

PAOLO SOLERI Fragments: A Selection from the Sketchbooks of Paolo Soleri: The Tiger Paradigm-Paradox. Harper and Row, 1981. 211 pp.

Beware: this is not, as the dustjacket would suggest, a book of graphic sketches; something that might tempt designers who would further understand Soleri's architectonic imagery. It is a selection from notebooks ... i.e. writings! True, however, the book is set of "fragments", fragmentary thoughts that converge on what Soleri calls his "sledgehammer eschatology". Soleri acknowledges that this set of 25 "forays" into metaphysical enquiry do not accord with the conventions of systematic thought and lack of major synthesis. But that is only one of a number of lacunae. His thoughts are often lazily conjectured rather than precisely formulated. Meanings are too frequently difficult to grasp, even after attempts at de-coding by cross reference from chapter to chapter, from Soleri to Soleri. And it is far from clear who the book is written for: philosophical metaphysicians? environmental designers? A 'popular audience'?

Eschatology: "any system of doctrines concerning last, or final, matters, as death or the afterlife" (Random House). It is not a subject one should expect Paolo Soleri to write upon. Unusually gifted though he is, Soleri is foremost an imaginer -- and builder -- of habitates. There is still scope and great need, for serious notemaking and profound thinking about his own creations, his arcologies: about Arcostanti and how, and with what substance life can be lived there; and with what quality death (and other final matters) are to be met there.

Does the publication of Fragments therefore signal an ending of Soleri's master building career? Does it ruefully bespeak a restless mind now wearied, perhaps disappointed, by the arduous path of environmental experimentation? The question arises if only because the substance and intellectual appeal of Fragments surprisingly bear a tenuous relationship to the idea and the experiment in habitate which Soleri so daringly advanced, and then nurtured into being with so little philosophical and sociological premeditation. Now Soleri is advancing a daring metaphysical hypothesis: "reality, equipped with consciousness, is attempting to create its own semen." Further, "truth does not

exist; it is in the process of being created" -- an Hegelian proposition which, let us be aware, gives absolute licence to any 'creative' act, any design.

The sub-sub title of this book refers to an ancient philosophical speculation. The beautiful, predatory tiger symbolizes irreconcilable attributes of being: life is beautiful (paradigm), it is inequitable (paradox). According to Soleri, this paradigm-paradox is unresolvable unless we have an "eschatological model" explaining our full being as integral part of a cosmos continuously creating "its own seed, the DNA of resurrection."

In Soleri's model divinity, creation and grace are placed at the end of things, not at the beginning as in orthodox religions. In his essay on "Crowding, Urban Effect", for example, he draws this conclusion:

Thus, the urban effect becomes a "religious stress" attempting the transformation of matter into spirit and therefore becomes the genesis of a divine, totalizing grace. This would be the ultimate semen, the Omega Seed ... [the seed] would be a state of total recall; that is, of (total) resurrection.

Perhaps this tells us what Arcosanti, environmental design, is supposed to be about.

In the book's Foreword, philosopher Henry Skolimowski elucidates the idioms of Soleri-metaphysician. He says of his experience in reading Fragments, "What was baffling on one level became a challenge on another level ... But what is the mind for, if not for deciphering unfamiliar idioms". Most of us, I'm sure, could think of a few mindful enterprises that are more rewarding.

William T. Perks
Professor of Urbanism and Planning
University of Calgary

From Bauhaus to Our House
by Tom Wolfe
McGraw-Hill Rhynerson.

Jim Wagner
Edmonton

O white god!

Looking dapper in his white suit and shoes, Tom Wolfe, the great giver of popular social commentary, has descended upon the world of modern architecture and pronounced it unfit for human consumption. Basically a condensed history of modern architecture, his book oversimplifies the various events of the last century to the point where they are trivialized as just so many styles and theories. Unfortunately, in order to make his arguments work, Mr. Wolfe finds it necessary to approach his subject from a rather narrow point of view; "I don't understand it but I know what I like." Admittedly it's not the objective of this book to be a thorough examination of modern architecture, but such incompleteness renders his arguments facile.

Using the same approach as that in "The Painted Word", his criticism of the art world, he ridicules the notion of theoretical discussion and the advancement of architectural thought, dismissing them as "this month's 'Theory of the Century.'" What Mr. Wolfe has failed to understand is that it's necessary to complement design with theory in order to provide a point of reference for discussion and practise. Such activity dates from at least as far back as the classical orders of the Greeks, to Roman times and the writings of Vitruvius, through the numerous architectural treatises of the Renaissance, to the modern era.

Other, more valid criticisms which he makes, are similarly incomplete. His statement that the original ideas of the early modern movement have since been replaced by fashion and economics is largely true. But he is probably unfair in laying all the blame on architects when we live in a society where the balance sheet is all important. Likewise, Mr. Wolfe's lament about the lack of a truly American architecture, in this, the American era, is a laudible one. But here he fails to discuss the possible parallels between the International Style and the concept of the global village, or the curious fact that many modern powers (the United States, Russia, Nazi Germany and others) have chosen the style of the ancient powers (Greece and Rome) for their important public buildings.

As for the writing style Mr. Wolfe employs, it is annoying, to say the least; run on sentences, bon mots, repetition (asides), and exclamation marks. And he just loves italics. One suspects

these are simply means of concealing a thin argument. How very bourgeois! Fortunately, this volume is equally thin and the reader needs only a few hours to get through it.

It seems likely, though, that those people most sympathetic to his views won't buy this wook. Architecture not being a big seller. As for those readers interested in a more complete and accurate account of modern architecture, they would do better to look elsewhere.

The American Home Architecture and Society 1815-1915. David P. Handlin. Boston/Toronto: Little, Brown & Co. 1979.

The integral connection between architecture and society is skillfully and painstakingly illuminated in this volume by David Handlin, who also comprehensively indicates the complex relationship of architectural concept and result. Handlin, an Associate Professor of Architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, sketches the American adaptations of European precedents in housing forms, and then dwells in 19th century attempts to define the basis of a new, better domestic architecture. Interest in the ideas that formed the basis of American domestic architecture motivates Handlin, who specifically has not written a Whiffen-like survey of the subject. The study of these ideas is systematically divided into major sections dealing respectively with the towns in which this new domestic architecture developed, its landscaping, the House Beautiful concept, the dissemination of housing plans, and finally the development of advanced mechanical systems for the home. While cogently creating a clear sense of the social and cultural atmosphere in which these changes took place Handlin not only clarifies the philosophic bases and divergences of 19th century domestic architecture but provides us with a plethora of fascinating information regarding American planning issues, building techniques and design creation. Literary, historical and design sources are drawn upon, and the stories revealed are supplemented by many rare, and in some cases seldom published plans and photographs. This major volume in the study of American housing has the delightful bonus of being extremely lucidly and eloquently written, which will, I am sure, aid in its establishment as a vital standard work.

Robert Hunter
Edmonton