



NEWSLETTER

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DIRECTOR'S CORNER BY LAIRD EASTON, HISTORY

THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

"The ultimate aim of all visual arts is the complete building." Thus begins the famous "Bauhaus Manifesto" issued by Walter Gropius in 1919. Inherent in this apodictic statement is an unconditional view of architecture as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art that leaves nothing to chance. Or even to serendipity. Modernist architects like Gropius, reacting against the eclectic historicism of nineteenth-century architecture, believed that modern architecture should have a morally uplifting effect. Such a goal demanded that all design details be subordinated to it. As Frank Lloyd Wright wrote, "In Organic Architecture then, it is quite impossible to consider the building as one thing, its furnishings another and its setting and environment still another. The Spirit in which these buildings are conceived sees all these together at work as one thing. All are to be studiously foreseen and provided for in the nature of the structure."

Not surprisingly a somewhat Puritanical atmosphere of aesthetic purity reigned in some of these "total" environments. As Karsten Harries writes, "to bring grandmother's old lamp into such an environment would be to desecrate what is after all a work of art."¹ Or as a German art critic wrote of the somber

mood in the Jugendstil rooms designed by Henry van de Velde: "While the total atmosphere compels a spiritual attitude, an earnest diligence, it oppresses one a little. . . . To live in such rooms requires especially educated and even especially clothed people." Indeed, as many have noted, there is something totalitarian in this dream of a complete building.

The tension between a programmatic aesthetic ideal aiming at homogeneity and wholeness and the needs of human comfort pervades the history not only of architecture but of the built environment as whole. And The Built Environment is the theme that the Humanities Center will be exploring during the coming academic year. We have planned an ambitious program around the topics of interior spaces, gardens, houses, towns, and cities—all the spaces humans organize around themselves. Several prominent guest speakers are invited but we will also be tapping the resources of our faculty for our symposia and tertulias.

Humanities Center receives generous grant

The Humanities Center has never chosen a theme more apt to attract the interest of the local community. All of us are interested in the houses in which we live, or would want to live; all of us have a stake in the kind of community Chico is, and will become. Our town is also the site of some rather interesting experiments in The Built Environment. As a very concrete expression of the interest of the community in this theme, I am pleased to announce that this year's theme will be

¹ Karsten Harries, "The Dream of the Complete Building," *Perspecta* 17 (1980): 42.

underwritten by a very generous grant from **Tom DiGiovanni** of **New Urban Builders**. DiGiovanni and **John Anderson**, who directs planning and design for the company, have created a mission-driven business dedicated to building mixed-use neighborhoods in Chico and the North State. The grant they have provided will enable us to bring a wider range of outside speakers to campus as well as to do a number of community events.

Presidential Scholar Witold

Rybczynski: Inaugurating the theme will be the arrival in September of Presidential Scholar Witold Rybczynski, easily the most noted and widely read writer on architecture and the built environment in this country. I can recall reading his "breakthrough" book, *Home: History of an Idea* back when it was published in 1986 and being impressed at both the astonishing inventiveness of this history of domestic comfort as well as at the author's gracious style. Here was an original and undogmatic voice in the field of architecture, interior design, and urban planning that had not been heard since Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs. This impression was subsequently confirmed in a series of subsequent books covering a wide range of topics, including, *The Most Beautiful House in the World*, *Waiting for the Weekend*, *Looking Around: A Journey through Architecture*, *City Life*, *A Clearing in the Distance* (the definitive biography of Frederick Law Olmstead), *The Look of Architecture*, and *The Perfect House: A Journey with Renaissance Master Andrea Palladio*.

Rybczynski, who is a working architect as well as the Martin and Margy Myerson Professor of Urbanism at the University of Pennsylvania, will speak on his next book about the Vizcaya Estate in Miami (due out in November) on Wednesday, September 27 at 7:30pm in PAC 134. He will also be interviewed on stage in PAC 144 on Thursday,

September 28 from 5 to 7pm. Also, on Thursday, September 28, he will meet with interested faculty, students, and members of the community for an informal seminar in the Humanities Center from 2pm until 4pm.

"Built Environment" Symposia and Tertulias:

We have a number of our own faculty speaking on themes related to The Built Environment. Amy Bloch, Art and Art History, will give the talk "Ritual, Imagery, and Space at the Baptistery of Florence" (October 20, 3-5pm, Trinity 100/126),

Other Symposia and Tertulias:

On October 26, Rob Davidson, English, will read "Terminations," a new short story from his collection-in-progress (Thursday Tertulia, 4-5:30pm). On November 3, Andrea Lerner, English, will speak on the environment and the Modoc Indians (Friday Symposium, 3-5pm). On December 8, Daniel Schindler, Theatre, and Annaliese Baker, Theatre, CSU-Sacramento, will give the talk "Performing Arts in Southeast Asia: Ancient Stories in a Modern World" (Friday Symposium, 3-5pm). All of these will be held in the Humanities Center, Trinity 100/126.

Forthcoming Spring Semester Events:

February 1, author Leonard Koren speaking on the most beautiful flower shop in the world (7pm); first week of April, David Pike (Comparative Literature, American University), "Subterranean Worlds: The World beneath London and Paris, 1800-1945" (Trinity 100); April 16, "Chico and Its Built Environments: A Roundtable Discussion" (PAC 144); April 26, Allan Jacobs and Elizabeth Macdonald (UC Berkeley), "Great Boulevards," followed by a walking tour of the Esplanade on the morning of April 27.

EXAMPLES OF BUILT ENVIRONMENTS

Many thanks to those who submitted descriptions of built environments that have impressed them. We received more than we could print in this issue, so the rest will be published in our spring 2007 newsletter. The pictures that accompany some of them have to be reproduced in black and white, alas.

Lawrence Bryant, History

A brief response!

As I am pressed to think about my favorite built environments, it becomes clear to me that they are libraries. From the quiet, but for even a seven-year-old, majestic space of the little Carnegie Library in the small



South Georgia town of my early years to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, where I researched my dissertation and book, I have always sensed another and wiser world when I enter a library. I think that from the tiny libraries to the grand, the architects knew that they had civilization in their hands; even in the digital age without libraries, we are left without recourse to knowledge other than our meager imaginations, acquaintances, and experiences. The grand systems of organizing knowledge in the 19th century created the wonders of the French, British, and American reading rooms and research libraries—as well as other less spectacular ones. The rise of the universities also created the space devoted to knowledge and its accumulation in wonderful and enchanting sites throughout this nation and the world. I could list those places that I grew intellectually and discovered the world—including Emory's Chandler Library, Harvard's Widner, and Berkeley's Bancroft—but the list would be long and to describe the different experiences of the places both difficult for me and probably tedious for the reader. I shall pause only to praise the Folger Shakespeare Library, which has become my favorite because of its size, its brilliant staff, and its magnificent collection of Renaissance sources. Even in Chico, we may not have the grand designs of the old or new British and French National Libraries, but the Meriam Library, gives me that sense of otherness than the ignorance of the world outside, when I enter there and encounter its helpful staff and collection and its efforts to bring students to knowledge not yet known. The old British Museum and the Bibliothèque Nationale both had great glass domes to bring light from the outside in to readers seeking to learn. These are my favorites for sentimental reasons, but the new B.L. and B.N. in use of space and bringing books to thousands still stir me in ways that no other built environment can. Libraries are not merely show and design, they function for humanity.

John Milbauer, Music

From the MOMA Giacometti exhibition catalogue (2001):

"The most magical Surrealist object made by Giacometti is 'The Palace at 4a.m.'...1932...Virtually an immaterial drawing in space, 'The Palace' barely steps across the threshold between the imagination and external space..."

Love it...



Carl Peterson, History

The architect Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944), best known for the Viceroy's Palace at New Delhi and the Cenotaph in Whitehall, also designed several Edwardian country houses together with their gardens. Sometimes thought of as the culmination of the Arts and Crafts movement, these domestic spaces were intricately devised from familiar local materials, human in scale, treating house and garden together as in vernacular building. The one best preserved of these readily open to the public is Hestercombe, Taunton, Somerset (1906). In an immediate setting almost as uneventful as the Sacramento Valley, and starting with an unfortunate house by somebody else, Lutyens linked them with a series of richly textured, wonderfully varied, beautifully phrased spaces. If I were to name the one among many great gardens I have visited that seemed to me the most perfectly composed, harmoniously sited, wholly satisfying, it might be Hestercombe. And luckily anyone who wants to see it can join Jeanne Lawrence, who has included it on her upcoming Garden Tour of Southern England! (www.csuchico.edu/hfa/travel)



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