

From the MOMA . . .

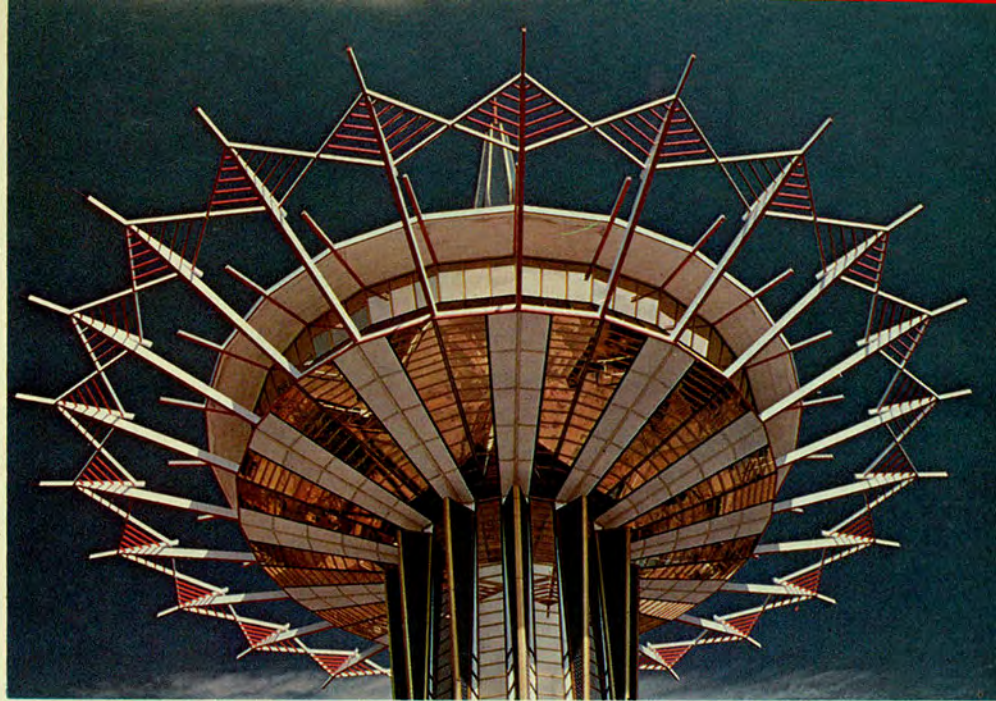
EDITORIAL LEAD by Suzanne Stephens

Almost from its inception, the Museum of Modern Art was not only the disseminator of modern architecture and design principles in this country, but also an arbiter of "taste" as well. By the buildings and products it chose to display and to publish from 1932 on, the Modern's architecture and design departments did more than codify and clarify design standards to an unknowing public. They began to establish the standards as well. The examples of architecture or design chosen for display were not selected because they represented interesting topics for critical discussion, but because they were *good*. They had inherent *quality*.

Considering the photographic images of buildings or the design products, the cool aesthetic- and utility-oriented descriptive prose, and the very precise drawings, one may wonder what could go wrong. The 1950s and 1960s saw the proliferation of designs that attempted to recreate the aura of those photos and texts serenely fixed in their luminous gray and white surroundings. The Modern was helping to form professional taste. The version that trickled down, however, from the professional taste elite to the larger audience, clearly lost something on the way. Architecture at several removes from the originals ranged in types of accomplishment.

Shown on the following pages are examples of two very different modern design responses now to be found in the American physical landscape. The first, an ensemble of aggressively symbolic taste, bridges geographic place, but not time. Looking as if it crystallizes the dream of a Yamasaki designing Brasilia after he had seen the Seattle World's Fair, Oral Roberts University unabashedly seizes upon a late 1950s expression for inspiration.

The other, a planned community, seeks to be unassertively timeless. It has appropriated a series of past and present American architectural styles and current planning principles to create a domain that transcends both time and place. Nevertheless this mutely "tasteful" and idyllic community represents a response very much grounded in this present culture. [SS]



Prayer Tower stands in Ralph L. Reece Memorial Gardens as central focus of flat O.R.U. campus. 24-hour prayer service is offered at this headquarters of the Abundant Life Prayer Group.



Photos: Peter C. Papademetriou

Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, Ok

O.R.U. architecture?

The architecture of Oral Roberts University is a mirror reflection of certain popularly understood images of Modern architecture.

If Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Ok, can be seen as the Vatican of charismatic Christianity, then the buildings on its sprawling, flat campus could be interpreted as a clear example of the Modern American Baroque tradition in architecture. This vision of a university essentially belongs to the images and values of the founder, the revivalist Oral Roberts. While the Christian liberal arts school is seen by some as a beacon to society, O.R.U. is also the physical mirror of a kind of popular understanding of modern architecture itself. In fact, it would appear to be a logical extension of the assumptions of American architecture of the last two decades.

At the time Tulsa was chosen as home base for the Roberts organization in 1947, it had the best air connections to many of the movement's supporters in the Southeast. It was also fairly close to the center of population in America, giving it an affinity to things "Middle American," in a sense. From the Prayer Tower—the central symbol of the 4000-student campus—a powerful connection emanates outward to the 3.1 million families who participate in the message of Oral Roberts. Like Rome, Tulsa is a pilgrimage point, but those who go there during the frequent gatherings have all expenses paid.

One thing immediately strikes the visitor about the O.R.U. students: they are neat, well-mannered, and extremely well-dressed. The population of the entire campus seems like one big family, and this image is reinforced by the fact that even meals are taken together at the Hewitt Dining Commons. There is no smoking or drinking on campus; there is a dress code for class, chapel (required), and cafeteria, and there are separate male and female dormitories. Dorm life still includes room checks and control lobbies. A fair portion of the campus is given over to athletic facilities that accommodate a mandatory four-



Triangles at entry to Christ's Chapel symbolize "praying hands"; silhouette reminds one of revival tent (above). Roberts Dormitories (below) are consciously designed without front or back.



"Eternal Flame Fountain" is at the corner of the porch in the Learning Resources Center (below).



Oral Roberts University



Triangle motif expressing Trinity is used throughout campus, as seen in windows (above), organ pipes (below) in chapels inside Christ's Chapel.



Benign grandma runs check-point at Quad Towers Dorm (above). All 4000 students eat at Hewitt Dining Commons (below) in front of Quad Towers.



In Christ's Chapel lobby, "Dove" on ceiling flies over the cross (below).



City of Faith Medical Center (below) will have a 777-bed hospital.



year physical education program. There is, in addition, a registration check-in at the Aerobics Center that requires each student to measure up to basic health standards or face dismissal. O.R.U.'s education of the whole person, in body, mind, and spirit, is presumed to be reflected in the campus itself, which is considered to be expressive of the totality encouraged by the Roberts organization: "A Miracle Life-Style" in which each adherent is designated as "Partner."

It was in the 1960s that the charismatic movement began to place greater emphasis on the concept of the Holy Spirit within the traditional Christian Trinity and, at O.R.U., this new intensity was extended to include a human trinity of equal emphasis—one of body, mind, and spirit. It is from such ideas that much of the appearance of the place is generated, and to which the architecture constantly refers.

A particular life-style

There is a motto in the brochure *Quick Facts About O.R.U.* that states, "make no little plans here." While Daniel Burnham was obviously born too soon, there is definitely a kindred spirit in Tulsa where "The O.R.U. campus, valued at more than \$150 million with 20 major buildings, is noted for its ultramodern architecture and innovative educational technology." Established in 1963, O.R.U. engages in "Educating the Whole Man" (sic) and relies on big plans, without which "carving a brand-new Christian liberal arts university out of the turbulent 1960s wouldn't have been possible." In each step of the ongoing building program, the physical reality of the campus architecture has continued to reinforce the concept of the big plan.

The campus layout is divided into quadrants, with areas for residence, athletics, learning resources, and chapel. All activities crisscross and confront the Prayer Tower. The Learning Resources Center itself is considered a symbol both of interdisciplinary "cross-pollination," since all libraries are together in one building, as well as a representation of the constant integration of charismatic Christianity in all activities.

All things in threes

Modern architecture was called upon to give form to O.R.U. and, in so doing, it has reflected the formalist characteristic of the 1960s. The dominant motif is the triangle—a constant reference to the two trinities. As a style, the use of this form reflects the preference of Frank Wallace, AIA, principal architect for Oral Roberts, for "buildings without fronts or backs." Also, Wallace had admired the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and Minoru Yamasaki, as well as a building in St. Louis that used reflective gold glass. When the final scheme was prepared for the Prayer Tower, which was completed in 1965, Wallace developed what is probably one of the first extensive uses of that material for exterior cladding.

Angularity characterizes the principal

campus buildings, some of which are actually generated by intersecting triangular systems. The dormitories, or the so-called Quad Towers, of 1971-77, are enclosed forms with corner triangular openings. Christ's Chapel employs triangles at the entry to evoke "praying hands" and results in a prickly silhouette that suggests a tent-like structure. The Prayer Tower itself is called a "modern-day cross" and evokes a crown of thorns, albeit a Wrightian one.

Modernity, therefore, is integral to the message projected at O.R.U. The contemporary style is chosen to suggest a mission for today, but one that is also "futuristic." The bright colors and implied opulence are no doubt in part due to Oral Roberts' own particular color-blindness, but they are intended to be more evocative of Abundant Life (also the title of the Roberts monthly magazine). The general idea is that prosperity is possible in *this* life, and that is what is reflected, literally, in O.R.U.'s architecture.

Zeitgeist in anodized aluminum

And so the Spirit of the Epoch is transformed in its search for form from Gropius to Rudolph to Yamasaki to Frank Wallace. Its basis would appear to represent attitudes inherited from the Eisenhower era, which clearly stand against the unrest and questioning that characterized so much of the last decade.

O.R.U. Architecture appears to be a reinforcing symbol of the taste of its users. To a great extent, its social model is suburbia, and it is the principles of suburbia that mold the architecture that in turn reflects them. The unity of purpose of the movement is representative of a non-denominational spirit. As a consequence, the images are abstracted, thereby deferring from being *specific*. In this abstraction, the images remain identifiable as modern, and in their modernity they are acceptable as symbols of a new spirit. Also, the somewhat anonymous character of the forms creates a total homogeneity.

The aesthetic reflects that of a new middle class whose aspirations are toward elegance—an elegance that is somewhat standardized and perhaps a bit gaudy to ensure that the point not be missed. It is designed to be impressive, in other words. Yet the impressiveness is as comfortably predictable as one would expect in a good motel; it is slightly overpriced "Ramadamentality."

Keeping the faith

O.R.U.'s architecture, however, only begins to suggest certain relationships when compared to the proposed City of Faith Medical Center, which is soon to be adjacent to the campus. When the 777-bed hospital project was announced last year, a great controversy raged in overbedded Tulsa, and efforts to block construction extended up to the State legislature. In early April, however, it was announced that Tulsa had issued a building permit for two of the three components.

City of Faith may quite possibly suggest

an other-worldly image referring to Oral Roberts' wife's recent book *Heaven Has a Floor*. Three buildings, all triangular, stand on a four-square platform. As to the origin of this arrangement, that can only be known through the revelation that Oral Roberts himself described: "... and then He began to show me the buildings, the details of them, and He had me to turn in my Bible to the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, and the last chapters, chapters 21 and 22, where He described the City of God, the New Jerusalem. And He showed me the River of Life running down through its streets and the Tree of Life on each side, whose fruits are for the healing of the nations. And He said, 'I want you to build towering buildings, not low scattered buildings, not places where the doctors are often misplaced and the patients are over there. I want you to build from a single base three great towering buildings where the doctors and the patients will be together. And out in front I want you to build the Healing Stream. I want this stream to run up to the building and to be joined to the building with Healing Hands, my Healing Hands, with one hand to represent the Hand of Prayer, the other to represent the Hand of the Physician. And I want these great healing hands to join the building and the stream so when people drive up and they see these towering buildings filled with physicians who are dedicated in their skill, dedicated to God and dedicated to people in their healing, and the people who will come out of the Oral Roberts University School of Theology to work with those doctors, to pray, as they see those towering buildings and the River of Life and the trees, the evergreen trees and the Healing Hands, as they see it, they're going to feel something. They're going to want to get well.' And when people want to get well, they've got a better chance. And He said, 'I've chosen you to build it.' I said, 'God, how can I build it? Won't it cost a lot of money?' He said, 'Far more than your mind can conceive. Lay your mind aside and get into your spirit and then you'll see.' 'How big, Lord? How big?' Well, He gave me the picture and I came home and had my architects and artists to paint it and I have it here." [Peter C. Papademetriou]

Just inside the front door of Christ's Chapel.

