CURRENT BOOKS

Farewell to Modernism

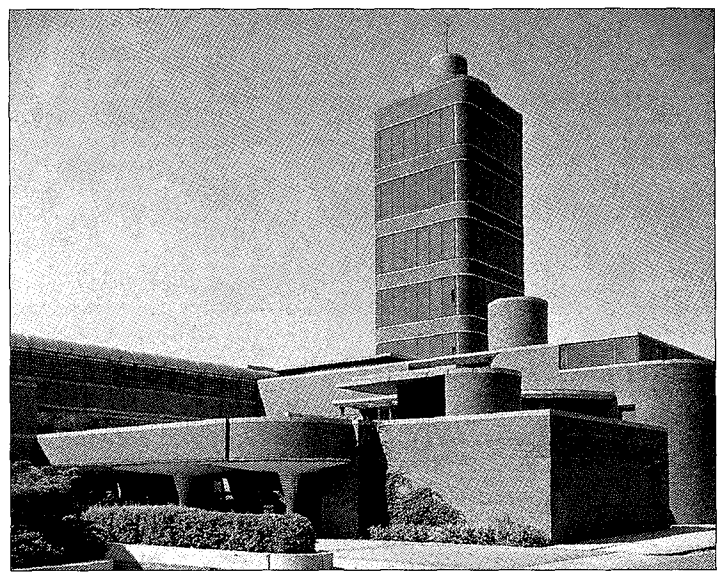
THE ORAL HISTORY OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE: Interviews with the Greatest Architects of the Twentieth Century. *By John Peter. Abrams. 320 pp. $67.50*

"Less is more," Ludwig Mies van der Rohe supposedly said, thus summing up his severe, minimalist approach to the art of building. To which the architect Robert Venturi impishly replied, "Less is a bore." Venturi's postmodernist manifesto, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture,* was published in 1966, a year as good as any to date the end of what is commonly called the Modern Movement in architecture. This movement is remarkable for its pantheon of heroic figures—Mies, Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright—and its equally heroic buildings. It is also distinguished by its brevity: beginning roughly in the 1920s, the Modern Movement held center stage barely 40 years.

Forty years is not a long time to reinvent architecture. But that is precisely what the early modernists set out to do. Their aim was to design buildings that owed nothing to the past and belonged distinctly and unmistakably to the 20th century. This ambition was in great part a reaction to the Victorian revivals of historical styles that had characterized architectural design during the late 19th century. Although the public generally liked neo-Elizabethan and neo-Flemish homes as well as Classical public buildings such as the National Gallery in Washington, many architects were dissatisfied with combining and recombining styles from the past. They felt that a modern age called for its own modern architecture. To this end, they generally ignored the well-established Classical architectural tradition that had nurtured architects as disparate as Freidrich Schinkel, Stanford White, and Edwin Lutyens. They did away with conventional notions of ornament and decoration and instead found inspiration in such industrial prototypes as factories, steamships, and airplanes. Their aim, insofar as it was possible, was to make buildings machinelike. The results, from the Centre Pompidou in Paris to Boston's City Hall, were sometimes refreshing, sometimes merely bizarre, often functionally implausible, but always strikingly original.

Despite the stylistic clichés that are commonly associated with modern architecture—flat roofs, pipe railings, and blank white walls—the Modern Movement was more than a fashion. It was truly a movement, that is, a loose grouping of people with a broad range of ideas. This diversity is made evident in historian John Peter's *Oral History of Modern Architecture,* a collection of interviews with 59 of the most notable architects of the Modern Movement. What is surprising in Peter's *Oral History* is not how much agreement there was among different modernist architects, but how

little. The Modern Movement was a very big tent, indeed.



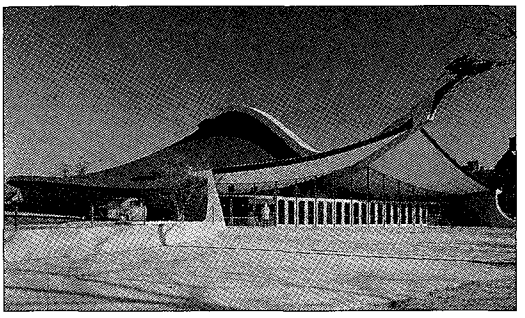
Practicality, for example, is generally held to be integral to modernist design, and the Swiss designer Max Bill piously tells Peter that "what influenced all my thinking in doing architecture is always the human need." Mies, however, had a very different opinion: "The sociologists tell us we have to think about the human beings who are living in that building. That is a sociological problem, not an architectural one."

"Ornament is a crime," the Viennese modernist Adolf Loos famously wrote—a sentiment echoed by Le Corbusier's "I have been at war with decoration for a long time." But Willem Dudok, a Dutch early Modernist, is less doctrinaire: "Ornament is so elementary in the human desire," he observes.

"Form follows function," wrote Louis Sullivan, but even this tenet was not universally followed. "I don't think that architectural form always should be practical or so," says the Finn Alvar Aalto in his fractured English. "There exists practically no culture in the world where it's only utility that commands."

The conversations with Peter also suggest that, though city planning was a preoccupation, here too there was no agreement. Le Corbusier denounces cities such as New York, London, and Paris as monstrous and proposes instead an urbanism of tall buildings and parkland. But his disciple, the Brazilian Oscar Niemeyer, who built many of the public buildings in his country's new capital, Brasília, seems unable to summon great enthusiasm for that soulless city, except to praise it for its lack of pollution. Louis Kahn orates unintelligibly about transforming Philadelphia through the use of enormous parking structures, thankfully never built. Wright, who, despite his 80-odd years, understood that cars, telephones, and television may have made the traditional city obsolete, proposes a horizontal automobile city. "It's inevitable," he proclaims. (Forty years later, San Jose, Phoenix, and Houston have proved him right.) Understandably, most of the architects do pay lip service to the need for formal planning. But Mies is less sanguine on this point: "There are no cities, in fact, anymore. It just goes on like a forest . . . . It is gone forever, you know, the planned city."

Many interviews Peter recorded in his *Oral History* make unsatisfactory reading because the ideas expressed are so banal. Great architects, while they are often great talkers, are not necessarily great thinkers. Many of the conversations deal with abstractions—pious political ideals, vague generalities, half-baked social theories—rather than with the specifics of architecture and construction. Architects are trained to build buildings, not new societies, and while the Modern Movement heralded the new age,



it also seriously misinterpreted it.

Progressive in their aesthetic theories, modernist architects steadfastly held on to a principle that was, in effect, medieval: the ascendancy of the Master Builder. (An oft-repeated image in Bauhaus publications was the Gothic cathedral.) In their minds, at least, architects stood at center stage, ready to make—and unmake—the world around them.

But modern consumer society is much too complex, dynamic, and discordant to be guided by an individual vision, let alone the individual vision of someone as autocratic as Le Corbusier or Wright. Moreover, consumers are not passive; they impatiently make demands, often unexpected demands. They are not interested in being lectured to, and they want more choices, not fewer. The inability to anticipate the volatile and heterogeneous nature of consumer society was, finally, the Modern Movement's fundamental flaw.

It did not take long for the improvised ideology of the Modern Movement to begin to unravel. One already senses in Peter's interviews with younger modernist architects such as Minoru Yamasaki, Philip Johnson, and Eero Saarinen the beginnings of postmodernism, that is, a dissatisfaction with dogma, a tentative acceptance of the past, and a desire to broaden the architectural palette. By the 1960s, Yamasaki (designer of New York City's World Trade Center) was already producing a kind of neo-Gothic modern, and Johnson had built a spate of museums that were defiantly neo-Classical in composition and used not raw concrete but hand-carved travertine.

But it was the mercurial Saarinen, the most gifted designer of his generation (he was only 51 when he died), who probably deserves the greatest credit for pushing design beyond the confines of the Modern Movement. He achieved this in a set of extraordinary buildings: Dulles International Airport, the CBS Building in New York, and the TWA Terminal at Kennedy Airport. In the Stiles and Morse Dormitories at Yale University, not his best work but ambitious sorties into historicism, he created a kind of Italian hill village in New Haven. As early as 1956, Saarinen told Peter: "God knows I am very, very enthusiastic about Mies van der Rohe and the almost common vernacular style that he created and that we all accept as a fine thing. However, I cannot help but think that it's only the ABC of the alphabet, that architecture, if we're to bloom into a full, really great style of architecture, which I think we will, we have to learn many more letters."

Saarinen was right. The orthodox architectural vocabulary that fills *The Oral History of Modern Architecture* was, finally, too meager to carry the Modern Movement into the future. I don't think Saarinen understood, however, that there was no going back once the apple cart was upset. As soon as architects started questioning the narrow tenets of modernism, it was every designer for himself. Having severed its links with the past, modernism left architects with little to fall back on.

The schools of architecture, which had already once drastically remade their curricula to suit the Modern Movement, were not much help. The result has been a sense that anything goes. A bewildering array of architectural ideas confronts the public on every street corner: buildings that meticu-

lously recreate bygone styles, buildings that try to remain faithful to Modern Movement ideals, buildings that resemble Braun toasters, and buildings that look like they fell out of the sky and never quite got pieced together. Less may have been a bore, as Venturi claimed, but the replacement has turned out to be not so much complexity and contradiction as confusion and anarchy.

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Midmorning in the New World Order

TEMPTATIONS OF A SUPERPOWER. *By Ronald Steel. Harvard. 144 pp. $18.95*
WORLD ORDERS, OLD AND NEW. *By Noam Chomsky. Columbia. 311 pp. $24.95*

History seems to allow no time-outs. With unnerving rapidity, the winning of the Cold War has already turned to ashes in the mouths of the "victors." The "New World Order"—that glad, confident morning—is now clouded over with doubts and fears more shapeless than those that darkened the days of superpower confrontations. The Cold War, it seems, was the good war. As well as stifling ethnic and religious conflicts worldwide, it gave the protagonists a clear sense of purpose. Yet obvious as it may seem, Americans have had trouble grasping the point made in both of these books: the Cold War was more an advantage than a menace to the United States.

Beyond making that point, however, these two books could hardly be more different. Ronald Steel, a professor of international relations at the University of Southern California, displays a cool, skeptical pragmatism as he discusses America's efforts to define its new world mission. Noam Chomsky, known almost as much for his anti-establishment political commentary as for his pioneering work in linguistics, practically bristles with outrage at the politicians, public, and—to him, most unacceptable of all—intellectuals who have assented to America's foreign policy, both past and present.

Though he does not share Chomsky's indignation, Steel does wonder whether the United States can "find a way back from the Cold War." After all, in American political life the Cold War was, he writes, "our society's central focus" for three generations. America's all-consuming effort to contain communism revealed its underlying missionary character. (Revolutionary France, Steel points out, possessed a similar sense of unique destiny.) But this evangelical zeal aside, the Cold War occurred at a unique historical moment in the international power system, when America's reach was—or seemed to be—global.

Immediately after World War II, America arrived at a definition of national security that was practically without precedent. Throughout history, great powers have defined their security essentially in terms of neutralizing immediate military threats. But to the formulators of postwar U.S. policy, national security meant shoring up democracy wherever it was threatened in the free world. Here was, quite possibly, an historical first—traceable to what Steel unkindly calls the "loose rhetoric" of Woodrow Wilson—in which national security, the ideal of universal peace, and a liberal-democratic world order were all inextricably linked.