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In *La Belle* Dallas: The Crescent, 1986, Shepard + Boyd/USA and John Burgee Architects with Philip Johnson, architects

Cite**survey**

Dallas Through the Looking Glass

Malcolm Quantrill

The latest acquisition on view at the Dallas Museum of Art is a townscape, a prospect of a piece of the city as it was or might be, in the French manner. There is something strange in the composition, something not quite surreal, yet still decidedly reminiscent of Magritte. But the confusion of effect is not that of a moonlit building beneath a sunlit sky. Rather it is the change of effect that results from the grouping of images of familiar objects of varying scales, so that the assembly is familiar in bits, but not as a whole. Thus, the townscape has as its focus an urban fragment, a piece of the city, that is itself fragmented. Indeed, we might say *"Ceci n'est pas l'architecture"* not because what we see is only a pictorial representation of that architecture, but because the representation is of bits that do not add up to a whole. Indeed, further study of the composition reveals that what is being represented is not the Parisian *hôtel*, although *hôtel* is certainly implied, but the modern high-rise in that guise. When we note that the artist is none other than Philip Johnson (in association with John Burgee Architects), we recognize this artifice as readily as those of the Belgian surrealist.

Looking north across the city from the Dallas Museum of Art, we can, of course, see several piles less picturesque than The Crescent hotel and office complex. And aside from the fact that this three-part development incorporates more of the Bedford limestone than was used on the Empire State Building, an atmosphere is evoked, if not in the picture frame of the Museum of Art window or close up, then perhaps as you sweep into the complex between the 18-story office tower and the luxurious Crescent Court hotel. For amid the flurry of high-styled women and European cars, we might indeed be somewhere else, in another urban fragment across the Atlantic, and not in Dallas at all.

The limestone is as yet too fresh to give us more than a hint of history, as yet unloved by the hand of nature, and still unchafed by man and machine. Like the lady in the hotel's Beau Nash Restaurant, stiffly attempting to avoid body contact with her plate of linguine, the stonework's margins and chamfers present the appearance of laundered virginity: the body of architecture is somehow veiled in this appearance rather than revealed.

The "cast iron" that is aluminum (and seems fully conscious of its role as Sullivan's "makeweight") weaves a curious web across specially created gaps in the 18th-century illusion. Amid the grandeur of the major stage props, this would appear to be a play for the taste of the masses, a touch of vulgarity, perhaps. But it is too fine on the office tower, too gray and too calculated in its whimsy to amuse the "common man," although in the three-tiered marketplace it achieves the comic relief of Copenhagen's Tivoli. In the palm-decked greenhouse of the Beau Nash, however, we sense its true purpose in the scheme of things. The interiors, like the spaces between the buildings, have a focus in their spatial ordering and their use of materials,

George Holmes, Archer M. Huntinton Art Gallery

Architectural model, The Crescent (School of Architecture, University of Texas at Austin)

Citeations

creating the feeling that in the Crescent Court hotel you can have an elegant good time. This is nowhere more true than in the Beau Nash brasserie, with its assured balance of lighting, darkness (mahogony), and color. Once inside the hotel – the entry court with its tempietto has too much parking for the right effect – you are, indeed, in another place. But it is the interior design and not the architecture that transforms both place and people. And there are tough jostlings of intention between these two realms, although I fear that much of this vulgar struggle is lost on the usual guest. In the great entrance hall, for instance, the circulation across to the second court is rudely interrupted by the intrusion of the second-floor gallery, like a piece of intimate apparel fallen from its proper place. But the marble floor of this space must be seen to be believed and is a material triumph over mere spatial and architectural adversity.

In the Beau Nash brasserie, the struggle is between the ceiling and the arched windows on both sides, in which the windows are defeated and depressed by the sheer weight of the mahogany beams that might easily have been omitted along the wall spans. But this is a space that is already popular with local residents and therefore always busy and noisy with the enjoyment of its excellent cuisine. Dinner and Sunday brunch bring back memories of the best smaller European restaurants; while breakfast in the greenhouse is ritzy in the true sense.

The elevators are by far the most efficient to be found anywhere. They deliver you into a crescent-shaped corridor, of course, where perspective is canceled out by the illusion of infinite distance. Long stays are not suggested by the layout and furnishings of the rooms, however, which are nevertheless very comfortable if undistinguished. One expects each room to have its French window but this, alas, opens onto a shelf rather than a balcony. Putting a hesitant foot out you soon realize why. The view from the room, unlike those down the corridors, is strictly one-point: you are intended to look across the courtyard and not up and down the crescent. If you break the rules, the illusion is destroyed, because the crescent is open-ended and the urban fragment not a complete entity in itself.

The harsh reality of the urban landscape intrudes beyond the garden wall to the right and the swimming pool to the left.

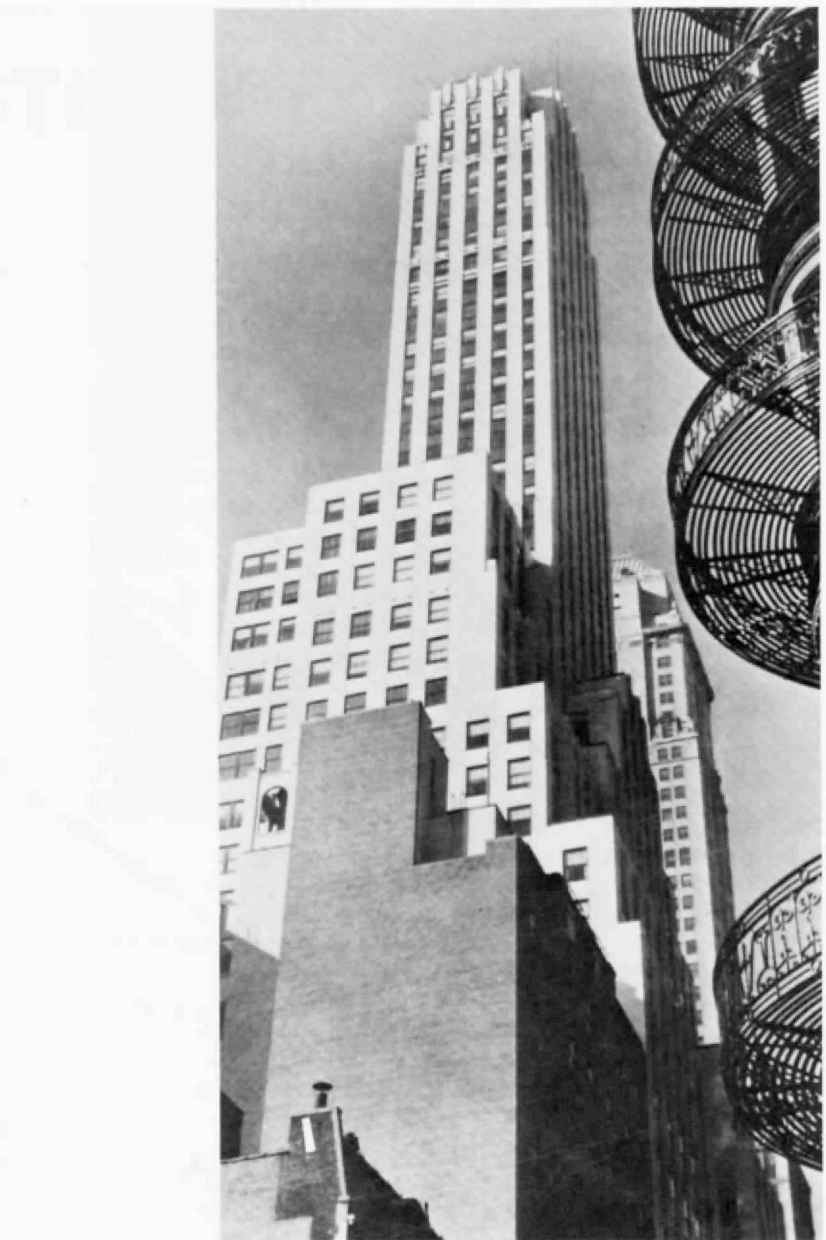
Returning to the townscape viewed from the museum gallery, I am reminded of the way in which the skylines of both Dallas and Fort Worth are delineated by profiling buildings with light bulbs. This magical transformation of a city's form at night is achieved by a simple and *vulgar* device – the very same one used in the interior of Dallas's N.J. Clayton-designed Santuario de Guadalupe Cathedral to accentuate the arches. In the case of the skyline, distance is the essential component of the illusion. There is no illusion in the Santuario, however; it is impossible to escape its reality. In the case of The Crescent, distance does not aid the illusion: the *hôtel* is frankly too surreal to be believed. But at close quarters the Crescent Court is more accommodating in its interior imagery. This may not be architecture – it avoids being monumental in spite of itself – but it's a great backdrop for fun and games. And it is just possible to be in Dallas and glimpse Paris through Mr. Johnson's looking glass. That is, if you are willing to play at mistaking the image of *la jeune fille* for that of *la belle dame mondiane*. ■

New York 1930 and LA Lost and Found

New York, 1930, Architecture and Urbanism Between the Two World Wars
Robert A.M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and Thomas Mellins with David Fishman and Raymond W. Gastil, New York, Rizzoli, 1987, 847 pp., $75

LA Lost and Found, An Architectural History of Los Angeles
Sam Hall Kaplan, New York: Crown Hall Publishers Inc., 1987, 224 pp., $27.95

Reviewed by Stephen Fox



Berenice Abbott, Museum of the City of New York

22 East Fortieth Street, 1931, Kenneth Franzheim

At 847 pages *New York 1930*, successor to Stern, Gilmartin, and Massengale's *New York 1900*, is not a quick read. It is a voluminous account of architecture built in New York (principally in Manhattan, but also including the outer boroughs), between 1917 and 1942. This is organized by building and institutional types – public buildings, entertainment and retail buildings, residential buildings, and tall office buildings – and concludes with a short section on urban improvements and the World's Fair of 1939. The book is illustrated with a stunning array of period photographs (some of them a bit muddy in printing) and fewer architectural drawings than one might wish. Although urbanism figures in the subtitle, it is to architecture that the book is dedicated; typological organization virtually ensures that the text becomes a catalogue of buildings.

The cultural trajectory that Stern, Gilmartin, and Mellins trace through buildings is dramatically inclined. It spanned from the end of the Progessive Era, with its "high" concept of civic grandeur, expressed in the nobility of classical architecture, to the raucousness of the Jazz Age and its delight in the sophisticated novelty of art deco (or what Stern, Gilmartin, and Mellins prefer to call Modern Classicism), to the crisis of the Great Depression, which propelled a renewal of engagement with sociological problems and lent the Modern Movement in architecture a certain moral urgency upon its American appearance. Underlying this trajectory the authors discern two gradual but inexorable trends: the dissolution of what they call the "metropolitan ideal" of 1900 before the tendency to suburbanize and domesticate, and the supplanting of the Progressive notion of civic virtue with financial speculation and social engineering.

In the chapters on theater, retail, and exhibition design especially, the authors' compilation of examples enables one to follow clearly the leading developments in taste, techniques, and attitudes that characterized this trajectory. In other chapters, however, these themes emerge less clearly as the authors seemingly race from subtype to subtype and example to example. In citing then-contemporary assessments of building projects, a critical dimension is introduced, along with some unanticipated revelations (for instance: the general opprobrium that Rockefeller Center encountered when first announced). But although it is evident that the authors regret the rejection of Progressive civic and architectural standards in the interwar era, they do not articulate a coherent critical interpretation of this epoch that might bridge between evaluations in the past and evaluation from the perspective of the present.

Houston's favorite New York architects crop up from time to time in the narrative. Alfred C. Bossom is mentioned, although none of his buildings are illustrated; John Eberson's three major contributions to New York's body of movie palaces are recognized; Harrie T. Lindeberg turns up on Beekman Place; and Kenneth Franzheim's 22 East Fortieth Street, a 42-story office tower completed in 1931 for Jesse H. Jones, is illustrated with a Berenice Abbott photograph. The Houston architect William Ward Watkin makes several surprise appearances in his role as an occasional commentator on the course of American architecture in the early 1930s.

New York 1930 is not the concise social-historical profile that its title might seem to imply. It is, however, a rich, discursive chronicle of the ways that social and cultural circumstances affected building development and intersected with architectural trends during the 1920s and 1930s.

Any temptation to criticize *New York 1930* for its profusion of detail is checked by a quick flip – and there's no compelling reason to slow down – through *LA Lost and Found* by Sam Hall Kaplan, design critic of the *Los Angeles Times*. Kaplan merely repackages what Gebhard, McCoy, Winter, Banham, Hines, Polyzoides, Chase, and Hess have already written about architecture in the Los Angeles region, stringing it all together with some light-weight and often repetitious anecdotal historical detail. In dealing with periods of LA architectural history that have not been written about, like most of the 19th century, Kaplan's limp grasp on American architectural history becomes apparent. Equally frustrating is his curt dismissal of the current SCI Arch-Santa Monica-Venice school, which he describes as "funky and punk designs" of "strained geometry and perverted materials" satisfying only "an often parochial, preconceived view among critics and peers of a spaced-out, LA architecture scene." What Kaplan doesn't seem to understand is that this work is appreciated not because it "represents" Los Angeles, but because it is ingenious, inventive, and lyrical. Kaplan exhibits as little feeling for the city as its history. One gets no sense of the diversity, texture, or patterns of development that characterize the place or of the multiple architectural cultures, and their sources of patronage, that often have occurred simultaniously in Los Angeles and the many distinct towns that surround it. The book is sustained only by Julius Shulman's architectural photography. There are no architectural drawings.

Architectural histories of American cities are needed. Too much has been lost and too little is remembered, even of buildings and architects that in their own time achieved some degree of critical recognition. *New York 1930* redresses the general lack of knowledge, but it is over-ambitious and unwieldy; the cataloguing of buildings (a commendable enterprise in itself) constantly competes with the accounts of historical developments. *LA Lost and Found* is too superficial and unresearched to communicate an adequate sense of historical particularity. M. Christine Boyer's *Manhattan Manners, Architecture and Style, 1850-1900* (Rizzoli, 1985) provides a more appropriate model for an architectural history of a city (or an epoch in the city's development). It does not include every notable work of architecture built in or proposed for New York in the last half of the 19th century, but it does examine, quite cogently, patterns of development and redevelopment through architecture, supplementing textual information with maps and charts that condense data graphically to support the textual findings.

If urban architectural history is to have a public agenda – informing citizens why cities have developed as they did, identifying important works of architecture, and serving as a catalyst for historic preservation (one of the stated purposes of *LA Lost and Found*) and urban conservation – then greater methodological discipline than is evident, for opposite reasons, in *New York 1930* and *LA Lost and Found* must be brought to bear on the presentation of historical material. ■