

North American 'Pop' Architecture
The Victory of Mediocrity

The facade is really a Roman invention. It covers a modest structure with rich, and many times undeserved, pretensions. Roman society itself was, in many ways, a cultural facade. Its architecture only echoed their cultural modes. What I want to talk to you about here, however, is what is commonly called 'Pop' architecture and in its most famous, or infamous, North American guise. It has been celebrated in North America by figures as diverse ^SMarshall McLuhan, Robert Venturi and Tom Wolf, and deplored by equally famous North American cultural critics. Anyway that you look at it 'Pop' architecture is an actuate manifestation of cultural values in my society. Before too many of my colleagues from other countries or other political persuasions get any ideas that this paper will be a typical anti-American tirade, let them think again. Much of the modern architecture that I have seen in Europe, both East and West, certainly would fit the 'Pop' mode nicely, whether it is a faint echo of their own past national glories, or a blatant copy of a North American 'original'. I see little difference between a rather bad quasi-Parthenon, housing a ministry of culture, and a MacDonald's hamburger stand, as I have recently seen, overlooking a canal in

Amsterdam.

This brings me to another point before I take up my main task. In the meetings of this organization that I have attended thus far I have heard very little of what I would call criticism and much of what I would call blatant propaganda. Perhaps, to be fair, as I said last year at our meeting in the German Democratic Republic, it isn't only that we speak many different languages, but we differ in what we mean when we use words like art or criticism. To me, criticism means to be critical and where I am the most critical is my own backyard or culture.

In Europe, before the victory of Christianity, in the period commonly called the 'Dark Ages', the nomadic tribes of the time carried their riches, generally jewels and the like, with them from place to place. It was only when the church began the building of their cathedrals with their eyes toward Heaven and a need for permanence do we see a change. Only in societies that believe in their own everlasting future do you see this building for permanence. Witness Egypt and Greece as well as early church architecture. Even Roman architecture, notably the Pantheon and the Colosseum, despite their facades and the best efforts of the barbarians to tear it down (they lacked the simple technology to destroy such structures), stands today. Today in North America we build gigantic buildings that dwarf the ancient's work, yet rather than being built to last an eternity, they are designed

with a life-span of twenty years or less. History in the sense that I like to think about is to be around the things that remind me of my past; not my personal past, but the past of mankind. Perhaps that is why I am interested in Art History and Criticism, but what kind of future is there going to be for the human race without a past - only a present, or, at best, some kind of a nostalgic rehash ^{IN A} ~~of the past~~ Disney World style?

I began this paper with some thought about the idea of facade and perhaps I should return to this theme in its modern context. All of the buildings that I am showing you are on a single strip of highway leading into central Winnipeg (Canada's fourth largest city, located in the centre of the prairies in the province of Manitoba and my home for the last five years) from the suburb of Fort Garry. This road, as many in North America, became more and more valuable real estate as more and more middle class people fled the city centre for suburbia where, at least, they could own a home with some property and avoid, at the same time, the pressures of the city. Of course this is not only happening in North America, but to a large extent much of Europe as well. But what has happened in North America, more so than here in Europe, is that the exodus of the middle class from the city centres has left in its wake a dead city. Mind you it is not, as yet, anywhere as bad in Canada as in the

United States, but this is more through luck than planning. It is still safe to walk the streets in any Canadian city at night, a feat that I would not recommend to colleagues in many American cities. In fact there are, most notably in Toronto and Montreal, facets that one might even call night life, but nothing like Paris, Amsterdam or Brussels. Increasingly cities in North America are becoming little more than daytime business centres and even some of the more 'progressive' businesses are moving their headquarters into the suburbs. In these business centres it is generally only the breadwinner who ventures forth, leaving his family in their cloistered suburban communities. It is a tale oft-told and by many more qualified to talk about its psychological and sociological aspects than me. What I want to speak to you about are some of the aesthetics of such living.

Now I will be the first to admit that I am somewhat of a snob, but also crazy enough to think that I have right on my side. To declare LAS Vegas hotels great architecture, as does the noted American architecture critic Robert Venturi in his latest book, Learning from Las Vegas, has got to be pure and simple lunacy. Las Vegas, and its ilk, does represent the total victory of mediocrity with its plaster movie set places masquerading as luxury. What is even sadder to witness is the impact of such mediocrity on Canada, as can be seen in the photographs that I have taken of Winnipeg's Pembina 'Strip'. I don't

think that there is a single important building in this six miles of highway that is any more than the shallowest facade.

I am afraid that it is an increasing truth that things, and more important people, are judged by what they appear to be and not what they actually are - in essence, facade. It can be argued that the planners of such 'Pop' architecture give the people what they want. This is, of course, patent nonsense. They give us what they want, and at the same time make us believe that it is what we want. I am more convinced than ever that modern Western society is visually illiterate or at the very least visually corrupt. I am not sure who or what is to blame for this condition. Perhaps it was our growing reliance on words rather than on images, or, if you prefer, abstractions. But certainly some portion of the blame must be laid at the feet of our artists and, while the finger is being pointed, let us not leave out ourselves - the critics. I was told the other day by one of my colleagues that every society has had its throw-away architecture, only in today's society we have no other kind! Hell, in North America we even post-date the idea of throw away architecture. In Chicago there is hardly a single surviving example of the classical Chicago school architecture of Louis Sullivan, Henry Richardson, David Burnham, John Root and Frank Lloyd Wright. This important architecture (and it was not meant to be thrown away) has been destroyed by

wreckers in the name of progress. If it were not for the photographic record, and they are by no means complete, we would know about as much about these important buildings as we do about Greek painting of the Classical period. -

in other words, nothing. No society can afford to continue to destroy its past completely in favour of its present, nor can it rely on the facade to satisfy its needs. Sooner or later, and it is going to be sooner, we are going to wake up to the fact that much of the modern man-made world is ugly and it is we, all of us, who made it so. - Capitalist, Socialist, Communist, all, in the pursuit of lord knows what.

Of course, the United States makes an easy and cheap target and when I talk about North American 'Pop' architecture I really mean American. The examples that I use to illustrate this talk were taken in Canada and are really a kind of colonial architecture (most of the businesses you see are Canadian subsidiaries of American firms and the buildings, more or less, come in a kind of prefabricated, or kit, form), but that, in itself, is no crime. Much of the great architecture of the past, and present, is based on examples from elsewhere. Without this 'borrowing' there never could have been what we now call the Renaissance. I feel compelled to repeat that is my job to be critical of what I see, and foremost about my own society, because so much of what I have heard coming from the podium at the last two AICA congresses have been little more than flag-waving and cheap shots at other societies.

Much North American popular architecture is atuned more to the automobile rather than, as in older European cities, the pedestrian; hence, its heavy emphasis on large brightly lit signs, designed to attract the attention of both driver and passengers. This is why the facade is so effective. Who cares about details while travelling at 100 kilometres per hour. I, for one, would never dream of walking down the Pembina 'Strip', if for no other reason that it is several kilometres from the city centre. In fact, many of the businesses are designed, as in the drive-in restaurants, to be used without ever leaving the car itself. One could spend a lifetime in North America without ever leaving his car. There are drive-in restaurants, banks, cinemas, automatic car washes, yes - even funeral homes. Remember, as well, the vast distances that exist on our continent. Canada is over 7000 kilometers across and the United States nearly as large. In Canada, however, we have only slightly over 20 million people. Considerably less than Poland in an area many, many times its size. We suffer, as well (some might call it a blessing), from a very short history. In Europe, you have an architectural history going back many hundreds of years. The United States is just celebrating its two hundredth year as a nation and in Canada we have just passed one hundred years. Our traditions, therefore, are very young. Yet we seem hell bent on destroying whatever history we have by constantly

tearing down buildings and replacing them with more modern structures. My colleagues at this conference from Montreal are well aware of this malady where no less than architectural genocide has been done to the city. I refer here to the development, if one wants to call it that, of Sherbrooke Avenue. This is not to say that development of this types goes on without protest, but generally the developer wins out over the protesters, my able colleagues among them, who end up being called the enemies of progress or some such other nonsense. In Canada I believe it is because critics, such as myself, are ineffectual in getting the message across and because, in our society, the urban population really does not have a sense of place (more about that later), or, if they do, lack the power to use it. In our country, however, there is a notable exception to this creeping urban blight and that is the city of Toronto where a reform city government was elected to stop the non-stop and non-thinking development.

In many ways they have been successful. Certainly Toronto is one of North America's most interesting cities and it was not too many years ago when it was justly described as the dullest city in Canada (and that is dull indeed). Like most other major cities in North America, Toronto was racing, headlong, into building vast canyons of cold skyscrapers. I think many of you here would be interested in knowing that the man most responsible for what Time magazine

called 'The Greening of Toronto', Mayor David Crombie, is what we in Canada would call a Conservative. In fact, many believe that he may be the next leader of the national Conservative (albeit Progressive) party. So much for Socialist planning! But it proves that something can be done to save our cities and stop the visual garbage, be it of the glass tower variety or the hamburger stand.

I mentioned before, there is a lack of sense of place in North American urban life, be it in the U.S. or Canada. We can't solve our problems by either importing richer European cultures wholesale (Canada) or by inventing one (U.S.A.). For all that I know sense of place, or, if you prefer, pride, may only come with time and I am proving to be too anxious about the whole thing or perhaps the McLuhans and Venturis of our world have, indeed, the proper solutions. Their view of an ever-changing, throw-away world that has very little room for people like myself is like B.F. Skinner's recent and chilling book, a world Beyond Freedom and Dignity. This is a world quite suited to 'Pop' architecture, with its anti-human elements. Nor do I look for an answer in world Communism where the vulgarities of 'Pop' are replaced with the dulling mediocrity of pseudo-equality. Every little great architecture, or art of any kind, is by committee, be they committees of Capitalists or Communists. They are built by men, but designed by the architect. Unlike many other artists, therefore, the architect must rely on the skills of

workers to realize his vision, but still it is that vision that separates architecture from junk. It should be pointed out here that much of 'Pop' architecture is not designed by architects, but just happens, like some awful accident. Indeed, the vast majority of buildings constructed in North America are not designed by architects. They are designed and built by contractors, who, like the examples I have shown you, take a simple box and add to it any number of exterior embellishments that state, or shout, the building's purpose, i.e. to attract attention to itself. In this fight the buildings must battle with each other, hence, in many cases, signs are larger than the buildings they advertise. Admittedly the Winnipeg buildings I have shown you are, if such a thing is possible, bad examples of the type of thing that I am talking about, but that is to admit that there are good examples, which is like saying that certain types of Smallpox are to be preferred because they have better and bigger spots. The examples that I show you, however, are typical and can be repeated thousands of times over on the outskirts of countless North American cities. Many is the time, when travelling on a long distance bus tour in the United States, that I have awakened to find myself entering a city through a nearly identical maze of outlandish 'Pop' architecture and been unable to tell whether I was in Arizona or New York. Again, I must remind you of the size of our country, compared to yours, to understand the enormity

of what I am saying. The distance between the two furthest provincial capitals, St. John's, Newfoundland and Victoria British Columbia, is some 7605 kilometres. If you take that distance across Europe, how many countries and different languages will you come into contact with? The answer, in its simplest terms, - all of it and then some. In fact, it is very close to the distance, within 500 kilometres, of that between Warsaw and Bangkok. I don't mean to imply that Canada is the same from one end to the other. Topographically it is as diverse as the people who inhabit it, but this boring architecture is. If you have seen one MacDonald's or A & W hamburger stand you have seen them all. Believe it or not, this dulling sameness is one of their claims to fame and why these establishments are popular with the public. No matter where you go you can be assured that the place and the food will be uniform. One assumes that this is the reason why such U.S. chain operations are becoming popular in Western Europe. They certainly cater to more than just visiting North American tourists - either that or an extraordinary number of North Americans I see in MacDonald's in Amsterdam have learned to speak pretty good Dutch. And don't forget, with the current value of the dollar, both theirs and ours, most North Americans travelling in Europe can't afford the luxury of a 'Big Mac' in Holland or some Finger-lickin' Good Kentucky Fried Chicken from Colonel Sanders' Paris outlet.

It is only a matter of time, my friends, before this

architectural plague spreads itself around the globe. The Japanese have been conquered by MacDonaldland and even our friends in the Soviet Union are consuming Pepsi-Cola. Watch out my socialist friends. Before you know it, American hamburger stands will be lining your highways. While this may be interpreted by some as a milestone on the road to detente between two superpowers, I prefer nuclear proliferation to a proliferation of the banal. I am only joking, of course, but it does amuse me to think of the linguistic gymnastics that the French Academy will go through in an attempt to Frenchify the American words that go with these enterprises - ah! the hot dog, french fry, hamburger and coke.

I think that I must return to the notion that all of this 'Pop' architecture that I deplore is designed for automobiles and not people. At present the best examples are to be found in North America and more particularly in the United States. The reason is self-evident - more cars per capita than any other place in the world. But the rest of the world is racing to catch up, all in the name of progress. Now European cities are too being slowly taken over by the automobile. The vibrations from traffic are shaking down the cathedrals and those that don't fall are being eaten away by exhaust fumes. But these buildings can be replaced by parking garages. Now, are we going to allow this to happen - even in the name of progress? The answer is yes. The visual garbage I have

shown you is only the vanguard of the new mediocrity - a mediocrity based on the profit of the fast buck. There is a saying in North America that, "You are what you eat." But, in reality, we, all of us, are much more. We are what we surround ourselves with. If all our architecture is of the throw-away variety, our society will be a throw-away society. I am afraid that I can offer no ready solution to the problems that I have outlined for myself. I have taken the coward's way out. I have moved from Winnipeg to a small town on Canada's East coast and taken a position with a small university where the horrors that I have described don't, at this time, exist - but this is only a delaying action. The world is a small place and it can only be a better place for all of us to live in if we have critics who make themselves heard. We cannot afford to be a smug cultural elite. We must, as a group, call attention to the things that we think wrong in the visual world, be it architecture or paintings. Too long have we let our standards erode. I agree with Mr. Venturi. There are things to be 'learned' from Las Vegas - they are the mistakes of placing blind faith in the short term. If such architecture is an accurate picture of North American society, then our society is, indeed, in trouble.

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