

RETREAT FROM THE BLEAKNESS WITHIN

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Everybody, as Reyner Banham once pointed out, knows that Modern Architecture is undecorated. This concept is the layman's recognition check: flat roof, big windows, no decoration. It originated in 1908 with Adolf Loos' manifesto declaring ornament to be a crime, established itself rapidly as a matter of faith, and has now been so widely accepted for a quarter of a century that there seems little point in trying to repudiate it. Architects stopped designing ornament, craftsmen stopped making it, to such an extent that few could now produce it even if they tried.

Two typical recent examples of undecorated non-domestic interiors by distinguished American architects are the vestibule of 500 Park Avenue, New York (the new headquarters for the Pepsi-Cola Corporation), by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, and the vestibule of the Kalita Humphreys Theatre at Dallas, Texas, by Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright, from an early age, showed an incomparable genius for creating dramatically proportioned and subtly related interiors, but his chief skill always lay in his ability to subdivide and adorn them with decorative elements of delicately calculated richness and scale. It was perhaps this skill which he inherited specifically from the teaching of Louis Sullivan. Unlike Sullivan, he never built and decorated a large theatre during his lifetime (the Dallas Theatre being in fact completed after his death), but anyone who has studied the interiors of his famous houses built during the first quarter of the present century, or the vestibule of his Tokyo hotel, can well imagine what such a theatre, built by him at that time, would have looked like. The walls and ceilings would have been vigorously modelled, and the surfaces, richly textured with abstract geometric patterns, would have combined with the whole to form an environment of incomparable splendour in complete harmony with human scale and mood.

There were doubtless many good reasons why his Dallas theatre was left so plain, but no one will deny that it is completely barren, and the bunch of flowers on the table only draws attention to the poverty of the surrounding design. The director claims that "Frank Lloyd Wright intended here to excite the viewer with anticipation of the dramatic experi-

ence inside," yet whilst it might conceivably do this for some plays, it is unlikely to excite much anticipation for Oscar Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest*, which is currently being performed. Perhaps modern architecture is itself too much concerned with the importance of being earnest, and in its puritanical pursuit of a new morality is becoming completely unsympathetic to any rich visual experience except those constituted by variations of light and space.

The vestibule of the ten-storey Pepsi-Cola building might perhaps seem to trivial to instance as an example of this trend, but its architects have designed some of the finest office buildings in North America, and its qualities are very characteristic of what passes for "prestige architecture" in North America today. The exclusive use of glass or plain marble slabs for walling shows a clear influence of Mies van der Rohe. The determination to leave the street level quite bare (and thus simulate a building mounted on stilts) shows a clear influence of Le Corbusier. But despite the many fine qualities of the rest of the building, the vestibule itself is so bleak as to be almost a caricature of modern architecture, reminiscent of the décor of Jacques Tati's film *Mon Oncle*. This vestibule has been characterized by one critic as "chaste," but a more appropriate word might be "sterile." Presumably the ground floor, which may eventually be used for occasional non-commercial exhibitions, was left empty to give the "prestige" by its sheer extravagance. But the owners, whether appalled by the ludicrousness of this vast hall occupied only by a single uniformed attendant, or awe-struck by its sepulchral nudity, have subsequently decided to cover the entire floor with flowers, and thus made the giant advertisement appear to be lying in state.

The lobbies of most office buildings and theatres built at the beginning of the century undoubtedly were, like the many domestic interiors of the period, poorly lit and over-ornate; but they presumably corresponded to some extent to a natural craving for the visual enjoyment of richness which, for centuries, has been regarded by most people as one of the legitimate fruits of wealth. When Owen Jones wrote the first chapter of his famous *Grammar of Ornament* in 1856, he claimed that "the desire for ornament increases with all peoples in the ratio of progress in civilization," and there was little sympathy at that time for Horatio Greenough's view that



Frank Lloyd Wright: Kalita Theater, Dallas—Lobby

Architectural Forum

ornament was merely "the instinctive effort of an infant civilization to disguise its incompetence." It was natural, in an age of plenty, when mediaeval and Renaissance culture was so much admired, that Greenough's assertion should pass unheeded, just as it was natural, sixty-five years later, for a generation recovering from the catastrophe of the First World War to accept Le Corbusier's assertion that "decoration is the essential overplus, the quantum, of the peasant; proportion is the essential overplus, the quantum, of the civilized man." But we are living in a new age of plenty, when austerity no longer has much moral justification, and it may well be that under such conditions Owen Jones' contention was not entirely wrong.

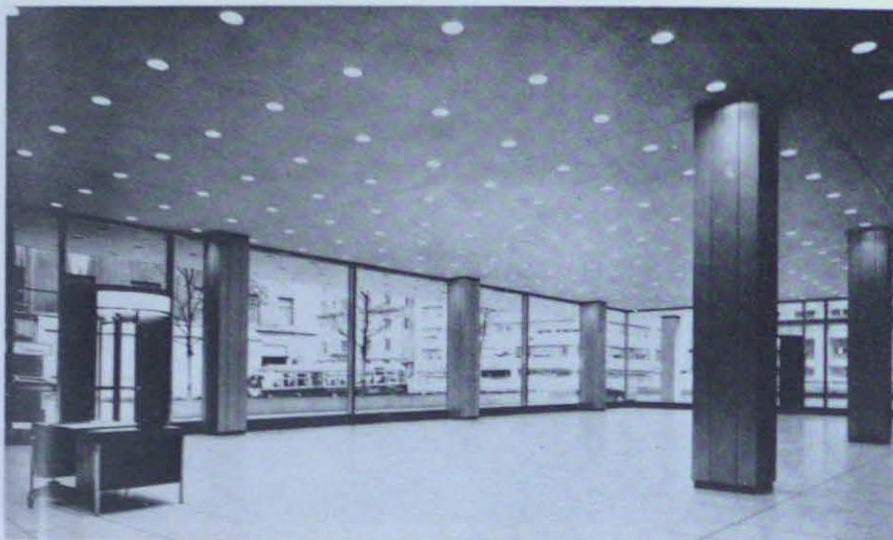
I am not suggesting that there would be any justification for reviving the kind of interior popular in the second half of the nineteenth century (and which Owen Jones himself was one of the first to condemn): but I do suggest that architects here and elsewhere will have to design their structures with more concern as to their potentiality in terms of interior elegance if they are to retain public respect. At present, the walls of an entrance vestibule, however important or luxurious, can be fashionably designed only with plain sheets of glass, plain sheets of marble, or abstract murals (which in recent New York examples have ranged from two carefully drawn lozenges to a series of random holes illuminated by flickering coloured lights behind). The rhythms, patterns, and compartmentation of surfaces, which in earlier centuries gave human scale to interiors, have almost completely vanished, and the only real contribution made by the present generation to interior design is in the skilful exploitation of the effects of artificial light.

I believe that public is yearning for an architecture of humanism; not that pseudo-Renaissance humanism extolled by Geoffrey Scott and Henry Hope Reed (which is only meaningful in an age of masonry construction) but the humanism which accepts architecture as a composition of standard elements designed and assembled to accord with human scale. Frank Lloyd Wright knew and mastered better than anyone else of his generation the subtleties and intricacies of scale, but being at heart a nineteenth-century romantic, he rejected the standardization imposed by the industrial machine. Ar-

chitects such as Skidmore, Owings and Merrill have industrial standardisation at their finger-tips, but their interiors too often reflect more the scale of machinery than of men. It was undoubtedly a great feat of engineering to include panes of glass at 500 Park Avenue measuring nine feet by thirteen feet ("enough glass to make 159,000 12-ounce Pepsi-Cola bottles"), but the main advantage of plate glass windows at street level is to allow passers-by to see something interesting within. With modern lighting, modern materials, and modern tools, rich interiors should surely not be impossible to achieve, and it is apparent from the wonderful creations of shop display designers that the potentialities for this sort of environment are enormous, once architects abandon their more austere spatial abstractions and think in terms of space as actively enjoyed by the common man.

The absence of ornament on the outside of buildings began as a reaction against its excessive use in the nineteenth century, but it only became general once architecture came under the baneful influence of abstract sculpture, for clearly nothing could be more alien to sculpture than ornament. The lavish ornamentation favoured in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was unquestionably symptomatic of a decline in the standards of taste, for architectural theorists of all ages have insisted that exterior ornament should be subordinated to structural elements, and regulated according to a building's social importance and use. But the complete absence of ornament inside public buildings seems to me very abnormal, and quite unjustifiable by ethical, practical or historical criteria. There may be evidence that the interior bleakness of most new American buildings corresponds to a spontaneous popular demand, but it seems more reasonable to attribute it to the sociological-architectural doctrines which have been propagated for the last half-century, and have shown, when put into effect, such marked indifference to the warmer inclinations of the humanity they claim to serve.

The pioneers of the "contemporary" interiors were Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, both now famous as architects, but originally distinguished as an exhibition designer and a painter respectively. The ideal environment for exhibiting works of art is a series of simple interrelated



Pepsi-Cola Building—Lobby

spaces; the ideal environment for painting picture is a tall bare room with a large window occupying one wall. Both require plain surfaces to function efficiently; the former to allow artefacts of different character to be displayed together, the latter to allow artefacts to be created without any environmental influence at all. Neither would appear to be ideally suited to the habitation of human beings, unless of course one happens to be painter or an exhibition designer by temperament or profession.

The artist's studio, which became the paradigm for all Le Corbusier's interiors, and the exhibition pavilion, which became the paradigm for those of Mies van der Rohe, were well suited to the low cost housing developments which were the main concern of these designers, as architects, immediately after the First World War, but they proved less capable of satisfying the needs of an affluent society, such as is represented by Europe and America today. One only has to glance

through current fashion magazines to see that the rich and sophisticated do not decorate their houses in the "contemporary" style unless they collect works of art, in which case their houses become miniature museums. Typical of these is the architect Eero Saarinen's residence, in which there is virtually nothing except pictures, sculpture, and the smooth fibre-glass chairs ("antiques of modern architecture") he designed himself, and sits in with such an acute air of discomfort (whilst his wife and son sit on the floor). The walls and ceilings are flat white surfaces, and the ornamentation, for such it is, consists of intricate oriental sculpture mounted on pedestals, or brightly-patterned abstract paintings hanging on the walls. Little wonder that so many wealthy Americans furnish their dwellings with antiques, or that "reproduction Victorian furniture," which would have been inconceivable twenty years ago, is now in popular demand in the less expensive stores in New York.

