

RESOURCES & ENVIRONMENT

Shaikh would like the United States to take a more aggressive stance on export safety, notably by backing the UN Environment Program's proposal to compile a worldwide list of all hazardous export products. Without U.S. backing, he argues, any UN export safety effort will surely stall.

ARTS & LETTERS

Big Glass Boxes

"A Posthumous Mies: The Case Against" by Joseph Rykwert, in *Art in America* (Apr. 1986), 980 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10021.

At the 1968 opening ceremony of the New National Gallery in Berlin—an austere, glass-faced pavilion perched on a windowless stone base—the museum's director quipped: "Where shall I hang the pictures?"

"That's your problem," replied the gallery's designer.



Mies van der Rohe's twin towers at 860 Lake Shore Drive in Chicago caused a stir when they rose on the Windy City's lakefront in 1951. Today they are just two glass buildings among many in the nation's metropolitan areas.

ARTS & LETTERS

The designer was Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969), the Bauhaus architect whose vision of “logical structure” brought steel-and-glass skyscrapers to America. Known mainly in the United States as the architect of New York’s Seagram Building (built in 1958) and Chicago’s Federal Center (1964), Mies fostered a “marriage” of art and technology during the 1920s and ’30s. His concept of “skin and bones construction” helped builders of high-rises to cut construction costs. Mies’s minimalist philosophy: “Less is more.”

Today, in the year of Mies’s centenary, glass-box buildings dominate skylines from San Francisco to Sydney. Though his style endures, so do his critics. Rykwert, who teaches architecture at Columbia University, is one of them. He argues that “Mies was totally oblivious to the social context of his buildings.” Obsessed with construction details and the overall harmony of his buildings’ forms, he often disregarded the function his structures were to serve. He approached design problems as if they were “moves in a game of checkers,” the author says. Mies’s buildings, while appealing to the eye of the passerby, were often uncomfortable and impractical on the inside. Although other architects strove to mimic Mies’s style, many of his disciples lacked his touch, his fine sense of proportion and detail. They could only create clumsy imitations. As a result, many big U.S. cities now suffer from what Rykwert calls the “Sixth-Avenue Syndrome”—after midtown Manhattan’s ranks of towering glass boxes.

Guarding against such an outbreak, the City of London recently scuttled plans for the Mansion House Square project, a 290-foot tower and plaza designed by Mies just before his death. Rykwert praises the move. In building the project, the developer, Peter Palumbo, would have had to demolish 21 fine Victorian edifices, just to make room for what His Royal Highness Prince Charles called “another giant glass stump.”

Lifeless Fiction

“Missed Moorings” by Nicholas Lemann, in *The Washington Monthly* (Feb. 1986), 1711
Connecticut Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C.
20009.

Experience provides the raw material of good fiction. It is no accident that many major American novelists had, at some point in their lives, vocations other than writing. Mark Twain and Herman Melville piloted ships. John Steinbeck worked as a farm hand. Ernest Hemingway drove an ambulance during World War I.

But what has happened since World War II? wonders Lemann, national correspondent for the *Atlantic*. Writers of fiction in America, he argues, have become a wimpish lot, choosing to hole up as teachers in university writing programs rather than to brave the workaday world. Consequently, their “range of experience has become narrower over the years”; what emerges from their work is a disengaged and predominantly negative view of American life.

A case in point, Lemann contends, is Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, winner of the 1985 American Book Award for fiction. The story of a college town overshadowed by an ambient toxic cloud, *White Noise* fails to ven-