

Extract from
Irish Times, Dublin.

15 MAY 1985

ARTS AND STUDIES

DOROTHY WALKER visited two architectural exhibitions in Paris.

S700

From Function to Fiction

THE PARIS BIENNALE has included an architectural section for the last five years. Previously this has been confined to the work of architects under 40. (The artists were confined to the age of 35: the official reason for the five years' leeway was not retardation but an allowance for architects to establish themselves in practice.)

This year as with the rest of the exhibition, the age-limit has been removed and what Lawrence Wiener called "the geriatric avant-garde" (including, let it be said, himself) is showing its paces in architecture as in the other art forms, including sound. The architectural section, however, unlike the Fine Art section, is exclusively confined to one particular trend, the Post-Modernist, selected by an international commission headed by the French architect, Jean Nouvel. It is entitled "Seen from the Inside — or the Reason for Architecture," and it covers a very wide geographical span of five continents.

As in the Fine Art section, there is no Irish representation, although there is one project in the catalogue for the "Taoiseach's House" competition in 1983 by Julian Wickham with an accompanying text by Aldo van Eyck.

The exhibition is in the magnificent new venue of the Park de la Villette (Metro: Porte de Pantin.) It is composed of large colour prints by two photographers, Deidi von Schaewen and Daniel Lainé, of, mostly, the exteriors of 24 buildings while the film-maker Jean-Luc Léon has penetrated the interiors of 12 of these buildings on a real-life sequence of takes. I have always found that architectural exhibitions fall down on the question of scale and distanced reality: one tends to be looking at an exhibition of photographs, an exhibition of buildings being in fact physically impossible other than in something like a World Fair. One

does receive a certain amount of photographed information but one cannot experience the spaces and immediacy of building as one can experience the immediate presence of the work of art. Film undoubtedly helps with the realisation of scale and interior space.

A rival architectural exhibition was on show at the Centre for Industrial Creativity at the Pompidou Centre, called "New Pleasures of Architecture." This showed very similar works, in many cases identical buildings, so I will discuss them in tandem. The "New Pleasures" were more successful as an exhibition in its format of small one-man (no women) environments with photographs, masquettes and architects' original drawings, and, most interestingly, in the inclusion of architecturally-based works of art. These paradoxically gave a real cohesion to the various architectural projects; gave, I suppose, precisely that reality and immediacy which is of necessity missing from the straightforward architectural exhibition.

Thus, Ben Williken's large environment "The Last Supper" was a full-scale reconstruction of the room in Leonardo's famous painting, the room only, with table, windows, metal doors, but no figures; or Anne and Patrick Poirier's "The Way of the Ruins," a 20-ft. long "Street" of tiny ruins made of minute wooden bricks covered in powdered graphite. Charles Simmonds's "habitations" would have fitted very happily into the exhibition as did Christo's large drawing of the wrapped Reichstag in Berlin, a project he hopes to complete within the next year.

As to the architecture shown in these two exhibitions, Heinrich Klotz, founder and director of the German Architecture Museum, in Frankfurt, summed it up rather more nearly than many of the architectural solutions when he called it "The decline of function and the rebirth of fiction". These

fictions, however, do not seem to me to be grounded in any architectural truths, as literary or artistic fiction would deem necessary in their particular media. The fiction in many cases is more in line with the theatrical fictions of stage sets or, in some of the more ambitious, of film sets. There is also a somewhat theatrical, if not actually lurid, use of colour, of which by far the most popular hue is tinned-salmon pink, as in the model for a house in Luxembourg by Rob Krier made of what looked like salmop-pink polystyrene marshallow. I find it difficult to take seriously an architectural movement whose principle external manifestation is the colour salmon-pink—can this really be the reason for architecture? (I notice, however, that the recently decorated Post Office in Cahir, Co Tipperary, is right out there in front with its new colour scheme.)

While one is distracted by the flummery content of the "New Pleasures Seen from the Inside," one must nonetheless look for some serious intention on the part of these practitioners.

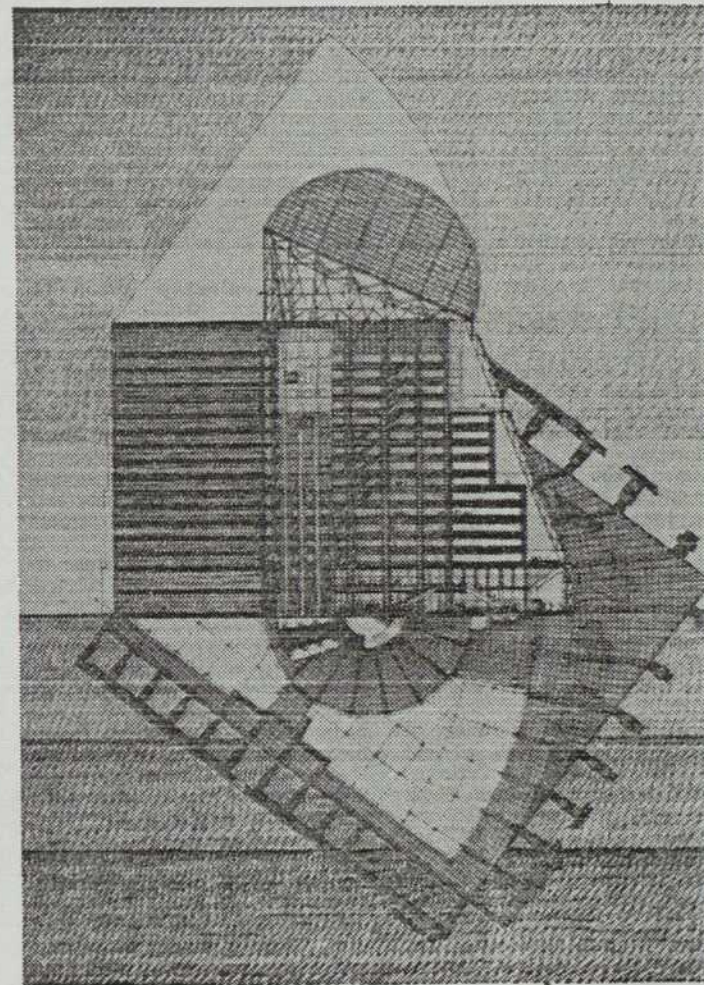
Those Dublin architects who tend towards Post-Modernism have always seemed to me to be motivated by a genuine sociological concern for their fellow-citizens. Such is not the case at all in these two exhibitions. On the contrary, the schemes range from wildly extravagant private town houses by the Chicago Seven which make Venturi's revenge on his mother (her house in Pennsylvania) seem quite tame by comparison, to the grim designs for schools and student accommodation, in Italy, by Grassi and Rossi respectively, guaranteed to turn their young occupants into Fascists by the primitive prison/army character of the buildings and layout. Rossi's project for a cemetery is more human.

Frank Gehry's own house in California, far from any sense of relaxed lotus-eating in that sunny

climate gives the impression of an incredibly messy RUC post with enclosed wire meshing, and high fencing. Other houses show a *nostalgic de la grandeur*: Thomas Gordon Smith's fully coloured Greek Temple house in Sacramento, California; Charles Moore's Italian Piazza in New Orleans; Thomas Beeby's vast house with back-stairs and servants' quarters in Chicago; Stanley Tigerman's Villa Proeh in Highland Park, Chicago, with the Illinois version of Bernini's Vatican Piazza round the back.

One does at least associate space with the State of Illinois, plenty of wide, open space. All the more uncomfortable then is the extraordinarily cramped position of Helmut Jahn's State of Illinois Centre. The photograph here gives no idea of how cramped the building is in reality, shoehorned down between the city's world-famous Modernist skyscrapers. Jahn's free-hand crayon drawings of the building, on the other hand, were quite beautiful. While Jean Nouvel has, understandably, not included his own buildings in the Biennale exhibition, his project for the International Communications Centre at La Défense on the outskirts of Paris is a significant change from the work he was doing some years ago when a reconstruction of the Madeline Church appeared as a penthouse on the roof of an office building. The La Défense building is a steel frame and glass building with no fiction other than the four central bays of the new building which are empty frame, the offices being contained in the glazed two- and three-day sections of either side.

The Biennale exhibition gives a wider, possibly wilder, survey of the world scene in recent years, surrealist underground station in Brussels, vertically undulating bank in Vienna (fluctuating with the dollar?), Foster's ladder-construction sky-scraper in Kong Kong, Skidmore Owings and Merrill's neo-Frei Otto airport in



Helmut Jahn's State of Illinois Centre.

Jeddah, a bewildering *embarras de richesse* which is very instructive in showing how much architecture has changed in the last 20 years. Both exhibitions are worth seeing; the Paris Biennale continues until May 21st, the Pompidou Centre until April 22nd but if "The New Pleasures of Architecture" is finished, the main exhibition at the recently reopened and redecorated main exhibition space is a fascinating mix of philosophy and high-tech: called "Les Immatériaux" (The Immaterialists), it has been curated by a well-known French philosopher, Jean-Francois Lyotard, to include an extraordinary variety of factors in

everyday life, this complex dealt with by the most up-to-date technology in sound, art, communications, etc. Aer Lingus has various handy Paris short-trips but if you do go, remember that the shops are closed in Paris on Mondays and the museums are closed on Tuesdays, so it is better to go in the second half of the week and there is a very useful flight back on Sunday evening.

Finally, a *dernier cri*: what there is obviously a ferment of ideas going on worldwide in architectural design, I feel there is still room for discrimination, to differentiate between the larky and the lively, between gawdy and Gaudi.