

The Mercury on . . .

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# BOOKS

## stomach trouble

**STREETS FOR PEOPLE.** By Bernard Rudofsky. Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., New York. 1982. 351 pages. \$10.95

By IFAN PAYNE

If there are two recent books on architecture that I would recommend to anyone seeking to understand why the contemporary American built environment is in the mess that it is, those two would be Tom Wolfe's *From Bauhaus to Our House* and Rudofsky's *Streets for People*.

It never fails to surprise me that every citizen of this country is affected to a greater or lesser degree by the built environment, yet architecture is a topic that receives little attention from the popular print or electronic media, and there appears to be less informed discussion on the quality of the buildings which surround us than any issues that have a comparable effect on our daily lives.

To a considerable degree, Tom Wolfe's excellent expose of the bankruptcy of the International Style of architecture has reached popular consciousness more than almost any book in recent memory. With gleeful accuracy he pointed out the nakedness of that particular architec-

tural steel and glass emperor. Not only did it have no clothes...not only is the glass box a naked ugliness...but the perpetrators of this magisterial and fascistic environmental imposition defiled our land while proclaiming that their particular dung-heaps smelt like *Eau de Cologne*.

The accuracy with which Tom Wolfe hit the mark could be measured by the squeals of protest from the architectural establishment which hacked away at a detail here, and an inaccuracy there, all the while leaving Wolfe's vision unimpaired.

By contrast, Bernard Rudofsky's equally, perhaps even more, hard-hitting book has raised hardly a whimper. Yet his attack on the American built environment is every bit as devastating as is Mr. Wolfe's and every bit as entertaining and readable.

"Despite their touted living standards, Americans are essentially unassuming where things that money can't buy are concerned. Since most of them are not acquainted with streets other than those they have grown up with, the question of how to put them to better use never arises...(T)he streets of this country simply have too many unpleasant connotations to be popular - filth,

soot, stench, an absence of shade and shelter; hold-ups, murder, riots, parades, traffic lights ordering one to Stop, Wait, and Walk, without so much as a Please. Streets are the entrails of the city, with more than a touch of scatological flavor, constipation being just one of their chronic ailments...

"The American city has always been the repository of the inhabitants' collective lack of know-how, and no other facet of national life illustrates the shortage of instinct, imagination, and grace as does the urban environment."

This is quoted from the very opening pages of the book, and Rudofsky takes off from here, hitting hard and accurately at the filth, devastation and inhumanity of American streets and urban environment.

The book is built as a three-part structure.

First, there is a fascinating historical treatment of the development of American cities and streets, with vivid snapshots of urban American life...such as the descriptions of the large herds of pigs that roamed freely—at considerable danger to the human inhabitants—through the streets of New York City up until the middle of

the last century. The four-footed porkers were the only means of urban sanitation until Boston showed how it could be done by pioneering organized garbage collection in the 1820's.

The pigs may have gone, but Prof. Rudofsky rubs the readers face in his and her own dirt.

"Street dirt is still one of the conspicuously appalling sights in American towns. It is a virulent form of the old evil, aggravated by the packaging industry that unloads an increasing volume of instant trash upon us. Yet from all the evidence, natives are unaffected by it. Just as the syphilization of a race imparts a degree of immunity and seems to lessen the disease's manifestations, so does constant exposure to dirty streets blunt one's sensitivity."

The second, parallel part of the book's structure, deals with alternative ways for organizing and using streets. This is done by illustrating and comparing the way in which other countries and civilizations (many of them supposedly 'less developed' than the USA) have created streets that are superior to ours by almost every measure.

Here, the author also often shows his fine ear for the language and the

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apt image as, for example, "Italy represents the rear-view mirror of Western civilization."

The third part of the book's structure is a comparative description of a number of elements of the streetscape: canopies, stairs, bridges, sidewalk-cafes. The descriptions are of streetscapes in a wide range of South American, European, North African and Middle Eastern countries (though with perhaps too great a concentration on European Mediterranean countries), and the comparison is with the modern American urban scene. And everywhere abroad that he looks, the author sees evidence of environmental caring while everywhere he looks in this country he sees environmental obscenity.

Anyone who thinks reading about architecture is difficult will have no problem with this entertaining and absorbing book...and it's full of pictures.

Anyone who thinks reading and considering the built environment is dull or uninteresting will surely be sparked by this lively work.

Anyone who might have been complacent in the belief that we are a civilized people living in a civilized environment will find plenty to take issue with with here.

The author deliberately attempts to rub the reader's face in the environmental muck around us, while

at the same time directing our eyes to alternatives that do exist over the horizon.

Which brings me to one of the two weaknesses of the book.

Bernard Rudofsky nowhere suggests what we, all of us...any of us...might do about the situation.

Nor does he really come to grips with the answer to another question: why do we allow things to remain as they are?

A discussion of who really controls our buildings and our streets might have helped the reader understand why matters can perhaps only get worse, not better.

Professor Rudofsky does put his finger on one aspect of the American heritage that still pervades much of our (James Watt-like) thinking today: "No wonder this country never developed anything comparable to the (attitudes) of Asia and Europe to whom the land is as sacred as the fruit it bears; to whom the town is a fixed point in the universe. To the colonists, the continent was enemy territory, to be conquered and exploited."

And he does raise an important issue when he asks why it is that one of the world's richest nations has created one of the least life-enhancing built environments?

"...it would be a task worthy of the historian—or psychiatrist—to discover why Puritans think that good and lasting architecture needs moral justification".

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