

Center in Paris, which opened in 1977, represented “the dawning postmodern moment,” and 20 years later, “the funhouse mentality produced its first great building, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao,” whose “amazing design succeeds precisely because [architect Frank] Gehry had the wit—and the guts—to take as his subject the annihilation of the museum as we know it.” People go to Guggenheim Bilbao to see the building, not the art, says Perl.

This trio of institutions may be viewed as offspring of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, the original “user-friendly” art museum, Perl notes. “There is very little in the way of multimedia exhibitions, attention-grabbing alternatives to painting and sculpture, or institutional self-promotion through high-end

architectural projects that the Museum of Modern Art has not done, and done decades ago.” But there is, he says, a basic difference: “Nowadays, it is not art but the culture’s fascination with art—and with the art business—that fuels the museums. The museum curator who was once interested in how artists were responding to the world around them has been replaced by a curator who is more interested in the environment than in the artist.”

In the “funhouse” museums, Perl says, paintings cannot compete with “the enveloping atmosphere, the overheated mood.” In supposedly “opening art up to new media,” Tate Modern and the others, he concludes, are “closing art off from the wellsprings of tradition that have nourished artists forever.”

Architecture’s Class Struggle

“Class Notes” by Michael Benedikt, in *Harvard Design Magazine* (Summer 2000), Harvard Univ., Graduate School of Design, 48 Quincy St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

Architects believe that theirs is a *helping* profession, writes Benedikt, director of the Center for American Architecture and

Design at the University of Texas at Austin. And just what is the nature of the service they provide? Well, this is seldom expressed out

EXCERPT

The Lit Crit Job Bust

At long last there is widespread talk of a crisis in literary studies, and yet in a kind of displacement the hand-wringing is directed not to the real problem, but to one of its side effects—that there are almost no college teaching jobs available for new Ph.D.s. When supply dwarfs demand, the question arises, is the problem mainly one of demand, or of supply? Everyone talks only about supply—that is, too many people in graduate school—and nobody ever faces the dreaded possibility that the crisis is really one of reduced demand. Yet, it should be obvious that demand is the problem. If undergraduates were majoring in English at the rate of 30 years ago, their numbers would be about 60 percent greater than they actually are today. The supply of Ph.D.s would then be hopelessly inadequate to meet the demand for new professors of English. The real source of the crisis must therefore lie in the fact that undergraduates are not attracted to what college literature programs now offer them. The college literature establishment professes sympathy for its hapless graduate students, but is not prepared to do the one thing that might help them—and that is, to think again about the mix of identity politics and postmodern dogma that has made English and related departments intellectually uncompetitive.

—JOHN M. ELLIS, a professor emeritus of German literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in *Academic Questions* (Spring 2000)

loud, but, as much as anything else, it is “to preserve or elevate the class of their clients.”

Architects, of course, do not confuse class with “money or material wealth, old or new,” says Benedikt. It is a matter of exhibiting “good taste and refined behavior”—and certain architects stand ready to offer their clients instruction in acquiring these. The fact that the “star system” has become so entrenched in the architecture world, Benedikt maintains, is due “at least as much to the star-architects’ lifelong commitment to, and success at, promoting their own class status and that of their clients as to their hard work and design talent.”

A mark of upper-class status is “the conscious suppression” of any display of need, including the need for class elevation itself, says Benedikt. “Class-wise architects . . . will appear in no need of permissions or compliments, assurances, money, or agreement—certainly in no dire need.” This “neediness-denying virtue (real or dissembled),” Benedikt argues, powerfully affects “the very nature of design and the architect’s choice of style.”

Consider, for example, Mies Van Der Rohe’s Farnsworth House (1946–50), in

Plano, Illinois, and Philip Johnson’s emulative “Glass House” (1949) in New Canaan, Connecticut. What do those austere glass boxes exemplify, asks Benedikt, but “the class-emblematic transcendence of ordinary human needs” for heat and privacy?

“When genuine needs are spurned rather than satisfied,” the author contends, “and especially when they are spurned out of a strategic need to avoid the display of neediness, the results can only strain at, not achieve, nobility. Not only can the psychic toll be considerable, but the whole strategy is eminently cooptable by those whose real interests are economic.”

Look around, he concludes, at the state of architectural culture today: “The dominant strategy for class supremacy remains attached to the ascetic/minimalist/modernist program of neediness denial, with all sensuality, all richness, all tradition, all need for physical and psychological comfort surrendered to the unadmitted need for art-world prestige, and sublimated to reading/writing about the extremely subtle charms of raw concrete and translucent glass, tall empty spaces, and light.” Most artists and most Americans “aren’t having it,” Benedikt says.

OTHER NATIONS

Brazil’s Young Democracy

A Survey of Recent Articles

The full flower of democracy came late to Brazil, nearly five centuries after Europeans first arrived, but finally, little more than a decade ago, it did come—and so far, it has survived. But its roots are shallow, and daunting social problems persist in the world’s fifth largest and (with 150 million people) fifth most populous country. Sixteen scholars, writing in *Daedalus* (Spring 2000), assess Brazil’s condition and prospects.

Fernando Collor de Mello was elected president in the 1989 elections that marked Brazil’s becoming a full-fledged democracy. The traumatic but successful 1992 impeachment of Collor on corruption charges, and his removal from office, can be read as a sign of the democracy’s strength, rather than its weakness, notes Leslie Bethell, director of

the Centre for Brazilian Studies at the University of Oxford. Current President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who won a second term in 1998, is “a distinguished sociologist . . . and a politician with impeccable democratic credentials and advanced social democratic ideas.”

But Brazilians consistently hold political leaders in extremely low esteem, Bethell and historian José Murilo de Carvalho, of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, separately observe. In a 1998 poll, 94 percent said they did not trust politicians, overwhelmingly regarding them as dishonest. President Cardoso fared a bit better: Only 69 percent distrusted him. Eighty-five percent looked upon Brazil’s political parties with suspicion. Those parties are numerous—30 or so, cur-