

Because It's Everywhere

Why Architecture Matters: Lessons From Chicago by Blair Kamin. University of Chicago Press, 2001. 386 pp., \$37.50.

Reviewed by Terrence Doody

I was born in Oak Park, Illinois, and have known about Frank Lloyd Wright's houses for as long as I can remember. On summer jobs in downtown Chicago, I learned that real Chicagoans are on a first-name basis with their buildings and quite proud of their associations with the Carbide and Carbon Building, the Monadnock Building, Carson Pirie Scott, Marina City, and the Merchandise Mart — which once claimed to be the world's largest office building outside the Pentagon. One summer I worked in an office tower around the corner from Mies van der Rohe's apartments on Lake Shore Drive, and from that building watched the John Hancock Center go up. I saw two hardhats on a girder one day ascending into the clouds. And that same summer I was present when Mayor Richard J. Daley dedicated the magnificent Picasso that stands in front of City Hall on what is now Daley Plaza. The mayor gave one of his few memorably good speeches that day, arguing that the controversial statue would educate Chicago's children to grow up thinking of this masterpiece as a natural part of their heritage.

Today, in carpool, my kids and I often discuss the houses en route to school. Children are quite definitive about "nice" houses, and their favorite is a chateau-style dwelling, guarded by two iron griffins, indigenous to the Loire region of Bellaire, Texas.

When I read Blair Kamin's claim that architecture matters because it is "the inescapable art," I felt at home. Kamin is the architecture critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, and he loves both Chicago and his job. He doesn't boast about the Merchandise Mart, but he does point out that for years Chicago could claim the world's tallest building (the Sears Tower) and the world's largest (and most awful) housing project, the Robert Taylor Homes. He also points out that on a 20-minute stroll down Dearborn, "you can get a short course in the history of the skyscraper."

Why Architecture Matters is a collection of articles Kamin wrote throughout the 1990s when a lot was happening in Chicago and his paper gave him an unusual amount of space. These are not 800-word newspaper columns; they're

magazine essays in which he can develop a complete position. And for his six-part series on the Chicago lakefront, its history, sociology, and future, he won a Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 1999. Kamin's enthusiasm, complex standards, and clear sense of purpose make this book more than a random sampler. And his subtitle, "Lessons From Chicago," means something.

He is very thorough and well-organized: when I finished reading the index and preface I felt I could have written a review from them alone. He lays out his principles and prejudices very clearly, notes that he and Ada Louise Huxtable of the *Wall Street Journal* are not only architectural critics but urban critics as well, and he links himself to Allen Temko of the *San Francisco Chronicle* as an "activist." "Activist criticism," Kamin writes, "is based on the idea that architecture affects everyone and therefore should be understandable to everyone. It analyzes architecture as a fine art and as a social art," and it invites its readers to become activists themselves in the public debate that defines the environment. He reports on the results of these debates in postscripts he adds to the individual pieces, letting us know whether his side won a point or lost it to the forces of politics and money.

These postscripts not only provide continuity, they epitomize the attitude of all Kamin's writing: They are honest, modest, real. When he writes about a local architect named Harry Weese in a section called "Unsung Heroes," he quotes one of Weese's eulogists, who said: "He taught us to follow our senses, even when our intellects objected, and to trust in the abundance of the material world rather than in ideal systems which were distilled from it.... Harry built to adorn human activity rather than to mold or direct it." On the other hand, Kamin also praises and defends the second- and third-generation Miesian architects, who have fallen from grace in the moment of postmodern excess, for the courage of their principled simplicity. And he retails with obvious fondness the crack that Skidmore Owings & Merrill have been called the "three blind Mies."

Why Architecture Matters is divided into four parts. The first and longest is "The Evolving Metropolis" and amounts to Kamin's beat writing. It opens with a strong objection to Mayor Richard M. Daley's plan to redecorate Michigan Avenue with a maypole. (Richard M. Daley is the son of Richard J. Daley, who

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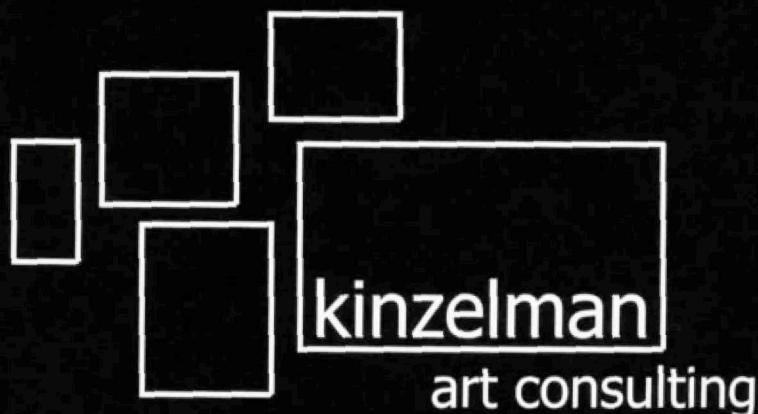
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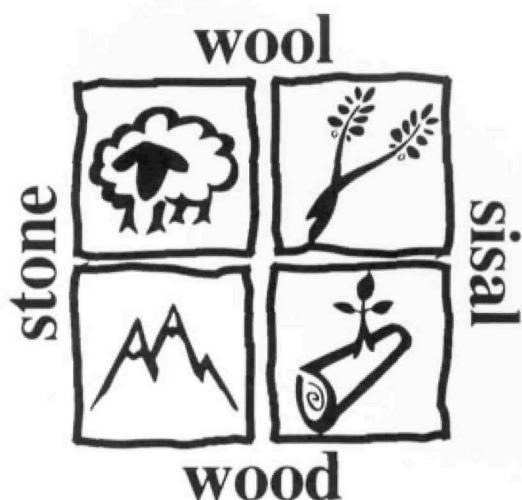
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was Hizzoner, Da Mare.) Kamin also takes issue with the mayor's plan to thwart crime by turning some city streets into cul-de-sacs, slams the theme-driven architecture of the Disney store and Planet Hollywood, praises the beautiful bridges of Cook County and the mayor's efforts to restore them, and points out how oversized houses in the city and suburbs are devouring green space (which is true as well in the Loire region of Bellaire.)

Part two, "The Art of Architecture," begins with a hymn of praise for the John Hancock Center, which in my eyes is the most beautiful tall building in the world. (And the book's cover, a rakishly cropped photo of the Hancock soaring into the blue, is worth the \$37.50 admission by itself.) Kamin, however, also leaves Chicago to celebrate the difficult art of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D. C., Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim (is there anyone who doesn't like it?), and Helmut Jahn's Sony Center in Berlin. It is in this section that Kamin worries Chicago has forfeited its title as the nation's architectural capital and also wonders what effect Rem Koolhaas' plans for a new campus center will have on the sacred grounds of Mies's IIT campus.

The third section, "Architecture as a Social Art," is marked by Kamin's reporting on public housing in Chicago, which has been a killer issue for 50 years. He doesn't rehearse the enormities of the Robert Taylor Homes or of the infamous killing fields of the Cabrini-Green project; for local readers, he doesn't have to. Nor does he tell the story of the blood on the hands of Richard J. Daley that is told so powerfully in Adam Cohen's and Elizabeth Taylor's *American Pharoah* (Little Brown, 2000). Instead, he writes about improvements in city housing, the lessons actually learned; and he explains, to my amazement, how principles of the New Urbanism, utilized for low-income housing rather than the disneylands of the Florida Panhandle, realize Jane Jacobs' principle of the eyes on the street that protect neighborhood children. This section, on what Kamin also calls "defensive architecture," is very good stuff.

"The Lakefront: Democratic Vistas," his fourth and final part, is similarly good. He begins with what's already been done to improve the Chicago lakefront's museum campus, its traffic and parking, and its new public beachhouse. Then he tackles the whole of the lakefront, from the far north to the far south side, and the racist politics that have divided them. He has suggestions for the needs and further uses of Grant and Lincoln Parks and an idea for how unused steel mills could be recycled. It is in this section that Kamin's subplot emerges: its hero is Daniel Burnham, Chicago's great visionary planner, whose antagonist is Mayor Daley, Richard II, whose heart is in the right place, actually, but whose own vision and plans aren't big enough for

Kamin. This is activist architectural writing at it fullest, and it is apparently having some success. At least according to my native informants, who think Daley is now doing a good job.

It is possible, I suppose, to live your life without engaging Cezanne or Mozart, Keats or Joyce, but architecture is inescapable: ubiquitous, necessary, a second nature to us. It is part of the atmosphere our eyes breathe, the outermost layer of our body's skin, the first field of historical symbols we all ineluctably share.

In his preface, Kamin mentions the first attack on the World Trade Center, February 26, 1993. In the publicity materials that come with the book, the University of Chicago Press mentions the second attack on September 11. Those two buildings were not beautiful, beloved landmarks like the Chrysler Building, the Hancock, or Pennzoil Place, but they are now, and they matter more than ever. ■

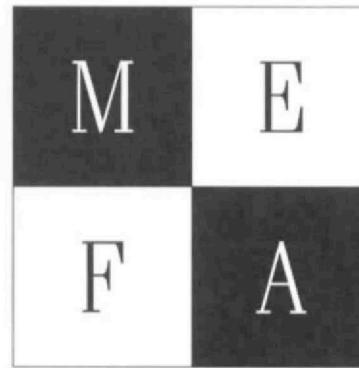
New and Notable

The Light Construction Reader edited by Jeffrey Kipnis & Todd Gammon. *MonaCelli*, 400 pp., \$39.95. This ambitious collection of 38 essays explores MoMA's 1995 "Light Construction" exhibition, which assembled works made of glass, perforated metal, and other transparent materials. Curator Terence Riley and a host of noted architects and theorists, including Peter Eisenman and Anthony Vidler, examine the work of those included in the exhibition — Steven Holl, Toyo Ito, and Herzog and de Meuron among them — and raise crucial questions about the role of materials, the nature of architectural effects, and the legacy of modernism.

Rammed Earth by Otto Kapfinger and Martin Rauch. *Birkhauser*, 160 pp., \$65. An introduction to contemporary building with rammed earth, a phenomenon that fuses ancient knowledge, modern technology, and innovative construction techniques. This volume investigates in particular the work of Martin Rauch, whose work includes the "Church of Reconciliation" in Berlin — the first load-bearing structure to be built with rammed earth in Germany in 90 years.

Great Leap Forward Harvard Design School Project on the City and Rem Koolhaas. *Taschen*, 800 pp., \$50. In 1996 and '97, Harvard's graduate students studied China's Pearl River Delta, five cities with a population of 12 million. The establishment of Special Economic Zones — "laboratories for the contained unleashing of capitalism" — hastened an unprecedented experiment in urbanization on an astonishingly large scale. *Great Leap Forward* contains essays by Rem Koolhaas and others that explore the results of this rapid modernization, which has produced an entirely new urban substance.

— Michael Kimmins



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