Science, The Human Spirit

By DAVID L. PERKINS, AIA

Microcosm versus macrocosm. The little world versus the greater world!

This paradox is the one that seems to be revolutionizing the world today and provoking the most thought. Ironically, it is the key word that dominates most industries, commercial endeavors and professions these days. It seems to be a short time ago that more commonly associated with the so-called religious ceremony Catholics attend on Sundays.

Yet today, this four-letter word, more familiarly linked with "mass" production, "mass" consumption, and "mass" demonstrations, has become the most effective threat to our individuality. Margaret Meade once made the comment that our children today are even being educated to a large degree by the "mass" media.

Toss Terms

In architectural circles, the experts are tossing around terms like "macrocosmic," "microcosmic," "total approach," design concept, etc. - all directed to create a total environment that will promote easy interaction and coordination, and to live and grow in a manner befitting the people's times and the opportunities their times offer.

Most members of the profession in architecture agree that the physical structure in our cities is indispensable in planning designs now and in the future that would integrate the intellectual, educational, social, recreational, industrial, and commercial needs of man into one "work of art" that would harmonize them into a more functional and aesthetically appealing unit. The fore-runners of this movement were architects, active in citing its necessity.

Nathaniel Owings of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill has written The American Aesthetic which is an appeal to rehabilitate our total environment.

Such scientific investigations by the Greek Constantinos Dauxidas and his book on ekISTICS, which is the science of human settlements, support the need for careful planning in the future, as well as giving insight to the needs of civilizations in the past and how they were handled.

Dynamic Planning

But, there's an enthusiastic American architect, Lawrence Halprin, whose works are a living example that for dynamic planning another element must be featured besides physical planning. The name of the man who has proved that planning plays so well is INVESTIGATIONS. In his case, it's human involvement.

Halprin's basic philosophy toward efficient and functional architecture acknowledges that planning is a definite necessity today and physical design is important. But, his personal approach is that buildings and complexes should be more beautiful and functional. This should be a psychological stimulant to the joy of being and moving and doing things that are inherent part of human nature. His pre-occupation with the "human scale" has prompted Von Eckhardt to refer to him as the "majoranist force in environmental design."

Prime Example

Ghirardelli Square on San Francisco's waterfront is a prime example of Halprin's style in effect and it has grown to be a major tourist attraction in just four years. A huge and successful shopping center composed of old and new buildings, many shops, dining areas, plazas and fountains, has numerous winding stairways, tiered platforms, balconies and walkways that people find hard to resist.

The magnetism of his designs is that they entice movement; they encourage people to become not just living spectators, but active and enthusiastic participants in the environment he has produced. One of his fountains in Portland, Oregon has such a frolicksome atmosphere, it often prompts spectators to jump in and enjoy the way the water swirls around their feet as they walk along the steps under the water's surface. Though all of his designs don't elicit quite this degree of merry-making, the undertone of the human element and quality of personal involvement rather than perfect design are always predominant forces in Halprin's work.

Keen Insight

In planning the macrocosm or "mass" world, over-specialization is a pit easy to fall into with science and technology moving at such a rapid pace and with populations expanding every day. Though keen insight and expertise in the physical planning of environments can't be overemphasized, it's only a part of the total picture. The delicate problem for architects in the future might well be to try and preserve the zest and vitality that is human nature while providing order amid the confusion. It's a challenge that Halprin seems to have met with great success.

Though he has some critics, Lawrence Halprin's designs seem to blend both the physical and "human," and they are an encouraging indication that today's architects should not limit themselves to the physical process of their profession because he will be losing something valuable in the process.

Like good art, architecture shouldn't just be something functional or pretty to see. It should bring about a definite response from the people involved.

Nature and ecology have always played an important part in man's outlook and it's imperative that the human element be protected and balanced in the other forces of science that seem to be trying to automate the human spirit. Halprin's designs, though controversial in some areas, capture the balance necessary to give human nature and individuality its rightful place. Let's hope his enthusiasm is contagious!