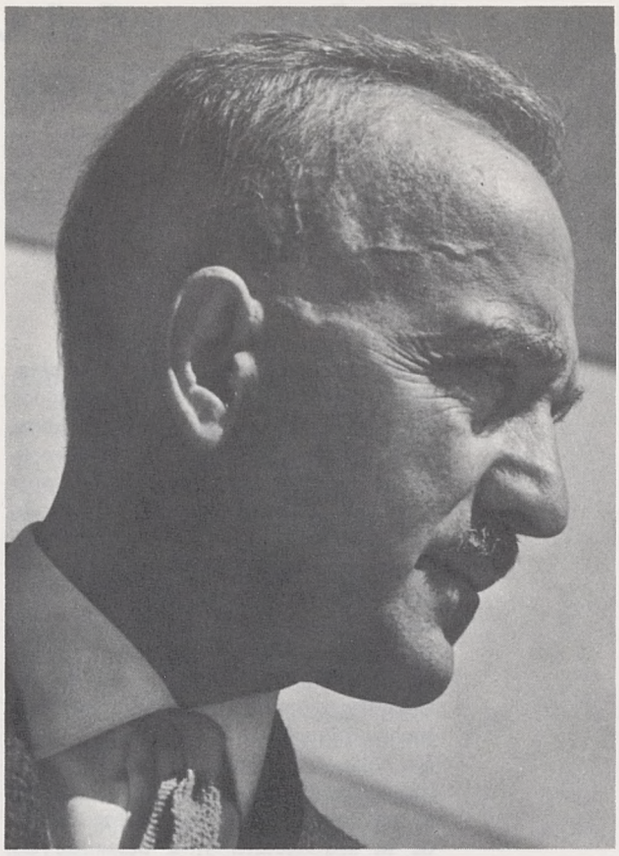
Aba Elhanani, Tel Aviv



Architecture in the Maze of the Plastic Arts

In the same way that many strange and varied definitions exist for the term Art, so also have various definitions for the concept of architecture become crystallized.

Ruskin argued that architecture which does not include decoration is nothing more than construction. Ruskin's stability on this point might well be checked. Surely, this is the same Ruskin who so hankered after craftsmanship and the arts and crafts, the valiant fighter against the slogan of art for art's sake, and the sworn enemy of all who claimed that art is the antithesis of practicality?

From this we may quite easily derive that Ruskin places architecture in the honoured category of the arts and crafts.

Because he appreciated and preferred these works above art itself, Ruskin saw architecture as the pinnacle of artistic expression—the Mother of Arts, so to speak.

This classification of architecture as one of the arts and crafts is decidedly legitimate. A man who builds boxes for the storage of clothes is called a carpenter who, if he excels in his workmanship, is known in many languages as a master carpenter (Meister in German, Master in English). In the same vein, he who builds boxes for people to live in and does so with outstanding skill is entitled to be called master builder. Whether either of these boxes can be considered as art will depend upon the taste of the critic and of the onlooker.

It is a fact that the primitive constructions in most countries and of many periods are included in the broad range of architecture. It therefore seems almost pointless to argue whether the work of a contemporary engineer, simple as it might be, should or should not be considered as architecture.

As far as this writer is concerned, he is prepared to make the definition that every *planned structure* belongs to the realm of architecture, and the differentiation between construction and architecture is neither realistic, practical nor possible. (Obviously, it is still possible to differentiate between good or bad, exciting or depressing architecture, but such differences are purely subjective and are liable to change in accordance with the tastes of the times.)

At present, the idea of all-embracing or generalized architecture seems unacceptable, and the opinion held by Ruskin which classifies and differentiates between architecture and construction, persists.

From all the various inaccurate definitions and explanations on this point it becomes clear, one way or another, that architecture is a sort of 'building + . . .'. For the purposes of this essay, let us accept this definition since it offers no tangible change. What the aestheticists term 'building unworthy of the name of architecture', is in my opinion simply architecture of lesser value. The disparity between Brunelleschi and a contemporary builder in his village is no greater than between Giotto and a primitive painter who decorated a humble chapel in some remote southern hamlet.

Let us therefore, for the time being, agree on the formula: Architecture = Building + X.

Plus what? And here we tread on thin ice. If a structure is not completely architectural in quality, and some added 'spices' are required to make it so, whence shall they be taken? It then becomes clear that they must be drawn from either fields of sculpture or painting. Naturally, it would be a lot easier to claim that the art of architecture is independent of the arts of sculpture and painting and lives rather in the company of music, literature and suchlike. But such a classification would be difficult to prove for the claimant for the selectivity of architecture.

If one discusses three-dimensional design, one must accede that this artistic department is already held by sculpture. And if one searched for the specific in the first half of the formula, something from some other department would have to be added to the work of construction.

By sheer force of logic, the way leads one to relegate architecture to the departments of Industrial Design, and to see in the house an industrial product which, like many similar products, can be 'artistically' designed. A house, after all, is a 'box' for dwelling in; a church a 'box' for praying in, etc.

"We too, the architects, are capable of shocking public opinion"

And here, uncomfortably enough, we find that the whole profession becomes relegated to a secondary department within a different though new profession which has inherited much from arts and crafts and for which a bright future is predicted. And here, too, the whole of architecture becomes but a department secondary to the motorcars or washing machines of which there is such a wide range of fashionable models.

Is this shifting of architecture to the departments of industrial design a vision of the future, or is it the precise description of today's reality? Should the latter be the case, we had better learn something about industrial design!
Before the makers of the Ford motorcar (or any other make, for that matter) can produce their car, they must take into consideration a whole list of functional requirements, such as the comfort of the driver and his passengers, security requirements, the workings of the various mechanisms, heating, cooling, etc. Let us further keep in mind the complex mechanical installations, for here the industrial designer requires much talent in bringing about a correlation between the makers of the engine and the makers of the various mechanical accessories. Above all, the maker of a motorcar has to concern himself with the marketing appeal of his article, since he is obliged to compete with other makers in his own country and abroad.
It would therefore appear that, by comparison, the role of the architect is much simpler. He has but few competitors, and when it is a case of speculative building, rivalry in the same town or village is even more limited, while he benefits from the advantage of the site. And when it concerns a 'house on the river' or a 'house opposite the Opera' or some other luxurious palace, competition is even more limited, and the builder for the 'Tobacco King' will only vie with the builder for the 'Whisky King' or 'Denture King'—in other words, members of the same income bracket who can afford to squander so and so many legitimate tax-deductible millions.

In this perspective, the architect seems like a country doctor as opposed to the industrial designer planning *next year's* car body, who in turn looks more like a sophisticated professor.

We must not ignore the argument that the comparison lacks relevancy, as a car is much more short-lived than a house. To this we can reply that houses are not included in the list of industrial designs, at any rate not the longer-lasting houses. Truth is that the only pre-eminence of building design over industrial design is that of prestige. The very prestige having its roots in the illustrious history of architecture. The fact remains that the designing of this article called 'house' or 'building' has earned a specialized discipline, whereas all other articles, from the iron and the toaster to the 700-seat jet plane, come all under the collective heading of 'industrial design'. And therefore, architecture has the one outstanding advantage of its ancient and aristocratic origin, and its traditional distinction of being 'One of the Arts'. (We may add a further advantage, lifting architecture out of the community of design, i.e. its relatively recent marriage to the profession of town planning. As this marriage has yet to be officially sanctified, and does not directly concern the subject here discussed, we shall not enlarge.)

The advantage of architecture's noble birth is confronted by the tactical advantages of industrial design. This is a new, energetic profession which has already proved its mettle and resourcefulness (at least on sight!). This tactical advantage over architecture can be compared to the notorious advantage of an enterprising class of newcomers over the settled aristocracy basking in the glory of a past that is no more.
In the manner of degenerate aristocrats, we hasten to withdraw from this doubtful kinship with the upstart profession of designing, and seek shelter in the company of the childhood friends, painting and sculpture.
It is of course possible to claim a natural though ancient relationship between the visual arts, architecture, painting and sculpture. It is even possible to point at a reciprocal influence in both directions between painting and sculpture on the one hand, and architecture on the other.

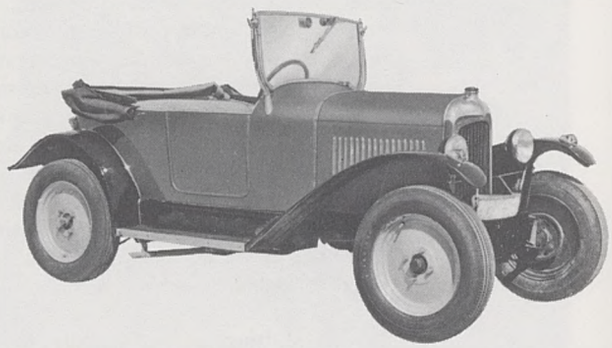
There are those who say that architecture sets the tone. A new fashion appears (how?), and within a short while, the entire entourage has undergone its influence, as if architecture determined the trends in the other arts. It could be called 'architectonization of environment'. It suffices to look into a Gothic church with its vertical lines and rows of slender pillars joined together in exactly the same way as the folds in the saints' robes in the Gothic statues.
Those who say that it is architecture which starts new cycles, therefore say that it is architecture which every few decades creates a new form, a new image or 'Gestalt'. As for Gothics, it is difficult to determine who came first, but today it is easy for us to ascertain that the 'aerodynamic' forms of Saarinen's terminal at Kennedy Airport were inspired by cars, planes, irons and other 'aerodynamic' accessories. Here, a very gifted architect attempted to translate 'technical' shapes into the language of building. People will come and claim with some measure of justice, that the 'aerodynamic' car or even aeroplane do not derive their shape from purely aerodynamic requirements, but that here the shape of futuristic arts has been implanted in a commercialized stainless steel edifice of great attraction. Thus or otherwise, this perplexing process formed, in fact, the image of our era.
According to scholars like Wölfflin[1], painting preceded architecture during Renaissance. And Wittkower[1] proves, on the strength of Raphael's sketch-book, that during Baroque too, architecture followed painting. But let us advance to the beginning of this century. It is obvious that paintings from such artists as Piet Mondrian or Theo Van Doesberg had a great influence on architects, famous and others.[2] We have already mentioned the inverted influence of architecture on painting and sculpture, and many are the examples of the mutual influences of the arts.[3]

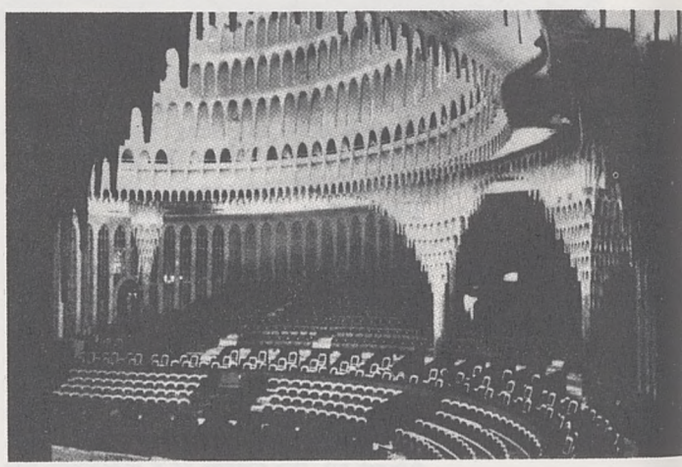
[1] *Heinrich Wölfflin: Renaissance and Baroque. Rudolf Wittkower: Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism.*
[2] *It is interesting that the opinion prevails, that the entire 'Stijl' group was influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright's first exhibition in Europe, in 1910.*
[3] *There is plenty of proof of the relationship between music and architecture, starting with Rudolf Wittkower's claim that the architects of the Renaissance built their façades on the normal relations of musical consonance, and up to Erich Mendelsohn's sketches which he called 'Bach Toccata in C Major', etc.*

. . . suffice it to compare a jet plane to a motorcar from the beginning of the century, and compare these two with a Poelzig theatre of the turn of the century and a Scharoun theatre of the fifties . . .'

«... il suffit de comparer un «jet» avec une voiture automobile du début du siècle, puis de les comparer tous deux avec un théâtre Poelzig des environs de 1900 et un théâtre Scharoun des années 50...»

«. . . es genügt, einen Jet einem Auto des Jahrhundertbeginns gegenüberzustellen und sie dann beide mit einem Poelzig-Theater vom Anfang des 19. Jahrhunderts und einem Scharoun-Theater aus den fünfziger Jahren zu vergleichen . . .»





All these examples prove that there was indeed a strong relationship between architecture and its offspring ('architecture—mother of the arts') but it is hard to disregard the feeling that this relationship, at least during the Renaissance, was the result mainly of the very identity of the artists, painters, sculptors and architects. In those days, the architect was also a painter and/or sculptor, so that this ideal symbiosis became natural.

But if we go deeper into the matter, and start separating the architecture of a Renaissance palace from its pictorial and sculptural decorations, we shall be perplexed. The proportions had been laid down by rules common to architects, painters and sculptors. The architects of those days needed but simple manipulations of the established laws of proportion, and had little to manœuvre between architectonic accessories not less hallowed such as the arch, the pillar, architraves, etc.

But what are these accessories if not traditional sculptural elements that have little or not changed since antiquity's classical days.

It would be interesting to meditate on the causes why Renaissance, when the sciences bloomed, contributed less to constructional innovation than the Gothic era which, as is well known, lagged behind in scientific progress.

And this meditation brings to mind a strange but significant phenomenon, i.e. that our present era, so rich in unprecedented scientific advance, has not brought forth a revolution, let alone some real progress in the field of building technology, as compared to the general technology which is racing ahead. Suffice it to compare a jet plane to a motorcar from the beginning of the century, and compare these two with a Poelzig theatre of the turn of the century and a Scharoun theatre of the fifties.

We can be even more emphatic by comparing Rome's Coliseum with New York's Lincoln Center. The technological difference astonishes by its insignificance.

In the twentieth century, all the accessories that, with minor interruptions, have served architecture so well during nearly two thousand years, were eliminated.

Apparently, a revolution was taking place which carried the promise that architecture would become an independent creative field. It looked as if architecture, in the twentieth century, would build for the sake of building. Only, the inferiority complexes towards the other arts of the initiators of this revolution became even more accentuated.

It may not have been purely coincidental that, at the very moment of a revolutionary change in architecture, at the dusk of one era and before the new trend was fully born, abstract art made its apparition. It would be wrong to say that it was born then, for Islamic art, and all the arts and crafts, have been abstract for centuries. But at the turn of the century, this natural and obvious means of expression became a legitimate trend in painting and sculpture. Abstract art as such won recognition, and such high priests as Kandinsky, Klee and others were accepted in the galleries.

Of course, certain difficulties cropped up. It somehow did not seem decent to sanctify an existing ancient art such as the modelling of pots and bowls and other utensils. Therefore, the new term of 'significant form' had to be invented. This term became extremely convenient to the amateur theoreticians of the new architecture, who started speaking of: 'Architecture is above all an art, and only as such will it produce significant forms.[1]

Thus, Le Corbusier and Gropius demanded the integration of the arts with architecture, and attempts were made by the Bauhaus to educate towards 'artistic architecture'. No more attention is devoted to the quality of the materials, what matters is the expression of form. The borderline between painters and sculptors disappeared, and architecture became for them an ideal profession to borrow from, a solid basis for abstract art in all its variations. Cubists, constructionists and elementivists drew 'architectural façades' which were flat compositions (Mondrian) originating in designs from the language of modern architecture.

This tendency grew even stronger under the influence of Cezanne's theories, who spoke of *constructing a painting* and called basic geometrical shapes 'building blocks' of painting.

[1] *Le Corbusier.*

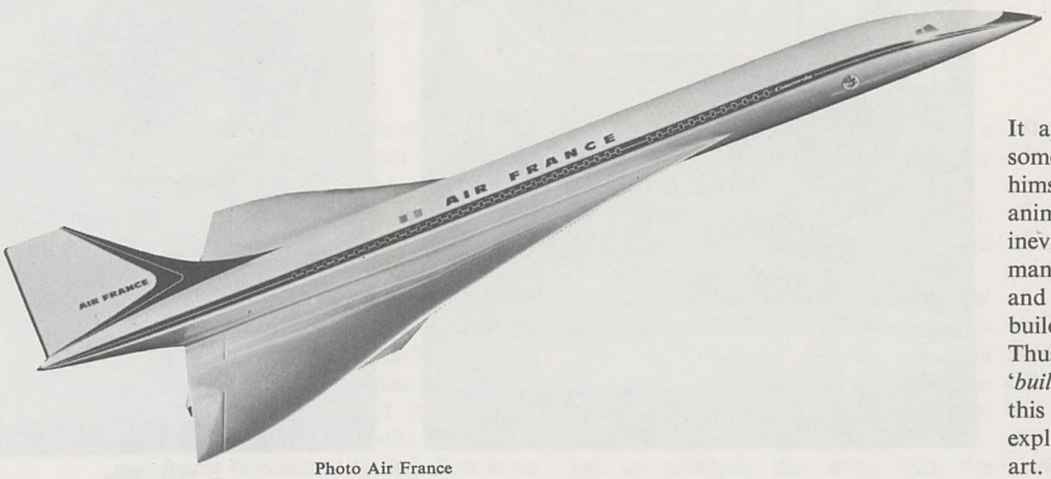
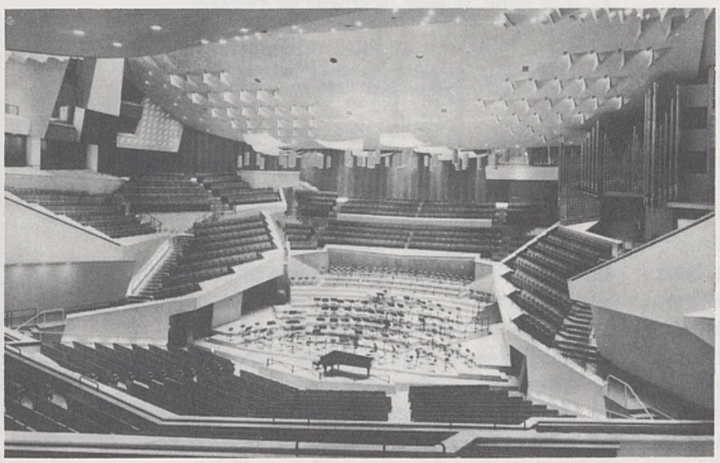


Photo Air France



The influence on modern architecture was substantial, although so far no study has been made on the depth and nature of this influence.

Such theories, superficial though they were, caused an absolute chaos in the thinking process of a generation, a confusion the fogs of which have not yet dissipated.

It was the Bauhaus that turned architects into building sculptors. The integration of the arts led in the beginning to the elimination of every ornament or sculpture, as the entire building was supposed to be a perfect sculpture. As against the group of architects seeking salvation in the 'significant art', one of their leaders declares laconically that 'he does not recognize the problems of form at all'[1] Here starts the procession of all the avant-garde 'isms', which I do not intend to enumerate. (Neither do I rule out the possibility that some new 'isms' may make their appearance, or disappear, by the time this essay is printed.)

[1] *Mies van de Rohe.*

Such a list may be found with Pevsner, Ruchards Banham or Collins. We are more interested in the Gordian knot that has been tied between architecture and the arts, a knot more crooked and dangerous than all the knots that linked the arts throughout history.

This danger has many faces, but the most serious, perhaps, is confusion. The building ceases to be a shelter for man or his activities, and becomes an object for manipulating with forms. Let us quote Prof. Collins: 'A building as simply an object in space, instead of as a part of space.'

The attachment to painting and sculpture becomes even more difficult at the beginning of the second half of this century.

Painting's, and particularly sculpture's drawing nearer to architecture at the turn of the century is better understood against the background of their relinquishing figurative or thematic art.

It appears that an artist always needs some association. The moment he weans himself of all association with the animal, the vegetal or the mineral, he inevitably falls back on associations with man's handiwork, the most prominent and largest of which, obviously, are buildings.

Thus the sculptor becomes a constructor, '*building* architectonic forms'. Possibly, this compulsion for association may explain much of what goes on in modern art. The fact is that pure abstractionism cannot exist, even less feed the creative imagination of the artist. The artist needs associations. Suffice it to mention the abstractionists, starting with Braque and Picasso at the beginning of this century with their collages, up to today's pop art. All kinds of familiar material went into the collages, from newspaper clippings to household utensils, building debris, parts of machinery and even toilet bowls.

This association with objects from daily life combines nicely with art's claim in general, and modern art's in particular, to be linked to the present, to life of our time and its daily problems. Only, the philosophy of art is a post-mortem philosophy.

Most of this philosophy is created in the wake of developments, a sort of analysis of 'why did they do it' carried out not by the artists themselves but by critics and thinkers.

Generalizing, we may say that the philosophy of art is one of the weaker sides of every modern philosopher, be it Cassirer, Russell or others.

Militant artists such as Kandinsky, Klee or Picasso also tried their hand at developing philosophic theories. It becomes evident that these meditations, part philosophic and part poetic, are not always fit to be included in the discipline of philosophy, and may be more appropriately related to such other disciplines as psychology or letters. Here we discover the wishful thinking of the artist, which more often than not is just naïve thinking.

It therefore appears that the artist creates mainly with the instruments available, with a sensitivity sharpened towards the environment and the subconscious gift for the interpretation of environment through assimilation of greedy impressions and permanent associative inspiration. There is nothing new in this talent and these teachings, they have always existed.

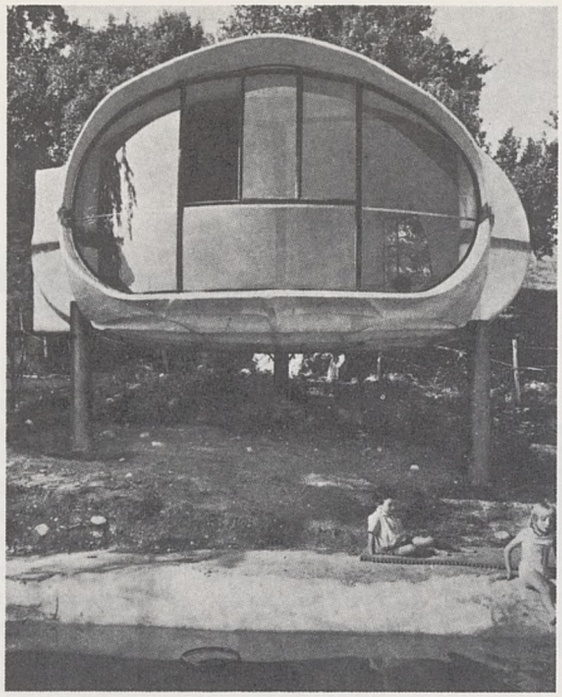


Photo Wyss

'. . . truth is that the only pre-eminence of building design over industrial design is that of prestige . . .'

«... à la vérité, la seule supériorité du «building design» sur l'«industrial design» est celle du prestige...»

«. . . die einzige Überlegenheit der Hausgestaltung über die Industriegestaltung liegt in ihrem Prestige . . .»

Velasquez interpreted his milieu, the Spanish Royal Court, by showing the contrast between the Infante's sumptuous garments and their degenerate faces; the modern artist will do the same thing by using scrap and shaping it into menacing amorphous masses.

The multiplication of 'isms' is explained by the development of communication, including mechanization, as well as the glut of publications which acquaint the Belgian or Pakistanian artist with jet-speed with the latest creations overseas.

This is explained by the enormous social confusion, the 'liberation', the 'advent of the era of universalism' or suchlike. The fact is that we have been flooded, in this century, with 'isms' and 'arts' at such a speed as can only be compared to the changes in the fashions of clothes, hairstyles or motorcars.

An even better comparison is obtained when recalling that fashions very often return, albeit under a different name, provided that we do not repeat them after a short interval of 2–3 years, but borrow from a somewhat earlier period.

This is exactly what happens to painting and sculpture. Just as the crinoline dress may become the *dernier cri* in 1970, it may also come to pass—and we can already see the first signs of it—that painting portraits in the realistic style à la Dali or à la Da Vinci, will be considered up-to-date in 1970. Except that in such case, it will not be *dernier cri,* but *avant-garde*.

Maybe this sounds like destructive criticism of the pick of today's creations, but on the other hand it may be just plain stating of facts from which far-reaching conclusions can be drawn, *not necessarily condemning*. Perhaps these excited, sickly, nervous searches are indispensable for understanding our times and their turmoil.

Here is the moment to return to architecture. In this cauldron of changing styles in painting and sculpture, the architect must do something. Our union with the plastic arts demands that we too dance the modern steps that but yesterday invaded the ballroom (and leave it tomorrow?).

Only, in architecture it is hard to move with such speed from 'ism' to 'ism', from brutalism to sensitivity to neo-plasticism to . . . who knows whither.

When we shall become tired of the 'isms', their place will be taken by artists—architects whose 'style' will be proclaimed the style of the generation . . . for two or three years.

We shall no longer crown a Corbusier for 40–50 years, but rather take a Louis Kahn for three years, and after him crown Kenzo Tenge or Paul Rudolph. If not a new style, then at least an idol for a while, and if this idol can lecture or write (confused sentences concealing the absence of original thought, at times any serious thought)—so much the better!

But the important thing the architects demand of the painters and sculptors, is the very freedom to change their ways every few months or years. And also the freedom and courage to revolt against tradition, and confront the public with unconventional, daring, monstrous creations and proclaim that 'this is it'. In this respect it is interesting to read Louis Mamford's arguments on the adverse influences of painting on architecture.

Painting and sculpture are deeply involved in it, for it is interesting to look at even the most complex works of a talented artist, and we do not mind at all if he is deranged (this may even be in his favour!). But the position is different in architecture. The architect does not wish to lag behind the artist, and tries to follow in his steps. First he revolts, sheds convention and tradition such as the burden of rationalism in architecture that started in the twenties.

Why functionalism? Who said that a building must be comfortable? Where is it written that a school must look like a school? All the conventions that were sacrosanct in the twenties, thirties and forties become very soon antiquated idols to be smashed.

We too, the architects, are capable of shocking public opinion, be it with hideous forms or anti-aesthetic art, or with a mad prima-donnaism expressed in shapes, suggestions or budgets. If we build a house that is difficult to dwell in or the use of which is torture, we can always claim, as do the painters and sculptors, that lack of comfort, or worse, only serve to illustrate to the consumer the nature of our times, wars or nuclear bombs!

Here becomes evident the essential difference between architecture and all the other plastic arts. Architecture does not have to express the social schizophrenia and the crisis in faith in the same manner as can be done, nay, must be done, by painting and sculpture, poetry and literature.

Architecture interprets its era first of all by the application of engineering and technological know-how on the one hand, and by creating physical facilities appropriate to the specific activities of the era on the other.

It is obvious that the tastes of the period, its aesthetic urges, will also find expression. And if we refer to our time, methinks that its aesthetic image is expressed, for better or worse, by industrial design—the automobile, the iron and the aeroplane.

I believe that Le Corbusier's brutalism in concrete, with all its pathetic beauty, does not further modern architecture. On the contrary, it hampers and paralyzes it. For if we can attain results in textures and forms (significant forms) there is no need to search for technological improvements. For just as Picasso introduced African art into Cubism, a future Le Corbusier may discover say Polynesian architecture and turn it into the ultra-modern legitimate trend of the 21st century. It is the bitter truth that building technology lags decades behind every other industrial advance.

Suffice it to say that building technology has not progressed since Gropius of the Bauhaus. It looks as if we are too deeply concerned with manipulating forms, to deal with the problems of new materials or new methods.

The outlook of architecture differs from that of any other art. Let us quote Martin Buber who says: 'The principle of architecture is nothing but the humanization of space. Architecture is the ancestor of all the plastic arts. It heralds their birth, and they live in its shadow. They submit to its authority, to the extent that they are relegated to the museums when civilization declines, and remain there in all their splendour but separated from their roots. But the structures from which they have been detached do not share their exile.

Of all the plastic arts, architecture alone stands in the full reality of human life. This is natural to architecture which, unlike the other arts which create patterns in space, is not theoretical but opens space itself and creates forms in it. Therefore, beholding a building is different from beholding a painting or a sculpture. You are in front of a cathedral, no matter whether at the façade or some other part thereof, and take in only as much as can be taken in in this way. All you obtain is but a hint of the entity of the edifice. If you desire more than a hint, you have to pass through the building, inside and outside, and cover all the component parts of this mighty creation with your very feet as it were, until all your senses merge and become a single insight into the entity of the building.

Architecture requires a specific scrutiny. It requires an observing grasp and synthetic beholding.'

As against Buber, let us recall Bauhaus' Moholy Nagy's definition of architecture: 'A preference of methods and materials in a given spot'. This is an excellent definition, but doubtless not satisfactory in today's world of fashions.

Let us conclude this essay with the opening theme, the essence of the profession. Is not the formula: Architecture = Building, without the additions, sufficient?

Are not the requirements of the house, the building, not sufficiently comprehensive in order to answer all the questions?

Is it not enough that we ask from ourselves that we plan buildings suited to their purpose and comfortable, expressing their functional essence and giving us a feeling of satisfaction. Let us also add the obligation to execute all this to the best of today's technological know-how in order to improve the operation and lower the cost of production.

This definition sounds utterly prosaic and reactionary. But methinks that some 'reactionaries' the world over should dare to become the real avant-garde.

Such an avant-garde might at last restore architecture to its rightful place where no travesty of fashions prevails, but continuity through progress is assured.