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DESIGNS FOR BEST PRODUCTS SHOWROOMS ON VIEW AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

An exhibition featuring six facade designs commissioned by the Best Products Company for their retail showrooms will be on view in the second-floor Goodwin Galleries of The Museum of Modern Art from December 13, 1979 through February 10, 1980. Directed by Arthur Drexler, Director of the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum, the exhibition includes models and drawings of these projects, commentaries by their architects, and photographs of built work for Best Products by SITE, Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer, and by Venturi and Rauch.

The Best Products Company is the nation's largest catalog-showroom merchandiser, with 74 showrooms in 10 states. Beginning in 1972, the company began to build a series of innovative designs by the SITE architectural group, retaining the basic "brick box" prototype but manipulating facades so as to create what Mr. Drexler calls "a sort of built commentary that starts with the original standard design and, by implication, takes on commercial building, the consumer society, the uses of ambiguity, and the relation of architecture to art." Six examples of SITE's work are shown. In addition, the company commissioned a just completed showroom in Oxford Valley, Pennsylvania, from Venturi and Rauch, and an administration building near Richmond, Virginia, by Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer.

For the current exhibition, six architects were asked to consider the basic Best Products architectural problem: What do you do with a showroom building that is essentially a windowless box? Their responses, as illustrated in the exhibition, are substantially different, although there are affinities. As Mr. Drexler observes in his text for the publication accompanying the exhibition, "What current moods might have been expected to produce is extra-architectural associations, and that is what all of the six architects commissioned to design new showroom facades have come up with." While Anthony Lumsden, Michael Graves, and Allan Greenberg "respond with sobriety, differing most of all in what they take seriously," Stanley Tigerman, Robert Stern, and Charles Moore "respond to the occasion with humor, but for Tigerman and Stern humor is another mode of moralizing."

Stanley Tigerman and Robert A. M. Stern "deal with a realignment of building types." In Tigerman's project, the entire building is converted into a typical suburban home--but now on a warehouse scale. Rather tongue-in-cheek, Tigerman notes in his catalog statement that "only one very small, alien element clouds the otherwise clear azure dome over suburban America--the uneuphemized, uncleansed, naked capitalist without any emperor's clothes at all--the commercial-strip shopping center." Tigerman's project is marked by satiric intent. For Robert Stern, on the other hand, the model on which he exercises his architectural wit is not domestic but sacred. Stern's project recalls Henri Labrouste's 1829 reconstruction of the two temples of Hera at Paestum. Where Labrouste would have had trophies and inscriptions, Stern has placed images of such modern trophies as TV sets and tennis rackets. Stern writes: "The standard Best Products building is a box whose purpose is to supply the objects that are demanded by and in part define the lives of those who live out a version of the American Dream--a version in which material

possessions, once the objects of religious sacrifice, now serve to mark out rituals of daily life. To a considerable extent our household goods have become our household gods; our markets, temples of consumerism. In designing a facade for Best, we have undertaken to tell the story of this transformation of values in a witty way, and to describe the cycle of life to which it bears witness."

Charles Moore's facade is a crystalline, playful sculpture that fragments into reflecting facets of mirror. What may not be immediately apparent, however, is that these facets combine to represent a group of 12 "guardian" elephants carrying howdahs. As Mr. Drexler notes, "the reflecting surface thus makes abstract an image Moore has borrowed and rearranged, namely, the angular elephants originally devised for San Francisco's almost forgotten World's Fair of 1939. The result manages to be at once abstract and figurative, as well as interesting, amiable, and zany. These qualities are in no way undermined by associations with ancient relief sculptures depicting Babylonian or Persian triumphs."

Anthony Lumsden utilizes glass technology to sculptural ends, but the result is different indeed. "Perhaps the most astonishing of the six," in Mr. Drexler's opinion, Lumsden's curved-glass project is an exploration of some of the themes first broached by the SITE buildings for Best Products. The overall effect of Lumsden's project is lyrical, but this lyricism is one compounded of the forms and methods associated with technology. Lumsden writes: "The Best showroom project continues to investigate an architectural vocabulary I have used for several years: the membrane aesthetic; the extruded facade; intersecting forms; and reversed curves. In this project destruction of the box is intended without identifying with inversion and entropy as generative resources."

Michael Graves' and Allan Greenberg's approach to history is earnest rather than parodistic. They both draw upon classic forms, albeit with somewhat different impulses and emphases. Greenberg has added a small, richly detailed portico to the original Best Products "box" (which has been left visible). Greenberg conceives this Tuscan-columned entryway being executed in the finest marbles. In his statement about his project, Greenberg makes explicit his unproblematic adherence to the classical tradition and its notion of the "beautiful": "The classical language of architecture simplifies the problem of providing shelter from the elements and physical identity for the retail outlet by using beautiful architectural forms that have been honed to physical perfection by the experience of centuries. Contrary to recent dogma, the classical tradition is not dead, and its forms are neither overly expensive nor impractical.... By following the example of the past and by using the forms and meanings of classical architecture, we can make our shopping precincts and their buildings richer and more coherent works of architecture that will assume their rightful places in the American landscape."

Michael Graves, on the other hand, has designed his portico to overwhelm and perhaps usurp the Best Products box by offering the possibility of a colossal stoa. "At its most persuasive, the design goes beyond the parameters of the problem," observes Mr. Drexler, "and yet it addresses itself forthrightly to the idea of a public place."

The overall message of the exhibition is that, as Philip Johnson writes in his Foreword to the catalog, "The Modern Movement seems really gone from the scene. But not modern architecture. Modern can still include Venturi; Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer; Wines--as well as our six. Harder to define than the International Style, less arrogant and self-satisfied with their moral superiority than their

ancestors, architects today are more inclusive, more permissive, more popular-oriented, indeed more popular, than the Modern Movement allowed."

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