Martin Filler

*Makers of Modern Architecture from Frank Lloyd Wright to Frank Gehry*


Martin Filler has written a compelling series of essays that first appeared between 1987 and 2007 in *The New York Review of Books*. Instead of writing a historical survey or a monograph about a single architect, the author offers seventeen individual essays assessing seventeen celebrity architects or partnerships. All but four are on individuals; the remainder covers couples, including Charles and Ray Eames, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, the partnership of Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silvetti, and the oppositional pairing of Daniel Libeskind and David Childs. Every chapter is replete with biographical details and vivid judgments concerning the pros and cons of the architects’ leading buildings. Filler’s book presents criticism of a high order, with the author striving to offer historical aperçus concerning the various movements in the modern era. Terms such as “modernism” (used on 38 pages), “International Style” (32 pages), and “postmodernism” (27 pages) place buildings and concepts in proper conceptual and chronological order, with the latter two terms mostly used in a derogatory fashion.

Filler’s central argument is that “what a society builds mirrors its values more clearly than any other physical objects” (xiv). For those who bemoan the mediocrity of America’s post–World War II urban building stock (both commercial and residential) and the tendency toward exurban sprawl, Filler’s argument helps explain the sorry state of the American built environment. Yet for Filler things are not quite so simple: he lays out carefully and in depth the accomplishments of individual celebrity architects along with the historical background of their creations. Filler’s grasp of his subject matter, moreover, is strengthened by his having published more than three hundred articles before writing for the *Review*.

Unlike the work of Kenneth Frampton, who aspires to an operative mode intended to affect building production directly, Filler’s critical profiles strive to identify defining issues in the career and work of each architect. For example, while Filler depicts Louis Sullivan’s distinctive architecture as part of a progressive movement in the first chapter, he also describes the architect’s personal difficulties as conveyed in his writings and in leading biographies. Filler is sympathetic toward this leading architect of the turn of the twentieth century, and he refutes the revisionist authors whose books detract from Sullivan’s reputation. Contrary to Frampton’s analytic and rationalist treatment of Sullivan’s architectural excursions in his *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (first appearing in 1980), Filler celebrates Sullivan’s personal style and attitudes as revealed in his skyscrapers and banks. It is ironic, Filler explains, that Sullivan’s diatribe against American materialism is accompanied by the production of lavish, beautiful, and often florid forms, as in the case of these two modern urban building types.

At first Filler seems to lionize Le Corbusier and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, as he extols most of their designs, but later he reminds readers of the unsavory political choices they made in World War II; as Winfried Nerdinger and other architectural historians have shown, Mies competed to design for the Nazis in the mid-1930s, while Le Corbusier courted a problematic Vichy regime with a variety of ambitious proposals. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Filler lavishes praise on Frank Gehry and Venturi and Scott Brown. Where he forgives Gehry his penchant for sculptural expression that often seems to occur at the expense of tectonic resolution, he balances Venturi and Scott Brown’s blanket acceptance of popular culture against the important lessons he feels they learned from roadside vendors.

Philip Johnson and Santiago Calatrava come in for much harsher criticism—Johnson primarily for his right-wing politics, and both for what he sees as their kitschy designs. Filler defines the meaning of kitsch (142, 290), accompanying his definitions by devastating attacks on the buildings that correspond to this term. Filler interprets Johnson’s kitsch in narrow terms as typically “a familiar object transposed into an incongruous new use, such as a Statue of Liberty table lamp or Last Supper breadbox. Johnson,” Filler continues, merely inverted the usual shift in scale, working from small to large. The major buildings of his Postmodernist period are generally perceived as involving such inane transpositions: the AT&T Building of 1979–1984 in New York as a giant Chippendale hightboy; the PPG Corporate Headquarters of 1979–1984 in Pittsburgh as the Victoria Tower of Charles Barry’s Palace of Westminster of 1836–1865 in London redone in mirror glass; and the office building at East 53rd Street and Third Avenue in New York of 1983–1985 as a colossal lipstick (142).

Generally sympathetic toward women in architecture, Filler provides generous portraits of both Ray Eames (not trained
as an architect, but very much a designer and copartner with Charles) and Scott Brown, whose skills he unequivocally praises. It may be noted here that Filler dedicates the book to his wife, Rosemarie Haag Bletter, a noted architectural historian of the modern era. Bletter's influence here is deft and deep-seated. Although Filler often provides historical background on his own, Bletter's expertise in modern architecture and especially Germanic culture seem to have informed the chapters on Mies van der Rohe (chapter four) and on Norman Foster (chapter fourteen).

While Louis Kahn is not treated at the level of detail one encounters in the writings of Sarah Williams Goldhagen, Filler nonetheless can hardly praise the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth (1966–72) highly enough: “The interior of the Kimbell, washed with a pearlescent natural light that gives its arching vaults an ethereal presence, is as close as we are likely to come in modern times to an architecture of the infinite” (131). Despite this encomium, Filler has some reservations about Kahn’s private houses, his First Unitarian Church in Rochester, New York (1959–69), and the Erdman Hall dormitory at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania (1960–65). But Filler does not expand his critical remarks here about these buildings, and the lack of detailed explanation is a detriment.

Several chapters address contemporary issues, but none strike such a tragicomic chord as the struggle of Libeskind and Childs over architectural control at New York City’s “Ground Zero.” Filler goes beyond detailing the squeamish idiosyncrasies of these two disparate architects, summarizing the architects’ prolonged battles with an array of political entities and economic forces controlled by New York Governor George Pataki and the developer Larry Silverstein. Filler is by no means alone in concluding that Libeskind’s final design of the Freedom Tower is shallow, achieving the level of kitsch with a silhouette meant to echo the upraised arm of the Statue of Liberty.

Filler also develops discussions of such general terms as “modernism,” “postmodernism,” and the “International Style” throughout the book. The first of these terms conjures multifarious meanings pertaining to the period between 1880 and 1930 (an area in which Bletter has particular expertise), when architecture and social idealism were paired in a variety of ways. In the field of architecture, modernism continued its avant-garde approach in the 1930s, even as the International Style exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932 sapped the political and social vitality from the movement. Somewhat problematically, the term “postmodernism” appears thoughtlessly on the same pages as the “International Style” numerous times (for example, xv, 50, 115, 127, 151), and is viewed negatively as a bastard style that indiscriminately revaled historic ornament. Filler uses only the formal meaning of postmodernism and does not incorporate, for example, the well-known philosophical writings of Fredric Jameson or Jean-Francois Lyotard—just two examples in a host of references on the topic.1 Although Filler’s Makers of Modern Architecture is perhaps not the place for displays of such erudition, surely Frampton’s article “Critical Regionalism” would have lent some respectability to postmodernism. Filler’s mixed reception of postmodernism—appearing by turns as an injurious stigma (xiv and xv) and as a benign harbinger for contemporary revivals of classical motifs—swings in a positive direction in his analysis of Silvetti and Machado’s recently completed addition to the original Getty Villa and Museum in Malibu, California (210).

In summary, this is a beautifully written work, albeit not necessarily for an academic audience. Those seeking the scholarly apparatus of footnotes and bibliography, for example, will be disappointed. Yet the New York Review of Books, in which the essays originally appeared, is a much revered journal for politics and the arts, and Filler’s compilation of essays underscores the contribution he has made to this arena for general readers over the years. The scope of the Makers of Modern Architecture is broad, although not inclusive enough for some critics (namely Deyan Sudjic).2 Further, except for some parenthetical references to the Japanese architect Yoshio Taniguchi, architect of the recent addition to New York’s Museum of Modern Art, there is a problematic lack of focus on non-Western architecture. Nevertheless, this book, more than any other contemporary critical work, will go far in enlightening general readers about modern architecture, rewarding specialists with an array of informed and insightful discussions of well-known architects of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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Notes

Shirine Hamadeh
The City’s Pleasures: Istanbul in the Eighteenth Century

In 1703, after decades of absence, the Ottoman court returned to the city of Istanbul, an event that initiated a century of intense building activity and urban change, marked by the establishment of suburban waterfront palaces, public gardens, and fountains. Shirine Hamadeh’s central concern in this volume is to counter established notions of “Westernization” as the major interpretive framework applied to this period of Ottoman architectural and social history. She seeks to explain “how a new architectural sensibility allowed emergent social and cultural practices to carve out their own space in the physical fabric of Istanbul . . . how novel forms, spaces, and decorative idioms, changing patterns of patronage, and new patterns of architectural perception revealed and reinforced the internal dynamics that were played out between a society in flux and a state anxious to reassert its visible presence and authority in the capital” (4).