

the even more striking hexagonal North Christian Church, topped by one of the most famous spires in America. I. M. Pei designed the public library, whose plaza is dominated by sculptor Henry Moore's *Large Arch*. William Rawn conceived Fire Station No. 6 as an abstract takeoff on a barn, Richard Meier built a school, and the list goes on: Harry Weese, Cesar Pelli, Kevin Roche, James Polshek, Charles Gwathmey, John Johansen, Robert Venturi, Gunnar Birkerts, Edward Larrabee Barnes, and John Carl Warnecke—almost a complete roll call of Modernist stars.

But Columbus's masterful, if small, buildings have not saved the city from the fate of many similar towns across the country, according to Philip Nobel, an architectural writer. Washington Street, the main drag, is dotted with empty storefronts. A restaurant once noted in guidebooks is shuttered. The retail lifeblood of the city has drained away to the Wal-Mart and other "big box" stores on the outskirts. The dense city center surrounded by small single-family houses does not have enough stores to attract much street life, and the downtown has an "8 to 5 existence," Tom Vujovich, president of the city's redevelopment commission, told John King, the urban design critic for *The San Francisco Chronicle*.

Now, a redevelopment commission is debating whether the town needs all its showcase buildings. Number one on the endangered list is the Kevin Roche post office from 1970. It occupies an entire block off the main street, and, despite its provenance, is a "leaden exercise in

Columbus's Modernist jewels have not saved the city from the ills that beset other American cities.

funereal pomp," according to King. An enclosed shopping mall by Cesar Pelli also faces the redevelopment commission's scrutiny. In a city with so much, there has been no outcry. Columbus architect Nolan Bingham observes that "there are only a few buildings that will last a truly long time."

ARTS & LETTERS

A Novel Approach to History

THE SOURCE: "In Praise of the Novel" by Carlos Fuentes, in *Critical Inquiry*, Summer 2006.

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW is novels. Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes—himself the author of numerous works of fiction—points to the impact of Miguel Cervantes's *Don Quixote de la Mancha* when it appeared in 1605, in an age in which Cervantes's native Spain was an aging empire on the verge of breakdown.

"As Cervantes responded to the degraded society of his time with the triumph of the critical imagination," writes Fuentes, we citizens of the world today "face a degraded society and must reflect upon it as it seeps into our lives, surrounds us, and even casts us upon the perennial situation of responding to

the passage of history with the passion of literature."

As the 21st century begins, he observes, military spending far outstrips expenditures on health, education, and development. The needs of women, the elderly, and the young are left unaddressed. The environment is under siege. And terror is met with terror, while its root causes remain untended. Images have collapsed space and pulverized time, and we humans are in danger of becoming "cheerful robots amusing ourselves to death."

These realities "should move us to affirm that language is the foundation of culture, the door of experience, the roof of the imagination, the basement of memory, the bedchamber of love, and, above all, the window open to the air of doubt, uncertainty, and questioning." That "air of doubt" that writers stir is why, though "considered politically feeble and unimportant," they are persecuted by totalitarian regimes.

Yes, Cervantes wrote as a man of his times, but what perhaps made him great—*Don Quixote* was recently voted the best novel of all time by 100 writers from around the world—is that he transcended them. He wrote as an inhabitant of "the house of world literature," which is capacious enough to hold the traditions from which great works of literature spring as well as those they create.

We in the modern era need to shore up this house, according to Fuentes, to ensure our very survival. "Humankind will prevail, and it will prevail because, in spite of the accidents of history, the novel tells us that art restores the life in us that

was disregarded by the haste of history. Literature makes real what history forgot. And because history has been what was, literature will offer what history has not always been. That is why we will never witness—bar universal catastrophe—the end of history.”

ARTS & LETTERS

R.I.P., *Iron John*

THE SOURCE: “Remembering *Iron John*” by Jess Row, in *Slate*, Aug. 8, 2006.

A LACK OF IRONY IS WHAT killed *Iron John*, poet Robert Bly’s call to arms for a men’s movement published in 1990. It’s been largely reduced to a joke, and that’s too bad, says Jess Row, a writer and English professor at the College of New Jersey.

Recent books such as Caitlin Flanagan’s *To Hell With All That: Loving and Loathing Your Inner Housewife* and Harvey Mansfield’s *Manliness* criticize modern domestic life and argue that our culture’s attempts to press for gender equality have produced unhappiness and social breakdown. “Flanagan and Mansfield are united in nostalgia for a kind of Douglas Sirk version of the ’50s, without the irony, in which men provided, led, fought, and defended, and women cultivated, nurtured, healed, and willingly acquiesced to men’s desires,” writes

Row. Such books prop up old stereotypes and prejudices, he says, but they aren’t being met with better books “that examine contemporary relationships and gender roles without panic, dread, or shame.” This dearth is particularly evident in the men’s department.

In *Iron John: A Book About Men*, which is structured on an allegorical interpretation of a German fairytale, Bly argues that contemporary American men are sorely lacking nurturing fathers, meaningful mentors, self-respect, and “most of all,” Row says, “the ability to cultivate their inner resources—as Socrates said, to know themselves.” Though reviled by many feminists, Row writes, Bly supports the women’s movement, as long as both sexes acknowledge that men’s and women’s inner needs are different.

The book has its share of flaws—myopia, a failure to grapple with Freud, overgeneralizations,

etc.—but what was fatal to it “was simply that it was too easy a target for satire.” Bly himself—a shambling bear of a man who strummed a lute and wore colorful vests—cut an unfortunately comic figure, and many misconstrued his book and the men’s seminars he conducted to mean that “contemporary men need to somehow return to nature, re-create tribal ceremonies, or otherwise fetishize what they have lost.” Yet the affirmation and hope Bly offered to men set numbly adrift in the post-World War II industrial economy were real, as were his optimism, his generosity, and his fearless reliance on poetry.

The value of his message is lost in the post-*Seinfeld* landscape. “Irony, and the fear of ridicule, have, in a way, made any serious discussion of men’s emotional lives impossible,” writes Row. The sensitive-man ethos Bly espoused is now the butt of advertising cam-

paigns and wisecracks. The resulting repression means that “we still lack a basic vocabulary for, say, the experience of a stay-at-home father, or the difference (from a man’s point of view) between flirtation and harassment at work. If we don’t find a way of emulating Bly’s generosity of spirit and willingness to risk truth-telling, we’re going to remain stuck with recycled arguments and archetypes, lacking a language that applies to our own era.”

EXCERPT

Museum Leadership 101

I was appointed director [of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art] in May of 1977 and I would have to say it’s a different world, to the point that, knowing everything I know, were I offered the job again I’m not sure I would take it. . . . It has become bureaucratized and legalized, with a paralyzing near-zero risk-tolerance level, and . . . financial issues dominate everything we do.

—PHILIPPE DE MONTEBELLO, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in *The New Criterion* (Sept. 2006)