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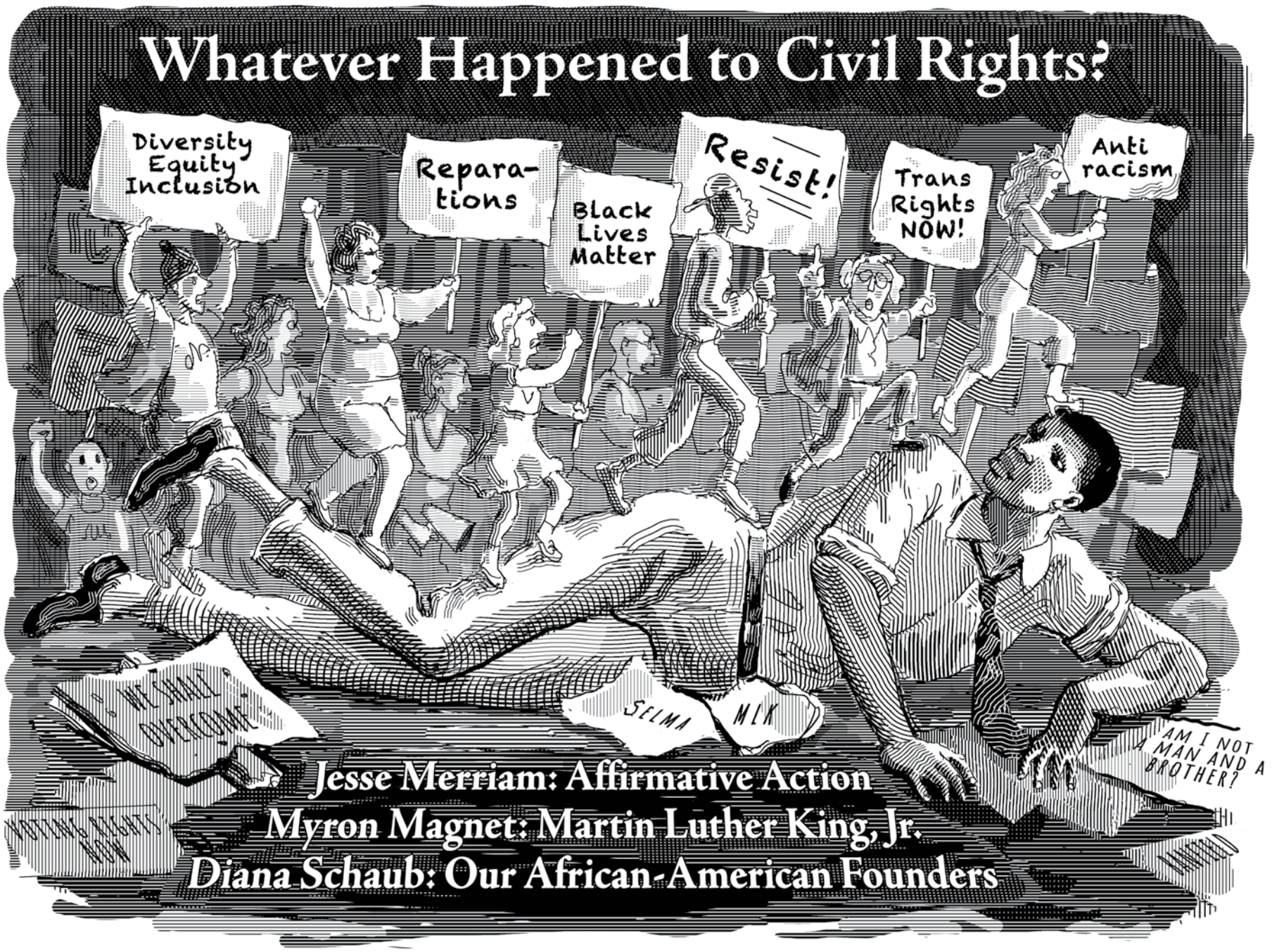

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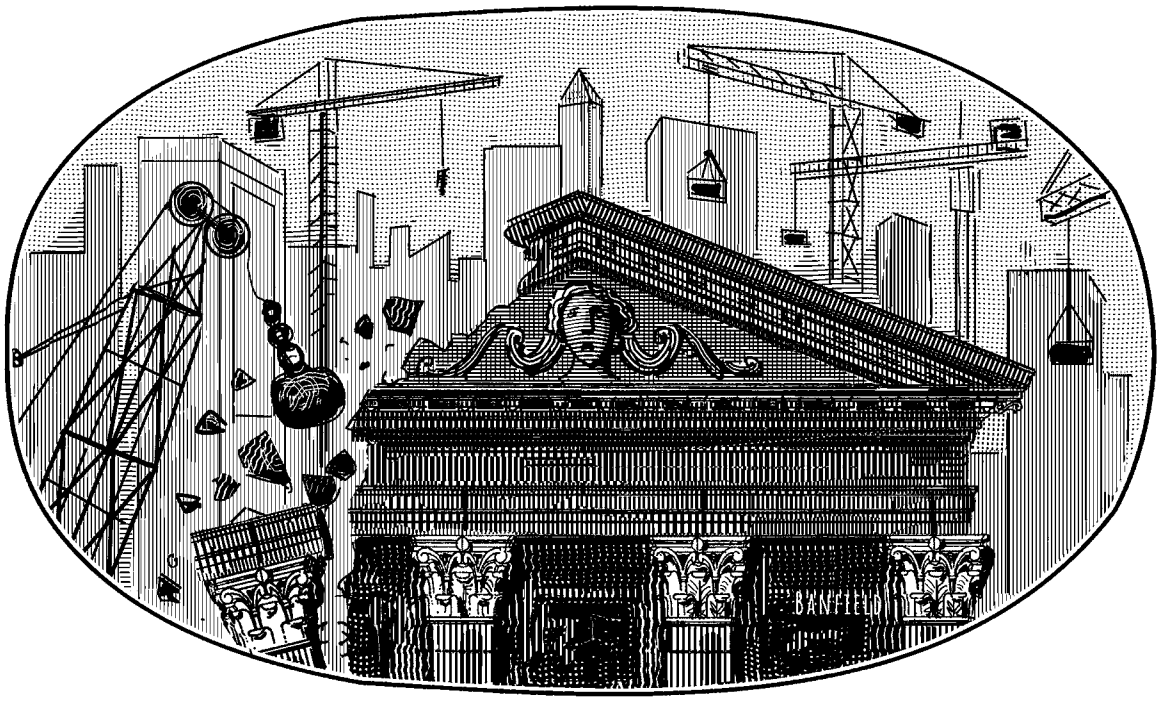
Book Review by Michael J. Lewis

Set in Stone

The Story of Architecture, by Witold Rybczynski.
Yale University Press, 360 pages, $40



An architect who writes for the general public is a rare thing. When architects write, it is usually about themselves. Even Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, prolific and gifted as they were, wrote chiefly to advance their own vision of architecture. Witold Rybczynski is the great exception, an architect who writes not for his fellow professionals but for anyone who cares about buildings, a category that should include almost all of us. During his lengthy teaching career—two decades at McGill University in Montreal and two more at the University of Pennsylvania—he has managed to turn out a book every couple of years. *The Story of Architecture* is his 22nd.

The book strikes you first by the clarity of its prose. Born to Polish-speaking parents who emigrated to Montreal, Rybczynski did not speak English until he was sent to school. A bilingual background leaves its mark on a writer, who grows up knowing that anything can be said in multiple ways, and that you must always be alert to the possibility of misunderstanding. One learns to write to be understood, not to impress or dazzle. That there is a public appetite for lucid, unpretentious writing about buildings is shown by the success of *Home*, Rybczynski's surprise 1986 bestseller.

At first glance, *The Story of Architecture* is a conventional survey, a brisk tour through seven thousand years of building activity, from its prehistoric rumblings through classical antiquity and the Middle Ages to the creation of the steel-frame skyscraper. But it is no comprehensive history. Instead, Rybczynski's method is to "select a few buildings from each period, and to describe the circumstances surrounding their commission, construction, and use." He typically juxtaposes a pair of buildings in a single short chapter, either to show how one inspired the other (e.g., San Vitale in Ravenna and the Palatine Chapel in Aachen; the Crystal Palace and the Eiffel Tower) or how two responded to the same cultural moment (Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum and Jørn Utzon's Sydney Opera House). The lesson is that a building is never a singular expression of genius, created in isolation, but is rooted in its time and place. It is this rootedness that gives it its richness.

Chronological surveys of art typically fit their examples into an evolutionary sequence, tracing the birth, growth, and maturation of new styles. There is something reassuring in this, to know that there is a purposeful direction to things, that we are not merely bobbing along on a turbid sea. The first true history of art, Giorgio Vasari's *Lives* (1550), depicted the Renaissance as one long ramp leading up to Michelangelo; Johann Winckelmann's *History of Art in Antiquity* (1764) did something similar with the Apollo Belvedere, "the highest ideal" of all ancient art, after which came the inevitable decline and fall. In much the same way, histories of architecture once culminated with the triumph of the International Style.

To write such a history, to create an official genealogy of whatever movement you happen to endorse, is nothing more than writing history backward. This might be called the Whig view of architectural history, and Rybczynski clearly has no use for it. He certainly is not impressed by the claims of International Style modernism. In an interview he once told how his wife presented him with a Wassily Chair—Marcel Breuer's tubular steel masterpiece—on their tenth anniversary. He lowered himself into it, felt extreme discomfort, and from then on used it only for hanging clothes.

Many who write about architecture are often more interested in the ideas behind a building than in the building itself. Not so with Rybczynski, whose book effectively ignores theory. What fascinates him are the objects, many of which never appear in the standard histories. For example, Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue's

Nebraska State Capitol, with its exquisite prairie-punctuating tower, one of the few state capitols that is not a pocket-sized paraphrase of the U.S. Capitol. Another is Raymond Hood's RCA Building at Rockefeller Center, a "massive slab whose clifflike setbacks resemble a stunning geological formation, endlessly repetitive and yet oddly organic." Both buildings exult in "a kind of joyful self-confidence" that could not be farther removed from contemporary European architecture, with its "stern Calvinist idea of modernity."

Because he would rather talk about objects than theory, Rybczynski pays close attention to detail. These are those specific decisions about moldings, joints, and so forth that an architect must make when turning a paper design into physical reality. The imaginative treatment of details can turn a thoroughly conventional design into something sublime, as Rybczynski believes the Lincoln Memorial to be. Here we learn how architect Henry Bacon took as his model the Parthenon, turned it 90 degrees, and roofed it with thin slices of translucent marble, making the interior a solemn neoclassical greenhouse. Instead of Greek acanthus leaves, he adorned its frieze with alternating leaves of northern laurel oak and longleaf pinecones, characteristic plants of the North and South, proposing reconciliation in botanical terms. Even the dimensions of each element were gauged to the experience of the viewer; the Lincoln statue, for example, is made 19 feet high so that you glimpse it as you mount the great stair.

All this was classical, but not in the narrow archaeological sense:

> Despite its name, the Lincoln Memorial does not commemorate Lincoln's life, his presidency, or his tragic death; it is essentially a war memorial—but of an unusual sort. It neither celebrates victory nor pays tribute to the more than six hundred thousand dead of that bloody conflict. Bacon created an architectural metaphor for a nation reunited after a harrowing civil war. That required presenting Lincoln both as a man—the tired leader—and as a national symbol, not deifying or canonizing him, but raising him to an almost mythic level.

For Rybczynski, this is public art at its finest, an arena in which the achievements of modern architecture have been modest, to say the least. This chapter should be read by anyone who thinks the Lincoln Memorial is nothing more than a pious platitude.

In short, *The Story of Architecture* is refreshingly curious and open-minded about the buildings it discusses. Only in the final chapters do we get a sense of ambivalence, that the examples cited are there because of their celebrity and not because of their intrinsic quality. Whether or not one admires Paris's Centre Pompidou, whose raw structural scaffold flaunts its color-coded mechanical guts on the outside, it is certainly exciting. Yet Rybczynski's account is conspicuously cool and dutiful. When he calls its designers, Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, "irreverent functionalists," it is not at all clear if he thinks that is a good thing.

What is decidedly not a good thing, in Rybczynski's view, is the rise of the globetrotting celebrity architect, the "starchitect." This inevitable consequence of "the global reach of modern media and the popularity of international travel" has had a pernicious effect on the making of buildings, as aspiring architects seek to cultivate their idiosyncratic signature styles in order to establish brand recognition. "What happens," Rybczynski asks, "when the demand for originality trumps other considerations?"

> In the past, architects were familiar with the places in which they built and with the people they built for—and the people they built for knew them. Globalization means that the most famous architects regularly built in far-off places and for people with whom they had only a passing acquaintance. This was different from Jørn Utzon spending nine years working on the Sydney Opera House or Louis Kahn devoting the last twelve years of his life to the Dhaka capitol.

But the book is not mindlessly hostile to the work of the starchitects. The first to earn that name was Frank Gehry and Rybczynski finds much to admire in his Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, a "silverplated peacock" that is at once "vertiginous, awesome, and carefree." But about his successor, Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, he is less enthusiastic. His CCTV Building in Peking was intended to repeat the sensation of the Bilbao Museum but succeeded only in being willfully eccentric (it has been compared to everything from a deformed donut to a walking pair of metallic trousers). Unlike Bilbao's jubilant appeal to the emotions, the CCTV Building appeals only to the intellect, and Rybczynski makes no effort to conceal his preference: "If Gehry is the 'smart man from Hollywood,' as he was once described, Koolhaas is the humorless man from the Low Countries." (It is a tribute to how gentle this book is that this is the only snide comment in it.)

The story of architecture is notable for how strongly it focuses on the architects themselves, as it walks us through their decision-making process. For Rybczynski, this is where the high drama of building resides, the perennial struggle to enclose space with matter in a way that says something meaningful about society or life or belief. It is a fundamentally humanistic way of looking at architecture, and it is not without a sense of tragedy. For one cannot build a building without facing limits—the limits of materials, of site, of budget, even of our lifespans—which makes every design a quest for the unattainable.

To regard architecture as a rational process of problem-solving is to make it ahistorical. Unlike buildings themselves, which are doomed to age and decay, an ingenious solution is a living thing. Like a brilliant chess move, it stands outside of time. So, it is satisfying that *The Story of Architecture* is framed by two similar essays in structure and image. It begins with the Cairn of Barnenez, a massive funeral complex in Brittany from about 4800 B.C., which was built with admirable economy: "the exterior wall was built with larger stones carefully fitted together, and the leftover space was filled with rubble." Seven thousand years later, Gehry did much the same when he draped paper-thin scales of titanium over his Guggenheim Bilbao, where "the structure is there simply to support the architecture, not to define it." In each case, the façade is a veneer applied to a functional core, making formal imagery and structural reality independent of one another.

The Story of Architecture is one of those books that work on multiple levels. For the beginner it is an engaging introduction to architecture, not merely its history but the way in which buildings are designed and built. And it is equally rewarding for the scholar, who will find new information in each of its 39 chapters. Perhaps most appealing is its humility. One reads its lively account of the design and construction of Moshe Safdie's sensational Habitat 67 Montreal and is never told that Rybczynski himself worked on that building in his first job as a freshly graduated architect. But as I said at the outset, Witold Rybczynski is the unusual architect who does not write about himself.

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