CORRESPONDENCE

Engineering of Excitement

To the Editors,

Sirs,—Your November issue, just received, displays on its cover drawings of five combinations of hyperbolic paraboloids.

Your comment on the frontispiece mentions that these are studies by students of the American engineer Catalano.

I would hesitate to raise a seemingly trivial correction by pointing out that Mr. Catalano is not an engineer, were I not compelled by other motives than pedantry.

Mr. Catalano is an architect.

This fact is only important in one respect: it is the architect, and only the architect, who can finally combine structural ingenuity with spacial meaning and correct scale. We need not even mention Soane’s breakfast room (however much it is a ‘structural fake’) or Galli Placidia’s tomb to realize that scale and geometric and structural forms in the hands of an architect-designer combine into an absolute whole. I mentioned these two examples intentionally, as they are diminutive in dimension and vast in scale.

This is the architect’s mastery displayed. We have for so long now had to take our lead from the engineer, due to our complete poverty in purely architectural knowledge, that we seem to be trusting him wherever he leads us.

Catalano is tackling his investigations from the correct end: his first and main consideration is that of scale, and I mean architectural scale. The fact that he is investigating a ‘new’ structural shape is completely irrelevant in the final assessment of spacial values. After all, we haven’t—most of us—yet mastered the architectural consequences of a cross vault.

Yours, etc.,

S. Bukan.

Lagos, Nigeria.

Venezuelan News Letter

To the Editors,

Sirs,—Interesting and informative as your Venezuelan Newsletter (November, 1958) was, I should like to comment on some of the points mentioned by your correspondent.

The true splendour of the Banco Obrero housing schemes here in Caracas lies, I feel, not in the attempt ‘to preserve a human scale on the often dramatically-terraced sites,’ but in the achievement of exploiting these sites with long, high ellipses and slabs of reinforced concrete frames, infilled with brilliant primary colours. Set against the mountain range, the whole is magnificently monumental in a way that is entirely architectural, and needs no apology in ‘human’ terms.

Few Caraqueños imagine the schemes ‘unite all classes of society’ (in the common purpose of a better life). Admirable as they both are, one might as well refer to the Peabody Trust Housing with much the same degree of accuracy.

Lastly, and this on a point of
The present baffling turn taken by Milanese and Torinese architecture probably appears the more baffling to ourselves, viewing it from the wrong side of the Alps, because of the irrelevant hopes, the non-Italian aspirations of our own, that we have tended to project on Italian architecture since the war. Without realizing what we were doing, we built up a mythical architecture that we would like to see in our own countries, an architecture of social responsibility—stemming, we believed, from such political martyrs as Persico, Banfi, the younger Labo—and of formal architectonic purity—stemming from Lingeri, Figini, Terragni. This architecture, socially and aesthetically acceptable to men of goodwill, we saw embodied in particular in the Milanese BBPR partnership, of which the first B was the martyred Banfi, the terminal R was Ernesto Rogers, the hero-figure of European architecture in the late Forties and early Fifties.

The evidence of the eyes often contradicted the myth; again and again the architectonic qualities that we sought were to be found in work of the Roman school, notably (and surprisingly) in the work of Moretti, whom the Milanese would brush off as 'not socially serious' while the awkward questions of modern eclecticism raised by the work of Luigi Vagnetti had a way of being unformulable except in terms that put Milan on the spot as well. Nevertheless, our hopes continued to reside in Milan, in the Triennale, in QT8, in the Compresso d'Oro, in Comunità, in Domus and, even more, in Casabella Continuità, Persico's famous magazine of the Thirties revived under Rogers's editorship.

But when Casabella began to publish, with manifest editorial approval, buildings that went far beyond Vagnetti's in historicist eclecticism, when the BBPR partnership staged
for the London Furniture Exhibition of 1958 an Italian section that seemed to be little more than a hymn of praise to Milanese borghese taste at its quiescent and most cowardly, and when, finally, the Italian exhibit at the Brussels Exhibition was seen, then confusion followed hard on disillusion. But behind our own private reactions there remain the buildings that produced them, and the attitude that produced the buildings, an attitude that even other Italians, like Bruno Zevi, clearly regard as wrong-headed and misguided. Indeed, these recent works of Gae Aulenti, Gregotti, Meneghetti, Stoppino, Gabetti, their associates and followers, and the polemics advanced in their defence by Aldo Rossi and others—all these call the whole status of the Modern Movement in Italy in question.*

Historically, the modern movement has always had a meagre foothold in the Peninsula, and has depended on flukes of patronage. Before the war, modern architecture hardly existed out of earshot of the railway line from Milan to Como, an area where the backstage influence of Marinetti (whom Sartoris once acknowledged in print as a patron of the movement) and other Fascist Modernists was most likely to be felt. Within that narrow zone, ‘modern’ was practised as a style, since it could not be practised as a total discipline—as literally hollow formalism of Terragni’s Casa del Fascio at Como brilliantly demonstrates. Since the war it has relied chiefly on a post-partisan mood of social responsibility and conscious avantgardeism in the cities of the north, on foreign relief programmes, and—as we have all been forced to know by a brilliant public-relations campaign—on Olivetti. But let that mob wither, let those relief programmes pass into Roman hands, let Olivetti’s stylistic determination waver... the bulk patronage of architecture still comes from the government and from the borghese classes, neither of whom has much use for out-and-out modernism, especially in domestic work, which is where the retreat from modern has begun.

Recall the crushing Fascist tenements in Ladri di Biciclette, the dark, overstuffed interiors of Moravia’s early stories. Set against them the blocks actually being built for low-rental housing by SGI and even INA-Casa, or the interiors in which rising Italian film-stars are photographed ‘at home,’ and depressingly little has altered beyond the detailing, and some amelioration of space standards. Recall too the homeless, starving, couple in Miracolo a Milano whose first wish was a crystal chandelier, and you know something bitter about Milanese mental processes.

Practically everyone who is buying or renting domestic accommodation in Italy today wants forms and structures that give better immediate value for money than out-and-out modern affords, and giving, iconographically, immediate and reassuring evidence of the building’s domestic nature—be it signorile at one end of the social scale, casalinga at the other. Such requirements do not necessarily rule out good architecture, as Quarini’s work at La Martella, in the face of economic desperation, and Moretti’s Casa del Girasole, in the teeth of economic affluence, amply demonstrate. Above all, there is in both of these, and in some other comparable works, a degree of progressive aspiration, a forward-looking aesthetic, even when structural techniques and social orders seem a millennium behind those for which the modern movement was created.

But the retreat harks back, consciously and avowedly, to what Aldo Rossi calls ‘the forms of a middle-class past,’ to the Tempi Felici, to the good old days when the northern cities were growing fat on the proceeds of the industrial expansion of the early nineteen-hundreds, when the Simpion had just been triumphantly pierced, when the Milan International Exhibition of 1906 was the talk of Europe—and when Lo Stile Liberty, Italian Art Nouveau, still held sway, but was beginning to lose its fine careless flourish under influences from beyond the Alps.

Paolo Portoghesi seems to have been the first to call the style of the Retreat by the apt term ‘Neoliberty’ as late as the end of 1956, but the Liberty content of the style has been clear from the start, and underlines the fact that this is not just an isolated piece of juvenilia (the Neolibertarians are all young) but something for which the whole body of Italian modernism must share the blame. For more than three years now, leading architectural periodicals in both Milan and Rome have been working over the remaining monuments of Art Nouveau in a degree of detail that bespeaks a more than historical interest. Works of Gaudi, Sullivan, d’Arconeo, Horta, and the Viennese school, in particular, have been described and illustrated even to the extent of the original drawings and colour-blocks of their exteriors, supported by texts that were far less expository or explanatory, than they were eulogistic and rhetorical.

Where the oddity of this situation struck the present writer most forcibly was in the way in which Italian writers dealt with Sant’Elia, playing down his Futurism, playing down his influence on later architects, but emphasizing his origini Liberty. Again, Gillo Dorfles, most intelligent and least parochial

* Rossi’s polemic, and illustrations of typical works of the Retreat, can be found in Casabella, No. 219 (other buildings had been illustrated earlier in No. 217), Zevi’s editorial attack on ‘provincialism’ is in Architettura, No. 36, and there is a further worthwhile editorial comment, from a less committed position, in Architettura-Cantiere, No. 18.

† The term is apt chiefly in describing the intentions of the Retreat; its stylistic sources go well beyond the wild Liberty of, say, d’Arconeo, and draw clearly from the Wiener Werkstätte in Vienna, and even from the Amsterdam school (particularly from de Klerk) and the Glasgow school. From these last two sources come, presumably, the preoccupation with brick, and a tendency to square off the profiles and silhouettes of projections and roof-slabs. Nevertheless, the term Neoliberty can stand—if only because it was coined by someone close, and sympathetic, to the movement.
The extent to which the famous names of Milanese architecture have retreated can be judged by these two blocks by Figini and Pollini, one of 1949 in the via Brolo, 1, and the other in the via Circo, completed last year, 2.

3 and 4, the relationship of the retreat to historical precedents can be measured by comparing two illustrations, 5 and 6, of a late villa by Otto Wagner (as they appeared in Bruno Zevi's magazine l'Architettura) with two recent works in which Ernesto Rogers was involved, the Aquila office in Zaude, with their dummy pitched eaves concealing a flat roof behind, and the interior of the Italian Pavilion in Brussels, with its Wagnerian stained glass (and its stupendous outburst of Milanese Chandeliers).
In spite of the work of their elders, it is the young who have been credited with the creation of Neoliberty, as exemplified by their work in Turin, Milan and Novara.

7 and 8, in Turin, the much-discussed Bottega d’Erasmo, by Roberto Gabetti and Almaro d’Isola, emulates the hard, brisk plasticity of Mackintosh on the front, and something softer and more Viennese at the back.

9, at San Siro, outside Milan, the stable-block designed by Gae Aulenti seems to draw on the same late nineteenth-century sources as the earliest Le Corbusier (AR, March, 1959.)

10, near Novara, the block of duplex apartments by Gregotti, Meneghetti and Stoppina, shows unmistakable likenesses to Amsterdam-school work that appeared in Casabella about the time of their completion.

11, apparent ‘Modern Historicism’ is not restricted to Italy—witness this house by David Gray at Lowestoft—but a case can be made for drawing on some periods rather than others.

12, finally, Neoliberty is not limited to the North of Italy; this detail is from a new block in Rome designed by the well-known Cooperativa di Reggio d’Emilia.
of Italian aesthetes, spoke of *lo Stile Liberty* in a recent book (significantly entitled *Oscillazioni del Gusto*) as a style 'very near to us.'

Questioned about his attitude to both Neoliberty and its forerunner, Dorfles replied, in a letter from which the following are quotations, 'Today... my position is critical towards the excessive stylistic and decadent influences of certain Milanese and Torinese groups (including some of the experiments of Aulenti, BBPR, etc.) without, however, considering it purely a piece of provincialism as Zevi does.' This, from Dorfles, should warn us that, for Italians, Art Nouveau, or its local variants, has some continuing validity that it has lost elsewhere, and he goes on to make a statement that opens up a wider question of more than Italian relevance: 'But I am convinced still, that the future in architecture, as much as in design generally, lies more in a stylistic continuation of the Art Nouveau than in the Bauhaus-style.'

Now the problem of alternatives to the 'Bauhaus-style' is one that clearly exercises the minds of younger architects in many parts of the world, even if they have not, as in England, an explicit hostility to 'the white architecture of the Thirties.' There is a widespread feeling that much that was of value in the architecture and theory current before 1914 was lost or buried in over-hasty stylistic formulations in the early Twenties, and then forgotten during the Academic phase of the Thirties—hence that preoccupation of younger architects, to which Henry-Russell Hitchcock has drawn attention, with architectural questions that were current about the time they were born.

But, even if the men of the nineteen-twenties were wrong, and the men of the thirties were stubborn in error, that is no reason for going back to the beginning and starting all over again. Events have moved too fast, even in the Forties, for there to be any time for architecture to go back and re-puzzle its earlier problems. Over and above this, there are particular reasons for not going back to Art Nouveau.

The only conceivable justification for reviving anything in the arts is that the reviver finds himself culturally in a position analogous to that of the time he seeks to revive—a return to something like classical sophistication and affluence in Fourteenth-century Italy justifies the Renaissance architecture of the Fifteenth, the achievement of something like Athenian democratic sentiment in the early nineteenth justifies le style neo-grec. What undermines these justifications is the presence of factors that notably were not present in the styles revived—Christianity in Renaissance architecture, industrialization in neo-grec—and where these intrusive factors are too large to be overlooked, the justification must fail.

Now a justification of Neoliberty on the basis that Milanese _borghese_ life is still what it was in 1900 is indeed implied in the polemics of Aldo Rossi. But it will not wash, because that life is not at all what it was at the beginning of the century, as Marinetti, with his fanatical mobilism, already recognized in Milan in 1909, Art Nouveau died of a cultural revolution that seems absolutely irreversible: the domestic revolution that began with electric cookers, vacuum cleaners, the telephone, the gramophone, and all those other mechanized aids to gracious living that are still invading the home, and have permanently altered the nature of domestic life and the meaning of domestic architecture.

Parallel with this domestic revolution there was a thorough overhaul of ideas and methods in the plastic arts generally, marked by such signs as the Foundation Manifesto of Futurism, the European discovery of Frank Lloyd Wright, Adolf Loos' *Ornament and Crime*, Hermann Muthesius's lecture to the Werk bund Congress of 1911, the achievement of fully Cubist painting, and so forth. These mark a watershed in the development of modern architecture; there is a certain consistency about everything that has happened since and a schism from what happened before. And Art Nouveau, _lo Stile Liberty_, happened before.

It has become a convention, based chiefly on paying too much attention to what the masters of Art Nouveau claimed they were doing, to regard it as the first of the new styles, but the evidence of the eye affirms that it was the last of the old, in spite of the signs of transition that can be found in its best works. To revive it is thus to abdicate from the Twentieth Century—which may have purely personal attraction—like going to live on a desert island, but is no help to one's fellow-men, and architecture, for better or worse, concerns one's fellow-men.

On the other hand, these objections do not—yet—apply to the tendency to a _de Stijl_ revival visible in Anglo-Saxon countries, reaching an extreme point as far as England is concerned, in David Gray's recent house at Oulton Broad. Even sofar as this revival the forms of Rietveld's work, it does at least revive forms created since the watershed, still possessing marginal significance. But if the present disquets of architecture resolve themselves in a crisis of ideas—such as the Neoliberarians claim is already upon us—and raise another cultural watershed, then the Rietveld revival, as well, will cease to have any living significance for us, and Neoliberty will become the last revival of—not a pre-mechanical culture—but the last pre-mechanical culture but one.

But all such justifications are marginal; the lasting significance of the revolution put in hand in 1907 is that it has given Western architecture the courage to look forward, not back, to stop reviving the form of any sort of past, middle-class or otherwise. The performance of the revolutionaries may not have matched their promise, but the promise remains an is real. It is the promise of liberty, not Liberty or 'Neoliberty,' the promise of freedom from having to wear the discarded clothes of previous cultures, even if those previous cultures have the air of *tempi felici*.

To want to put on those old clothes again is to be, in Marinetti's words describing Ruskin, like a man who has attained full physical maturity, yet wants to sleep in his cot again, to be sucked again by his decrepit nurse, in order to regain the nonechalance of his childhood. Even by the purely local standards of Milan and Turin, then, Neoliberty is infantile regression.