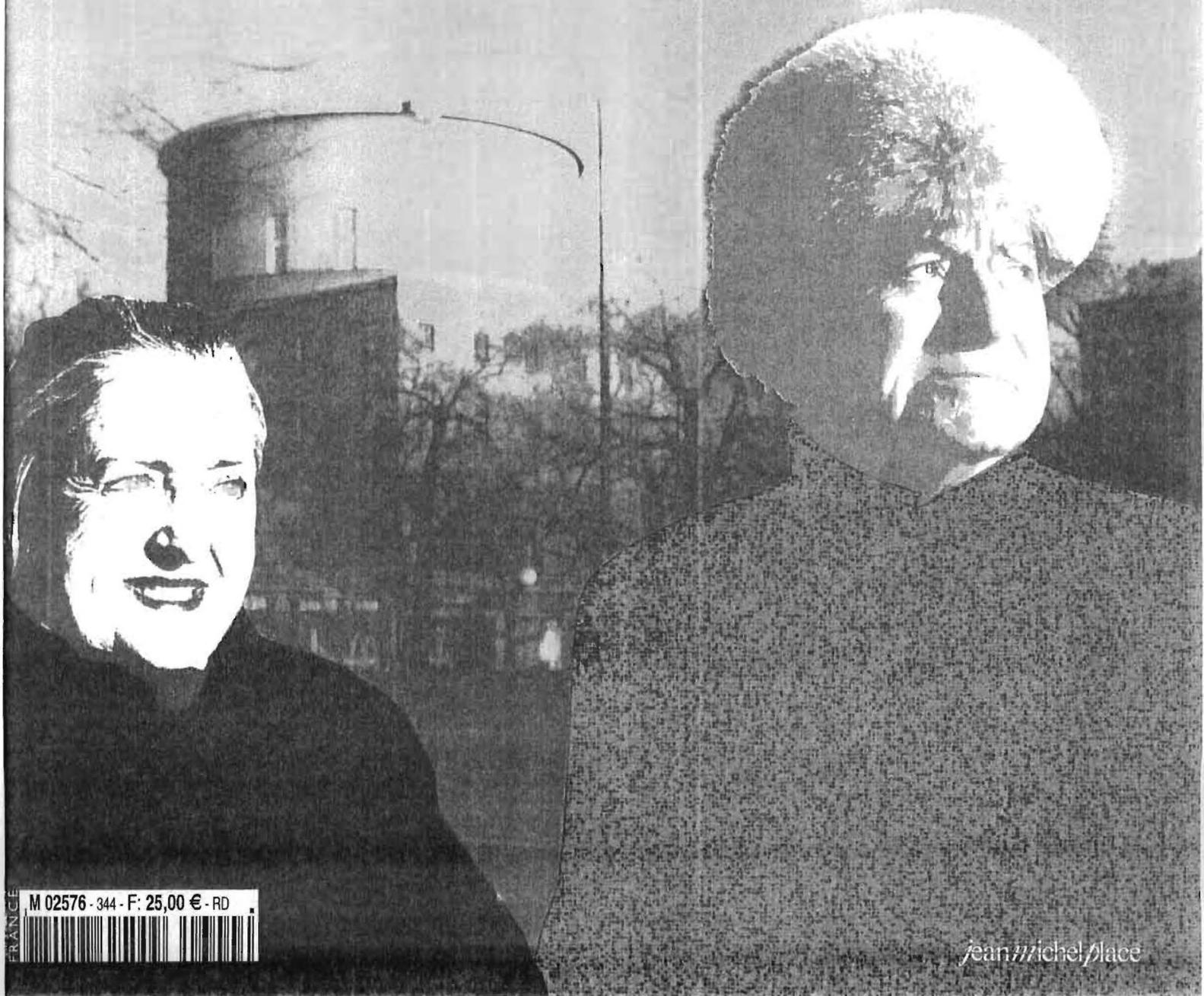


l'architecture d'aujourd'hui

ART

ALISON ET PETER
SMITHSON



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jean michel place

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"BUT TODAY WE COLLECT ADS"

The writings of Alison and Peter Smithson affirm their exacting theoretical stance and their openness. "But today we collect ads" was published in the Finnish magazine *Ark* in 1956. It was an important year for the Smithsons, coinciding with the construction of the prototype for the House of the future, in which their attempt at a social critique was neutralised by the presence of household gadgetry imposed by the market.

Traditionally the fine art depend on the popular arts for their vitality, and the popular arts depend on the fine arts for their respectability. It has been said that things hardly 'exist' before the fine artist has made use of them, they are simply part of the unclassified background material against which we pass our lives. The transformation from everyday object to fine art manifestation happens in many ways: the object can be discovered – *objet trouvé* or *l'art brut* – the object itself remaining the same; a literary or folk myth can arise, and again the object itself remains unchanged; or, the object can be used as a jumping-off point and is transformed.

Le Corbusier in Volume 1 of his *Œuvre Complète* describes how the 'architectural mechanism' of the *Maison Citrohan* (1920) evolved. Two popular art devices – the arrangement of a small zinc bar at the rear; with a large window to the street of the café, and the close vertical patent glazing of the suburban factory – were combined and transformed into a fine art aesthetic. The same architectural mechanism produced ultimately the *Unité d'Habitation*.

The *Unité d'Habitation* demonstrates the complexity of an art manifestation, for its genesis involves: popular art stimuli, historic art seen as a pattern of social organization, not as a stylistic source (observed at the Chartreuse d'Éma, 1907), and ideas of social reform and technical revolution patiently worked out over forty years, during which time the social and technological set-up, partly as a result of his own activities, met Le Corbusier half-way.

Why certain folk art objects, historical styles or industrial artifacts and methods become important at a particular moment cannot easily be explained.

*Gropius wrote a book on grain silos.
Le Corbusier one on aeroplanes,
And Charlotte Perriand brought a new
object to the office every morning
But today we collect ads.*

Advertising has caused a revolution in the popular art field. Advertising has become respectable in its own right and is beating the fine arts at their old game. We cannot ignore the fact that one of the traditional functions of fine art, the definition of what is fine and desirable for the ruling class and therefore ultimately that which is desired by all society, has now been taken over by the ad-man.

To understand the advertisements which appear in the *New Yorker* or *Gentry* one must have taken a course in Dublin literature, read a *Time* popularizing article on Cybernetics and have majored in Higher Chinese Philosophy and Cosmetics. Such ads are packed with information – data of a way of life and a standard of living which they are simultaneously inventing and documenting. Ads which do not try to sell you the product except as a natural accessory of a way of life. They are good 'images' and their technical virtuosity is almost magical. Many have involved as much effort for one page as goes into the building of a coffee-bar. And this transient thing is making a bigger contribution to our visual climate than any of the traditional fine arts.

The fine artist is often unaware that this patron, or more often his patron's wife who leafs through the magazines, is living in a different visual world from his own. The pop-art of today, the equivalent of the Dutch fruit and flower arrangement, the pictures of second rank of all Renaissance schools, and the plates that first presented to the public the Wonder of the Machine Age and the New Territories, is to be found in today's glossies – bound up with the throw-away object.

As far as architecture is concerned the influence on mass standards and mass aspirations of advertising is now infinitely stronger than the pace setting of *avant-garde* architects, and it is taking over the functions of social reformers and politicians. Already the mass production industries have revolutionized half the house – kitchen, bathroom, utility room, and garage – without the intervention of the architect, and the curtain wall and the modular prefabricated building are causing us to revise our attitude to the relationship between architect and industrial production.

By fine art standards the modular prefabricated building, which of its nature can only approximate to the ideal shape for which it is intended, must be a bad building. Yet generally speaking the schools and garages which have been built with systems or prefabrication lick the pants off the fine art architects operating in the same field. They are especially successful in their modesty. The ease with which they fit into the built hierarchy of a community.

By the same standards the curtain wall too cannot be successful. With this system the building is wrapped round with a screen whose dimensions are unrelated to its form and organization. But the best post-war office block in London is one which is virtually all curtain wall. As this building has no other quality apart from its curtain wall, how is it that it puts to shame other office buildings which have been elaborately worked over by respected architects and by the Royal Fine Arts Commission.

To the architects of the twenties "Japan" was the Japanese house of prints and paintings, the house with its roof off, the plane bound together by thin black lines. (To quote Gropius 'the whole country looks like one gigantic basic design course.') In the thirties Japan meant gardens, the garden entering the house, the *tokonoma*.

For us it would be the objects on the beaches, the piece of paper blowing about the street, the throw-away object and the package.

For today we collect Ads.

Ordinary life is receiving powerful impulses from a new source. Where thirty years ago architects found in the field of popular arts techniques and formal stimuli, today we are being edged out of our traditional role by the new phenomenon of the popular arts – advertising. Mass production advertising is establishing our whole pattern of life – principles, morals, aims, and aspirations, and standard of living. We must somehow get the measure of this intervention if we are to match its powerful and exciting impulses with our own.

(List of Key Ads: number and sources: *New Yorker* n° 9, *Ladies Home Journal* n° 31, *Saturday Evening Post* n° 2, *Holiday* n° 2, *Paris Match* n° 1, *American Vogue* n° 1.)



Collage d'Eduardo Paolozzi, Scrapbook n°2, 1947