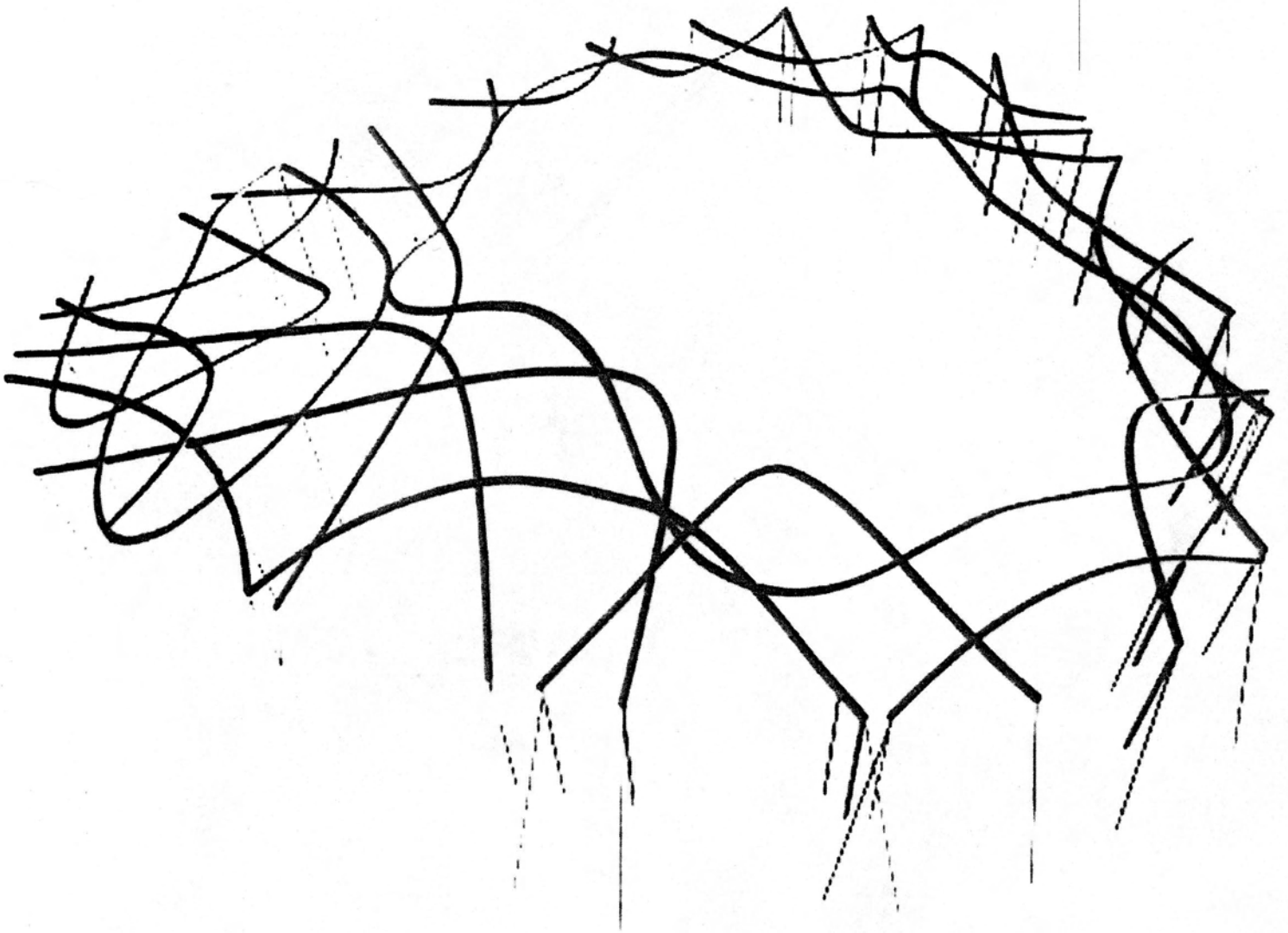


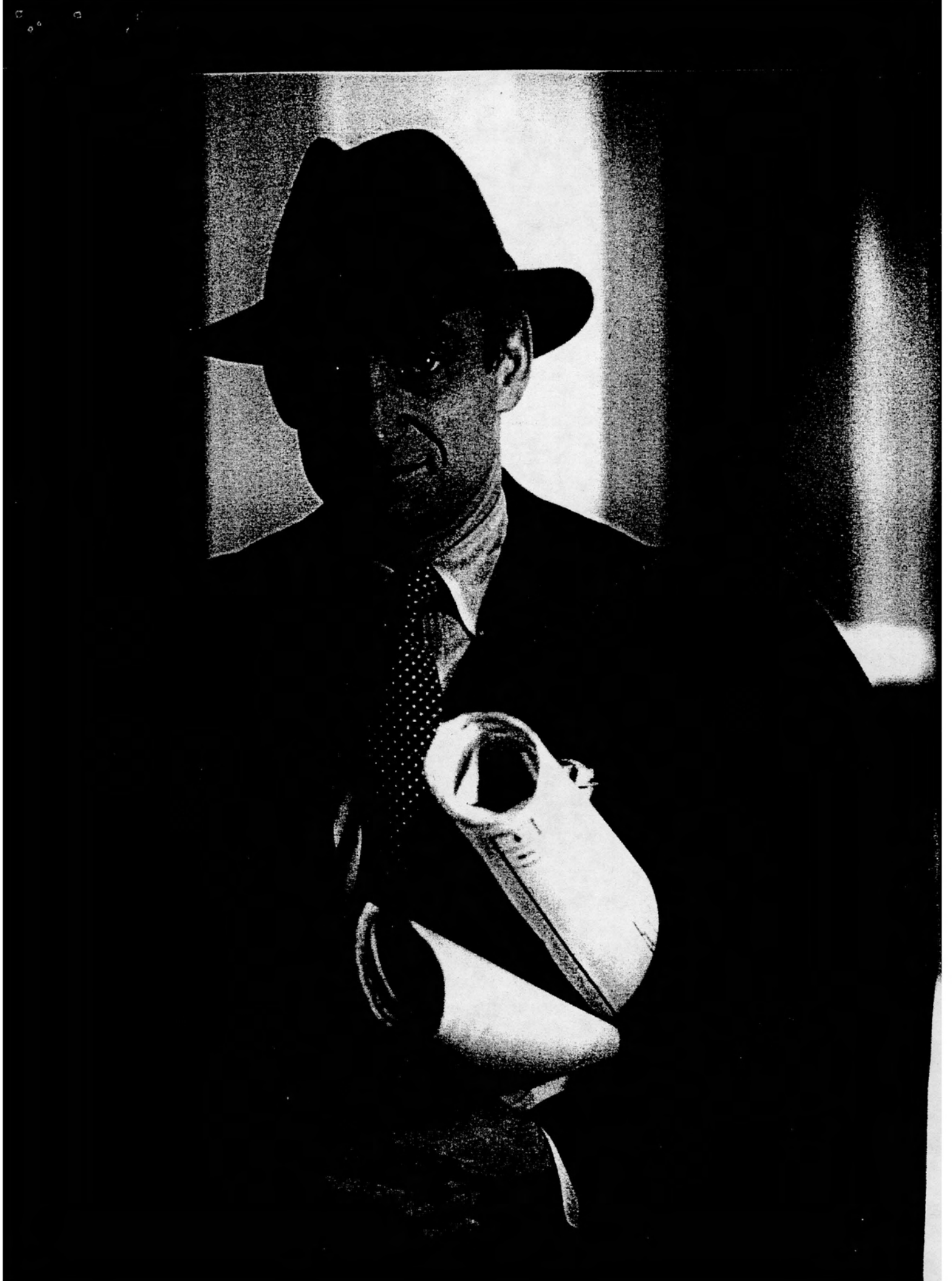
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33





Photograph of Robert Stern  
in *Buildings and Projects*,  
1-1985

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## **Mark Jarzombek**

### The Saturations of Self: Stern's (and Scully's) Role in (Stern's) History

#### Preface

This article completes the sequence of four articles written for *Assemblage*. The first two, "Ready-made Traces in the Sand: The Sphinx, the Chimera, and Other Discontents in the Practice of Theory" and "De-Describing the Language of Looking: Wölfflin and the History of Aesthetic Experientialism," investigated issues about the underlying textuality of modernist architectural discourse.<sup>1</sup> The first looked into the question of tropes, the second into the complex disseminational practices involved in the manufacture of the myth of modernism's optical-centeredness. The third and fourth articles, "Recognizing Ruskin: *Modern Painters* and the Refractions of Self" and this present one, focus on the question of self-fashioning.<sup>2</sup> In the Ruskin article, my investigation revolved around the relationship between Ruskin's various identities-of-self and his approach to theory, in particular those involving the figures of Turner and Ruskin's father. My intention was to discuss the problem of "transference," using Ruskin to demonstrate how quasi-autobiographical figures, some generated by Ruskin, others by me, function in the interstices of history and fiction. In this article, I claim a greater sense of historical-professional distance to the subject under investigation, but I still admit that the writing of history, much like the desire for objectivity, is integral to the desires of self.

## Mastering the Narrative

It should no longer come as a surprise how thoroughly our understanding of modern architecture is conditioned by modernity's own historicizing narratives. How can we overlook such pairings between historian and architect as Adolf Behne and Walter Gropius, Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, and Sigfried Giedion and Le Corbusier?<sup>3</sup> The dismantling of these relationships has been an important aspect of the historiographic research of the past two decades. Nonetheless, the tradition perseveres, having been carried forward by Colin Rowe's and Kenneth Frampton's introductions to *Five Architects*. More recently, Stanislaus von Moos has now been called in to write an introduction for the monograph on the work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, William Curtis for Álvaro Siza, Werner Oechslin for Mario Botta, and Colin Rowe for Rob Krier, to name just a few examples.<sup>4</sup> Is this part of the continuity of avant-gardism's vibrant presence or is it a belated and vicarious attempt to relive a fading avant-gardist fantasy? What is certain is that what was once an anxious and risky polemic has now become a routine spurred on just as much by a legitimate need for critical reflection as by the forces of patronage and promotionalism (not to mention the book marketing strategies of the likes of Rizzoli).

All of this would be more interesting to Ph.D. students than to anyone else if a new pairing had not emerged in recent years to remind us of just how integrally connected contemporary architecture is to the traditional web of historicizing and professionalizing discourses that claim to make it comprehensible. I speak of the relationship between Vincent Scully and Robert Stern, which came to a head when Scully agreed to write the introduction to the second volume of Stern's *Buildings and Projects* of 1992.<sup>5</sup> This is a short and unassuming two-page piece.<sup>6</sup> Yet it can hardly be ignored, if only because we are dealing here not with a historian and an

architect, but, in essence, with two historians. And when we also take into account that Stern is the proud student of Scully and the self-proclaimed embodiment of Scully's idea of a "physical historian," it is clear that this introduction takes on complexities hard to match in twentieth-century architectural discourse.<sup>7</sup> It presents an opportunity to admit outright the difficulty of writing a history adequate to the historicism of Stern's postmodernism.

One of the primary issues that the Stern/Scully equation presents for study is the relationship between history and self.<sup>8</sup> Though this relationship is at the very root of modernity (if not of bourgeois culture), architectural history does not know how adequately to accommodate itself to the question of the "design-of-self," even though architectural history, as a discipline, is dependent on the importance of the idea of "design." The meaning of the self in the context of history is assumed to lie in the realm of singular interpretation, and not in the diagrammatic and always partial totality of its readings. Some scholars will, of course, say that the self has the privilege of its own literality and thus is only as significant as its own author determines it to be. Everything else is unwanted (and, for many, unwarranted). This point of view serves merely to intimidate. The literality of the self is a system like any other.

My comments could begin anywhere, but let me start with the suggestion that Scully's introduction to *Buildings and Projects* be seen as a response to the introduction he wrote in 1977 to the second edition of Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction*. This piece reinforced Scully's claim from 1974 that Venturi, not Stern, was to inherit the baton that once belonged to Frank Lloyd Wright.<sup>9</sup> Even though Scully knew Stern much better than Venturi, Stern, he wrote, was too "heavy handed" and too "self-conscious" in his application of history to be an effective designer. Stern took this criticism very seriously, and in the following years

he made a concerted effort to demonstrate the legitimacy of that form of responsible historicism that in the wilder days of the 1970s seemed to be so impossibly self-conscious. By the time he wrote the first volume of his *Buildings and Projects* of 1986, it was clear that he was asking for vindication. Stern claimed — presumably with all the humility that goes with the awkward act of self-observation — that “the work of my office . . . cumulatively expresses the process of intellectual and emotional transformation, or maturation, which is the distinguishing mark of an individual’s search for meaning.”<sup>10</sup>

Scully got the message. In his introduction to volume two, he wrote that “I believe that Robert A. M. Stern’s recent architecture has come to speak for itself. Its purpose and effects are perfectly clear, fully formed, and no longer require extensive introduction.”<sup>11</sup> A statement from such an eminent historian cannot easily be ignored.

Obviously, Stern must have done something between 1977 and 1992 to convince Scully of his legitimacy. And most certainly it was that he developed his reputation as a real historian. Stern’s books, including *New Directions in American Architecture* of 1969, *New York 1900: Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism 1890–1915* of 1983, which he coauthored, and *Modern Classicism* of 1988, belong to the few writings by a fully practicing architect ever to be reviewed by the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*.<sup>12</sup> It was no small accomplishment.

To Stern’s credit, he has managed to demonstrate the viability of the double identity of architect-historian.<sup>13</sup> And this, too, is no small accomplishment. After all, art practice and art history have long since gone separate ways. That such a separation has *not* occurred in architecture has a lot to do with the struggle in the 1970s to reclaim architectural history for architects and to keep it from becoming an art historical

subspecialty. Several architect-scholars played a role in the battle, not only Stern. I think, for example, of Anthony Vidler and Stanford Anderson.<sup>14</sup> But whereas Vidler and Anderson called for a more intellectualist approach to architecture (cultural hermeneutics for the one and Popperian historiography for the other), Stern stood fast to conservative populism. Thus unlike Vidler and Anderson who founded Ph.D. programs, Stern directs a preservation program that hopes to have a direct impact on architectural practice. The result is a fascinating tension between Stern’s desire to maintain credibility as a historian and his ambition to remain comprehensible to the world as known by his clients.

Despite Stern’s repudiation of “theory,” it would be wrong to assume that his writings lack theoretical density. On the contrary, they possess a powerful *unclarity* in the complex overlapping of autobiographical notations, academic positionings, cultural politics, and populist polemics. To start with, *Buildings and Projects*, though at first glance so superficial, is an integral part of Stern’s construction of his *new* self. It documents the architect as sympathetic and capable, with the text mixing the rhetoric of personal friendliness with that of professional responsibility:

This Shingle Style house sits on fallow farmland in Southampton; its horizontal lines, low brick plinth, and gently raked roof tie the house to a relentlessly flat landscape.

A long, low silhouette is presented to the south, but to the north, where the site falls off, a rubble clad basement story is exposed, offering a more impressive mass.<sup>15</sup>

The banality of the language is not as innocent as it pretends to be. It replicates the entries to the *Essential Guide to Traditional Homes* published by Home Planners and distributed around the country by the thousands. In it we read sentences like these:

This traditional home fits right in whether built in the busy city or a secluded rural area.

A convenient first-floor master suit also includes terrace access.

A traditional favorite, this home combines classic style with progressive floor planning.<sup>16</sup>

The text of *Buildings and Projects* thus suggests that Americans are tied into a language of real-estate historicism that, far from being just an accident of culture, is the basis for their unique and genuine way of “knowing” architecture. It is a language that, presumably, “needs no introduction” (to borrow Scully’s phrase). Real-estate lingo, in all its directness, becomes the equivalent for Americans of what *Bauen*, in all its difficulty, is for Germans. All the more reason, therefore, to reject the artificiality of what Stern, in *Pride of Place: Building the American Dream*, calls “Walter Gropius’s Cambridge” and “Mies van der Rohe’s Chicago.”<sup>17</sup>

Stern wants readers to note, however, that he is not just a glorified contractor. The trope of commonness is elegantly injected with the trope of “living history.” In essence, the deadest form of architectural discourse is illuminated from within by an ontological premise that gives the equation its sense of genuineness. Stern — the “new Stern,” that is — lets it be known that he is no Venturian banalist. His roots, as he explains in *Pride of Place*, lie in the great achievements of “H. H. Richardson’s New England” and in “Raymond Hood’s New York.”<sup>18</sup> The skyscrapers of Manhattan, Stern adds, “seemed to me the peaks of an astonishing mountain range: fabulous buildings . . . were wonderfully intermeshed in my schoolboy’s imagination with images of King Kong and the experience of Fifth Avenue shopping sprees.”<sup>19</sup> But the significance of these “roots,” Stern points out, took on resonance, only once he entered design school at Yale and discovered how little value they were given.<sup>20</sup> But if Yale’s design teachers were out of touch with the reality around them, Vincent Scully was not. Scully, as Stern writes, looking back, could “make the buildings of the past and present come alive as a continuum of artistic passion and cultural concern.”<sup>21</sup>

But Stern, in narrating his youthful entry into the embrace of history, now faces a problem, the very problem that Scully recognized in 1974. If he were to end his autobiographic portrayal with Scully, his work would smack of the same academicism that Scully accused him of in the 1970s. He would be back at square one. Stern thus realized that he would have to portray himself as something *more* than a student of history. He had to invade the domain of history itself and what better way to be a “historian” than to coin a new historical term, “modern traditionalism.” It not only serves to define the lofty ideal of his historical age, it also, supposed

offers the most optimistic and accommodating of all the points of view and best renders architecture capable of achieving in our time the integrative role it enjoyed in its most illustrious period

Stern, in writing about his own work, puts these “principles” into play by claiming that “despite the chaos that rages everywhere around us, each building [of mine] still represents an opportunity to affirm and reestablish the inherent order of things.” This is why *Buildings and Projects* is filled with such weighty words as “dignity,” “dialogue,” “balance,” and “openness.” Carefully edited into the language of real-estate jargon, they evoke all that is “good” in history and presumably in modern traditionalism. Cynic and negativity deflect as if they were the attributes of some dark and brooding “other.”

The trouble is that this “feel-goodism” permits Stern to idealize history in ways that defy any kind of objective explanation. Consider, for example, Stern’s appropriation of Scully’s concept of “Shingle Style,” a term that gained currency in Scully’s book by the same title was published in 1955.<sup>23</sup> Scully’s designation, rooted in the unflappable confidence of his research, becomes reduced to a pattern language the superficiality of which is now its essence! While there is nothing wrong with this, problems set in when the buildings and the language that is supposed to describe them no longer

ve the same historical cross-referentiality. When Stern scribes a house of his as “a contemporary essay in the Single Style,” we are no longer sure what this means.<sup>24</sup>

re lesson, I would argue, that we learn from all of this is not necessarily how architecture creates a “dialogue” with the past, but how neo-Victorian self-righteousness fuses with a neohistoricist presumption of accessibility in a way that expunges upper-middle-class architecture from any and all residual traces of cynicism and guilt. As a result, Stern’s stipolemic polemic is trapped in the paradox of a self-consciousness of unself-consciousness. It exists in an open continuum somewhere between modernism’s opposition to history and postmodernism’s return to history. It nurtures the “tradition” of historical forms to counter the narrowness of modernism and the “tradition” of historical research to counter the excesses of postmodernism, but it floats in the uselessness of an ideal that belies its own professed interest in historical reality. We have to wonder, therefore, what other historians — those who understand the importance of history, but who reject “-ism” history as the obvious solution — are supposed to do when confronted with these historical fantasies for which there are tantalizingly few rules.

### Scully/Stern and the (Anti-Avant-Gardist) Encodings of Self

There are four levels to Stern’s historicity of self: the impersonal, the personal, the academic, and the abstract. They are related in the following way. The impersonal language of real-estate historicism folds over into a narration of personal struggle framed in the authenticity of “roots.” Similarly, the agenda of cultural reform folds over into an art historical reality that (supposedly) proves its worth. The equation is completed by Scully’s introduction, which, in my final reading, helps us take up the issue of the relationship of postmodern historicism to the avant-garde. Stern, for

example, knows that the subject of postmodern history has to be defined not by the sheer will of a person’s creativity, but by how well the person functions *within* the framework of society. And Scully, once again, obliges. Stern, we are told, “knows the good,” is “a formidable exemplar” of some of “our society’s major qualities,” and “is here for keeps.”<sup>25</sup>

But Scully plays his part not without a cunning of his own. The praise that he lavishes on Stern is rooted, so it turns out, in his *own* understanding of what constitutes “history.”

Stern’s greatest quality, whether as architect or critic, has always been his ability — a very rare one — to perceive what exists, not to twist phenomena to his perceptions but to *see* them, to recognize them as they are.<sup>26</sup>

This italicized “seeing” is, of course, a cliché pointing to the modernist infatuation with its own correctness. Nonetheless, it is here dusted off to suggest that Stern is less postmodern and more modern, and that, furthermore, he is now in tune with the Enlightenment demand for historical responsibility. And this means that Scully is transferring some of his own autobiographical desires onto Stern, for is it not Scully who would like to go down in history as someone who does not twist phenomena to his perceptions but *sees* them as they are? After all, this is how we have already come to admire him.<sup>27</sup> Thus even though Scully is attempting to extend *Stern’s* profile into the secured monumentality of history, absolving him from the earlier criticism of being too “self-conscious,” he limits Stern’s identity to that of his *own* aspirations as historian. Stern, naturally, welcomes this elegantly constructed praise. In fact, he points to it in the acknowledgments that precede Scully’s introduction, stating that Scully “in the assessment” of his work “has been characteristically deep-seeing and direct.”<sup>28</sup>

This could all be written off as innocent flattery of the master, but that is to allow its contrivance to work its magic with no awareness of the theoretical issues at stake. The

italicized *seeing* is a reference to avant-gardism written against the grain of its own premise; for this *seeing*, in all its “directness,” subverts the modernist premise of a penetrating gaze that is at first incomprehensible and only gradually understood with the help of the critic-historian. This *seeing* is supposed to point to a form of cognition that is understood from the beginning and that does not require “the historian” to contextualize it.

In this sense, Scully has changed his tune just as much as Stern. We need only to again compare Scully’s introduction to *Buildings and Projects* with that of *Complexity and Contradiction*, which legitimates and contextualizes the avant-gardist moves of Venturi, in particular those having to do with Venturi’s interest in literary theory (especially T. S. Eliot). The situation with Stern is altogether different and more complex. Since he makes *no* claim to be avant-garde, his work would be endangered by any hint that he needs a historian (critic) to defend his position in history, which is why the book has to be at least half portfolio and ostentatiously “professional.” Scully is aware of the paradox that this forces him into and adapts his role accordingly. He no longer discusses architecture in the context of its difficulty, as he did with Venturi, but in the context of its cultural normalization: “[The] purpose and effects [of Stern’s architecture] are perfectly clear, fully formed, and no longer require extensive introduction.”<sup>29</sup> Scully sacrifices his identity “as historian” (that is, as the person who understands “difficulty”) to make way for the integration of history in contemporary culture. He makes Stern’s architecture less visible, less contentious, and less troublesome.

To better understand the nature of the problem, let us look back at such figures as Erich Mendelsohn and Bernard Rudofsky, both of whom were also trying to bring modernism into contact with the spiritual values of cultural history. But if Mendelsohn and Rudofsky looked for a connection

between modern architecture and primeval principles, rejecting academic rules about form as an artifice of bourgeois civilization, Stern seems to be looking for the connection between culture and history precisely in its academic rules, rules that can then be adjusted and modernized according to the client’s needs. Thus, whereas Mendelsohn could champion culture and still reject history, Stern sees the operations of the architect and the operations of the historian as much closer. To bolster this synthesis, Stern quotes from Scully’s *American Architecture and Urbanism* of 1969. The quotation appears on the title page of *Modern Classicism*:

History is essential for architecture, because the architect, who must now deal with everything urban, will therefore always be dealing with historical problems — with the past and, a function of the past, with the future. So the architect should be regarded as a kind of physical historian, because he constructs relationships across time; *civilizing in fact*.

It is clear why this paragraph is attractive to Stern. It implies that architects, as “physical historians,” are more successful in preserving history, and all its presumed virtues, in a culture than are scholarly historians. Stern can supply a clear and more pragmatically useful notion of “history” than is proposed by Rudofsky’s vague nostalgia for Mediterranean villages. But it may be a Pyrrhic victory. If the primeval nity of village architecture can be rejected as false, so, too, is the upper-middle-class notion of art history.

And so we wind up with yet another wonderful symmetry. Scully folds Stern into his own modernist/nationalist agenda only to discover that he has to “dehistorianize” himself to be a better spokesman for the generic consciousness that is supposedly so fully historicized in Stern’s architecture; in a parallel move, Stern, appropriating the world of Scully, “historianizes” himself to make way for the grand (and “humble”) project of making history meaningful.



his pulls Stern dangerously close to the academicity of historical understanding. So in a final turn of the screw, Scully, having first appropriated Stern, repositions him within Stern's historiography. When he states that Stern's architecture "has come to speak for itself," he is referring to a pivotal chapter in Stern's *Modern Classicism* entitled "Architecture Speaking for Itself." In this chapter, Stern argues that several late-nineteenth-century architects, especially Tony Garnier, invented the "language of Classicism" to create "a new, powerful architectural idiom," an idiom that he, of course, aims to maintain in his own work.<sup>30</sup> Scully thus places Stern within Stern's subjectivist historiographic fantasy, making it difficult to think outside its frame of reference.

One might wonder whether Scully is not playing with Stern like a cat with a mouse. He first legitimates Stern's position by integrating it to his own perspective; he then extends his acceptance of Stern beyond the domain of "professional" history; and he finally reduces him — for, ultimately, Stern must be historicized outside of his own context — to the narrow self-serving vision of Stern's embattled historiographic aesthetic. Is this genuine praise, innocent flattery, or a cruel hoax?

### Locating the Subject Within (the Subject)

It might very well be that Stern is a greater master at the game of history than he is at that of architecture. For if we take the whole package — Stern the advocate of traditional modernism, the self-devised historical construct in which he defines the "historical" appeal of his architecture; Stern the author of *Modern Classicism*, the architectural historiographic framework in which he packages his broader identity; Stern the "physical historian" working to rebuild a civilized historicism in the chaos of the world; Stern the ahistorical voice of nobility and responsibility; and

Stern the student of one of the most eminent historians of our time — we encounter a situation that makes it difficult to discuss Stern, much less his postmodernity, without getting lost in the tangled overlay of personal, hermeneutical, conceptual, and historiographic scales that I have tried to outline above. But in thinking about the various practices inherent in this system of narrations and cross-narrations, it is important to recognize the genius that fully understands the power inherent in the intersection of all these ambiguities. They can be used to create the semblance of a world in which one can "belong" to a form of knowing without having to openly discuss its parameters. It is a form of magic and, like magic, it demands that its illusions be respected.

The photograph of Stern as it appears in the frontispiece of the first volume of *Buildings and Projects* — and reproduced at the beginning of this essay — is an important piece of this magic.<sup>31</sup> It portrays Stern as an illustrious designer running off to meet a client with a smile on his face. The monochromatic dark suit, the conservative tie, the silk handkerchief in the vest pocket, the Mona Lisa smile, the coat draped capelike over the shoulders speak of him not only as a successful member of the working bourgeoisie, but also as the holder of important spiritual and aesthetic values. The soft tones of the face and the direct glance imply a tenderness that seems to be pulled out of the reluctant architect by the studied focus of the camera. The hands are interlocked in a calm, meditative pose, while the scrolls project forward out of his coat like Samurai swords at the ready. The endearing qualities of the architect are posited here in reference to the enduring qualities of history.

The iconographic references are clear. The cloak is from Frank Lloyd Wright, the hat is from Humphrey Bogart, and the pose is from Howard Roark.<sup>32</sup> The mid-century look is even more obvious if we think of Arnold Neuman or Alfred Eisenstaedt, who gave us those wonderfully pensive images



2. Photograph of Hugh Casson  
by Alfred Eisenstaedt

of “the creative set.” Indeed, the 1940s and 1950s seems a reasonable time for a self-proclaimed traditional modernist. Anything earlier would have been too radical (and possibly too European or too “German”) and anything later would have forced the architect into the uncomfortable world of the late 1960s.

The photograph puts Stern into Neuman’s restrained modernism in the same way that Stern puts *himself* into the discourse of “classicism.” It is an insertion strategy that is key to the relationship between Stern’s historicism and his architecture. Stern states, for example, that the 222 Berkeley Street office building in Boston is one “that could successfully operate in the marketplace, yet fit in with the most elaborate yet fragile urban contexts in America.”<sup>33</sup> This statement reveals more than its casual placement in one of Stern’s articles might suggest. Its referent is not the build-

ing, but Stern himself. Stern takes pride in fitting in. He is a patriot — to use an alternate military metaphor to that of the avant-garde — standing in the middle of the crowd rather than at the forefront. He identifies with the principles of the group (that is, “classicism”) and does not try to “subvert” these principles to other ends (as supposedly the avant-garde does). Stern’s genius thus lies in a modernist collaging of historical “realities” to create a proposition of a contextualized self that appears to rise intact from the seductions of the self-fashioning ego.

This strategy also applies to Stern’s self-imagining as author. Take, for example, *Modern Classicism*. First, it outlines the “rise of modern classicism” with dutiful reference to all the standard monuments of European architectural history. Then it turns to recent events by organizing architectural production according to stylistic differences, with individual architects slotted into appropriate categories. Despite all the discussion about the importance of history as a “civilizing force,” there is no discussion of the problematic of history writing. Everything is presented as if it were ever so obvious and ever so reasonable. But this “reasonableness” is the ultimate disguise, for like a Renaissance master, Stern produces a text that includes his own portrait (and many times over, for that matter). As far as I can see, there are no equivalents among twentieth-century texts in architecture. Stern writes about “Stern”; it is the perfect self-fashioning insertion.<sup>34</sup> Though he talks about himself in the first person singular (this being presumably the honest thing to do), we might wonder why all the other architects are discussed in the third person. Stern’s problem is easy to see. To ask a fifty or so architects who are discussed in the book to write one-page analysis of their own work would have resulted in chaos. To exclude himself from the text was equally impossible. Stern had no choice. Nonetheless, he becomes the very fault line where Stern as architect and Stern as historian compete against each other. I am not suggesting a for-

ula of how to approach the problem more successfully, but I do believe that to conceal subjectivity behind a veil of historical propriety and yet to live in the chimerical world of disciplinary disjunctures undermines the need for a great transparency about the vulnerabilities that such multiple positioning entails.

In essence, the book wants its readers to sense the “authenticity” of Stern’s search; but in the process, it removes the distortures inherent in the individual’s assessment of his own historical context. The implication, not to mention danger, of a work like this becoming “history” to be disseminated among gullible architecture students is that the writing and the presentation of history coalesce into a condition where analysis, polemic, flattery, and revisionism are rendered so indistinguishable that no innocent reading could ever unravel it all.

### Building on a Capital Idea

The perplexities of how to write a critical history of Stern’s postmodernism — namely, one that would include the multiple machinations and subversions of the architect in his own historicities — are deepened if we turn to the 1994 article in *Life Magazine* featuring Stern’s “American Dream House.”<sup>35</sup> American Dream Houses are not insignificant to Stern’s design-reform strategy. But they are more than just “architecture,” they are the link between cultural history and autobiographic self-imaging, for his Dream Houses, like Stern himself, are “eddies of calm in a sea of doubt.” To buy into this myth, we can call *Life Magazine*’s toll-free phone number and purchase the plans for Stern’s house at the tidy sum of \$450. (The cost of the house is supposedly a mere \$150,000; the price of the land is separate, of course.) The first thing we should remember is that several major building contractors, like Ryland Homes, can put up a dream house anywhere in America according to

similar specifications. House plans can also be purchased from *Better Homes and Gardens*. Hundreds of thousands of these houses already dot what is left of the American landscape. So what makes Stern’s infomercial so unique? This is the first instance in a long time that an architect of major stature has professed an interest in the American suburban box as if it were still a significant expression of an American philosophical essence. Stern is claiming to take back from the contractor the torch once held by such luminaries as Frank Lloyd Wright and Charles and Ray Eames. And why not? With all that money being spent on houses and so little of it going to real architects, why should someone like Stern not be entitled to join the fray and break into the housing market?

If that were all it was, there would hardly be a problem. But Stern is eager to use the opportunity to once again demonstrate his new historical legitimacy. The article points out that, formerly, Stern’s work had “a self-conscious jokiness about it,” implying that youthful rebellion has given way to mature conservatism. “He now takes history to heart and calls himself a modern traditionalist.” The article also notes that this has come with the blessing of Scully:

‘He has learned that it’s much better to be correct,’ says Yale art history professor emeritus Vincent Scully, who taught Stern. His designs respect their surroundings.

The public interiorizing of “architectural correctness” again implies that we (as *spectators* of history’s search for a proper location in American architecture, as *students* of how to make an American architecture, and as *consumers* of an American Dream) should all sympathize with the magnificent process in which history, once denied any role in modern architecture, has now come full circle to lead the way back to cultural equilibrium.

But what about the designs themselves? Stern makes it clear that architecture is a “narrative art” and that “to be really ar-

ticulate as an architect" is to raise one's voice "to heights of lyricism, to make each element, each word, resonate with meaning."<sup>36</sup> Where now do we find that "lyricism" in these houses? The façade is published with snippets of text explaining the house's significant features: the gable, the porch, the garage. One snippet states that "Stern calls windows the eyes of a house."<sup>37</sup> I was drawn to this statement because of the importance that seeing — and seeing-the-truth, in particular — seems to have for the all-important narratability of the building. If the windows are the eyes of the house, then what is the face?

This is no casual question, for the theme of reading "the face" is brought up repeatedly. Stern is pictured, for example, seated at a desk with one hand resting lovingly on a model of the house, the other pointing to his head, as if to demonstrate the link between thought and production, between face and façade. In another photograph his face is *directly* over his model house. Presumably, Stern has an eye to such sentences by Scully as "We can empathize with [these buildings] as the embodiment of sentient beings like ourselves."<sup>38</sup> By why quote from Scully when Stern states in his article that "as with people, so with houses. . . . Character can show on the face"? And what is the "face" Stern is proffering? He is softly smiling, and his head is high and confident. But just in case potential clients have trouble reading this, Stern lets it be known in the text that his designs are "spirited, cheerful, and sturdy" and that they evoke "an American tradition almost 400 years old." This is the face, presumably, that the American middle class prefers. Who, after all, would like to live next to unspirited, dreary, and unsteady neighbors?

Pop characterology, for that is ultimately what this is, carries with it a dubious thesis that works of art constitute a form of being that can be known by the direct act of seeing (where the word *seeing* is emphasized, as in the Scully

quote, like some sort of purifying revelation of being). Though facile, it has had and continues to have its eminent defenders in art, architecture, philosophy, history, handwriting analysis, and politics. It is a theory that purports to bypass whatever identity we may have in the real world so as to tap into our "inner" consciousness and bring out the truth that lies behind the mask. In looking at a Stern house assuming that we are "normal" citizens, we should be saying, Now *there* lives an upright family. But even though most Americans would put the equation of external looks and inner essence into the harmless tradition of capitalist discourse (people who look good are successful, meaning people who want to be successful should try to "look good"), we should not forget the pattern of abuse throughout the century, a pattern that should at least force us to be skeptical about the great ideals of a self-liberating opticality before reaffirming it as essential to the American Dream.<sup>39</sup>

The problems inherent in Stern's affirmations of bourgeois aesthetic wholesomeness are evident in a glaring inconsistency. Characterology implies congruity between inner world and outer expression. Stern points to his head and to model of his house, implying that "This made That." But if we remove the "cheerful" façade of the house and look at the site where eye and mask come together, we find some curious things exposed to light: a garage, a toilet, a closet, and a shoe cabinet! Is this misfit between the happy face and the nitty-gritty realities of everyday living the values Stern is championing? We would hardly think so. It must be an accident. But such is not — and cannot — be the case. The text points directly to the masklike character of the façade. As to the windows — those so-called eyes of the house — "the wood mullions separating the panes are glue on but *appear to be real*." And as to the garage doors, "they are like having one's garbage out front. Here [Stern] turns the garage doors to the side. Only the driveway is seen. . . . The triple windows add light and *complete the disguise*." V



3. Photograph of Stern from *Life Magazine*, June 1994

can hardly believe our eyes. If this “completes” the disguise, where did it begin? Is Stern teaching us the language of American cheerfulness or the language of deception?

And so, straightaway, we enter into the crisis of appearance and reality that in terms of “reading” architecture is no more complex than reading history. But if the American Dream turns out to be nothing but a mask, how can we escape from drawing the conclusion that it is rooted in a quagmire of pretentiousness and hypocrisy? How can we refute the thought that the infomercial is actually a set up in which the clients are conned into believing that their home represents an “investment” in American consciousness without realizing the incomprehensible shallowness of this image?<sup>40</sup>

Though all this demonstrates the obvious impossibility of curing social ills through a “comprehensible” architecture, the true problem that emerges is where this leaves the historian, once modernity has tried so vainly to enclose itself, yet again, in its own contrite expressions to render invisible the complex interpenetrations of architecture with agencies of cultural pedagogy. If we argue that these complexities are secondary to Stern’s position in architectural history, how then do we write a history where we can discuss them without falling into the cycle of affirmation that they demand?

And how do we deal with the fact that any skepticism thrown its way will be written off by Stern’s defenders as typical of those who are removed from life’s vibrant search for meaning? Despite the messy self-incriminations this entails, I would still argue that, if we are looking for the means by which to come to terms with Stern, it is precisely the *lack* of authenticity in combination with its various historical and capitalist discourses that makes Stern so deserving of historical analysis. In other words, it is his *commonness*, as opposed to his rarity, that makes his work so significant. The subject cannot be extracted from the polemic of its own subjectivity; the postmodernist ego has also to accept the consequences of its postmodernity.

### Conclusion: The Dialectic of Self-Fashioning

The complicities between architect and historian, like those between image and reality, can by no stretch of the imagination be separated from the very aesthetic world in which they reside. As full participants in this commerce-of-identities, *each and every one of us* expects — and indeed are all experts at recognizing and establishing — the balancing act between rhetoric and truth. In fact, we have become so expert in reading this balance that we willingly bracket out

the problematic aspects of truth construction to secure for ourselves a measure of usable “truth” simply in order to get on with life. Laws, like truth-in-advertising laws, help us to define the boundaries when it comes to consumer production, but in the arts, there are less risks and more risk takers. And while this has certainly kept the discourse interesting, we have to admit that unless there is some form of resistance, the intellectual content of architecture will always be what suffers. Rhetoric and image can more quickly become “truth” than the slow working of critical self-reflection, which is all the more reason to not elevate certain forms of cultural discourse — that is, architectural history — out of messy interrogations. Here, for example, the accommodations among Scully, Stern, pop capitalism, and the manipulations of self are not thought to be a problem appropriate to the “noble” discourse of architecture. But the consequence of this silence is that the ideal of authenticity is doomed to become little more than a fantasy propagated by cultural forces that perpetuate and simultaneously satisfy the need for faux-critical social certainty. A history of architecture, when it subsumes this fantasy as the primary avenue in creating a discourse-of-meaningfulness, comes all too quickly to see the architect through the rosy lens as a “reformer” of culture and the historian as a “guardian” of meaning, without wondering if anything has actually been changed or protected.

The interplay of high aesthetics with aesthetic cunning, and of authenticity with bourgeois self-righteousness, was brilliantly parodied in a recent advertisement for Ralph Lauren Polo, and it is here that I wish to end my ramblings. The image portrays an artist in his studio. But we notice right away that the work of art he is fashioning very closely resembles a Giacometti. This artist is clearly not an “original” thinker. He is an artiste, an imitator, and even worse, a fraud. But before we throw him and his work out the window, we might meditate on the interesting philosophical



4. Polo Ralph Lauren, “The New Romantics”

problems that this image raises. Though a parody of the modern artist, it brings to light the problem of slippage that in other contexts is not meant to be seen as problematic. Here the man is looking out at the viewer, in a way that subverts any lingering attempts to separate object from subject, high art from artifice, and modernism from modernity. Some will argue that this image embodies everything that is wrong with art. I would argue that this image truly “speaks for itself” in that it represents the undisguised truth about the complex *artificiality* of artifice in modern culture, and that in the unflinching complicity of history, commerce, and seduction, it is more potent and more appropriate to Stern’s own attitude of constructed authenticity. If, as I am suggesting, neither Scully nor “Stern” can be trusted to explain the role — and importance — of Stern (and for that matter, history) in architectural discussions, then it is certainly true that no more neutrally analytical structure necessarily does the job any better. But by bringing the problem

to light and by allowing it to remain “as problem,” we can at least begin to purge history of an implicit teleological agenda that always seems to sneak up on us long before we can prepare an appropriate defense.

### Postscript

Forgive me as an old cynic for failing to resist putting fingerprints on the polished mirror. But it has been the critic’s task — and I would say the historian’s task as well — to question representations and to ask in the simplest of terms, who is its master? In today’s world this is no easy matter, especially when we deal with something as supposedly inconspicuously “positive” as architectural history. As historians, we have, therefore, the awkward obligation to read out of the edifice of architectural history a different truth than that which is used to construct it, a truth, I would argue, about the inherent contradictoriness of architectural production and historical production. At stake is something larger than just architecture: the need to understand the greater part of art and artifice in our culture. For while consciousness has freed itself from the old shudder to proclaim its authenticity, that shudder is still constantly being reproduced (and, of course, demanded by a conflicted bourgeoisie) not only in the name of “humanism” but also as if it were above criticism. But history, though important to the essential humanity of the subject, remains incommensurable to its own discourses and is a stranger to its own image. To discredit the tendency to pull everything into a swamp of contested modalities out of which there seems to be — and may indeed be — no real escape is a weak counterploy. History succeeds only when it returns upon its own devices.

Architecture, in ignoring this, can pretend to be loyal to the Enlightenment search for clarity, but it becomes entrapped in the necessarily savage world of disguised intentions and bourgeois hypocrisy. The transcending elements are thus

consumed in the dialectic of their own construction, with the result that architecture, the three-dimensional objects in the world that we would all like to see built and that we would all like to have understood by a sympathetic public, becomes the weakest element in the game. It becomes the unwitting testimony to that postindustrialist allegory of nonrevolutionary regeneration that, in the final analysis, can present itself only as a shock wave of the very confusion that it claims to supersede.

Philosophical thought when thus enmeshed in the problem of architectural history — touching in an odd way on the very “architecture” of history — begins with the recognition that architectural history still tries to make a correspondence between buildings and common sense. Critical thought destroys this correspondence, for it recognizes that the commonsensicalness of life (and history) becomes reality much more quickly than we might anticipate because it seems promising and productive enough to repel all alternatives. And this is precisely why it continually provokes the dialectical thought that it attempts to deny, for dialectical thought starts in the other direction; namely, with the recognition not only that the world is unfree, but that history is integral to this state of “unfreedom.” This is not to say that we need to get rid of history, but rather, that *as historians* we need to realize history’s own compulsion to make reality conform to its disguises. Between the historian and history is a destination that cannot be achieved. It is caught up in a system of refracted interferences. Simply stated, this part of the absent in architectural history must be made present because the greater part of the truth is always in what is absent.

Dialectical thought thus allows history to struggle against its own devices; for once we realize how completely these devices integrate themselves into the fabric of aesthetic discourses (and all history is aesthetic), we also realize why we still need to be historians — to use that awkward and out-

dated concept — and especially historians who can operate both within and outside of architectural history. For even if we trace architectural history's obscurantist dynamic, we are left with what remains obscure. Dialectical history can, therefore, never do what architecture (and its appropriate corollary, "a Stern-styled architectural history") can claim to do; namely, to liberate us from alienation and restore the web of harmony to aesthetic production. Yet architectural history, once it recognizes its complicity in its own aesthetic, can acquire the self-commandment to struggle against its preestablished (and predigested) humanistic essence to find a different sort of humanism, one that can live with the partial breakdown of self-assurance, but without the standard lament.

Notes

1. "Ready-made Traces in the Sand: The Sphinx, the Chimera, and Other Discontents in the Practice of Theory," *Assemblage* 19 (Spring 1993): 72–95, and "De-Scribing the Language of Looking: Wölfflin and the History of Aesthetic Experientialism," *Assemblage* 23 (Summer 1994): 28–69.
2. "Recognizing Ruskin: *Modern Painters* and the Refractions of Self," *Assemblage* 32 (Spring 1997): 70–87.
3. Ruskin's admiration for George Edmund Street constitutes one of the earliest critic-architect alliances of modernity. Street was noted for his Victorian Gothic. Ruskin is particularly important for Street's book *Brick and Marble in the Middle Ages: Notes on a Tour in the North of Italy* of 1855. For a discussion, see Michael W. Brooks, *John Ruskin and Victorian Architecture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 156ff. See also Sigfried Giedion, "Art Means Real-
- ity," in Gyorgy Kepes, *Language of Vision* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1944), and idem, *Walter Gropius* (Paris: G. Cres, 1931). A later example is the introductions that Colin Rowe and Kenneth Frampton wrote for *Five Architects: Eisenman, Graves, Gwathmey, Hejduk, Meier* (New York: Wittenborn, 1972).
4. See Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, *Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown*, introduction by Stanislaus von Moos (New York: Rizzoli, 1987); William Curtis, "Álvaro Siza: An Architecture of Edges," in *Álvaro Siza* (Basel: Birkhauser, 1969), 32–45; Mario Botta: *Arquitecturas 1980–1990*, introduction by Werner Oechslin (Barcelona: G. Gili, 1991); and Rob Krier, *Urban Space*, foreword by Colin Rowe (New York: Rizzoli, 1979).
5. Vincent Scully, introduction to

Robert A. M. Stern, *Robert A. M. Stern: Buildings and Projects 1987–1992*, ed. Elizabeth Kraft (New York: Rizzoli, 1992).

6. Not unlike the introduction Scully wrote to *Aldo Rossi: Buildings and Projects*, ed. Peter Arnell and Ted Bickford (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 12–13.
7. Stern did not go to Yale to study under Scully, but to pursue a career in architectural design. Nonetheless, he worked closely with Scully and is not shy to demonstrate his admiration of the historian.
8. Self-fashioning is a familiar practice to anyone who studies the Renaissance. For some reason, it is a topic still "too intimate" in histories of modern architecture, still sensitive to its legitimacy. On the theoretical background, see the introduction to Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From Moore to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Advanced studies into the relationship between architect and critic are also much less developed in architectural history than they are in art history. T. J. Clark's study of Courbet, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic 1848–1851* (Greenwich, Conn: New York Graphic Society, 1973), still has few equals in architectural history.
9. See Vincent Scully, introduction to Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 2d ed. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977). For Scully's critique of Stern, see Vincent Scully, *The Shingle Style Today or the Historian's Revenge* (New York: George Braziller, 1974), 33.
10. Robert A. M. Stern, *Robert A. M. Stern: Buildings and Projects*

1981–1985, ed. Luis F. Rueda (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), 6.

11. Scully, introduction to Stern, *Buildings and Projects 1987–1992*, 14
12. See Helen Searing, "New Directions in American Architecture [rev. ed. by] Robert A. M. Stern," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 38, no. 1 (March 1979): 69–70, and Carl W. Condit, "Robert A. M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and John Montague Massengale, *New York 1900: Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism 1890–1915*," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 44 no. 1 (March 1985): 77–79. None of the reviews in the *JSAH* mentions Stern as an architect or deal with the interrelationship between architectural history and architectural practice. While this is undoubtedly because the reviewers want to treat Stern's work from within the dignity of the discipline, I would think that the whole point of Stern's historicism rests in its connection to architectural practice. Some of the other works by architects to be reviewed are Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas* in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 32, no. 3 (October 1973): 258–60, and Alison and Peter Smithson's *Without Rhetoric: An Architectural Aesthetic 1955–197* in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 35, no. 3 (October 1976): 227–29.
13. Stern is the director of the Historic Preservation Program at Columbia University.
14. I also think of Michael Hays (Harvard), Gail Fenske (Roger Williams), Vikram Prakash (University of Washington), and others, myself included.
15. Stern, *Buildings and Projects 1987–1992*, 160, 106.



6. *The Essential Guide to Traditional Homes* (Tucson: Home Planners, Inc., 1993), 101, 104.

7. Robert A. M. Stern assisted by Thomas Mellins and Raymond Gastil, *Pride of Place: Building the American Dream* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, and New York: American Heritage, 1986), 7.

18. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

19. *Ibid.*, 1.

20. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

21. *Ibid.*, 4. Stern also describes Scully in “The Doubles of Post-Modern,” *The Harvard Architecture Review* 1 (Spring 1980): 80: “Acknowledging a debt to Frank Lloyd Wright, Scully offered a definition of Modern architecture as the ‘architecture of democracy,’ an ‘image of ourselves’ emerging precisely at the beginning of industrialism and mass democracy [where] we find it, in terms of fragmentation, mass scale, and new, unfocused continuity. In this sense Scully, seeking to reconcile the views of such early twentieth-century historians as Fiske Kimball with those of Giedion and Pevsner, brings us to the threshold of our current perception of the distinctions between the Modern tradition and modernism. As a result, it is now possible to see the Modern Movement as an episode in the broad history of Modern architecture itself.”

22. Robert A. M. Stern with Raymond W. Gastil, *Modern Classicism* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 63.

23. Vincent Joseph Scully, *The Shingle Style: Architectural Theory and Design from Richardson to the Origins of Wright* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955); the book was revised in 1971 as *The Shingle Style and the Stick Style: Architectural Theory and Design from Richardson to the Origins of Wright*.

24. Stern, *Buildings and Projects 1981–1985*, 36.

25. Scully, introduction to Stern, *Buildings and Projects 1987–1992*, 15.

26. *Ibid.*

27. The back cover of Scully’s *The Shingle Style Today* carries the following statement by Philip Johnson: “Gimlet-eyed Vincent Scully has done it again; a fascinating study of some of America’s newest architecture.” Not being well versed in eighteenth-century metaphors, I had to look in the dictionary. A gimlet is a small tool with a screw point and a drill bit for boring holes. “Gimlet-eyed” means, therefore, “sharp-sighted.” Since it is an architectural tool, it seems a fitting metaphor for an architectural historian, even though it carries with it the suggestion that the historian bores holes (of criticism) into works of architecture. It also carries with it the notion of penetration and suggests various other readings that I will not pursue.

28. Stern, *Buildings and Projects 1987–1992*, 9.

29. Scully, introduction to *ibid.*, 14. What are we to make of the quotation of T. S. Eliot’s that follows? After all, quoting Eliot these days is hardly as uncontroversial as it was twenty years ago. Is it perhaps a coded reference to *Complexity and Contradiction*, which Scully found so important precisely because it introduced Eliot to the architectural scene? Is it a personal favorite of Scully’s?

30. Stern, *Modern Classicism*, 23–25.

31. Stern, *Buildings and Projects 1981–1985*.

32. Modernism has never seen an artist’s manipulations of self-identities as problematical. We can hardly think of Wright or Johnson without

wondering if our interpretation of their work is a product of their own cunning. But if we expect autobiographic revisionism from *them*, we shouldn’t expect it any less from Stern. In fact, it is arguable that self-positioning was *de rigueur* to avant-gardism for so long that architects now know it is expected of them to construct their genius as a form of historical truth. But therein lies a problem.

33. Robert Stern, “Design as Emulation,” *Architectural Design* 58, nos. 9–10 (1988): 22.

34. Stern, *Modern Classicism*, 222.

35. See Robert A. M. Stern, Stephen Petranek, and Jennifer Allen, “A House for All America,” *Life Magazine* (June 1994): 82–92. It is not an incidental expression of his ideas. In *Pride of Place*, 85–123, Stern devotes a whole chapter to “dream houses.” Unfortunately, these houses were designed for Samuel Clemens, Henry Davis Sleeper, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and other early twentieth-century millionaires. This is a peculiar choice at best. Fortunately, the *Life Magazine* article puts all this aside and presents dream houses that are more accessible.

36. Stern, *Buildings and Projects 1981–1985*, 6.

37. Stern also uses the window-as-eye metaphor in *ibid.*, 160.

38. Scully, *The Shingle Style Today*, 34–35.

39. I have explored this idea in “Describing the Language of Looking.”

40. Stern is well aware that his design may not be for everyone; he therefore provides some possible alternative designs: Spanish, Tudor, and Dutch. But this certainly does not do justice to Stern’s claim that

he is “sensitive” to the diversity inherent in his mission. The array of choices anticipates not only that consumers will see architecture as little more than make-up artistry, but also that the American Dream is still obsessed with an early colonialist fantasy totally out of touch with the evolution of this dream in the twentieth century. Should East Europeans, Asians, and Near Easterners be included? Or should they “assimilate” as earlier immigrants had to? “But,” I am sure someone is bound to ask, “why should the readers of *Life Magazine* worry about this?” And the answer would be that the upscale, white, multigenerational Americans who are the most likely targets of this infomercial have few alternatives in their limited repertoire of architectural ideas to think beyond the stereotypes that express decency, morality, and upstanding character. And, finally, who can forget the poignant humor of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown’s *Signs of Life* of 1976, where the imbalance between what is seen and what is expressed was so cruelly and magnificently portrayed? For reasons that are disturbingly obvious, this work, redolent as it is with sarcasm, has been relegated to the basement in that great search for meaning in American architecture.

### Figure Credits

1. Photograph by Peter Aaron/Esto.
2. *Eisenstaedt’s Album* (New York: Viking Press, 1976).
3. Photograph by Joseph Astor.
4. Polo Ralph Lauren.