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 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). 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.” 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 Traum (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 actually 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
for the design of public space within the city, was a pioneering one in the early 1950s. Wall clearly shows the ways in which this strategy questioned not only conventional design methods, but also the way in which traditional architectural types—particularly the street—were programmatically and formally reinterpreted as “living rooms of the community” (109).

To establish a relationship between the suburbanizing mechanisms that had been developing since the late 1920s and Gruen’s development concepts for the city, Wall describes in detail the political, economic, and social forces “that precipitated America’s urban and suburban revolution” (57–65). By contrast, however, only a few passages in the book make reference to other contemporaneous examples of planning alongside explanations of Gruen’s projects. A timeline offers associative clues, and the text proceeds on the same basis. Wall mentions the Greenbelt towns of the New Deal as the source for Gruen’s models of the regional shopping center, interprets Lewis Mumford’s “polynucleated city” as a prototype for Gruen’s centralized urban model, and describes Clarence S. Stein’s interpretation of the “neighborhood unit” at Radburn as providing a background to Gruen’s conception of “community planning,” but the author does not offer deeper insights into these familiar issues. By contrast, Wall’s comments on Gruen’s highly innovative conception of the architect as an “interdisciplinary team leader” (78–79) and his “integrated planning” model of action (168) are illuminating. A notable (although too brief) section is devoted to the surprising methodological and ideological parallels between Gruen’s definitions of the city center and the CIAM discourse on the heart of the city. In 1952, for example, Gruen proposed that the city center should “fill the vacuum created by the absence of social, cultural, and civic crystallization points.” In the same year, the city center was described in the CIAM 8 conference publication The Heart of the City: Towards the Humanisation of Urban Life as a “meeting place of the people and the enclosed stage for their manifestations.”

Although Wall’s book is not really intended to address issues involving the history of conceptual relationships in architecture, it does establish the importance of Gruen’s contribution to changes in human living spaces during an era of social restructuring, a time of apparently limitless mobility and early mass consumerism. In Victor Gruen: From Urban Shop to New City, Wall has not written a history of ideas relating to Gruen’s urban-planning theory. Yet this book, along with Hardwick’s work, does lay the foundations for such a history. Wall begins to make available a fuller and more comprehensive view of this period, a pivotal view historically and in terms of urban planning, and he offers a better way of understanding Gruen’s theories in the city in the context of the post-war period.

Konstanze Sylla Domhardt
ETH Zurich

Notes

3. Victor Gruen and Larry Smith, Shopping Centers: The New Building Type, Progressive Architecture 33, no. 6 (1952), 67-94
4. “A Short Outline of the Core,” in The Heart of the City: Towards the Humanisation of Urban Life, ed. Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, Jose Lluis Sert, and Ernesto N. Rogers (New York, 1952), 164-68. It should be noted that Wall’s book reflects a continuing imbalance in the state of research on postwar CIAM, which still tends to emphasize Team 10’s criticism of CIAM’s prewar guiding principles in the mid-1950s. The canonical view that Team 10 represented a complete ideological break with CIAM does not adequately account for the considerable evidence for historical continuity between Team 10 and its predecessors.

William H. Jordy
Edited and with an introduction by Mardges Bacon
“Symbolic Essence” and Other Writings on Modern Architecture and American Culture

Ask a current architecture student what he or she knows about William Jordy and your response is likely to be little more than a blank stare. In fact, ask anyone teaching architecture to describe Jordy’s work and, unless he or she went to Brown University, you’re still likely to get a rather vague reply. How is it that Jordy, who lived from 1917 to 1997, doesn’t have the same disciplinary stature as his peers, including Reyner Banham, Alan Colquhoun, Colin Rowe, and Vincent Scully? All of these other architectural writers have very defined historical projects and appear again and again on contemporary syllabi. So where’s Jordy?

Unlike his peers, it was not until last year that a collection of Jordy’s articles was brought together into a single volume, permitting an assessment of his role as a historian and critic of modern architecture. Expertly edited by Mardges Bacon, who also contributes a lengthy and illuminating introduction, “Symbolic Essence” and Other Writings on Modern Architecture and American Culture collects texts written by Jordy between 1943 and 1993. Among his contemporaries, it is Scully to whom Jordy is most often compared. The two did their graduate work at the same time at Yale, subsequently taught together in the history of art department at Yale, and focused their careers primarily on American modernism. Unlike Scully, however, Jordy’s doctorate was in the burgeoning discipline of American studies; entitled “Science and Power in History,” his dissertation focused on the nineteenth-century historian Henry Adams. And whereas Scully has published well over a dozen books, Jordy published only three...