ON ARCHI-TEC-TURE

COLLECTED REFLECTIONS ON A CENTURY OF CHANGE

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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On Architecture

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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Classic New York: Georgian Gentility to Greek Elegance

Will They Ever Finish Bruckner Boulevard?

Kicked a Building Lately?

The Tall Building Artistically Reconsidered: The Search for a Skyscraper Style

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Architecture, Anyone? Cautionary Tales of the Building Art

The Unreal America: Architecture and Illusion

Frank Lloyd Wright

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Introduction

CRITICS ARE NO MORE CLAIRVOYANT than their fellow mortals. Those of us who write for newspapers have little time to consider the long term or the larger implications of our work, nor are editors known for welcoming such digressions. We are focused on the moment, looking for the next big thing; it is the immediate news peg or upcoming trend that matters. Sometimes we are so busy fighting a defensive rearguard action for an old revolution that we miss the signals of a new one. This has been particularly true for the champions of modernism, a crusade that never seemed to end even as the ground shifted radically under its practitioners' feet.

Pressing deadlines, we are not given to abstractions, but this does not mean that we are without passionately held convictions or a personal point of view. I was once asked by a distinguished French journalist, "Just what polemical position do you write from, Madame?" and when I failed to produce an appropriate polemic and replied that I wrote from crisis to crisis it was clear that I had failed to measure up to his expectations. I could have said that I wrote from a sense of entitlement, in the belief that everyone deserves, and has a right to, standards of quality, humanity, and yes, even art, because art elevates the experience and pleasure of the places where we live and work. As critics, we do our best to explain and uphold those standards and to hold faulty feet to the fire. As journalists, we report the news, which runs the risk of instant obsolescence.

As I sorted through hundreds of columns and articles in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *New York Review of Books* to choose what appears in this book, a picture emerged that was much more gratifying, I confess, than I had hoped for or expected. With the hindsight of the twenty-first century, I began to notice a pattern that told the story of an extraordinary evolution of architecture and culture

in the five decades of the twentieth century that I have been privileged to witness and record. What could have been an exercise in nostalgia turned out to be an exercise in discovery. I was writing at a historic moment, observing an amazing century of change, documenting an architectural revolution, watching a remarkable scenario unfold. Looking back, it seems that I had been looking forward all the time.

The theme that runs through all of this writing is the transformation of the modernism that pervaded every intellectual and cultural aspect of the twentieth century into a new way of thinking and building. Inevitably, the topicality and immediacy of many of these pieces has faded. Some hot-button issues no longer have the urgency of their original publication. Do-or-die controversies dissolved over the decades. A recent online response to an architecture blog, signed Harry, gave a "shocking" Philip Johnson building that was the buzz of the 1970s its ultimate putdown and place in history: "Remember when the AT&T now Sony Chippendale tower was a scandal? Ho-hum."

I have included items never reprinted before because it is clear to me now that they are part of the larger story. Many more familiar columns were not chosen, but subjects that still seem like landmarks, or milestones, or express enduring values, have been retained. Some endure in spite of me, and for all the wrong reasons. My reservations about the architectural worth of Edward Durell Stone's 2 Columbus Circle in New York, built by Huntington Hartford in 1964 as his Gallery of Modern Art, and the case I made for its conversion by the Museum of Arts and Design after a long period of deterioration and neglect, have been blown off by preservationists in full nostalgic cry for the impossible and unreasonable. The name "lollipop building," from my original description of it as a "little die-cut Venetian palazzo on lollipops," has stuck, even if my arguments haven't, and may prove to be my only claim to immortality. As a case history, however, it is a perfect example of how wrong the preservation movement is going today in its evaluation of the buildings of the recent past.

I felt that it was important for every piece in this book to appear as originally published, without the layers of interpretation or reevaluation that subsequent decades have added. Nothing has been changed, edited, or updated, because the issues can only be understood in their original context. There are some obvious omissions. I have not devoted space to preservation, although I was an active participant in that hard-

fought battle, because its success is a matter of record and I do not need to repeat the well-known achievements that have established it firmly in our cities and our lives. Admittedly, the war is never won, and we are faced today with a new crisis: a modernist heritage that is under threat, without the scholarship or the standards that are needed to resolve it. Nor have I included anything on sustainable or green architecture, because I believe that building for climatic and human needs should be a given, intrinsic to any design utilizing the remarkable technology that has revolutionized construction today. The literature is overwhelming; it needs no cheering section here.

The reviews and articles chosen for this book represent only a fraction of what I have written over the years; at best this is a spotty history, a very rough guide to a movement inspired as much by the miraculous tools of computer and structural technology and intense generational and societal change as by the perceived failures or deficiencies of modernism. It is all quite low-key. There is no revelatory blast; no moment of epiphany; no trumpet flourish announcing the ways in which modernism was being rejected or redefined, how everything it preached and practiced was being questioned, or how this led to a radical shift in the art of architecture comparable to any of history's great redefining aesthetic upheavals.

"The Way We Were" looks back briefly at the decades covered in this book with a few randomly selected pieces meant to suggest the nature of the times. "The Way We Built" presents a selection of some of the iconic images and structures of the twentieth century, when modernism was fully embraced by the establishment for its skyscrapers, corporate headquarters, and public and cultural buildings, even as countercurrents were flowing underneath. "Modernism and Its Discontents" brings that rebellion to the surface, while "Reinventing Architecture" and "Rewriting History" deal with the new work and ideas as they appeared. These later sections include those architects who refused to play by modernism's rules and had enormous influence on the state of the art, as well as practitioners and styles banished by modernism as counterproductive to its radical purity and revolutionary intent. Revisionism was rampant, and as controversial as it seemed at the time, it has all been absorbed into a productive mainstream.

I don't think I lost my compass; the pieces neither protest nor fail to acknowledge change, nor do they offer uncritical admiration of what

seemed the irresistible leading edge at the time. Tempting as it is to be part of a glamorous in-crowd, I have never joined architectural groupies of any persuasion. As an architectural historian, I have not bought into anyone's belief systems, including modernism's most admirable and often faulty illusions. I have a built-in skepticism of dogma and its more pretentious theoretical justifications, and a scholar's interest in the evolution of creative thought and style.

Now to answer the question I am most frequently (do I sense, hopefully?) asked: Do I think I was ever "wrong"? Sorry to disappoint, but my opinions have not really changed; I called the buildings like I saw them, and I feel pretty much the same way now. My judgments have all been made in the immediate context of their time, measured against some pretty timeless standards—something hindsight, with its rewriting of history, often prefers to ignore. Simply put, I was there; I know what happened. Neither am I a good building's fair-weather friend, abandoning it if it has gone out of style, nor am I capable of elevating a bad building to newly discovered significance through some previously unperceived and often invented attributes. When a perfectly dreadful mid-twentieth-century office tower in London that I once described as looking as if it had been run up on giant knitting needles is given protected status, I can only wonder, "What are they thinking?"

Occasionally I have second thoughts. I was, perhaps, too kind to Renzo Piano's revisions for New York's Pierpont Morgan Library. Because I am easily snookered by an elegant design, something Piano always delivers, I suspended my unease about how the library's unique personality and quirky charm had been sacrificed, albeit handsomely and efficiently, to a coolly rational unifying plan and what is rapidly becoming a generic museum model. Now let me see, if this is a Gutenberg Bible, it must be the Morgan. As museums have expanded and multiplied on their way to becoming the social, cultural, and economic status symbols of our time, they have, like airports, become almost indistinguishable. Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim of 1997 changed the museum landscape forever, but it also established the museum as an iconic structure and a model that would be blindly followed by business-dominated museum boards unwilling to invest in anything less than an iconic look-alike by a tiresomely familiar name.

Hindsight gives greater weight to some buildings and events, while

downgrading others. Robert Venturi's "gentle manifesto," *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, published in 1966, was a shot across the bow of modernism that seems even more significant today. This small, slim volume, with its plea to reexamine history and the environment, opened the door to a whole new range of thought and practice, from the best and worst of postmodernism to the most extreme forms of expression today. Venturi and his wife and partner, Denise Scott Brown, continued to unsettle accepted conventions by praising the "dumb and ordinary," telling us to learn from Las Vegas, and suggesting that Main Street was almost all right. Their mantra, "inclusive rather than exclusive," denied the practice of filtering out whatever displeased our preconditioned aesthetic responses. If accepting the past was unthinkable, acknowledging the existence of the expedient world of the twentieth-century strip mall and suburbia was worse; this was heresy, but heresy was reality. Nor is it inconsistent with the century's rapid and continuing change that even the Venturis' vision was superseded as Vegas morphed and malls mutated and architecture, once the rarified province of artists and intellectuals, became one of the priciest and most popular marketing tools of an expanding supercapitalist age that had no use for the dumb and ordinary and instead invented globe-hopping starchitects.

I am more than ever convinced that the postmodernism that took over in the 1970s with so much hoopla was a blip in the process, but an absolutely essential blip as a generation rebelled against the faith of its fathers—although rarely, if ever, have so many stand-up one-liners, inside jokes, and ill-digested knockoffs of history produced so many really bad buildings. I am just as sure that some of its most egregious exercises in bowdlerized trivia will be lovingly embraced by future preservationists.

By the end of the century, with taboos broken and technology showing the way, the art of building had evolved into a galaxy of new styles, from high-tech marvels to computer-generated undulating blobs. For all who forged boldly ahead, however, there were others who remained locked into the ideals and beliefs of a rigid and righteous modernism, even as younger architects were kicking over its lingering traces. Modernism became history when the preservationists moved in.

What is truly fascinating is the way reputations have gone up and down over the years. Each generation sees what it wants to see, writes its

own script to fit its own needs, relevant to its own worldview. If you wait long enough, what is admired will be relegated to history's dustbin, and if you wait even longer, it will be rescued and restored. Stick around, as they say on TV. Paul Rudolph's 1971 Art and Architecture building at Yale is a stunning example of how the generational love-hate process works. I thought it was an extraordinary building then, with its powerful, brutalist forms and complex interlocking levels, and I think it is extraordinary still. But the multilayered interiors that made it so spatially intriguing frustrated a faculty and students used to warehouse-style studios, and as modernism bashing became the fashion, increasing indignities were visited upon it, from the rejection and destruction of those spaces by the architecture students' construction of favela-like minislums within them, to a still-mysterious fire. More than thirty years later, Yale has undertaken a full-scale, respectful restoration of the building, calling it "a masterpiece of space, light and mass." It will be known as Paul Rudolph Hall.

Boston's competition-winning City Hall, designed by Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles in 1962 at the height of the brutalist style, is at the bottom of the cycle. Everybody in Boston hates it and the mayor wants to demolish it. Admittedly, there is nothing cozy and lovable about the uncompromising drama of the building's rough concrete forms, but it has been ill-served to a degree remarkable even for politicians, who have a notoriously bad eye for architecture as anything but patronage or real estate and a preference for Howard Johnson Georgian once removed. I am convinced that there are whole bureaucracies devoted to the painstaking sabotage of any good government building they get near. Not quite lost in the mists of political time is the unrealized plan of another mayor, Abe Beame of New York, to demolish the equally despised Tweed Courthouse for a little colonial cupcake with a cupola on top. Déjà vu, anyone? Boston's old City Hall, long unloved, was eventually saved and reused. But only a massive cultural shift will save this City Hall, a building consistently misused and misunderstood. As originally designed, it had a dignity and openness that belied Boston's notoriously convoluted politics. I admired the building then, and I admire it now.

Who could have imagined that the palatial headquarters built by corporations like Connecticut General and American Can, exemplars of modernist luxury dominating the twentieth-century suburban land-

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scape, would be abandoned and sold off as real estate to developers for McMansions? Or that the General Motors building that brought mediocrity and a dismal, redundant plaza to the most elegant part of New York's Fifth Avenue would be redeemed by the Apple store's magic crystal cube on a newly elevated plaza, turning disaster into triumph? When I agitated to have the concrete bunker against the Hudson River planned for New York's Javits Convention Center redesigned in glass, I never anticipated that it would turn out to be a lump of black coal. In architecture, the Law of Unexpected Consequences applies.

Time also plays surprising tricks. It is inconceivable to me that Alvaro Siza and Rafael Moneo, indisputably in the top rank of today's most talented international practitioners, critically acclaimed and universally admired by their peers, are passed over on institutional short lists in favor of those who play a more provocative and publicity-wise game. Because the practiced excellence of their subtle, sophisticated work lacks the instant "wow" required for the competitive, can-you-top-this stakes, it fails to push the right buttons for those whose knowledge does not extend beyond trophy names. Similarly, the aggressively theatrical solutions of Jean Nouvel have eclipsed the delicacy and refinement of Christian de Portzamparc, who combines sensuous references to mid-twentieth-century form and color with stylish twenty-first-century solutions of striking originality.

The diagrid façades and space-frame-covered courts of Norman Foster, the high priest of high tech, are proliferating on a scale previously unimaginable. Impeccably executed, commercially viable, and utterly predictable, they are blanketing the world with the twenty-first century's equivalent of the twentieth century's universal curtain walls of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. What was big business then is even bigger business now. It also never occurred to me that engineering advances would finally remove all the traditionally observed height restrictions from tall buildings, and I certainly did not envision an age of Skyscrapers Gone Wild. Supersized, contorted, totally out of context, setting new benchmarks in the race to claim the slippery title of world's highest and most ostentatiously vulgar building, they make futurism look like something by Emily Post.

What pleases me most is that the masters who gave modernism its name and form not only refute all this ghastly overreaching, they look better than ever. Discipline, restraint, and rigor have a lot to recommend

them. These were gigantically talented architects who pioneered a totally new kind of building and a radical new aesthetic based on the epochal changes in materials and construction brought about by the industrial revolution. Even those whose work seems farthest from the source are quick to acknowledge their debt. Richard Meier's admiration of Le Corbusier has always been clear; postmodernists like Robert Venturi give Alvar Aalto his due. What is emphasized by this generation, however, are not the obvious signposts of modernism, but features more relevant to their own needs and perceptions, like implicit connections to historic precedents and attention to the setting and the land.

Rereading the pieces I wrote about these twentieth-century giants, I see genius, and courage, and great works of architecture that endure. I also see qualities that set their work above and apart from today's practice, when "attitude" and a challenging novelty are bringing architecture to a discomfort level of fashionable edginess that may be claiming its first architecture victims. At a time of superchic hard-edged minimalism, Alvar Aalto's soft-edged humanism invites us to experience the skill with which his buildings include people and nature, and the timeless pleasure that gives us. Louis Kahn elevates our own humanity in buildings that speak to our dignity and worth. And faced with so much excess in our lives and our world, Mies van der Rohe still gives us the relief of the precise and perfect elimination needed to reach the bones of beauty, reminding us that indeed, less can be more.

In the short piece that opens this collection I suggested that it was time for a book on "The Joy of Architecture" to celebrate the pleasures of this remarkable art. It took about thirty years, but Alain de Botton's *The Architecture of Happiness*, published in 2006, fills the bill. This lovely book is devoted, in large part, to finding one's comfort zone, showing us how easily we can understand the art and design of our environment. But comfort has never produced the departures that mark the turning points of art and history, and we are in the turmoil of historic change and out of our comfort zone right now. We need to stretch beyond the familiar to appreciate the power of this new work to expand and enrich our sense of self and place. Architecture is remaking our world. It is important to understand how and why this is happening if we are to be beneficiaries, rather than casualties, of the process. Its rewards are personal and universal in a way no other art can match. Its joys are common to us all.

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