

## The Museum of Modern Art and the Man-Made Environment: An Interim Report

The Museum of Modern Art is unique in that it deals with the whole spectrum of man-made objects, ranging from those whose meaning is largely private, such as painting and sculpture, to those whose meaning is substantially dependent on a socio-economic context, such as industrial design, architecture, and urban planning. As an institution concerned with evaluating the ideas and emotions embodied in the man-made objects of our culture, the Museum has been seeking new ways of comprehending and acting upon the processes that give form to our present environment.

In October 1967, the Museum sponsored the creation of The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, an independent, non-profit, educational corporation under a charter of the Board of Regents of The State University of New York. The Institute was conceived as a new educational milieu, both for the training of post-graduate architectural and social planners and for the research into and design of the physical environment. For the last three years it has been testing design proposals against the actual political, social, and economic constraints of implementation and serving as a bridge between the theoretical world of the university and the practical world of planning problems.

Another aspect of the Museum's evolving design program is its response to changing intellectual and emotional circumstances. Just as today the arts and sciences are developing new ways of understanding the structure of the universe, so are man's ways of feeling, thinking, and acting upon his environment changing significantly through design.

Concurrent with advances in the sciences, the development of a new world-view that conceives of systems as dynamic and in a constant state of change has driven designers away from concern with isolated elements toward a focus on processes. Design is thus shifting its emphasis from the production of isolated objects to a more comprehensive approach in which objects are conceived in relation to one another and to their ecological, constructed, and socio-cultural environments. The designer, accordingly, no longer understands the man-made environment as exclusively populated by passive communities of non-related elements, but rather beholds it as a result of the processes of interaction between the physical elements he designs and society's patterns of rules and behavior. The current changes taking place in design research, practice, and education can be seen, therefore, as attempts to develop new design approaches which can deal comprehensively with all factors involved.

To deal with these changes, the Museum is now developing a Program on Environmental Design under its Department of Architecture and Design. This Program will be implemented by means of two different though complementary functions. The first is a *critical*, or retrospective, function; the second is a *postulative*, or prospective, function. The critical function will aim at understanding the meanings and relationships

of our present environment by analyzing it in the context of past and contemporary history; the postulative function will explore alternative solutions to the problem of the man-made environment through environmental design projects.

Through its critical functions, the program in one of its projects hopes to develop methods for dealing with the changing circumstances of design with the publication of a series of books entitled *Prospectives of Design*. This project will deal with the fact that the most crucial design contributions of the last decade which merit "collecting" have in many cases not been objects but rather theoretical essays and design proposals. These have greatly expanded two important concepts: first, the notion of what constitutes design and the extent of its relation to the socio-economic environment; and second, the modes by which the designer beholds his environment and the methods by which he attempts to act upon it. This anthology will therefore present the most important theoretical writing of the last decade dealing with this subject. In addition, it will commission essays on the ecological and physical aspects of the man-made environment.

As part of its postulative functions, the program will undertake a series of projects with The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies. *The Street as a Component of the Urban Environment*, a project commissioned to the Institute by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and The Sloan Foundation, will examine the potential of street design as a means of improving the urban environment. It will analyze the physical and social problems of urban streets in areas of residential, commercial, and mixed land development. This will be done through detailed analysis of various street types in several urban contexts and the development of socially feasible alternate design solutions. This study of streets may lead to the development of new models for community environments. It will culminate in an exhibition at the Museum, tentatively scheduled for late 1972.

The research project entitled *Institutions for a Post-Technological Society: The Future of the Man-Made Environment* attempts to investigate the nature of the crisis of our urban environment with two major concerns: to break through the impasse in dealing with the man-made environment by examining the objectives to be met by those institutions—universities, museums, private and public agencies—concerned with its design, management, and evaluation; and, to postulate the new or restructured types of institutions that will have to be developed to satisfy these objectives. This project will culminate in a publication and a series of presentations at The Museum of Modern Art in 1972.

—Emilio Ambasz  
Curator of Design  
Director of the Program on Environmental Design

Excerpt from

## Members Newsletter

Spring 1970

NEW SCHEDULED FOR JAN. 8-9, 1972

NEW SCHEDULED FOR MAY 22, 1973