

*Leonardo Ricci—  
Is Involvement Enough?*

Dear Editor: Your comments about Leonardo Ricci, and about his "involvement" (AUGUST 1960 P/A), are pertinent. When has anything worthwhile been done *without* unreserved commitment on the part of the doer? With this I am in total agreement; but the results, in the present case at least, suggest that involvement alone is not enough. What is wrong?

Can it be that the direction of his involvement is wrong? I have long suspected that a preoccupation with painting theory at the expense of a concern with building construction problems and human needs hinders good design. Has it not been the case throughout history that the closer the designer was to the spirit of his time and to the technical problems of building, the better was the work? Witness what evidence we have of prehistoric dwellings, medieval Romanesque and Gothic churches, Cotswold cottages, Swiss chalets, early American architecture, plus anonymous barns and country houses everywhere.

With a few exceptions, whenever theories of painting or archeology have intruded themselves it would seem the architectural standard has declined. This preoccupation with painting may be one explanation of Ricci's work. While he says, "I think we must get away from the bizarre, the experimental, from the urge to be original at any cost . . ." his work seems to this distant observer to exhibit just that tendency. It looks typical of what is being done in so many parts of Europe and by "advanced" architects all over the world as Tom Creighton reported in his article. Tom also says, "No one can deny that he is a

creative person," and this may be, but how do his buildings differ from all the other mannered designs which try so hard to be "interesting"?

I say that there is too much "interesting" work being done and too little with that appealing human trait—modesty—so rare in most of us but so often found in the greatest men—Einstein, Schweitzer, Gropius. Nor does modesty preclude verve. Look at Maillart's bridges, the hill towns of Italy, the Swiss houses around Schwarzenburg, Albini's "Museum of the Treasury of St. Lawrence" in Genoa, Maybeck's work in Berkeley, and many other examples.

How do we get away from this tendency? The best statement I know is that remarkable last chapter written by E. B. White for "The Elements of Style." Let every young architect read it—substituting the proper architectural words for grammatical terms—particularly the paragraph where the author has just said, "No idiom is taboo, no accent forbidden; there simply is a better chance of doing well if the writer holds a steady course, enters the stream of English quietly and does not thrash about.

"But," the student may ask, "what if it comes natural to me to experiment rather than to conform? What if I am a pioneer or even a genius?" Answer: then be one. But do not forget that what may seem like pioneering may be merely evasion, or laziness—the disinclination to submit to discipline. Writing good standard English is no cinch, and before you have managed it you will have encountered enough rough country to satisfy even the most adventurous spirit."

How many of us use the old materials properly, to say nothing of the new?

FRED BASSETTI  
Seattle, Wash.

Dear Editor: I read Fred Bassetti's letter and wish to comment further on your article. I like its emphasis on Ricci's spirit and energy rather than his architecture. This is obviously the point. This energy and enthusiasm about his work, his conviction, comes closer to what is noble in a man and is perhaps therefore more capable of creating great architecture than the more humdrum eight-to-five architects of little conviction, those who are apt to drift with the usual architectural-magazine bill of fare, and the cliché.

I have little interest in what a magazine thinks of a man's work. Even in a publicity-conscious, publicity-guided, togetherness-clotted society a magazine fulfilling its duty as reporter should call attention to work being done, attracted

or guided by variety and seriousness (humor included), rather than modishness or monetary worth. Your article added a perspective which, like Ricci as a person, is refreshing. Grading his architecture from A to X either by you or by me does not matter one good-goddam. Better to remember those words of Rilke, "Works of art are of infinite loneliness, and with nothing to be so little reached as with criticism. Only love can grasp, hold and fairly judge them."

DONALD M. FROTHINGHAM, JR.  
Seattle, Wash.

Dear Editor: Leonardo Ricci in his "involvement" follows man's most productive tradition. His concern with the whole of life compels admiration.

It is easy to carp and criticize. While I am not attracted to portions of Mr. Ricci's architectural philosophy and even less to the results, I certainly affirm with you his right to say and do as he believes. From your article it is clear that he would be a stimulating and vital individual to know.

When you get down to the meat of any architectural matter—the buildings—there is again demonstrated the weaknesses of the split painter-architect personality.

I must add the empathy "involved" in sliding down the Bellandi handrail does smack of brutality. I realize I am laying myself wide open on this one! As for presentation, I have always found lacking those articles which illustrate predominantly the exterior of things and which ignore or give minimum shift to interiors and plans. In Ricci's story you show thirteen exterior photographs to three interior photographs (two of these quite small) and no plans whatsoever. This method of presenting architecture is by no means exclusive with your magazine, but it is one to which I do not *subscribe* (shattering word for any publication!).

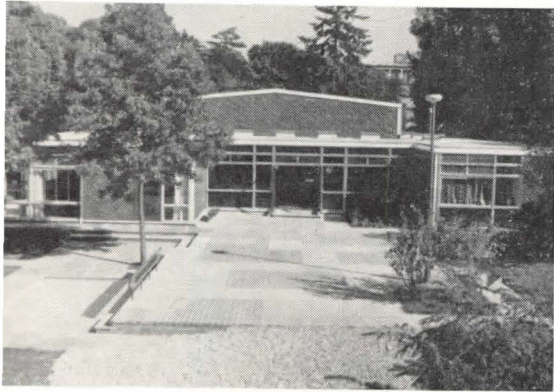
ALFRED BROWNING PARKER, FAIA  
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*We had the same anxieties about sliding down the Bellandi handrail, but Ricci points out that a slide down that balustrade might lead to a sorry end at the bottom of the cliff. For the more practical purpose of climbing the stairs, he tells us, the projecting uprights afford an excellent grip.* Ed.

*In Milano—"Home and School"*

*The current Milan Triennale, which follows (or attempts to follow) the theme of "The Home and the School," has at-*

tracted much criticism. Principal exhibits are a house erected by Alcoa and a British prefabricated school. In the following letter Professor John G. Grace of Tulane University, who has spent the past year abroad studying schools, gives us his impressions of the exposition.



Dear Editor: It is pretty much to be expected that old Triennale hands will find Number 12, already dubbed a "flop" in local circles, a bit of a disappointment. It is only fair to state that it must have taken courage on the part of the committee to turn its back on a sure thing and deliberately strive to turn the attention of the public to the solution of more basic social problems.

The previous "fair type" Triennales, housed in pavilions which put the delightful gardens of the Parco Sempiano to good use, emphasized national trends, interior design, furniture, etc. This year the Italians, with only two important exceptions, confined themselves and their guests entirely to the remodeled interior of the Fascist neo-classical Palazzo dell'Arte. The only two buildings actually erected, the British school and the U.S. home, both making use of prefab systems of construction, by their very nature come closer than most exhibits to offering clear-cut interpretations of this year's theme.

The former, completely landscaped and furnished down to the last item for opening day, has created something of a sensation. In a country where cost of construction and speed of erection could play an important part in the implementation of any school building program, it is no accident that this exhibit has stolen the show. It is to be hoped that the Alcoa home (not completed at this writing) will be as confidently assertive. Unfortunately, where the British elementary school is literally typical of many already built and in use today, the benefits of industrial production as realized through prefabrication of modu-

lar components and mass purchasing remain largely theoretical as far as the American home-buyer is concerned. Is it perhaps accidentally symbolic that whereas the school whose *in situ* (job-poured) floor-cum-foundation slab rests firmly on the ground (no matter what contortions the ground may be subject to, such as subsidence due to mining, earthquakes, etc.), the U. S. home, presently perched on wobbly concrete piers, has to have the ground shoveled in around it.

The big question is how successful the current Triennale as a whole is in developing and exploring the theme it has set itself. Certainly the architects for the remodeling and planning of the exhibit space have been skillful in devising an "itinerary" full of interest and contrast in volume and lighting. Raising the whole floor of the main exhibition to the level of the existing window sills enables the visitor to walk round and peer downwards into the various apartments and classrooms, which have been furnished according to location—whether designed for the country, the suburbs, or more central areas within the city itself.

Just how successful these exhibits are in themselves as progenitors for an ideal environment is open to question. About all one can say is that the nearer one got to the center and the more money (for some reason) one had to spend, the more ghastly did the furnishings become.

As for the vast display of architectural drawings comprising a personal show of eight Italian architects on a rotational basis, none but the most avid student is likely to devote the hour necessary to discover who did what and separate what has been done from what is "projected"

Of the various countries participating with ground floor exhibits the more positive contributions were made by Mexico, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, and Switzerland. Most of the other exhibitors merely nodded in the general direction of either the home or the school without apparently being aware of anything beyond or in between.

For those who demand nothing more from a Triennale but more of the same—only different—this one may seem to be a flop. But the fact seems to be that Italians are "Triennale-minded;" boys seem to bring their girl-friends as a matter of habit. Perhaps the Triennale is one way to make people aware that the shaping of an environment demands more than pretty furniture. It must be seen in the wider context which links town planning at one end of the scale with interior design at the other. This

may be said to be a good start in a positive new direction.

JOHN GRACE  
Wimbledon, England

### *Intuitive Design—Another Advocate*

Dear Editor: After many years of "suspension"—designing axially-stressed structures—it was a source of great consolation to me to see that these same concepts were so correctly understood by the students at Columbia University, as evidenced in their designs for an Industrial Display Pavilion (AUGUST 1960 P/A). And, all the more so since, as guest critic, the writer refrained from offering architectural suggestions and only assisted the students in clarifying structural principles.

Concerning the motives impelling intuitive structural design, Professor Zuk in the same issue has contributed an illuminating companion discussion based on a profound philosophical comprehension of these motives.

As a "down-to-earth" constructor, I would like to re-emphasize that there must be a clear understanding of the physical laws governing structural behavior in order to create designs of architectural validity. That no training in higher mathematics is required to attain such knowledge has been stressed in a previous discussion (FEBRUARY 1960 P/A). Of particular interest is the section of Professor Zuk's discussion on "The Forces of Structure," as it throws light on the behavior of a homogeneous-section beam stressed beyond its elastic limits—in a phase beginning at the first appearance of cracks and concluding at total collapse (DECEMBER 1957 P/A). Within this phase, ever increasing forces—beyond the ultimate elastic strength that the material is supposed to provide—appear to be needed in the continuously reducing sectional areas, so that when they are combined with smaller and smaller arms they can still produce a balancing resisting moment permitting the beam to be still in service during this phase. A similarity between the concluding equation synthesizing statics in this phase,  $P1 = cd^2$ , and Einstein's equation for energy,  $E = mc^2$ , would suggest that a strength of nuclear order is developed during the concluding stage of the beam's life. Professor Zuk's reference to the electromagnetic forces governing strength of materials, however, may lead to the correct approach to this problem. Communications regarding the writer's shortcomings in his attempt to contribute a solution to this problem would be welcome.

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