

# BOOK REVIEWS

On my last trip from London to America I soon found that the infallible method of creating a *frisson* of shock and disapproval at dinner was to say that, in *From Bauhaus to Our House*, Tom Wolfe had largely got it right. My architect and architectural historian friends are all too much part of that avant-garde architectural world whose assumptions Wolfe explores and ruthlessly satirizes. Their hostile reaction to his book merely confirms the accuracy of his most useful definition: the art-compound, those self-justifying and self-fulfilling elites of architects (or artists), confident of their place in line with the march of history, contemptuous of the uninformed attitudes of clients and others outside the compound walls; those who have made the public "willing to accept that glass of ice water in the face, that bracing slap across the mouth, that reprimand for the fat on one's bourgeois soul, known as modern architecture."

In this book, Wolfe attempts to do a *Painted Word* on the complacent modern architectural establishment and answer the question why it is that, in the United States' greatest and richest century, the public has been made to accept unquestioningly an architecture, derived from austere Continental dogmas, which they usually hate. Wolfe is far from the first to attack the orthodoxies of modern architecture. David Watkin's *Morality and Architecture* (1977) exposed the irrelevance of that mischievous element of moral purpose—whether Christian, Socialist, or just Hegelian-historicist—with which progressive architects have justified their aesthetic preferences for over a century, but Wolfe's attack on the pretensions of architectural fashion is utterly deflating and very funny. His analysis of the power of "anti-bourgeois" snobbery in advancing the clinical, minimal aesthetic of modernism is perfectly on target—the snobbery which lies behind the smug liberalism we know and love on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet it does seem odd that such attitudes should have had so much success in the United States, where, on the whole, the last century of architecture has been such a perfect expression of the raw vigor of capitalism.

In poor Britain, where the state has put up so much modern architecture

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## FROM BAUHAUS TO OUR HOUSE Tom Wolfe / Farrar Straus Giroux / \$10.95

Gavin Stamp

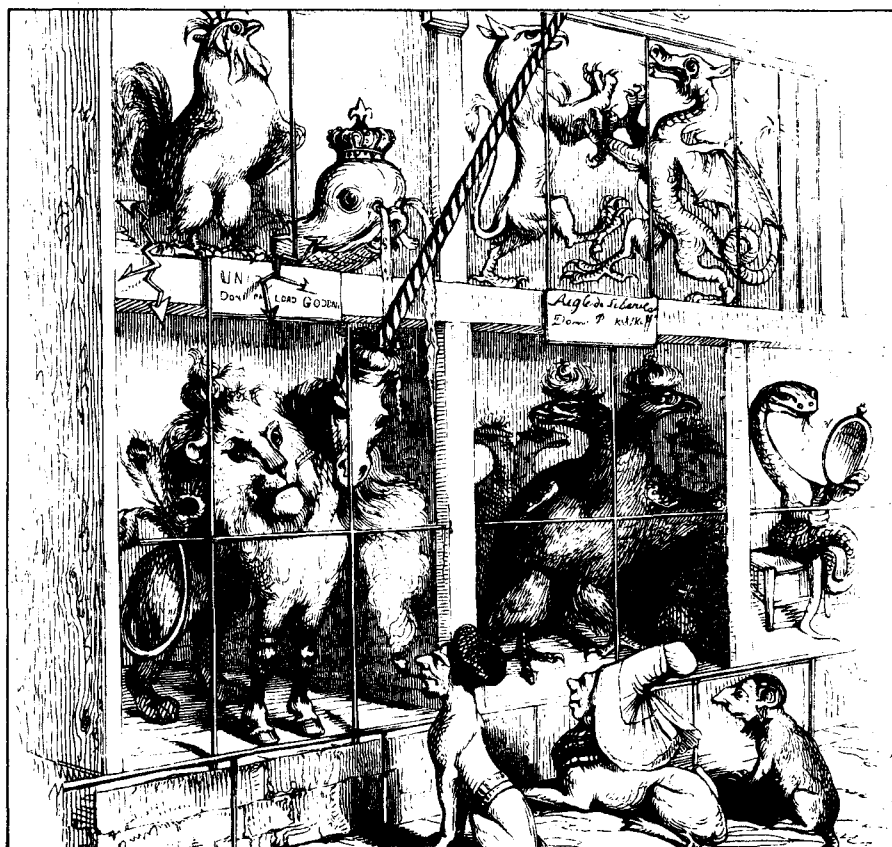
since 1945, our version of this snobbery has been generally accepted. The self-defense of our own aging compound of modernists, who give each other knighthoods, is "social consciousness." His apparent lack of it is now being used as an argument against the current popular revival of interest in our last great architect, Edwin Lutyens. To the man in the street, the public high-rise housing erected by the London County Council and the office buildings erected by developers are equally horrible, but the like of Sir Hugh Casson, president of the Royal Academy, are able to distinguish somehow between the good, or "herbivore," architects of the former and the vulgar "carnivore" architects of the latter. On the whole, therefore, Wolfe's book is just as apposite over here.

What a pity, then, that *From Bau-*

*haus to Our House* displays some rather weak and simplistic history—which enables Wolfe's victims to dismiss it altogether. Wolfe continually refers to "worker housing" of the 1920s as being the basis of all modern architecture, but while it is true that the desirability of inflicting a non-bourgeois, minimal industrialized architecture on the unfortunate proletariat (who have always fought back: as with the notorious Pruitt-Igoe estate in St. Louis) has obsessed avant-garde architects, that tradition cannot really explain the present appearance of, say, Chicago. Mies van der Rohe, the principal exotic influence on the modern architecture of American capitalism, was at heart a Classicist and he reduced the steel frame of the skyscraper to a refined, precisely proportioned grid of bronzed metal and tinted glass—which is much too sophisticated, and expensive, for workers.

It was the genius of the Prussian, "Less is More" Mies to graft his style onto the indigenous American skyscraper tradition and so create such totally American monuments as the Seagram Building, and I fear that Wolfe underestimates the Americanness of American architecture. With the glorious exceptions of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, American architects have always been dependent upon European influence but have often created buildings which are different, special, and sometimes better than the prototypes on the other side of the Atlantic. American Neo-Classical architecture has a dry, original character of its own; H.H. Richardson made Romanesque into the most vigorous and rugged of all Victorian architecture; the Shingle Style was a peculiarly American and very creative development of the style of Norman Shaw, and even the Classicism of McKim, Mead, and White is of a scale and a confidence that could only be American. Wolfe is quite wrong to suggest that it is only since the 1930s that American architects have been subservient to European fashions: Almost all notable American architects of the nineteenth century trained at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris.

There is, however, something different about the pro-European snobbery of American architecture in recent decades, a snobbery which prefers theory to practice and the minimal to the exuberant, and it is refreshing to find Wolfe making a defense of Frank Lloyd Wright who, for very good reasons, could not bear Gropius or Le Corbusier. Wright had to suffer the indignity of being treated as mere history when, as Wolfe rightly notes, in 1935 he had over half of his life's work ahead of him. I have for long been surprised that there is not more interest in Wright's architecture today, for his all-American, "organic," non-academic originality is everything that Post-Modernism aspires to and fails to reach, but since 1935 he has not been considered part of the modern mainstream: His very American-ness and creativity count against him. To a European, Wright is the greatest name in American architecture and so it amazed me to find a snobbery against him still lingering in those remote scholastic mutual-admiration societies which are schools of architecture.



Similarly, I can confirm the accuracy of Wolfe's remarks about the "apostates"—those modern architects who dared to step out of line to try to design something rich, decorative, and enjoyable—who found themselves virtually excommunicated in polite architectural society: Edward Durrell Stone, Eero Saarinen, John Portman. Americans, I am sorry to say, have fallen for the "High Tech" gimmickry of British architects like Stirling, Foster, and Rogers, so that when I say that the glazing of English buildings by Foster is less sophisticated and interesting than that of a Hyatt Regency Hotel, American architects think I am either joking, which I am not, or that I am trying to damn Foster by comparison with something palpably awful, which I do not think those wonderfully extravagant hotels are.

But the United States is not alone in this craven subservience to foreign fashions; the tyranny of Modern dogma is worldwide. British architecture also completely changed direction in the 1930s and 40s following an influx of Continental refugees, and they soon acquired native acolytes who did their best to wipe out the old guard and suppress the traditions of building in which we once excelled. The result, paradoxically perhaps, is that postwar British commercial architecture has been little else but a cheap, inefficient copy of New York and Chicago. I begin to think that a cultural inferiority complex is a condition peculiar to the Anglo-American liberal intelligentsia.

Even so, as extraordinarily badly taught as the British architectural schools are, they are not yet as pretentious and as ethereally theoretical as those in the United States. On the current state of affairs in the architectural compounds Wolfe is superb, and by quoting the words of the Whites and the Greys, the Post-Modernists, the Rationalists, and the rest, he successfully makes them seem ridiculous, and strangely irrelevant. His basic point is that, despite all the new "isms" and the apparent rejection of Modernism by many architects, the compound walls are as high and as impenetrable as ever. Traditional styles can never today be used straightforwardly; rather, a detail must be made nonsense of to show that it is "an ironic historical reference." To provide an architecture which is truly popular and decorative has yet to be attempted, despite all the verbiage in *Skyline* or *Oppositions* or any of the other

journals over which architectural students in the compounds pore. As Wolfe observes in a crucial passage, "For any architect to have explored an avenue such as a new, straightforward (non-ironic), exuberant (non-camp) system of decoration for American architecture in the late twentieth century would have been a revolutionary development. It would also have been heretical. . . . no architect who tried it was likely to have any significant effect on the course of American architecture. The entire structure of the compounds and the clerisy, with all their rewards, psychic and mundane, would have to be dismantled first." Or perhaps, as

the wittiest and cleverest pseudo-apostate of them all, Philip Johnson, observes, perhaps the scholasticism of the East Coast is becoming irrelevant and a vigorous American architecture is going up in places like Houston or Los Angeles.

Watkin's *Morality and Architecture* became a cult book for a time—because it was about theories—and was carried around by students (who probably never opened it). I cannot see the same happening with *From Bauhaus to Our House*: it is too irreverent, too funny, too accessible. A pity, for though young architects will find it disconcerting, the book has much to teach them. □

THE DEAN'S DECEMBER  
Saul Bellow / Harper & Row / \$13.95

Stephen Miller

"The artist," Flaubert said, "must be in his work as a god in his creation, invisible yet all-powerful." Yet few great novelists have been invisible in their novels. They often insist upon their presence—commenting on a character's actions, offering a reflection about human nature. Even Flaubert did not always follow his artistic creed. But some novelists, of course, are more visible than others. Like Nabokov and Updike, Saul Bellow is often very visible in his novels. Reading his novels—or, to be precise, reading all but his first two novels, which are Flaubertian—we hear a vigorous, sardonic, brash voice, the voice of a writer refusing to be confined to the demands of plot and character creation. If Updike is the narrator-as-preacher, nudging his readers to speculate about what it all means, and Nabokov is the narrator-as-aesthete, insisting that his readers pay close attention to his exquisitely detailed observations, Bellow is the narrator-as-taxi driver, telling his readers to cut the nonsense and stop taking this or that fashionable idea seriously. Even though some of his novels are in the third person and others are in the first, it does not seem to make much of a difference; we hear Bellow talking in all of them, hear the voice of a writer who is in turn amused, ex-

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asperated, and angered by the way we live now.

As a worldly-wise taxi driver—one, moreover, who has read all the Great Books—Bellow is not afraid to pursue his own reflections while the plot languishes. He is our most essayistic novelist; his main characters are always struggling with ideas—getting angry at them or, more often than not, being confused by them, befuddled by the profusion of ideas on the loose in the modern world.

The dangers of Bellow's essayistic approach to fiction are obvious. At times his novels veer too close to monologue; we do not know who is doing the struggling with ideas—the main character or the novelist. Bellow is most successful when he creates characters who are not intellectuals, such as Tommy Wilhelm of *Seize the Day*, Hattie of "Leaving the Yellow House" (a short story), and Woodrow Selbst of "The Silver Dish," a recent short story that is one of Bellow's most powerful works of fiction. But even novels such as *Herzog* and *Humboldt's Gift*, which have intellectuals as central characters, are generally successful despite their garrulity and gimcrack plots

because Bellow makes them farcical as well as serious. He doesn't endorse his central characters' opinions; he merely offers them for inspection.

Bellow's sardonic voice can be heard in his latest novel, *The Dean's December*. Explaining why he returned to live in Chicago after spending years in Paris, Albert Corde (the central character) says: "There's the big advantage of backwardness. By the time the latest ideas reach Chicago, they're worn thin and easy to see through. You don't have to bother with them and it saves lots of trouble." It would be easy to jump to the conclusion that Corde here is simply a spokesman for Bellow, because Bellow has always made much of his Chicago connection. And because Bellow often has trouble distancing himself from his main character, it is hard to know what to make of Corde's opinions. But the problem with *The Dean's December* is not simply that Bellow is, so to speak, too close to Corde; the problem is that Bellow takes Corde all too seriously. He is not a farcical figure. Far from it, he is a hero of sorts, but his heroism is not sufficiently tested in the novel. Only one other character—an old school pal who is now a famous columnist—acts as a foil to Corde, but Bellow never gives the columnist a chance to challenge Corde's views. Corde comes though the novel with flying colors—getting high marks for insight, decency, moral seriousness. The result is a novel brimming with important ideas yet inert as a work of fiction.

Corde's own situation seems far-fetched, as if Bellow were desperate

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