

Colin Rowe

MANY PEOPLE ENCOUNTER SOMETHING in their lives that they can never get out of their heads. It lurks like a shadow behind everything they do or think after the encounter. My personal encounter was my first reading of *Collage City* by Cohn Rowe and Fred Koetter in 1977.

At that point, I had been practicing architecture on my own and teaching for ten years. After trying a lot of this and that, I was finally getting my feet on the ground and finding what seemed to me a direction that made some sense. It all had to do with San Francisco and the fact that virtually everything that had been built since World War II in the city I had grown up in, lived in, and had great affection for seemed harmful to the city and made it a less good place. This included a lot of building: all of the federally funded urban renewal of the 1960's, all of the City's public housing, the freeways that had been jammed through city neighborhoods and along the waterfront, the god-awful speculative building where ordinary builders did exactly what the City's Planning Code made them do. Something was wrong. Something was obviously wrong with what architects and planners had been doing for twenty-five years, and with what I had been taught to do in my education as an architect.

I had just completed three years of work as a consultant to the San Francisco Department of City Planning, helping to rewrite the housing design standards for the City's Planning Code, and I had designed and built the small project called Pacific Heights Townhouses as a demonstration of the ideas proposed for the new Planning Code. Pacific Heights Townhouses were decidedly modern dwellings, very dense and compact, with double height spaces and lots of sunlight, but they nestled comfortably amid their Victorian neighbors, which very little recent housing in the city had managed to do. I knew vaguely that this work was related in some way to that of some young European architects named Krier, who were interested in traditional cities. I had also heard that there was an urban design studio at Cornell that looked at cities in ways that were different from the scorched earth planning by demolition that was taught at Columbia, Harvard, and other places. But I really knew very little about what anyone other than Jane Jacobs thought about how screwed-up architects were.

Then came *Collage City*. On my first reading of it, I felt like someone who had spent years on a Micronesian island listening to scratchy ukulele records suddenly finding himself in the middle of a von Karajan performance of the Ninth Symphony. It has been said of the great events of 1942 and 1943 that the tide of battle shifted because Winston Churchill had unleashed upon the armies of the Axis nations the full fury of the English language. Never before *Collage City* had the fury of language been directed so magnificently at the failings of the modernist city and the intellectual underpinnings of its tacit theory.

For 181 pages, majestic sentence by majestic sentence, an argument is constructed that says that all my professional colleagues of my generation and I had been breathing a colorless and odorless poison gas from the moment we entered architecture school. What we had breathed in was a lethal concoction of naive utopianism, pseudo-science, historical determinism, and cockeyed populism. The results were those very urban renewal, federal highway, and public housing programs that were tearing San Francisco and every other city in the world to bits. What it seemed to be saying was that in my own little efforts of the past few years I was not alone and armed with a peashooter but that I had this giant with a mighty sword standing beside me.

I made the key passages of *Collage City* required reading in every course I taught. Later I added its companion book, Michael Dennis's *Court and Garden*. Michael Dennis and his college roommate Fred Koetter have been among Colin Rowe's early urban design colleagues at Cornell and have built their powerful careers as architects and teachers on their years with Colin Rowe. I hoped that my own efforts stood on the same ground. In some ways, I felt confident in what I was doing as an architect and teacher, but I always wondered if Colin Rowe, the man whom I had appropriated to stand behind it all, would think I had gotten it right. In his eyes, would my version of city architecture be too literally contextual or not literal enough, or were the projects just too dinky to be worth considering? For twenty-two years, I did not have the chance to find out.

Then in 1999, the Seaside Institute staged an event at Seaside, Florida, in which many of the leading teachers and critics in the architectural world were invited to discuss the New Urbanist movement and the works of its principal practitioners. It was an interesting cast of characters on both sides. The New Urbanist roster included Jacquelyn Robertson, Ray Gindroz, Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Stephanos Polyzoides, Elizabeth Moule, and me. There was a longer list of stellar critics, including Robert Campbell of the Boston Globe, Alex Krieger of Harvard, Withold Rybcyzinski of the University of Pennsylvania, Doug Kelbaugh from Ann Arbor, Alan Jacobs, Donlyn Lyndon, and Harrison Fraker from Berkeley—and Colin Rowe. I would finally get to meet the man who had served as my appropriated mentor in absentia all these years.

Seaside is very difficult to get to. One of the routes is to fly to Fort Walton Beach, Florida, a small place in the Florida Panhandle, and take a van for about an hour and a quarter. When I arrived in Fort Walton and found my van driver, I realized that I would be sharing the van with a very old man in a wheelchair, Colin Rowe. He looked ill, wasted, and very uncomfortable, with puffy purple ankles and puffy feet with sores on them stuffed into slippers. There was a great maneuvering with canes and lots of pushing and pulling and grunting, and we finally got him seated in the front of the van. I sat behind him and observed his head poking over the back of the van seat. I realized that from inside this blotchy pink dome with its wisps of white hair had come *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa*, *Roma Interotta*, and *Collage City*. The pyrotechnic language, the dazzling wit, the erudition, the mind with the strength of Sampson that had pushed down the intellectual pillars of the modernist city was just there, inches away, sheathed in this sweating,

not very attractive flesh.

At infrequent intervals on the long, ugly ride to Seaside, I made attempts to engage him in conversation. Like other very old men, he seemed to find refuge from his multiple discomforts by swathing himself in layer upon layer of grumpiness. He responded to my conversational attempts either with total silence or with speech-like sounds that seemed to emanate from the depth of his colon, traveled through god-knows what, and emerged as BLLEEEAAAUGH or SCHLUUURRRPHG. Eventually we arrived at Seaside, and there ensued another great struggle with canes and the wheelchair, several of us grunting and pushing and pulling until he was at last seated in his chair with someone to escort him to his quarters. Then he finally spoke, in an elegant voice, free of all colonic dyspepsia. The diction was John Gielgud; the timber of the voice was Lionel Barrymore. "This," he said grandly, "is a very strange place."

The presentations began early the next morning with Colin Rowe seated in the first row of critics in his wheelchair with his two canes. Throughout the day, he didn't say much, but when something seemed to displease him he unleashed one of his colonic eruptions. Now and then, the Gielgud/Barrymore voice would appear with a remark laced with the kind of savage bitchiness that one reserves for the laziest and most pretentious students at a school where one hopes never to be invited back. At one point in the middle of a presentation, he shouted, "C minus." When the stunned presenter said something like "Huh?" he repeated it louder, "C MINUS." At another point, he wheeled himself over to a big plan map in the middle of a presentation, rapped it loudly with one of his canes, and said, "I've beeen there, to this very spot. Ghaaastly place.GHAAAASTLY!"

My turn to present came at six o'clock at the very end of the long day. What I was going to show were the three projects that were not only our most important current work but each of which in different ways represented the culmination of what I had been working toward in the twenty-two years since I had first read *Collage City*. What a situation: showing what was really a summa of my lifework to that point to friends and colleagues in front of the man whose thinking had shaped all of it, and finding him to be this foul-tempered, evil-tongued, totally intimidating wreck of a man. Of all the ten thousand forms of trepidation I had ever felt before presenting work, there had never been anything quite like this.

Partway into the presentation, Colin Rowe interrupted me as he had others all day long—only it was not the great dyspeptic bleat, nor was it the Gielgud/Barrymore voice. He said, "As Ken Frampton would say...," and his voice became the gentle, erudite voice of Kenneth Frampton. Frampton, like Colin Rowe, is a man of immense learning. He speaks softly, almost in whispers, as if the act of downloading his great burden of thought causes him physical pain. The sentences were those two-hundred-word, conditional, pluperfect, subjunctive constructions of a complexity that I thought only Kenneth Frampton was capable of, and he most likely only on the third draft. The references were to the kinds of obscure things that Frampton likes to talk about:

Swiss housing estates I had never heard of, Italian Rationalist revivals of seventeenth-century Spanish block plans in Naples, other things I can't remember.

It took me some time to realize that this very strange speech, muttered in a way that the transcript of the event caught none of, was intended as his oblique form of high praise. He liked the work. He was actually smiling, something I had not imagined he could do.

When it was over, I went to the bar that overlooks the beach. Colin Rowe was sitting by himself, watching the sunset, his shaking hand guiding an impatiently awaited martini to his lips. He motioned for me to join him and, what the hell, I too ordered a martini. We chatted for a while, and he was friendly and cordial. By the time we were on the second martini, I was comfortably trading gossip and architectural obscurata with the twentieth century's greatest master of those two forms of discourse.

I thought to myself that from my peculiar vantage point, martinis in the sunset with Colin Rowe is a Walter Mitty moment of the first order. It is the last mountain stage of the Tour de France. At the end of the day, with three mountain passes behind them, an unknown American is riding the wheel to wheel with the invincible Miguel Indurain, up the final brutal climb to l'Alpe d'Huez. The year must be around 1995, when Big Mig was in his prime. The roar of the CNN helicopter is smothered by 150,000 chanting voices at the edge of the road: MEE-GELL DAN-YELL, MEEGELL, DAN-YELL Oh God, the glory of it.

The life of an architect, like that of a bicycle racer, is not without the possibility of occasional hard-won rewards.

