

—Rondal Partridge.

Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, California.

BUILDINGS IN THE VERNACULAR

By ALLAN TEMKO

AFTER World War II, as the "International Style" swept powerfully through much of the world, it became apparent that regionalism nevertheless remained a force in modern architecture, not only in Alvar Aalto's Finland, but also on the hills overlooking San Francisco Bay. Although the new architecture of the industrial age, like industrial technology itself, overrides national boundaries and local building traditions, as in the work of Mies van der Rohe or Buckminster Fuller, there existed on the West Coast a sizable group of serious architects—perhaps as many as thirty or forty by the 1950s—who sought an authentic regional vernacular in their carpenter-built houses, schools, and churches.

Thus the sweeping natural grandeur of the Bay region became the theater of one of the more interesting dialogues of the modern movement. To internationalists such as the brilliantly uncompromising Raphael Soriano, whose lucid houses of steel are fully at home on the wooded Bay hillsides, the regionalists were acting in the teeth of profound twentieth-century realities. The regionalists may have appeared thoroughly contemporary in outlook, but in fact they relied heavily on preindustrial techniques and materials—especially redwood left to weather naturally—in order to achieve modernist ends.

As long as the West remained thinly settled and lightly industrialized, as it did until the war, there was no paradox in the regionalist approach. At their finest the small redwood buildings were

undeniably gracious, handsome, and economical. In particular the servantless houses, which by the 1940s had been discovered by the consumer magazines and which have since influenced residential design throughout the nation, were at once unassuming and "warm," yet very dignified. Beneath broadly projecting roofs and trellises that shielded large areas of glass from the sun, they were vivaciously open to stirring views, as well as to patios and decks, which the balmy climate allowed an informal society to enjoy most of the year.

In such unconstrained architecture Lewis Mumford and other humanists rightly saw great hope. For it offered the possibility of a middle way between the impersonal structural objectivity of Mies van der Rohe and his followers, on the one hand, and on the other the overpowering romantic personalism of Frank Lloyd Wright. Within the liberal range of the "Bay Region School"—as Mumford named it, although he knew it was part of a broader coastal movement extending from Pasadena to Seattle, and going back in time to vernacular redwood cottages of the last century—there was abundant room for local variety according to geography and climate and for personal interpretation of the carpentry idiom. There could be even gloriously eccentric mixing of redwood with reinforced concrete, asbestos wall panels, and steel factory windows in Bernard Maybeck's great Christian Science Church of 1910-12 in Berkeley, which is probably the school's chief masterpiece.

Significantly, the intellectual center of the movement was also at Berkeley, where William Wilson Wurster presided over the school of architecture which Maybeck had founded, and where younger regionalists such as Joseph Escherick and Vernon De Mars were professors. The school itself was housed in one of the most charming redwood buildings of all, almost residential in



—Morley Baer.

Patio of Stanford structure in photo at top—"modest expression in wood."

scale, which was designed in the office of John Galen Howard, the Beaux-Arts classicist who, like many architects of the older generation, happily turned to the regional style in his small buildings.

Yet Richard Neutra, who himself used redwood with pristine internationalist elegance in California houses, warned that "all humanism is not redwood"; and this in turn raised the question of how well the regionalists would build, when they finally had the chance, with steel and concrete in urban situations.

For across the Bay was "The City": San Francisco, white and proud on its hills, an international metropolis that contained the real challenge the regionalists had yet to face. Although many of them had offices in San Francisco, they were essentially suburban architects with very little experience in heavy construction. Historically in San Francisco, as elsewhere in America until the slump of the Thirties, the major downtown commissions had gone to eclectic firms, some of them very able, which produced a succession of picturesque towers and solid classical monuments (with the notable exception of the exquisite art nouveau glass curtain wall of Willis Polk's Hallidie Building of 1915). When big buildings were erected again after the war, they were virtually all pseudo-modern pastiches, including the I. Magnin Store on Union Square and the 25-story Equitable Building in the financial district.

Only in the 1950s, after the national firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill established a San Francisco office, did large modern buildings of exceptional

distinction rise in the city. The first, and in some ways still the most interesting, was a Miesian tower of glass set in its own resplendent park: the Crown Zellerbach Building, completed in 1959. Although the California sun punishes the all-glass façades, so that curtains are frequently drawn and the spectacular views are lost, Crown Zellerbach set a new architectonic standard for the Far West in its meticulous detailing, its unflinching use of technology, and its remarkably open structure. Supported by only nine columns on either side of the 20-story slab, with a utilities tower flanking the southern façade, the unobstructed floors are 200 feet long and nearly 70 feet wide.

Before so strong and clear a concept the regionalists could only recoil: they found it "oversimplified" and, in spite of its grace, "cold." Nor could men devoted to a carpentry tradition fully appreciate the spatial majesty and technical daring of the two prodigious hangars by SOM's structural designer Myron Goldsmith that went up at the San Francisco Airport about the same time. In contrast a regionalist firm such as Anshen & Allen, in a significant garage on the University of California campus for which the brilliant engineer T. Y. Lin devised long spans in prestressed concrete at extremely low cost, felt obliged to embellish the exterior with "sculptural" decoration, very much like a concrete pineapple skin, and a Chinese gate supposedly emblematic of the region's ties with the Orient.

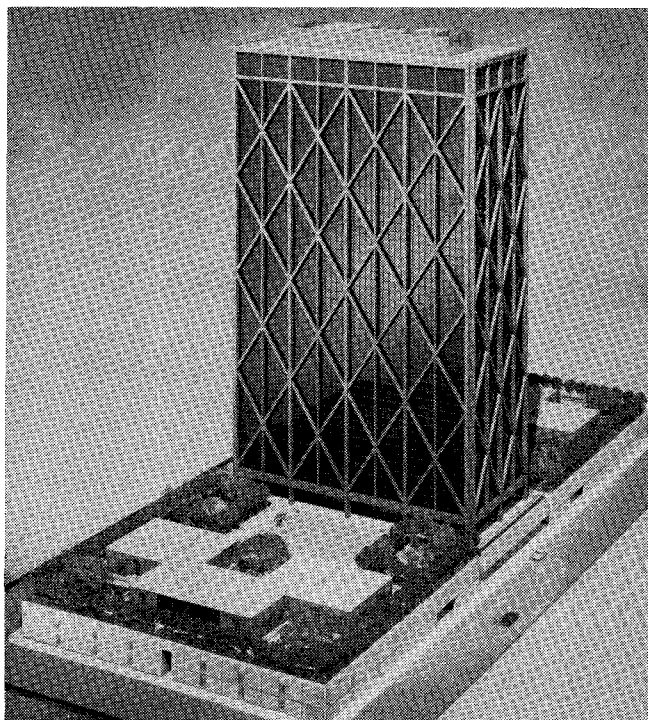
Still less could the regionalists accept the fine Miesian serenity of SOM's Naval

Postgraduate School on a beautiful wooded site at Monterey (the historic town which in a sense was the birthplace of the Pacific School of Architecture). Instead of these Chicagoan buildings, the regionalists insisted, there should have been something Californian.

But what, precisely? As long as the regionalists could answer with modest expressions in wood, such as the Center for Advanced Study of the Behavioral Sciences, a research retreat which William Wurster and his partners, Theodore Bernardi and Donn Emmons, lovingly placed on an isolated knoll on the Stanford campus, their replies were very convincing.

In San Francisco, however, where they finally were receiving downtown commissions, they were much less persuasive. The Wurster firm's first large San Francisco building, a massive service facility for the Bank of America at the important intersection of Market Street and Van Ness Avenue, finished in 1960, comes as a shock. As if the world's wealthiest bank could not afford to landscape part of the irregular site, and thus give the structure a well-defined emplacement and a more coherent form, a cumbersome lump of a building was heaped up from the sidewalks. Apart from the soft brown color of its precast concrete wall panels, it was hard to see what, if anything, made this heavy, malproportioned structure "Californian."

But incoherence and irresolution might be inevitable in large buildings if they were designed as informal redwood houses might be, turning out "the



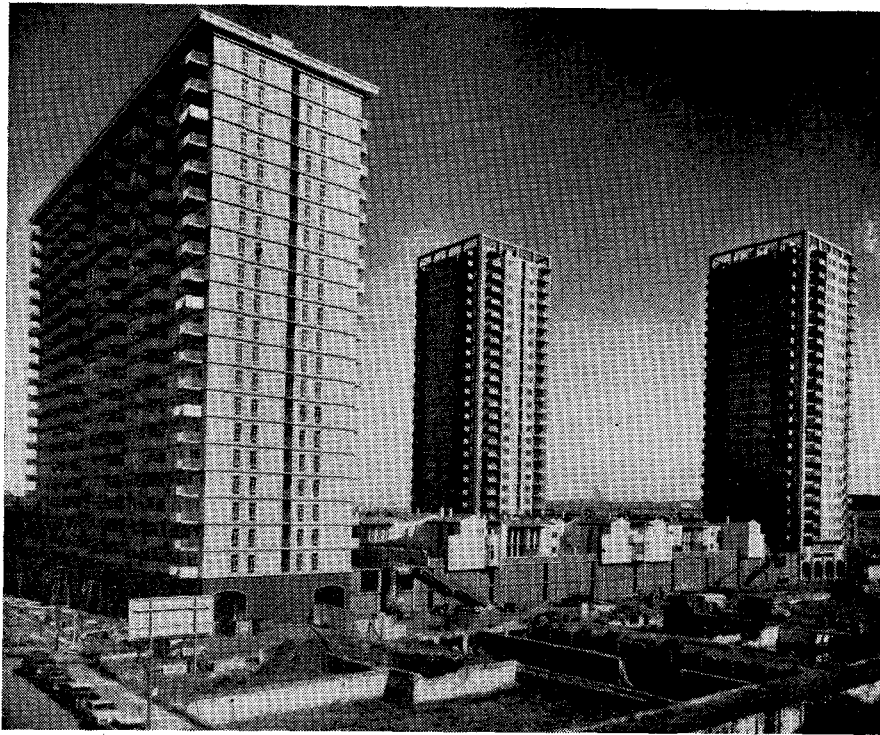
—Dwain Faubion.



—Morley Baer.

Alcoa Building, San Francisco—"structural regionalism."

Crown Zellerbach Building, San Francisco—a new standard.



Golden Gateway Center, San Francisco—a new skyline.

way they had to.” This seemed to be precisely what was happening, at staggering cost to the taxpayers, at the once-lovely campus of the University at Berkeley.

After a long reign of architectural terror from the Thirties onward, under slipshod successors to the admirable classicists of the early years of the century, the vast “multiversity” of Clark

Kerr had been turned over to the regionalists in the Fifties. Dean Wurster was named chairman of the campus planning and development committee, and it is altogether characteristic that no detailed study model of the entire campus was deemed necessary during a period of enormous expansion (that in the last decade alone has cost some \$100,000,000). The result was the devastation of one

of the most magnificent sites in the world as an almost incredible hodgepodge of unrelated structures arose. Some were better than others, but none, including the new College of Engineering by SOM, had real architectural significance. Almost all were brutally coarse in comparison to older work on the campus. The most deliberately brutal of all was the new College of Environmental Design, Wurster Hall, which houses the Departments of Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and City and Regional Planning, and was designed by Professors Esherick, De Mars, and Donald Olsen.

At their worst the new buildings parody once-valid traditions. Overhanging roofs sit on bulky classroom or laboratory blocks like outsized hats. Concrete sunscreens, thick enough to carry locomotives, do not remove the need for Venetian blinds inside. A meaningless trellis of steel, jutting from the roof of the Student Union, is perhaps a tribute to the shade of Maybeck but it does not shade the building. Virtually everywhere on the campus there is now a slapdash quality, as in the exterior drainpipes running down multistory façades which seem to be, and may well have been, afterthoughts by men unused to monumental practice.

With few exceptions all the leading regionalists were involved in this debacle, from veterans such as Gardner A. Dailey, a creditable redwood architect in the old days, to John Carl Warnecke, whose big firm is one of the most successful in California although he is only in his early forties.

Warnecke, who had done well enough in redwood, too, has been raggedly uneven in his strangely characterless campus—sometimes uneven within a single building, perhaps because of changing staff. In San Francisco, moreover, as principal architect of the mammoth \$38,000,000 Federal Building, which has more total floor space than any other office structure in the West, Warnecke has helped to perpetrate an architectural calamity far greater than any at Berkeley. This insensate mass, a perfect emblem of faceless bureaucracy, has irreparably disrupted the fine baroque scale and noble mood of the Civic Center.

The office of Wurster, Bernardi & Emmons, also very large and successful these days, has landed two of the most magnificent commissions in the history of San Francisco. They are working on an enormous Headquarters Tower for the Bank of America, being assisted in the design process by the peripatetic Dean Pietro Belluschi of MIT (who helped also with the esthetics of the Pan-Am Building in New York) and, somewhat surprisingly, by Emery Roth & Sons, who are responsible for a whop-



Golden Gateway area from the air—Are town houses necessary?

ping chunk of the postwar commercial hackwork in Manhattan. Perhaps the assignment of the Roth firm is to keep costs down. Nothing is publicly known of the carefully guarded preliminary design, except that it calls for the tallest building by far in San Francisco's history, reportedly 700 feet high.

One wishes the architects all the best, and hopes they will do considerably better than the Wurster firm has done thus far in its other tremendous commission: twenty acres of residential development in the great Golden Gateway project, bordering the downtown financial district on the site of the delightful old produce market, which was cleared as a slum.

Together with De Mars & Reay, the Wurster firm won an ambitiously staged design competition for this big undertaking which will eventually transform a long section of the skyline. Their basic concept was admirable—it called for an elevated cityscape, twenty feet above the existing streets, which would continue to interlace the area. This elevated cityscape would have two kinds of tall structures—point-towers and slabs—rising at intervals from pedestrian plazas, which actually would be the roofs of shops and garages below on the old street level.

The most questionable feature of the scheme was the installation of town houses on the plazas. Picturesque historicism was obviously intended, and a simulation of the over-all physical pattern of San Francisco, where towers leap haphazardly from clusters of small buildings at all levels of the steep terrain. But not only did Golden Gateway seem the wrong place for small (but mercilessly expensive) residences, the town houses also destroyed the space that towers need for a decent setting. There was also the question of privacy. The bleak concrete patios of the houses and apartments on the plaza level, fenced off as if they were suburban backyards, would be plainly on view to the thousands of residents above.

In the preliminary proposal, however, the towers seemed acceptable, if totally uninspired (in contrast, for example, to I. M. Pei's fine Society Hill group in Philadelphia, also a renewal project). Usually, too, competition designs are decisively improved before they are executed. In this case they were perceptibly coarsened. These concrete monoliths are utterly without scale, and studded with stuck-on balconies. In an effort to mitigate their ponderous effect, Alexander Girard was called in to tart them up, as the English say, with pretty color. Alas, this talented man, so adroit in small areas such as the Fonda Del Sol restaurant in New York, produced a palette of Easter-egg shades, which, on



International Building, San Francisco—"stridently gay."

—Fred Lyon.

these sullen surfaces, suggest too much makeup on a fat woman.

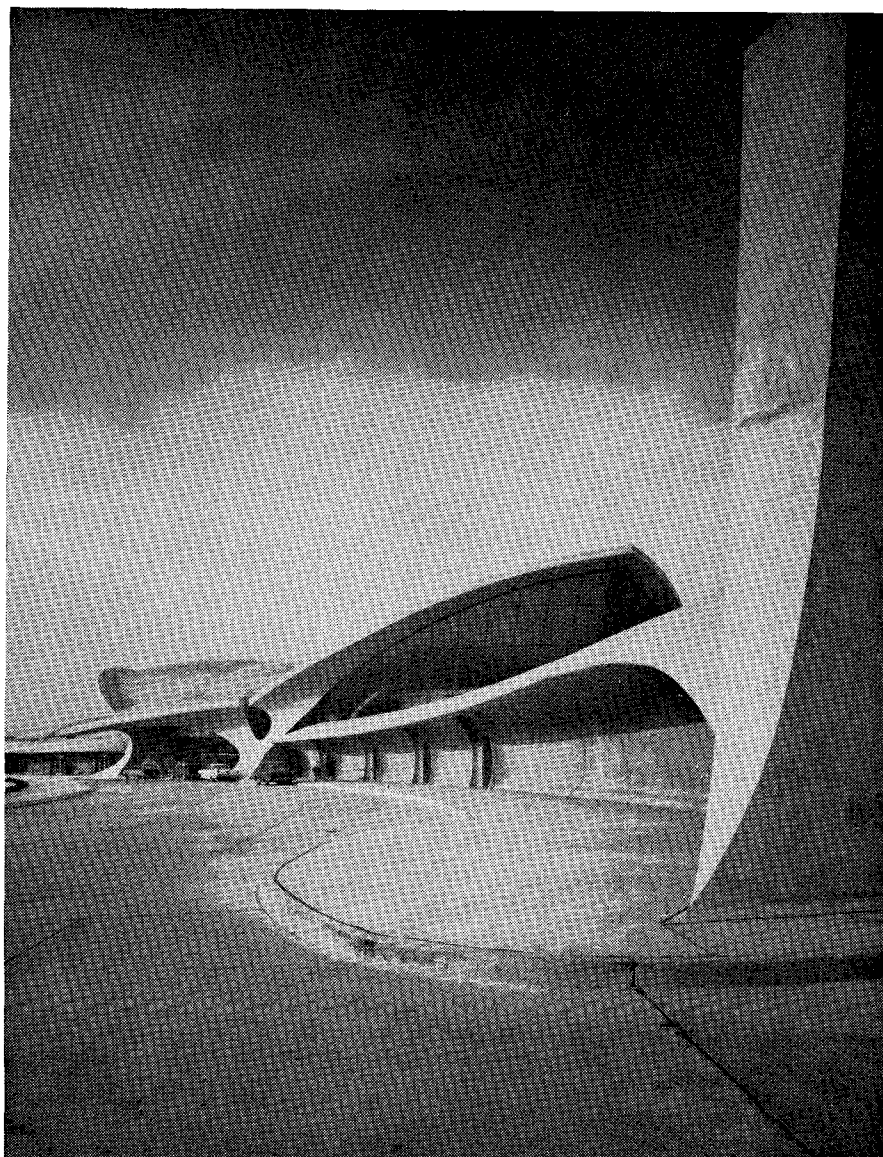
Even more disastrous, because they must be passed through as well as seen, are the plazas. The town houses, which appeared rather trim in the competition design, now compose a sort of mad frontier village with both Scandinavian and Latin overtones. As it turned out, in order to make the effect more "warm," the town houses were parceled out to three firms—Wurster's, De Mars's, and Anshen & Allen—none of whom evidently bothered to tell the others what it was doing.

The unfortunate role played here by William Stephen Allen and his late partner Robert Anshen is especially regrettable because they alone, among the regionalist firms with major reputations, have managed to produce a superior building in downtown San Francisco.

Their twenty-one-story International Building is an openly romantic reply, a somewhat Wrightian reply, to the Miesian purism of SOM's Crown Zellerbach. Situated at the base of Nob Hill, just below St. Mary's Square, where California Street begins its spectacular ascent from the financial district through Chinatown to the hotels at the summit, the tower lifts with the city in cantilevered tiers, terracing westward, but not quite joining St. Mary's Square, at the fourth-floor level; and then lifting again, seventeen stories to the rather garish roof which caps the penthouse like frivolous millinery. The façades are very active, indented at the four corners so that it becomes an eight-cornered building; and crushed white quartz embedded in the precast concrete spandrels catches the light. The building is too stridently

(Continued on page 57)

SHOOTING ON SITE



—Ezra Stoller (TWA).

TWA Terminal, Kennedy International Airport—The image echoes Saarinen's intention: "to take the discipline imposed by the concrete shell vault and give it a non-static, soaring quality."

By MARGARET R. WEISS

THE PASSENGER jet-bound for Hawaii had a bemused, slightly worried expression. Actually his concern was not about air safety, or about his professional role as a recorder of architectural history. He was merely reflecting on the \$400 he had to pay for excess baggage—one of the occupational hazards an architectural photographer whose work requires six or seven cases of assorted equipment learns to live with.

In this instance the traveler was

James Vincent, on his way to photograph the new Kahala Hilton for a magazine assignment. But it might just as easily have been Alexandre Georges or Samuel Gottscho, Baltazar Korab or G. E. Kidder Smith, Ezra Stoller or any of a hundred others who have made both an art and a science of recording buildings for architects, contractors, industrial clients, advertising agencies, and publications.

Whether his pictures are destined for a documentary odyssey underwritten by a foundation grant, an archeological text sponsored by a museum, for a travel brochure, a magazine feature, or an aluminum manufacturer's annual report, the architectural specialist has to face two facts—or rather, two facets of one fact. His subjects are massive, immobile; he must always be peripatetic, a Mohammed coming to the mountain of steel and glass. And, as one of the leading practitioners of architectural photography readily admits, "It is no job for the faint-hearted. A full coverage means just that: inside, out, night and day—and around the clock, too, whenever the job demands it."

Intimately concerned as he is with the empirical world of experience, the photographer may have little academic interest in the esthetic theories of architecture. Yet he cannot avoid being affected by the influence such concepts have had on the architect's tangible product. When a Le Corbusier conceives of architecture as "the masterly, correct, and magnificent play of the forms of light," it is a clue that the architect does more than simply harness logical solutions to functional needs. Logic is tempered with feeling; every material, invention, and method at his disposal has to be utilized creatively to fashion beautiful form.

IT IS from this marriage of form and function that the architectural photographer takes his cue. Not a single exposure is made until he has grasped the architect's intention, discovered how the building has been designed and structured to fulfil its particular function, and determined what approach will most effectively serve the client's purpose. For Samuel Gottscho, who has specialized in architectural subjects for forty years, "it is a matter of studying carefully what the architect has done. And what has been done beautifully should be beautifully done in the photography, too."

Doubtless such a professional credo makes for satisfied clients. In appraising Ezra Stoller's work, for example, a member of the architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill commented, "He shows the best side of the architecture, first studying it to learn what the architect has attempted to say, then trying