

# Modern art as architecture assailed by critic von Eckardt

By CRAIG PIECHURA

A foe of the "mirror box" school of skyscraper architecture recently visited the home of glass box buildings in metropolitan Detroit—Southfield.

Wolf Von Eckardt, architecture critic for the Washington Post for 12 years, told aspiring architects at Lawrence Institute of Technology (LIT) last week that buildings should be designed to be lived in, not looked at.

Von Eckardt, 61, created a stir locally when he blasted the Renaissance Center and its "gleaming glass tubes," calling it architect "John Portman's never-never megastructure."

Author of a new book called "Back to the Drawing Board," Von Eckardt also had sharp criticism during an inter-

view for some of Southfield's biggest buildings.

"In an area like Detroit where you have so much land why do the architects and the entrepreneurs and big corporations build these towers of pride?" Von Eckardt asked rhetorically. "I think they build them just to be seen, just an advertisement that glares in your eye."

Pointing across the street from LIT to the Prudential Town Center, Von Eckardt minced no words in his critique:

"A building of that size, I think, is just so totally unrelated to a human being. It is out of the human scale. It is just a giant, abstract poster, in this case for Prudential."

"I don't think that the inhumanity,

the harsh anonymity of glass is improved by making it gold," Von Eckardt said. "That's a gilded cage."

"Totalitarian architecture is a triumph of technological strictness over human feeling for what's beautiful and amenable. By building a structure like that, I think Prudential is telling you the individual who works here doesn't count at all."

VON ECKARDT, WHO'S not an architect, insists that architecture is too important to be left in the hands of just the building designers. Hearing his harsh criticism of the Renaissance Center, many LIT students and faculty members were surprised to find the critic far from "bitchy," but closer to a humanist.

He doesn't apologize for his early statements about Detroit, but makes a point of mentioning the city's strong points.

He lauded the architects at Wayne State University and LIT for focusing on finding solutions to urban dwelling problems.

He had high praise for the "immacu-

late upkeep" of Detroit's revered Fisher Building, designed by architect Albert Kahn in the 1930s.

Detroit, Von Eckardt said, has stopped "whining" about losing its industry to the suburbs and started to develop its medical, educational, managerial, and cultural centers.

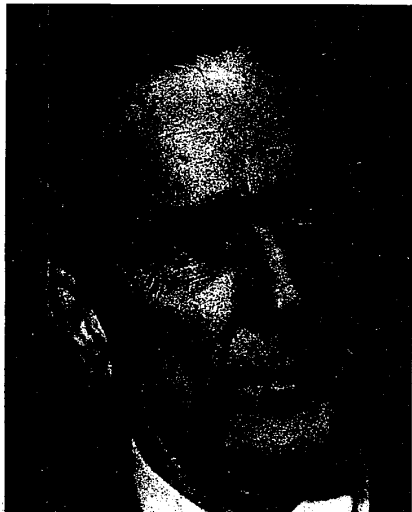
"It isn't a critic's job to be loved," he said. "Movie stars need to be loved, not critics. My job is to stimulate people to think about architecture, to stimulate discussion. I don't think a half-billion dollar project like the RenCen should be taken for granted just because Mr. (Henry) Ford has given it to us."

A BUILDING LIKE the Renaissance Center or the Prudential Town Center is built more for "creating attention than architecture," Von Eckardt states in his book.

A local example of architecture that doesn't serve its purpose, in Von Eckardt's opinion, is the Ezra David Synagogue, 2450 Southfield Road.

The modern structure is a scalloped

(Continued on page 8A)



Wolf Von Eckardt, architecture critic for the Washington Post, wasn't always a journalist. He came to the United States from Berlin in 1936 as a political refugee and worked as a research analyst for the U.S. prosecution in the Nuremberg war crimes trials. (Photo by Allen Schlossberg)

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