

Behind the Tension and Contrast

MARCEL BREUER: SUN AND SHADOW. The Philosophy of an Architect. Edited by Peter Blake. Designed by Alexey Brodovitch. Illustrated. 205 pp. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. \$7.50.

By VINCENT J. SCULLY

1956

ONE wishes there were some word other than "philosophy" which architects and other artists might use when describing their verbal rationalizations for the forms they make. The importance of the plastic arts in human experience derives from the fact that they arise from and give rise to systems of knowledge which have little to do with rational thought. They are at once pre-rational in terms of human development and an extra-rational extension of knowledge in complicated and intellectualized societies. Since the break-up of Baroque culture in the late eighteenth century the architect, like other artists, has no longer had avail-

able to him a clear set of cultural principles within which he could work. He has therefore often been forced to imagine his own programs for building and his own set of values for expression.

Doing so, he has often come to think of himself as a social philosopher, an arbiter of life principles and a rational director of the objectives of civilization. This attitude has sometimes led him into intellectual absurdities which at best have had little to do with his actual buildings and at worst have adversely affected his own essentially intuitive processes of creation. Some of the "philosophy" presented by Frank Lloyd Wright belongs in the first category; it is possible that the "rational" systems of a more recent generation belong in many instances to the second.

In the training of that generation Marcel Breuer, as Walter Gropius' most gifted collaborator at the Bauhaus and Harvard, played a major part. Yet Breuer has generally managed to avoid the error of thinking of his work

in terms other than those which are proper to it. When he touches lightly upon city planning in his present book he insists that he will not speak as a sociologist, as many architects have attempted to do, but as an architect who is primarily concerned with the emotional effects of form and space and with human experience in sensory terms.

His chosen title is precisely appropriate to his work. "Sun and Shadow," he tells us, derives for him from the Spanish *Sol y sombra* of the bull ring and of the Spanish view of life: not compromise but tension, not gray but black and white in vital contrast. This is a happy image for Breuer's work, which the present book, well edited by Peter Blake, presents in hundreds of photographs and drawings from its beginnings in Germany in the Twenties to its later, but by no means final, phases in America after 1936.

The visual material, accompanied by an entirely inoffensive

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text, clearly demonstrates that Breuer is above all the architect of tension and contrast. (Appropriately enough, the book is bound sideways, for me a rather tension-producing arrangement.) He enjoys the suspended rather than the rooted shape, the perforated rather than the solid surface, the contrast rather than the harmony of colors. Through these qualities his buildings seem an excellent emotional equivalent for and metaphor upon a major segment of modern life.

They are also important because they show Breuer to be one of the few architects in America who participates not only in a rather generalized Bauhaus esthetic but also, most positively, in the self-challenging aggression and tumult which is characteristic of Le Corbusier's design. Sometimes, as in his Caesar Cottage at Lakeville, Conn., of 1951, Breuer can even accomplish something most rare in architecture but common in Le Corbusier's work. That is, he can evoke an image. The building becomes a creature, tense and masked.

The necessary generalization of much of modern life is understood by Breuer in his search for types, as demonstrated by his unilineal and binuclear plans and his new interest in space frames. But he remains an individual and thinks and works in specific terms at small scale. From this derives his intense vitality in furniture and house design, but from it also arises his obvious difficulties when attempting to attain appropriate scale for large building projects. This is a modern problem, and its effects can be observed in Breuer's projects for the Unesco building in Paris and St. John's Abbey in Minnesota. If the final designs for these projects can achieve monumental order and scale, a new phase will have begun in Breuer's already distinguished career.