Making a spectacle of architecture on PBS

by Roger Kimball

On the television series Pride of Place.

Devotees of public television will have noticed a new item on its menu of cultural delicacies these past weeks. In addition to the usual fare of romanticized Dickens, Austen, colonial India, and the other literary and historical subjects that have provided the staple for its tastefully served-up “dramatizations,” we are now being offered romanticized architecture—also “dramatized,” to be sure, and certainly “served up,” though perhaps not quite so tastefully as one has come to expect from the programs that the Public Broadcasting Service has imported from the BBC. What we have, in short, is Pride of Place: Building the American Dream, an eight-part series on American architecture that is sponsored by Mobil Oil and scheduled to air weekly through the middle of May.

Our host for Pride of Place is the New York architect Robert A. M. Stern, a Professor of Architecture at Columbia University and Director of Columbia’s Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture. Mr. Stern narrates the series, accompanying the television cameramen to more than one hundred locations across the country, from the ghettos of the South Bronx to the gaudy, stage-set splendors of San Simeon, William Randolph Hearst’s “dream house” in California. Mr. Stern’s tour of American architecture includes cities, campuses, resorts, suburbs, parks, and reconstructed villages like Williamsburg, Virginia, as well as individual buildings and monuments. All in all, he undertakes an ambitious itinerary that is intended to lend credibility to the series’ double billing as both a documentary and a “personal view” of its subject.

“Personal” the series surely is—often to the point of idiosyncrasy. Indeed, for anyone who has sat through all eight episodes of Pride of Place in three days, as this writer has, there can be no doubt that it offers the viewer abundant evidence of Mr. Stern’s opinions about the triumphs and failures of American architecture, including his speculations about where modern architecture went wrong and his assessment of the most pressing challenges facing contemporary architectural practice. But does Pride of Place also count as a “documentary” in any recognized sense of the word? Does it present us
with anything like a straightforward, historically accurate account of the distinctive heritage and achievements of American architecture? Does it, at bottom, really even address itself primarily to matters of architectural interest? These are the questions one finds oneself asking again and again when contemplating *Pride of Place*.

Such questions are also provoked by the book published to accompany the series. Written by Mr. Stern with two associates, Thomas Mellins and Raymond Gastil, the book *Pride of Place* is a three-hundred-odd-page, copiously illustrated volume that faithfully reproduces the “personal view” of American architecture that Mr. Stern has provided for the PBS series.[1] The chief difference between the television series and the book is that in the former Mr. Stern interrupts his narrative once or twice an episode for a prearranged chat with a fellow architect or architectural writer about the topic at hand. Altogether, there are eighteen guests on *Pride of Place*, including such well-known figures as the architects Philip Johnson, Cesar Pelli, Peter Eisenman, Morris Lapidus, and Leon Krier, the historians Vincent Scully, Gwendolyn Wright, and Charles Jencks, and the journalist Paul Goldberger. These exchanges, which range from arcane speculations about architectural “space” to Philip Johnson’s reminiscences about his cousin Theodate Pope Riddle (one of America’s first women architects), would seem to be intended to impart an air of authority and credibility to the series—that, and perhaps also to add a touch of human interest to Mr. Stern’s soliloquizing.

The interludes vary considerably in theme, too, from Morris Lapidus’s musings about what the Mayan Indians might have built had they had our decorative resources to Peter Eisenman’s misty “philosophical” observations about his attempt to “destabilize the notion of home.” One of the founders of the now defunct theoretical architecture journal *Oppositions*, Mr. Eisenman is famous for abstruse, often polemical pronouncements that are full of the rhetoric of semiotics. He was comparatively straightforward for the television cameras, however, even if, like several other guests on *Pride of Place*, he liked to pretend that architecture is best understood as a “text.” Mr. Stern, as au courant as anyone about such matters, likes to think of architecture as a text as well, though he did confide in his book that it was not until he went to graduate school at Yale that he “began to understand . . . that architecture is a narrative art, and that architectural style is analogous to poetic diction.” It was sometimes easy to forget, watching *Pride of Place*, that architecture primarily has to do with building buildings—real buildings, ones that we live and work in, not ones that we read or ponder abstractly.

It has hardly been necessary to tune into PBS, let alone to turn the pages of Mr. Stern’s companion volume, to know something about *Pride of Place*. Sponsored *in toto* by Mobil, the series has been the subject of the kind of aggressive advertising that is usually reserved for a big-budget Hollywood movie or Broadway show. In New York City, for example, one can hardly walk down the street without encountering a clump of posters proclaiming *Pride of Place*, and the magazines and journals here have likewise been full of notices for the show. The spate of advertising in *The New York Times*
culminated just before the series began airing at the end of March in an arresting two-page spread, featuring the postmodernist *Pride of Place* logo and a précis of each episode. There was also a screening of the first episode early in March at the State Department in Washington, D.C., followed by a lavish reception in the recently redone diplomatic reception rooms on the top floor of the building. This was not your usual cheese-and-crackers-and-cheap-white-wine affair, but a buffet feast for several hundred people replete with champagne and open bar, suckling pig, and—to reinforce the ambiance of culture—a string quartet discreetly dispensing Vivaldi in the corner. One couldn’t but wonder how much all this cost—eight hour-long television episodes, many of which involved a generous use of aerial photography, ubiquitous advertising, the reception—but Mobil declined to reveal the budget for this latest example of tax-exempt educational programming.

What were we actually shown after all this promotion? Did it merit the advertising, the champagne, the suckling pig? Unfortunately, the answer is “no.” No matter how one looks at it—as video documentary, as architectural history, as social history, even as television entertainment—*Pride of Place* is a shambles. Even before Mr. Stern makes his first appearance on the screen one knows—or rather hears—that something is terribly wrong. The dreadful, and dreadfully manipulative, music leaves no doubt that we are in for something spurious. The music was composed by Carl Davis, currently the conductor for the Bournemouth Pops Symphony Orchestra and composer of the music for various television series, such as *The World at War, Churchill—The Wilderness Years*, and the Mobil-sponsored series *Praying Mantis*, as well as for the film *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. For *Pride of Place*, Mr. Davis’s music features the strains of sweet nostalgia—“Home Sweet Home” plays with unbearable frequency—but is capable of achieving the mock-heroic and pop-apocalyptic when the occasion arises. And arise it does—again and again and again.
But corny as the music is, it probably provides the series with its only semblance of dramatic tension or show-business flair. And in relation to Mr. Stern’s on-camera performance, the music is also responsible for a good deal of the series’ unintended humor. While the music is alternately bathetic and absurdly sentimental, Mr. Stern is consistently, comically wooden. His voice is reedy and unpleasantly high-pitched; his delivery is uncertain; and the nervous staccato hand movements that accompany his every word rob even his most heartfelt pronouncements of grace. Then, too, there is Mr. Stern’s manner. He tends to maintain a somewhat glassy, far-off expression—the result, perhaps, of being unable to take his eyes off the teleprompter—and an incessant smile that can be most generously described as unpersuasive. Mr. Stern performs so poorly on camera that one can only wonder why he was allowed to narrate the series. Didn’t the producers—who are, after all, professionally concerned with such matters—recognize that they had failed utterly to come up with an American Kenneth Clark? In this respect, considered simply as an actor, Mr. Stern is far less compelling than many of his guests—than Jacquelin Robertson, for example, the dean of the architecture school at the University of Virginia, who joins Mr. Stern in the first episode at Monticello and whose mellifluous voice and dignified stage presence are in marked contrast to his host’s efforts.

On the other hand, it must be said that Mr. Stern does not enjoy particularly good directing. For one thing, Murray Grigor, who directed and co-produced *Pride of Place* and whose film credits include *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright* (1983), has what one might call a Mediterranean sense of pace. Things go slowly in *Pride of Place*. Throughout the series, but especially in the later episodes, there is an extraordinary quantity of tedious filler, little of it having anything to do with architecture. There are long, long pans across innumerable sunlit fields and endless facades, lingering shots of soldiers marching, of children playing in the grass, of Mr. Stern driving a red convertible along the highways and byways of America. Though much of this contributes to the series’ moments of unintended comedy, it does not help to enliven Mr. Stern’s performance. Nor does the glibly inept cinematography come to his aid. On the contrary, as often as not it undercuts or obscures the very points he tries to make, showing fragments of a building when the entire structure is called for, zooming in on irrelevant details, offering spectacular aerial views that tell us nothing about the buildings as experienced by the people who use them. It is a rare moment indeed when one can glean any sense of a building as an architectural whole. If Mr. Stern painstakingly describes the inviting sense of vertical flow that a grand staircase communicates, we can expect the camera to pan ever so slowly, ever so horizontally, across the middle of the stair. Architecture is notoriously difficult to present effectively on film, but it helps if the cinematographer makes some effort to follow the script.

The quality of the production and performances in any television series is always an important ingredient in its success, and the poor quality of both in *Pride of Place* is a serious handicap. But the real problem with *Pride of Place* is its failure as an exercise in architectural history. In part, this is simply a failure of communication. Each of the episodes contains references to a good many
unexplained architectural terms and unidentified architectural figures. “Campanile” is one of Mr. Stern’s favorite words—he uses it to refer not only to a bell tower but also to just about any slender vertical structure— but he never bothers to explain it, nor does he explain the score of other more or less technical terms that he and his guests use. Again, Mr. Stern gives us an elaborate account of who Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was—Mies is one of the series’ arch-villains, so it is important that we know just who we are dealing with; but he leaves many lesser-known architects—Louis Kahn, for example, who figures prominently in his first episode—barely identified. One is reminded that public television, which was launched as “educational television,” now seems to have abandoned any serious didactic aspiration whatsoever.

This is not to say that Pride of Place is too specialized or too full of architectural detail and the particulars of architectural history. Quite the contrary. While Mr. Stern displays and discusses innumerable buildings, we do not come away from the series having been instructed about architecture; rather, we feel that we’ve witnessed a particularly ambitious set of home movies or a travelogue. The book leaves one with an analogous feeling. I do not, for example, remember seeing a single architectural plan in the entire eight episodes. Nor does Mr. Stern take the trouble to discuss building types, architectural structure, or the relation of style to structure. Yet these are fundamental elements of architectural study, without which any discussion of the subject must lack intellectual substance.

Instead of architectural analysis, Pride of Place gives us a House & Garden version of American architecture. Everything is reduced to surface, façade, decoration, local color— the couture of architecture. Mr. Stern’s discussion of Daniel Burnham’s Flatiron Building (1902) at Twenty-third Street and Fifth Avenue in New York is a typical case. Noting that the windy open spaces north of the building’s wedge-shaped front would “bare the ankles of the fashionable women on Fifth Avenue and Twenty-third Street,” he points out that “The legend is that police called out ‘twenty-three skidoo’ to shoo away the male gawkers.” In the television episode, we even get an animated short about the phrase. And this is about all we take away from Pride of Place about the Flatiron Building, one of the great early skyscrapers. All this has nothing to do with architecture, of course, but it is exactly the kind of trivia that pervades the series. Also characteristic is the disproportionate amount of time Mr. Stern spends wandering through the houses of the very rich: the “cottages” at Newport, Rhode Island, Hearst’s San Simeon, James Deering’s Vizcaya in Biscayne Bay, Florida, Isabella Stewart Gardner’s Fenway Court, Boston, and so on. These are the places that have clearly captured Mr. Stern’s imagination, not because they are of compelling architectural interest—in fact, they belong more to the history of conspicuous consumption than to the history of architecture—but because of their eccentricity, their aura of wealth and power, their snob appeal, and not least because of their campy extravagance, which gives Mr. Stern’s penchant for coy irony full rein.

In order to understand what is really at stake in Pride of Place, however, it is necessary to look more
closely at the “personal view” of American architecture that informs it. It is here that the series fails most conspicuously. At the center of that “personal view” is Mr. Stern’s presumption that his approach to architecture constitutes a recovery of architectural tradition and history. His pose as a champion of history and tradition is suggested already in the title of his first, and in many respects his best, episode, “The Search for a Usable Past.” Evoking the spirit of Van Wyck Brooks, whose notion of a “usable past” he appropriates, Mr. Stern here sets out the basic terms of his view of architecture and touches upon most of the themes that will occupy him in succeeding episodes.

According to Mr. Stern, the “crucial issue” facing American architecture today is its relationship to the past. Only if it retains a living bond with its past achievements can architecture hope to transcend its merely utilitarian tasks and “build a dream.” Yet Mr. Stern points out that American architecture, lacking an indigenous tradition, had to fashion a tradition for itself out of a wide range of disparate elements; where Europe was born to its history and an architectural tradition, America in an important sense has always had to concoct its tradition, “inventing and reinventing” the past. Thus Mr. Stern calls for an architecture that blends “pragmatism and myth.” Looking back to his youth in Brooklyn, he contrasts the fancifully ornamented skyscrapers of the Twenties and Thirties with the cooler, sparser modernist architecture of the Fifties and Sixties. For him, these later buildings betrayed the “dream” that promised to lift architecture from the realm of engineering to the realm of art; in reacting against historicism, modernist architecture showed itself to be enslaved to an ethic of functionality that “fiercely negated the past in favor of a single-minded orientation to the present.” Modernism, according to Mr. Stern, abandoned the search for a usable past.

Somewhere in the midst of this tale of paradise lost, as Mr. Stern castigates the “insensitive, uniform boxes” of modernist architecture, the camera shifts abruptly from cheerful, long-distance shots of old New York skyscrapers and begins panning slowly across the glass façades of half a dozen modernist buildings. At the same time, the soundtrack, previously full of elevating arpeggios and trills, begins intoning a gloomy threnody. The entire sequence epitomizes the grossly manipulative quality of Mr. Stern’s presentation. Moreover, Mr. Stern makes it clear that for him modernism’s “fierceness” is not confined to its negative attitude toward the past; it also has dire consequence for one’s social conscience. In one of his more extraordinary observations, he recalls his student days, when modernism was triumphant: “A new postwar world had dawned, I was reminded, and just as I must learn to love the bomb—or at least live with it—I must learn to love an architecture that exalted function and structural technique as the determinants of significant form.” For Mr. Stern, it would seem, modernist architecture is not merely aesthetically displeasing, it has an insidious connection with instruments of death and destruction.

This, of course, is nonsense. There is no analogy between modernist architecture and atomic weapons whatsoever. Indeed, the chief interest of Mr. Stern’s suggestion to the contrary is the cast of mind it betrays. And in this regard it may also be worth mentioning Mr. Stern’s description of Mt. Vernon as
“the Lenin’s tomb of American architecture,” a description that speaks volumes about Mr. Stern’s sensitivity to history and tradition. This remark is noteworthy, too, because *Pride of Place* bills itself in part as a celebration of the American democratic tradition—a fact that no doubt explains why the State Department would have offered its premises for a screening and reception. Perhaps the best summary of Mr. Stern’s thinking about these matters is to be found in his peroration. “The American dream has not been a blind leap into the future but a determined march,” Mr. Stern rously concludes at the end of *Pride of Place*:

> at our best, our march forward has been directed by the lessons of what went before, and only when we have broken our contract with the past, with our best sense of what is noble and right, have we stumbled: we stumbled in the South Bronces of our inner cities; we stumbled in Vietnam. When we stumble again, let us hope we do not fall down once and for all. Like Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, I believe “in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us.” It eluded us at the dawn of our Republic, it eludes us now, “but that’s no matter— to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther .... And one fine morning—

> “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

Now we see that on top of everything else modernism is implicated in the decline of the South Bronx and in the Vietnam War. It is here, perhaps, in Mr. Stern’s idolization of the pathetic figure of Fitzgerald’s Gatsby—a character whose doomed pursuit of the “orgiastic future” rests upon a total fabrication of the past—that we have the real key to the conception of “history and tradition” as well as the motivating “dream” that informs *Pride of Place*.

But the main point of Mr. Stern’s criticisms of modernism—the end to which the whole of *Pride of Place* strives—is to clear the way for the triumph of postmodernism. In short, his guiding theme is that modernist architecture was an aberration, an ahistorical rupture in American architectural history that is only now being repaired by the ascendancy of postmodernism. Finally, after the depredations of modernism, “the corporate world has come around again,” Mr. Stern tells us; finally American architecture has found spokesmen for tradition and history in architects like Philip Johnson, Michael Graves, and Robert Venturi. Buildings like Johnson and Burgee’s AT&T Building (described as the first New York skyscraper in forty years “to inhabit its height proudly”) or PPG Place, Johnson and Burgee’s “neo-Gothic” glass complex in Pittsburgh, are said by Mr. Stern to have “rekindled the confident spirit of the 1920s.”

The ironies to be found in this “personal view” of the history of American architecture are no doubt endless. But the greatest irony is to be found in Mr. Stern’s essentially campy posture as a champion of history and tradition. Throughout *Pride of Place*, he shows himself to be utterly incapable of distinguishing between real history and a superficial parody of history. Mr. Stern’s romanticized
version of history, like the versions of the past offered by the BBC in its dramatizations of novels and
historical events, wraps the past in a glaze of nostalgia. Thus it turns out that Mr. Stern has a good
reason for insisting that history and tradition in American architecture are “invented and
reinvented,” for his handling of history in Pride of Place shows that his real talents are in the realm of
fantasy, not historical exposition. The picture of American architecture that he peddles in Pride of Place
is woefully irresponsible when it comes to the historical record. The entire series rests on a systematic
distortion of the character and achievements of modernist architecture. For while it is true that
modernist architecture challenged the ethos of nineteenth-century historicism, to conclude that
modernism is therefore anti-historical or anti-traditional is worse than simplistic; it is a blatant
misrepresentation. As the German writer Wolf Tegethoff observes,

Contrary to widespread opinion, in part deliberately promoted for purposes of propaganda, modern
architecture did not make a break with history, but consciously adopted its achievements and sought to
build upon them. Behind the presumed fundamentally new beginning that took place in the years just
before and immediately after the First World War there ran uninterrupted strands of development that
clearly exhibit this historical continuity.[2]

In this connection, one need think only of the deep and lasting influence of neo-classicism, especially
of Karl Friedrich Schinkel, on modernism, an influence that Colin Rowe investigated in some detail as
long ago as the late Forties.[3]

In fact, Mr. Stern’s animus against modernism and its chief proponents completely undermines his
analysis of its accomplishments. This is perhaps most amusingly evident in Mr. Stern’s rhetoric and
diction, which is not what one would call fastidious. Constrained to offer grudging praise for Mies’s
Seagram Building, because of the near universal admiration it has occasioned, Mr. Stern describes its
design as “mordant.” “Mordant,” one wants to remind the Director of the Temple Hoyne Buell
Center for the Study of American Architecture, means “bitingly sarcastic.” What can it mean to
describe the design of the Seagram Building—or any building, for that matter—as “mordant”? It
means nothing at all, I’m afraid, though perhaps it does allow Mr. Stern to say one thing while
suggesting its opposite. Whether he is conscious of this is hard to say, but he indulges in this sort of
thing a lot, at times resorting to out-and-out contradiction. Thus, for example, he insists on one page
that Mies “rejected history” and tradition but admits on another that “he struggled to create an order
based on the steel I-beam that could compare with the traditional orders of Classicism.” Often, in fact,
Mr. Stern speaks truer than he means to, as when he lauds Robert Venturi’s fanciful buildings at
Princeton University, yet concludes by noting that “Venturi and his partners look at the past with a
twisted smile,” or when, in the midst of fulsome praise, he observes that the details at Michael
Graves’s new library at San Juan Capistrano constitute “an almost embarrassing climax of cuteness.”

Furthermore, Mr. Stern’s version of American architectural history is ludicrously anachronistic,
interpreting every ornamental flourish from Colonial times on down as a prelude to postmodernism. Among the more irritating specimens of this tendency was Mr. Stern’s description of Jefferson in terms that made him out to be, as it were, a postmodernist before his time. Jefferson, clearly one of Mr. Stern’s heroes, was called upon to lend authority to all manner of folly. Thus Mr. Stern refers to Philip Johnson’s famous Glass House as “a Modernist version of Jefferson’s ideal,” “an industrial age Monticello.” In one of his many reflections about San Simeon, he writes that “Hearst’s restless intelligence and obsessive nature resulted in an approach to building reminiscent of Jefferson’s.” One notes in passing that Philip Johnson’s version of Miesian modernism is exempted from the criticism that Mr. Stern directs against Mies himself, perhaps because in Johnson’s hands Mies’s rigorous proportioning and use of materials have been abandoned for the sake of achieving a certain “look.” But can Mr. Stern really believe that there is a Jeffersonian spirit animating the Glass House and San Simeon? Can there be any three buildings in all of American architectural history that have less in common than Monticello, the Glass House, and San Simeon?

The truth is that what we see throughout Pride of Place is the same arbitrary, deeply ahistorical approach to history and tradition that characterizes postmodernism itself. This approach is based on the belief that applying a Chippendale top or Egyptoid ornamentation to an essentially modernist skyscraper somehow represents a genuine recovery of history or tradition. History, from this point of view, is fundamentally a matter of packaging, decoration, and facade. Thus, after berating modernism, Pride of Place cuts without warning to Plimoth Plantation to give us a lecture in architecture as it should be. We watch as actors, in period costume, assemble the frame of a house. It is all very picturesque and romantic, especially the close-up shots of one of the men pounding the apparently hand-carved tenons into the mortises. The beams themselves, however, are awfully smooth—indeed, they are almost certainly machine-finished, a fact that gives the lie to the whole schmaltzy sequence and typifies the dishonest approach to tradition and history that Mr. Stern traffics in.

A similar pretense is at work in Mr. Stern’s frequent invocation of “myth.” He would have us believe that postmodernist architecture has helped put our culture back in touch with the dimension of myth, tradition, and “dreaming” that the rationalistic imperatives of modernism abjured. One hears such talk about “the recovery of myth” and the like a good deal these days, of course, though in truth it is rarely more than a rhetorical gesture. As Jacques Maritain has pointed out, myths in the sense Mr. Stern intends “have no force except through the faith man has in them. It is essential to them to be believed in.” But postmodernism’s attachment to myth is purely superficial; it toys with myth the way it toys with historical ornamentation, arbitrarily appropriating first this, then that element or motif. At bottom, it remains as firmly rooted in the modern, technological world as the strictest Miesian, all the while refusing to acknowledge the implications of this contradiction. Never is there any question of belief, of authenticity; “myth” for postmodernism, like “history,” is little more than a kind of costume, a kind of mask it dons in order to disguise its essentially modernist underpinnings.
and to achieve an aura of tradition.

Nevertheless, it is precisely postmodern-ism’s talk of “history,” of “tradition,” of “myth” that gives it its great appeal at the present time. For though our culture is deeply shaped by science and technology and the essentially rationalized approach to the world that they imply, there remains a great nostalgia for something like a “mythic” view of the world. Postmodernism answers to that nostalgia, glibly dispensing the illusion of myth, the appearance of tradition, the look of history without bothering to involve itself in any of the fundamental commitments that genuine myth, tradition, or historical awareness would entail. Mr. Stern is only too happy to play this game, to speak grandly of recent architecture’s resuscitation of history and mythic ambitions and, in the same vein, to import cliched religious terminology in order to invest his discussion with an aura of spirituality and high purpose. Houses are “temples” for Mr. Stern, as are museums, as is even the Chrysler Building, and art is a sacred endeavor that consecrates our secular world. He goes on like this wherever possible, most egregiously, perhaps, in his discussion of the Pennsylvania Academy of Art and its “heavenly treasures.” One can only wonder what terms Mr. Stern would use to describe a real temple or church—if indeed the distinction has any meaning for him.

A good deal of Mr. Stern’s approach comes together in his discussion of resort architecture, “Resorts: Paradise Regained.” He devotes an entire episode to the subject ostensibly because resorts have inspired significant architecture in this country, but really, or so it seems, because it gives him another opportunity to wallow in a world of fantasy underwritten by wealth, caprice, and eccentricity. It also allows him to offer us further extraordinary analogies, some of which are every bit as wonderful as his reference to the atomic bomb in the midst of his discussion of modernism. “Just as one can see normally buttoned-down men and women reveal their every physical and psychological nuance during a summer afternoon at the beach,” Mr. Stern writes, “one can see national architecture preferences, free at last from so many economic and societal constraints, intensely expressed in resort architecture.” But do men and women “reveal their every physical and psychological nuance during a summer afternoon at the beach”? Of course they don’t. And can “national architectural preferences” really be said to express themselves in any important sense in resort architecture? Of course not.

Still, it is worth pausing over Mr. Stern’s assessment of resort architecture; for while his discussion often borders on the absurd, it does provide a splendid example of the sensibility that characterizes Pride of Place. “The greatest American resorts have gone beyond conventional exercises in escape,” writes Mr. Stern;

resorts have functioned as stage sets upon which the nation has enacted a mythic version of its past.... Moreover, Americans have learned to live together in a community at their resorts. In a democracy where strict social traditions and codes of behavior do not apply, the resort has provided an image of communitarian stability that the “real” world fails to provide. Whether at a grand hotel, a summer colony,
or a theme village, Americans on holiday have dealt themselves strong lessons in social behavior, often under the benignly dictatorial hand of a hotelier or self-appointed tastemaker.

What are we to make of this passage? Leaving to one side the unexceptionable suggestion that American resorts have “gone beyond conventional exercises in escape,” is there a single assertion here that can stand without qualification? We have already discussed Mr. Stern’s invocation of the “mythic past.” Here we can see that his notion of “community” is hardly more substantial. And the idea that the resort provides democracy with its ideal image of community is not simply false, it is obscene. At best, the resort can be seen as an ironic parody of a genuine community—though it is indicative of Mr. Stern’s entire presentation that any distinction between an ideal and its caricature is lost. (Consider, in this regard, the arch quotation marks around the word “real” in the above passage—exactly what reality is Mr. Stern calling into question?)

At the center of Mr. Stern’s discussion of resorts is the work of the Russian-born architect Morris Lapidus, whose best-known creation to date is probably the Hotel Fontainebleau (1954) on Miami Beach and whose genius for expensive kitsch allowed him, in Mr. Stern’s words, to fashion “a new aesthetic identity for Miami.” Mr. Stern is absolutely correct when he notes that “Lapidus invented a vision of an architectural past that never existed” and describes him as a “designer of permanent stage sets.” But I hardly see that this makes his work “some of the most original and inventive architecture produced in this country,” as Mr. Stern puts it. In fact, Mr. Lapidus’s creations for Miami Beach, like most “resort architecture,” are the trashiest concoctions, utterly without aesthetic or architectural merit. Their “elegance” is based on overblown, pseudo-historical pastiche combined with lots of lights and shiny surfaces. And the truth is that the works of Mr. Lapidus and his ilk are perfect for Pride of Place because they accord so completely with Mr. Stern’s “personal view” of architectural history as a kind of “stage set” to be plundered in order to invest fundamentally modern structures with the patina of history and tradition.

The essential clue to the attitude behind this “new aesthetic identity” was aptly summed up by Mr. Lapidus himself when he observed:

“People are looking for illusions; they don’t want the world’s realities .... Where are their tastes formulated? Do they study it in school? Do they go to museums? Do they travel in Europe? Only one place—the movies. They go to the movies. The hell with everything else.”

“People are looking for illusions”—at bottom, that is the unacknowledged motto of postmodernism. Mr. Lapidus also displays great insight when he invokes the movies in this context. For it is the movies, not architecture, that provide Mr. Stern with his one stable cultural reference point throughout Pride of Place. He begins the series by telling us that New York in the Twenties was his “personal Oz,” and there follow references to (and often clips from) all manner of movies and
television shows: the main house in *Dallas* is adduced as an example of architecture inspired by Mt. Vernon; bits of *Citizen Kane* are shown during his discussion of San Simeon, *King Kong* when he discusses the Empire State Building; James Gamble Rogers is said to have “used architecture to provide Yale with a kind of WASP version of *Roots*”; and there are also references to *Goldfinger*, *Superman*, *High Noon*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *Christmas in Connecticut*, Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, and on and on. Indeed, it seems at times that Mr. Stern can hardly make a point without bringing in a movie.

For example, Charlie Chaplin apparently provided Mr. Stern with a touchstone for understanding modernist architecture. “Mies willingly condemned architecture to an existential world without past or future,” Mr. Stern tells us.

But however rooted in the concrete and the practical, the technology that Mies deified was itself not an eternal truth but a variable, a constantly evolving standard. Mies’s escape from the past into the technological present in time became subject to history as well, taking on, in less than half a century, a dreamlike, almost quaint quality, evoking the nostalgia for the machine age one now feels when watching Charlie Chaplin’s 1936 film *Modern Times*.

Le Corbusier, too, reminds Mr. Stern of *Modern Times*:

Le Corbusier sketched a world relentlessly locked into a shadowless present. His dream encased the bureaucrats of business and commerce in huge unornamented and uniform office blocks, which he dubbed “Cartesian” out of respect for the French logician. Le Corbusier’s towers were to be reserved for the new managerial elite, who after their working day traveled high-speed roadways to be decanted into stacked duplexes around the edges of the park. Like his contemporary T. S. Eliot, Le Corbusier emulated this managerial elite, transforming himself into the bowler-hatted man in the black suit that Charlie Chaplin would parody.

But was Le Corbusier’s world “locked into a shadowless present”? Was Descartes a “logician”? Is it fair to say that Le Corbusier’s buildings were conceived for “the new managerial elite”? What about *Unité d’Habitation*, his widely admired apartment house in Marseilles? And T. S. Eliot—well, here Mr. Stern is once again indulging in the cheapest of cultural stereotypes.

After that initial screening of the first episode of *Pride of Place* in Washington, Herbert Schmertz, Mobil’s vice-president for public affairs, stood up to assure us that what we had just witnessed was a serious exploration of cultural and architectural themes, not to be confused with such manipulative television drivel as *Lifestyles of the Rich and the Famous*. But the sad truth is that *Pride of Place* has virtually nothing to do with architecture or high culture and almost everything to do with “lifestyle.” There is no attempt to come to terms with important architectural or aesthetic issues, or even to present an accurate and comprehensible picture of architectural history. Of critical judgment there is
not a trace—Disneyland, San Simeon, Monticello, Newport: so long as it's not modernist, it's all one to Robert Stern. Instead of a thoughtful, critically discriminating presentation of American architecture, we are given picture-postcard views of places and buildings—especially the houses and grounds of the rich and powerful—intertwined with Mr. Stern's cheerleading for postmodernism.

It seems entirely appropriate, then, that near the end of the last episode of *Pride of Place* we should see Mr. Stern and the Utopian architect Leon Krier being driven around Williamsburg, Virginia, in a horse-drawn carriage and agreeing that in many respects the reconstructed Colonial village represents the best hope for the “future” of American architecture. Whatever virtues Williamsburg may have as an example of historic preservation, it has nothing to contribute to the central architectural problems of our time. But considered as an exercise in nostalgia, as a cosmetic rehabilitation of days gone by, it stands as a perfect symbol of Mr. Stern's postmodernist conception of history and tradition. “At Williamsburg,” writes Mr. Stern, “one can simultaneously escape into history and escape from it.” Williamsburg also stands as a perfect symbol for the cultural vision of public television in this country. Instead of the BBC’s romantic tales of the British Raj, we get Professor Stern going around a reconstructed Colonial village in a horse-drawn carriage talking about the future of American architecture. If *Pride of Place* can be considered “educational” at all, it is only in a negative, admonitory sense. It is, alas, a cautionary tale.


Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest book is *The Fortunes of Permanence: Culture and Anarchy in an Age of Amnesia* (St. Augustine’s Press).

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 4 Number 9, on page 25
Copyright © 2019 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com
newcriterion.com/issues/1986/5/making-a-spectacle-of-architecture-on-pbs