

## Citations

## Houston Tour de Fox

Houston Architectural Guide. Text by Stephen Fox; photographs by Gerald Moorhead. Houston: American Institute of Architects/Houston Chapter and Herring Press, 1990. 318 pp., illus., \$15

Reviewed by John Kaliski

Whenever I go to a city I have never visited, upon arrival I always follow the same routine. First I inquire as to the location of the best bookstore. Regardless of its location, near or far, I immediately seek it out. If I am lucky and the city is walkable, I pick up a transit map and plot my route on bus or tram. In lesser cities I pray that the rent-a-car map is detailed, for often the good bookstores are off the main thoroughfares. Finally, the store found, I search the shelves for that quintessential record of a city's character – the guidebook.

City guidebooks come in all shapes and vary widely in intent. Some are pure literature and through worldly description create a backdrop for more cosmic musings. A good example is James Morris's *Venice*, with delicate descriptions of the daily life of plazas, ducal ghosts that haunt palazzos, and the habits of the locals. Aptly revealing the romantic character of the canal city, the book dwells on the inevitability of Venice's physical as well as human decay.

Architects more typically purchase city guidebooks that are pictorial, though sometimes still rakishly literary. In this regard one is reminded of Rem Koolhaas's erotic tour through *Delirious New York*. However, I usually have little choice but to settle for the conventional architectural tour guide that notes the formal landmarks and high points of the urban scene as well as the built history of a place.

This latter type of guidebook is often horribly dry and boringly descriptive. Gebhard and Winter's guides to northern and southern California are exemplary in this regard. Replete with factual information, small photographs, and unreadable maps, these books were originally designed as pocket guides to California's built environment – but in fact you need overalls to carry them about.

Other architectural guidebooks take on an iconic significance that reflects the personality of a city's recent architecture. A recent guide to Frankfurt, Germany, features a white vinyl cover that, unfolded, reveals two white squares and a white double-square map. Fumbling to keep all these disparate pieces in place, I walked right by Richard Meier's Museum for the Decorative Arts – a white villa of white squares in plan, section, and elevation overlooking the Main River.

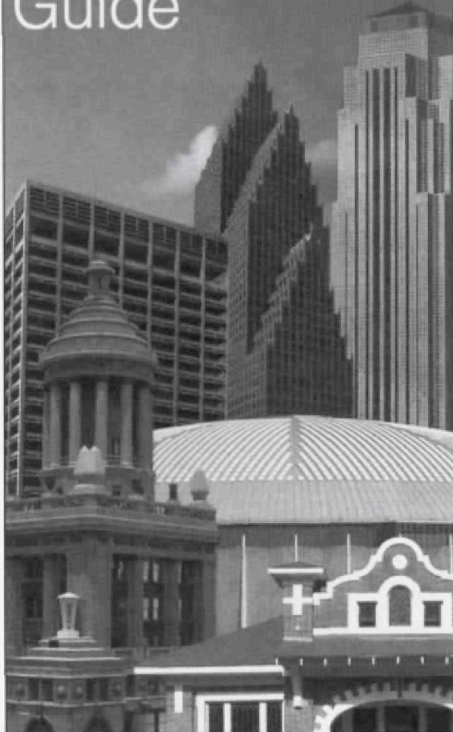
Stephen Fox's *Houston Architectural Guide* takes a middle course between the poetry of description, à la *Venice*, and the description of poetry, à la the Gebhard and Winter guides. The book covers Houston's major monuments, providing a wealth of information and attention to architectural detail. At the same time, it strives to reveal Houston's mythic character. It is populated with the personalities, stories, and feelings that provide a conscience to a city that rarely looks back.

Fox's premise is that Houston's built environment is first and foremost a reflection of the individual property owner. In his introduction Fox states,

*The desire for a fixed, dependable order that guarantees the possibility of voluntary, individual change but exacts no demands and initiates no action illuminates the Houstonian conception of the proper role of public authority, as well as its blind faith in the conviction that individual initiative is superior to collective wisdom.*

AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS HOUSTON

## Houston Architectural Guide



While the collective result is a "mess," the quirkiness of the individuals leads to all sorts of follies that add up to architectural theater clamoring for attention even as it is first consumed and then neglected by the locals. Environmental amnesia results. Each individual provides his own mental map of the city, and visitors need to be initiated into private histories and private maps before they can accurately see the place. Fox, our tour guide through Houston's private mysteries as illustrated by buildings, subdivisions, and physical infrastructure, allows us to see the whole, warts and all, in the hope that we will "take responsibility for the future by learning about the past."

Given the author's goal of making us see the whole, it is not surprising that he offers the low as well as the high. Strange juxtapositions result – just as they do throughout the city. For instance, Gwathmey, Siegel & Associates' 16 Crestwood Drive, a tasteful modernist exercise done for a client with good taste, is followed in the text by the Beer Can House, a structure that undoubtedly tastes good. Following this inclusive path, Fox sometimes too generously describes architecture, such as the buildings that make up the campus of Texas Southern University, that he didactically wants Houstonians to confront. Architecture is built politics, and Fox wants the reader to experience the truthful yet at times ugly results of democracy.

*Houston Architectural Guide* is full of wonderful facts, from the place notable Houston architects are buried (Glenwood Cemetery) to the location of Nabisco's first Houston plant (Chenevert Street). While purists might complain that the book's plurality necessitates the relative neglect of work that deserves to be recognized, this book is ultimately about the city as a collective experience much more than it is a collection of architectural masterpieces. In this regard Fox strays from the genre of descriptive architectural guidebooks. He makes the reader laugh, feel angry, ponder, or remember; at times he exaggerates, has tongue in cheek, is guileless or scheming – a Houston individual. Yet he always makes the reader look again and again at the city. Stephen Fox loves the city of Houston and wants us all to love it as much as he does. This is the strength of his book. I have only one complaint: given the literary conception, the book is unfortunately laced into the straitjacket of the most banal standard-architectural-guidebook format. Fox's wit deserves an equal graphic design intellect.

*Houston Architectural Guide* is an important addition to an understanding of Houston's topos as well as a literary work that further defines the phenomenal language of this particular place. Read this book carefully and look again. ■

## Country Pleasures

*The Architect and the American Country House, 1890-1940* by Mark Alan Hewitt; photographs by Richard Cheek. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990. 312 pp., illus., \$45

*The American Country House* by Clive Aslet. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990. 302 pp., illus., \$45

Reviewed by Stephen Fox

Preparation for reading the two books that Yale University Press has issued simultaneously on the American country house, one by former *Cite* editor Mark A. Hewitt, the other by the English architectural historian Clive Aslet, might include a perusal of Kevin Phillips's *The Politics of Rich and Poor in America* and Nelson W. Aldrich's *Old Money: The Myth of America's Upper Class*. Phillips describes a series of economic and political cycles in 19th- and 20th-century America that concentrated wealth disproportionately in the hands of the privileged few. Aldrich meditates on the effect this wealth has had on those who inherited it. Both establish a context – external and structural in the first case, introspective and psychological in the second – for comprehending the paradoxical condition that the "country house" represents as an American domestic institution. It appeared as the ostensible turn-of-the-century successor to British and American antecedents. Yet as Hewitt observes, it was radically different. Not only was the new American country house not a political institution, as were those of Great Britain; it was rarely even part of an economically productive enterprise, as were houses connected with plantations of the American South or ranches of the American West. The American country house was instead the focus of sumptuary display, where the beneficiaries of industrially generated wealth sought to represent architecturally a status in life into which they hoped to insert themselves.

Hewitt's book, the more ambitious of the two, clarifies some of the ambiguities that cluster around the use of the term "country house" to describe these establishments. He identifies three distinct although chronologically overlapping stages through which the country house passed between 1890 and 1940: the stately home, the country place, and the suburban house. The first stage produced the showiest, most ostentatious houses, such as those associated with the architects Richard M. Hunt, McKim, Mead & White, and Horace Trumbauer. Of these Hewitt concludes:

*The central idea behind these palaces was the institutionalization of the individual: the captains of industry, realizing the fleeting nature of recognition within their enterprises, wanted permanent monuments to their names. . . . unfortunately, as Henry James and Edith Wharton observed, even palaces of stone could crumble if a society did not institutionalize the wealth and patrimony behind them. Unlike England, America tended to resist such edification.*

The country place took form in reaction to the pretentiousness of the stately home in a

series of more modestly conceived houses, often designed as integral parts of comprehensive garden settings. Charles A. Platt and Wilson Eyre were the architectural progenitors of this episode. As Hewitt discerns,

*America's romantic country places sprang from an idealistic desire to commune with the land but also to possess it. The individualist impulse to retreat to the country seemed to some critics no less anachronistic than the wish for aristocratic trappings of the stately home. . . . Threatened by higher land costs as the century progressed, the country place was just as short-lived a tradition as its forerunners.*

Of the last phase, which was broadly diffused throughout the United States and is most poignantly captured in the suave neo-vernacular houses of Mellor, Meigs & Howe of Philadelphia, George Washington Smith of Montecito, and John F. Staub of Houston, Hewitt documents the transition from palatial grandeur to suburban propriety and repose in the 1920s:

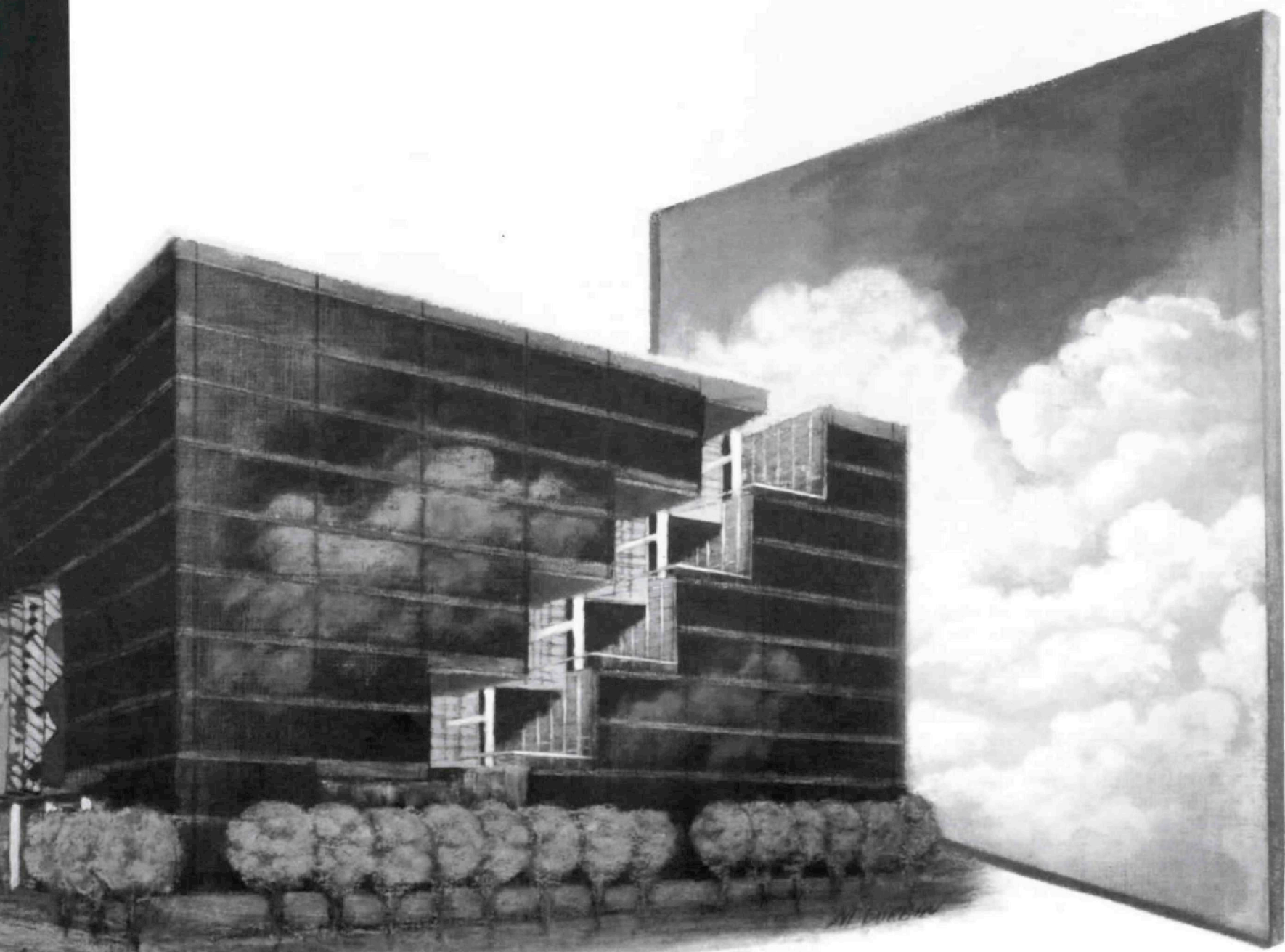
*The smaller country house with its attached garage became the dominant domestic type for upper-middle-class Americans. Most homes of the upper-income class were built in country enclaves or garden suburbs tailored to the car. By building a house in a regional [stylistic] idiom, with an architect who had established expertise in the style, the patron was able to identify more closely with the way of life and society in a new locale. The most ardent exponents of these historical revivals and reappraisals were often those who had come from elsewhere, finding economic or social opportunity in a new place.*

Hewitt surveys a large body of country houses from each of these three periods. He identifies the major styles and types within phases and the major architects associated with the country house movement, and includes chapters on the planning and servicing of country houses and modern-style country houses of the 1930s by Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard J. Neutra, George Howe, and William Lescaze. His foremost contribution, however, is to examine this phenomenon in the context of American cultural preoccupations of the period and to identify the contradictions inherent in the movement, both social and architectural. Yet Hewitt's probing of these unacknowledged tensions does not lead him to devalue the superior quality of the best country house architecture. His sympathy for these buildings and his skill at explicating successive trends in turn-of-the-century architectural eclecticism and garden design are conveyed in fluent, incisive writing. This sympathy and insight are reinforced by the superb photography of Richard Cheek, whose ability to use the camera as an interpretive medium is exceptional.

Clive Aslet's *The American Country House* neatly complements Hewitt's *The Architect and the American Country House* rather than duplicating it. Aslet discusses many of the major houses that Hewitt analyzes, yet the thematic organization of his book manages to place the subject in a somewhat different perspective. Rather than examining these houses in historical sequences, Aslet looks at them in the context of different venues (the mountains, the shore,



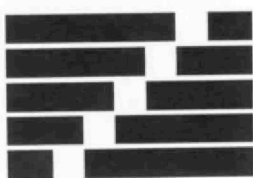
Houston's country house: Bayou Bend, 1926, John F. Staub, architect.



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the farm, or the ranch), the sporting pastimes of the leisure class, and the equipment and administration of the country house. Aslet tends to concentrate on larger houses and does not really address the general suburbanization of the country house that occurred in the 1920s. His prose is charming and graceful, making the book a pleasure to read.

What these two books reveal is the richness of an American architectural subject that heretofore has been examined almost exclusively in monographs on individual architects. Hewitt and Aslet make it clear that the subject warrants more exposure. The value of their books is that now a scholarly foundation exists to support such broadened research. ■

## 'Architectures capitales à Paris'

College of Architecture  
University of Houston  
6 July – 16 September 1990

Reviewed by Patrick Peters

More than a hundred years ago in his *Entretiens sur l'architecture*, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc described for his students at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts the essential principles of their discipline. Architecture, he wrote,

*must be true according to the programme and true according to the methods of construction. To be true according to the programme is to fulfil exactly and simply the conditions imposed by need; to be true according to the methods of construction, is to employ the materials according to their qualities and properties. . . . purely artistic questions of symmetry and apparent form are only secondary conditions in the presence of our dominant principles.<sup>1</sup>*

The range of possible interpretations of this dictum comes to mind when viewing the works recently exhibited at the University of Houston College of Architecture under the title *Architectures capitales à Paris*. The installation of photographs, drawings, and elaborate models presented ten recent monumental public projects sponsored by the French government for the city of Paris. These works indicate that, while the structural rationalist legacy of Viollet-le-Duc lives on in Paris under the patronage of President François Mitterand, it has assumed various guises, from the "deconstructed" landscape at La Villette by Bernard Tschumi to the timeless abstractions of I. M. Pei's pyramid at the Louvre and Johan Otto von Spreckelsen's cube at La Défense.

With these presidential commissions Paris has once again gained international acclaim through national building, on a scale

unparalleled since the time of Napoleon III. Consistent with the Parisian tradition of continual self-contradiction, of admitting outrages such as the Eiffel Tower and the Centre Beaubourg in order that they may eventually become constituents of the city, these works do not reflect the subtle tempo or texture of the Parisian back street. Instead they live up to their pseudonym, *Les Grand Travaux*: major landmarks, structural tours de force, formal monuments destined to become tourist fare. While their presentation at UH was flamboyant rather than thorough, the exhibited works suggest a process of city building exemplary for Houston in two ways.

First, they demonstrate the practice, long evident in the capital, of each political regime leaving its monuments as gifts to the city. Today in Paris one finds the squares of royalty, Napoleon's monuments to his military victories, neighborhoods restructured by the boulevards of Baron Haussmann for Napoleon III, and the Centre Beaubourg sanctioned by Georges Pompidou.

Second, they demonstrate that, from the outset, President Mitterand sought to elevate the quality and stature of French architecture for an international audience, and to refresh his own country's awareness of contemporary architecture. He aimed his program at cultivating a public that might again support city building that proved sensitive to urbanism and civic life. Consequently, *Les Grand Travaux*, with the exception of the Finance Ministry buildings at Bercy, were conceived to house diverse cultural institutions. And through various consultations and competitions, they not only gave recognition and exposure to a number of talented French architects but also stimulated French production by introducing contributions from internationally recognized foreign architects. As in Houston, these public works express an untenable thirst for renewal; as is not the case in Houston, they demonstrate the positive influence that governmental monuments can exert on the long-term quality of city life. In fact, the site models reveal that, in a few cases, these monuments were carefully inserted within the fabric of existing buildings. This is especially true of Jean Nouvel's Institut du Monde Arabe, which, by inflecting toward circumstantial site features and neighboring buildings, avoids the overt formalism present in some of the other works, such as Dominique Perrault's Bibliothèque de France and Francis Soler's Centre des Conférences Internationales beside the Eiffel Tower.

Ironic, then, is the fact that it was precisely the thin veil of formal French classicism borrowed by Philip Johnson from Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's House of Education that served as the lightning rod to draw two heads of state to the College of Architecture during the 1990 economic summit. Through the agency of delicate instruments of international protocol and the overt

intercession of Kenneth Lay, cochairman of the Houston Summit Committee and chairman of the University of Houston Board of Regents, the College of Architecture provided an amiable setting for both a private reception hosted by President Bush and an informal presentation of a doctorate of humanities and a distinguished professorship in architecture to President Mitterand while he viewed the exhibition.

During a 1983 seminar at the Sorbonne, the French president explained that his enthusiasm for the mission of *Les Grand Travaux* "stems from the conviction that the industries of culture are the industries of tomorrow." Given the nature of current public building in Houston, one wonders what faith leaders in this city hold in either one. ■

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 64.

## Sky-Fi and Battery City

The Skyward Trend of Thought: The Metaphysics of the American Skyscraper by Thomas A. P. van Leeuwen. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1988. 176 pp., illus., \$25

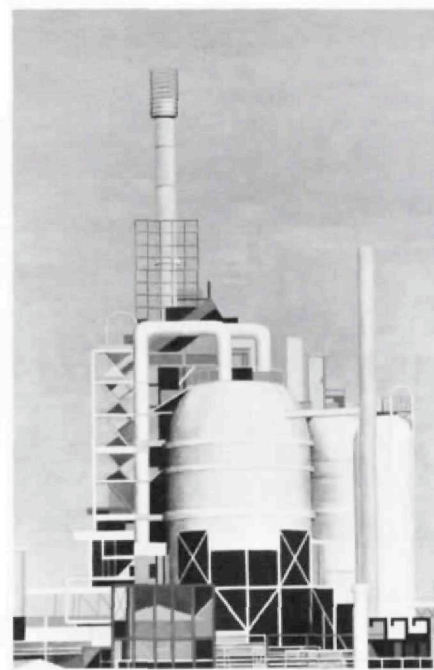
Charleston: Antebellum Architecture and Civic Destiny by Kenneth Severens. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988. 316 pp., illus., \$49.95

Reviewed by Stephen Fox

Two recent works of architectural history examine their subjects in ways that depart from, but can reinvigorate, standard forms of architectural historical discourse. Thomas A. P. van Leeuwen's *The Skyward Trend of Thought* is a collection of short, dense, provocative, and frustrating essays.

It illuminates what he describes as the "metaphysics of the American skyscraper." Van Leeuwen asserts that, historiographically, the "how" of American skyscraper development has been confused with the "why," a confusion exploited by mid-20th-century historians who sought to annex certain elements of American skyscraper development to a selective, syncretic history of modern architecture. As this conspiracy-theory deduction may suggest, van Leeuwen's correction of the record has a gleefully demented undertone. His intentional wackiness is in fact an open tribute to *Delirious New York*, Rem Koolhaas's "retroactive manifesto of Manhattan."

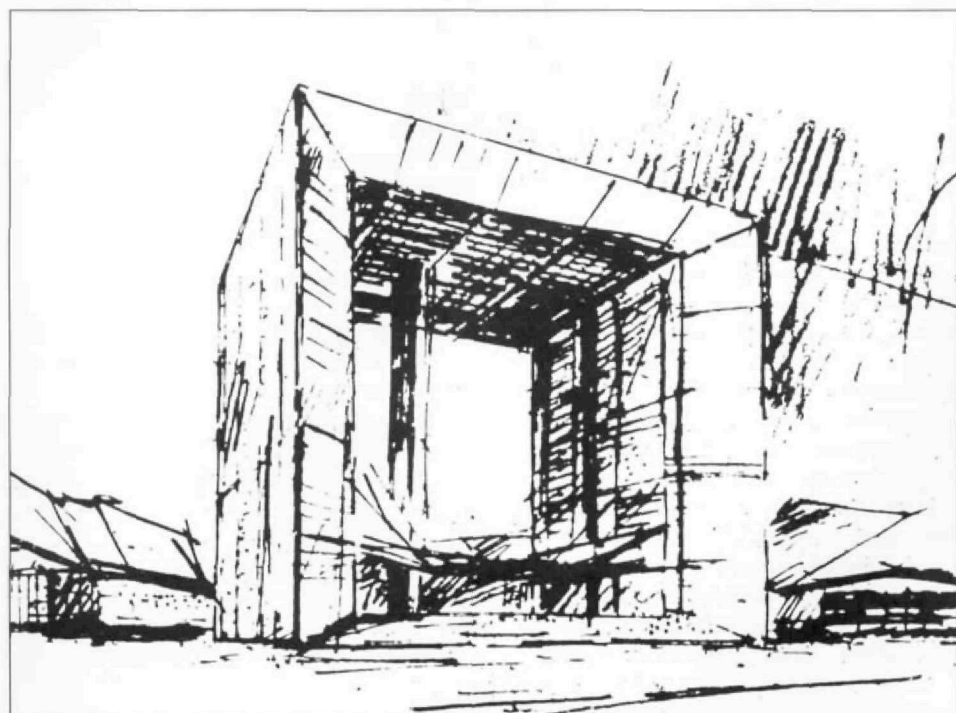
Van Leeuwen's desire to reveal the "mythical structure of 'The History of the Skyscraper'" (sic) is inhibited by failures in the literary structure of his book. The five essays – on the skyscraper as an embodiment of specific mythemes, on an architectural analysis grounded in myth types, on the skyscraper as representational usurper, on the rituals of city building that the skyscraper initiated, and on the search for a compelling natural metaphor to inspire the formation of skyscrapers – are a chaotic assemblage of outrageous assertions, curious facts, and startling, often profound, insights. They abound in redundancy and display little effort to construct a coherent, logical argument. This is a misfortune and, for van Leeuwen, a decided miscalculation. The essays fragment into anecdotal digressions, abetted by the MIT Press's unconscionable failure to edit the manuscript properly. Van Leeuwen's attempt to subvert the complacent assumptions that govern positivist architectural historiography appears as nothing more threatening than personal idiosyncrasy. One regrets that van Leeuwen did not attend more carefully to *Delirious New York*, in which outrageousness of content was never allowed to compromise clarity of presentation.



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In comparison to *The Skyward Trend of Thought*, Kenneth Severens's *Charleston: Antebellum Architecture and Civic Destiny* might at first glance seem entirely conventional. This is not the case, however. Severens grounds his history of Charleston architecture from 1820 to 1861 in a closely analyzed account of economic, political, and social cycles in the city's history. He strives to read architecture as an ideological reflection of its times and the circumstances of its coming into being. Severens uses period documents to determine how Charleston's chief public institutional and commercial buildings were evaluated (or whether they were evaluated), whether and why any excited controversy or special praise, and whether they contributed to, or were isolated from, broader urban, economic, and architectural trends. Severens does not reject the standard style history of 19th-century American architecture. Rather, he precisely correlates stylistic developments with specific events and personalities in the history of a specific place, weighing stylistic transformations against public expectations, dominant building typologies, the evolution of the architectural profession, and the shaping of a city's image. Severens should pursue this methodical examination of architecture as evidence into the realm of housing and especially into the built world of African-Americans in Charleston, who made up over half of the city's population in some decades of this time period. The book does presume a wider knowledge of Charleston and South Carolina history than the casual reader is likely to have, and the illustrations are not always numerous enough, well chosen, or adequately descriptive. Nonetheless, *Charleston: Antebellum Architecture and Civic Destiny* is a work whose scholarship ought to stimulate more intense critical inquiry into the history of American architecture. ■



Johan Otto von Spreckelsen, Grand Arch at La Défense, sketch for March 1983 international architectural competition.

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## Pompeii Rediscovered

Rediscovering Pompeii  
*The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston*  
 11 November 1990 – 27 January 1991

Reviewed by Elyzabeth Yates-Burns McKee



Courtesy of the Italian Ministry of Cultural and Environmental Assets.  
 Archeological Superintendency of Pompeii.

Reliefs With Theatrical Masks, 1st Century A.D.

In his introduction to *Rediscovering Pompeii*, the catalogue of the splendid exhibition that arrived this fall at the Museum of Fine Arts, Ennio Presutti writes:

*The fascination of Pompeii cannot be explained merely by the beauty of its paintings, the variety of its buildings, the wares of its shops, or the surprising discoveries that are still being made as the excavations proceed. Pompeii is a city that returns today to live the rhythms of its daily life in all its aspects. . . . The fascination lies . . . in the extraordinary possibility of reestablishing a dialogue, contact between modern man and the people of almost two thousand years ago.*

Pompeii and Herculaneum, rediscovered by accident in 1738, fired the imaginations of late-18th- and 19th-century architects, and the excavations of these cities stimulated the formation of the self-consciously antiquarian and neoclassical cultures of western Europe. While the impact of the finds was evident in all fields associated with the arts and archaeology, architecture and the decorative arts were most affected: in fact, it was through these discoveries that a new relationship between the decorative arts and architecture took shape, eventually culminating in the volatile discussions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries regarding their origins and purpose. The decorative arts, in particular the so-called minor arts of metalworking, ceramics, and weaving – the techniques that produce the artifacts of daily life – were and still are regarded as highly problematic, having been judged to be of “lesser” stature than the high art of architecture. But it is precisely the strength of this exhibition – which showcases the simple and lyrical beauty of the minor arts in daily life – that it recalls the complex interrelationship and mutual dependency of the “minor” and “major” arts, the culmination of which is the site that architecture suggests. In other words, architecture becomes the stage (as does the exhibition design) for everyday living, which is facilitated by the variety, specificity, and aesthetic qualities of the objects at hand.

The Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum were destroyed in A.D. 79 by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. Pompeii, a middle-class mercantile city of approximately 150 acres, was buried beneath 15 feet of ash and debris. During the three days of the eruption, most of its 20,000 inhabitants died. Today, 50 acres still remain to be excavated; in comparison, Herculaneum, a resort city for the upper classes, remains virtually untouched by archaeologists. Given the overwhelming beauty of many of the objects unearthed in Pompeii, one only wonders at the treasure still to be discovered in the wealthier city.

For those who saw this exhibition in New York, a second visit is in order. Jack Eby, the Museum of Fine Arts' in-house

architect, has expertly elaborated on the architectural spirit of the period with an enfilade of four rooms that become telling elements in their own right. Perhaps most powerful is the startling color of each room – coats of “pure pigment” reminiscent of the polychromy of Gottfried Semper and other 19th-century architectural theorists whose speculations were archaeologically grounded, or even of Matisse's *Red Studio* (1911) or *Harmony in Red* (1908-1909). The rooms furnish a stunning rejoinder to the Neoclassical fiction of a purified white Classical architecture.

Also of particular interest are the fresco wall paintings *Landscape With Seaside Villa*, *Marine Landscape With Architecture*, and *Room With Garden Paintings*, which suggest an entirely different conception of perspectival space than our own. Prefiguring the iconic architectural “backdrops” of the 14th-century masters Duccio and Lorenzetti, the Pompeian wall paintings represent rhythmic continuity and figurative depth. The master artists of the period, all of whom remain unknown, were skilled in illusionistic measures, including the modeling of surface textures. The trompe-l'oeil of the various paintings, in particular those suggesting architectural scenes and landscape vistas, creates an ultimately ambiguous sense of reality – an idea relevant to contemporary discourse on the nature of representation in architectural space.

Though the exhibition includes the requisite specter of the Lady of Oplontis – the resin cast of a young woman trapped in an endless instant of death – it is most striking for its overwhelming emphasis on life and the creative energies. If these resurrected objects are any indication, daily life for the Pompeians was lived in a state of heightened aesthetic awareness and consequent enjoyment. One recalls Semper's assertion of the bounty and worth of the objects of antiquity, contradicting the 19th century's perception of the “obsolescence” of the methods and objects forged by ancient civilizations. Modern eyes, too, might be amazed by the uncontrived yet sophisticated lyricism of the frescoes, sculptures, lamps, tableware, jewelry, and silverware.

*Rediscovering Pompeii* is a once-in-a-lifetime event. Sponsored by IBM Italia and IBM America, it came to Houston from the IBM Gallery in New York City and will return to the custody of the Italian Ministry of Cultural and Environmental Assets in Rome. IBM, the major underwriter for the modern excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum, has also developed software programs that aid in archaeological digs. A key component of the exhibition is the showcase of interactive computer technology, including a number of programs for museum visitors' participation. The exhibition's stay in Houston was made possible by IBM's grant to the Museum of Fine Arts. ■