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Flintstone Modernism: or, The Crisis in Postwar American Culture

By Jeffrey Lieber

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In a speech delivered at the centennial celebration of the American Institute of Architects in 1957, publishing executive and entrepreneurial impresario Henry Luce posed the following question: “Is real political freedom incompatible with pervasive beauty?” (7). What would it mean for a democratic, capitalist nation like the postwar United States to achieve “great representation” in the tradition of classical civilizations? Moreover, what would such “greatness” look like for a middle-class society guided by political ideals of free enterprise and individual liberty in the wake of the unimaginable devastation of the Second World War and the “failure” of the European avant-gardes? Could such a society create a great civilization with the tools on offer? Jeffrey Lieber’s *Flintstone Modernism: or, The Crisis in Postwar American Culture* sees the transformations in architecture and culture of the 1950s and 1960s as a series of reckonings with these questions.

In this sweepingly exuberant and innovative study, Lieber grapples with the widespread fascination with classical prototypes and epic form in icons of modern architecture as well as in wide-release Hollywood films, popular visual culture, and criticism by public intellectuals of the postwar period in the United States. Examples such as Edward Durrell Stone’s invocation of the Roman Colosseum in his pavilion for the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair, references to ancient Egyptian burial temples and the Acropolis in Walter Netsch’s Air Force Academy (1957) on the Rampart Range in Colorado Springs, and Eero Saarinen’s monolithic “Black Rock” tower (1965) for CBS in New York figure prominently, as do many of the era’s sword-and-sandal films such as *The Robe* (Henry Koster, 1953), *Helen of Troy* (Robert Wise, 1956), and *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956). Lieber interprets these examples as sociopolitical allegories that communicated collective values



regarding the nature of antiquity and modernity, and the meaning of beauty against a charged political backdrop of postwar American foreign policy and Cold War nationalism. Lieber terms this preoccupation with linking ancient archetypes and modern ideals “Flintstone Modernism” after the 1960s television cartoon that, in its representation of a Stone-Age family living in a suburban home outfitted with the prehistoric equivalent of modern conveniences, “knowingly made a parody of the post-war [Vitruvian] imperative to be timely and timeless” (7). Following Hannah Arendt, whose penetrating phenomenological critiques of the period diagnosed a crisis in culture among the newly liberated laboring classes—consumers whose “gargantuan appetites,” she claimed, no longer hungered for (high) culture but rather for entertainment—Lieber weaves revelatory new insights into well-known icons of American modernism.¹ Sutured into a broad tapestry of social, cultural, and political histories, this study renders such monuments freshly strange, as agents and icons of transformations in populist understandings of history, culture and representation, as well as totalitarianism and democracy, at midcentury.

Lieber’s study is an important contribution to recent scholarship on postwar modernism, not least because of his clever choice of subjects. Three comprehensive, multipart chapters engage state-sponsored or corporate monuments by iconic second-generation modernist architects. These include buildings by Gordon Bunshaft, Eero Saarinen, Marcel Breuer, Edward Durrell Stone, and Philip Johnson that have long either confounded or bored scholars. While these structures have, until recently, been reviled by architectural historians as “deeply flawed” and even “corrupt,” they were simultaneously celebrated by design enthusiasts, just as sword-and-sandal films have been either celebrated as cult classics or derided as camp (14). Buildings by the “boring” Bunshaft and “much-maligned Stone” have, Lieber convincingly maintains, undergone a radical shift in popular opinion in recent years (33). Twenty-first century preservationist debates over buildings such as Lever House (1952), on New York’s Park Avenue, and its sister building Manhattan House (1950), alongside the craze for midcentury design among social media influencers, new-age design enthusiasts, and the millions of faithful viewers of the hit primetime television series *Mad Men* (2007–2015) have effectively reshuffled midcentury modernism’s critical fortunes.² Where once it was deemed a sellout and washed-up byproduct of a failed modernist project, corporate modernism has since been remixed and recoded as a fashionable form of lifestyle branding. Indeed, Lieber points to the distinction between “postwar” and “midcentury” as one of historical and political import but also as terms that divide architectural historians and design enthusiasts. He also accounts for the use of “corporate modernism” as a moniker resulting from the recent reassessment of the style (14–17). This phenomenon, Lieber reminds us, tells us just as much about our own shared present—our relationship to global capital and its place in contemporary American life—as it does about our collective past.

This impetus underscores Lieber’s commitment to unearthing historical realities of these manifestations of postwar architecture and culture—realities whose complexity is frequently overlooked due to assumptions of failure or because of their recently shifted meanings. An equally significant element of Lieber’s study is found in his commitment to revising dominant understandings of the nature of representation more generally, in his meditations on the labors of cultural analysis, and in the possibilities afforded by a deeply interdisciplinary, humanistic, phenomenological approach to a social history of art and architecture that probes what Manfredo Tafuri called “subterranean ideologies” through, among other approaches, queer and gendered perspectives.³ This methodological

reassessment is valuable to readers who are not specifically concerned with the architecture and culture of the United States, or even the mid-twentieth century, and speaks in a timely manner to issues in the study of representation and culture today. Such a study makes clear the profoundly political nature of historical scholarship in our own time and the urgency of reassessing our collective practices.

Chapter One, “The Cult of Immaculate Form,” explores the ideological frameworks laid out by Luce in his Western Culture Project and prescriptions for architecture of the 1950s. In the wake of devastation wracked by totalitarianism in Europe, Luce and others pointed to the need for a new monumentality that could be purged of its association with Nazi fantasies and instead imbued with the spirit of democracy, positioning the United States as stewards of Western civilization and a war-torn world made immaculate. How could we “say the old and new in a new language?” critics asked (39). This language, Lieber persuasively demonstrates, was embodied by Luce’s notion of “pervasive beauty”—a paradigm of “great representation” that traded in allegories of beauty and freedom invested with moralizing, nationalist ideals of corporate management and free enterprise. This language found expression in photographic representations of Bunshaft’s Connecticut General Life Insurance Complex (1957) and Lever House, in criticism, in Cinemascope and other new widescreen technologies that Lieber connects to the free-span glass curtain wall, and even in ideals of female beauty espoused in commercial visual culture. Lieber’s handling of this wide range of material is exceptionally skillful. He compellingly demonstrates how each created the sense of a pervasive ideal of self-sustaining corporate Arcadia, mixing New World imagery with ancient history and biblical myths to effectively democratize everything that fell within the vista view, thereby purifying modernism itself from a trampled, European past.

Yet there are other reasons to appreciate this chapter, which may be the most outstanding of the three case studies. Lieber’s commitment to exploring in full the different registers in which “pervasive beauty” manifested itself is a tremendous feat that speaks to the value of his subtle phenomenological analyses and interdisciplinary approach. For instance, through evocative visual analysis, he likens W. Eugene Smith’s photograph of Connecticut General for *Architectural Forum* to the effect of an epic mural and a pastoral allegory of good governance. He describes Bunshaft’s building as an all-encompassing screen creating “an overall gossamer effect” (53) that shared with widescreen cinema technologies an aesthetic that he calls the “commonsense of the glass curtain wall” (69). In moving fluidly between photography, the built environment, architectural criticism, and film, Lieber poses a larger question about the nature of representation and the disciplinary divisions that have forfeited rich cultural histories to the crevices between them. Rather than simply defining his study by medium, Lieber returns to the image as the broadest class of representation. This is where, to reference Jacques Rancière, materials are distinct yet equivalent common surfaces by which signs, forms, and acts are expressed in a shared material language that is at once concrete and symbolic —“where drawing lines, arranging words, or distributing surfaces are all divisions of communal space, certain forms of inhabiting the material world.”⁴ Here, one might think of Sergei Eisenstein’s invocation of the filmic experience of architecture, but this reorganization to categories of thought is also usefully deployed to material further afield —the undeniably screen-like appearance of fin-de-siècle interior architecture by August Endell and Josef Hoffmann, for instance, or the distinctively pictorial quality of some twentieth-century sculpture.⁵ In *Flintstone Modernism*, Lieber poses the question of how our experience of a building or a widescreen epic film or a glossy

photograph might open up towards an understanding well beyond the individual object itself, and to our experience of “being-in-the-world.” This experience is, crucially for him, historically and politically specific to a time when everyday Americans not only looked at architecture, films, and magazines, but also felt the weight of history, opportunity, and real fears of cultural annihilation on a daily basis.

Chapter Two, “Architecture, Mass Culture, and Camp,” accounts for the shift in style demonstrated in 1960s buildings by Saarinen, Breuer, and Stone. As Lieber argues, these architects seized upon the language of antiquity to not simply envision ideals of good governance and material abundance, as in Luce’s prescription from the 1950s, but to create soaring monuments to a democratic empire founded on total peace—the dream of a Pax Americana. By presenting a dazzling array of visual material—from advertisements for building materials that marshaled cartoon imagery of Egyptian pyramids, the Parthenon, and Byzantium to films that materialized America’s notion of ersatz empire—Lieber demonstrates how these objects traded in myths of permanence and durability while functioning as mass-produced, disposable byproducts of the crisis in culture. In this way, this chapter most clearly demonstrates a larger strength of the book. Whereas social histories of visual culture, architecture, or even film have long privileged the avant-garde’s oppositional stance, *Flintstone Modernism* instead takes up mass culture. The kinds of questions grappled with in the postwar United States predominantly concerned the representation of mainstream political ideals, and by bringing real socio-cultural analysis to bear on bourgeois culture, Lieber upends modernist scholarship’s biases for oppositional cultural material. In so doing, he applies a critical lens to a more pervasive, and varied, social constellation—effectively widening the net while highlighting tensions within mass culture itself. Lieber sensitively brings these histories into conversation with one another, pointing out the ideological confrontations, fissures, and otherwise hidden meanings among populist, or mainstream, histories.

The complexities and tensions encountered between ancient precedents and modern ideals, and between high culture and mass entertainment, are usefully navigated by Susan Sontag’s notion of “camp,” which, Lieber demonstrates, democratized culture while also respecting it. Chapter Three, “The Useless Monument,” analyzes the postwar architecture of Philip Johnson as specifically antidemocratic and anti-utilitarian. In this analysis, Lieber vociferously defends the camp sensibility against unfair scholarly dismissals based on “thinly veiled homophobia and snobbism,” and in so doing unveils a queer subtext to Johnson’s obsessions with romantic classicism, Renaissance symbolism, and aristocratic posturing (200). He reveals a different view of culture and of power—one intent on undermining mainstream political views rather than sanctioning them.⁶ Drawing from critical theorists of literature and film, Lieber posits a nuanced reading of Johnson’s engagement with uselessness as an essentially queer position that engaged culture, history, politics, sexuality, and style and functioned as a site of political, social, and sexual inversions. This bold revision of dominant accounts and prejudicial modes of interpretation is both timely and immensely valuable, especially in studies of canonical figures such as Johnson.

Lieber’s text is on the whole beautifully written, although it sometimes suffers from a dizzying amplitude of examples and the density of his theoretical apparatus, which threaten to outshine his superb engagement with visual material. The twenty-one color illustrations are fine companions to these elegant analyses, and several appear as carefully considered pairs in full-page spreads. One pairing, a 1959 advertisement for Sanymetal products

featuring an archetypal 1950s woman at the mirror and an eighteenth-century portrait of the Marquise de Pompadour by François Boucher, is especially evocative, as is another of Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building (1958) and a 1954 cover of *Harper's Bazaar* featuring the face of a diamond-clad, shimmering female beauty. Overall, *Flintstone Modernism* represents a profound contribution to studies of postwar culture and to the recent explosion of interest in design studies. Its greatest utility, however, is in its reassessment of larger questions about the nature of representation itself and of methods and consequences of interpretive historical work. This includes arguments for employing gender and sexuality as methodological lenses through which to reassess well-known material, and for the ways in which cultural analysis should not only open up dialogue among concurrent historical narratives but also between the past and our immediate present. After all, if our work fails to speak meaningfully to non-specialists, then who are we writing for?

Notes

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (1963; New York: Penguin, 1993), 205.

² See also Jeffrey Lieber, "What We Lose When the Union Carbide Building Falls," *New York Times*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/01/opinion/union-carbide-building-manhattan.html>.

³ Lieber cites Tarfuri's history of Renaissance architecture specifically as his methodological model. See Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. Jessica Levine (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).

⁴ Jacques Rancière, "The Surface of Design" in *The Future of the Image* (London: Verso, 2009), 91.

⁵ Sergei M. Eisenstein, "Montage and Architecture" (1938), *Assemblage* (December 10, 1989): 111–131.

⁶ Specifically, he takes issue with the interpretation by Charles Jencks in *Modern Movements in Architecture* (New York: Anchor, 1973).