CURRENT BOOKS

Monuments of Evasion

EXQUISITE CORPSE: Writing on Buildings. *By Michael Sorkin. Verso. 365 pp. $34.95* **VARIATIONS ON A THEME PARK**: The New American City and the End of Public Space. *Edited by Michael Sorkin. Noonday. 252 pp. $15*

During the 1980s, writing from his perch at *The Village Voice*, Michael Sorkin established himself as one of America's more provocative critics of contemporary architecture. *Exquisite Corpse*, a collection of 55 essays from the *Voice* and other periodicals, constitutes Sorkin's "adieu to the journalistic trenches," a parting shot before he returns to full-time practice of the craft he so deftly criticized. His fellows in the trade should welcome Sorkin's return. As Lyndon Johnson once observed, it's better to have your critics "inside the tent pissing out than outside the tent pissing in."

Among other tales, these essays tell about the making of a profession-wide muddle. Coming out of graduate school in the early 1970s, Sorkin and his generation of architects could either go the way of the idiosyncratic masters, the Frank Lloyd Wrights or the Louis Kahns, or follow the money and work in vast corporate firms. The choice seemed clear. Making art meant making sacrifices.

Then Philip Johnson presented a new possibility. Wearing a cape and holding a model of his Chippendale-topped AT&T Building, Johnson became one of the national icons when he appeared on a January 1979 cover of *Time*. America's most celebrated corporate architect, noted for his owlish black glasses, was suddenly impersonating a 19th-century bohemian artist. Fitting historic styles or funny allusions to the facade of a building, he declared flat-topped, steel-and-glass skyscrapers "boring." In one stroke, the perennial in-

sider with his own table at New York's Four Seasons, a close adviser to CEOs, was—could it be possible?—"outside."

Sorkin deems Johnson's example counterrevolutionary. Architects could now have it both ways. Following Johnson's lead, they could play the artist and pay no price. Frank Gehry, Robert Stern, Michael Graves, and others were given large-scale jobs by such deep-pocket patrons as Disney, and architects at big firms like I. M. Pei and Kevin Roche began to be thought of as artists. The Pritzker Prize, called the "Nobel" of architecture, institutionalized the confusion by bestowing its first award upon Johnson. Ever since then, Sorkin notes, the Pritzker has been unable "to decide whether it wishes to recognize persons who are credits to American architectural big business or credits to some higher notion of Architecture."

Sorkin's cast of heroes and villains may be unfamiliar to the general public, but the contest he delineates is easy to follow. On one side are the few surviving individual practitioners—the avant-garde—who still consider architecture high art; on the other are the big firms pursuing architecture as a corporate business.

The individualists did not have an easy time of it during the last decade. As land values became inflated, those smaller buildings and structures, painstakingly designed and detailed by one architect working alone at his drafting board—the type of building that is the bread and butter of small architectural offices—proved increasingly uneconomical. Many dedicated architects were forced to make their living teaching, producing little built work and a great deal of "paper architecture." As Sorkin relates, their drawings became divorced from any possibility of production. Mike Webb's black and white visionary designs or John Hejduk's muted color

renderings of imaginary urban spaces were reclassified as art and sold in galleries. Hejduk, dean of the architecture school at Cooper Union, took to writing mournful poetry, while all the jobs, the best commissions on the best sites, went to large firms with teams of designers, engineers, and marketing departments.
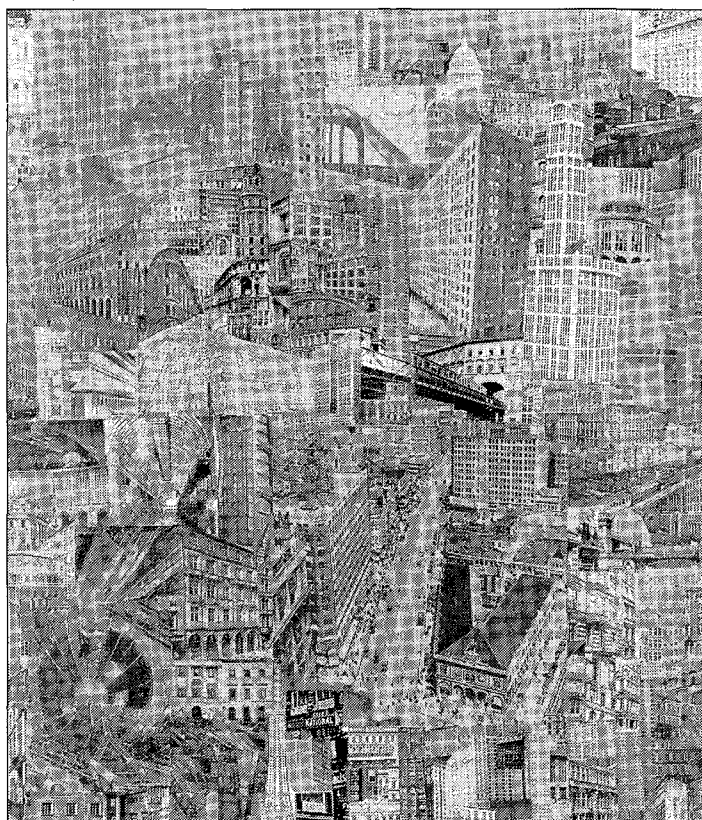
Such firms as Skidmore, Owings & Merrill or Kohn Pederson Fox churned out buildings that looked graceful on the skyline but proved to be awkward and forbidding from the ground. Since the engineering and technology of 1,000,000-square-foot buildings was fixed, there was little for architects to do except to find a suitable style in which to dress them. Cavernous, church-vaulted lobbies ornamented with palm trees and surveillance cameras, multi-story atriums, and pompous winter gardens were built in every ambitious downtown.

Architecture during the 1980s was thus less an act of invention than a matter of application. The "postmodern" grab-bag of historical styles became a way to provide the impression of architectural variety when, in fact, little existed. Sorkin dismisses Johnson's AT&T Building in New York—an undifferentiated slab with cute Chippendale ornamentation—as the "architecture of appliqué, a building of words with no syntax."

Because postmodernism's repertoire was the same from Singapore to St. Louis, a handful of jet-lagged designers, acting much like visiting symphony conductors, dropped in, ignored the local talent, and did the show. Architects in solo practices had to be content to design long-shot schemes for faraway competitions, such as the New Paris Opera or the "Peak" in

Hong Kong, or wait for an enterprising art dealer to find the way to their door.

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How recent architectural practice has affected the social environment is the subject of *Variations on a Theme Park.* Here Sorkin and seven other critics study, variously, walled communities in Los Angeles, malls, festival markets, "edge cit-

ies," suburban sprawl, and gentrifying slums. All try to discover why cities have lost their distinctive sense of place.

Starting in the 1960s, as the massive middle-class exodus to the suburbs shrank their tax base, mayors of cities such as Pittsburgh and Chicago enlisted architects and planners to "renew" their downtowns and clean up their slums. To attract necessary operating capital, cities encouraged reinvestment through tax abatements and

zoning variances, and made land available at significant discounts to private developers. These developers in turn hired architects whose job it was to edit out the disquieting details of real cities that had prompted people with money to move out in the first place. They had to find ways to lure taxpayers back downtown. Their answer was to create attractive "theme" cities, transforming their urban centers into Disneyland fantasies.

South Street Seaport near New York's Wall Street typifies this strategy. To bring suburbanites back into a place that they had come to see as dangerous and dirty, the Rouse Company (which had successfully remade historic working districts in Boston and Baltimore) turned the smelly streets of the old district into the sanitized main arteries of a "renewed" shopping area for nine-to-fivers. South Street Seaport was filled with upscale shops built on a nostalgic village scale. Unlike Disney's Anaheim or Orlando, where paste Matterhorns and three-fifths–scale Broadways have a backlot obviousness, architect Benjamin Thompson's South Street Seaport hijacked lower Manhattan for an authentic backdrop to its simulated fronts. For those who travel along this imaginary promenade, writes architectural historian Christine Boyer, "centers of spectacle efface the distinctions between the real cityscape and the show." At South Street and similar places, consumerism replaces production, and the "intimate streets, lined with small-scale facades and shopping arcades" only hide the very loss of work that put the city into crisis in the first place.

It has been more than 30 years since the urbanist Jane Jacobs mournfully declared the "death" of American cities. Her last hopes resided in the sort of easy mixing of classes typified by West Tenth Street in Greenwich Village, with its fresh-baked Italian bread and attentive neighbors. Most such places are now gone for good. Both in the older suburbs, where life in the "country" is separated from work by a car or train trip, and in today's "edge cities," where office and home are closer together, the street that once formed the nucleus of

the city has been abandoned by every form of life except the automobile. In cities such as Minneapolis and Montreal, skyways above and tunnels below connect office towers to sleek inner-city shopping malls, worlds removed from the old potholed cities. Political scientist Langdon Winner even envisions a future "Information City," modelled on Northern California's Silicon Valley, where one will hardly need budge from his or her modem. There will be no streets to bridge over or tunnel under because there will be no need to move anywhere. This brave new world will be one without any true architecture, where everyone is "networked" together without having "to move through a world of people and material things."

Neither Sorkin nor the other contributors offer alternatives to the recent architectural displacements resulting from what Sorkin describes as the "dissipation of all stable relations to local physical and cultural geography, the loosening of ties to any specific place." Perhaps the authors propose no solutions because architecture has typically served and rarely challenged power. While a few large firms are still putting up tall towers—which now have over 20 percent vacancies in most cities—or designing million-dollar vacation homes for the easy money made downtown, the majority of architects are now without work of any sort. Decaying neighborhoods, homelessness, and empty downtowns were not addressed during the building boom, and that boom crashed in 1990. The themed festival markets such as South Street Seaport and the new gentrified slums where young couples educate their children privately to avoid the local public schools are our contemporary Potemkin Villages. Their stage-set prosperity masks the architectural and social failure to reinvest in ourselves.

—*Ross Miller, Resident Fellow at the Chicago Institute for Architecture and Urbanism, is the author of* American Apocalypse: The Great Fire and the Myth of Chicago *(1990).*