

One Man's Cityscape

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A PLACE TO LIVE, by Wolf Von Eckardt. Delacorte Press. \$9.95.

Most American newspapers employ movie critics; many support drama and dance critics; only a handful think it worthwhile to employ architecture critics. Of this handful, none is more perceptive or eloquent than Wolf Von Eckardt. He works for the *Washington Post* in a city where the ghost of Pierre L'Enfant must surely cry out for vengeance as vinyl skyscrapers daily desecrate his original plan. The sting of Von Eckardt's prose has, alas, small effect on the elephantine hide of the city's bureaucracy. In his time have arisen such monstrous blights on the landscape as the Rayburn Building, a marble mausoleum for senior House members, and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, a giant assortment of music halls sprawling along the Potomac, apparently designed to quarantine culture.

Von Eckardt doesn't quit readily, as his latest book shows. It is at once an angry essay on America's urban environment, a history of its origins, and a primer for those who would elevate civic design to a higher order in public priorities. The book displays all the strengths and weaknesses of the author's heroes, the great modern architects—it is dramatic, sweeping, bold, indeed breathtaking, but a little impractical. If *A Place to Live* were a building, one might justifiably conclude that it's a nice place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there.

The book is not organized in any discernible fashion. It begins with a discussion of urban theories, then skips to a history of modern architecture, including some concise assessments of the great names therein. The author then leads readers on an odyssey through the history of American city planning to contemporary views on what urban renewal has done to the American landscape and what new towns might do.

The most revealing part of the book is in Von Eckardt's evaluation of leading modern architects. A chapter called "Kitsch" discusses the con-

fections of Edward Durell Stone, while a chapter called "Restraint" is devoted largely to the monuments of Eero Saarinen. Most of the book consists of similar sketches, from Gropius, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe to the newer architects Paul Rudolph and Philip Johnson. The sketches are more historical than biographical, for something in Von Eckardt will not allow him to pin the blame on those responsible for what he calls "the anarchy of forms." He deals harshly with Rudolph's "almost absurd" arts building at Yale and damns Johnson with faint praise by saying he is "really a better architect than Niemeyer."

BUT for the giants, those who spread the gospel of the Bauhaus and the "International Style," Von Eckardt displays indulgence to the point of idolatry. Mies, Corbu, *et al.* were theorists of revolution first, he indicates, citing Le Corbusier's statement that "All the values have been revised. There has been a revolution in the conception of what architecture is." Von Eckardt admits that the revolution "remains a promise, at best a prophecy," but fails to concede that the promise was false and promulgated by false prophets. Instead of stating that Le Corbusier, a great artist, might have been too much the irrelevant eccentric, the author finds it easier to condemn the anonymous hordes of highway engineers, real-estate men, profiteers, and bureaucrats as the chief villains in our shoddy environmental saga.

To be sure, he throws a sop to the cause of historic preservation and to the mass-produced Techbuilt homes. Von Eckardt even admits that the Mies-Johnson Seagram Tower on Park Avenue may have "destroyed the harmony of the cityscape. The change from the old to the new was too abrupt." Park Avenue today is a gauntlet of brutal glass boxes; but who is more responsible, the lesser men who designed the imitation buildings or the geniuses who "revolutionized" and experimented with the cityscape by designing the Sea-

gram Tower and Lever House? Von Eckardt fails to answer.

He does imply that the new, intimate town of Reston in Virginia might well be the antithesis of the towering dreams of Le Corbusier. Reston is not a revolution but a reaffirmation of values as old as those of medieval city planners. It is designed to what Lewis Mumford calls the human scale. If Von Eckardt does not confess a past flirtation with grandeur, he atones adequately in his reporting on Reston, on the best trends in urban renewal, and on the new hopes for all of America. Indeed, his saving grace is that he is not afraid to dream and to hope. His epilogue on de Tocqueville's return to America in the twenty-first century is a hymn of hope to the rational powers of Americans in controlling their environment. One needn't agree with every particular of his hopes for cities, but they are a refreshing contrast to the miasma of ideological dogma and metaphysical froth that dominates much of the discussion of cities today.

VON ECKARDT's view of the future is much more vivid than his view of the past, to which he devotes too much of his book. One feels that his appraisal of new buildings, although clear-eyed, still suffers from the strain of trying to categorize them in their proper Miesian or Bauhaus pigeonholes. This astigmatism may be alleviated once Von Eckardt explores more thoroughly the cold, sordid realities of politics and zoning, building codes and tax laws, all of which have more influence on our environment than a battalion of purists.

The editors of the *Washington Post* have recently liberated Von Eckardt's writings from the movie pages and distributed his critiques and reports in the news columns, where they belong. Architecture, surely the most cloistered of the major professions, may yet have a critic who will shine a public spotlight on it to the end of making its efforts more relevant. Von Eckardt's next book may be more disciplined and thus more stirring for would-be followers. In the meantime, his current thinking on the cause of civic design will have to satisfy us, since it seems to be the only such crusade in town.

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