elor of Arts—two-year Master of Architecture sequence was one response to this context—a response that proved innovative for its time even if, as Michaelides reports, it was prompted largely by the school’s desire to help shield Vietnamese students from draft eligibility (104). His accounts of the school’s administrative struggles appear all the more telling in retrospect, with the university’s post-publication decision to subsume the once-separate schools of art and architecture under the banner of its new Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts.

The administrators’ perspective is offset, in part, by the offstage presence of other influential faculty, including the historians Buford Pickens, Udo Kultermann, and especially Norris Kelly Smith, the iconoclastic Wright biographer whose “discouraging preaching” (102) and antimodern moralizing Michaelides remembers with a grudging fondness. Likewise alive throughout these pages is the brilliant, cantankerous future Berkeley dean Roger Montgomery, the one faculty colleague whom these administrators seem to have considered their equal in talent, ambition, and especially willfulness.

Finally, the memoir section of the book offers pride of place to two architects who never served in more than visiting positions at the school: Maki and Obata. Obata’s terse memoir does not do justice either to the importance of his own career or to the school’s history. Maki uses his essay as an opportunity to reflect not only on his several terms as a visiting lecturer at the school but on the book-ended achievements of his original design for Steinberg Hall (1960, his first American commission) and his recent completion of the Sam Fox School—both additions to the original architectural building. Maki’s discussion, the most intensely personal of the book’s first-person accounts, reveals that St. Louis is “the city that appears most often in [his] dreams”—not the city’s landmarks, Maki confesses, but “the desolate midtown or some fantastic townscape born of my memory” (92).

In that melancholic dream image lies the great missing link of this book: what of the city that lay untouched by Washington University, by modernism? What of all the streets, and all the buildings, in all the cities, that even the grandiose visions of the postwar age failed to reach? In the end, such questions are moot. What gives this book its special value is its singular focus on the people who taught and practiced architecture in one place and the institution that brought them together. As Maki writes, “then, as now, architects were most interested in architecture and the architects around them” (91). Anyone interested in architecture and architects will appreciate this volume for its value in bringing alive that tight world as it flourished in one place during one short but hopeful span in mid-century America.

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Note

Nicholas Adams

Skidmore, Owings & Merrill: SOM since 1936

Many readers will be surprised after reading the opening lines of this text about the American architectural firm Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill (SOM): “This book is dedicated to those who dug the foundations, lettered the working drawings, cut the friskets, adjusted the computer programs, and whose names find no space in a book of this sort. In the context of the modern worship of the celebrity, the study of SOM forcibly reminds one that making architecture depends on teamwork, institutional cooperation, and the continuity of architectural generations.” Next to this quote, Nicholas Adams places a picture of the Chase Manhattan Plaza, one of the emblematic SOM buildings, in its construction phase, where we see hundreds of construction workers peering over the exposed structural frame. Many blue-collar outfits and few white-collar ones provide a singular backdrop for the accompanying phrase: “without the work of everyone, the building would be impossible.”

After reading the book, one understands this atypical beginning. The enormous operational complexity of a firm that has built over ten thousand buildings, is still active today, and has offices all over the world with hundreds of associates is striking, but it pales in comparison to the gigantic work needed to turn projects into built realities. SOM attempted to merge business and aesthetic principles, and in so doing, it developed a strategy that achieved the results Adams traces here, including the Sears Tower in Chicago, completed in 1974.

SOM’s postwar buildings are essential to understanding the so-called modern movement in the United States. Adams informs the reader that he will use the firm’s most emblematic buildings as case studies and will not consider the hundreds of supermarkets and other everyday constructions that are also part of the firm’s immense output. The book, therefore, is about the most exportable architectural aspects of a giant operation. The author forewarns us: those in search of intricate theses derived from archival research must wait for future doctoral investigations. This book will encourage them, and this alone makes it well worth our attention. Despite the omission of archival material, Adams’s contribution will become an indispensable element in future analyses of SOM. The author defines SOM as a firm with almost no architectural theory. The only exceptions are Myron Goldsmith’s text, “The Effects of Scale” (1953), some late lectures by Nathaniel Owings, and the handwritten works of Robert W. Cutler. This light intellectual baggage contrasted with so much built work hints at SOM’s working method: the resolution of problems generated by specific projects. The firm departed from this approach on only a few occasions, such
as with the invention of specialized constructive solutions that eventually became commonplace in skyscrapers. These include luminous dropped ceilings, window-cleaning cages, thermal bridges for structures, glass curtain walls without wood trim, lightweight concrete, and the first software programs for structural analysis, all of which came about as ingenious answers to pressing problems that helped reduce costs. For example, the diagonal structure in Chicago’s emblematic John Hancock Center allowed the reduction in weight of a conventional skyscraper structure from between 220 to 245 kg/m². In the Sears Tower, SOM saved the client ten million dollars. Hiring the firm was more than hiring an architect; it assured cost savings and made an architectural statement.

Louis Skidmore and Owings met each other in 1929; by 1936, they had opened, with John Merrill, their first office, located at 104 South Michigan Avenue in Chicago. It was not until 1939, due to their friendship with Robert Moses and their involvement in the planning of the New York World’s Fair, that they entered powerful circles leading to commissions for large projects, such as the wartime new town of Oak Ridge, Tennessee. The firm was a partnership with a few key individuals who stood out from the rest: Gordon Bunshaft, William E. Hartmann, Bruce Graham, Fazlur Kahn, Walter Netsch, and Goldsmith. Adams describes each of their training, interests, and design capabilities. In doing so, he allows the reader to see the development of many buildings that are featured in the book’s second part, where one enters the intricate world of SOM. In this world, the firm’s political relationships and organizational skills allowed them to arrive, almost always in first place, at design solutions for important buildings in postwar American cities. It is also a world from which SOM’s founders would soon exit, while the above-mentioned architects assumed responsibility for most of the projects.

Adams insists that Goldsmith, who worked for Mies van der Rohe between 1946 and 1953, was SOM’s only Miesian. However, this does not lay to rest a matter that is clearly evident: SOM’s architecture was built on Mies’s success in the United States. The firm made Mies’s ideas a formula for corporate success, and its leaders concentrated the firm’s focus on some key aspects, including problem solving in construction and financing, rationalization of the design process, and selling clients with cleverly designed presentations. They also were willing to work with landscape architects and artists to soften their buildings, which were often set into the natural and urban landscape with a painful arrogance. The relationship that exists between the Farnsworth House (1946–50), in which Goldsmith took part, and the stunning Republic Newspaper Building (1969–1971) in Columbus, Indiana, makes these ideas evident.

The Republic Newspaper Building was a showpiece of SOM’s craftwork, a kind of swan song for the era of the firm that most interests Adams. This type of architecture finds outstanding precedents in the firm’s earlier work, which the author carefully examines and which forms an integral part of the book. These buildings range from Lever House, Manufacturer’s Trust Company Bank, Connecticut General Life Insurance Company, Chase Manhattan Bank, the Air Force Academy Chapel, the addition to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, and the Yale Beinecke Rare Book Library to finally arrive at the almost mythical John Hancock Center in Chicago. Detailed analyses of each building explain the circumstances under which the projects were done, the clients’ concerns and reactions, and the characteristics of the sites. Adams also considers reviews, mindful of Lewis Mumford as “an implicit symbol of the hope of a world in peace,” was also described as an interpretation of the Chicago School (69). Adams supports this idea with reference to a critic’s chilling comment offered in the June 1952 issue of Architectural Forum: “I stand here with utter cleanliness, without mystery. Look at me . . . everything is visible, evident, obvious; I am the expression of this industrial age. Look at me and I will reflect your image, darker but not more dramatic than what you truly want to be. . . . I am you. I will be here when you leave. I am you but I am larger than you” (69). Power and kindness appear as qualities of modern architecture. In Adams’s presentation, SOM’s architects make it possible for these qualities to be perceived by the critic and the average American alike.

Adams dedicates only a few pages to SOM after 1974. By then the firm had to compete in a market in which it was vastly outperformed. The postmodern mentality mixed with often low-quality contextualism and media savvy architects seemed to render SOM’s modernist philosophy obsolete. Newer arrivals to the firm such as David Childs, Diane Legge-
Alex Wall  
*Victor Gruen: From Urban Shop to New City*  
Barcelona: Actar, 2005, 269 pp., 50 color and 120 b/w illus. $50, ISBN 84-95951-87-8

Until recently, the work of the Austrian émigré Victor Gruen (1903–80) has attracted little scholarly attention, as he seemed to belong neither to the academic elite of his period nor to the modern European avant-garde. The rediscovery of Gruen is associated with a growing interest in the origins of consumer culture and the commercialization of the public sphere and with a revival of the debate concerning the suburbanization and decentralization of the city—two historical contexts whose physical products Gruen helped create. In addition, Gruen was most influential during the two decades following World War II, an era that decisively shaped worldwide perceptions and uses of urban space as well as current academic views of the city.

Gruen was a typical representative of this period of fresh departures. In terms of specialization, he crossed the frontiers of different professions; socially, he operated in an extremely heterogeneous environment. As dramatist and cabaret artist, designer of furniture and shops, architect, planner, and environmentalist, he conceived and designed living spaces on every possible scale. Gruen was less interested in prestige architecture than architecture for human interaction, less concerned with the physical object than with ephemeral intermediate space. His focus was on the level of action, on people’s everyday encounters—in his words, “that primary human instinct to mingle with other human beings” (56). In his designs he tried to provide scope for this to develop. Gruen described the functional program in this connection as being a motor for social activity, not as its essence. In the range of his spatial dramatizations—from urban shop to new city—this approach became the script of a drama, and the city center became a stage for urban culture.

Alex Wall’s book, the second monograph on Gruen, follows M. Jeffrey Hardwick’s *Mall Maker* (2004).1 Previous research approaches, including Hardwick’s, reflected criticism by Gruen’s contemporaries who saw him as a commercial architect and described him as merely the “philosopher of the regional shopping center.”2 By contrast, Wall proposes a more comprehensive interpretation of Gruen: “To Gruen shopping was not the end but the means for approaching what he considered architecture’s real task: the struggle for the space and form of the contemporary city” (11). Wall’s presentation of Gruen’s personality and oeuvre is as multifaceted as his subject. It succeeds in identifying four leitmotifs within the wide field of Gruen’s urban involvement without obscuring his complex view of the city. In chapters titled “Commerce is the Engine of Urbanity,” “Think of It as an Experimental Workshop,” “The Car and the City,” and “Alternatives to Sprawl,” Wall outlines frameworks for his detailed studies of Gruen’s architectural and journalistic projects. Gruen reflected self-critically in an autobiographical manuscript from 1979, *Ein realistischer Träumer* (A realistic dreamer), which serves as a reference point within a loosely chronological and somewhat redundant text. Wall makes particular reference to this German-language source, previously ignored in research on Gruen. Wall’s analysis breaks down the apparent homogeneity of Gruen’s comprehensive view of the city, revealing discrepancies within its content. The result is an informative narrative structure based on Gruen’s own reflections that nevertheless provides the reader with some critical distance on the material.

As Wall correctly shows, Gruen’s works represent a general profession of faith in the city. Wall argues that, from Gruen’s point of view, the city—in his words, “that great human invention for the facilitation of human communication [and for the exchange of goods and ideas]” (12)—is a “cellular metropolis,” an entity that ideally organizes itself around centrally located areas (201–4). This view proposes a model for the recentralization of the city: a return to the city center, both physically and ideologically. According to Wall, this aspect was expressed in Gruen’s commercial retail planning, in projects for revitalizing downtown areas, and in new plans for whole cities. Gruen’s theoretical writings similarly synthesize humanistic and sustainable models of the city, and his urban proposals were associated with two fundamental considerations. First, he wanted to address the cultural and social dimensions of the city as well as its formal and infrastructural components. Second, he regarded downtown areas and suburbia as complementary parts of a higher-level whole. The resulting effect was that in both areas of planning—in his interventions in the existing city and in his plans for the expanding suburban settlement area—Gruen aimed to design places primarily intended to improve the quality of urban life. This approach, certainly a topical one nowadays, is convincingly illustrated by Wall in his discussion of public space in Gruen’s works. Wall shows the way that Gruen tried to translate his understanding of a common urban ideal into urban-planning strategies that mixed commercial, cultural, and social functions within urban space. In addition, Wall gives a detailed account of Gruen’s most important design thesis: how spatial models such as the “cluster,” developed for suburban shopping centers, were capable of being adapted to the revitalization of the downtown area. This planning strategy, which used the shopping center as an experimental platform...