A PRIMITIVE AT HARVARD

A Critique of:

The Carpenter Center

Carpenter Center—Entrance

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Harvard's new Centre for the Visual Arts, the first building to be constructed by Le Corbusier in America, has now been completed, and it has already been described officially as "of historic importance." Needless to say, it has been honoured with the usual flattering display of polite controversy, since if a building nowadays is not controversial it is of no interest at all.

Controversy is considered especially important in a university building, for, as one leading architectural periodical has observed: "To steer clear of the 'safe and familiar' is one of the earmarks of any good university." The safest and most familiar way to avoid being safe and familiar in architecture is to design a building of alien shapes, alien materials, and queer dispositions, and this is what has been done here.

Curiously enough, the shapes have not achieved the shock that was expected, perhaps because the building is almost a replica of one constucted recently by Le Corbusier for a cotton-spinners' association headquarters in India, but mainly because we are now used to seeing Corbusieresque shapes juxtaposed against more traditional buildings in America. Moreover, Harvard's campus has long been a heterogeneous collection of buildings. The only thing that shocks the visitor about this new building is the extraordinary primitiveness of its structure and mechanical equipment.

Disregarding the fact that nearly all the concrete mullions have warped (whereby few of the numerous exterior doors fit), the most disconcerting feature of the building is its air-conditioning equipment. This consists simply of a series of large machines, standing starkly and noisily in the middle of each floor, and looking for all the world like surrealist images of medieval fireplaces. Now the American custom of hiding air-conditioning equipment behind a suspended ceiling may well be reprehensible; indeed, several distinguished architects, such as Louis Kahn, have gone to great trouble to try to integrate this equipment within their structural frames. But Le Corbusier virtually disregards this as a design problem. For him, architecture is simply a matter of abstract sculptural forms, and building technology, one feels, is either left to subordinates or left to take care of itself.

This attitude seems particularily curious for two reasons. One is that Le Corbusier has long taken delight in chiding the Americans on their incompetence and timidity (his most famous *bon mot* being his reply to an American newspaper reporter to the effect that New York's skyscrapers were "much too small"); the other is that his fame as a theorist mainly rests on his plea for technological efficiency, as expounded in *Towards a New Architecture.* But the Visual Arts Centre at Harvard is, technologically, less advanced even than the villas he was constructing 30 years ago, and this must be particularily bewildering to Americans, since mechanisation usually constitutes for them the essential comfort and status symbol of modern life.

Doubtless these artists' studios will function well enough, because their function is so loosely defined. But what of the circulation between them? Access is either by an unobtrusive door on the ground floor or by a flamboyant baroque ramp, which rises to the third-floor level, pierces the building from one side to the other, and leads only to two insignificant studio doorways clearly marked: "Ramp exit closed, use stairway." But perhaps such criticisms will be disregarded as irrelevant for this building is an *objet d'art,* and no future monograph on Le Corbusier (and one's imagination boggles at the thought of how many there will eventually be) will bother to analyse the efficiency of the building, or even to examine how it weathers, since a complete photographic documentation was established while it was still in its pristine state.

The Harvard Centre for the Visual Arts is undoubtedly of historic importance, but at the moment for one thing only, namely as the fulfilment of the primary notion which has dominated all Le Corbusier's earlier work. For him, form has seldom been related to function, but simply to the notion that the ideal building type is that of an artist's studio. His early houses were artists' studios. His Unité d'Habitation, at Marseilles, is a collection of artists' studios. His latest building is distinguished historically in that it is actually designed as an artists' studio, and we can see now that the great architectural advantage of modern artists' studios (which do not even need ideal lighting to illuminate a posed model) is that they can take any conceivable shape the architect likes.