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ART AND ARCHITECTURE: THE HIGHS AND LOWS; A Vision of a Mobile Society Rolls Off the Assembly Line

By **NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF**

LET'S be optimistic. Some spectacular buildings were completed this year -- and what matters more to an architecture lover?

The London-based architect Zaha Hadid, a precocious talent who is only now winning the kinds of mainstream commissions she richly deserves, wrapped up two stunning buildings, both potent examples of how Modernism is being reimagined for the 21st century. And Rem Koolhaas's 1,300-seat concert hall in Porto, Portugal, should finally establish him as one of the world's great designers as well as the profession's mightiest thinker.

Ms. Hadid's boomerang-shaped BMW plant in Leipzig, Germany, with its sensual curves and purring assembly lines, did for the computerized auto plant what Giacomo Mattè-Trucco's Lingotto Factory in Turin, Italy, did for the old labor-based model in the 1920's: project a powerful vision of a mobile society. At the same time, she has rejected the regimented order that gave the machine age a dehumanizing quality.

Ms. Hadid's science center in Wolfsburg, Germany, also comes to terms with Modernism's authoritarian strain. Built in the shadow of a Nazi-era auto plant, its dynamic concrete form, evoking the prow of a ship sailing through space, sits on gigantic inhabitable cones that allow the surrounding street life to flow directly underneath. It celebrates her knack for fluid, seamless spaces that blur the boundary between interior and public realms.

But for me the biggest sensation was Mr. Koolhaas's concert hall, Casa da Música, packed with urban energy as if in response to Porto's sleepy atmosphere. The building's chiseled concrete form, resting on a carpet of polished stone, suggests a bomb about to explode.

None of these buildings are in major global cities. All three are designed by "star architects," a term that elicits eye-rolling or outright contempt in some circles today, as if popular success is indistinguishable from selling out. Flush with new projects, a widely respected architect told me recently that he felt nostalgic for the days when there was little work for anyone, as if unemployment were better for the creative soul.

It may be true that talents like Ms. Hadid and Mr. Koolhaas have sucked some of the oxygen from members of a younger generation struggling to find their footing in a celebrity-driven profession. The jury is still out on that one. But either way, these buildings prove that architecture is in the midst of a

renaissance. Whatever one imagines about the egos of their architects, these projects exude a social dynamism and freedom -- a thriving democratic ideal.

What's more, such buildings force us to re-examine corners of Modernist history that once seemed relegated to the scrapheap. Their architects are clearly influenced by talents as far ranging as Kevin Roche, Hans Scharoun and Oswald Mathias Ungers, whose tough, sometimes brutal forms were once excluded from the Modernist canon.

The problem is how few people seem capable of such a generous view of history. Recent landmark preservation battles in New York suggest that the civic powers-that-be insist on defending a narrow view of the past and of Modernism in particular. That became apparent during the crusade to preserve Edward Durell Stone's so-called lollipop building at 2 Columbus Circle, a landmark of late Modernism, when the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission refused to schedule a public hearing to consider its designation. As a result, the facade is being utterly revamped.

This was an atrocious betrayal of the public trust. A similar debate is unfolding in Berlin, where the German government plans to demolish the 1970's Palast der Republik. The former home of the East German Parliament, it played host to cultural events and festivals as well as political conferences during the Communist years.

Both 2 Columbus Circle and the Berlin building represent important moments in their cities collective memories. The pressure to remake or raze them is arguably a form of censorship, a drive to cleanse history of anything but a strictly prescribed view of the past.

The most heartbreaking example of this attitude can be found in New Orleans, which had essentially been reduced to a theme park long before Hurricane Katrina hit in August. A conventional formula of convention center, casinos and themed historic neighborhoods was embraced to attract tourist dollars. That transformation, which went hand in hand with the neglect of the local infrastructure, was as responsible for suppressing the city's textured character as the ensuing storm and breached levees were. Now those same profit-minded forces, with their insistence on a touristy image of New Orleans, are circling the city again. They may well succeed in draining the city of what little life it has left.

We should be clearer about who the enemy is. Narrow visions, not big egos, are the problem.