

All the World a Stage

Henry Dreyfuss, Industrial Designer: The Man in the Brown Suit by Russell Flinchum. Rizzoli International Publications, 1997. 224 pp., illus., \$50.

Joseph Urban: Architecture, Theatre, Opera, Film by Randolph Carter and Robert Reed Cole. Abbeville Press, 1992. 272 pp., illus., \$65.

Reviewed by Barry Moore

Last year, in conjunction with the Cooper Hewitt Museum's exhibition *Henry Dreyfuss Directing Design*, Rizzoli International released what is, surprisingly, the first book to comprehensively document the life and work of this pioneer of industrial design, who died a quarter of a century ago. But then again, there's a precedent for being slow on the uptake when it comes to acknowledging in print the importance of innovative designers: In 1992, when Randolph Carter and Robert Reed Cole's *Joseph Urban: Architecture, Theatre, Opera, Film* was published, it was the first extensive survey of its subject, who had passed away in 1933.

These otherwise unrelated books are connected by more than being overdue studies of creative geniuses who, a generation apart, influenced many around them; they're also linked by the fact that, early on, each of the men pursued a successful stage design career. Both Henry Dreyfuss and Joseph Urban were formed by the theater. And both carried away to their greater triumphs a crucial lesson of scenic design: that the control of the entire design process results in the physical embodiment of an intellectual idea. But where Dreyfuss profited from the theater mainly by learning to work very thoroughly and very fast, Urban brought a deeper sense of architecture and light and color to the stage than it had ever seen before. And that work informed his architecture as well.

For Urban, work as a stage designer allowed him to accumulate the capital he required to establish an architectural office in New York and pursue his first love. For Dreyfuss, experience and connections in the theater, along with a regular income, gave him what he needed to begin his industrial design career. Both men were superb in their theatrical endeavors and could have been known for that alone. Urban, however, went on to design some of America's best examples of Art Deco buildings and interiors. And

Henry Dreyfuss, of course, evolved into a giant in the industrial design field, creating everyday objects seen and used by millions of people the world over.

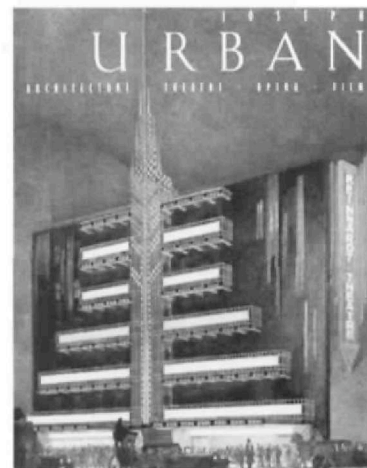
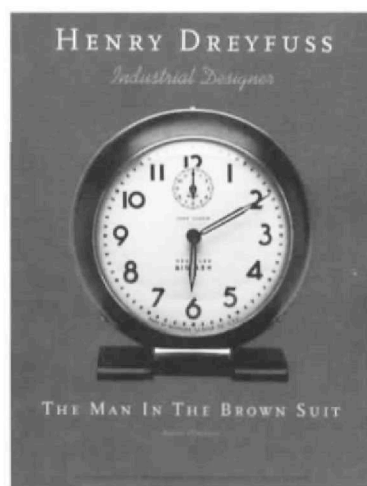
Joseph Urban's life combined great talent propelled by enormous energy, and it spanned two worlds. He was born in 1872 in Vienna, where he also trained, and the first half of his career was steeped in the spirit of *Jugendstil* (as Art Nouveau was designated in Germany). In his home city he designed books, furniture, fabrics, buildings, interiors, costumes, sets for avant-garde operas, and, with the most astonishing results, pavilions for Emperor Franz Joseph's 50th anniversary in 1898 and his 60th anniversary in 1908.

Although first and foremost an architect, Urban was a consummate man of the theater. Because of his groundbreaking scenic design in Europe, especially for visionary director Max Reinhardt, in 1912 he was hired by the Boston Opera and brought the "new stagecraft" to America. For Urban, the aim was to fuse all the elements of a theatrical piece — sets, costumes, lights, movement — into a unified whole for maximum effect, a concept Richard Wagner named *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

The Boston company failed to survive beyond the outbreak of World War I, a fortunate turn for Urban, since it left him free to take advantage of the attention his work had drawn from the era's great Broadway impresarios, most notably Florenz Ziegfeld Jr. When Ziegfeld, eager to elevate his already successful Follies to the highest theatrical art, first approached Urban, the designer was apprehensive about doing "girlie shows." But soon he was happily immersed in creating a distinctive architectural look for Ziegfeld's extravaganzas. The "Great Follies" date from 1915, Urban's first; the collaboration continued through 1931 and included the first production of *Show Boat* in 1927. Reviewers were always unstinting in their praise. In the years preceding the Great Depression, the Ziegfeld Follies became a symbol for America, and it was Urban who raised them to a high level of sophistication and art.

Urban enjoyed an equally long and successful collaboration with the Metropolitan Opera, for which he designed more than 50 productions, building the scenery in his studio, overseeing its installation, and designing the lighting as well.

In the flush of his Follies triumphs, Urban met William Randolph Hearst, whose mistress, Marion Davies, had been a Ziegfeld Girl. At the time, Hearst



was running a motion picture studio in New York, and he soon asked Urban to be his scenic designer. Not only did the three-dimensional quality of the movie sets make them more architecturally challenging than those of the stage, but Hearst's deep pockets allowed Urban to at last earn and save enough money to establish his first architectural office in Manhattan.

The quality of the architectural output of this poorly remembered man is astounding: superb Art Deco penthouses for millionaires, a clubhouse in Palm Beach, Fifth Avenue shops, an experimental (and unbuilt) theater for Max Reinhardt, the overwhelming Ziegfeld Theater with its egg-shaped interior. Most notable, perhaps, is New York's New School for Social Research — a superb 1930 modern building, and one of only two of Urban's works still standing.

Urban's last commission was to consult on the design of the 1933 Chicago Century of Progress. He contributed the fair's two most memorable elements: the color and the light.

Henry Dreyfuss also produced prodigiously on Broadway. In 1923, barely out of school, he was engaged by the Mark Strand Vaudeville Company to design sets, costumes, lighting, and equipment. He executed 52 shows a year for five years, for \$50 a week. He was well trained for the work, having studied at New York's Ethical Culture Society's Arts High School from 1920 to 1922. It was the last of his formal education, though his intellectual pursuits never abated.

Briefly, Dreyfuss worked for that other stage designer who turned to industrial design, Norman Bel Geddes; he

always referred to Bel Geddes as "genius number one in my life."

By 1928 Dreyfuss had begun his transition to the still new field of industrial design. Work was slow at first, probably because Dreyfuss was unwilling to compromise. When an executive at Macy's offered him an opportunity to redesign anything and everything sold in the department store, Dreyfuss was intrigued, but ended up refusing the job because he wouldn't be able to consult with the people responsible for manufacturing the products. Without the manufacturers' cooperation, he knew, his design ideas could too easily be compromised. Again in 1930, when he was invited to join in a competition to create a new telephone for Bell Telephone Laboratories, he declined because he wasn't allowed to consult with the phone company's engineers. But when none of the other designers were able to come up with something Bell liked, they hired Dreyfuss anyway, and he is credited with the design of the 1937 Model 302 telephone. Dreyfuss went on to create Bell's 500 series phone, over 93 million of which were manufactured between 1950 and 1982, the most numerous technological object ever shaped by one person's aesthetic.

Throughout his long career — which included designing New York Central Railroad's iconic 20th Century Limited (and everything in it), Westclox's Big Ben, Honeywell's thermostats, and John Deere's tractors — Dreyfuss never lost sight of these design parameters: safety and convenience of use, ease of maintenance, cost, appeal, and appearance. For Henry Dreyfuss, this mantra was a road map rather than a blueprint, and the prioritization of these human values made his designs both universal and timeless.

One of the pleasures of *The Man in the Brown Suit* is its profusion of illustrations; the same is true of *Joseph Urban*. With both books, there is an irresistible temptation to first look at all the pictures and read the captions before plunging into the carefully researched texts.

But the texts have their own joy, if only as a reminder of how Henry Dreyfuss touches us everyday, through the way he reshaped his field of industrial design, and of how Joseph Urban's work can still inspire and delight — he was the last Renaissance architect of the 20th century. No library of architecture, design, or theater should be without this pair of books. ■