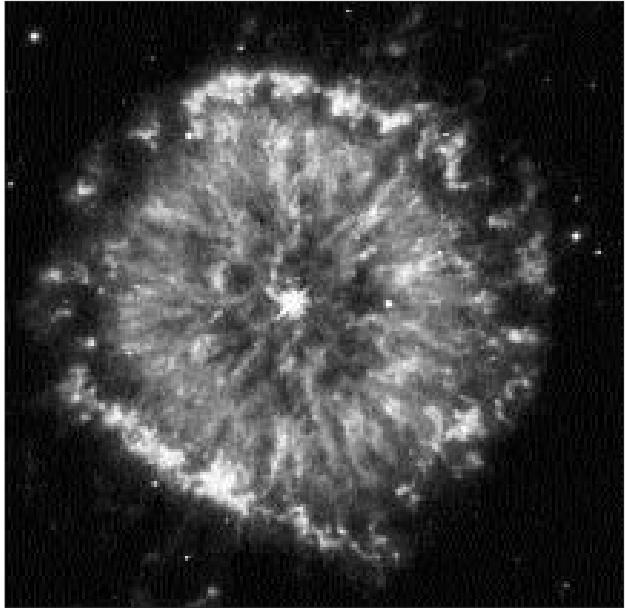


from its supernova to the outer reaches of the Milky Way, where the gases cool and rain back on the galaxy.

Stars thus seem to be the “main source of power for the interstellar medium.” But it’s not a certainty. Reynolds says that the loop above one huge bubble “looks uncomfortably similar” to certain features of our own sun that are created by the sun’s magnetic field. It may be that magnetic activity dominates the galaxy’s atmosphere, just as it does that of the planets and stars. That would make the analogy between the interstellar atmosphere and our own earthly one “even more apt than we think.”



This collapsing star in the constellation Aquila began emitting a huge cloud of gas several thousand years ago, but the image is only now being captured by the Hubble Space Telescope.

ARTS & LETTERS

The Decline of Commercial Architecture

“Design and Development” by Witold Rybczynski, in *Wharton Real Estate Review* (Fall 2001),
Lauder-Fischer Hall, 3rd fl., 256 S. 37th St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19104-6330.

Commercial real estate developers, who are responsible for the vast majority of new buildings in the United States, seldom win plaudits for great architecture. Not one of the nine projects that won the Progressive Architecture Awards last year was a developer-driven building. Yet Rybczynski, an author and University of Pennsylvania professor, isn’t ready to lay the blame at the feet of money-grubbing developers.

“In the past,” he notes, “some of the most imaginative and experimental architecture was commissioned and built precisely by and for real estate developers.” As long ago as 1728, the speculative builder and designer John Wood erected a spectacular and innovative residential complex in the English resort town of Bath that included, among other things, “33 three-story houses behind a façade that was loosely based on the Roman Coliseum.” The renowned architect John Nash designed the Royal Opera Arcade, a glass-roofed shopping

street (and precursor of the mall) that opened in London in 1818. Other examples include New York City’s Dakota apartment building (1884) and Rockefeller Center (1933). The many commercial commissions of modernist master Mies van der Rohe included the aluminum-and-glass Lake Shore Apartments (1951) in Chicago—a now familiar style that was revolutionary in its day, according to Rybczynski, “influencing the design of both office buildings and high-rise apartments for more than two decades.”

So why did developers move away from cutting-edge architecture? Rybczynski is skeptical of the pocketbook explanation. History shows that good architecture doesn’t have to cost more. He thinks the change has more to do with a shift in the patronage of high-profile architecture.

Beginning in the late 1960s, governments, tax-exempt institutions, and private individuals had the biggest building budgets,

and thus the ability to make an architect's reputation. "Public clients were notorious for ignoring the user, whether it was the tenant in a high-rise public housing bloc, or a child in a windowless schoolroom, and for spending [other people's] money on architectural experiments. . . . Such clients have encouraged architectural styles that are often bleak and whose minimalism runs in the face of

common taste. It is a didactic architecture of private symbols and quirky theories, that favors aesthetics over function, exterior expression over interior convenience, and design purity over clients' demands." Why would a developer—or anybody else who cares about the comfort and happiness of a building's inhabitants—hire architects with an agenda like that?

A Crisis for Catholic Writers?

"The Last Catholic Writer in America?" by Paul Elie, in *Books & Culture* (Nov.–Dec. 2001), P.O. Box 37060, Boone, Iowa 50037–0060.

This essay is not really about the "last Catholic writer in America"—there isn't a "last." Today, "if you are a Catholic writer," Elie observes, "it is as though you are the only person left who takes this stuff seriously—the only writer who cares about religion, and the only Catholic who has any literary taste. You are the last Catholic writer in America, and you are afraid the species is dying out."

In some ways, things were not that different for the previous generation of great American Catholic writers: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day. Much of the talk of Catholicism's "communal character" was "just a theological stereotype. One of the four past greats once wrote, "Today, each writer speaks for himself, even though he may not be sure that his work is important enough to justify his doing so."

Yet many things are different, notes Elie. Today, "the authors of the best Catholic writing may not be known to us as Catholics," Elie writes. "They may not be Catholics at all." He thinks of the novelist Denis Johnson and the short-story writer Richard Bausch, neither of whom is Catholic though both have written about the struggle for faith and the need for redemption in a way that Flannery O'Connor surely would have understood, though she might not have comprehended "the mismatch between the religious impulse and the church's resources for dealing with it."

O'Connor's faith was as natural to her as the air she breathed. In a curious twist, she did not write about Catholics but about Protestants because, she once explained, Protestants had "more interesting fanatics." Elie claims "that the Catholic writer today has less in common with O'Connor than with the primitives and grotesques she wrote about."

EXCERPT

Giving Life a Theme

The great themes of literature have always been such valuable things as courage, freedom, and love; human failings like pride, greed, and revenge; and a few others—usually tragic aspects of character and experience, most notably death. Almost all great works can be linked to one or many of these themes. The frequency with which the theme is courage may give a clue as to why we read. Given the themelessness of real life, works of art concentrate and illustrate for us what experience may not provide; they may talk about what we dimly sense but do not articulate in mundane daily life.

—Diane Johnson, novelist, in *The Southern Review* (Autumn 2001)