

Simplicity's Vulnerability



Commanding and captivating are those great walls, which of time and place remembered, help give a campus visual distinction. Two shown here demonstrate polar aspects of the art; in these instances, the architectural equivalents of minimalist sculpture. Though these landmark compositions are now out of fashion, they earn attention as examples of an art disciplined for visual effects, carefully studied, uncompromised.

The brick facades (top left) at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) mark one edge of the academic precinct. Ignoring the temporary building, from the camera's viewing point, the castle-like facades could march onwards to infinity. The Spartan rhythm is reinforced by the landscape theme. A green carpet and a picket line of trees reinforce the geometric progression. Interior functions ruled out extensive fenestration. Monumentality is relieved by the indented strip windows, and the extended brick at the upper level.

The University of East Anglia design (bottom left) represents a high-water mark in sculptural concrete as a three-dimensional statement celebrating technology and architectural austerity. As at RIT, the facade offers no clues as to interior purpose. The forms bow to no sovereign style.

In both instances the simplicity is deceptive. The smooth surfaces and hard edges represent the concluding phase of Modern Architecture. Purposefully, they disregard their surrounding context, and make no metaphoric gesture to architectural history.

One notes that the pendulum swing in taste may be inching back in this direction - a starkness that beguiles because it is strikingly different from most contemporary designs. Thus a cautionary note. Such effects are not casually determined but require careful study. An occasional indecisiveness in elaborate and intricate designs will shadow such mishaps and compensate for discrepancies. A small error in scale, detailing, or composition will ruin simplicity's grand design and rhythm.

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