

- The Scandalous Story of Architecture in America

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***From Bauhaus to Our House* by Tom Wolfe**

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Tom Wolfe's earlier squib against Modernism, *The Painted Word*, was a reasonable *succès de scandale* among those with enough interest in the New York School of painting to want to defend it, but went little further than that. *From Bauhaus to Our House*, on the other hand, has achieved the unprecedented feat (in architectural publishing) of making its way, albeit briefly, into the American best-seller lists, along with all those diets, cats and Barbara Cartland.

What is more, this startling success has been accompanied by a sustained chorus of outraged disapproval from practically every US critic who is actually qualified to pass expert judgment on its contents. One may simple-mindedly attribute these contrasting responses to *FBTOH* to the disrepute into which all architecture seems to have fallen in the popular media, so that any book knocking modern architecture is guaranteed a welcome from everybody but modern architects ... except that there seems to be more to it than that.

For a start, Wolfe is hardly the bringer of hot news: effectively, he is the last of the rude little boys to notice the non-existence of the Emperor's no longer new clothes. The lateness of the book is notable: not only did Wolfe signal his dislike of modern architecture as long ago as the introduction to *The Kandy-Kolored Etcetera* in 1965, but even among diatribes of this sort it comes at the weary end of a line that stretches through books by Peter Blake, Brent Brolin, Robert Venturi and others right back to Jane Jacobs's epoch-breaking attack on Le Corbusier in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, over twenty years ago. Of course, all this has guaranteed Wolfe a readership whose anti-modern reflexes had been well Pavloved, so that they could barely help themselves when they saw the trigger-word 'Bauhaus' on the cover, but it still leaves one wondering why the hostile critics were so ill-prepared that instead of greeting it with well-rehearsed yawns, they mostly lost their heads, like the distinguished ('wit, raconteur and') designer George Nelson in four pages of *ad hominem* bad temper in the *AIA Journal* for December last. Part of that ill-tempered display, however, might be due to Nelson recognising some of Wolfe's snide stories as ultimately his own, for Nelson, along with Peter Blake, the late marvellous dragoness Sybil Moholy and Philip Johnson, is one of the prime sources of scandalous stories about modern architecture in North America (my own

stock is deeply indebted to him). Gossip, in the almost hermetically-sealed subculture of New York architecture, in particular, has always been splendidly corrosive and rollickingly bitchy, but it was kept inside the family, so to speak, and Wolfe's first crime, as like as not, is to have profaned the sacred grove by opening it up to the *lumpen-intelligentsia*.

Even so, what Wolfe retails in this book is mild compared with some of the stories exchanged under the stars at the Aspen Design Conference over the years, or over cocktails at Yale or in the Architectural League of New York. However, what was alleged there about Alma Mahler's poor rating of Walter Gropius in bed, or Frank Lloyd Wright's plagiarism of his apprentices' best designs, or the curious 'extra services' required by Le Corbusier when staying in hotels abroad, was alleged within the privileged boundaries of the modern architecture 'compound' (Wolfe's useful but overworked term). Yet this mild ventilation of the secret places can hardly account for the almost paranoid reactions. For that slightly hysterical strain I think something peculiar – *very* peculiar – to modern architecture in North America may be to blame.

Not only is it a closed sub-culture, it is also by now a very well-entrenched academic establishment. Its obvious command posts were at Harvard with Gropius and at Illinois Institute of Technology with Mies van der Rohe, but its connections and influences had embroiled practically every architecture school north of the Rio Grande by the beginning of the Sixties. (Wolfe unaccountably does not recount the story of the annual conference of design teachers whose first item of business was a vote on whether to proceed in English or German!) In alliance with the architecture section of the Museum of Modern Art (funded by Philip Johnson's family) and the (predominantly German) art-history establishment, they effectively fixed the agenda and procedures for three if not four generations of architects, artists, critics, historians and designers. To mock all that is to threaten the intellectual and academic security of thousands who have grown up under its hegemony, and the paranoia extends well beyond architecture: some of the most alarmed responses to the book in my hearing have come, for instance, from scholars of constructivist art.

What is also baffling is that these alarms have been raised so late. These establishments did not seem overly upset by Wolfe's pioneering encomiums of the architecture of Las Vegas, with their prefatory sneers at Mondrian and Moholy-Nagy, culture-heroes of the modern architecture establishment, and its accompanying pedagogy. Presumably the changed conditions of today that guarantee Wolfe an easy success may also make it that much easier to

de-stabilise the academies.

So much for the book's effects: what of the content and manner that produced them? It is, obviously (how well we now know young Tom!), all about fashion and style, and it purports to be an account of how the fashion for modern architecture was foisted on America by foreigners. In other words, it continues a traditional Isolationist/Conspiracy-theory attitude roughed out around the end of the Thirties by the likes of Robert Moses and furniture designer Robsjohn-Gibbings, and developed in the McCarthy period by the magazine *House Beautiful*, which, in tireless defence of Frank Lloyd Wright, constituted itself a kind of Un-American Architectural Affairs Committee and was always discovering Functionalists under the bed. However, this particular exegetic tradition was just about exhausted by the time Tom Wolfe first hit the Big Apple, and he has had to re-invent it for himself, it seems. For it is very conspicuous that the book falls into two halves, historically, at about the time when he began to write and observe for himself at the beginning of the Sixties. Before that, he has to rely on secondary sources, oral or printed, but somewhere toward the end of Chapter Four – near enough the middle of the book – something more like an eye-witness tone can be detected. So he just missed the original paranoia about *Bei-uns-kis* ('Bei uns is all different und besser') while it was still alive, but he joins the bandwaggon just as the first major defections from orthodox Modernism were beginning.

These defectors are his first heroes – heroes in exact measure of the degree of their defection from the ideal of the pure 'Yale Box', and in that measure they get kid-glove treatment too. Thus Edward Durell Stone, designer of the pretty little Huntington Hartford Museum and the lacery-tracery US Embassy for New Delhi, is excused exactly the kind of sneering heaped on Wolfe's villains. With unbelievable innocence (or dissimulation?), he attributes the reluctance of the spectacular spouse of Stone's declining years (Maria Torchio) to actually marry him, to her alleged dislike of his clothes and his architecture, whereas the world gossip network at the time knew that it was due to his drinking habits. His desperate drying-out was watched with bated breath and his courtship-display posturing was described with unabashed relish wherever two or three were gathered together.

From this point on in Wolfe's narrative, we get essentially nice-guy art-journalism of the sort perfected by Calvin Tomkins at the *New Yorker* in the same period, only with more frequent dashes of vinegar. Indeed, one can be grateful for his refusal to be over-impressed by the various Post-Modernist movements which have surfaced in the States since those days. He rightly sees them as ironic glosses on Modern orthodoxy, which would be pointless

if that orthodoxy ceased to persist. As he says of Robert Venturi, his 'treatise turns out not to be apostasy at all but rather an agile and brilliant skip along the top of the wall of the compound'. One wonders how he would feel if he knew enough of the inside history of New York architecture to know that both the practice, and the nomenclature, of Post-Modern were started around 1962 (just too early for him to observe) by none other than Philip Johnson, whose AT&T building ('with a top that seemed to be lifted straight off a Chippendale highboy') is the triumphant All-American conclusion of the book.

The conspicuous inadequacies of the first part of the book, however, are of a different order. It is not a matter of lacking information (though any expert can pick holes in his scholarship), because much of what he says is true, however naughtily phrased, nor even a matter of slanted viewpoint, but of a weird lack of empathy, an almost inhuman lack of interest in discovering why the USA has seemed so set upon clothing its architecture in the foreign garmentation of modern architecture's European wing.

It is true, of course, that the USA has always been a net importer of architectural styles. Those captains of industry and academe who encouraged the 'White Gods' to leave Europe in the Thirties in order to have them build or teach in America were simply continuing a habit that went back at least to the early 19th century when Boston bookstores advertised the arrival of new consignments of architectural pattern-books from London. But there was an almost traumatic urgency about those invitations to the Bauhaus masters and to Mies van der Rohe, as men of good will sought to rescue leading European architects from the Nazi peril.

Equally, though, these good souls believed that they would get a fundamentally better architecture, not just a new garmentation, an architecture better adapted to the pressing social needs of the times. Wolfe makes a great deal of (ultimately self-cancelling) fun of modern architecture's alleged origins in Marxist 'worker's housing' in Mittel-Europa, but shows no sense of how good, how important, that must have looked at the time. There is no mention of the architecture of the Tennessee Valley Authority, which for two generations was concrete proof that the new architecture, and the largest programmes of social and environmental reform, were integral parts of one another.

Nor – one last scold – does Wolfe seem to be aware that the recovery of Frank Lloyd Wright's reputation after the early Thirties was to a large extent the work of European (or Europe-oriented) pundits who believed that Wright was not only one of the founding fathers of modern architecture but also the

greatest exponent of a purely American architectural tradition that went back through Louis Sullivan to Henry Hobson Richardson, both of whom were as American as Mom, apple-pie and Walt Whitman. From the time that intelligent Europeans like Adolf Loos and C.R. Ashbee began to acquire first-hand knowledge of American architecture around the turn of the present century, it became increasingly pointless to draw hard-and-fast lines between European and American architecture.

When Alfred Barr described the contents of the Museum of Modern Art's first architecture show as 'the International Style', he knew whereof he spoke. It was, indeed, the show that opened the doors of North America to the European variants of Modern, but those variants had more American sources and resources than even Barr cared to admit. If Wolfe equally knew whereof he spoke, he would know that far more important in forming the purely stylistic surface of the new architecture than his despised workers' housing was the imagery of US industrial architecture in concrete and steel that Gropius had enviously described in 1913 as 'monuments of nobility and strength ... comparable almost to the works of Ancient Egypt'.

What the good grey despicable liberals welcomed to the drawing-boards of America was a prodigal offspring of America's own prodigality, a body of pragmatic practice refined and subtilised by European dialectical prowess. Normally, however, when European styles cross the Atlantic they shed their ideological content on the way, but in this case the cultural divestment was curiously delayed by the fact that the ideologues had accompanied the style across the water in droves, and then stayed on.

Modern architecture did not finally emerge as a gutless value-free packaging system until America thought it needed one – in the Eisenhower years of faceless 'grey-flannel' corporatism. Lever House in New York is one of the necessary triumphs of the International Style, but it is also the point where corporate America finally wrung the last vestiges of ideological guts out of the style and left only the elegant husk behind. What Wolfe affects to despise is an American achievement, not a European importation, and if he is genuinely so puzzled to know why American corporations should have inflicted this allegedly unsympathetic style on themselves, he had better go back to corporate history, not the Karl-Marx-Hof in Vienna.

Wolfe is not alone in despising it, of course: all those in revolt against Amerika-with-a-Nazi-k despised it too, because they saw in it an especially American failure, an especially American lack of humanity to men. And it is possibly because it avoids raising that embarrassing issue, and blames

everything on foreigners, that the book has been such an unthinking success. But it may also be because it comes within sight of revealing that corporate sell-out that it alarms the academic and design establishments so much. As an intelligent anti-Modernist of my acquaintance described his architectural schooling in the late Sixties, 'they all did modern, but none of them were honest about their reasons. They said it was economy and function and all that stuff, but it was really just an empty style, the only one they knew.' Before the innocent lambs of America decide to lie down with the Wolfe, let them remember who it was who *really* decreed that every child 'goes to school in a building that looks like a duplicating-machine replacement-parts warehouse'.

But let none of us forget or fail to enjoy the wicked, personally-observed accuracy with which the superficialities of the modern affectation are lampooned by Wolfe:

Every young architect's ... apartment was that box and that shrine. And in that shrine was always the same icon. I can still see it. The living-room would be a mean little space on the backside of a walk-up tenement. The couch would be a mattress on top of a flush door supported by bricks and covered with a piece of monk's cloth. There would be more monk's cloth used as curtains, and on the floor would be a sisal rug that left corduroy ridges on the bottoms of your feet in the morning. The place would be lit by clamp-on heat lamps with half-globe aluminum reflectors, and ordinary bulbs replacing the heat bulbs. At one end of the rug would be ... *the Barcelona chair* ... The Barcelona chair commanded a price of \$550, however, and that was wholesale. When you saw that holy object on the sisal rug, you knew you were in a household where the fledgeling architect and his young wife had sacrificed everything to bring the symbol of the godly mission into their home.

Currently shackled up with his second or third wife and as many as *four* Barcelona chairs, that fledgeling architect, now grey-haired and a little overweight, serves, it seems, as professor, chairman or dean of practically every architecture school in the English-speaking world. Perhaps *that* explains the book's bad reception in expert circles.

