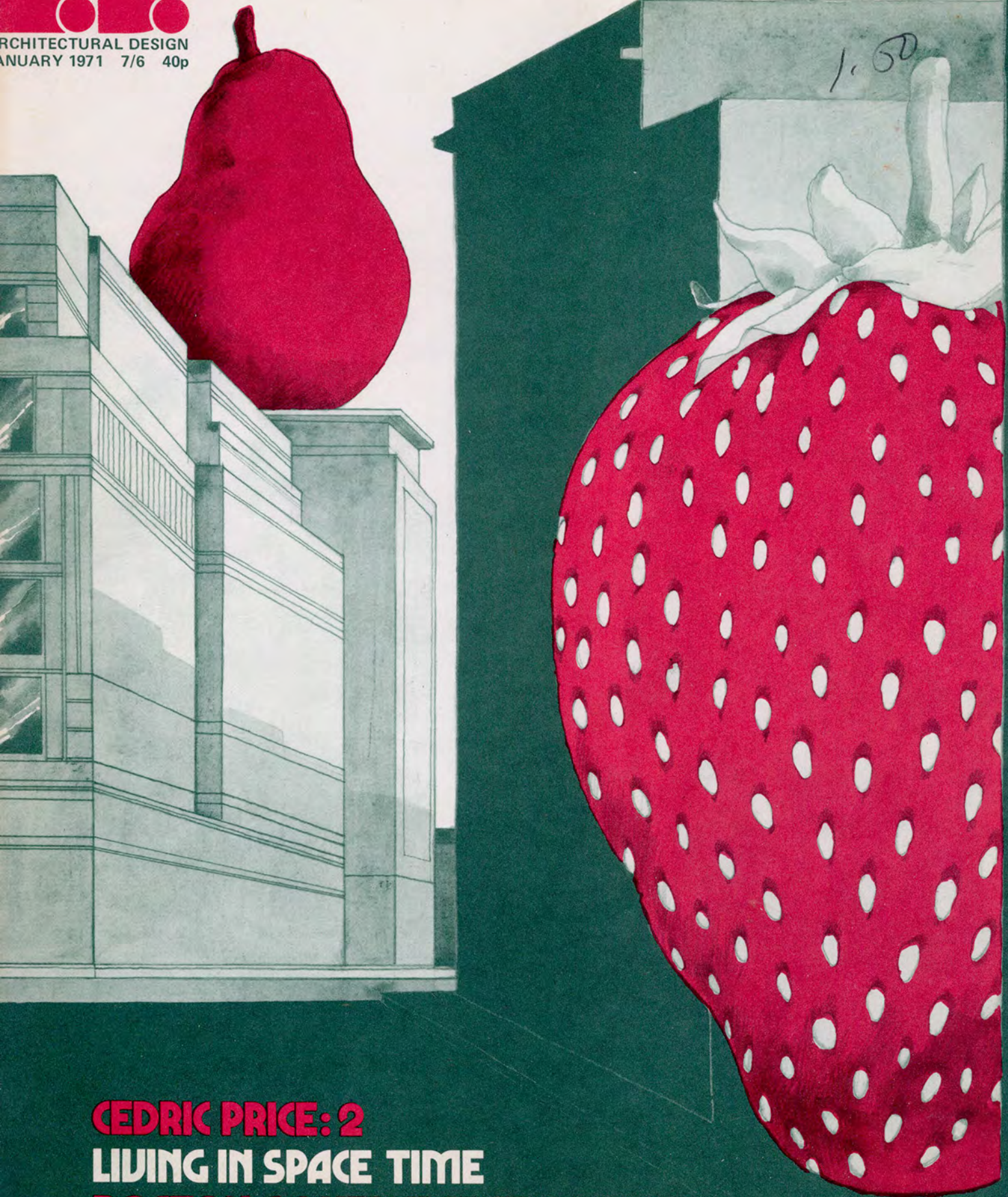


EB



**CEDRIC PRICE: 2**  
**LIVING IN SPACE TIME**  
**BOSTON GOVERNMENT CENTER**

# LE CORBUSIER A LA MODE

Revolution for the Sell of It

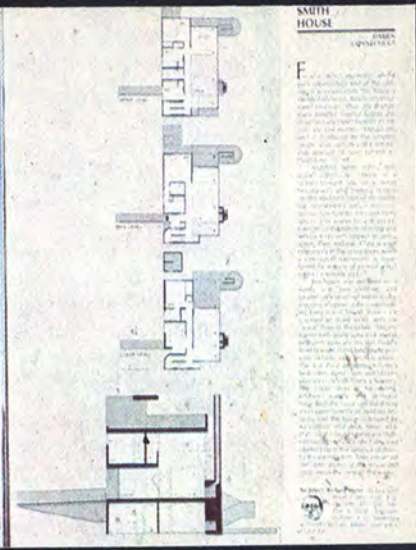
The morality of style is one of the permeating myths of architecture. Within the professional trade journals, the house by Richard Meier 1, 2 was regarded as an elegant statement in the tradition of early modern architecture, *de rigueur*.

Formal analysis of the composition certainly renders a similarity with Le Corbusier's own Five Points of 1926. Its iconographic use of motifs, such as the free facade, the articulated staircase with two different banisters and the round columns set in a shallow space behind the window plane, extends the building well within a professionally orthodox style.

However, the recent appearance of several advertisements relying heavily on employment of this building begs the question of further iconological interpretation 3, 4. As a manifestation of the "House of the Future" syndrome, Meier's design is presented as being somewhat avant-garde and "futuristic". At a point in time some forty years later than its paradigms, such proposals can only seem slightly improbable or, if not, they at least question the relevancy of the style altogether. Being used to push a plush stereo unit through suggestions of extremely sophisticated good taste, and investment in a financial corporation by suggesting a future life, Meier's house appears to possess a schizophrenic symbolic content.

Through a softening of the revolutionary overtones of its sources, it must appear inevitably as another form of packaging; one either currently available to a corporate capitalist elite or one to be aspired to. The dialectical tensions of Le Corbusier are gone, and the International Style stands before us finally to be recognized as a *décor de vie*.

Peter C. Papademetriou



Two chickens in every pot.  
A car in every garage.

It's taken over forty years, and considerable change, but Hoover's promise is about to be realized.

If the standard of living keeps going up, luxury by present definitions could be considered a bare essential in just a few years.

Discretionary income isn't going to be a problem for most Americans. But knowing how to take care of this money will be.

By the middle of the 1970's, the average wage earner who needs a variety of financial services will be the largest untapped market in the country. And we'll be ready for him.

We're CNA Financial Corporation.

Already we can help people handle money in a number of ways: Personal loans through General Finance. Insurance through the CNA Insurance Company. Commercial Casualty and Commercial Assurance. New homes through the Levin Group. Even health care through Kary Financial.

Those are the basics of CNA Financial, the largest corporation in the country, with assets over three billion dollars. A nice start when you're talking expansion.

When the man with the average income becomes the biggest market for diversified financial services, CNA Financial will be there to help.

From insurance policies for new home Americans to money loans for the aged. From investments to new homes to car loans.

We make money work.

**CNA FINANCIAL CORPORATION**

The Yale Architectural Journal

# Perspecta 32

Resurfacing Modernism

*published 2001: 30 years later*



# LE CORBUSIER A LA MODE

Revolution for the Sell of It

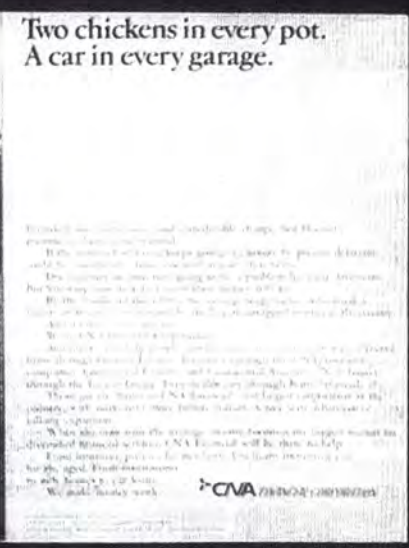
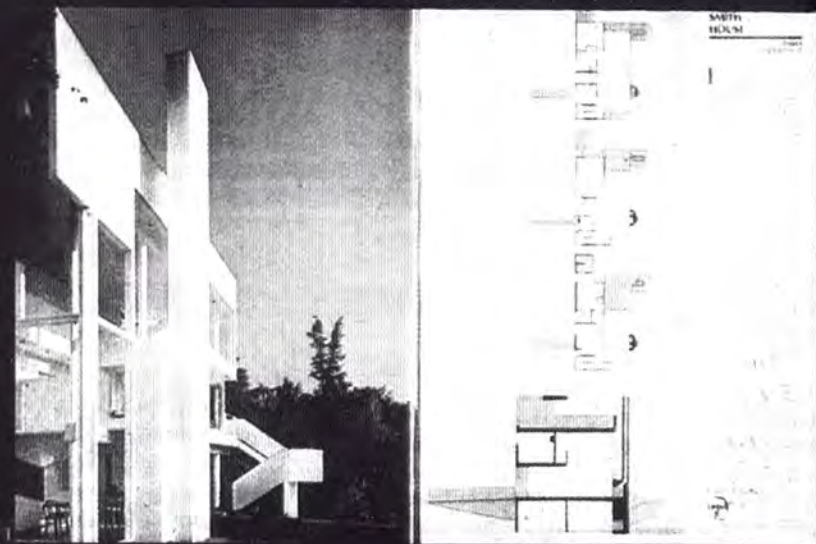
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# Recurring Surfaces: Architecture in the Experience Economy

SANDY ISENSTADT

Architecture today is split. Arrayed on the one hand are varied, intelligent, and often provocative investigations into the making of form. New materials, new design processes, virtuoso manipulations of irregular geometries, whole new metaphors for the generation of form, surprising borrowings from unlikely sources: each of these characterizes some of the most innovative design thinking of our time. Equally, architects working with self-imposed formal constraints and strict spatial orders have brought minimalist modernism to new levels, while others speculate on the future of architecture in a world increasingly dominated by visual media and virtual flows of information.

On the other hand, and set against such vivid imaginings, is the vast majority of building today: the dreary landscape we spend much of our adult lives unconsciously trying to screen out, a nation of functional footage costumed in the abridged populisms of PomoLite. Just look out your window. It arises from those expedient and often unquestioned conventions that help each of us get through yet another day at work but, in the case of architecture, remain on the surface of the earth for decades and decades to come. There is really no malevolence in its making, just convenience, but the result is a built environment so bleak even those who have profited mightily from it race to live elsewhere.

Between the two stands a gulf. Architects and builders looking to wrap up another project, limited by budgets and client expectations, crowded out from their own initial design dreams by the sheer difficulty of getting anything built at all—let alone a good building—can lose patience with theoretical challenges or, more often, ignore them altogether. Indeed, many of the more thoughtful designers today see themselves operating against a backdrop of banality and tired acquiescence, a tsunami of indifference about how we build. At the same time, an especially inventive area of current commercial practice is the trend toward the creation of themed environments, from resort parks to restaurants, from offices to shopping malls. Relying on the creation of atmosphere through images, whether painted, built up in relief, or projected on screens, themed environments are, for all their visual evocations, literary allusions; they refer to another place. However romantic or thrilling, they are not *about* building or form. Thus, such work, whether lame or cunning, represents not just a diminished degree of design energies, but appears downright antagonistic to a premise of formal development or to the expression of new materials and methods or new processes of design.

This essay contends that both commercial-populist and avant-garde practices today may be gathered under the big tent of theming, despite evident and substantial differences in their design agendas, despite often contradictory motivations in their pursuit, and against all appearances to the contrary. Both coordinate sensory cues within a given place to achieve a consistent set of symbolic expressions; both aim self-consciously to convey specific meaning with form. Both aim as well at target audiences; the goal is not a utopian reconfiguration of society but meaningful communication with a group defined in part by its ability to read the symbolic cues presented.

That this is an overly broad definition for theming is agreed: nearly any design large or complex enough to engage cultural and environmental factors could with this definition be considered an example of theming. This observation, however, only leads to my central claim that the very proliferation of themed environments betokens an emerging mode of architectural reception: serial immersion in narrative environments, itself an effect of an emerging experience economy. We—that is, "the public"—have in fact already become expert at reading a symbolic landscape, one bristling with referential content; we have come to expect this condition and, as a result, we look for it ... everywhere. Theming, in this sense, has become a common way of understanding architecture. As such, it deserves examination as a means of interpreting architecture, as a means of relating architecture to the culture that produces it. This essay looks at the 1970s debate between the Whites and the Grays as one progenitor of today's split and, by placing that debate within the context of a cultural search for authenticity, argues that both White and Gray positions participated equally in the formation of a new paradigm for the reception of architecture: theming.

^ Page from *Architectural Design* January 1971.