

The most misunderstood of movements in Architecture, Mannerism, has a modern-day counterpart. It is not Post-Modernism, but rather, **A NEW MANNERISM**, which like Mannerism, is elusive and seen as a **CRISIS**. Is it?

by William Mark Pimlott
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A CRISIS, we are led to believe, results when normally ordered institutions and activities become helplessly out of control. It begins with a quiet rumble, but such rumblings tend to be infectious and invariably, grow to be of epidemic proportions or influence.

Architectural historians tell us of numerable crises, the most notorious being, perhaps, the Mannerist crisis. Architects were supposedly self-indulgent, blissfully ignorant of Renaissance dogmae which they were 'blaspheming'. One might say that mannerism was a 'popular' activity, an animal borne of popular culture. Such beasts are traditionally destined for derision, probably because, in hindsight, they are seen to be contradictory or detrimental to society's more serious culture. For years, Mannerist architecture has been spoken of with disfavour because of its 'pop culture' leanings. In fact, the majority of work called 'Mannerist' was extremely good. It has been the selected removal of excellent architects from that classification, and their placement elsewhere (Late Renaissance, etcetera), that has let Mannerism wallow so long in the annals of popular culture.

As we saw (Mannerism, The Fifth Column, vol.1, no.4), Mannerists concerned themselves with a search for pleasure through variety: of form, expression, space and colour. Included

in this was an attitude which attempted to 'distort' or change the rules of Renaissance architecture. It is only too evident, in light of discussions of contemporary architecture, that current practitioners of the art argue for similar change as well.

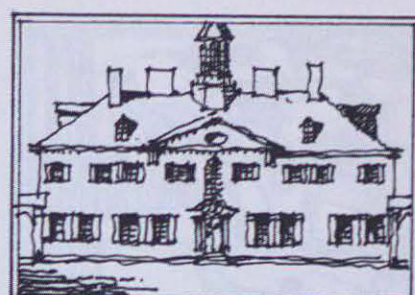
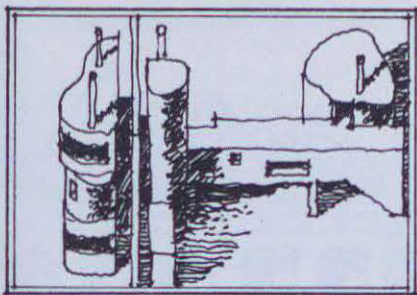
Judging by the widespread attention given to these arguments by various journals of architecture, lecture series and panel discussions, their acceptance has reached 'epidemic' proportions. However, there remain many voices who cry 'crisis'. Their greatest concern is a perceived rejection of serious architecture and its replacement by popular architecture or worse, Post-Modern Architecture.

'Post-Modernism', as such, does not exist at all, except in the minds of devout Modernists, Neo-Rationalists and a few outspoken individuals. It has been a convenient umbrella phrase which throws all architectural movements into one rather murky broth. Consequently, those placed in that group voice their dissatisfaction whenever Post-Modernism is mentioned. They certainly do not wish to be associated with anything so amorphous, and many find difficulty with populism. Seeing very few similarities to each other, they have placed themselves, or have been placed into many categories, few of which are particularly meaningful. Criticism of Post-Modernism never

addresses any of these specific categories, rather, it addresses the nebulous concept of 'Post-Modernism'. It is thus necessary to define a common ground within which thrusts of the critical sword may be parried. The particular difficulty lies in the fact that Post-Modernists, if one may pardon the expression, are reluctant to admit that such a common ground exists. The various camps seem so rigidly defined and so diametrically opposed, that such ground appears to be shaky. However, I share the opinion that all of this work represents a **Mannerism** of sorts - a 'New Mannerism'. A brief outline of the characteristics of Mannerism (via illuminations from Frederic Hartt and John Shearman), as well as an attempt at a comparative parallel with current movements, should begin to breach the gaps.

Briefly, Mannerists seemed to seek and achieve:

- a. **varieta** (the human pleasure derived from variety) as a rejection of Renaissance **invarieta** (logic, order and the Platonic absolutes)
- b. a mannered re-interpretation of what had preceded - Renaissance or otherwise - in architectural or artistic expression (achieved through what many call distortion and a few describe as the 'humanising' of Renaissance composition, detail and colour)
- c. an architecture which was vastly more personal, yet more public oriented, than ever before (a popular



John Hejduk, *Bye House*; Robert Venturi, *Brant-Johnson House*; Alan Greenberg, *'Mount Vernon'*

architecture for 'a more cultured age'). Ensuing from this were unusual containments and proportional inversions (Laurentian Library, Michelangelo); humorous distortions and manipulations of architectural detail, and 'fantasy' spaces (Palazzo del Te, Giulio Romano); fragile layer-on-layer classicism (Palladio); and a few extreme distortions - with mixed results (Casino dello Zuccheri, Frederico Zuccheri).

Mannerism was that creature borne of some muscle flexing following a long period of order and restraint; flux within a period of transition. Many have cried 'crisis' with respect to it, and there are those who still do. In "Mannerism" (The Fifth Column, vol.1, no.4) I forwarded the objecting notion that the Mannerist Crisis was not a crisis at all. The conclusion was based upon the fact that Mannerist architecture did not reject the principles of a 'Good Architecture'. That its expressions, derived from the creative, personal **instincts** of each artist did not harm the art, but, rather, enhanced it through the liberation of ideas.

The new Architecture makes similar gestures. Its nature of multiplicity of thought makes the perception of its purpose so difficult, and conversely, allows criticism of it based on its capriciousness so easy. A category, which represents a group of ideas, makes multiplicity coherent. The new Architecture, defined in the context of Mannerism can therefore begin to become so.

a. VARIETA

There is indeed a new **varieta** although it is seen in many different ways by the Whites, the Greys and the Neo-Classicists.

i. The Whites

These architects are profoundly influenced by the work of Le

Corbusier, particularly the early period. This enclave began in the late 1960's as 'The New York Five': Charles Gwathmey, Richard Meier, John Hejduk, Peter Eisenman and Michael Graves. When the monograph "**Five Architects**" was released, there was a definite distortion of Corb's white work. In Gwathmey's case, Corb was filled out more, becoming more volumetric - rigid external forms were more or less maintained. Meier modeled his efforts on Corb's earliest work (Villa Savoy), but has produced caricatures of it in a bitterly antiseptic series of projects. Hejduk has expanded on Corb's sculptured volumes within the grid through multiplications (the curvy rooms increase in number like rabbits), by taking these volumes out of the context of the grid and letting them hang in space as independents. Eisenman's work bears little resemblance to Le Corbusier's and can only be described as an abstraction of some notions that he is preoccupied with (rotation and translation). It is an intensely personal exercise, meant for no-one but himself. It seemed, too, that before Michael Graves developed into a classicist of sorts, a fixation with both early and later Corb existed, utterly concluded by the Snydermann House, which appears to be rather alot like the blob in the gilded cage.

ii. The Greys

Robert Venturi pioneered the Greys' search for **varieta**, when he forwarded the statements "I like complexity and contradiction in architecture" and "Less is a bore". Without "Complexity and Contradiction" there would be no broohaha, no fighting between Whites and Greys nor amongst Greys; for that matter, there would be no such thing as a 'Post-Modern Crisis'. While there are those who seek genuine American architecture (again), a more publicized group searches for that same goal through the roots of popular culture. The proponents of this

methode, Venturi, Charles Moore, Robert A.M. Stern and many others, all peddle this notion in varying directions and degrees of intensity. Their position has caused a tremendous stir - both in North America and abroad. It has borne most of the vituperous commentary from Modernists, the Whites and some, like Stanley Tigerman, who draw abuse from those who are just a shade of grey apart from him. The Rationalists in Europe say even worse things. This exchange is known as Rationalist vs. Realist: where Maurice Culot calls Charles Moore "Mickey Mouse". However, past all the abuse and mudslinging from within and without, there remains one common thread running through the work of the Realists - it is American (and Americans like fun). The Europeans howl alot about this.

iii. The Classicists

These are simply the architects who presently carry on a classical tradition in architecture and urban planning. Among this group are Alan Greenberg, Michael Graves, Quinlan Terry, Leon Krier and Maurice Culot. Sometimes included is Robert Venturi, and many would wish to posthumously include Sir Edwin Lutyens. They seek variety in architecture in the sense perhaps closest to the Mannerists - through simple pleasures to be derived from details, colour, proportion and planning gestures.

B. MANNERED REINTERPRETATION

i. The Whites

It almost goes unsaid that each headstand that is done in order to achieve that variety we have spoken of, must be, within this White Theatre, nurtured by the form-giving Le Corbusier. Either a direct quotation or a contortion of these forms constitutes a reinterpretation of them. Each architect's personal translation is an idiosyncrasy - a



mannerism.

ii. The Greys

It is from the interpretation of historical forms that the Greys have received such wide attention and at the same time, provoked such abundant criticism. No Period has been left untouched by those who have been called 'Post-Modern'. Yet, within this camp, there is a feeling that what is being done is right - for the peoples' enjoyment. Others believe that it is a free ticket to magazine publicity.

iii. The Classicists.

Like the Mannerists, the Classicists (the Neo-Neo-Classacists) cannot leave Classical Architecture alone without a bit of form-giving input. After all, overdressed sameness was a major contributor to the decline of Neo-Classical Architecture in the United States and elsewhere. So, those like Alan Greenberg distort or manipulate or invent mannered details and plans; while those like Michael Graves 're-invent' Classicism in a personal manneristic language which attempts to represent its stylistic intentions. There is always however, personal affectations which make this architecture quite different from Classicism.

C. A PERSONAL, PRIVATE ARCHITECTURE

All three of these camps in North America encourage the development of a 'style' which is very personal, yet somehow tied into the roots of the history of architecture. (As the White School is directly tied to Modernism as an historical phenomenon, it avoids the central elements of debate which form the remaining discussion). The public's accessibility to each of these styles is dependant upon its subconscious architectural tradition of experience. Presumably, accessibility to what is being expressed should

VITRUVIUS: FIRMITAS, UTILITAS, VENUSTAS

result in work that is well received and enjoyed. And, if the expression is related to a significant segment of the historical continuum, then its appeal will acquire a stature of permanence, and its 'personal and private' nature will become insignificant.

'POST-MODERNISM IS MANNERISM' - Omer Akin

It seems that at the very least that our contemporary condition is a descendent of Mannerism, and that in certain instances is quite identical to it. Longing to replace that meaningless term (Post-Modernism) with one that has the quality of having definite characteristics, 'New-Mannerism' seems to suit the qualifications.

Like Mannerism, New-Mannerism shall certainly have to endure ridicule now and many years from now. It is, unavoidably, an architecture of a transitional period. 'Permanent' New-Mannerist buildings do not exist in appreciable numbers yet, nor are represented in connection with large scale public functions.

There are, without too much extrapolation, many New or Neo-Mannerists. And those who they have left behind in stylistic interpretation, the Modernists, are not particularly happy about what they are doing. The Modernists, say they are completely immersed in style: an elitist preoccupation. They say that consideration of the user has been forgotten. They say that the notion of a building being at first functional has been lost. And, that the New-Mannerist architecture is narcissistic, and offensive; at best, regressive. The contention has arisen that New-Mannerist Architecture is not architecture at all, but merely academic acrobatics concealing incompetence.

THEN...

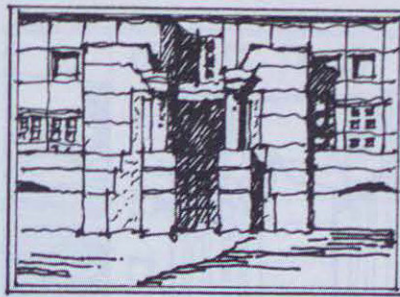
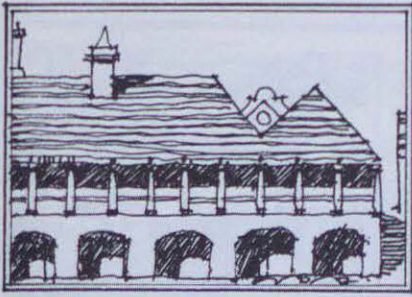
WHAT IS GOOD ARCHITECTURE?

A list of criteria which has always qualified the above query is that given to us by Vitruvius: UTILITAS, FIRMITAS and VENUSTAS, or Commodity, Firmness and Delight.

Modern architects say that their work fulfills all of the above requirements and make a pledge to society that a better world will result from their work. New-Mannerist architects say exactly the same thing.

If we can ascertain just who does actually fulfill the very important requirements of a 'Good Architecture', then we may determine if there is a New-Mannerist Crisis, no crisis at all, or one which has been with us for longer than we wish to believe.

Facing page, from left.
Venturi and Rauch, Brant House,
Bermuda, 1979; Michael Graves,
Plocek (Keystone) House 1977-9
Quinlan Terry, No 7 Frog
Meadow, Dedham, 1980.



'FIRMNESS, COMMODITY AND DELIGHT' ARE CONSTITUENT PARTS OF A GOOD ARCHITECTURE.

THE NEW-MANNERISTS

A. COMMODITY

i. Function

Does New-Mannerist Architecture work? Certainly, one cannot answer this directly without making unsound generalizations. However, in the spirit of 'good architecture', shown are three plans for houses representative of varied methods:

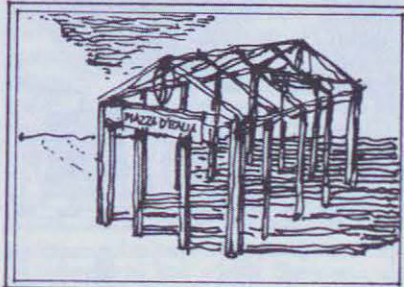
All of these houses work, by virtue of the fact that their plans are derived from traditional bases of relationships. They are not particularly complex, but rather, straightforward and 'easy'. Perhaps the most significant thing about them is that anyone could walk into these houses and know where to go to get to each important part. There is a logic inherent in these plans which has to do with the sequence of rooms and spaces.

ii. Contextualism and Social Duty

A major premise of the New-Mannerists' work, particularly the Greys, has been **contextualism**. The intervention of new buildings into any context should, they insist, reinforce the existing fabric, rather than be at odds with it. And in the circumstance of a deteriorated fabric, the new building should attempt to re-establish those qualities that have been lost. This position is truly essential to the

Greys' cause and allows them to attempt the 'saving' of the modern city.

Implicit in their efforts are the inclusion of man in the scheme of their architecture; in terms of his compatibility with it, his traditions of experience, and finally his enjoyment of it. Thus, the 'frivolous architecture' that is Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia is no longer frivolous at all, but a serious exercise in social architecture which seems to work extraordinarily well.



The logic behind the resurrection of these principles is simple. If man has lived happily in the past with certain constants, why has Modernism, from its birth, openly rejected them?

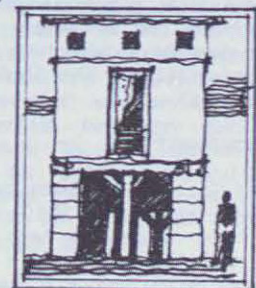
B. FIRMNESS

There is no pretentious rhetoric about structure being wielded by New-Mannerists. The buildings are built in accordance with methods that have been used in the past for

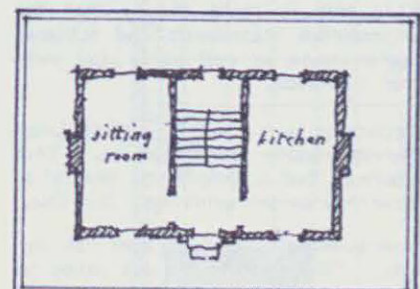
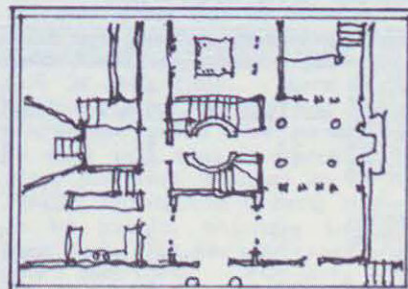
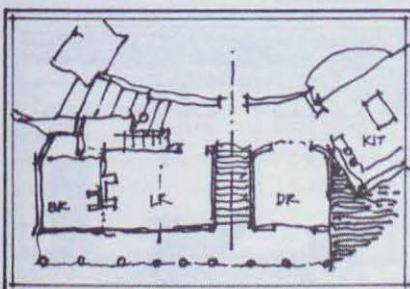
centuries. Gravity goes downwards: walls bear on walls, walls bear on columns and beams and columns bear on walls or the earth. As all have always done.

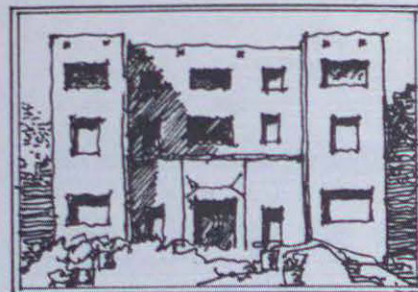
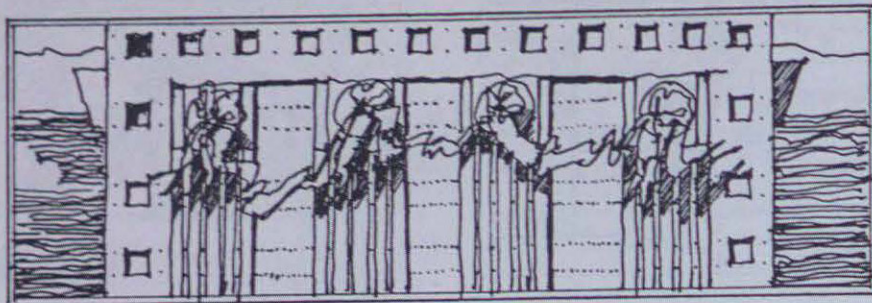
C. DELIGHT

It has been said that beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, and this adage, although hackneyed, must be taken quite seriously by the architect, whose art indeed must be the most accessible of all to the public at large. The Grey architects and the Neo-Rationalists in Europe (adamantly Non-Mannerist) seem to think that accessibility is attained through balanced composition, a reintroduction of the principles of symmetry, and archetypal reference. In other words, beauty can be achieved through reference to experiences we have known.



The Greys believe that ornamentation is a part of our tradition of experience. They see this issue as the original Mannerists might have. Decoration or ornamentation is





something which may beautify architecture through its rendering of: the plasticity of a surface, the play of light, and its introduction of variety, which presumably encourages a reaction of pleasure. It is the allowance of ornament which permits architecture to become eclectic, personal and lovingly flawed; or to become expressive of some hierarchy, placing us at a suitable distance.

The Neo-Rationalists reject ornament in favour of European urban archetypes, which differ according to local vernacular plans, proportions, profiles and materials, which retain a nature of public accessibility.

The Modernists, alternatively, reject both ornament and archetypology, and instead, introduce an exclusive visual language which, when at its best, speaks to but a few aesthetes. Is the public or populist architecture of the New Mannerists, as the Modernists insist, obscene?

THE MODERNISTS

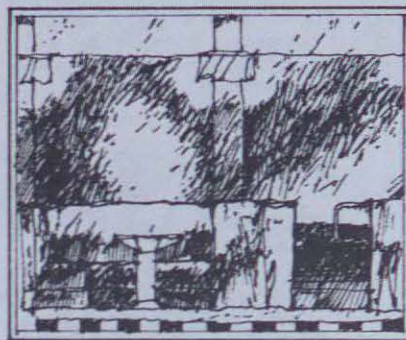
For all of the vast promises made by the Modernists from 1910 to the present, their success in both social reform, and the architecture which they claimed would induce it, has been abysmally limited. They did succeed in instituting an architecture void of colour, the expression of material and that could be related to by no-one but themselves. It became the element of debate solely in avantgarde circles. It is only in these circles that the preposterous statements and schemes that we know so well could have even been tolerated.

"Ornament is a crime" - Adolf Loos. Oh, Mr. Loos, you hypocrite. Your American Bar is simply too 'pretty' to allow you to say something like this.

"Less is more" - Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. This is where we are asked to throw away all of our worldly possessions to live in a glass room

with nothing in it but a solid onyx wall. Luxury in Poverty.

Project: City for 6,000,000 inhabitants. Le Corbusier (changed his name to seem more like the 'answer'). A proposal that was so radical that it could not possibly be taken seriously.

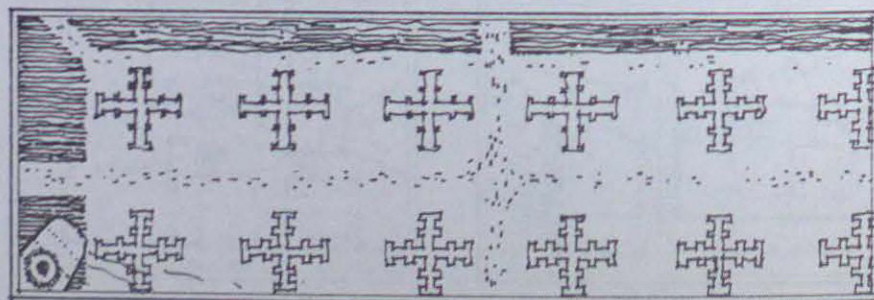


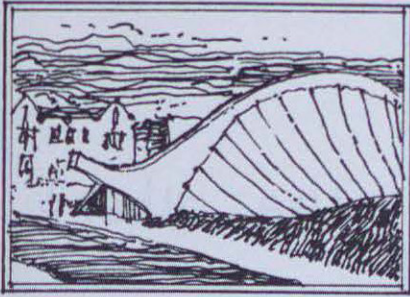
Graves, garlands on Portland; Loos, Steiner House, American Bar; Curling up with Mies van der Rohe, circa 1927;

Yet, it somehow became the model for the Modern City. Its message still sits very well with Modern architects and cities all over the world have suffered greatly because of it. Not only does Corb's scheme ignore the notion of existing city fabric; it obliterates it. "We must throw out all that has gone before, because it is meaningless".

Modernism has been the only artistic movement which has actually had the audacity to proclaim such nonsense and to assure us that their artists, musicians and architects could fill the 'gap', so to speak, and more. All of these saviours of culture, of course, numbered no more than a few score individuals, who all knew of each other very well. They met at parties and conferences and the like, and if there ever was an academic elite pounding out the dogmae of architectural thought, the Modernists were that elite. It was so extreme that to them, it simply was not good enough to be sympathetic to their righteous causes, one had to follow their method precisely. Through the discretion the Modernists developed in selecting just who would or would not be among them, they began to see themselves and their work, as rigorous, honest, no-nonsense and functional. This then, was what really counted. It was Utilitas.

Le Corbusier and 6 million neighbours.





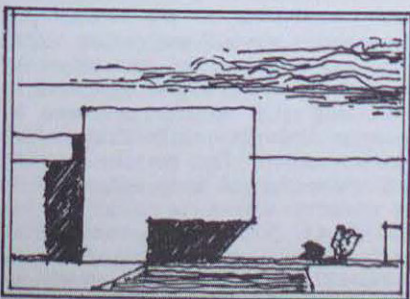
Beauty or beasts? Saarinen, Mies, Pei and our own WZMH.

As for Firmitas, the Moderns have maintained a commitment to structure as a separate entity, born when Architecture gave birth to Engineering as a profession unto itself. Their subsequent partnership was based upon a faith in the possibilities of the New Age - a 'Renaissance' which would expand knowledge and expose truth for the good of all men.

However, time has shown that the efforts of the partnership have not been innocent of deception, and the motivations towards the 'honesty' of structure have occasionally become obscure. 'Excitement' attained through the abnormal disposition of structure, all too often becomes one-line architecture - a commercial gimmick which is not very honest at all.

As an aside, it should be noted that the Moderns who were really good, never went out on any structurally unsound limbs, and never became lost in what Modernism was supposed to mean. These architects did indeed produce buildings which remain original, at times exciting, and when isolated, beautiful. These works unfortunately remain few.

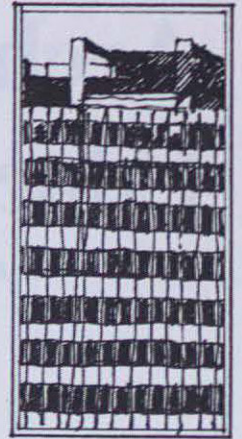
And Venustas? There is a constant



search for beauty that runs through Modern Architecture, a beauty that yearns to appeal to all Mankind. This, for the Modernist of today, has its roots in Cubism, which has to do with an **impression** of reality, and importantly, one that is distorted or abstract. Although Architecture is an Art, it, unlike its 'free' companions, is responsible to legibility and intimately linked to the world of reality. Therefore, architecture's sculptural abstraction intended to merely evoke some emotive response, is Sculpture, and is ignorant (with few exceptions) of its legibility, and importantly, its role, imposed upon it by its membership in a greater urban context. The manifests are objects of 'dumb' beauty - acontextual, egocentric and aggressive. However, what seems the most regrettable, is that the notion of 'architectural beauty' has lost significance (save the work of Aalto, Kahn, Mies and Scarpa). In a city, where there must be Architecture, and where there are only weak practitioners of a soulless Modernism, this loss has been catastrophic.

CRISIS?...WHAT CRISIS?

If we are asked to assess the state of architecture, are we urged to say that there is a crisis? Have things gone out of control? Certainly, there is confusion, borne of the multiplicity of ideas and means, but its intent and the ends are clear. These ends have finite parameters, so the future of architecture and of our cities becomes a known rather than an unknown. If there was any time to reaffirm faith in the 'basics' of a Good Architecture, now is that time. There is an awareness about the good and evil of intervention and a conscious attempt to work with what is proven to be good, not what is hoped to be so. Finally, Architecture is being allowed to be public, popular, fun and meaningful - to everyone, not just a select few.



It is my contention that the question of a crisis in Architecture may be turned around. By that timeless common ground of judgement, the Vitruvian principles, the New Mannerism is a Good Architecture. The debates waged by the New Mannerists are those which foster the growth of **values** and **morals**. This leads me to believe that we should not worry about a New Mannerist Crisis. However, perhaps we should seriously question the authority of those who contend that Architecture's 'New Deal' is formal and futile.

From beginnings in the backwaters of academia, the Modernists developed an attitude that would destroy our cities, try to forget our place, and attempt to establish our faith in the most temporal entity - our time itself. I would forward that their 'parti' was, and remains to be, one monstrous mistake. Their rejection of the rejuvenated spirit of 'good architecture' as manifested in New Mannerism severely darkens the proverbial 'light at the end of the tunnel' for Architecture, and leads me to believe that the 'crisis' ultimately lies with the legacy and acolytes of the Modern Movement. □

