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sous la dir. de Hélène Jannière & Paolo Scrivano

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Abstract Throughout the last century, no other period like the 1970s and the early 1980s seems to have marked a comparable contribution in raising the visibility of architecture as a matter of general concern: no longer confined to the realm of the profession, architecture began to be regularly featured in the general press. Not coincidentally, it was around those years that Modernism became the object of some of the most vigorous attacks launched by commentators situated well outside the professional circles. Tom Wolfe's well-known pamphlet *From Bauhaus to Our House* or Prince Charles' controversial architectural speeches, are telling episodes of a diffused perception of the distance separating the public of users and viewers of architecture from the oft-self-referential world of the profession.

The aim of this essay is to examine some significant and select examples of architectural criticism published during the mid-1970s and early 1980s in Britain and the United States. Particular attention is devoted to the modes of interaction and contamination of this type of criticism with the genre of cultural journalism.

The following issues are at stake: which rhetoric, patterns of interpretation, and schemes of narration does architectural criticism borrow from the realm of journalism? In which ways, and through which languages, are specific aspects of the buildings and/or the architectural profession addressed and criticized? What are the recurring targets of architectural criticism? What are its audiences?

Michela Rosso obtained her Doctorate in Architectural and Urban History at the Politecnico di Torino, where she has been teaching courses of History of Architecture since 2001. Her main fields of research include the history of architecture (eighteenth to twenty-first centuries) and architectural historiography. On these topics, she has published the volume *La Storia utile. Modernismo e memoria nazionale. Londra 1928–1951* (Edizioni di Comunità, 2001). In June 2014, she was general chair of the third EAHN (European Architectural History Network) international conference, held at the Politecnico di Torino. Among her current interests an important place is occupied by research on the relationship between architecture, humour and satire.

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Michela Rosso

Architectural Criticism and Cultural Journalism in the 1970s and Early 1980s. Britain and United States: Shared Territories and Languages *

Since the early 1980s, British and American mainstream newspapers have developed architectural columns and published articles written by journalists specialized in architecture and the built environment. The latter's names have become well known also outside the academic and professional circles and, in most cases, they are not of architects by training. Thus, their independence from the professional milieu has – at least in theory – guaranteed a separation of roles and fields that has certainly improved the quality of the discussion whilst widening the knowledge of architecture outside of a restricted elite. Although literature on this topic remains limited, recent scholarly research has been prompted by the newly-acquired accessibility to some professional archives, such as those of *New York Times* critics Ada Louise Huxtable and Herbert Muschamp, both held at the Getty Research Institute.

In addition to the extension of the discussion about architecture and the built environment from the professional circles to a more heterogeneous audience, the late 1970s and the early 1980s also witnessed a strong public opposition towards architectural Modernism. As it has been pointed out, the critique of functionalism came from several directions, and although it manifested itself for the most part in aesthetic terms, it was deeply connected with wider social and political arguments (Potts, 1981; McLeod, 1989; Rustin, 1989). Favoured by the new conservationist turn that had followed the economic recession of the years between 1973 and 1975, the decline of Fordism as the prevailing mode of production, and the dismantling of its system of regulations, this new wave of cultural revisionism was to take on several forms. Under censure were the dominant institutions of the Fordist era, the social and economic values they represented – the welfare state –, and their prototypical architectural and urban forms. While a fierce attack was waged against the massified and utilitarian character of public housing, this critique also found expression in new claims of difference and identity, a rediscovery of the worth of various kinds of particularism, and a new reverence to tradition (Rustin, 1989: 94–95).

The aim of this article is to examine select examples of architectural criticism appeared between the late 1970s and the mid 1980s in Britain and the United States, dealing with texts produced within distinct professional fields, and channelled throughout different kinds of media. The first example is that of the author of architectural commentaries

* **This article is based on a paper originally given at the third *Mapping Architectural Criticism* international symposium "Toward a Geography of Architectural Criticism: Disciplinary Boundaries and Shared Territories" (April 3–4, 2017: Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art, Paris).**

Peter Blake (1920–2006), an American practising architect and prolific writer who published extensively in both the professional press and mainstream magazines and newspapers. The second looks at Tom Wolfe's *From Bauhaus to Our House* (1981a). Better known for the bestselling books *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, *The Right Stuff*, and *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Wolfe (1931–2018) was a pioneer of New Journalism, a term he contributed to codify in the early 1970s (Wolfe and Johnson, 1973). As an editor to *Harper's*, his writing expanded into social, cultural and art criticism. Not conforming to the standard dispassionate and unbiased register of journalism, Wolfe's typical style would often make use of literary devices usually only to be found in fictional works. In the third and last part, dedicated to the discussion surrounding Mies van der Rohe's un-built scheme of Mansion House square in London (1962–1985), the current essay will introduce and compare some episodes of criticism voiced on this controversial project by both the specialist literature and a range of newspapers and popular magazines, as well as during the public debate held during the 1984 public inquiry. The text focuses on the themes and languages shared by these three different sets of contemporary criticism on Modern architecture.

Modernism at stake: some writings by Peter Blake and Tom Wolfe

The years between 1977 and 1981 were crucial in critically reassessing the legacy of the Modern Movement. In 1977, at least two books were published in London touching upon this issue: David Watkin's *Morality and Architecture* and Charles Jencks' *The Language of Post Modern Architecture*. By acknowledging the autonomy of architectural form from any technological, economic, social or political factor, the architectural historian and enthusiast champion of an architectural classicist revival David Watkin went as far as to declare the failure of Modernism. A failure that Jencks was soon to identify with the iconic demolition, in 1972, of part of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis.

However, shots of the now famous sequence filmed on April 22nd, 1972 showing two of Minoru Yamasaki's buildings in the act of collapsing under an explosive detonation had already appeared three years earlier in the pages of a magazine published on the other shore of the Atlantic. The author of the article, the Berlin born American architect, architecture critic and journalist Peter Jost Blach, *alias* Peter Blake, had chosen it to illustrate his article "The Folly of Modern Architecture", published in September 1974 in the Boston-based literary and cultural commentary magazine *The Atlantic Monthly*. With it, Blake had followed a suggestion from the magazine's director, Peter Davidson, who had asked him to admit the ultimate defeat of modern architecture and come up with some alternative solutions (Blake, 1977: 7). Blake's article, which would later win him the Architecture Critic Annual Medal from the American Institute of Architects, anticipated most of the themes exposed in his successive and well-known book *Form Follows Fiasco: Why Modern Architecture Hasn't Worked*: this text appeared three years after, in 1977.

What Blake was attempting in his 1974 text can be summarized with the expression "shooting at one's father's corpse". Himself a member of what one could call a "fourth generation" of modern architects, educated at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Architecture in Philadelphia where he had also been apprentice to George Howe, Oskar Stonorov and Louis Kahn, Blake had started his article by confessing that "almost nothing that we were taught by our betters in and out of our architecture schools of the mid-century has stood the test of time […], the premises upon which we have almost literally built our world are crumbling and our superstructure is crumbling with them" (Blake, 1974: 60). He had then divided his text into nine paragraphs corresponding to nine fallacies[1]. Those fallacies – Blake thought – had kept architecture from working; among them were the emphasis on structure, glass skins, tall towers, large housing schemes,

1 **The use of the term "fallacies" clearly recalled Geoffrey Scott's *The Architecture of Humanism* (1914).**

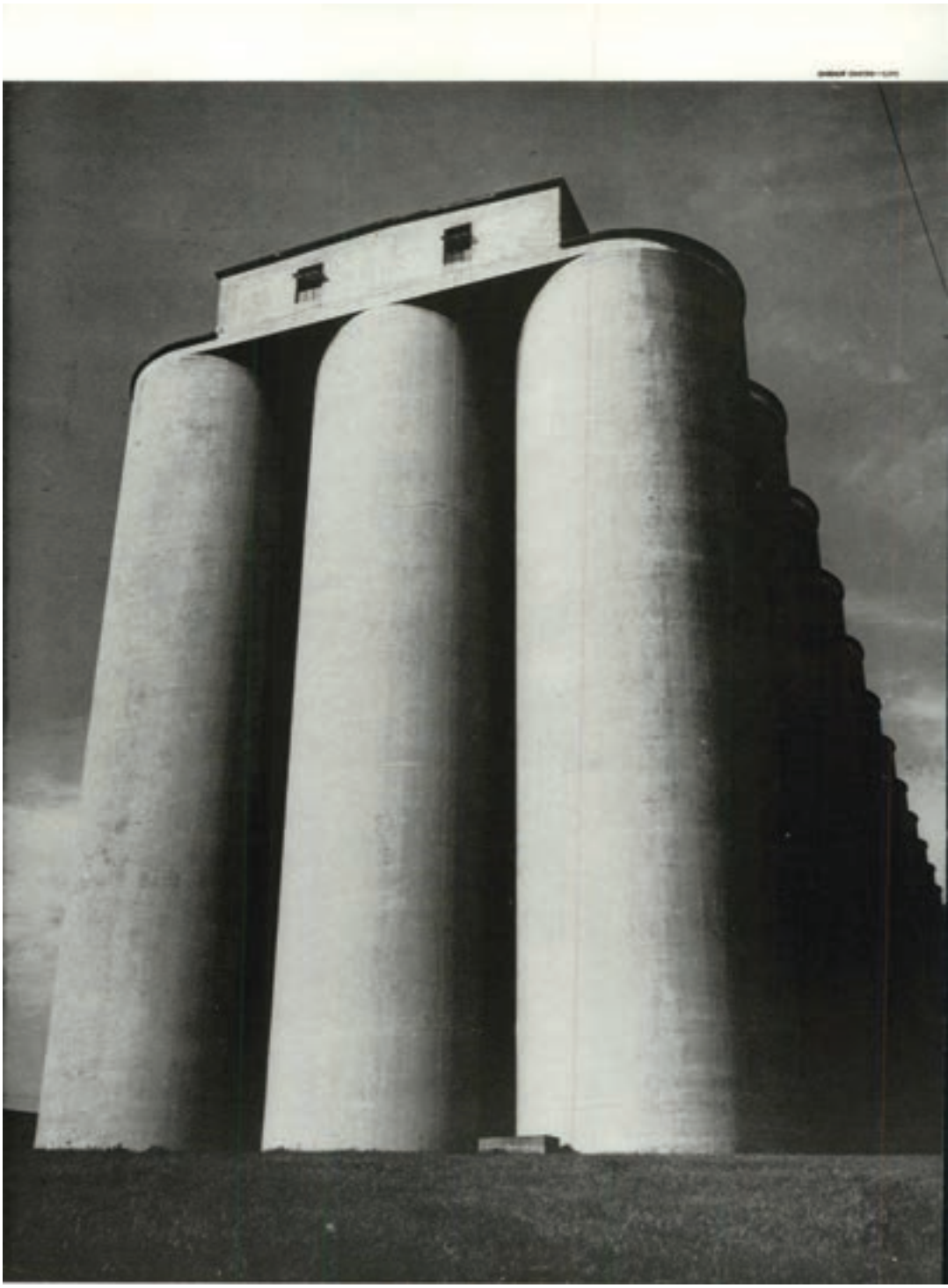
prefabrication, and urban sprawl. In *Form Follows Fiasco*, the nine fallacies would then be turned into eleven "fantasies" (function, the open plan, purity, technology, the skyscraper, the ideal city, mobility, zoning, housing, form and, finally, architecture).

A prolific editor and author, Blake had already published numerous books and columns, articles, and essays for both the professional architect and the layperson. Besides serving on the editorial staff of *The Architectural Forum* from 1950 to 1972, and *Architecture Plus* magazine, where he was editor-in-chief from 1972 to 1975, he had also been on the editorial staff of *House & Home* and published articles in *Harper's*, *The New York Times*, and *New York* magazine. Criticism to architectural functionalism was not at all new to him since it had already surfaced in some of his previous writings. For instance, in 1958, the year of the Seagram building's completion on Park Avenue in New York, he had published a series of four articles for the periodical *Forum*, grouped under the title of "The Art of Architecture". In one of them, entitled "Form Follows Function, Or Does It? ", he had addressed the widespread standardization of architectural functionalism in the United States, where "every city is studded by office and apartment buildings designed – if that is the word – by some sort of automatic 'functional' process". Firstly, was it possible – he argued –, to consider beauty simply as "a function of function", and, secondly, could "efficient function" automatically produce a "beautiful form"? (Blake, 1958: 103). **(Fig. 1)**

While Blake had attempted a self-reflective critique of modern architecture conducted from within the architectural profession of which he considered himself a typical representative (Blake, 1974: 59), a few years later, the already famous journalist and writer Tom Wolfe (1930–2018), who had never had a formal education in architecture, was to arrive at similar conclusions. In parallel to Blake's writings, Wolfe's *From Bauhaus to Our House*, issued in 1981 by the New York-based publishing company Farrar Straus and Giroux, appeared after having been already anticipated in the mainstream press: excerpts of it had been published in that year's June and July issues of *Harper's*. **(Fig. 2a–2b)**

Wolfe's argument was apparently straightforward. He saw twentieth-century architecture as the creation of an academic élite based in Europe and subsequently transported by "White Gods" to the New World. The "compound", as Wolfe called this "entirely new form of art association" (Wolfe, 1981a: 26), was a select, private community of intellectuals and artists whose main mission, to use the words of *New York Times'* critic Paul Goldberger, was "to foist modern design upon an unwilling world" (Goldberger, 1981). And, as all the "compounds", this one in particular "had a natural tendency to be esoteric, to generate theories and forms that would baffle the bourgeoisie" (Wolfe, 1981a: 27–28). He continued: "Composers, artists, or architects in a compound began to have the instincts of the medieval clergy, much of whose activity was devoted exclusively to separating itself from the mob. […] Once inside a compound, an artist became part of a clerisy, to use an old term for an intelligentsia with clerical presumptions" (Wolfe, *Op. Cit.*: 29). As the architectural historian James O'Gorman had noticed at that time, by seizing the elitist nature of architectural Modernism, Wolfe developed a theme already at the centre of his *The Painted Word* (1975) and at the same time pointed out the disdainful indifference of contemporary architects for the desires of their clients (O'Gorman, 1981: 83). Moreover, by insisting on the imported and derivative nature of Modernism in the US, he popularized a story that had already been delved into by a well-established field of studies on early twentieth-century European intellectual migration to America, exemplified by such works as those by Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn (1969), Henry Stuart Hughes (1975) and Martin Jay (1985).

As soon as it came out, the book was received controversially (Goldberger, 1981; Haag Bletter, 1981; Lehmann-Haupt, 1981; O'Gorman, 1981; Nelson, 1981; Banham, 1982). In the pages of *The New York Times*, Paul Goldberger admitted that Wolfe's argument was "not altogether distant from the truth", noticing however how the author



1

Fig. 1
Peter Blake, 1958. "Form Follows Function, Or Does It?", *Architectural Forum*, April: 98–99, vol. CVIII, n° 4

MODERN ARCHITECTURE II

Form follows function – or does it?

BY PETER BLAKE

A building may be highly functional—but, contrary to what many people think, this will not necessarily make it beautiful. Here is a new definition of the meaning of "functionalism."

"'The problem of architecture as I see it,' Professor Silenus told a journalist who had come to report on the progress of his surprising creation of ferro concrete and aluminium, 'is the problem of all art—the elimination of the human element. . . . All ill comes from man,' he said gloomily; 'please tell your readers that. . . .'"

When Evelyn Waugh wrote his satire, *Decline and Fall*, in 1928, most of his readers accepted this misanthropic concept of a "functionalist" as an architect who thought that good came only from the machine. It was a natural enough assumption: had not Le Corbusier said that "a house is a machine to live in"? And had not Louis Sullivan laid down the law some thirty years earlier by stating, unequivocally, that "form follows function"—which (as everybody knew) could only mean that architecture should grow straight out of wiring, plumbing, and steam heating?

"Form follows function" was the catch phrase that spelled (and continues to spell) *modern* architecture to most laymen. In 1928, it seemed like a strange idea, cold and forbidding; today, although widely accepted (and even more widely misunderstood), "form follows function" continues to evoke the image of modern as opposed to traditional architecture more readily than any other slogan. Yet there is no architectural principle that can claim a more ancient and distinguished tradition.

Form has followed function from the paleolithic cave dwellers to the neolithic lake dwellers; it followed function in Roman forts and aqueducts, in medieval castles and the Great Wall of China, in eighteenth-century English warehouses, and in twentieth-century Manhattan office piles. Functionalism, in short, is as old as building itself.

What has seemed to make functionalism new during the recent past is simply this: at the start of every radically new movement in architecture, better *function* (rather than better appearance) is the criterion by which the movement is judged. The first cathedrals of the Norman period, for example, were extremely simple and austere—stone shells built to fit around a ritual. Only when they had stood the test of functionalism did architecture move on to Chartres. The first loft buildings of the Industrial Revolution were severely practical. But once the functional base had been laid, Sullivan and Root could approach the esthetic problems of the skyscraper. And the large office blocks demanded by our present Managerial Revolution are just beginning to emerge from their early functionalist phase.

Critics of functionalism sometimes suggest that functionalism stops where architecture begins. This is unfair both to functionalism and to architecture. The functionalist period in the development of a new architecture is much like the formative childhood period in the life of a man. As he matures, he may reject many of the fads

Grain elevators with their plain, geometric monumentality served as an inspiration for many modern architects. Yet these structures were "undesigned," did not become art until reinterpreted by skilled architects.

Harper's

FROM BAUHAUS TO OUR HOUSE

Why architects can't get out of the box

by Tom Wolfe

BEAUTIFUL, for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain, has there ever been another place on earth where so many people of wealth and power have paid for and put up with so much architecture they detested as within thy blessed borders today?

I doubt it seriously. Every child goes to school in a building that looks like a duplicating-machine replacement-parts wholesale distribution warehouse. Not even the school commissioners, who commissioned it and approved the plans, can figure out how it happened. The main thing is to try to avoid having to explain it to the parents.

Every new $900,000 summer house in the north woods of Michigan or on the shore of Long Island has so many pipe railings, ramps, ball-treads metal spiral stairways, sheets of industrial plate glass, banks of tungsten-ball-ogen lamps, and white cylindrical shapes, it looks like an insecticide refinery. I once saw the owners of such a place driven to the edge of sensory deprivation by the whiteness & lightness & leanness & cleanness & barrenness & spareness of it all. They became desperate for an antidote, such as coziness & color. They tried to bury the obligatory white sofas under Thai-silk throw pillows of every rebellious, iridescent shade of magenta, pink, and tropical green imaginable. But the architect returned, as he always does, like the conscience of a Calvinist, and he lectured them and hectored them and chucked the shimmering little sweet things out.

Every great law firm in New York moves without a quarter of protest into a glass-box office building with concrete slab floors and seven-foot-ten-inch-high concrete slab ceilings and plasterboard walls and pygmy corridors

This is the first part of a two-part article. Tom Wolfe's most recent book, In Our Time, was published in 1980 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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2a

Fig. 2ab
1981b. "From Bauhaus to Our House (part 1): Why Architecture Can't Get Out of The Box", *Harper's*, June: 33; and 1981c. "From Bauhaus to Our House (part 2): Architecture for Architects Only", *Harper's,* July: 49. Source: Tom Wolfe papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

FROM BAUHAUS TO OUR HOUSE

Architecture for architects only

by Tom Wolfe

The story so far: Always obedient colonials when it came to style, American architects were bowled over in the 1930s by the European avant-garde fashion of Bauhaus architecture. The fact that the Bauhaus style developed out of the ruins of Germany after the First World War, in the name of socialism, and with the ideal of creating Perfect Worker Housing—i.e., in a setting that bore no resemblance to the United States—didn't matter in the slightest. When the Silver Prince himself, Walter Gropius, head of the Bauhaus, fled Germany and arrived at Harvard in the 1930s, he and many of his Bauhaus comrades were received like white gods come from the sky. The course of American architecture changed overnight. For the next thirty years American architecture—of every sort—would be based on designs and concepts devised for German worker housing in the 1920s.

1. Escape to Islip

WHERE WE COME UPON one of the ironies of American life in the twentieth century. After all, this has been *the American century*, in the same way that the seventeenth might be regarded as the British century. This is the century in which America, the young giant, became the mightiest nation on earth, devising the means to obliterate the planet with a single device but also the means to escape to the stars and explore the rest of the universe. This is the century in which she became the richest nation in all of history, with a wealth that reached down to every level of the population. The energies and animal appetites and idle pleasures of even the working classes—the very term now seemed antique—became enormous, lurid, creamy, preposterous. The American family car was a 425-horsepower, twenty-two-foot-long Buick Electra with tail fins in back and two black rubber breasts on the bumper in front. The American liquor-store deliveryman's or cargo bumper's vacation was two weeks in Barbados with his third wife or his new cookie. The American industrial convention was a gin-blind rout at a municipal coliseum the size of all Rome featuring vats in the parking lot stocked with hookers on flokati rugs for the exclusive use of registered members of the association. The way Americans lived made the rest of mankind stare with envy or disgust but always with awe. In short,

This is the second part of a two-part article.

Tom Wolfe's most recent book, In Our Time, *was published in 1980 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.*

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2b

3

Fig. 3
"Rue de Regret: The Avenue of the Americas in New York. Row after Mies van der row of glass boxes. Worker housing pitched up fifty stories high". Tom Wolfe's (1981a: 7) caption to *Avenue of the Americas / 6th Avenue, New York.* (undated), Brent C. Brolin photographer. Photo © Courtesy of Brent C. Brolin.

Fig. 4abc
"Gordon Bunshaft's Lever House, the mother of all the glass boxes. She was as fecund as the shad; Corner of the Seagram Building. Custom made bronze wide-flange beams stuck on the exterior to 'express' the real ones concealed beneath the concrete of the pier; The Seagram Building. Mies pitches worker housing up thirty-eight stories, and capitalists use it as corporate headquarters. Note the curtains and blinds: only three positions allowed — up, down, and halfway". Tom Wolfe's (1981a: 128-130) caption to **a** – *Lever House*. (Undated), Brent C. Brolin photographer; **b** – *Seagram Building: detail.* (Undated), Brent C. Brolin photographer; **c** – *Seagram Building: Frontal view* [detail]. (Undated), Ezra Stoller photographer; all laid out and framed according to the original layout in Wolfe's book. Photos: **a,b** © Courtesy of Brent C. Brolin [poor quality due to loss of originals]; **c** © Ezra Stoller/Esto.

Fig. 5ab
"Bruno Taut's Hufeisen Siedlung, Berlin, 1926 [a], and Robert Venturi's Guild House, Philadelphia, 1963 [b]. It took us thirty-seven years to get this far". Tom Wolfe's (1981a: 178) caption to **a** – *Hufeisensiedlung, Berlin-Britz*. (Undated), unknown photographer; and **b** – *Guild House, frontal view*. (Undated, 1967?), William Watkins photographer; both laid out and framed according to the original layout in Wolfe's book. Source: **b** – The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

4a–c

5a–b

seemed to pay no attention to what conventional historians considered a rupture between "modern" and "post modern": in his view "the so-called postmodernist architects were as determined as the modernists to put dogma before building" (Goldberger, 1981). As more than one reviewer had remarked, that apparent lack of subtlety could be explained by the fact that Wolfe's central theme was "not history, but social criticism" (Goldberger, 1981). As a consequence, Wolfe's saga of "architects' arrogance" started in the early 1920s and continued without interruption well into the late 1970s (O'Gorman, 1981: 83). **(Fig. 3-4abc; 5ab)**

The book was written in Wolfe's typical style of which in 1973 he had already identified the basic devices: "construction scene by scene", "lots of dialogue", and "resorting as little as possible to sheer, historical narrative" (Wolfe, 1973). Irreverent and hilarious, *From Bauhaus to Our House* blended together simplification, exaggeration and bittersweet hyperbole. As it was pointed out by *New York Times'* critic Christopher Lehmann-Haupt (1981), a cursory overview at the text highlights some of its recurring catchphrases: "The Silver Prince" is Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus; "Starting from zero" is the motto of the European avant-garde wanting to build a new purified world out of the debris of the Great War; "the colonial complex" is the complex of cultural inferiority felt by the American elites towards European culture; the "White Gods" are Gropius, Mies, Breuer, Albers, those European *emigrés* arrived as refugees in the United States in the mid 1930s and early 1940s.

In addition, the book did not analyse any building in detail. Instead of describing the architectural features of the mentioned architectures, these ones were often derogatively juxtaposed to ordinary things of everyday life. For instance, while writing about Louis Kahn's addition to the neo-Gothic building of the Yale Art Gallery (1951–1953), Wolfe paralleled it to a discount store and a parking garage: "In the eyes of a man from Mars or your standard Yale man, the building could scarcely have been distinguished from a Woolco discount store in a shopping center. In the gallery's main public space the ceiling was made of gray concrete tetrahedra, fully exposed. This gave the interior the look of an underground parking garage" (Wolfe, 1981: 105).

By provocatively combining the outlook of the outsider and a perspective that sought to appeal to the interests and opinions of a much larger public than the restricted circle of the leading architects and educators, Wolfe's text addressed a recurrent theme of the contemporary reaction to Modernism, namely its authoritarian, allegedly undemocratic nature. Whatever the expression "the standard Yale man" might have meant in the author's intentions, it was clearly used in opposition to an architectural establishment depicted as depriving all the others of their voice and identity. And in fact, at a closer look, the "standard Yale man" possibly refers to Wolfe's own background and can be read as "from the perspective of someone like me, who received a Yale education without particular distinction". It reads like something that one could define as a "disingenuous", falsely unpretentious, statement[2]. At the same time, a subtle taste of paradox informs some of Wolfe's acerbic writing. As in famous visual mockeries of modern architecture, for instance of the Looshaus on the Michaelerplatz and Gaudì's Casa Milà in Barcelona[3], Wolfe parallels modern architecture to ordinary, anonymous structures, thereby pointing out that *these buildings are not architecture*. In so doing he overturns the *objet trouvé* aesthetics and the cult of everyday things congenial to the historical avant-gardes, and employs it to devalue the modernist myths of functionalist de-ornamentation and building standardization.

As it was perceptively remarked, the centre of Wolfe's book are not buildings but architects (O'Gorman: 82). Through

2 I owe this reading to Paolo Scrivano's perceptive suggestion during our conversation in early June 2018.

3 I am referring here to two cartoons. One, "Los von der Architektur", appeared in *Illustrirtes Wiener Extrablatt* ,on 1 January 1911, picturing Adolf Loos's Goldman and Salatsch's building in Vienna as a sewer grating. The other, appeared in the Catalan magazine *L'Esquella de la Torratxa*, on 4 January 1912, showing Antoni Gaudí's *La Pedrera* as a garage for dirigible airships.

6

Fig. 6
Photomontage showing the proposed Mies van der Rohe tower, 1983. Source: John Donat/RIBA collections.

their personalities, Wolfe brings into focus the post-war North-American academic milieu possibly more vividly than any academic text. Heroes in Wolfe's account are described in their psychological as well as physiognomic features. For instance, at the time of Bauhaus's foundation in Weimar in 1919, the then thirty-six-year-old Gropius is depicted as "slender, simply but meticulously groomed, with his thick black hair combed straight back, irresistibly handsome to women, correct and urbane in a classic German manner, a lieutenant of cavalry during the war, decorated for valor, a figure of calm, certitude, and conviction at the center of the maelstrom" (Wolfe, 1981: 15).

Personification, a typical feature of today's political discourse, becomes in Wolfe's text a rhetorical tool used to domesticate a specialist knowledge to the general public by conveying to the reader the human side of the story. However, a further element should be added: the transformation of the public sphere into a permanent spectacle, where the role of the leader and his competences have been gradually superseded by his persona and public image has not spared the architectural profession either[4]. In fact, the emphasis on the physiognomy of the individual, on his face, his body, his anatomy and outfit, all these aspects so typical of today's political discourse, have become a constituent part of the ways in which the architect, as a public figure, is depicted in the media since at least the last two decades[5]. In this respect Wolfe anticipated in 1981 what was to become almost a cliché in the way the architectural profession would be represented in the media in subsequent years. By introducing biographical elements, anecdotes and trivial facts into the narrative, Wolfe succeeded in popularizing a topic that still appeared reserved to a closed circle of acolytes. By rendering his heroes more real and closer to the ordinary life of the average person, he probably managed to address a wider audience of readers. At the same time, the use of biographical elements seemed to restore in the reader a possible faith in the historical facts, thereby clarifying a distinction between historical truth and critical interpretation that a more scholarly, sophisticated and less accessible literature seemed to have put in question.

Modern architecture on the public scene: the rhetorics of anti-modernism and neo-traditionalism

As Michael Rustin wrote in his 1989 essay *Postmodernism and Antimodernism in Contemporary British Architecture*, during the mid-1980s architecture became the subject of significant public controversy in London: "a scheme for extending the National Gallery, which had previously been accepted by its trustees, was described by the Prince of Wales as 'a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a well-loved friend'. In response to the ensuing outcry, approval was withdrawn, a new competition held, and a postmodern design by Robert Venturi declared the winner. A mile or two east from Trafalgar Square, another public row broke out over a project, prepared over many years by the developer Peter Palumbo, to construct what would have been a Mies van der Rohe-designed building in London" (Rustin, 1989: 89).

The analysis of the debate over the un-built Mansion House Square scheme (1982–1985) unravels many of the arguments emerged from the episodes of architectural criticism and journalism recalled above[6] **(Fig. 6)**. Undoubtedly, it constitutes an emblematic test case of the architectural polemics surfacing within an emerging conservation movement, the new postmodernist creed, and what one of Palumbo's partisans, the then editor of *Building Design* Martin Pawley, recognized as "the regrouped forces of modernism" (Pawley, 1982). A look at the debate that developed around the scheme in the period 1981–1985 shows how an

4 **On this topic see, for instance Belpoliti (2009).**
5 **See Loricco and Micheli (2007).**
6 **The Mansion House Square scheme has recently been at the centre of attention of a series of essays and an exhibition at the RIBA Architecture Gallery. A more extended analysis of the debate can be found in the following essays from which this paragraph partly derives: Rosso (2016; 2017).**

architectural project, consisting of an 18-storey steel and glass tower overlooking a plaza and conceived by one of the undisputed masters of Modern architecture, was turned into the perfect scapegoat for all the major faults of the Modern Movement. The role played in this story by the media — architectural journals, as well as national and local newspapers, magazines, and TV — is paramount. At the same time, the discussion reached such an unprecedented level of vehemence that all language registers were put into use and exploited in order to voice either support or opposition to the initiative.

Following the refusal on the part of the London Corporation in 1982 to grant planning permission to the developer, the project received enormous media coverage and became the focus of an intense debate. This one was to take on two distinct forms. One, the public inquiry, consisted of a legal discussion that took place between May and July 1984 at Guildhall, the site of the City Corporation, and which involved more than seventy members of the public, single individuals and organizations, each one exposing in front of a public official their arguments against or in favour of the scheme. The other was a discussion that took place both in the architectural journals and in the general press. **(Fig. 7abc)**

Thus, the critique of a "tower that would rival bomb ruins", as architectural journalist Charles Knevitt had described it in the pages of *The Times*, and that was almost the perfect, though outdated, embodiment of all the functionalist dogmas of normalization, indifference to the site, and anonymous design, rested on the persuasion that architectural modernism had failed (Knevitt, 1984: 12). It had been Astragal, the name under which were signed a series of weekly editorials published in *The Architects' Journal* (AJ henceforth), to admit that the "pulling power of Mies's name" was no longer as great as it used to be (Astragal, 1982: 3). A similar position was shared by *Financial Times'* architectural correspondent Colin Amery who argued that "No longer do we believe in Mies's maxims or in the imposition of grids of convenience on our activities" (Amery, 1982: 23), echoed by the *Guardian*'s architectural correspondent Martin Walker who labelled Mies' tower "as old fashioned as Beatles' haircut" (Walker, 1982: 13).

Analogies with the planning history of London were frequent throughout the debate. Lines of historical continuity were drawn, stretching from Mansion House square scheme up to particular facts of the city's past urban history. Thus, the developer had justified the idea of a public space in this area as the culmination of plans prepared more than three hundred years before by Wren — following the Great Fire of 1666 — and then by Sir John Evelyn and Robert Hooke. Later, Palumbo argued, following the devastation of London by bombing during the Second World War, the idea had received further support from the team of C. H. Holden and Lord Holford in their City of London Development Plan (Palumbo 1981: 15–16; Palumbo, 1982). This tendency to resurrect specific segments of the city's history in order to strengthen the legitimacy of a project whose feasibility had appeared at least questionable to many, had been one of the favourite targets of AJ's long time cartoonist, Louis Hellman. In a humorous sketch issued on August 4th, 1982, Hellman had given the shocking announcement, written in a fictitious mid-seventieth-century English, that a new grand plan for London designed by the foreign architect "Chris van der Wrenne" and commissioned by "a dynamic developer from the New World" alias "Christopher 'Fingers' Colombo", had outrageously been turned down by the City architect. Hellman's story ended with the announcement that it would "be continued on Page 1944", hinting at the other recurrent target of public criticism at that time, C. H. Holden and W. G. Holford's postwar Plan for London (Hellman, 1982: 29) **(Fig. 8)**. The polemic often touched upon the project's indifference to the specificity of the site, insisting on a caricaturized representation of the modernist postulates of building standardization and internationalism. It was again Hellman, in the pages of AJ who brilliantly captured the humorous turn of this kind of polemic with a vignette featuring Palumbo as "Mumbo-Jumbo of Artistic Speculations Inc.", disguised as a contemporary Al Capone

Revived plans will mean the demolition of 8 listed buildings

£30m City facelift... 300 years after Wren

by Caroline McGhie

ON A THEME BY WREN—a model of the proposed Mansion House Square.

7a

PAUL SPENCER ON A FIERCE DEBATE THAT COULD CHANGE THE FACE OF BRITAIN

ARCHITECTURE

NEW LOOK: The National Gallery's 'turbaned' extension and (right) Peter Palumbo with his City development

A FIGHT TO THE DEATH

IN TUNE: Prince Charles, who has cut at the Gallery and City plans, with Sir Hugh Casson's support

7b

BUILDING DESIGN

The weekly newspaper for the design team

Fire laws ignore sports centres

Vote for Mies, snub for conservationists in Jenkin decision

NO WINNERS AT MANSION HOUSE

Reactions

Arup's station plans revealed

Story of a dream

Second try for BBC project

Shutter Doors Limited

Stalport OK?

INDEX

Post-modern quartet

Shutter Doors Limited

7c

Fig. 7abc
Caroline McGhie, 1982. "£ 30m City Facelift ... 300 Years after Wren", *The Standard*, January 7th: 5; Paul Spencer, 1984. "A Fight to the Death", *The Mail on Sunday*, September 30th: 13; "No Winners at Mansion House" (1985). *Building Design*, May 24th.

Fig. 8
Louis Hellman, 1982. "Hellman and Diary", *The Architects' Journal*, vol. CLXXVI, n° 31, August 4th: 29. © Hellman archive, RIBA Drawings & Archives Collections – Victoria & Albert Museum.

HELLMAN AND DIARY

YE BUILDING NEWS — 13th SEPTEMBER 1666

YE SHOCKKE HORROR!.....
YE CITEE TEARS UP WRENNE'S GRAND PLAN

Ye Committee of Citee Fathers yesterday turned downe ye planne for ye new citee centre designed in ye Moderne Style by ye worlde famous architecte Cris van der Wrenne.

Ye dynamik developpere from ye New Worlde Christophere "Fingers" Colombo told HS: "I am verily sick as ye parrotte. Cris is one of my Goddes. But I am going to fighte none and appeal to the highest authorities His Royale Highness King Charleseltine II who will see this planne will be to the greater glory of his reign."

His Majestie King Charleseltine II (left) will be certain by Royal Decree that Mr Wrenne (right) shall build his planne!

But Citee Architecte Sir Roger Pratte saide: "Wrenne is one of my gurus but frankly his modernistic orthogonal townne planninge conceppte is not in keepinge withe our National Heritage of Empiric Pluralisme...and anyway ye bigge landowners did not want it. These new Absolutiste ideas may be suitable in Holland or Paris but continental style plannes are foreign to our traditionnes."

Reaction to ye news came fromme ye famous architecte Robert Hooke who told our reporter: "These shorte sighted weeke kneede merchants have turned down ye onlie opportunitee to have ye uncompromisinglee moderne designe in ye citee from ye architecte of ye worlde classe. However, I have drawn uppe my owne humble plannes which I hope His Majestee will favour withe His consideration."

Alternative plan by Hooke Associates.

Ye loade of mealy mouthed Conservationistes have obstructed ye Marche of Progress in opposinge a designe based on ye Scientific and Rational Principles withe a loade of sentimental clappetrappe about preserving a collection of half-e dereliste mongrel structures and a chaotic uncoordinated streete patterne. Posteritee will judge

(continued on Page 1066)

8

and ready to decree that all buildings over twenty-nine years old should have been compulsorily demolished and replaced by identical copies of the Mansion House office tower and plaza (Hellman, 1985b). **(Fig. 9)**

Ideologically-tainted analogies were a constant feature of the debate: alongside the reference to the public building programmes of the Fascist regime, allusions were often made to Nazi bombing during the sad days of the London Blitz, between 1940 and 1941 (Knevitt, 1984: 12). In parallel, in his proof of evidence against the scheme presented on June 28th, 1984, David Watkin equated the Mansion House square project to the modernist vision of "a new world of gleaming glass towers" whose origins he traced back to Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin*, which he did not hesitate to define "vandalistic" (Watkin, 1984: § 4).

It was a "stump", and more precisely "a giant glass stump", the sardonic neologism used by Prince Charles in his notorious "Carbuncle speech" held on May 30th, 1984 at Hampton Court (Prince Charles, 1984). The derogative definition had surely managed to convey the image of a squat and stocky projecting remnant of something that had been cut, something lacking the necessary slenderness even to be called a skyscraper, with its less than ninety metres, and notably shorter than most of other Mies' high-rise buildings. By using this image, the Prince was to prophetically anticipate the unfortunate epilogue of the Mansion House Square scheme battle, as Hellman would perceptively record in one of his sketches, where the "stump" was to be finally and irrevocably "stumped" (put at loss) as a ball on a cricket ground (Hellman, 1985a). **(Fig. 10–11)**

As shown by these commentaries, the debate often assumed the typical modes of humour, in its various forms of satire and irony, sarcasm and playfulness: at each time derision and puns, jibes and parodies offered a more vivid representation of reality, or, as Ernst Gombrich had brilliantly expressed in his essays on caricature, "a likeness more true than mere imitation" (Gombrich, 1938: 319; Gombrich, 1960: 336). While the legal procedure entailed by the public inquiry normally required a factual language and rigorous arguments, the widespread mediatization of the discussion had resulted into the use of a less technical and more accessible vocabulary. In the end, this register of communication was to permeate also the ways in which some of the proofs of evidence read at Guildhall were articulated. Similarly, the same passion and vehemence which characterized some of the statements voiced by the press, was to be found in the specialist literature: among the professional magazines, *Architects' Journal*'s editorials had often made recourse to exaggerations and sensationalist tones. Similar devices were freely and profusely employed by commentators writing in newspapers. Conventional boundaries between "high" and "low", "expert" and "mainstream" discourses seemed blurred or less distinct. In each case, a common set of techniques succeeded to express in a better, more palpable way than other forms of criticism, the whole gamut of contrasting feelings nurtured by a project in which were apparently condensed all the major themes of the contemporary architectural polemics.

The Mansion House square scheme debate and the other contemporary episodes of criticism of modern architecture cited in this essay suggest how the crisis of architectural Modernism and the polemics that it entailed were to function as a catalyst in bringing the architectural discipline straight onto the public scene. The use of an array of tools and languages traditionally pertaining to distinct segments of the architectural culture seemed to question the assumption of architectural criticism as an autonomous disciplinary discourse.

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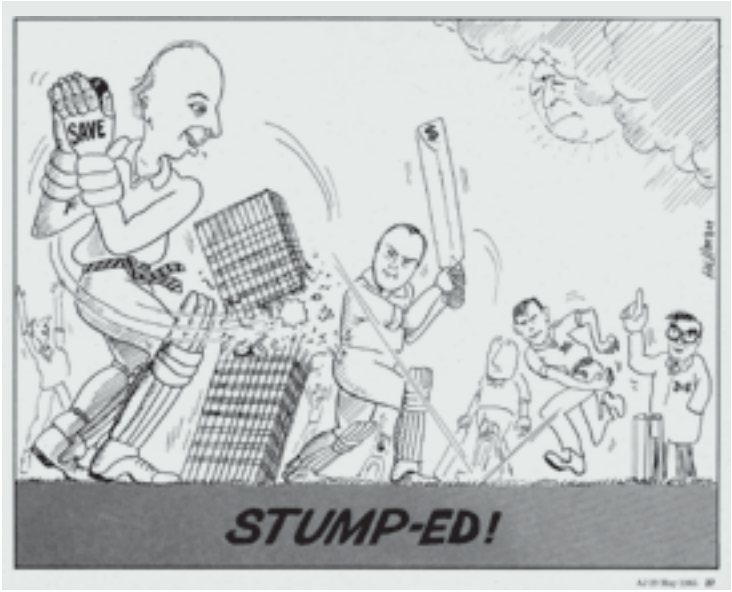
Fig. 9
Louis Hellman, 1985b. "Hellman and Diary", *The Architects' Journal*, vol. CLXXXII, n° 27, July 3rd 1985: 25. © Hellman archive, RIBA Drawings & Archives Collections – Victoria & Albert Museum.

Fig. 10
Louis Hellman, 1985a. "Hellman and Diary", *The Architects' Journal*, vol. CLXXXI, n° 22, May 29th: 27. © Hellman archive, RIBA Drawings & Archives Collections – Victoria & Albert Museum.



10

DESIGN

LESS IS NO MORE

From the Prince of Wales to the Penny Press, sides were drawn on whether modern architecture has a place in the heart of England

By Martin Filler

On May 22 of this year came the long-awaited denouement to one of the most significant architectural controversies of the postwar period. Since 1962, the British real-estate developer Peter Palumbo had sought to create Mansion House Square, comprising a nineteen-story office tower and an adjacent plaza by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, in the heart of London's financial district. Twenty-three years later, the British Secretary of State for the Environment, Patrick Jenkin, ruled on what many saw as nothing less than the future of modern architecture in Great Britain. After a lengthy appeal and review procedure, Jenkin turned down the design as "wholly unacceptable because . . . its height and bulk . . . would fundamentally and irreversibly alter the character of what is for many millions of people the historic center of the City of London."

A distinction must be made between the City of London—the ancient municipality at the core of the metropolis—and the larger city of London, which embraces Westminster and other boroughs more familiar to the tourist. The city of London is one of the most wonderful urban evolutions in the history of the world, at once noble and humane, distinctive in its parts but coherent as a whole; the City of London has all the charms of its American counterpart, Wall Street.

That Jenkin's decision came sixteen years after the London Court of Common Council approved the Mies scheme in principle was not a result of bureaucratic procrastination but rather is a manifestation of the rising tide of architectural conservatism that has lately swept over Great Britain. The Palumbo Affair is far from being an insular development: it has wide-reaching implications for the conception and practice of architecture at the end of the Age of Modernism.

Jenkin's pronouncement followed by eight months his similar judgment against another hotly contested design, an extension to the National Gallery on Trafalgar Square by the London firm of Ahrends, Burton and Koralek. Though that far-from-distinguished scheme had fewer supporters than Palumbo's Mansion House Square proposal, the two projects became inextricably linked in the public imagination after the widely reported speech delivered by the Prince of Wales at the Royal Institute of British Architects' 150th anniversary dinner in the spring of 1984. Prince Charles, that well-known authority on contemporary architecture, characterized the Mies tower as "another giant glass stump better suited to downtown Chicago than the City of London" and the National Gallery addition as "a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend." The press understandably gave front-page play to this rare exercise in royal phrase-making, much in the spirit of Prince Philip's famous exhortation to British industry in 1961 to "take its finger out."

The "glass stump" and "monstrous carbuncle" thereupon grew from an issue that primarily concerned architec-

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Fig. 11
Martin Filler, 1985. "Less is no more", *House and Garden*, n° 413, October: 104–112.

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Graziella Vella

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Paolo Scrivano

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