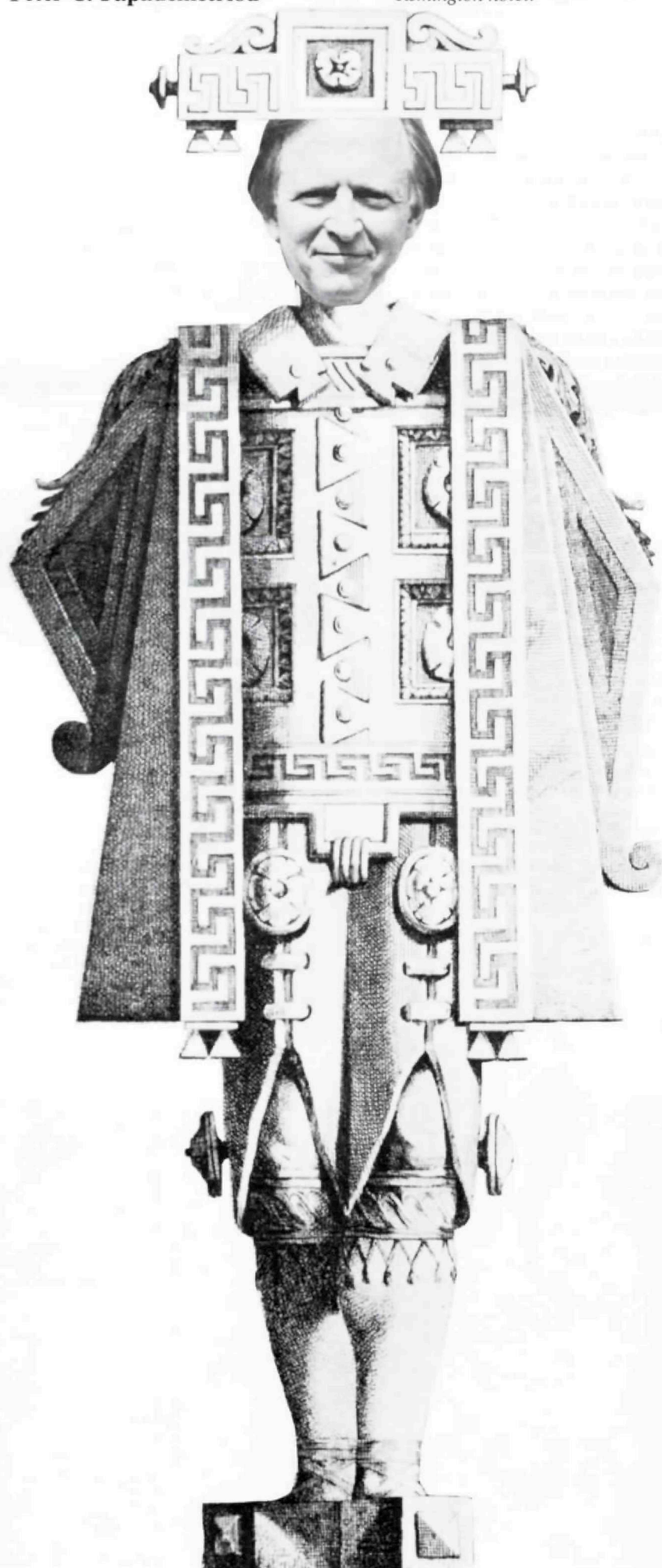


Wolfe Bites

An Interview With Tom Wolfe

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Thomas Hines, writing in the Design Book Review (Fall 1987) on the furor that followed publication of Tom Wolfe's From Bauhaus to Our House, suggested that notoriety makes strange bedfellows. The irony of Wolfe's biting dissection of architecture's inner circle of tastemakers was that he was inundated with invitations to speak at AIA meetings, although as Hines related, one particularly aggrieved party, "...responding to Wolfe's claim...insisted that 'in a rational world it would be absolutely unthinkable that a literate architect could read this book and actually invite the author to come and say more...'" When Wolfe was invited to speak in Houston in April 1984 at the invitation of Innova, Cite was curious enough to arrange for the following interview, conducted in the lounge of the Remington hotel.



Wolfe à la Grecque (with incisive assistance from Ennemond-Alexandre Petitot, 1771)

PCP: How would you characterize the future of "The Future" and society at the end of the 20th century?

TW: I don't have an agenda for what people should build, and I am not an evangelist. It seems to me that architects are generally way behind technologically. The International Style always talked about technology, which became the slogan of the Bauhaus; Gropius raised his battle cry of art and technology, of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. But the technology used by the Bauhaus was backwards in terms of what was known. The Bauhaus began as a political program and had no interest in the future, technologically.

PCP: Perhaps the Bauhaus had an image of what things ought to be like; the so-called "rationalism" and "objectivity" were structured to substantiate a theory. The Bauhaus was objective and rational because it looked like it ought to be objective and rational.

TW: The Bauhaus architects couldn't have been less interested in machine technology; it was just a stick with which to beat the bourgeoisie. The artists who are really interested in machines are people like the hot rodders, who will build an extraordinarily sculpted automobile, and then cut a hole in the hood and raise the carburetor and the cylinder block so that you can see that beautiful engine. Now *those* are people who are interested in art and technology. Our "fine" artists, it seems to me, are about fifty years short of being really interested in technology. I have never run into any architects who are presenting the public anything in the way of technology that they couldn't have learned in the Berlitz School of Engineering in two weeks. What is there? The only new thing from the technical side that wasn't in modern buildings one hundred years ago is air-conditioning; cantilevering was known and was done if possible; steel structure was known; the tremendous use of glass goes back a century; elevators go back to about 1860. I don't believe that in the last part of the 20th century people are that attuned to technology.

PCP: You think it's lost its romantic imperative and that it's just taken for granted?

TW: I have a feeling that people don't want to live with it. They may be excited by it; I'm not sure.

PCP: How do you reconcile the Chippendale interior with the comfort-balanced environment and a time-controlled lighting grid? Doesn't that seem a bit incongruous, for the 20th century to be reconstructing the 18th century? Are the forms that have a certain degree of cultural memory that everyone is talking about now (postmodernism and its heirs) in conflict with the reality of the "modern" experience?

TW: The question that interests me is: What *do* people want? I don't think anyone knows; I don't know. If a poll was taken, or if I really tried to get close to people who use buildings and probe this subject, I think that they may want the Centre Beaubourg. If so, I think it might be time to consider giving it to them. Or it might turn out that they want a room like *this* [gesturing to the hotel lounge]. If they do, I don't think it's anti-intellectual to consider giving it, but it has been considered philistine to go about architecture that way, for fifty years at least. It is considered a violation of the

standards of the priesthood to go around with the attitude of Richard M. Hunt, who said of the Vanderbilts, "If they want a house built upside down with a chimney on the bottom, I will give it to them." Now, he wasn't considered a hopeless philistine for saying that; that's how markedly the standards have changed.

PCP: How do you explain the alienation of professional taste cultures, what you call The Compound? I am interested in the question of the so-called *Vox Populi*, in the affinity between the taste culture of the architect and the expectations of the client.

TW: I have felt that I have never successfully made my point in either *The Painted Word* or *From Bauhaus to Our House*. The whole side of what has happened in painting and architecture that *really* interests me is the one you just touched on, and the point I tried to make is that in the late 19th century something happened in the arts that had never happened before. The artists and architects, and for that matter, composers and choreographers also, created this thing that I call The Compound. It was in response to the social chaos of the 19th century; the breakup of the old patronage system in which the nobility and the merchant princes were the only people who employed architects and artists and other professionals. All of the professionals went through a crisis in the 19th century and that's why you start seeing professional organizations form in just about every field.

PCP: They were legitimizing themselves.

TW: Yes; they were no longer under the mantle of an aristocracy or a very rich merchant. They had to protect themselves, so you end up today with these ridiculous standards for different professions. The artists and architects wanted these, but they wanted something more. They always had had a semi-divine status under the aristocracy. Vasari, in his *Lives of the Artists*, says that God looked down at the art of Florence and found it almost perfect but not yet perfect. He then sent his son, Michelangelo. This is the way that artists were looked at. How does one preserve that? They managed to create a series of quasi-priesthoods, and that impulse remains with us.

The greatest triumph was that after the Second World War, when people of great wealth and power *yielded* and were afraid to build a building without assembling a panel of experts, which was always dominated by an architect. I have heard businessmen describe these meetings. They would find out who was supposed to be the hot architect; today it would be Philip Johnson or Michael Graves. If Philip Johnson lives to be 126 years old there is no telling how many enormous buildings he will build. There was always an architect on the selection panel as an expert. When the plans came in, the businessmen in the late 1950s were absolutely baffled by those highly abstract, highly rational buildings. So all eyes at the table would turn to the architect and say, "What is this?" "It is all very simple," he'd say, "the articulation of the perimeter of the structure is creating a dialogue with the surrounding built environment," and they would yield to the expert. That whole piece of intellectual history is what fascinates me. I'm not a special pleader for any particular style.

PCP: Have you seen the 1927 book *Die Baukunst der Neuesten Zeit*? It contains incredible diversity of form: people like Bruno Taut, Joseph Paxton, Berlage, Olbrich, Poelzig... even early Walter Gropius, which is almost Frank Lloyd Wright-looking.

TW: I love this book though I've never seen it. It's an excellent example of what I'm talking about; you see all those things that were done, were all considered "modern;" no one said at the time, "That's old-fashioned." Yet a few years later they were saying, "That's old-fashioned" or "It's half-modern" (that was Philip Johnson's term). And it is in the nature of Compounds – and I insist that this notion of a Compound is vital to understanding contemporary art – to head for increasing abstraction because things that are not abstract can be understood too easily by outsiders and there is no need for the priest. That was the genius of Picasso, his early comprehension of its being time to go abstract. So, in the battles between the Bauhaus, Constructivists, and De Stijl, you can see they kept cutting ground from under one another by pointing to things that seemed bourgeois until finally the severity that we know as the International Style was all that was permissible. That's when the amnesia sets in. Now everyone is rummaging through the big closet, which in fact takes the form of finding old photographs.

PCP: I wonder whether or not the distance between artists and the public can be reintegrated?

TW: You've put your finger on something I think is important. I think the practice of architecture should be turned around, assuming one is interested in it, with the idea of delighting people. Today that sounds like a populist notion – that you should think about *delighting* the public – but was Vitruvius a populist? I seriously doubt it. Was John Ruskin a populist? I seriously doubt that too. Here are two people who talked about *delight* being one of the major obligations of the architect. I have a feeling that it is not necessary to revive 18th- or 19th-century forms, or any forms from the past, in order to delight people.

PCP: Culture seems so diverse at this point, in extreme transition. There is Allan Greenberg's Brandt House as a kind of Mount Vernon on one hand, and the Piano and Rogers Centre Pompidou on the other, which represent a kind of polarity. One is referential, hand-crafted, and uses fragments from the past, and the other High-Tech, "neutral," systematic, and totally devoid of meaning, other than through its engineering forms. There are even people who literally like both, not one *or* the other, but can accept both as part of the environment. Where does that leave the architect?

TW: Well, I would say we don't know. I don't think that architects have thought for a long time about what the people out there are going to like.

PCP: Who are the architects appealing to, then?

TW: To each other. The brilliance of The Compound is to convince very powerful people that they are right. Corporations, governments, and of course, the developers, began to like the International Style very much because it was less expensive to build a skyscraper that way than to build them the way Voorhees, Gmelin, and Walker were designing

them, with ornament and all those bricks done in tapestry forms, and people would accept it as luxury.

PCP: Austerity as luxury.

TW: I think "rational, honest, objective" architecture represents a concept with no bottom to it because it ignores the idea of what people want, what will make them feel better... and I doubt Mies cared, nor did Gropius.

PCP: They were ascetic.

TW: They were ascetic in the early days; they used to talk about the workers and they never met a worker other than the charwoman who cleaned up their meeting halls. Technology was romantic, it just simply wasn't real. People do not want to express their guts; they want to do the opposite, and that's pretty clear. Quinlan Terry said that every architect he knows who can manage it lives in a Georgian house. He says, "I live in one, and one day I said to myself, 'Why build anything else?'" and of course he hasn't since. That's an extreme notion, but it does raise the question again of the philistine/populist notion of what people really want.

I'm not suggesting that architects go out and take a poll; it would be a terrible way to build. But frankly, they are already starting to think that way. That is at the root of historicism, postmodernism, and of what I guess we would have to call ultra-modernism. It's entirely possible that one would discover that people are basically anthropomorphic; I know I am. I have always had dreams of what the interior of my house will look like. It will be full of friezes; every room would have a frieze. One of them would be called "Third Avenue" and would be somewhat like the frieze on the front of St. Bartholomew's Church on Park Avenue. But instead of being saints and people in white linen, it would be all the people I see whose images have stuck in my mind. It could be done if I could find a sculptor like Della Robbia. It would be a creative design; at the same time it would be full of human form. In Palladian architecture there is a lot of the use of human forms on the cornice looking down to see what's going on. That might actually be something that delights people.

Denise Scott Brown recently showed a slide of the State Capitol in Austin, and in the foreground was a low commercial building, and on the cornice, which was about 12 feet off the street, was a longhorn. It looked like something that had just been brought and stuck up there, and she said that if you turn the center of Austin over to comprehensive planning you are going to have to make a decision whether or not you want this juxtaposition. Because if you really want comprehensive planning it might well be that no one could ever put the bull up on the cornice. I think my one feeling is that if architects want to go in the direction of delighting people, they can do it subjectively. Architects, and for that matter, painters, know in their heart of hearts they are not all that different from other people.

I think people like to see anthropomorphic expression. If I were turned loose as an architect you would probably end up with caryatids, and that probably would be my notion of what would delight people. But I'm not an architect and I think it should be architects who, based on their own experience and vision, move in some new

direction and start thinking about content and figure out what would delight.

PCP: What you are talking about is a return to realism; realism associated with a positive viewpoint. You have to have confidence in the positive viewpoint or else you are going to be susceptible to vulnerable naïveté.

TW: All of this is *if* you want to do that. I'm not saying that anybody should. I think that there is not going to be any new direction in form. I think it's going to come in a change of attitude about content. We already are beginning to see that, seeing architects who are becoming aware of this in historicism, this avant-garde to the rear, where you rediscover the past.

PCP: What do you see as the role of the "critic?"

TW: Today the role of the critic is to be a courier. Critics bring the message from the center of The Compound out to the public, as *if* it's *their* critique. Someone like Paul Goldberger is a hand-maiden, not consciously, but he *is* a handmaiden of the dominant architects. He is a messenger boy. Robert Hughes is a messenger boy. When has any well-known critic ever championed an oddball, or ever tried to point the way to some desirable new course that no one else has? Anyway, it won't happen because of the current setup of the press and the messenger-boy system. They couldn't keep their jobs if they did anything but be messenger boys for what goes on in the center. These worlds are really rather small; you know how clubby they are. There is really nothing more that they can do unless they suddenly got an attack of courage, which isn't likely.

What critics should do is forget taste, except as something that influences what happens. It's all right to say these tastes are now fashionable and this is why people are doing this, but the approach should be analytical, scholarly. We have so few scholarly art historians now. We have people like Barbara Rose; to mention "scholarship" and "Barbara Rose" in the same sentence is ridiculous, judging from what she writes. The art historians are anti-historical. This is something that started in the late 1930s. It should be more important to do an original piece of research or to come up with an original concept that enables people to see to the heart of what is actually going on in design than to manipulate taste. I've read an interview with Paul Goldberger in which they asked him what his role was as a critic for the *New York Times*. He said it was to educate the public taste; I couldn't believe it! This is such a trivial and unproductive goal, if you are a critic. That should be the last concern of a critic. That shouldn't even be his concern at all; a critic should be a scholar and a rigorous analyst.

PCP: What is the likelihood of a demand for that kind of rigor? What is the reality of the media actually producing that kind of critic?

TW: I think they could get used to it very quickly. I don't think that editors – and I've even talked to some about this – are particularly happy with the kind of writing they get. You've brought *news*, but it's always wrapped and entwined like a root that wraps around itself. This is the compulsion of the critic: to express his taste about what he is talking about. These interminable pieces by John Russell in the *New York Times* about

something on exhibit that you haven't been to and are really interested to know about, but so much of the space is taken up with his aesthetic critique; I think we can do without it.

PCP: What would you see in lieu of that?

TW: I would do it more or less the way *Variety* does reviews. *Variety* is a trade publication and realizes it's ridiculous to review an Ingmar Bergman movie the way you review "Where the Boys Are." So you review it in terms of what audience it's aimed at. You say, "This is a 'beach and bikini' movie; is it a good one? Or is it a bad one? Or has it been done before, or not?" This becomes a kind of status analysis; this is what I encourage. The reviewer should tell you what's in an exhibition, let's say, or in a building, and then say, "These are the types of people in the art world who are going to like this, these are the people who are not going to like this, these are the people who are going to be surprised," so that it's an analysis of other people's aesthetics, not yours. I think people would love it, too. I think that would be informative and it enables those who want to know whether or not they might like it.

PCP: How do you see yourself as a critic?

TW: I don't look upon myself as one. I really look upon myself as being an intellectual historian.

PCP: The old "aesthetic distance?" But what you are talking about actually begins to remove the moral imperative from a kind of value system and suggests that different programs might be appropriate to the nature of the problem.

TW: I think that if you are going to have criticism as a public service function, it should help people to use their own values with regard to a building, painting, or whatever it might be. I don't think it would be that hard to do. ■