



BUILDING UP AND TEARING DOWN

REFLECTIONS ON THE AGE OF ARCHITECTURE
PAUL GOLDBERGER
WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

**BUILDING UP AND
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THE AGE OF
ARCHITECTURE**

PAUL GOLDBERGER

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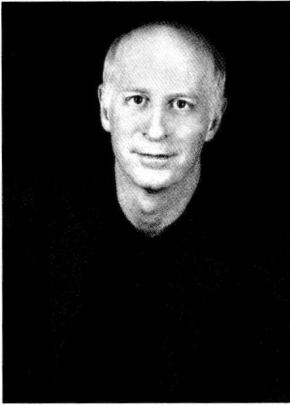
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Philip Friedman

Paul Goldberger is the architecture critic for *The New Yorker*. He also holds the Joseph Urban Chair in Design and Architecture at the New School in New York City. He began his career at the *New York Times*, where his architecture criticism was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Criticism, the highest award in journalism.

Goldberger is the author of several books, including the recently published *Why Architecture Matters*. His chronicle of the process of rebuilding Ground Zero, *Up from Zero: Politics, Architecture, and the Rebuilding of New York*, was named one of the *New York Times* Notable Books for 2004. He has also written *The City Observed: New York, The Skyscraper*, *On the Rise: Architecture and Design in a Post-Modern Age*, *Above New York*, and *The World Trade Center Remembered*.

CONTENTS

Introduction 8

Buildings that Matter

Good Vibrations 16
High-Tech Bibliophilia 20
Unconventional 24
Seductive Skins 28
Spiraling Upward 33
Situation Terminal 38
Out of the Blocks 42

Places and People

Bringing Back Havana 50
Casino Royale 60
Forbidden Cities 64
Many Mansions 69
The Eames Team 75
House Proud 84
Eminent Dominion 91
Toddlin' Town 97

New York

A Helluva Town 104
Dior's New House 111
Busy Buildings 116
High-Tech Emporiums 122
Miami Vice 127
West Side Fixer-Upper 132

Center Stage 140
The Incredible Hulk 144
Triangulation 148
Home 152
Towers of Babble 156
Gehry-Rigged 160
New York Becomes Like America 164
A New Beginning 170

Present and Past

Shanghai Surprise 178
Why Washington Slept Here 182
Athens on the Interstate 188
A Royal Defeat 193
Down at the Mall 202
Requiem 207

Museums

The Politics of Building 214
The People's Getty 219
When in Rome 223
Beaubourg Grows Up 227
The Supreme Court 232
Art Houses 237
A Delicate Balance 242
Artistic License 246
Outside the Box 251
Molto Piano 256
Mile High 260
Lenses on the Lawn 264
Bowery Dreams 268
Hello Columbus 272

Ways of Living

A Touch of Crass 278
Past Perfect 283
Glass Is the New White Brick 287
Some Assembly Required 291
Homes of the Stars 296
Green Monster 301
Disconnected Urbanism 305
The Sameness of Things 308

Index 314

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Bringing Back Havana 50
Casino Royale 60
Forbidden Cities 64
Many Mansions 69
The Eames Team 75
House Proud 84
Eminent Dominion 91
Toddlin' Town 97

New York

A Helluva Town 104
Dior's New House 111
Busy Buildings 116
High-Tech Emporiums 122
Miami Vice 127
West Side Fixer-Upper 132

Center Stage 140
The Incredible Hulk 144
Triangulation 148
Home 152
Towers of Babble 156
Gehry-Rigged 160
New York Becomes Like America 164
A New Beginning 170

Present and Past

Shanghai Surprise 178
Why Washington Slept Here 182
Athens on the Interstate 188
A Royal Defeat 193
Down at the Mall 202
Requiem 207

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The Politics of Building 214
The People's Getty 219
When in Rome 223
Beaubourg Grows Up 227
The Supreme Court 232
Art Houses 237
A Delicate Balance 242
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Molto Piano 256
Mile High 260
Lenses on the Lawn 264
Bowery Dreams 268
Hello Columbus 272

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A Touch of Crass 278
Past Perfect 283
Glass Is the New White Brick 287
Some Assembly Required 291
Homes of the Stars 296
Green Monster 301
Disconnected Urbanism 305
The Sameness of Things 308

Index 314

*To the memory of my father,
who taught me the value
of a few well-chosen words,
and to Adam, Ben, and Alex,
who learned his lessons, too*

INTRODUCTION

Architecture always connects to something; it is never a thing unto itself. That is one reason it is such a good subject for *The New Yorker*, where almost all of these essays were originally published. *The New Yorker* is a magazine that tends to look at most things, including the arts, in terms of their relationship to the wider world and, hence, their potential to make an engaging narrative. Architecture is politics, it is sociology, it is money; it is housing and cities and old buildings both crumbling and revived. Maybe more to the point, architecture is created out of a curious mix of good intentions and hubris. Perhaps that can be said of all kinds of art, but no other art makes the claims of social responsibility that architecture does, and no other art has the arrogance to think it will remake the world. An architect can sometimes be like an emperor, commanding vast resources to carry out what are often, when you get right down to it, just a designer's dreams. But he or she is more likely to be a struggling artist, grateful for the chance to redo someone's kitchen, or a functionary stationed at a computer, producing designs for a doorknob in a skyscraper.

Buildings do not just happen: they are the products of a peculiar combination of artistic vision, money, political wherewithal, and engineering skill. To the extent to which it is possible to take note of the process by which buildings happen, I do, not to excuse the results—no critic should ever do that—but to place the building within a context that enhances its meaning. You understand Palladio a lot better if you know that the villas he designed around Vicenza in the sixteenth century were not just expressions of classical grandeur but attempts to enhance the image of his aristocratic clients, whose houses were as often as not working farms. You understand Herzog and de Meuron's "Bird's Nest" stadium and Norman Foster's airport, both in Beijing, better if you see them as having been made possible by the mix of high aesthetic ambition and cheap mass labor that existed in China in the years leading up to the 2008 Olympics, and that may never come again. While you do not absolutely need to

know that the Basques, in northern Spain, were eager to remake the old, industrial city of Bilbao when they turned to Frank Gehry and the Guggenheim Museum to give them a new symbol of their region—and that they wanted the building both to stand out and to reflect the city—you will surely understand Gehry's remarkable building better if you know something of its origins.

I say this not to diminish the aesthetics of architecture or to deny that, when we strip away the layers of real-estate finance and zoning and construction and politics, and get beyond the arguments about what kind of environment is best for educating people, or healing people, or housing people, we are left with the reality that a building is an object. That is what buildings are: physical objects with walls, floors, ceilings, roofs, doors, and windows, which look a particular way and function a particular way. Evaluating how a building looks and how it works as a physical object will always be the core of the architecture critic's obligation. My point is only to say that if the critic's responsibility begins with considering the building as an object, it doesn't end there.

Matthew Arnold defined criticism as “a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world”; implicit within that is the obligation to share your judgments as well as your enthusiasms. Both judgment and enthusiasm are ways of expressing love, and a critic who does not love his field cannot last long in it. To love the thing—whether we call it architecture, design, planning, whatever—and also to love what it means in other people's lives, and not only your own, is, I think it is fair to say, a further prerequisite to functioning well as a journalistic critic. This is not inconsistent with exercising judgment; judgment and education go hand in hand and are parts of a critic's role as a kind of interpreter, to communicate his love of things and, in so doing, instill love in others.

Now, I realize that all of this can sound more than a little touchy-feely and distant from the notion that the point of this realm of journalism ought to be to expose the wretchedness of 99 percent of what gets built in the United States, not to mention elsewhere in the world; or to reveal the rampant inequities in redevelopment schemes, or the horrendous lack of a housing policy in this country, or the failure of planners to create a viable public realm in cities today. Well, yes, and the critic who is only an enthusiast risks being seen, like Browning's duchess, as “too soon made glad, too easily impressed.” As I look back at what I have done in *The New Yorker*, I think several of the negative pieces I've written—such as the one on the Westin Hotel in Times Square by Arquitectonica (on which the editors plunked the headline “Is This the Ugliest Building in New York?”), or the Astor Place condominium by Gwathmey Siegel, or the Prada store in Soho by Rem Koolhaas (which I compared unfavorably to the Toys ‘R’ Us store in Times Square)—have had at least as much impact as the positive pieces. Because *The New Yorker* does not as a matter of policy try to cover everything—because the magazine is selective, for reasons of both limited space and editorial judgment—the decision to write a negative piece has a special weight. There has to be something important enough to say to justify giving a building some of the few precious column inches the magazine