

A Word With You

THE influence of land prices on contemporary architecture is worth noting.

The price of land is the first fact of life the builder and architect have to reckon with, and it inevitably influences the style of the structure.

In the half-century from 1880 to 1930, land values in our cities soared steadily upward. This was the period when the frontier vanished, and more and more people crowded into the cities. Buildings soared steadily upward too, skyscrapers grew taller and taller, an evolution brought about by high land prices. But progress and productive power managed, for a while, to keep pace. The skyscrapers were built in skillful proportions and the design, while new, made use of traditional forms. There was an evolution of, not a break with, tradition.

The Great Depression and World War II forestalled large-scale building. After the war, the pace resumed, and a continued evolution of the skyscraper style took place, until around 1949, when land values outstripped production, as it periodically does, and we had a recession. After that came the Korean war (which "rescued" the economy), and then started the modern "building boom" in our cities.

But this time a new style of architecture started burgeoning that appalls most of us. Instead of the well-proportioned skyscrapers of the "golden age," faceless and shapeless monstrosities of

glass and aluminum are mushrooming and disfiguring our cities.

It is not difficult to trace this no-style to the high price of land. Every square inch of the building has to be calculated to yield the maximum amount of space and revenue. Stone takes up too much room, and architectural design has to be eliminated to cut costs. Instead, a few gim-cracks (like potted plants) are thrown in to make you believe that you're getting something. Once in a while they'll put the building on stilts or place it back from the street (thank you for nothing), thus giving a few extra square feet of concrete pavement (with no place to rest and no place to hide), but the building still rises sheer with its unrelieved and unseeing glare at the world.

While I am referring primarily to office buildings, the same trend has taken place with residential buildings. The older, more graceful apartment houses are being ruthlessly demolished to make way for flimsy, gaudy structures for which outrageous rentals are charged. A similar trend is noticeable in Suburbia.

A few art experts try to bamboozle us into believing that this is a great new style, but few people are charmed. I'll bet you that when we get enough land value taxation to cut the price of land to size, this bleak style will disappear, and builders will return to design.

—Robert Clancy

Vol. 26, No. 3

Feb. 1963

The Henry George News, published monthly by the Henry George School of Social Science, 50 E. 69th Street, New York 21, N.Y., supports the following principle:

The community, by its presence and activity, gives rental value to land, therefore the rent of land belongs to the community and not to the landowners. Labor and capital, by their combined efforts, produce the goods of the community—known as wealth. This wealth belongs to the producers. Justice requires that the government, representing the community, collect the rent of land for community purposes and abolish the taxation of wealth.

Publication committee: William S. O'Connor, Arnold A. Weinstein and Lancaster M. Greene, chairman, Editor: Alice Elizabeth Davis. Subscriptions \$2 a year; single copies 20c. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y.