

Books



From Bauhaus to Our House

Tom Wolfe
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981
Reviewed by James McCown

Tom Wolfe is one of our most erudite, and witty, cultural critics. He is at his best when skewering the conceits of the upper classes, academia, the media, the whole shebang. His iconic personal style, worthy of *Downton Abbey*, only furthers his distinction in a dress-down era.

From *Bauhaus to Our House* was his early 1980s send-up of Modernist architecture. It's fascinating to read this book with 30 years of hindsight. Think of that moment in architecture history: Postmodernism was ascendant; the elite architecture schools were encouraging their students to think beyond Modernist orthodoxy, but discussion about the building art had hardly filtered into popular culture. *Bauhaus* changed that. Here was a best-selling book that articulated what the vast majority of Americans thought—namely, why do some of my neighbors' homes look like insecticide factories? Nowhere was this more the case than in New England communities such as New Canaan, Connecticut; and Lincoln, Massachusetts,

which had more than their share of Modernist houses.

"Our story begins in Germany after the First World War," is Wolfe's opening sentence, after which he proceeds to chronicle the growth of the cultural phenomenon called Modernism, which had so many roots: the devastation of war; the loss of faith in mainstream religion; the sheer and bracing desire to do something completely different, to crash the icons of the past. After all, Europe had blown itself to bits, and the philosophers had pronounced God dead; who needs cornices and Corinthian capitals, much less Gothic arches and steeples? White stucco, flat roofs, and pilotis, please!

Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius are key figures in Wolfe's telling of this history, as one would expect. Maybe Gropius is singled out for special scorn, referred to mockingly as "The Silver Prince." Wolfe here describes the paternalistic attitude of elite architects toward "workers' housing," which was going to be an agent of the new utopia they had envisioned: "As Corbu himself said, they [workers] had to be reeducated to comprehend the beauty of 'The Radiant City' of the future ... there was no use consulting them directly, since, as Gropius had pointed out, they were as yet 'intellectually undeveloped.'"

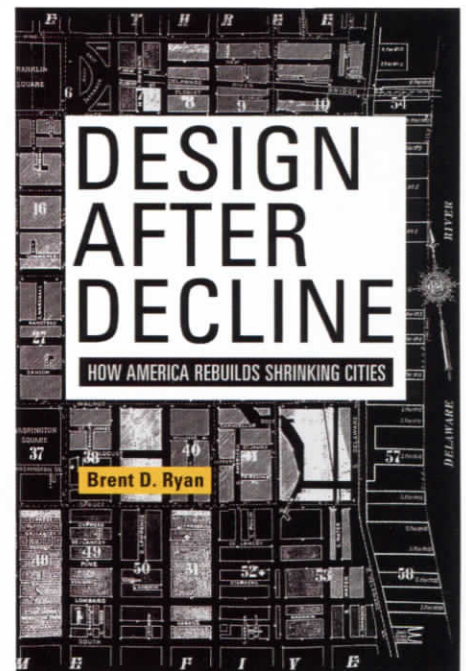
Wolfe peppers the first couple of chapters with a mocking "how very bourgeois!" to describe the elite's attitude toward the masses. He also describes how the new Modernist religion was crossing the Atlantic, reminding us our own Museum of Modern Art "was not exactly the brainchild of socialists or visionary bohemians. It was founded in John D. Rockefeller's living room... with A. Conger Goodyear, Mrs. Cornelius Newton Bliss, and Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan in attendance."

I so much enjoyed the first half of this book, but the second half was disappointing. As Wolfe begins to describe the evolution toward Postmodernism, he seems to invoke the very same scorn he used toward their Modernist forebears. Robert Venturi is all but called a phony; Michael Graves and others are grouped and dismissed as "Silver-

White, Silver-Gray," a chromatic reference to the high Modernists as "The White Gods."

Whatever architectural "-isms" happen to be in vogue at any time, what I find most trenchant about Wolfe's writing is that it singles out architects as having more than a whiff of cultural superiority about them. If you doubt that, sit in on a critique at the Harvard Graduate School of Design or MIT's School of Architecture + Planning. Maybe Wolfe's slim volume should be required reading at architecture schools from coast to coast. It's as lively and engaging now as it was 30 years ago.

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Design After Decline: How America Rebuilds Shrinking Cities

Brent D. Ryan
University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012
Reviewed by Matthew J. Kiefer

If you didn't know, this is the century of the city. But our giddy urban triumphalism also elides an inconvenient fact: there are

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winners and losers. In Boston, we agonize about whether success will erode the city's character and affordability, and about getting anything done with so many entrenched stakeholders. No such worries in Detroit, so cheap and so depopulated it's become a magnet for DIY urban adventurers eager to colonize a vacant lot or an abandoned office building.

In *Design After Decline*, MIT assistant professor Brent Ryan evaluates the effectiveness of urban design in revitalizing shrinking cities in the period after urban renewal. Focusing on Detroit and Philadelphia, his appraisals of projects that worked and many more that didn't are incisive. He doesn't shrink from existential questions: How important is urban design, among the tools at cities' disposal, in addressing decline? Does urban policy work at all in the face of larger economic and demographic forces? He concludes that urban design's influence was weak in the subject cities and suggests how it could be stronger.

Early urban renewal may have treated cities as hapless proving grounds for grand planning experiments, but at least it was ambitious and had a formalist design agenda. Ironically, though its mistakes were being corrected just as federal funding was being withdrawn, urban renewal was supplanted by a "redemption narrative" of social planning and contextual design. We are still in thrall to this narrative today, observes Ryan, even though it often masks timid, developer-driven efforts based on sub-urban vernacular design ideas.

Ryan's account of planning and redevelopment policy since urban renewal is absorbing and insightful. His analysis of why everyday landscape and new urbanist approaches have little to offer shrinking cities is similarly trenchant. He even dares to question the incrementalist legacy of the now-beatified Jane Jacobs. It's required reading to understand the arc of contemporary urban planning practice.

If urban renewal was the overbearing thesis and social planning its feckless

antithesis, Ryan's cure for shrinking cities—he calls it "non-reformist reform" since it accepts the constraints of capitalism—aims for synthesis.

It's based on five principles: 1) Palliative planning seeks to alleviate the effects of shrinkage even if it can't be reversed; 2) interventionist policy says, in effect, be bold or you won't have an impact; 3) democratic decision making aims to disperse redevelopment efforts even to places where they won't leverage private investment; 4) projective design replaces blandness with design excellence that overcomes the mistakes of High Modernism; and finally, 5) patchwork urbanism envisions a new pattern of viable neighborhoods in a landscape that may continue to devolve.

Ryan's clear-eyed remedies acknowledge the limits of planning and the need to adjust our physical conception of the city. Maybe urban design won't solve shrinkage, but why not aim high? And why not improve the lives of those who remain through tactical intervention?

You can't blame Ryan for wanting to have it both ways: interventionist and humane. It's largely what urban policymakers try to do now, albeit with insufficient resources and no guiding philosophy. But in favoring both palliation and assertiveness, his program risks being too nuanced to build support for public action, or even to implement consistently. And clearly, the intractable need to relocate residents or withdraw services is not very palliative.

Still, Ryan's prescriptions can help avert a Darwinian future of purposeful intervention in recovering cities and only haphazard efforts in those left stranded by the knowledge economy. Ryan's larger point is that, with the right mix of pragmatism and principle, we can treat the most ailing cities, too.

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Future Practice: Conversations from the Edge of Architecture

Rory Hyde

Routledge, 2013

Reviewed by Chris Grimley

I sit writing this review as my own curatorial team launches the third iteration of *Design Biennial Boston*, an exhibition with the prime motivation of promoting the various ways we, as young architects, practice—and to lend credence to the idea that there is potency in a contemporary architectural practice. That said, it has been a very long time since I have practiced architecture or have given any agency to the idea that architecture can be a viable business model. As Rory Hyde, the author/curator of *Future Practice* chooses to define what we do, I should be the ideal candidate to draw in to the many webs/networks/systems that are described here.

Throughout my reading, though, I could not help but wonder "Why the book? Why this format?" For such a range of diverse practices, the act of committing what must have been lively conversations to mere paper seems like a missed opportunity. Hyde, an Australian architect now based in Amsterdam, recorded all the interviews, either in person or via Skype, so why the dead-tree medium?

Any editorial process probably left much