JOSEF ALBERS AND THE NEW ARCHITECTURE

The noted German artist, who is in Havana offering a course at the Lyceum, tells us in a brief interview his views on the new art in architecture and determines the limitations of functionalism, the absolutism of which leads to the negation of aesthetic values.

(By Jose M. Valdes-Rodriguez)

Mr. Josef and Mrs. Anni Albers visited us in this office, accompanied by Clara Porset, herself an exceptional artist among us because her profession, which she very carefully cultivates, does not keep her from working in politics and in the public life of her country. Albers has been introduced to the readers of AHORA by Miss Porset herself.

As a beginning, we asked Albers if he believes that there must be a fundamental change in the social order for the new architecture to realize itself.

He hesitated a little in replying and then said that he does not deem it necessary, adding that the architects who are the leaders of the new current are not interested in politics, although that does not mean that they are opposed to the ends and aims of certain fixed tendencies.

As artists they are alive to the needs of the hour and the consequence is that they as a group are more advanced than the politicians.

We are in accord with Albers in so far as that the artist, influenced by the factors created by the hour in which he lives, projects himself into the future and creates for times to come. The leading architects to whom Mr. Albers refers really are advanced. But it is one thing what each of these artists plans and even realizes, individually, and another, whether the integral realization of a new form of art arising because of the presence of
definite social factors may be possible unless a social change occurs in which the said social factors achieve complete realization. This, more or less, is the judgment of the French architectural genius, Le Corbusier.

Albers tells us, in support of his assertion:

"If we study the development of the new architecture from its very beginning, we shall have to admit that many of its important ideas come from painting and sculpture. Leaders of present-day architecture like Le Corbusier, Behrens, Poelzig, Josef Hoffman, started as painters.

"One of the problems of painting is to emphasize the elements of the form, which was the great preoccupation of Cezanne. This, if we carry it into the social field, will mean that people will be side by side, and not on top of one another."

We tell Albers that we are in absolute conformity with him. That is the point of view of dialectical materialism extended to the relation between individual and society.

"Another problem is," Mr. Albers continues, "the activation of negative forms. If we use the negative in the same way as the positive, then there will not be left residuary forms; nothing will be wasted. In the social field, that would mean that there would be not persons but opportunities. There is no difference between him who serves and him who is served."

We again point out the socialistic sense of Mr. Albers' assertion. This is only possible in a socialistic society, but as long as work continues to be, as it is in a capitalistic society, a commodity, that synthesis between him who serves and him who is served will not be made; and the conflict will become more and more acute each day, and the "activation" of negative forms will be impossible, and there will be many residuary forms left, and there will be waste of forces and forms.
To illustrate his words, Albers tells us that "in order to realize that the monument is not a thing of our time but of the Middle Ages, it is enough to think that the pedestal, the biggest part, the most important, supports a small, often perishable thing."

"This proves that the artist has a direct contact with life. And when we say today that culture and civilization are not enemies but interpenetrate and superimpose each other, then it must be evident that the importance of the economic and technical foundation of our life must be expressed in art, especially in architecture, which is, of all the arts, the one having the closest contact with life. Moreover, the present spiritual development reacts against the historical view of the last century, and this means a positive action of independence."

"What is the role, in your judgment," we asked Albers, "of the functionalist in the new movement?"

"Decidedly, the most important," he answered. "I do not, however, believe that functionalism will cover all the aims of the new architecture. The functionalist throws out the term 'aesthetic'. I, on the other hand, cannot work without considering aesthetic needs". (Albers refers, of course, to the pure functionalist, or, rather, to a hyperaesthesia of functionalism).

"For me, the absolute functionalism reduces the field because it excludes the question of taste, and for me, the questions of taste have biological reasons. Furthermore, that condition of the pure functionalist is always relative; I do not know any of them, not even the greatest extremists, who want to, or can, put aside the question of proportion, a quality which certainly does not enter into functionalism.

"So it is that a biological architecture covers a much wider range than a functional architecture."
As we said before, with Professor Albers came his wife, Anni, an artist who, in the design of textiles for industrial purposes, has a very distinguished place in the world. She works in what could be called organic design. The artist, with the different colors before her -- not in paints but in threads -- her raw material, combines them and prepares the designs which will afterwards be the models for thousands and thousands of feet of fabric.

Josef and Anni Albers are artists of the highest rank. The lectures offered by the former at the Lyceum are having a great success.

We would have liked to talk with them longer; but their many obligations and our daily job made this impossible.

Let us leave in these pages something of the thought of the artist who works to find new architectonic forms expressing the hour in which he lives, and who even more tries to anticipate the solution of the problems of the men of the future, working, of course, from the data which present times can supply.

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