The Influential Automobile

The purpose of architecture is, in general, to take the functional requirements of a building, combine them with the most appropriate building techniques and clothe the whole with art. In order to do this we must take into consideration climate, materials, location, etc. But we tend to discount one of the single biggest factors in influencing the physical world in which we live: our old friend, the automobile.

Sure, electricity and plastics and air conditioning have made a difference. But we go on trying to camouflage our houses to look like those ingredients had never been invented. Our lights are imitation gas - non - electric lamps. Our plastics are die - formed to look like shingles and brick. Our air conditioning is very carefully hidden.

Not so with the automobile. You only have to compare your own home today with pictures of the typical American farm dwelling a century ago to realize that the automobile has indeed altered the way our houses look.

Room Of Own

For instance, what is that big gaping hole in the side of our house? The carport. the carport, or, of course, the garage. The front door has moved away from its former street side orientation and is now, more often than not, situated with wheel - born visitors in mind.

No longer do we have the picturesque carriage houses, backrooms and barns of a century ago. For a while, we tried to pretend so with the detached garage, but the automobile being a cleaner and quieter housemate than the horse, we gave it a room of its own, in the kitchen.

The automobile has affected our architecture in subtler, and more far - reaching ways than this however. The reasons so many of us live in suburbs today is because we have the means to get to these. The automobile being a cleaner and quieter housemate than the horse, we gave it a room of its own, in the kitchen.

The automobile has affected our architecture in subtler, and more far - reaching ways than this however. For instance, is the theory of space ever the same as it was when the automobile was not around? No longer do we have the pictures we have when we look at our old friend, the automobile.

The automobile has certainly been the major factor in the decentralization of our cities. Because of the automobile, the major portion of our weekly family budget is being spent in neighborhood, area, regional shopping centers, our downtown areas, the so - called "center cities," are becoming financial, governmental and business administrative centers. Without going into the question of whether this is good or bad, we certainly must recognize that it is caused by the automobile. And, that is changing many of our old concepts of architectural design.

Parking Lots

An aerial photograph of almost any medium to large city in the United States will show what is probably the biggest physical change wrought by the mechanical horse. Twenty - five to thirty per cent of the land area will be unoccupied by buildings - parking lots. Modern planners, who tend to think in terms of space, see this as a healthy trend. Of course, the open spaces will have to be something more than a quarter block of asphalt paving. With landscaping, the addition of little places to stop, a few flowers, some sculpture, empty spaces, become breathing spaces, a welcome relief from the monotony of nothing to look at but buildings.

Formerly, the city planners' idea of a neighborhood center was a school, a church and perhaps a park serving an area of houses, all within walking distance, say a mile radius. It made a very pretty picture, despite the fact that neighborhoods are almost never made up of people all of the same religious persuasion, and for years this remained the theoretical yardstick for master planning schools, traffic arteries, fire stations and almost every other type of service oriented architecture.

Larger Areas

Today, almost all of this is out the window. Because of the automobile (and the school bus), schools are being placed to serve larger areas, churches go where the land is available, and, sad to say, the parks frequently get what is left over.

Although many of the effects of the automobile on our environment have been somewhat beneficial, a few aspects of the motor age are somewhat frightening. Drive down any major artery in Lafayette and what do you see? Mile after mile of commercial jungle. Restaurants, filling stations, retail shops, liquor stores, each elbowing the other in a rather vain attempt to get closest to the street and attract the most attention. Commercial strip development is not Lafayette's strong point; as in most other cities, it is, unfortunately, the child of the automobile. Until our planning and zoning functions find a way to bring some order out of this problem, I am afraid we are stuck with it.

The big question now is, will we control this new force in our lives, or will it control us?