

cruel joke

BETWEEN ZERO AND INFINITY by Daniel Liebeskind. Rizzoli International. 111 pages. \$19.95.

By IFAN PAYNE

The majority of books on architectural subjects that reach the general public tend to be descriptive or of a historical nature. This is to be regretted since there is a wealth of fascinating publications concerned with theoretical matters that underlie the development of contemporary architecture or that provide insight into the nature of modern architectural thought.

One of the more important theories that forms part of the basis of modern architecture, and the International Style in particular, concerns an approach to the beginning education of the budding architect. This approach is commonly known as *basic design*.

"Basic design" is a misnomer in

that it suggests that what is subsumed under that name actually forms the basis of design education. The reverse has historically been true; the subject matter actually covered by that label has not been recognized as such for at least two millennia, during which time a great deal of extraordinarily fine buildings were constructed.

"Basic design" was in fact dreamed-up by a small group of educators working in the Bauhaus school in Germany during the 1920s and, furthermore, some of those educators designed buildings, and taught architects who designed buildings, which constituted part of the greatest destruction of the human environment and spirit yet known to mankind.

I refer here to the style of architecture which commonly manifests itself in the inhumane steel, glass and concrete boxes that populate like alien invaders our centers of so-called civilization.

This is a style of architecture that for half a century has created what architect, writer and politician Sim Van der Rym has described as an architecture of "humorless, humanless nightmares of cities destroyed and landscapes desecrated; sacrificed to ideal and abstraction, self-serving technology, commercial greed and institutional irresponsibility."

It would be simplistic to maintain that the notion of "basic design" was at the heart of such an architecture, but it is true to state that the concept of "basic design" forms an important part of the architectural education of many of those who would conform to the environmental crimes committed in the name of Modernism.

"Basic design" is concerned with the manipulation of a narrow set of visual characteristics as part of an indoctrination into a prescribed aesthetic system. The fundamental visual characteristics that form the basis of the system are those that were stated at the opening of

Euclid's collection of other men's work, the *Elements*. (Euclid's major contribution was not that of original thought regarding the nature of geometry etc., but of organizing previous work into a new and more useful order).

Three of the initial elements denoted by Euclid were the point, line and the surface.

Over the centuries the *Elements* came to be regarded as Holy writ until in the past two centuries other mathematicians—Bolyai and Lobachevski were among the first—demonstrated that the Euclidean system of looking at the physical world was as arbitrary as any other system that could be, and was, devised. Not only does the geometric and topological world operate just as well under other systems, it actually operates a little better in those, for example, that point out that "parallel" lines do in fact meet and that all space is not

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linear, but is very much warped.

Apparently the painter Wassily Kandinsky was ignorant of all this when he proclaimed in 1926 that the "basic elements" of the visual world were the point, line and plane.

Kandinsky was teaching at the Bauhaus at the time so it transpired that a painter's outdated notions of two-dimensional space were used as a basis for the education of its architectural students who, it seemed to have been forgotten, were supposed to deal in four-dimensional space. To these basic concepts were subsequently added the notions of rhythm, harmony, solid, void, balance, to name but a few of the other arbitrary elements of an already arbitrary and irrelevant system.

No wonder that there was little concern for the quality of life generated by their sterile, rigidly geometric buildings.

But it turns out that the precepts of "basic design"—though a great deal less basic than those listed, for example, by the Roman architectural writer, Vitruvius—have an important part to play in the theoretical work of sophisticated architects who have already mastered their craft, and this is evident in the fascinating studies and writings of Daniel Liebeskind who is the head of the Department of Architecture at Cranbrook Academy of Art.

Between Zero and Infinity contains a brief essay which lays out the questions which his graphic explorations seek to answer: how should the post-Skinnerian environment, in which the

technocratic architect has created solutions to the "problem of humanity," appear to the caring architect? Can "the significance of architectural works and its affirming power lie in a movement of the truth-of-time as a whole, rising from the plastic-sensible as does lightning from thunder, abandoning the visible to the inertia and contingency of its own obscurity?"

In a series of brilliant transformations of architectonic elements Daniel Liebeskind demonstrates that for him the answer is a clearly stated affirmation of the evocative richness of newly-perceived space and form.

In page after page of beautifully crafted architectural studies based on the precepts of visual "basic design" the author shows that it is as possible to inhabit an imaginative space—a pleasure garden of spiritual spatial delights—as it is to inhabit the environmental effluence of industrialized America.

Between Zero and Infinity provides a stimulating insight into the conceptual basis of an alternative way of looking at architectural space, and in doing so it demonstrates by the sophistication of the author's vision that only the simple-minded could have confused the notions of basic visual design with those of elementary visual design and that it is a cruel joke that those same principles formed at least in part the basis of much that is worst in the environment in which we slave.

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