

Ada Louise Huxtable 1988 Laureate Oscar Niemeyer Essay

On Awarding the Prize

by Ada Louise Huxtable

A lifetime in architecture is both short and long. It is short enough to build a distinguished body of work that is clearly and unmistakably of its own time, with the strengths and weaknesses that this implies, and long enough for the ideals and principles upon which that work was built to go out of style. It does not quite take a lifetime for tastes and beliefs to change. What does not change is the quality of the work, and the passion and predictability with which the present rejects the very recent past.

At a time when reputations are seesawing in and out of history, with the modernists heading the list of outs, the selection of Gordon Bunshaft and Oscar Niemeyer for this prize may seem reactionary to some, a bow to nostalgia, or a rebuke to the new. To fly in the face of fashion, however, by honoring two modernist masters while criticism is focusing on the revealed flaws of the modern movement, is more of a radical than a reactionary act. By suggesting the need to reassess, rather than to reject, the philosophy and practice of the recent past, the intention is to make a revisionist gesture as much as to bestow an overdue honor.

The award acknowledges the quality and importance of two parallel and complementary contributions. Bunshaft and Niemeyer represent the opposite sides of the modernist coin - the rational and the romantic, the powerful and the poetic. A continent and culture apart, they have had a profound impact through buildings that have defined twentieth century life and architecture in a significant and irreversible way. Both have been committed to the vocabulary and the ideals of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe and a movement that altered the nature of building, and of its response to the technological and other factors that have made this century unlike any other.

Gordon Bunshaft has defined the corporate headquarters building, a structure as important for our commercial culture as the palace and the church were for an earlier royal or religious age, with consummate art and skill. If we demur at the symbolism we deny reality; it does not make these suave skin skyscrapers and stunning office palazzi less dazzling achievements. If Brasilia is trapped in the errors of early urban theory, Niemeyer's domestic and recreational designs, in which flowing, free-form spaces are so perfectly married to the exotic landscapes of Roberto Burle-Marx, demonstrate a lyricism and a language unique in time and place. Together, these two architects summarize and signify the range and character of the modern movement. They have helped define and shape the century's art and institutions.

In the haste to move on to another century, we often fail to understand our own. It is appropriate to recognize a lifetime of work, while the life, and the work, can still be celebrated.

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