Citeations

Between Talk and Tease

The Land, the City, and the Human Spirit: America the Beautiful - An Assessment, *L.P. Fuller, ed., Austin: Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, Center for the Study of American Architecture, 1985, 146 pp., $11.00*

Journal of History and Theory, *Mark Schneider, ed., Houston: University of Houston College of Architecture, 1985, 49 pp., illus., $7.50*

Reviewed by Malcolm Quantrill

In England we have an expression to distinguish between two clearly contrasting things or experiences: we say that "a" and "b" are as different as chalk and cheese. To an English ear the term "beautification" sounds like so much chalk. On the other hand, the concept of "Post-Cartesian Meditations on Themes from Heraclitus" conjures up a promising, almost soupy *brie*. A report on the post-White House (Conference on Natural Beauty) Conference at The University of Texas at Austin, like many conferences, mixed politics, rhetoric, morality, personal salvation, and other earthbound concerns, and the result is a useful bedside book. In contrast, the University of Houston's *Journal of History and Theory* with its *Kama Sutra* of current architectural positions, would seem to be out of place in the bedroom. Between them, these two publications appear to have much the same agenda as many colleges of architecture or environmental design throughout the world - an agenda that spans the landscape of reality with (or without) a dream.

Allowing that the Austin conference was, as Ian McHarg suggested, an encomium for Lady Bird Johnson, it still must be subjected to the test for all conferences: "Was it worthwhile and memorable? Were there views expressed there that should not have been missed, that stung you to attention about the issues under discussion?" I remember being taught by McHarg when he didn't know words like "encomium." In those days he told us every day that landscapes should be *dramatic*. But the truly great thing about McHarg is his realization that it was only by exercising his own histrionic talents that there would be any landscape left in the environmental drama. His *Inquiry Through Design* is deservedly a bestseller and remains one of the best books in our field; and although almost everybody has (or claims to have) heard him at least once, he remains good at a conference because he quickly comes to the point. I regret that I was not there to hear him say: "As far as we look, the people who are supposed to be looking after the environment are not looking after the environment. If I knew who was supposed to be looking after the environment, I swear to God I'd sue the bastards." And in true McHarg style, he followed up that opening slog with: "All the calculated actions we've seen in the Interior Department and the Office of Surface Mining seem to say the same thing: 'We'll take economic growth because we need economic growth for reelection, and in the process we're absolutely prepared to sacrifice the environment. And we don't mind sacrificing human health and well-being either.' " Then, he hit home with his solution to the problem: "One remedy, of course, is to toilet-train American industry. There is no question that industry is not only incontinent but toxically incontinent. And, of course, incontinence has only two explanations: one is infantilism, and the other senescence." The only difficulty of playing McHarg at a conference is knowing when to put him in to bat: to open the innings or to hit the final, winning run? As Nathaniel Owings went on to say, it's difficult, if not impossible, to follow McHarg's performance. And so we leave the opening session on "The Land" and pass on to Edmund Bacon's innings for "The City." He recalled columnist Neal Pierce's account of that famous debate between Jim Rouse and Jane Jacobs, in which Rouse argued that in order to deal with city problems you have to think big and take big bites of the apple. And Jane Jacobs countered by saying: "You'll spoil the human scale; you'll just spoil diversity. You've got to think little." Bacon's solution is to accept the essential *contradictions* of a city's *complexity* and, in Robert Venturi's terms, to have *both* the bread of scale *and* the meat of quality. Bacon nailed his menu to the mast in Austin by repeating his maxim: "The truth is - and we proved this in Philadelphia - that you've got to think big and act small and then you get somewhere."

From considering "The City," the conference moved on to the realm of "Visions." William D. Ruckelshaus told his audience: "Having deciphered the ecological handwriting on the American wall, we are now charged with the task of persuading others to act upon what we have read." Denise Scott Brown went on to remind us that you cannot actually have a *vision* of the *past* and to claim that we "associate thinking of the future with utopian thinking." She told her audience that: "In approaching the planning for the Republic Square district of Austin, we [Robert Venturi and herself] believe that the most forward-looking plans must look backward and that part of our utopian excitement will come from examining today's city as a descendant of its history and a progenitor of its future." Did she, and does this, imply that our "vision of futures" must incorporate some mirror-image of past experience, just as dreams (a form of "vision," after all) depend upon a sifting of historical consciousness. That is a role which we can, in any case, readily associate with the work of Charles Moore.

Serious academics, who are continually astonished by Moore's almost constant state of jetlag, must have been even more astonished to have him confess that "It always seems to be my role to lower the tone" and then go on in a lucid style that nearly matches McHarg's. He said (and it should be written large in every college of architecture): "You come to a city and deal - as we are doing at the Hyatt Regency where we are staying - with a totally synthetic and interior world that doesn't have anything to do with the world around." Moore went on to explain that: "In poor old Detroit, the almost billion-dollar Renaissance Center made the desperate mistake of staying hermetic, separate from the city, which has come close to destroying it - and surely destroyed downtown Detroit. But even in beautiful Austin, there across the river, we are cooped up in another time capsule that could be picked up and placed, God knows, in Houston without our knowing the difference." The core of our environmental difficulties, Moore so succinctly observed, is the problem we have in matching images we have of "the city of our dreams" and the demands we make about so-called "comfort and convenience." Moore recalled Ed Bacon's "image of the village" that requires both the attention of the human hand and the scale of the human body and pointed out the conflict between these village characteristics and the automobile and air-conditioning machinery, concluding that: "The cars wipe out that human scale, and the machines to make us cool wipe out our connection with the out-of-doors and the world about us."

To Tom Wolfe fell the task of offering some post-prandial, rakish delight, which he did in part by alluding to James Wines's reference to what he calls "the Turd-in-the-Plaza School of Sculpture," quoting Wines as saying, "I personally do not care if they build these boring glass boxes. I do not care if they build an absolutely arid stretch of concrete or marble in front of it and call it a plaza. But why do they have to deposit that little turd in the plaza?" Thus, the Austin conference might be seen as the basis of a manual for the toilet-training of everyone from industry to the developer (and this last category must, of course, include both civic authorities and large state universities), but that would not be entirely fair to its qualities as a bedside book (rather, that is, than a work of reference). What is fair, however, is to point out the deficiencies in editing the proceedings down to size, but there again this failing might be seen as one attached to the way the conference was structured.

In the history and theory publication from the University of Houston, Mark

Schneider opens his essay "Post-Cartesian Meditations on Themes from Heraclitus" with the following observation:

When Ortega y Gasset explained that you cannot become your past because you already are it, he situated himself on the far side of prevailing historicism and squarely in the contemporary stage of phenomenology called hermeneutics - the inquiry into the nature of historical and interpersonal understanding. What is truly history is an art *of memory which faces up to the fact that remembering a former lover can never again be the same as loving her . . . If the woman who stepped out of the box were the same as the one about to be cut in half, there would be no need to applaud the magician. The past always comes into the difference by way of a difference.*

And if you are looking for an explanation of where it's at in Houston (where it's most certainly *at*), as the emperor says in Peter Schaffer's *Amadeus:* "There you have it." For the University of Houston's *Journal of History and Theory* is redolent with such excursions into the magician's realm and that of the occult.

In his project "The Fountain of Reflection," one of several projects by students in the University of Houston's History and Theory Program presented in the publication, Yoshinobu Yokono quotes from Frederick Kiesler: "Art is not based on invention because Art is an invention; an invention by nature to camouflage the inevitable mortality of flora, fauna, man and matter." Question: How do we find a metaphor between an "improbable" (Pietilä) problem and know models when the models are essentially turgid? The answer is certainly explored in the Houston works presented, particularly those connected with the Progetto Venezia problem for Palmanova. What also makes this issue of *The Journal of History and Theory* worthwhile is the interview of visitor Dalibor Vesely conducted by Mark Schneider, Ben Nicholson, William Taylor, and their students in a graduate seminar. They appear to be talking to each other and to *us.*

For the most part theory, as Henry Diamond observed about conservation at Austin, is an afterthought that comes slightly ahead of Esperanto in our priorities. The value of theory, it might be supposed, lies in its effectiveness, that is, its impact upon the actual practice of the *art.* And Heaven knows there was not enough discussion of the environmental art at Austin. I find myself looking for a balance between theory and practice in the environmental game plan and finding only extremes. Does it always have to be a difference between chalk and cheese?■

The Decorated Diagram: Harvard Architecture and the Failure of the Bauhaus Legacy

Klaus Herdeg, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983, 125 pp., 120 illus., $22.50

Reviewed by Paul W. Schieffer

The Decorated Diagram offers a valuable addition to the few books of critical architectural history. Architectural criticism speaks to us today through some confusion; what it often lacks is a proper sense of criticism. Criticism ought to be imaginative, to explain, to seek out, to clearly show us our past and present. It ought to be critical. Criticism complements architecture. We need criticism. Without it, our powers are diminished. Unlike the criticism of other arts, architectural criticism seems especially difficult because verbal and visual skills are often exclusive of one another. Pictures without words or words without pictures. Also, it's hard to take criticism.

For example, Tom Wolfe's *From Bauhaus to Our House* swept through the history of the Modern Movement with dazzling style, some wit, a little irony, and many facts, incidents, and anecdotes as phrases. Its very slickness concealed the astounding quantity of material it contains. Like Voltaire on Louis XIV, Wolfe put a mighty subject into a thin book. True, he transposed a few facts here and there, but the principal themes are fascinating. Why then were five decades of architects so upset as to fulminate and rage against Wolfe to the point of tedium? It's pretty simple. Wolfe's tone was wrong. He set up Walter Gropius as the Silver Prince. No person who ever met Gropius, worked with him, or was taught by him could possibly accept this Silver Prince stuff. The exceptional warmth, affection, and self-effacing courtesy of Gropius were always apparent. Wolfe's false antipathy toward Gropius (I believe he assumed it to punch up his paragraphs) cost Wolfe the serious audience his theses deserved.

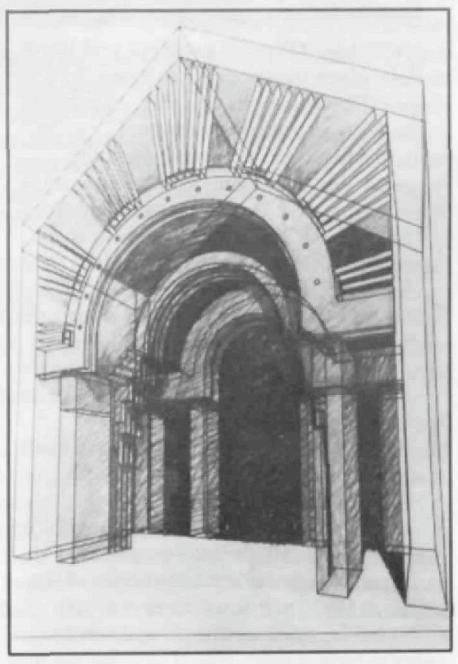
With *The Decorated Diagram*, Klaus Herdeg, also a Harvard graduate, writing about Gropius and the failure of the Bauhaus legacy, reminds us that Edward Barnes, John Johansen, Philip Johnson, I.M. Pei, Henry Cobb, Araldo Cossutta, Paul Rudolph, Ulrich Franzen, Victor Lundy, and TAC's John Harkness and Louis McMillen all were trained by Gropius at Harvard. (The impact of Harvard, Gropius, Marcel Breuer, or indeed of anything on Philip Johnson may be safely left to the reader's imagination.) Herdeg's book examines and critiques the Harvard-Gropius experience from published sources and buildings, thus creating an argument that can be replicated easily. Where he compares Karl Schinkel's Altes Museum and Philip Johnson's Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, you might choose the British Museum reading room and the Boston Public Library addition with perhaps similar results. Herdeg likes his subjects and even in his severest criticisms, one finds no rancor, no bitterness, but rather a sort of affectionate respect. Herdeg's comparisons offer a lovely exegesis of some major criticisms of the Bauhaus ethos. They are so admirable as critical appreciations that if you were quite an unreconstructed admirer of Gropius et. al., I would still press them on you as being intelligent, imaginative and, for the most part, well written. But ". . . posture of hard-nosed pragmatism at the expense of intellectually speculative and architecturally contextual investigations" characterizing the available problem descriptions at Harvard didn't really bother me as much as it did Herdeg. Gropius's dislike of historical conciousness seems, in retrospect, rather more naïve than ill-intentioned. Philip Johnson reminds us that "We cannot not know history," and he is right.

Other criticisms supported by Herdeg's analyses are: (1) the separation of the design process into the design of a functional plan and the creation of visual interest as discrete events; (2) the refusal to view space as a primary organizing force and experienced event; (3) the inability to provide a clear sense of scale or of easily made transitions; (4) a general sense of dull earnestness (the use of wit or irony seems quite a foreign language); and (5) the use of analogical models is not conciously addressed.

Occasionally the reader stumbles over what I shall describe as Cornellspeak. In this language of Formal Structure we confront the graceless airs of multivalency, symbolic attributes, latent interpretations, transformations, and thematic vehicles. This deep structure of *architectural-contextual investigation* seems to taper off through the book and I'm happy to report that most of Herdeg's writing gives Cornellspeak the slip.

Through *The Decorated Diagram*, Herdeg's analyses offer a thorough and careful look at the work of the Moderns, among whom the Postmoderns stand with valencies and latent interpretations pouring out of their pockets. This history-by-comparison and careful analysis is a very good way to look at buildings and a good way to think about buildings, although it doesn't quite cover up the strong and biting criticism of the title itself. These are decorated diagrams and are, in the terms of Gropius's own theoretical work, a failure of the ethos.■

Pioneers of CAD in Architecture



A computer-generated image of the San Antonio Art Institute, San Antonio, Moore Ruble Yudell, architects; computer program by John Heile

Alfred M. Kemper, editor, Pacifica: Hurland/Swenson, 1985, 654 pp., illus., $78.00

Reviewed by John Heile

Computer-Aided Design (CAD) is now becoming a technologically and economically feasible reality. From simple beginnings in the early 1960s, the theory and practice of this field have developed to the point where the use of CAD techniques is beginning to transform the practice of architecture. Several factors have contributed to the emergence of this potential. First, basic research conducted over the last two decades has established some important theoretical foundations for the field. Second, an increasingly broad range of powerful and reliable computer software designed for use by architects is becoming available. Finally, the rapidly decreasing cost and widening availability of computer hardware are bringing acquisition of computing capabilities within the reach of even the smallest of architectural offices." - William J. Mitchell, *Computer-Aided Architectural Design*

But, what good is a computer to an architect? Palladio found pen and paper perfectly adequate, after all. And it is hard to imagine Frank Lloyd Wright at the keyboard. (It just doesn't go with a cape and cane.) The most sophisticated piece of technology on most architects' desks, even today, is an electric pencil sharpener.

This question demands a broad answer, and is beyond the scope of this book review. However, for starters, it helps to look at the successes and failures of those that have gone before us. *Pioneers of CAD in Architecture* is a guide to the accomplishments (and missteps) of over 60 practicing American firms, 12 architectural schools, and various special contributors. The sole idea of this book, as stated by the editor, is "to share CAD experiences, facts, and figures, as well as ideas about CAD in architecture." It also contains comprehensive evidence of that learning period and represents offices varying from the largest in the country to single proprietor practices.

This book will give you a good understanding of the problems associated with integrating CAD into an existing company's structure. Many of the firms represented examined CAD as a single element to be incorporated into an established design process and created a specific program to place it within that process. In some instances, this resulted in frustration and poor overall performance because the true capabilities of CAD, or more specifically, a particular CAD system, were misunderstood or misused. The reason for this is partly due to the lack of communication between the architectural profession and the CAD industry. Quite often the result has been the failure of industry to address the needs of the architectural profession and its inability to figure out what it should be doing to satisfy that market.

For instance, the salesmen for CAD systems will say that one can increase professional productivity by replacing drawing boards with graphics work stations, and they probably will quote impressive productivity ratios. They may be right. But it is notoriously difficult to measure productivity, in any meaningful way, in a service profession, and it is certainly absurd to apply the industrial notion of productivity to artistic activity. After all, not all systems available today have features necessary to solve particular problems or increase productivity. But some do: the point is that there exists a wide range of systems with varying capabilities and nobody knows exactly what system is needed for the practice of architecture, and exactly how it will be used. The process of mutual learning is the issue that emerges here. It is an important contribution of this book and not only will help a firm learn how to effectively incorporate the use of a computer in its daily practice, but also will help shape the next generation of architectural CAD systems so that they are geared towards the architectural practice much more than any of the current commercial systems.

The evidence that the architectural profession is learning what it needs and what to demand also is contained in this book. Academicians dedicated to CAD research have been outlining the characteristics of appropriate CAD systems since, at least, the very early '70s. The "Schools" section in this book should offer a refreshing optimism to professionals since many of the features (that they are requesting) already are available in experimental systems running in academic laboratories.

From within the diversity of CAD stories contained in this book springs a general agreement about the basic requirements of a CAD system. First, it needs to emphasize design rather than drafting, and do it in such a way that the business and the technology of architecture are integrated with its artistic and functional requirements. Second, a CAD system should integrate 2-D and 3-D representations in such a way that the design profession essentially generates a model of the architectural solution which next directly will lend itself to automatic drafting and 3-D visualization, report generation and specifications writing, engineering analyses, and designs. Third, a CAD system should be easy to use and adjustable to the traditional methods of the architectural practice, possibly going as far as including "sketch work stations." But in doing so it also should take maximum advantage of the powers of the computer to enhance these traditional methods. Last, but not least, CAD systems should be cost effective for large firms as well as for the over 23,000 smaller U.S. design offices.

In conclusion, these comments should not be interpreted as a recommendation that one should wait until better CAD systems become available. On the contrary, even today's systems are worth installing in an office. Such a move is not simply a sound business and marketing decision, but a required investment in continuing education. The sooner a firm learns how to effectively incorporate the use of the computer in its daily practice, the better prepared it will be to use the more design-oriented systems of the not-too-distant future. A firm's competitive and marketing edge by the early 1990s, when the majority of architectural firms are expected to have CAD, simply will not depend on CAD ownership, but on how well the firm has learned to use the CAD system from both the production-cost point of view and the quality of work produced. For those firms which have not yet moved in this direction, but are ready to do so, this book should prove valuable.■