1-1-1998

Real Ugly, Dead Beautiful

Raymond Ryan

Recommended Citation

Ryan, Raymond (1998) "Real Ugly, Dead Beautiful," *Oz*: Vol. 20. https://doi.org/10.4148/2378-5853.1326

Real Ugly, Dead Beautiful

Raymond Ryan

Mixed-Use Building, Machado and Silvetti Assoc. Seaside, Florida. Photo Courtesy of Seaside and Steven Brooke.

"No history of architecture can deal any longer with individual buildings only, or with buildings in a vacuum. There is no difference between architecture and city planning; all must now—or, rather, again—be treated as one."—Vincent Scully (1966)

In the early 1980s, the all-girl band "The Same" used to play around New York City, piecing together lyrics from fragments of various languages. In that cauldron of fashion and media, "The Same" had the memorable motto Semper Mutans (Always Changing). This attitude—this stance of paradoxical practicality—may be usefully appropriated when considering the development of cities and suburbs today. If, pace Scully, contemporary architecture is somehow at odds with our environment, that environment is, as "The Same" surmised, in a perpetual state of flux. The more we change and move and reorganize, the more we seem to want images of stability. Or is it the other way round?
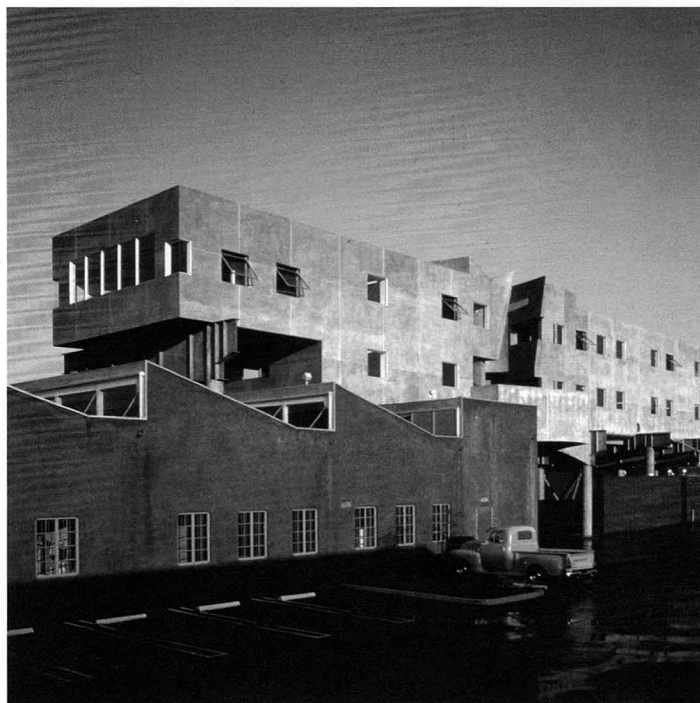
Samitaur, Eric Owen Moss Architects. Los Angeles, California. Photo courtesy of Tom Bonner.

Between Everything and Nothing

"We have nothing that is ours except time, which even those without a roof can enjoy."— Baltasar Gracián

I normally get to Culver City by turning off at the Robertson exit. I might also drive of course on one of L.A.'s endless surface streets, down Robertson from the swankier area known as Beverly Hills Adjacent or through the somehow uneasy suburbia to the west and east. But the Santa Monica Freeway, the 10, is the usual means of access, the daily denominator best known by Angelenos as they criss–cross the Southland. With motorists conferencing by carphone and the radio broadcasting Sig Alerts, it's the Freeway that most memorably defines the city. "Look, a 66 Malibu with matte paint job!"

Eric Owen Moss's reshaping of Culver City seems well aware of this superimposed datum of concrete and traffic, this kinetic lattice so much bigger than the isolated and static urban block. His towers and canopies and toppling fragments of new construction tweak and relate to the megalopolis circulating above and beyond. At first sight, Moss's quirky little tower at the Lindblade building looks like the product of designer indulgence. With its pyramidal cap and eccentric elements, it always reminds me of the Hansel and Gretel House in Beverly Hills (a structure relocated from its original site in Culver City). Lindblade is an intentional, Post-Modern landmark. But the torque and splice of Moss's roof is a response to the vectors of The 10. And his more recent Samitaur building seems to hover above a small service street as a fragment of freeway engineering itself.

Eric Moss is never lacking in ambition. His game or methodology is to work with the everyday but then to manipulate these physical situations or cultural assumptions as part and critique of our crazy and certainly complicated world. I almost wrote "whole world" but it's infamously difficult to imagine unity or continuity across the fickle surface of Los Angeles. In the ongoing development of Culver City by Moss and his clients the Smiths, urbanization has a double characteristic: it re-presents everyday objects (re-bars, 2x4s, the parking lot) and it explores geometric form. For Moss, eccentricity is a geometric construct (the initially odd porchway at Lindblade, formed by interacting planes of brick and plaster, is a re-entrant corner, a mathematical erosion). Strange scientific formulae dictate his major spaces. The purpose is to harness communal awareness.

You feel this urge for decentring and relocation even more strongly inside Moss's next group of warehouse conversions, at 8522 National. The original building is a dog–legged carcass of five single-storey industrial sheds dating back to the 1920s. To make a new formal entrance at one end of this "L", Moss incised a solid elliptical drum which leaks onto the street and is open to the L.A. skies. His fitting out of the interior then arranged itself about an L-shaped internal street and, in particular, a pattern of iconic nodes, as much subtractions as additions but all based upon universal symbol—a pentagon, a circle overlapping an octagon, another circle eroding towards an equilateral triangle. The sequence culminates in a masonry block conference room wrapped internally in plywood, an ellipse which cants inwards to suggest a truncated cone. This is the architect's most beautiful space.

Samitaur, Eric Owen Moss Architects, Los Angeles, California. Photo courtesy of Tom Bonner.

If the little tower at Lindblade and the skewed barrel vault next door at the Paramount Laundry seem to emerge from their immediate context as signals manufactured for popular recognition—in urban design terms, the equivalent of customising that Malibu in order to be spotted—then 8522 is most memorably about secret excavation and the creation of interior communal space. 8522 is understood through its voids, its shared almost monumental spaces squeezed by the necessities of program but open to the sky. These spaces have a splendid emptiness, an antidote to the constant change about them. ("Negative space," according to Rudolf Arnheim, "acknowledges the active function.")

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, French aristocrats and their classically-trained architects used remarkably similar tactics for their elegant town houses—the *hôtels particuliers*—buried within the dense urban grain of Paris. There, actual interior rooms were treated as residual fabric, merging with their surroundings so that the principal event—the external court of entry and display—might read as architectural form, pure and empty. From the patios carved into the fabric of Culver City to its proposed globular entertainment complexes, from the schematic segmentation of a gas tank in Vienna to his proposal to insert a "violated" arena into the ruined classicism of Havana's Plaza Vieja, Moss always mutates geometry and context. Occasionally, something like a classic void emerges.

In the seminal book *Court and Garden*, historian Michael Dennis identifies the maneuvers of the French *hôtel* designers as "asymmetry, local symmetry, recentering, figural rooms, functionally specific rooms, discontinuity, sequence, and hierarchical levels of poché." Borrowing a term from Clausewitz, Moss works

his "fog" (would "smog" be too local?) of signage and workstation furniture, of partitions and exposed service ducts in just such a residual, space-defining way. With the emphasis in Culver City on the creation of geometrically-derived voids as local group emblems and as mechanisms of release, is not Moss re-presenting today the strategies of the most sophisticated architects of the Enlightenment?

"The Hôtel de Beauvais," Dennis writes, "like most French hôtels, may be seen as a collision of the ideal and the circumstantial, a collision which in turn may very well have become something of an ideal in itself—an ideal of demonstrable virtuosity." In the contemporary American city, collision has become a kind of paradigm.

Pittard Sullivan, Eric Owen Moss Architects. Culver City, California. Photo courtesy of Tom Bonner.

This city is already marked by unprecedented occurences, of inordinate juxtapositions of program and of rapid erosion and "redevelopment." In many cases these phenomena occur on traces of Early Modernism or banal industrialization. Moss's work with the Smiths seems to relate back to the hôtel, working within a built and tumulous context and with bravura in its detail, a bizarre showing-off of junctions and materials which is partly advertising and partly for intelectual pleasure.

Coda 1: The Ugly

In a provocative series of essays for London's *AA Files*, Mark Cousins has argued for the power and subversive potential of ugliness. Cousins starts by reminding us that ugliness is traditionally

thought of as the opposite or negative of beauty, as being related in this "pole of negation" to contingency and individuality. All these characteristics—spatial erosion, the harnessing of contingent realities, the inversion of convention—certainly appear with Angeleno aplomb in the work of Eric Moss. "Ugliness," Cousins writes, "can deform a work, but it can also strengthen it." And it is with a similar sense of formal manipulation and of strange reinforcement that Moss has engaged the found post-industrial condition of Culver City.

But Cousins is adamant that ugliness should not be viewed as a kind of inferior partner (The Ugly Sisters Theory?) to beauty, that his "argument…is part of an attempt to suggest that ugliness has

little to do with beauty and that, in fact, beauty and ugliness belong to quite different registers." In classical philosophy and art appreciation, ugliness, according to Cousins, is found in comedy (which "may incorporate the disgusting, the grotesque and the incoherent"), in mimesis (in the task of representation), and "in discussions concerning the nature of genius." The artistic creator reveals his genius by tackling and taming—the designer as Hercules—"a seemingly impossible task."

Cousins is particularly intrigued by his "No–Nose" Theory, by the voyeuristic horror as recounted by spectators of *The Phantom of the Opera* when confronted by the noseless ghost. There's a

fascination in the absence of such a central object. The viewer tends to imagine the missing component or fill out the voided space. This is, in part, Moss's trick with all those partial polygons and ellipses—they instill possibilities of perception. But Cousins is focused on neither the artist nor the viewer/user—the subject—but on the object. As Cousins discusses the horror of seeing bone through torn flesh, Moss presents the sewage pipe as a contextual column and then splices it apart to reveal concrete, the true structure within.

"The ugly object," Cousins writes, as if thinking specifically of Los Angeles, "is an object which is in the wrong place."

Los Angeles is the site of conspicuous consumption, the city which fears earthquakes and mudslides almost as much as low box-office and drops in consumer confidence. Cousins inevitably reminds us of Enlightenment notions of The Sublime—the thrills of all-powerful nature, ugliness as "an unbearable pleasure"—before relating such aesthetisized emotions to contemporary reality through the idea of excess. "Rather than a lack (of beauty), it (ugliness) is an excess—an excess which comes to threaten the subject." Cousins believes that the benefits of the ugliness he is espousing are in its "murderous vivacity," in the "radical and violent operations (which) expose the precariousness of the subject, especially the subject's relations to objects in space."

Between Outside and Inside

"Public space is leaving home." —Vito Acconci

We're in a car again, driving west along Florida's Gulf Coast. Ozone. Swamp. Fried Fish. A whiff of sun protection cream. Some folks call this the Redneck Riviera. The coastline is littered with honky tonk hotels and trailer parks, Venturi country with its billboards and simulation façades. It's fringed with roadways that become bridges to skim across the surface of the Gulf: occasional engineering. This isn't South Beach or Disneyworld. We're in The South. You can still find small towns here like Apalachicola and De Funiak Springs, towns you can recognise from certain novels or movies, oneiric places with gentle neighborhoods and civic monuments surviving somehow into today's less structured era. You drive along the coast and suddenly find yourself in the new pristine encampment of Seaside.

Is Seaside a real town or some sort of svelte enclave? The legal and social definitions of township differ from culture to culture. Seaside is a private, commercial undertaking, a sub-urban or ex-urban tract with a primarily residential program. But unlike many such communities across the States (and increasingly around the world), Seaside is neither gated nor festooned with security apparatus and warning signs. As you pass through the unplanned mess of the Panhandle coast, the frayed edges of the highway change to arrays of neat, modestly-scaled houses before you

"Dreamland Heights," Steven Holl Architects. Seaside, Florida. Photos Courtesy of Seaside and Steven Brooke.

arrive at the centre of Seaside itself, altagon of mixed–use buildings about a sloping green. Here, the white and pastel houses have given way to a recognizable gathering place, a latent forum, the focus of Seaside's structure. The generic American subdivision has no such "there there."

Is this public space? In *The Fall of Public Man*, Richard Sennett defined "an urban situation…as one in which strangers are likely to meet routinely." In his later book, *The Conscience of the Eye*, Sennett wrote that "our urban problem is how to revive the reality of the outside as a dimension of human experience." The author is particularly good at exploring nineteenth century Paris and London, the relationships between political and commercial ambition on the one hand and public space and public representation on the other. He realises that urban growth is inevitably confronted with demographic influx and dislocation. He is coming from the liberal left and agrees, or at least sympathises, with Saint-Simon who "was convinced" that "daily communion through face-to-face exchange…would overcome class hostility."

Like Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, the planners of Seaside, and their patrons the Davises, Sennett bemoans the deterioration and fragmentation of the public realm in American cities. Like them, he has been influenced by Jane Jacobs with her attachment to traditional neighbourhoods and by Kevin Lynch who mapped

citizens'—or the city users'—cognitive charts of Boston. Lynch is quoted by Sennett as stressing that "a legible city would be one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an over-all pattern." As you walk around Seaside—cars are usually left around the Town Square—it's not easy to get lost. Or, to be precise, you can wander off the principle routes and be momentarily lost before reorienting oneself back onto a green or avenue or—at the splendid Leon Krier house—a minuscule circus.

The Duany Plater-Zyberk plan is a hybrid of classical core and Romantic sides. It has traces of both the Spanish and Anglo-Saxon colonizations of Florida. The place, after all, is in the South but also on the Caribbean. Some of the houses have an ante bellum air or could almost be on Nantucket; others, with their slatted screens and vivid coloration, seem to await a tropical storm. This is especially true of the new mixed-use building (containing stores and offices and a gym and apartments) by the Argentine–born architects Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silvetti. It sits across the Town Square from Steven Holl's "Dreamland Heights"—similar program, same basic envelop—as a mnemonic of the Americas. Last January, the Machado Silvetti building, with its third floor impluvium, was still waiting to be draped in an alluring mask of blinds (contraventanas). Whereas the "northern" Holl project is politely uptight in front, curiously idiosyncratic behind.

In his investigation into the nature of public space in the United States, Sennett differentiates between Southern European and Northern European, Catholic and Protestant attitudes to the civic and private realms. "The inner space of medieval Catholicism," he writes, "was physical, it was a space people could share. The inner space of Puritanism was the space of the most radical individualism and was impalpable." In America, Protestantism won out. This is not to rewrite, in stone and stucco, Europe's Wars of Religion but rather to track the changes in society as the western world became more rationalised, more industrial, and ultimately—with the Enlightenment—secular. An icon of that Enlightenment is the city of Bath which, like Seaside, "was a commercial resort—its life depended upon something like architectural politeness…(its denizens) limping from disease or from too many quadrilles."

The folks at Seaside are more likely to be out cycling or hauling a surfboard. But there is an aspect Sennett's perception of Bath which may be transferred to Seaside. "Queen Square," he writes, "…gives no hint of the diversity hidden behind the facades." The Enlightenment—and later, the resultant High Priests of Modernism—covered all inhabitants with the same uniform mask, the elevations of classical urban design. From Seaside, the overriding memory is of porches, often similar porches it is true but porches nevertheless which act as a buffer between inside and outside, between the domestic world—which Sennett describes as assuming increased and at times suffocating importance during the nineteenth century—and the streets onto which every house addresses itself. In a town made up largely of dwellings, this threshold between public and private is the crucial boundary.

Seaside has been castigated for trying to recreate the past, as if it a Theme Park of architectural quotation. The experience of visiting the place and talking to some of its protagonists makes me less emphatic. In The Conscience of the Eye, Sennett notes the description of New York's Battery Park City as "an illustration of life" rather than life itself. Sennett goes on: "You cannot begin something significant by creating immediate fullness." And this surely is the difficulty for the Davises and for Duany Plater-Zyberk: they are attempting to make in only a few years a coherent

township of houses and communal facilities and external public spaces. For them, planning is tied directly to The Plan, the two-dimensional drawing which purports to show an urban situation at one particular time, and the code charts, predetermined envelopes within which householders can act.

As if in response to the many critics of Seaside (Sylvia Lavin has stated that "the New Urbanism is neither new nor urban"), Sennett asks: "how does a planner invent ambiguity and the possibility of surprise?" The author's response is Time. "Time," he writes, "begins to do the work of giving places character when the places are not used as they were meant to be." He cites the reuse, by children in Manhattan, of urban loading docks as neighbourhood
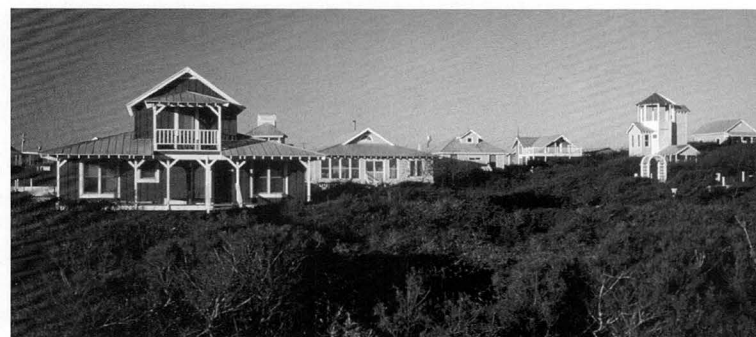
Seaside, Florida. Photo Courtesy of Gary Coates.

playgrounds; and appreciates in this programatic mixing the problem of mono-functional zoning, that great bugbear of Leon Krier's. Sennett is in favor of layering and notices in Deconstruction "that the sense of concreteness in physical things is tied to sensations of uncertainty," as if the New Urbanists were themselves the most afflicted with insecurity.

While noting that "difference, discontinuity and disorientation" (the Ds in Decon) are akin to the Enlightenment quality of "sympathy," Sennett is not proposing disorder. Rather, he is supportive of "shared moments…of leisure…, of that silence which is the prerequisite for the apprehension of reality."

Coda 2: The Beautiful

Seaside believes in beauty. Many of the town's constituent buildings are in themselves beautiful objects. Modest, well-proportioned, well-made, many of these neo–traditional buildings exude the classic Vitruvian characteristics of Firmness, Commodity, and Delight. That is very strange in the fractious, commercial world of the late twentieth century. Although the interiors are commodious and obviously enjoyed by their inhabitants, there is a nagging sense of unreality in the streets of Seaside, an unreality intimately connected to the pursuit of objecthood and ideal beauty. For Mark Cousins, "we might read the canons of beauty as at least in part a defense against the precariousness of the subject if exposed to the ugly object." For Cousins, beauty and symmetry work together to induce "the illusion of coherence."

So is Seaside, the influential proposition of Duany Plater-Zyberk and the Davises, no more than an illusion? Throughout history, there have been many documented attempts to make new urban plans, to colonise virgin territory with the imprint of ideal cities. From Miletus to Salt Lake City, from Palma Nova to New Haven and now Seaside, planners

*8222 National Blvd, Boardroom, Photo courtesy of Tom **Bonner**.*

have speculated on the geometric disposition of the ideal urban plan. Not by chance has Davis himself spent considerable amounts of time and energy studying the various symbolic layouts of the *città ideale* of the Italian Renaissance. Urban planners, almost by definition, believe in such two–dimensional plans as the origin and guiding framework for growth and management. But these plans, in their ideal rigid geometries, are so akin to graphic perfection, to "frozen music," as to be unreal in contemporary practice.

Cousins connects, via Freud, the principle of beauty to notions of longing and representation. "All objects of desire," he writes, "…are substitutions for something that is experienced as having been lost." (In Seaside, that most representational of towns, what is lost? The South? Childhood Vacations? Assumptions of Civility?) Each house at Seaside is very obviously an object, a recognisable three–dimensional thing. Cousins tethers such objects to classical representation and opposes this hermetic ploy of the beautiful to the world of interiors and our own interiority. Distrustful of ideal scenarios, he writes that "the ugly object is existence itself."

Culver City, unorthodoxed and idiosyncratic, engages a visually and socially tough context to exhibit the vivacity of which Cousins writes. Seaside, idealistic and uniform, exudes

the quality he describes as "playing dead." Culver City or Seaside? Real Ugly or Dead Beautiful? In the contingent world of Culver City, one realizes the validity of Cousins' comment that "lacking the singular intention of a plan, the building breathes the life of an organism." But in Seaside "playing dead" may not be as bleak as it initially seems. It "involves a certain conservative relation to life—it conserves itself, but only by suspending itself." Although neither place has yet to boast a cemetery, Cousins finds positive values in the proximity of death. In quoting Freud's epigram "*Si vis vitam, para mortem*" (If you want life, prepare for death), he reminds us that All Action and No Pause makes for an unbalanced environment.

That is why Seaside needs acts of guerilla intervention into its too-perfect whole. And that is why Moss's elliptical boardroom at the terminus of 8522 National is so truly beautiful.

Notes:
1.Mark Cousins, "The Ugly", *AA Files* 28, 29 & 30, London, 1994-5.
2.Michael Dennis, *Court and Garden: From the French Hotel to the City of Modern Architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1986.
3.Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye*, Knopf, New York, 1990.