

Local vs. Global

Sticks and Stones: Architectural America by Lee Friedlander, essay by James Enyeart. Published by Fraenkel Gallery/DAP, 2004. 216 pp., \$85.00

Robert Polidori's Metropolis by Robert Polidori, with Martin C. Pedersen and Criswell Lappin. Published by Metropolis Books, 2004. 144 pp., \$65.00

Reviewed by Maria Morris Hambourg

It would be hard to find two more different, superb books on architecture by leading contemporary photographers.

Friedlander's book—the result of many car trips around America over the past decade—displays a collection of vernacular and frequently undistinguished buildings seen through chain-link fences; festooned with wires and shadows; and intercepted by telephone poles, traffic signs, and other street furniture. The square photographs—brilliantly reproduced in black and white—offer variation upon variation of a particular kind of neatly patterned picture that fuses near to far by virtue of some special tricks like graphic rhyming and spatial telescoping, achievable with monochromatic film and a smart eye behind the camera. Eugène Atget and Walker Evans invented this genre of picture in the early part of the 20th century, but Friedlander has made it his own. Such pictures about the happy intersection of parts of a scene Atget called a *coin pittoresque*, or picturesque corner. Most of these photographs are just this, in modern American guise.

The book moves from rural structures and suburban yards to urban views, and most of the buildings that are framed are anonymous or blandly corporate. Sometimes these sharply seen segments of the ordinary have a lonely air, but just as frequently they are droll. Rather than lament the lack of beauty in these American scenes, Friedlander prefers to laugh, so he fashions his private jokes from parallel phrases, matched tones and textures, and surprising doubled notes; he punctuates with staccato rivets and untoward reflections and finishes with the lyrical line of a windshield or a scrawled sign.

The photographs tell much about what we sense but rarely articulate: the



From *Metropolis*: Oriental Pearl T.V. Tower (left) and Jin Mao Tower; Pudong, Shanghai, China; undated (original in color).

way history, geography, ethnography, climate, local jurisdictions and zoning, commercial agendas, and the particular angle of the sun impart an emotional and physical tenor to a place, a distinct character that, Friedlander shows us, is as detectable on the sidewalk as in the autographic towers of the skyline. While the pictures teach these lessons idiomatically and nearly subliminally, they are only tangentially about places. Severally, as an extended sequence, they are a long solo riff showcasing Friedlander's wry, cerebral vision and unequalled appetite for ever more elegant puzzles. The ones in this survey are the work of a virtuoso, the great American jazzman of photography, jamming for half a century.

Robert Polidori's Metropolis contains less than half the pictures of *Sticks and Stones*, but their scope and the volume's horizons are much wider. Whereas Friedlander is focused on the intimate pictorial relation of accident and intention, Polidori is photographing public architecture in its ambient space. Friedlander prowls about familiar territory with a hand-held camera to locate his unsuspecting prey, while Polidori flies into a foreign country, scouts the city and its world-famous buildings with a small digital camera, and then returns the next day with a big stand camera on a tripod. Although Houston's 1400 Smith Street (formerly the Enron Building), New York's Citicorp Tower, and other recognizable landmarks do crop up in Friedlander's frames, their

identities are irrelevant to the photographer's purpose, which utilizes a wide angle to bend the space and forge new pictorial relationships. Polidori's goal was to make an arresting photograph that convincingly conveys his subject's most characteristic qualities, seen in the best light.

Polidori is an architectural portraitist, and a great one. Like a society portraitist, he works on assignment, and his results are beautiful and telling even when the rich and famous client, in his eye, is neither. If his pictures sometimes earn extra points from the luscious colors of dawn and sunset, glittering electric lights, or the silky embrace of fog, they are also intelligently resolved as to structure, lighting, and point of view. To depict Shanghai's Jin Mao Tower, for example, Polidori had to stand far enough away that the picture included considerable ground-level space, which he chose to furnish with indigenous old dwellings in demolition (with people picking through the rubble), a spindly pine, and a utility pole slung with wires. These elements provide the human scale, historical introduction, and proscenium from which the sharp glass-and-steel tower rises like a rocket from its blasted pad.

Metropolis is a delight to peruse. The photographs are large and sumptuous, and the buildings are too. The sites range from capitals of the ancient world, such as Alexandria, Leptis Magna, and Petra; to anonymous and vernacular buildings in Jordan, Yemen, and India; to prominent,



From *Sticks and Stones*: New Orleans, Louisiana, 2000.

architecturally distinguished mosques, cathedrals, airports, hotels, and offices. Polidori excels with buildings that clearly embody certain meanings, and he treats them theatrically: temples enshrining light (Roden Crater), electric power (The Tate Modern), culture (The British Museum), luxury goods and style (LVMH Tower), democracy (The German Chancellery), and even authoritarian megalomania (Ceausescu's House of the People, Bucharest). Some of the most interesting photographs are of sites that enshrine the very idea of modernity—Brasilia in the mid-20th century, and, today, as symbols of the future, Dubai and Shanghai.

The accompanying text consists of discussions that are refreshingly unvarnished and enlightening. Polidori frankly dislikes Le Corbusier while he has only praise for Oscar Niemeyer; his photographs of their work tell the same story. His nimble mind goes a mile and a millennium a minute as he scampers through history and architectural practice and hops from cultural critique to photographic process. Assuming a general knowledge of architecture and global culture on our parts, his uneven but often insightful and endearingly personal guidance is a great relief from the usual texts. Even if we disagree with Polidori about questions of taste, reading his commentary as we view the impressive work in this handsome book is like having the artist at our elbow, enlivening the experience. ■