UNDER their shaggy brows, his deep-set eyes reflected the gleam of the desk lamp as the Great Architect looked fully at me for the first time since I had entered the room. A low rumble in his chest indicated that he was about to speak. His leonine head, with its magnificent mane of white hair, lent an air of solemn importance to his every utterance.

"Corbusier?" he echoed the last word of my remarks. "Bah! Those prattlers . . . Corbusier, Lloyd Wright, the rest of them . . . paper dreamers, that's all they are! They talk about ideal cities, cities of glass towers evenly spaced in accordance with a glorious plan. Nonsense! Everyone knows such things would be possible only in a wonderful Utopian state . . . and even at that, the schemes are not much more than merely pretty! A practical scheme — one that would fit New York, say — that's what we need."

Waving his hand as though to indicate that he was modestly refraining from stating aloud that he alone had such a scheme, the Great Architect filled two glasses with an unidentifiable red beverage, and pushed one across the table to me. Lifting his own glass to the light, he gazed at the bright focal point in its depths as though marshalling his thoughts.

"Let us look at New York," he resumed. "Objectively . . . analytically. We see many tall buildings crowded close together, shutting out each other's light and air, and separated by narrow streets jampacked with slow-moving traffic. We are forced to accept one inescapable conclusion; the buildings take up too much room! But what can we do about it? Now, let's forget about the limitless tracts of land which those . . . those . . ." He searched for another name, but failed. "Prattlers! ... take for granted. What can we actually do, here in New York?"

He took a sip from his glass, and I followed suit. The liquor was bitter, but undeniably potent. The Great Architect narrowed his eyes in concentration, and continued.

"All the remedies that have been proposed — elevated highways, pedestrian bridges, streets through buildings, and so on — solve only the circulation part of the problem, and very imperfectly at that. The only sane, all-around solution is to put the buildings themselves underground!"

He paused dramatically. I tried vainly to say something, but took another drink instead. The unknown fluid glowed through my veins, and I managed to find a hoarse semblance of a voice.

"Underground?" I queried weakly.

"Underground!" he repeated emphatically. "Of course, I mean commercial structures only. Just picture it to yourself.

"Wide boulevards and parks . . . small, pavilion-like structures housing the elevator lobbies of the buildings below . . . long vistas leading to public monuments (these remain aboveground, naturally) . . . plenty of room for museums, libraries, playgrounds . . . residential areas spread out to receive the blessed sunshine. Below? Offices, department stores, theatres, exchanges and so forth. A great many of these are air-conditioned already. Besides, our experts tell us that artificial, controlled lighting and ventilation are superior to natural, for purposes of comfort and efficiency. Why should these buildings be aboveground? The office worker would gladly sacrifice his meager glimpses of a grimy outdoors for the sake of the spacious sky, the facility of circulation, the beauty which will greet him when his day's work is over.

"The cost? Excavation will not be as great as you imagine. Remember that we will be able to extend under the streets, and such space-wasters as set backs and light courts can be forgotten. Then again, think of the savings in exterior facing, windows, water pumps, decoration . . . but you've thought of a dozen such items by this time yourself, haven't you?"

The Great Architect questioned me with a piercing look. I nodded dazedly and took another drink. The

(Editor's note: Building underground is not a new idea, as you will see from this article, reprinted with permission from the September 1936 issue of Pencil Points, copyright Reinhold Publishing Company.)
desk seemed to sway slightly as I set my glass down. He went on, speaking more deliberately than ever.

“No more wind-bracing ... heat losses reduced, cutting down fuel and equipment costs ... no more mooring masts or darning needles ...” His deep voice seemed to roll onward like that of some ancient prophet, telling of the paradise to come.

“The original purpose of building was to enclose space ... to create interiors. The exteriors came as by-products, merely because a wall has two sides. Exterior form is valuable only for monumental, symbolic, romantic, or sentimental reasons. These considerations have no bearing on commercial structures, yet architects often sacrifice good planning for the sake of a “swell” exterior. Under my scheme, the architect will at last be forced to devote his attention, and his client’s money, to the design of fine interiors, where men and women may work with efficiency and comfort, both mental and physical. His opportunities in the field of exterior design will, moreover, have wider scope than ever before. His sites will be in the midst of parks and boulevards, unobstructed by party walls, encircling buildings and narrow streets. So you see, both the buildings underground, and those above, will be the better for the change to a new order!”

I drained my glass and rose, steadying myself against the desk.

“Master,” I said. “Master ... you are a genius. You have brought the world a message, an idea which will ... a message. You have brought an idea, an idea ... a genius. The world ...”

He looked up at me coldly. The fire and enthusiasm seemed to have been drained out of his soul. His voice, which up to now had sounded impressive, was merely tired.

“Nice of you to have dropped in.” The Great Architect stood up and led me gently to the door. “I’m always glad to have a chat with a fellow professional. Good night.”