

Cornell Daily Sun

Two Cornell Professors: 'A Promise Unfulfilled'

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The Cornell Daily Sun asked Professors Klaus Herdeg '62 and Alan Chimacoff '62, architecture, to review the architecture of the new Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art. Here, they express their views.

It is obvious that one purpose of a building as a work of architecture is to provide shelter and accommodation of particular use requirements demanded of it. These are the basic services which any building is expected to provide.

Of greater and more lasting significance, however, is the consideration of a building as the product of an intellectual pursuit, as a cultural artifact [sic]. It is to the latter issues that we wish to address ourselves, since the responsiveness of the building as a functional organism can only be assessed after the building has been in operation for some time.

In viewing the building from afar and close-up, its strength of presence seduces one into aesthetic and intellectual involvement which, when pursued, leaves one dissatisfied. It is like a promise unfulfilled.

Perhaps the promise is most akin to the promise of meaning offered by a totem object. The most significant characteristics of the building which suggest totem-like qualities are the symmetry and profile of its configuration, i.e. its physiognomy, and its capacity to be envisioned at scales ranging from a pendant on a necklace to a monument to the gods. The vast unarticulated concrete surfaces - with a smoothness achieved at great expense - are chiefly responsible for this scalelessness.

If scale is that quality of a work of architecture which permits a person to measure himself against the work and thereby grasp its relative and absolute size, and if scale depends on the calculated articulation of the parts and details of the work, then the Johnson Museum lacks it in almost every respect. A sophisticated example of a building with scale is Uris Library, and to a lesser degree, the museum's immediate neighbor, Franklin Hall.

It is the building's totem-like avoidance of scale which has encouraged people to see it variously as a gigantic throne, a monumental altar, a colossal Chinese character or a giant's toy which tumbled out of the Arts Quad.

The range of popular epithets in itself raises the suspicion that perhaps greater meaning does not exist. Hypothetically, meaning could exist in two spheres. First, the physical expression of the building's functional organization (the famous shibboleth of Modern Architecture); second, the manifestation of an aesthetic and intellectual argument addressing itself to a range of historical and cultural issues which attach themselves to the project at hand. The Johnson Museum addresses itself to neither. With respect to the first sphere of meaning, it presents schizophrenic inconsistencies, the most blatant of which is the disposition of the gallery spaces themselves. The form of the building would suggest that the "great north slab" contained spaces of similar and perhaps repetitive use, while the spaces assembled to the south of "the slab" connote a contrasting, perhaps unique, set of uses. It appears contradictory that the gallery boxes are buried in "the north slab" and sculpturally expressed within "the great void."

With respect to the second sphere of meaning, the building offers no contribution to the ongoing polemic of Modern Architecture, into which context it purports to put itself by virtue of its employment of the contemporary stylistic vocabulary.

The premise of a polemic is undermined by the unsystematic, facile, but perhaps unconscious use of the format and detail clichés of Modern Architecture, such as skin-like windows in strips, vast expanses of unarticulated "invisible" glass, and deep-set windows with the "sun breaker" effect.

One of the principal afflictions which Modern Architecture suffers is its fixation on the object in the round, i.e. a lack of response to physical and spatial context. This building shares that affliction, notwithstanding the gestures of response to its setting. The views from and thru the building to the landscape are generous and well controlled and a

sensitive response is made to the space between Franklin and White Halls, especially to the pedestrian approach along the north side of the Arts Quad.

This principal argument might be restated in the following manner. If the power of a totem resides in its meaning, and if the Johnson Museum is totem-like but devoid of corresponding meaning, then its appearance of power is an empty one. In other words, the absence of meaning leaves us with the irresponsible use of the imagery of power. The question of whether it is **proper** to use a museum as an icon of power belongs, of course, to another category of consideration.

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