

# More Is More: The Rapprochement of Architecture and Art

By Paul Richard

Architecture, Goethe said, is the mother of the arts. He should have seen her in the '60s. She was stingy to her children then, grid-ridden and cold. But her spirit has since thawed.

She is returning to the galleries, acknowledging her history, even influencing pictures. Architecture, once again, has begun to nourish—and in turn is being fed by—other forms of art.

Released from the rigidities of less-is-more dogmatics, architects are now flirting with the pretty. The drawings they are showing here—in rooms long ruled by paintings—look like decorations. These are not working documents. They were made to please the eye.

Other sorts of artists—minimalists, conceptualists—meanwhile have discovered that architecture offers a path away from blankness, a means of pouring content—and narrative, and legend—back into modern art.

Something in this rapprochement recalls the tale-telling paintings—and the haughty petulance—of the days of the *beaux arts*.

Three arts shows touched by architecture are on view in town this month. One, at Barbara Fiedler's, 1621 21st St. NW, would have been larger were it not for the thin skin of Washington's Arthur Cotton Moore. Though architects are thought to be cool, hard-headed folk, Moore read the harmless essay accompanying the

catalogue, flew into a snit, and pulled out of the show.

"The fashionable picturesqueness of Arthur Cotton Moore's potpourri of (re)vitalization and (re)cycling without the necessary burden of (re)thinking . . . is all quite competent and in good taste and will surely offend no one," wrote Chicago architect Stanley Tigerman. Moore was nonetheless offended. "I will not accept," he said, "criticism from someone who has not seen my show."

Another exhibition of architectural drawings—these done, and nicely, too, by I. M. Pei and Partners for the National Gallery of Art's East Building—is at Adams, Davidson, 3233 P St. NW.

Both of these exhibits do more for the eye than they do for the mind. There is a hollowness about them, a sense of something missing. For architectural drawings, even the most handsome ones, remain but pale evocations of the buildings they portray.

The third exhibition, at Protetch-McIntosh, 2151 P St. NW, is vastly more intriguing. The works displayed do not suggest architecture tugged toward art; here, instead, the movement is the other way around. This is less a show of buildings than an exhibition of ideas.

Its look is half-familiar. These plans, photographs, computations, texts, and measured drawings, at first glimpse bring to mind the fashionable devices, and fashionable austerities, the in-turned analytic look that has become the hallmark of recent New

York art. But these works are not the same old thing. Their look is a disguise.

As true minimalists, true conceptualists, will discover to their horror, these artists are subversives. They do not hymn the pure. Using architecture as a wedge, they are forcing something romantic, menacing, ancient and eclectic into the domain of abstract art.

Their structures tell us stories. Their show is full of temples, pyramids, stage sets and log cabins, dark towers and mysterious doors—images that summon actors, priests, frontiersmen and maidens in distress. There are as many tales told here as there were in any 19th-century salon.

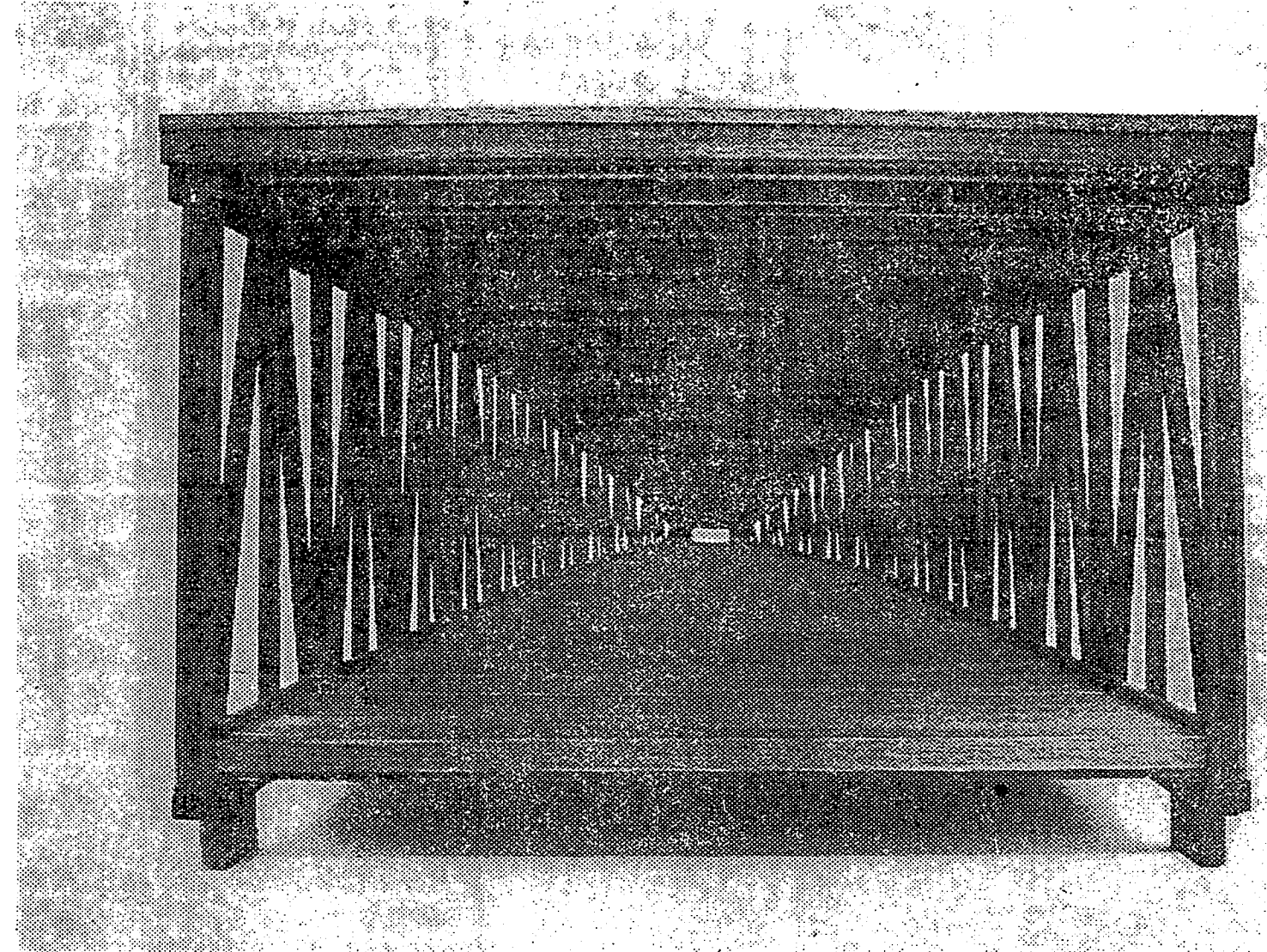
Siah Armajani's "First Bridge" is not only about structure: it also brings to mind New England's covered bridges and forced baroque perspective, Rome and Robert Frost.

Martin Puryear's windowed tower has no Rapunzel in it, but she comes to mind. Will Insley's fine ink drawings, though visually self-sufficient, turn out to be designs for a subterranean temple. Richard Fleischner's "Chain Link Maze" is part drawing and part sculpture, part prison and part playground. Mel Charney's photos show us the symmetry-restoring, eye-deceiving stage set that he built, in high spirits, on a street in Montreal. Seen in such a context, Jackie Ferrara's pyramid hints at the Middle East and Mexico. In the apses, domes, rough logs, pediments and arches of the house by Michael Graves here one reads a hundred references.

The finest works of art here first fill, then free our minds.

Perhaps it is unfair to judge an artist by a single work in a group exhibition, but there seem to be some second-raters in this first-rate show. Bernard Tschumi's ads are a wordy drag. Roelof Louw, who puts mirrors on the ground and nails four-by-fours to trees, takes ideas from his betters and pollutes the land. Nancy Holt, another one-time art polluter—she's placed concrete tubes on deserts—has since had the good sense to let a mason build her simple curving walls out of handsome stone.

"Art and Architecture: Space and Structure" is, despite its flaws, an important exhibition. It introduces Washington to a group of gifted artists who together may have found an antidote to the chilling blankness that



Siah Armajani's "First Bridge" at the Protetch-McIntosh show.

has emptied so much recent architecture, and so much recent art. It closes Feb. 16.

Though it is not a show of buildings, it is oddly denser than the shows of "real architecture" currently on view.

The architects exhibiting at both Adams, Davidson and Fiedler's try so hard to please us that it is not their buildings—but the far-from-necessary beauty of their drawings—that one remembers from their shows.

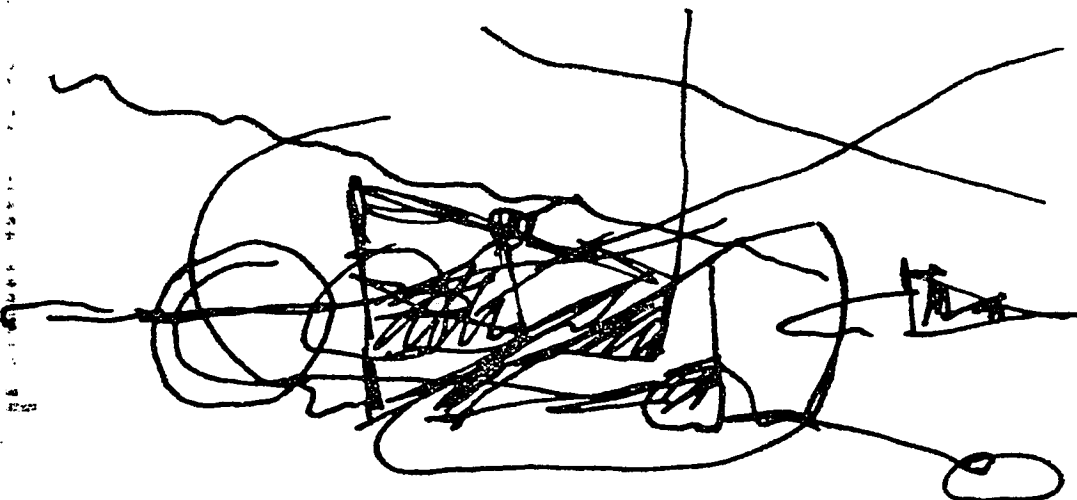
The Pei show now in Georgetown is ruled by Steve Oles, the meticulous draftsman who produced so many of the soft perspective drawings on dis-

play. Builders do not need drawings of such fineness—though, of course, they do please clients. Pei, who saves his master's touch for concrete, steel and stone, scribbles when he draws. Oles portrayed the East Building on small sheets of tracing paper before it had been built.

Pictures also upstage buildings in the Fiedler show. Joseph Boggs would add to the West Front of the Capitol what appears to be a pediment supported by a marble-encased Jungle Gym. Yet he draws so well, with such precision and conviction, that the viewer does not dwell on his inappropriate design. Though Bob Venturi is

a hugely influential teacher and designer, one would not guess his virtues from the rather crummy drawings in this show.

Richard Ridley here entertains his viewers. His drawings, cluttered with cartoons, are as informal and light-hearted as are his designs. The show also includes a pleasing rendering of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer's punning scheme for the Willard Hotel extension, and a costly rendering, by Germany's Helmut Jacoby, that presents on paper a downtown office block that Frank Schlesinger designed. The Pei exhibition, and the Moore-less Fiedler show, will run through the month.



I. M. Pei's concept drawing for the East Building of the National Gallery.