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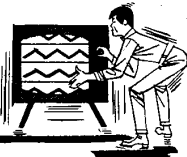
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He Seeks Humanism In Factories

By DAN McCOSH

"We designed factories when other architects thought it was beneath them," Sol King said, offhandedly.

King lives in North Park Towers in Southfield. He heads Albert Kahn Associates, a firm which has probably designed more industrial projects than any other in the world, and in the process designed most of Detroit.

THE ROOFS of most factories were supported by posts placed every 20 feet, in 1905. That was the year Albert Kahn designed a steel and concrete building for Packard Motor Co. on E. Grand Blvd. in Detroit, with the floors cleared of posts and natural light and ventilation "displacing the old prison workshop factory," as a newspaper told it.

The social and economic complexities of something like the early days of the auto industry don't swing on the personality of one man.

Starting with Packard, Kahn rode the wave of industrialization like some expert surfer, designing the Ford Highland Park plant, the first assembly line, a



SOL KING heads Albert Kahn Associates.

succession of downtown skyscrapers and the giant River Rouge plant.

Meanwhile, Kahn was scattering miniature castles and Tudor mansions around the city to suit the wives of the new industrialists, designing public buildings on Belle Isle, trying to soften the impact of industry with aesthetics, putting Roman arches around the upper lip of a roof 33 stories above the ground.

Walter Ruerth met Harry Bennett on a bridge near the Rouge Plant, World War II began, and construction started on the Willow Run bomber plant, the biggest assembly plant in the world.

Project director at Willow Run was King, just three years out of the University of Michigan.

KING IS the second generation in the company. President and director of architecture, he rose to his present position following Kahn's death in 1942, in a series of changes in the corporate structure culminating with his election as president in 1958.

"We are concerned with creating a man-made environment, for men," he said. "A human environment."

He uses the word "humanism" a lot, seeing the poten-

tial in a man-made environment from the perspective of someone who has spent his working life in the dead center of its creation.

"You can't ignore the technology. Some people today think you can go back, you can't. Man has been progressing ever since he came from the sea, when he started to pollute the ocean."

"Our values must relate to human values," he said, and he feels it is possible to relate some human values to the complex growth of technology.

King has applied this philosophy in his design work, using techniques like the free use of art, even paintings and sculptures in industrial settings. He designed an impressive entrance for employees at an Avon Products plant, to emphasize the basic importance of the worker.

The partners are a group of specialists who handle the technical problems inherent in plant design as well as the design of commercial buildings.

One of the newer plants

liberately relating the aesthetics to the surrounding skyscrapers.

Since King became director of architecture, the firm has produced buildings which break completely with the kind of architecture typified by the Fisher building, a Kahn design.

King is open-minded about "schools" of architecture, believing that design is a synthesis of the demands of aesthetics, site, technology, and the structure of the building materials themselves.

But when the synthesis is complete, he thinks the building should have a basic integrity.

"There are some buildings in Southfield, for instance, that are very good examples

of design. Others are not honest, they look like they are concrete, for instance, when they are actually steel structures."

"Some very nice buildings look fine, but there are exposed ventilators and machinery on the roof."

"The technical part of the building ruins the line for the eye."

THE VALUE of aesthetics is part of King's humanism, and he feels he can relate it even to the economic demands of industry.

"What is it a plant owner is trying to say to his employees?"

"The environment for work must be designed for the human being — to work. Not necessarily luxury — but

some recognition of his needs."

He has also expressed it in a concern for cities as places to live.

"There is one thing Mayor Norman Feder has said, which I don't think any other suburban mayor has, that is that it is impossible to replace the cultural life of the center city with a small suburb. You need the resources of the larger central city."

But he sees the city, even the family unit, fragmented by the accelerating rate of change. Working with the changing technology, struggling to control it, he feels even in architecture, new technology changes faster than the designer's ability to use it properly.

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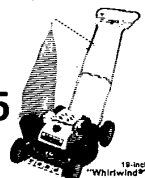
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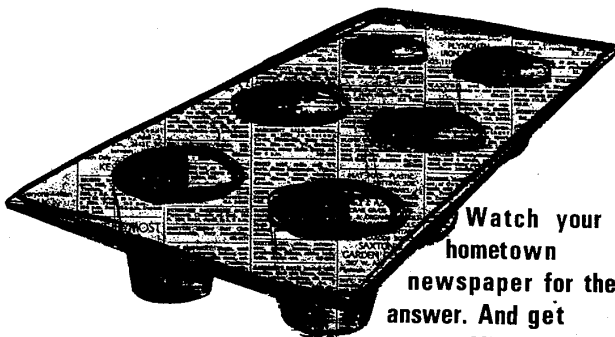
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