



Problems of Modern Architecture

by Rodney A. Lane

In this article I would like to talk about "modern," architecture, and what I feel is the basic problem facing it today urbanization. For the purpose of this discussion I should say that this will necessarily deal with the situation in America since this is the most familiar to me.

However, modern architecture, be it in the United States, Latin America or Asia is basically the same, that is the forces which brought about the changes from traditional building styles and techniques to those we see today are fundamentally the same.

To begin a discussion such as this then, we should examine those forces and see what implications may be learned. To do this it may be necessary to become somewhat philosophical in our examination, but I hope to remain general enough so that cultural boundaries may be easily crossed. If this is not the case and you find my argument totally unrelated to Korea and her unique problems, I wish to apologize now.

Economics of course is the most obvious factor. With economic development or growth comes urbanization and if this growth or development is rapid, the urbanization problems are made that much more difficult.

Large numbers of people moving to the city to find work and new businesses being started to serve these people means that buildings must be completed very rapidly.

Therefore construction of modern buildings must be efficient. No longer can we devote three or four years or longer to the construction of ceremonial structures.

All one needs to do is look around Seoul at the

great amount of construction taking place to realize this point. I often hear comments from people returning to Seoul after a short absence and they must learn the city all over again, everything has changed.

This phenomenon is very typical of American cities also.

It seems that a vicious circle here develops, economic growth, urban construction, migration and back to economic growth, The cycle, I think varies from country to country in length, but is basically the same.

The next step and probably the most difficult is to examine the reaction of the individual and the society to this modernization.

I think it can be said with a fair degree of accuracy, that most people including the common man, the upper class, as well as the intellectuals have a negative attitude towards the modern city.

They don't like modern architecture and remember the beauties of the traditional past.

They are against the fast rate of urban growth and think somehow it should be stopped.

They point to rising crime rates, break down of the family and a seemingly deterioration of the society to give proof to this claim.

The question can then be asked, "why can't urban growth be stopped?" or "why do people who once move to the city never return to the rural environment?" The most ardent critiques of the city are urban dwellers themselves, and those in the country long to move to the city. It is indeed a very interesting phenomena.

I won't attempt to give answers to these questions. I don't think anybody knows the answers, but of late there has been a recognition of the problem and people are beginning to search the city for its drawing qualities.

This, I feel is a step in the right direction. You may ask what does this all have to do with architecture and I will answer by saying it is

the core of modern architecture.

First of all, building types of today are unique to the modern era. Is there such a thing as a traditional style factory, office building, department store, movie theater, restaurant and so on? The modern era has created new functions for which there are no traditional answers.

Technically also the traditional materials of architecture as well as the construction technique could not produce today's buildings.

Science has played the key role in producing the fantastic economic growth we now see taking place.

As men have explored and discovered more about their environment, they have also developed a production system by which they can produce consumption goods at an almost unthinkable rate. This production system has provided the materials for building construction as well as the thousands of consumer products now available.

It is easy to examine and understand the physical changes brought about by this ability to produce goods.

A more difficult task, but I think the most important, is to understand the change society and the individual man have had to make in order to accommodate this new system.

Here again we can look to science for some clues to this problem. With economic development has come a fantastic increase in the number of scientists.

Of all the scientists who have lived 90% of them are still alive today. The scientific method is now used in almost all intellectual thought.

This I think is a product of specialization, each group in the society, be it industrial, social, government or educational, is focusing on one area of life. Each individual in that group is specialized in a field related to the function of the group.

The most classic example of this is the

production live worker who stands all day performing one function, such as bolting on the right front tire of a new automobile.

He has no knowledge of the rest of the work which must be done, but without performing his function the automobile certainly would not be completed.

In the intellectual world we can also see the effects of specialization. Today's college students are not concerned with many subjects. It would be almost impossible for them to gain sufficient knowledge in more than one field for them to be considered experts in all. Because the amount of knowledge is so great, we are forced to specialize in education, just as the automobile manufacture must specialize in order to produce cars at a faster rate.

To close this discussion I would like to quote from the work of William Barrett intitled "Irrational man."

"Thus with the modern period, man..... has entered upon a secular phase of his history.

He entered it with exuberance over the prospect of increased power he would have over the world around him.

But in this world, in which his dreams of power were often more than fulfilled, he found himself for the first time homeless. Science striped nature of its human forms and presented man with a universe that was neutral, alien, in its vastness and force, to his human purposes.

Religion, before this phase set in, had been a structure that encompassed man's life, providing him with a system of images and symbols by which he could express his own aspirations toward psychic wholeness.

With the loss of this containing framework man became not only dispossessed but a fragmentary being. I society, as in the spiritual world, secular goals have come to predominate;

the rational organization of the economy has increased human power over nature, and politically also society has become more rational, utilitarian, democratic, with a resulting material wealth and progress.

The men of the enlightenment foresaw no end to this triumphant expansion of reason into all the areas of social life.

But here too reason has foundered upon its opposite, upon the surd and unpredictable realities—wars, economic crises and dislocations, political upheavals among the masses.

Moreover, man's feeling of homelessness, of alienation has been intensified in the midst of a bureaucratized, impersonal mass society.

He has come to feel himself an outsider even within his own human society.

He is trebly alienated; a stranger to god, to nature, and to the gigantic social apparatus that supplies his material wants.

But the worst and final form of alienation, toward which indeed the others tend, is man's alienation from his own self.

In a society that requires of man only that he perform competently his own particular social function, man becomes identified with this function, and the rest of his being is allowed to subsist as best it can—usually to be dropped below the surface of consciousness and forgotten."

For architecture to once again become the mother art, reflecting man's abilities, desires and soforth, may not be possible.

In creating the modern era we may have destroyed that part of traditional societies which made it possible to have such an architecture the universal society.

The important thing to understand then, is that we must develop new criteria to judge the new architecture. If we do so, there is no reason why the modern era can not just as successful as the traditional.