

U.S.

Design: Best of '88 A Compelling New Modernism

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Last summer's well-hyped Museum of Modern Art exhibit devoted to the anxious, determinedly unlikable architecture called deconstructivist was the signal design event of 1988. Not, as its enthusiasts hoped, because it galvanized the profession and fascinated the public, but because it was so anticlimactic, a bust. We have seen architecture's future, and its name is not deconstructivism.

Which is not to say that successful design has turned bland and safe. The best new buildings and products are lively and provocative even as they avoid ideological purity. The compelling modernism of the moment is lush, dreamy and concerned with appropriateness, not big, inhumane and cookie-cutter corporate; successful ersatz-old-fashioned buildings are lately tough and even somber, not merely quaint and pleasant. Hybrids abound, and modesty is a virtue. Tod Williams and Billie Tsien's Long Island pool house, for example, combines industrial materials and delicate details. The Clayton County (Ga.) Library delivers a high concept with a relatively low budget. The finest work, from Washington's restored Union Station to the sleek Ford Probe, accommodates both pizazz and gravitas.

It is surprising nowadays when decent housing for the working class gets built. Boston's 50-unit Charlestown Navy Yard Rowhouses, designed by William Rawn, are virtually miraculous: cheerful, dignified, altogether grand-looking low-cost housing. The long, low brick structure culminates in a brilliantly fetching waterfront wing — cylindrical, two stories higher than the main body of the structure, with a copper conical top. Equally heartening is the graceful design applied to a humble fertilizer and hay-bale storage shed for a garden center in Raleigh, N.C. Local architect Frank Harmon unapologetically used homely materials (plywood, corrugated fiber glass) but observed lucid symmetries. A row of birthday-candle-like light bollards stands outside, handsome and functional.

A caretaker's cottage, a bathhouse, a lifeguard's tower: those were the modest requirements for Newcastle Beach Park in Bellevue, Wash. The buildings designed by Jones & Jones architects of Seattle manage to be sensible without being banal. They are charmingly appropriate to the region (wooden board and batten exteriors, exaggerated overhanging eaves) without being simply Hansel-and-Gretelish.

Ann Gray's new information kiosks on Paramount Pictures' Melrose Avenue studio lot in Los Angeles are also admirably no-nonsense and low-key. They are neoclassical wooden booths with fine detailing, standing-seam copper roofs and all the glitz of a New England farmhouse. When a large corporation suppresses the instinct for overpolished aesthetics, hurrah for Hollywood.