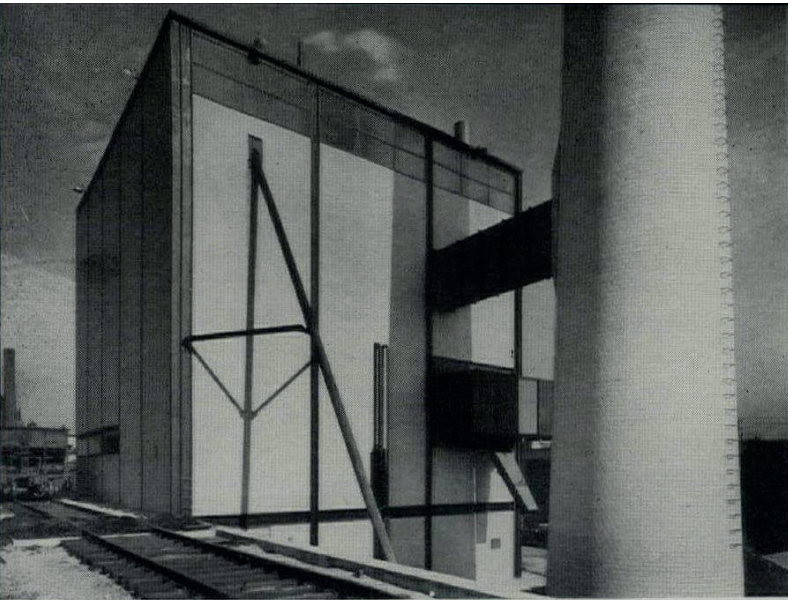
grees of unctuousity, as "beauty."

Functionalism promised much more than cold, articulated efficiency: it held a beacon up there at the top of the hill at the end of the road. For if architecture were eventually able to serve every physical need of man with scientific purity and exactness (while understanding and obeying precisely the physical laws of matter), then it would succeed in identifying itself with creation; or, if you like, architecture would merge into the cosmic pattern—not directly but through man. When that day came, fashion, taste, and style would slough off, and pure architecture would stand alone, the supreme art of man. Along these lines the materialist philosophy promised ultimate exaltation, which raised it from the level of the time-and-motion studies and made it a religion—like atheism.

How early modern was abandoned

Every architect in every new design had the opportunity to push a little closer to the ultimate in physical perfection. The aim of the old modern was clear and unconfused. And because of this the discipline along the way was accepted without question. But as time went on and a lot of the practice within the discipline turned out to be concentrating on the more mundane aspects of creature comfort—much of it something less than inspired—architecture gradually lost sight of the beacon at the end. Then the discipline became merely a nuisance—restricting and irritatingly austere in a rich, expansive era. Gradually the code was broken.

The glass box—basic unit of functionalism—sought ways of making itself not more suited to housing the human frame but more interesting, more pleasing to the hedonistic eye. The box began adding fascinating textural effects, gift wrappings, artwork at the entrance, and water, water everywhere. The irrelevant formality of the symmetric revival spread out from New Canaan. Shell structures took on extraordinary forms as architects sought to make them not more related to human activities but more evocative or more fun, like abstract sculpture or mud pies. Thus the new modern grew up, seeking to win back the attention of the wavering eye, seeking to enchant, to uplift, to excite,



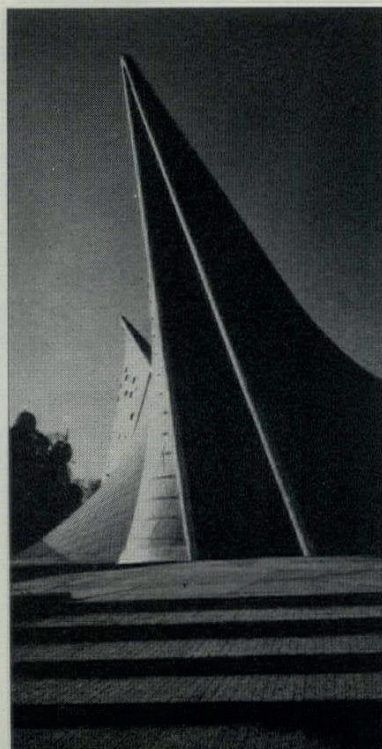
HERDRICH BLESSING



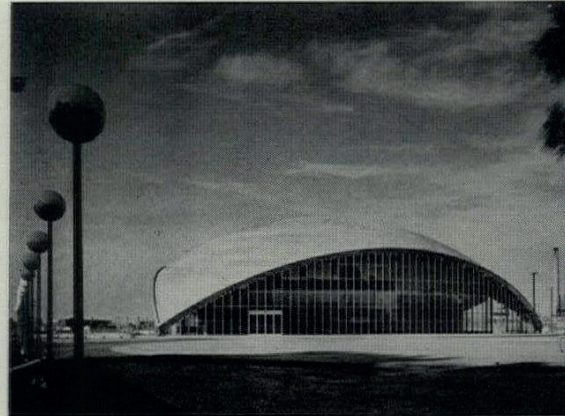
© EZRA STOLLER

"The early moderns . . . knew of nothing smaller than an architect who thought he could improve on the necessary minimum . . . [but] gradually the code was broken. The glass box . . . sought ways of making itself . . . more pleasing to the hedonistic eye."
 Top: Mies van der Rohe's "early modern" heating plant for I.I.T., 1950. Below: Philip C. Johnson's own house in New Canaan, Conn., 1948, "new modern."

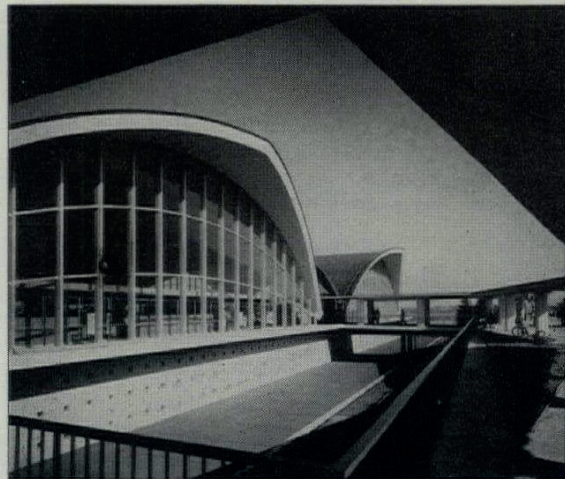
"Shell structures took on extraordinary forms as architects sought to make them not more related to human activities but more evocative or more fun, like abstract sculpture or mud pies." Right, reading clockwise: MIT Auditorium by Eero Saarinen, 1951; St. Louis Airport by Hellmuth, Yamasaki & Leinweber, 1955; Flint Center Auditorium, Michigan, by H. E. Beyster & Associates, 1958; and the Philips Pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair, by Le Corbusier, 1958.



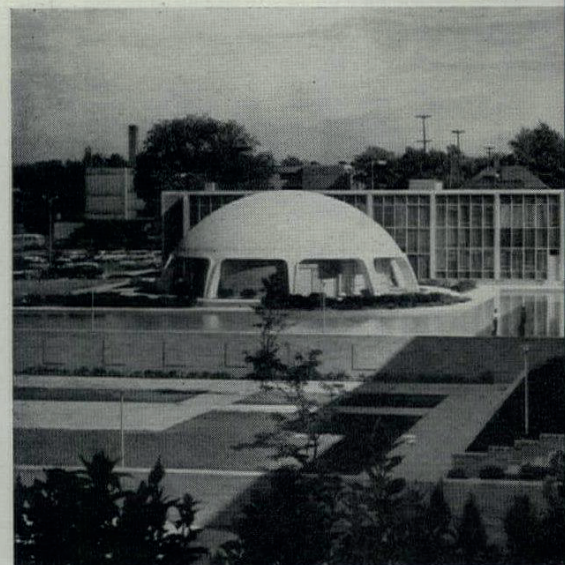
GRAHAM WARRINGTON



© EZRA STOLLER



© EZRA STOLLER



LENS-ART

to create the Kingdom of Heaven here and now, suddenly, by intuition.

This is not to suggest that architects have now revolted against all disciplines. On the contrary, only the over-riding central conviction is gone. Minor private disciplines and personal dogma under the broad umbrella of the beautiful aspirations are as numerous as ever. The shell gymnastics are still kept in bounds ethically as well as physically by the engineer's mathematics. Mies van der Rohe tightens his own disciplines continuously as he moves further away from functionalism.

When Edward Stone's ornamental effects get more intricate and frivolous it is usually a sign that his formal discipline is most rigidly foursquare. To the discipline of symmetry the purist new modern adds the discipline of proportional systems. Some adopt universal formal disciplines like the Golden Section or the square and apply them willy-nilly. Others prefer to select a particular formal discipline for the job in hand—a cylindrical tower, for instance, if there happens to be a few historic cylindrical forts in the neighborhood to act as inspiration.

Lost among the shells

The new architecture is not short of disciplines, nor of explanation and instructions along the road. All it lacks is a main signpost. The disciplines in force are all more or less expedient, all more or less individual, sophisticated techniques for reaching up to—to what? What is there to replace the old moderns' functional ethic and the firm conception of an ultimate goal of physical perfection? What is the aim of architecture, anyway? What are architects seeking among the shells?

The new architecture will not be tied down to a definition of its goal. It is inclined to get vague and evasive and to rely eventually on a semimystical paraphrase of Vitruvius' somewhat insipid definition of the architect's artistic aim: "pleasing effect." Wright, of course, continued to the end to see organic architecture as a clear white light, but his explanations of his vision, proud and poetic as they may have been, were not really much more helpful to others than when Edward Stone quips "I'm a fall guy for beauty." And when Saarinen demands

that a building should be "all one thing" he is stating a point of artistic discipline but not committing himself to an architectural faith.

The new modern is not yet prepared to confess that it has forsaken practically all the old principles, but rather hopes to retain a selection of them while readmitting richer visual delights. If it hopes for anything at the end of the road, it hopes to find a universal key to a beauty which might one day hold all the works of man in some sort of noble esthetic spell. This is so fundamentally opposed to the old moderns' concept of fitness and appropriateness to the task that it constitutes a revolution back to mysticism.

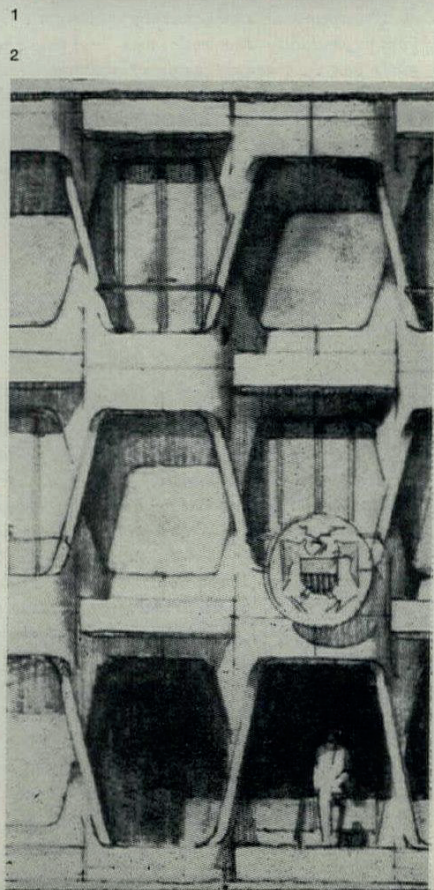
The new modern will argue that this is overstating the case—that there is nothing particularly mystical about beauty, hard as it may be to define. But if the word is not mystical, it is at least muddy, and unqualified for leadership. Expressions like "beauty" are widely acceptable only while they are allowed to remain enshrouded with mist. As soon as they are analysed and described in concrete terms the sense is narrowed so that all meaning is lost to the poets in the audience. Beauty is a private secret; it cannot be a target. Any attempt to pin it down invariably finishes with some stifflingly inflexible dogma like William Hogarth's "completely new and harmonious order of architecture": his rule of maximum variety, which finally reduced to "one precise line, properly to be called the line of beauty." The better the formula, the more fixed is the one expression on the pretty face of architecture.

Today the unsophisticated disciplines are gone and the old goals fail to beckon; and nothing much can be done about it. The whole artistic temper is very different now from the days when architecture had to kick free of patently false eclecticism. Moreover, the intellectual rat race is faster now. Everyone would like to be a one-man avant garde.

To be sure some details of the moral code of the early twentieth century were limited in relevance to their particular time and place. Nevertheless the sensible, sensitive, and concrete aims were timeless. Perhaps one of these days overindulgence in shell fish will upset the new modern sufficiently to make it pause and remember.



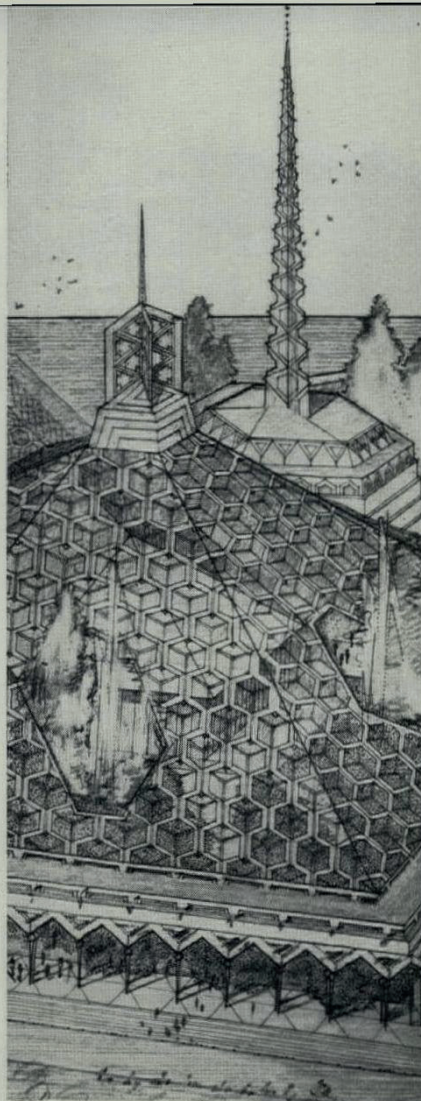
BAITAZAR KOBAB



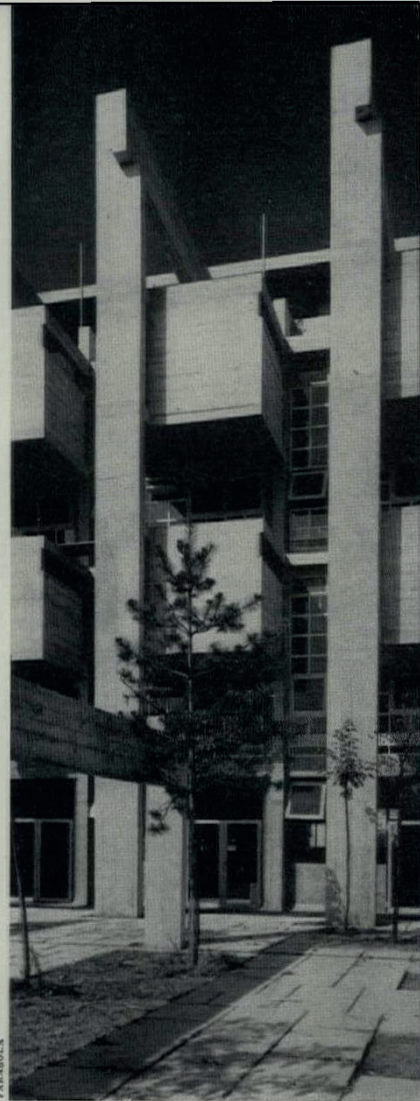
"Minor private disciplines and personal dogma under the broad umbrella of beautiful aspirations are as numerous as ever. . . . The disciplines . . . are all more or less expedient, all more or less individual, sophisticated techniques for reaching up to—to what? . . . The intellectual rat race is faster now. Everyone would like to be a one-man avant garde. . . ."

Six different interpretations of "beauty": 1) decorative use of structure by Architect Yamasaki at Wayne University, 1958; 2) plastic structural elements designed by Architect John Johansen for U.S. Embassy, Dublin, 1958; 3) refinement of steel cage by Mies van der Rohe at Crown Hall, I.I.T., 1955; 4) organic cellular structure becomes integral ornament in Frank Lloyd Wright's proposal for Arizona State Capitol, 1957; 5) brutalist use of raw concrete in Milan boys' home by Architect Vigano, 1958; and 6) Eero Saarinen's "search for form" as exemplified in Hockey Rink at Yale, 1958.

3



4

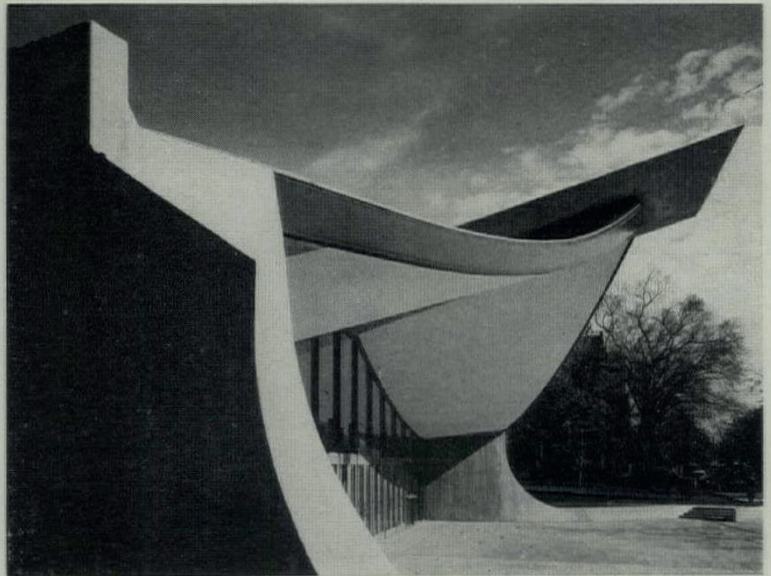


5



HEDRICH-BLESSING

P. E. GUERRERO



6