Romancing the Park

City Baseball Magic by Philip Bes, Minneapolis Review of Baseball, 1989. 48 pp., 50 illus., $5.95

Green Cathedrals by Philip J. Lowry, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1992. 275 pp., illus., $24.95

Lost Ballparks by Lawrence S. Ritter, New York: Viking, 1992. 210 pp., illus., $25

Reviewed by Bruce C. Webb

Baseball is the Rube Goldberg invention of sports, a series of semi-autonomous skill-motions held together by a complex set of rules; a mythic national pastime but a comparatively austere sport riddled with inbetween time, pauses, and endless waiting for something to happen. For the believers, baseball parks are not simply athletic venues but cultic shrines. Hence the mystical tone of Philip J. Lowry's Green Cathedrals, an atlas to the sacred geography of the diamond-studded paradise: "The more I have studied ballparks, the more they have begun to resemble mosques, or synagogues, or churches or such similar places of reverent worship. There is a scene of beauty at 21st Street and Lehigh in Philadelphia; Where once there was the Shibe cathedral, also called Connie Mack Stadium, there is now the Deliverance Evangelistic Church. There is a message in this."

Lowry catalogues "271 major league and Negro League ballparks, past and present." What he revers is not the newer multipurpose stadiums that appeared during the 1960s and 1970s as anonymous concrete expressions of some precise, prototypical programmatic order, but their classic predecessors, each a uniquely romantic personification of the local ingredients of team character, fan loyalty, and city spirit. Lowry's book pays homage to their praiseworthy diversity in an encyclopedic compilation of testimonials, pictures, occupants, neutral uses, capacities, largest and smallest crowds, surfaces, dimensions, fences, former uses, current uses, and anecdotes. Lawrence S. Ritter's more detailed, better-illustrated scrapbook, Lost Ballparks, focuses on 22 mostly vintage urban fields, major and minor, that have since made way for shopping centers, university campuses, a senior citizens center, a hospital, public housing, junior high schools, and parking lots.

Some idiosyncrasies of the old ballparks can be explained by the curious latitude accorded by the book of rules as to specifications for the playing field. While precisely prescribing the layout for the infield, the rules left the spatial definition of the outfield open to local interpretation. This allowed unusual field configurations to fit the odd scraps of urban land. It wasn't until rule 1.04 was passed in 1958 that a minimum dimension for new stadiums was fixed at 325 feet from home plate to the nearest fence and 400 feet to center field. But even with rule 1.04, nothing said a field had to be symmetrical or that it could not be configured, for example, to favor a home team with a surplus of left-handed power hitters.

Symmetry and uniformity would seem sportsmanlike precepts for stadium design. But the lookalike character of the super stadiums derived less charitably from the application of principles of systems design and diagrammatic analysis to the requirements of a multipurpose stadium. In Green Cathedrals, architect Dale Swearington cogently discusses engineering innovations in reinforced and lightweight concrete that allowed concrete to compare favorably with steel as a building material, enabling a monumental unity of form and structure within a modernist plastic expression. Moving stadiums out into the suburbs neutralized the localizing influences of the city context, freeing form to follow function in diagrammatic buildings that were symmetrical and usually round, with broad catwalkers and no interfering support columns.

What was really being optimized was engineering: the circular shape of most multipurpose super stadiums fits no sport precisely but can be fudged to accommodate them all. For baseball this configuration puts spectators at an increased distance from the infield and leaves many fans under the deep cover of overslung upper decks, screened from the trajectory of a well-hit fly ball. There's much to dislike about these super stadiums. Philip Bes's little book, City Baseball Magic, offers an incisive and comprehensive critique in laying out his argument for the design of Armour Field, a hypothetical new ballpark for the Chicago White Sox that sought to restore some of the ambience and character of the older generation of urban parks.

But unless I miss the point, what baseball romantics yearn for is the true idiosyncrasies that made the ballparks of the past so imperfect and so lopsidedly designed to favor the strengths of the home team. Nearly every book on baseball begins with fond remembrances of being taken to the ballpark by an adult and how the experience lingered. I recall going with my father to old Forbes Field in Pittsburgh - a grimy post-Victorian structure that to me resembled nothing so much as a steel mill or railroad station - and having the overwhelming feeling that the whole rickety, riveted steel structure was going to collapse. I made deals with the gods that if I let the other team win, maybe we could get out of there alive. At Forbes Field, I was a boy being initiated into a man's world that smelled of cigars, beer, and the sweat of hunky steelworkers who cussed everything.

Today baseball is a thoroughly sanitized "family entertainment." Maybe it all changed when the Brooklyn Dodgers moved to Los Angeles and the chimerical world of Hollywood, bypassing the cozy Mission-style ambience of LA's own Wrigley Field for the immense, multi-valent Coliseum until Chavez Ravine could
be rushed to completion. Perhaps it was when the Astrodome turned the baseball stadium into a kind of post-Barnum theme park out of diversionary necessity. Today baseball players live in a universal non-place realm, the same world inhabited by movie stars who live on the surfaces of electronic screens. They don’t belong to Houston or Pittsburgh or anywhere; they go where the money is. Everything about the game seems far off, miniaturized, squeaky clean.

Like many of our institutions, baseball today really is defined by marketing, consumerism, and television. In the third generation of ballparks, the ones Lowry calls regentrified classical parks, the postmodern “look” seems more like a piece of thin, “themed” wrapping paper applied to the outside surfaces of still-too-perfect stadiums. They embody the essence of capitalist architecture in the declining years of the 20th century – designed to look good on television and to hold life inside a high-priced controlled environment of ersatz nostalgia and lots of fringe buying. To restore baseball to its former look would mean resurrecting old spectator styles in places much less wholesome and slightly more illicit. It would also mean deconstructing the surface illusions of these places, creating instead stadiums of considerable irrationality – a kind of John Cage architecture held together by the narrative content of the game itself.

The Gardens of Roberto Burle Marx offers a more personal approach to the man cited as "the real creator of the modern garden" by the American Institute of Architects. It is the work of the late Sima Eliavson, a native of South Africa who was a writer, photographer, and lecturer on gardens and garden subjects. She traces Burle Marx's long and prolific career from small garden commissions to the large and spectacular urban landscapes in Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia.

The first part of her book, dedicated to the man and his background, contains

Painted Ground

Roberto Burle Marx: The Unnatural Art of the Garden


The Gardens of Roberto Burle Marx


Reviewed by Eduardo Robles

Roberto Burle Marx, born in São Paulo, Brazil, on 4 August 1909, emerged foremost among the creators of a modern landscape aesthetic in the late 1930s. His work is an example of landscape design as an artistic endeavor. A painter, muralist, sculptor, architect, and set designer, he brought to it sources of inspiration based on art, literature, garden history, and music.

Working almost entirely in his native Brazil, Burle Marx's career extended over half a century. From a few projects of traditional design to the refinement of a philosophy based on artistic and ecological concerns, he expressed a personal cosmology that was expanded and refined in each project. Burle Marx's designs could not have existed without Brazil and its natural richness, something he realized during his first visit to Europe when he saw the Dahlan Botanical Garden in Berlin. In this setting, the Brazilian transplants, exuberant even in the far-from-tropical light of a German winter, must have had an enormous impact on him – the beginnings of a vision. In his work, Burle Marx reminds us of a time when the garden was still an important aspect of civilization. He reaches for a clear and strong harmony between nature and man and wants to contain and preserve nature as it is interpreted, not imitated, by the eye and hand of the designer.
The Drawing on the Wall

Tadao Ando

The Menil Collection, Richmond Hall
20 March – 24 May 1992

Reviewed by Carlos Jiménez

Entering the Tadao Ando exhibition at the Menil Collection’s Richmond Hall, one immediately confronts two angled walls opposite one another. On the wall to the right, the architect has sketched a longitudinal section of one of his projects, transforming the wall into an actual drawing surface. In a single gesture, the continuous blue crayon sketch integrates an architectural form and its setting, paralleling Ando’s preoccupation with buildings and nature as inseparable elements. The wall to the left displays eight sequential photographs of the altar of one of Ando’s best-known works, the Church of Light, Ibaraki, Japan (1987–89). Within this series, each frame reveals the passage of light as it enters and transits the sacred space. Like a ritual sandbox, the cross-shaped opening animates the concrete walls and casts a spiritual presence. One need look not further than these two walls to grasp the essence of the architect’s work.

This exhibition of 12 self-selected works from the last ten years was organized by the Museum of Modern Art as part of its Gerald D. Hines Interests Architecture Program. Both the New York and Houston installations were designed by Ando, although at Richmond Hall the exhibition has been relieved of the freestanding faux-concrete wall that marred it at MOMA – a strained reference to the architect’s favorite material, cast concrete. A catalogue accompanies the exhibition, including an essay by Kenneth Frampton that assesses Ando’s “self-consciously cross-cultural position.”

Born in Osaka, Japan, in 1941, Ando has achieved an almost mythical prominence as a self-taught architect who developed his craft through a process of observation and travel. Adding to this mystique is his proclivity to initiate projects himself and then find clients to enable their realization. Ando’s path of self-discovery has culminated in a clarity of expression seldom seen in contemporary architecture; his spare geometry infuses even an anonymous detail or a blank concrete wall with the vitality of poetry.

The exhibition lamentably excludes important works such as the Azuma Row House (1975–76) and the Times I and II buildings (1984–86), in Osaka and Kyoto respectively. Located in crowded urban contexts, these projects demonstrate Ando’s ingenuity in creating spaces for refuge and sustenance in the midst of everyday chaos. This refined serenity – at once meditative and sensual – is most evident in the three ecclesiastical projects represented in the exhibition: the Chapel on Mount Rokko, Kobe (1985–86), the Church on the Water, Tomana (1985–88) and the Church of Light. Through material and texture, water and wind, shadow and light, each of the senses finds its correspondence.

Most of the projects are described by site models and by presentation drawings, some as large as 32 feet in length, rendered with seductive virtuosity. Beyond their graphic assurance, the drawings underscore Ando’s desire to fuse elements of nature with the tectonics of architecture. This is no better expressed than in the astonishing drawing of the Church on the Water: here the rotation of section, plan, and elevation converges in a seemingly unending line, bracketed by a heavily drawn blue sky and a blackening earth.

The site models are revealing as extensions of the topography on which Ando sculpts his forms. Often a plan’s configuration echoes or contrasts to some near or distant contour in the terrain. Each site model appears as an abstract portion of earth lifted from its source. For some architects, the rigor of geometry can impress the senses, but Ando’s reductive geometry is liberating. It often amplifies subtleties of site or serves to extend its reach, as in the case of his Forest of Tombs Museum, Kumamoto (1989–91) and the Chikatsu-Asuka Historical Museum, Minami-Kawachi (1989–91), where conceptual grids enter into and disappear under the water.

Placed at the exhibition’s midpoint, six television screens ask visitors to enter a simulated architecture of multiple images. These introduce an element of hyper incongruous with the projects. Video installations can work for or against an architect’s sensibility. For instance, in Arata Isozaki’s retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1991), the use of “high definition” television monitors was well suited to his showmanship. The saturated images transported one into Isozaki’s realm of eclectic compositions with an immediacy not felt in either the accompanying drawings or the models. In Ando’s case, the videos do facilitate an understanding of movement through his architectural pro-jections, but their slickness distances one from the true meaning of the work. What is most moving about Ando’s best work is that which cannot be said – the silent dialogue between the ephemeral and the eternal. At Richmond Hall, their medium of exchange is the memory of a flowing sketch and the haunting beauty of shadow and light.