From Bauhaus to Our House Study Guide

From Bauhaus to Our House by Tom Wolfe

Contents

Plot Summary

Tom Wolfe ranks among the most iconoclastic literary and art critics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The author of numerous books and a famous coiner of widely used phrases like "radical chic," "the right stuff," and "the Me decade," Wolfe has had a major impact on American culture, journalism and aesthetic critique. In his many books, Wolfe often takes aim at the establishments of various artistic and literary fields, such as art, literature, journalism and architecture. From Bauhaus to Our House is his critique of modern architecture and the architectural establishment.

The book is short and polemical, advancing savage criticisms of the most famous architectural theorists of the twentieth century such as Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus school of architecture, and associated figures such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe for being excessively theoretical, condescending to the consumer and integrating their radical left-wing anti-bourgeois ideology into their buildings. He is particularly critical of the importation of Bauhaus architecture into the United States, which here is often referred to as The International Style of architecture.

Wolfe's primary claim is that American business culture and government regularly commissions buildings that they consider hideous all to appear chic and in with the elite, snobbish architectural establishment which decides for itself what the customer should and should not like. Wolfe also points out the deep irony of the left-wing architectural establishment, which claims to speak for the working classes but in fact shares no aesthetic tastes with them at all, creates buildings they hate and refuse to live in and that the architectural establishment believe it can re-educate into accepting its tastes.

The book mounts its criticism as a historical narrative that extends from the end of World War I, ending the dominance of late nineteenth and early twentieth century architects that Wolfe approves of, and the beginning of the dominance of the Bauhaus school and its leader, the "Silver Prince," Walter Gropius. At first, Wolfe argues that the Bauhaus school has its ideological origins in the shattered emotional state of post World War I Europe, and Germany in particular. The Bauhaus style is one of smoke, rubble and destruction with a deep socialist impulse and hostility to anything it conceived of as "bourgeois."

Compounds of Bauhaus ideologues quickly formed and governments picked up their styles in public buildings. The Bauhaus architects came to use "bourgeois" as a term of art to mean whatever they disapproved of. When World War II came, many of these architects came to the United States and immediately dominated the architectural high culture of the United State, producing a number of students who continued the dominance of this radical left-wing theoretical chic all the way to the early 1980s when the book was written.

Introduction and Chapter I, The Silver Prince

Introduction and Chapter I, The Silver Prince Summary and Analysis

Wolfe opens with the claim that in probably no other place on earth have people with so much wealth and power paid for architecture they hated. Children walk into schools that look like factories and many can't figure out why it happens. New 900k summer homes are full of pipe railings, ramps, industrial plate glass, etc. and end up looking like insecticide refineries. Law firms in New York move constantly into huge glass office buildings with concrete slab floors and then hire a decorator to change it entirely. Everyone hates the glass box skyscraper.

To see these reactions, one only needs to visit conferences and symposia where architects congregate. They are often appalled themselves, particularly at the "glass boxes." Wolfe thinks that new approaches are on the rise, such as postmodernism, late modernism, rationalism, participatory architecture, neo-corbu and the Los Angeles Silvers. But they are not radical enough.

The relationship between the architect and the client in America is very bizarre. Those who commissioned buildings in the past wanted monuments to their own glory but today people submit to the bizarre preferences of the architect.

In chapter one, Tom Wolfe sets out to tell the story of how this strange situation came about. The story starts in Germany just following the First World War. Many young American intellectuals were traveling Europe; they are often called "the Lost Generation." Before this time, American thinkers often imitated European thought, but with World War I, the self-confidence of Europe was shattered while American self-confidence grew, allowing them to break free. The Lost Generation generally was the last to think, "They do things better in Europe." But they were particularly influenced by post-war Europe, which was in ruins.

This led young American architects to Walter Gropius, who founded the Bauhaus School in 1919; it was a school, a commune and a radical approach to art. Gropius was charismatic but not aristocratic; he was called "The Silver Prince," since silver was perfect, and gold too gaudy. Those who studied with him tried to start "from zero" and learn their craft all over again. Gropius backed all experiments. Many other architects came to teach at Bauhaus as well. They all wanted to start from zero in the way that Germany had to start from zero.

Germany was to start from zero with a new socialist government that would fight for the working classes and destroy the injustice of the rich. This idea was fleshed out in the Novembergruppe, a manifesto written by designers that would join Bauhaus. They were

to make all art "the business of the entire people," meaning the workers. The intellectual bourgeois would lead the working class and reflect their values. In fact, Gropius's interest in "socialism" was just his interest in aesthetic fads, but ideas have consequences.

Bauhaus had certain assumptions. First, architecture was for all workers and was to be built as such. Second, new architecture must reject everything bourgeois (where bourgeois came to mean anything you didn't like). Then Social Democrats in Germany and Holland started commissioning housing projects for architects of this "antibourgeois" style. These architects deliberately spurned architecture based on noble patronage, merchants, the state or outside parties. Instead, those who want to know art must live within the compound and accept the formed they created. They knew best.

Many found the creation of this new community "exhilarating." They're happy to reject bourgeois society and be superior to it. And this attitude produced much of the avant-gardism that has so influenced art in the twentieth-century. These architects and artists often created "in code" to produce "new ways of seeing," such as with Cubism and the music of Arnold Schoenberg. Artists acquired the instincts of medieval clergy, which aimed at differentiating itself from the mob, which was the substitute bourgeoisie. Instead of fighting for the workers, they fought for themselves against the public. Only these people knew creativity.

Yet their influence spread and many governments gave them jobs. As Gropius's influence grew, he came up with a new motto for Bauhaus, "Art and Technology—a New Unity!" But then the claims about what was bourgeois and what was not came to be incredibly narrowly defined. Buildings were theories made of concrete, steel, wood, glass and stucco, created in white or beige. Color was out and theory was in. Buildings were to be "functional," with flat roofs and sheer facades.

Competition starts to take place, not only to obtain commissions but competition in the creation and implementation of theories. Wolfe then discusses some of the competitors, such as Sant'Elia, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. These thinkers had some distinctions between one another but shared much: a disdain for what the public liked and a desire to implement their esoteric conception of art to compete with one another. Workers hated worker housing, but many architects replied that they had to be "reeducated" and so did not need to be consulted. Following Stalin, they would engineer the souls of the working class.

And then the young American architects came to the United States with these ideas in their heads, Louis Kahn, Edward Durell Stone, and Louis Skidmore, among others. Before, American architects had to fulfill the romantic fantasies of capitalists, but in Europe, they saw artists that had real autonomy from them. They found this autonomy irresistible. But Bauhaus made no sense in the United States. First, the country had not been destroyed in World War I, so "starting from zero" made no sense. Second, the United States didn't really have a bourgeoisie. No one cared about socialism or worker housing, but Bauhaus had to happen.

Chapter II, Utopia Limited

Chapter II, Utopia Limited Summary and Analysis

As a result of the Bauhaus, a piece called "The International Style" was written by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson for the catalogue of the Museum of Modern Art's catalogue of photographs and models introduced in 1932 to bring Gropius, et al. to New York. Museum catalogue copy is notorious for being pretentious, but "The International Style," was thought to be different. In the piece, the authors distinguished between "architecture" and "building." Bauhaus was "architecture." But Americans were engaged in "building." There was Frank Lloyd Wright, but he was only half-way there and could be forgotten.

The twentieth-century American skyscraper merely amused them with their ridiculous "zigzag trimmings." American architects simply obeyed the customer, whereas Europeans would walk away from commissions rather than debase themselves. "The International Style" analyzed the great "functionalists" which ignored the worker-theme of the Europeans. Instead, they claimed that their style had not originated in any social setting, and so "The International Style" caught on as the name for Bauhaus in America. Americans, if they wanted to be like the Europeans, had to understand that clients meant nothing but money. If clients cooperated, then they could benefit from the architect's bidding.

A big stir was created, largely because of the stature of the Museum of Modern Art. Only in the United States did businessmen introduce avant-garde art to carry the banner forward and urge others to follow. The Museum of Modern Art was founded by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. after all and in his living room with other capitalists in attendance. But then the International Style was institutionalized overnight. But again, it did not work in the United States and many United States architects were thereby ignored for retaining an American vision.

Chapter III, The White Gods

Chapter III, The White Gods Summary and Analysis

In 1937, Gropius came to the United States to escape the Nazis. He would make his permanent home there, as did many of the other Bauhaus architects. When Gropius arrived, he was received like a god and his followers like saints. Gropius was appointed the head of Harvard's architecture school and Breuer joined him. Moholy-Nagy opened the New Bauhaus in Chicago, which became the Chicago Institute of Design. Other institutions were created as well. The Museum of Modern Art gave Gropius a show of his work and Philip Johnson, one of the authors of "The International Style," started from zero and learned from Gropius.

American architecture was revolutionized in three years. The Bauhausians system of instruction and their very presence were responsible for most of the change. The Colonial Complex was not confined to architecture either, but extended throughout all the arts. The American Scene and Social Realist painting from the 1930s disappeared. Architectural instruction at Harvard was changed overnight, the International Style institutionalized. Frank Lloyd Wright was furious and bewildered; he had become a relic. He despised the Bauhausians, and Wolfe discusses some of the events where he snubbed them. Wright was the one who suffered and lost students. Many of these students became unmanageable, rebelling and writing manifestos right and left.

In the late 1940s and 50s, Buckminster Fuller rose to prominence, the father of the geodesic dome. Gropius and others were never very comfortable around him, and he was understood as an inventor. American architecture students became obsessed with the bourgeois-nonbourgeois distinction. However, the American students had an intellectual weakness—they really weren't interested in ideology or dialectics. They only liked ideology's sentimental side. They liked the idea of the common man, but did not understand it in the same way as did the Europeans. The American students then created an architectural structure known as The Yale Box, which they paraded around the country in artistic representation. Other such structures were created as well.

American clients started to see that something odd had happened. Yale had just been given a great deal of money to build a variety of American gothic buildings. When the art-gallery was to be built, a little man named Louis Kahn was made architect and added a bizarre Bauhasian structure, which shocked the Yale administration. The interior of the building was even more bizarre. But ever since then, administrators, directors and boards of trustees have not protested.

Chapter IV, Escape to Islip

Chapter IV, Escape to Islip Summary and Analysis

The twentieth century has been the American century. But the irony is that the buildings that represent American are distinctly un-American. American architecture does not express the manifestation of its exuberance, power or even high spirits. The Babylon of capitalism is constructed from worker housing. Sometimes worker housing was build for workers, known as public housing projects, but workers managed to stay out of them, calling them "the projects." Many went to the suburbs, going to places like Islip, Long Island. The houses in these areas are as un-Bauhausian as they could be. The worker-housing interiors are glum and uncomfortable; the suburban house is quite the opposite.

Today the furniture of the Bauhaus architects is available only through decorators. Again, ironically, the workers' furniture is solely the province of the rich, the property of the bourgeoisie. But the International Style is still dominant among elites and represents wealth. However, epithets for Bauhaus furniture and architecture arose, but the Bauhaus Americans took them as badges of honor, particularly the students of Mies, such as Philip Johnson. Johnson would come to promote Mies's work, which inspired minimalism. Their buildings continued to be built, such as the 1958 Seagram Building on Park Avenue, whose structure Wolfe describes in some detail. Other buildings the American Bauhaus architects built were similar and the architects even tried to control how the inhabitants of the buildings went about decorating the buildings' interiors.

Wolfe is continually stunned that American business elites took the demands of the Bauhaus architects so "supinely." The workers fought mightily against it, leaving such buildings when they had the chance. In fact, many who had lived in the projects built by Bauhaus architects in Southampton, New York cheered when the buildings were demolished.

Chapter V, The Apostates

Chapter V, The Apostates Summary and Analysis

Edward Durell Stone was one of the first International Style architects in America. On a plane trip to Paris, he met an "explosively Latin" Italian woman, Maria Elena Torchio, whose father was an Italian architect. She did not like his buildings but she married him a year later. She then changed his style, leading him to create the luxurious design of New Delhi's American Embassy. Stone had gone apostate. When the Embassy was unveiled, Stone was dropped immediately from fashionable architecture. He had become bourgeois par excellence. Stone didn't even try to resist, claiming that he represented two millennia of Western culture rather than two decades of modern architecture.

Stone was anathematized, not even asked to help build an addition to his own building; the job went to Philip Johnson. Wolfe remembers vividly when, in response, Huntington Hartford commissioned Stone to build his Gallery of Modern Art nearby. The reviews were scathing, but Stone's business did not collapse. The International Style was widely hated even by those who bought it.

A similar apostate was Eero Saarinen, though he was not dropped so completely. His sin was the design of the TWA terminal at Idlewild Airport (now Kennedy) in New York. The Dulles Airport building in Washington was even more elaborate. Saarinen wanted to start a new phase of architectural history, but the powers that be would not permit it. No architect was permitted a good reputation outside of the Bauhaus community.

Stone and Saarinen were too American and so parochial and bourgeois. These men glorified their clients. So many good architects worked so hard for their clients but passed through their careers in obscurity. Morris Lapidus was one such architect, selected by New York's Architectural League for a show and panel discussion. This would typically be an honor but instead it was something much more ambiguous. His work was characterized as a pop phenomenon. John Portman became the Lapidus of Wolfe's day, producing grand Babylonian ziggurat hotels, but in the university he does not exist.

Again, nothing American could gain prominence in the academy, not even Frank Lloyd Wright. Even the productivity of these men counted against them because it made them commercial. Young artists started to believe that no one could attain national prominence in the commercial world without selling out and so they became increasingly more abstract. This abstractness spread to other areas of the arts that had been neglected, such as choreography. Wolfe then briefly explains how choreography was taken over. European fashion could not be resisted. Even literature began to be effected, as was philosophy, which was almost taken over by the French rejection of analytic philosophy.

Chapter VI, The Scholastics

Chapter VI, The Scholastics Summary and Analysis

The architect who was to change things, to avoid being expelled but change the Bauhaus community nonetheless, was Robert Venturi, who published a book called Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture within a Museum of Modern Art series. His book looked like heresy since he rejected Mies's dictum, "Less is more," for "Less is a bore." He wanted messy vitality and hybridity to replace modernism. He embraced the distorted over the straightforward, the ambiguous to the articulated.

Venturi argued that architecture should not be restricted to the elite university world but should be brought once more to ordinary people. Yet Venturi's buildings still baffled people, particularly because he had built so few of them. He only mildly departed from modernism. Venturi had good academic credentials and his book had strong endorsements; his treatise turned out to be a sharp method of getting to the top of the social ladder in the Bauhaus movement.

Venturi's book sent a subtle message, not that modernism was to be rejected but that it was to be mixed with the experience "inherent in art" or the experiences of the students of Gropius, Mies, Corbu and the like learning with the masters. Architecture should now amuse and enthrall other architects. Wolfe compares his move to Scholastic philosophy in the Middle Ages, which he claims was theology meant to test the subtlety of other theologians. Venturi lived on the edge of heresy. Art was for the people and there was a historical inevitability to the forms that were used, but the artist must choose for the people which form they "inevitably" should have.

Venturi rejected thinking of the people as an industrial proletariat, but the middle-middle class, in lower-middle class suburbs. They were not the bourgeoisie but "sprawling" masses. The International Style was not elitist and Mies's modernism had gone bourgeois. So Venturi ironically pressed against Mieslings what they had pressed against previous architects fifty years before, but Venturi really looked down on the people as much as Gropius had before.

Venturi's style did not fundamentally change from the International Style but he did add the notion of the "modernist prank", which added odd pieces to buildings that did not need them. Modernist pranks generated an "ironic reference." He also often mixed the bourgeois with the nonbourgeois in order to debase the bourgeois and produce irony; he generated contradiction, violating the taboo without violating it.

Venturi sometimes tried to link high art and pop culture, but he had no interest in pop culture. Pop art was no rebellion; instead, they observed the doctrines of modernism and signaled that they weren't returning to realism. Venturi's departures from modernism were a "wink" back at it. Many younger architects found Venturi's "Big Wink"

alluring. He could rout the old crowd without destroying their system. He was still focused on the vernacular, just the American vernacular. He kept the faith.

Venturi also invented the idea of ironic historical references in architecture, and this gave rise to a "Pop Architecture" movement, which included a number of younger men. This notoriety brought Vincent Scully to Venturi, who became his scholar, counsel and liaison. Scully had credentials because he had prophesied about Venturi's greatness in the introduction to Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture.

The recession of the early seventies wrecked American business architecture almost as much as the Great Depression had. The expansion of the sixties had come to an end and next thirty to forty percent of architects had no jobs. As a result, many retreated into the academy. In 1972, a new compound formed, known as the Whites, or the New York Five, and announced their presence with their book, Five Architects. They advocated a return to pure principle, to Le Corbusier. They were the Whites because almost all of their buildings were white, inside and out, like Le Corbusier. They were focused on "the deep structure" of architecture, its "meaning."

The Whites introduced the fashionable jargon of French structural linguistics into America Universities. Structuralists believed that language had an immutable structure that derived from the central nervous system; they then see interest groups appropriating this structure for their own purposes. It should be absurd, but the point of it for the Whites is that they advocated stripping the bourgeois down to its bare bones. For the Whites, though, their buildings were simply bizarre because the only way to avoid the bourgeois was to be scrupulously pure and baffling. Peter Eisenman represented the apotheosis of this philosophy.

Chapter VII, Silver-White, Silver-Gray

Chapter VII, Silver-White, Silver-Gray Summary and Analysis

In 1973, The Venturi, or Pop Architects, took on the Whites in an attack. In a review of Five Architects called "Five on Five," five Venturi architects reviewed the Whites' book. The attack was coated in professional and gracious veneer but it was still brutal. The Whites were furious and made such a protest that American architects have stopped attacking each other in print, but the Venturi Five had helped them by making the Whites seem like one of two armies fighting for the soul of architecture. No, it was Whites versus Pops, or as they were later named, Grays. Thus, it was the Whites versus the Grays.

Young European architects couldn't understand the fight. Americans stole the forefront of architectural theory and had a great time with each other during a depression. European architecture had dried up without new creativity. But then the Rationalists were born. Like the Whites, they believed in going back to first principles, but they thought the Whites did not go back far enough. The Rationalists returned to the eighteenth century, to the early Renaissance. The Rationalists built pre-nineteenth century buildings, going back before the industrial revolution, prior to capitalism.

Rationalism was Marxist, much like Structuralism, but it was more sentimental. They believed, for some reason, that the Renaissance architects built for the people, though in reality these men were paid by kings, despots, popes and the like. Nonetheless, the Rationalists added a primitive element to the debate. Their work, honestly, looked like Fascist architecture and became known as the Rats.

British architects disliked theorizing but were interested all the same. An American architect, Charles Jencks, went to England and wrote The Language of Post-Modern Architecture, which analyzed the new currents. He quickly became known as the wittiest and smartest architectural writer around.

Jencks' term for the new currents, "post-modernism," caught on, though post-modernism was still really a continuation of modernism. This intellectual atmosphere led to architects being praised more for ideas and theories and sketches than for building actual buildings. The Whites and the Grays had actually chased money from architecture. Michael Graves, for instance, had become one of the most famous architects in the world without building almost any buildings at all. By the late seventies, many architecture businesses started produced a two-tracked business model, one track that built buildings and the other which theorized. Many commercial giants got in on the theory game as well.

In 1976, Vincent Scully refused to accept an award for the history of architecture from the American Institute of Architects because they did not bring Venturi into the College

of Fellows. Scully was right that Venturi had had enormous influence. And the Grays were slowly winning the battle; the Whites were moving away from Purism and Structuralism. Structuralism itself was being replaced by Entropy, which denied the existence of neat, logical, deep structures.

Future developments among the Grays involved playing with classical elements, and so many thought that the classical tradition was being revived, though this was not so in the mind of the Whites. They were trying to be creative and embellish, but Venturi was unable to do so because he was still the subject of the Silver Prince. Anyone who was truly revolutionary with embellishment would have been a heretic.

Nonetheless, by 1978, Venturi was victorious. Philip Johnson, one of the Whites, had designed a building that conceded many of the Whites' points, but he "leapfrogged" ahead of them by trying to be more avant-garde. The Venturi partisans were furious, arguing that Johnson stole their ideas, though they had never been put into real buildings. Johnson's building was apostasy, and this label has started to stick. Thus, the ability of Venturi's followers to excommunicate Whites was becoming a fact of life in the architectural community. Yet Johnson has remained an artful tactician, retaining his loyalty to classical modernism. He was reassuring.

Johnson had avoided total heresy, and the community was relieved because the apostasy hadn't caught on outside of the community. The rest of the world hadn't seen the change. They were still out of it and they still bought buildings they didn't like.

Characters

Tom Wolfe

Tom Wolfe is widely known as a wild and largely idiosyncratic critic of the contemporary arts and humanities. Having written over a dozen books, he has also contributed to American popular culture in a number of ways, including coining several famous phrases like, "the right stuff," and "the Me Decade." As such, he and his criticisms have impacted American popular culture.

Wolfe's work has primarily been as a journalist, particularly as one of the "New Journalists," who advocate mixing literary styles in journalistic writing. In his popular books, Wolfe develops extended critiques of the elites within particular areas within the humanities. He has criticized the art community, literary criticism, journalism and the architectural establishment at length. From Bauhaus to Our House is Wolfe's critique of the modern architectural establishment and the buildings they create.

Wolfe began his journalism career in 1956 and worked as a reporter for the next ten years, moving to the New York Herald-Tribune in 1962 and becoming a staff writer at New York magazine. During this time, he wrote his first book, The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby, which became a bestseller and shot Wolfe to prominence as one of the great literary experimenters in nonfiction. Throughout the rest of the sixties and the seventies, Wolfe became more and more famous. In 1979 his book, The Right Stuff, won the American Book Award for non-fiction. From Bauhaus to Our House was written in 1981, which would be followed by the classic work, The Bonfire of the Vanities.

Wolfe is not really a character in the book so much as he is an observer. Wolfe witnessed many of the events he discusses and inserts himself in the text only briefly and sporadically.

Walter Gropius

Walter Adolph Georg Gropius (1883-1969) is in many ways the villain of From Bauhaus to Our House. He was a German architect, born in Berlin, and was married to Alma Mahler, the famous composer Gustav Mahler's widow. He was greatly prominent in the pre-war German artistic community. Gropius became an architect like his father and great-uncle, though he could not draw. He often employed the help of colleagues, which included some of the book's other major characters, such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier. In 1910, Gropius established his own practice in Berlin, and in 1913, he published an article that had great influence on European modernist architects.

When World War I broke out, Gropius's career was put on hold, but after it was over he became the master of the School of Arts and Crafts in Weimar. Here he developed the

Bauhaus school, which Wolfe uses as a departure point for the plot of the book. Gropius's artistic ideas were the result of post-World War I Germany's national psychology, reflecting the rubble and destruction of the war and the rising tide of socialist ideology on the other. His students were taught to use modern and innovative materials and he promoted "non-bourgeois" architecture or architecture for the people. Gropius quickly rose to prominence and students across the world came to work with him and were encouraged to "start from zero."

With the rise of Nazi Germany, Gropius had to flee Germany in 1934, living briefly in Britain, but in 1937 he moved to the United States, where he would live for the rest of his life. He and his protégé moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Gropius became the head of the Harvard Graduate School of Design and formed the Architects' Collaborative, a commune of architects much like the Bauhaus commune in Germany.

Wolfe sees Gropius as a pretentious socialist who deliberately imbued ideology into his work and refused to give his customer what he wanted, instead presuming to dictate the consumer's preferences to him. For Gropius, in Wolfe's opinion, architecture was only superficially about the working classes and more about being fashionable and hip. Wolfe openly mocks Gropius's teaching slogan, "starting from zero," and labels him, "The Silver Prince," who created the architectural traditions that would dominate architecture for two generations.

Le Corbusier

A Swiss-French architect and fellow founder of Bauhaus architecture and the International Style.

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

A German-American architect, and along with Gropius, one of the founders of Modern architecture. He was known for the phrases, "less is more," and "God is in the details."

The Compounds

Groups of architectural students of the Bauhaus school.

Frank Lloyd Wright

The great early twentieth century American architect whose career was eclipsed by the Bauhaus school.

Philip Johnson

One of the most prominent American Bauhaus architects who called the Bauhaus style "The International Style" to make it more palatable to the United States.

Edward Durell Stone

A twentieth century American architect who tried to rise to prominence apart from the Bauhaus school after once being a member of it. He was labeled an apostate and his work was ignored by the academic architectural community.

Robert Venturi

An American architect who broke the Bauhaus mold successfully by only challenging the tradition at the margins. He was enormously successful, coining the phrase, "less is a bore," in response to Mies's, "less is more." Venturi had a number of students who defended his more embellished style that became known as The Grays.

The Whites

Five architects known as the New York Five who were critics of the Grays and ultimately fought an academic war of ideas with them.

The Grays

The name of Venturi's academic followers.

The Rationalists

A group of Italian architects who revolved against the cultural dominance of the Whites and the Grays who wanted to go back to the architectural ideas of pre-capitalist Europe. Unfortunately, their buildings, in Wolfe's view, looked a bit like fascist architecture.

The American Business Establishment

Wolfe finds it bizarre that the American Business establishment accepted hideous buildings they didn't like from the Bauhaus/International architects.

The Museum of Modern Art

The major New York museum around which much architectural culture was focused and which published a number of influential articles and journals in the architectural community.

Objects/Places

Post-War Germany

The period after World War I in Germany when Gropius and the Bauhaus School rose to prominence.

Post-War United States

The period following World War II in the United States which followed the period of Gropius's rise to prominence in the United States.

The Bauhaus School

The architectural school founded by Gropius, Le Corbusier and Mies.

Starting from Zero

The lifestyle that Gropius's students encouraged each other to adopt when studying with him.

Modernism

Modern thought in architecture, trying to move beyond belief in a traditional God and moving towards self-consciousness and making things new. The International Style was thoroughly modernist.

Post-Modernism

A cultural movement that attempts to move beyond modernism. In architecture, Wolfe sees little difference between the two movements.

The International Style

The name the Bauhaus architects acquired for their style in the United States.

The Bourgeois

Typically referred to the upper classes of a society, the "bourgeois" became a term of derision for anything the International Style architects didn't like.

Complexity and Contradiction

Robert Venturi's post-modernist and "gentle" manifesto which signaled his rise to prominence.

Five Architects

The book written by the New York Five architects who later became known as the Whites.

Five on Five

A review that five of the Gray architects wrote about Five Architects, which set off the battle between the two groups.

Structuralism

A movement within French linguistics that emphasized the common structure of all language and how this core of language was often twisted by the powerful towards their own ends.

Sketches

Wolfe believes that architecture became so focused on theory that architects would win awards for sketches rather than buildings.

Themes

Taking It Lying Down

While From Bauhaus to Our House mostly concerns the pretentiousness, ideology and snobbery of the American architectural establishment and the origins of its twentieth century culture, Wolfe also, from time to time, brings up an additional theme concerning the reaction of the communities that commissioned the architectural establishment's designs. Primarily American businesses, government and non-profits of a large size commissioned, in Wolfe's view, the hideous architectural designs that originates from the International Style architects and their descendents.

Wolfe cannot understand why these communities took the designs of the architects lying down. At one point in the book, Wolfe argues that the "working classes" hated the International Style. In one case, he reports a wide range of lower class people cheering when projects they had once lived in were demolished. The projects were built in the International Style and were considered by these people ugly and unlivable. Yet the upper classes took it. Wolfe wonders whenever has a community so eagerly and willingly spent enormous amounts of money buying something they hated.

One of Wolfe's points is that architecture is supposed to be about pleasing the customer, but the International Style architects rejected this model entirely because they wanted to be free to pursue their own designs and theories. Instead, they dictated what was good and beautiful and appropriate to their clients or refused to take the commissions. For whatever reason, the clients took it.

Snobbery

Wolfe is concerned to draw a contract between the International Style architects' stated aim of building buildings for the working classes on the one hand and believing that their preferences needed to be re-educated and reformed on the other. The International Style got its start in post-World War I Germany, after years of war had decimated Germany and impoverished it through war debts and hyperinflation.

During this period, the political ideology of socialism was on the rise. Socialism argued that the workers were the proper rulers of society and that society should be run for their benefit. As such, Gropius and the other Bauhaus architects imported this philosophy into their work. They built for the "proletariat" and not for the "bourgeois." Instead, they struggled to avoid anything they regarded as bourgeois.

The problem with this supposed devotion to the working class is that it was a concern independent of what working people actually wanted. One illustration of this is the fact that when the Bauhaus architects came to the United States they took no notice of the fact that the working classes in the United States were substantially different from the working classes of previous decades in continental Europe. Yet even when later

architects like Venturi updated the anti-bourgeois philosophy for the American working classes, these architects still ignored their tastes and believed that their tastes needed to be reeducated. This is, in short, the ultimately hypocritical snobbery.

Left-Wing Pop Culture

Tom Wolfe has little patience for pretentiousness, particularly when it is given off by those who are bad artists. And while he vehemently denies being a conservative, he is sharply critical of far-left ideologies, such as Marxism. Wolfe argues that many of the architectural ideological movements he documents have their origins in Marxist political thought.

The Bauhaus architects got their start as, more or less, ideological Marxist architects who repudiated all things capitalist and sought to build buildings for the supposedly socialist working classes. They saw bourgeois "pollution" all around them and sought to do everything they could to avoid emulating it. This tendency extended deep into the International Style architects and even afterward, as Marxist ideological influences were on the wane.

Wolfe seriously doubts that the International Style architects are true socialists, though. For one thing, they do not really care about the working classes, in Wolfe's view, as evidenced by the fact that they ignored worker preferences and even sought to re-educate them. Further, socialist influence was little more than a fad in Wolfe's eyes, because the architectural expression of the ideology seemed so inconsistent and to change according with what was hip and what was not. Thus, one of the major themes of From Bauhaus to Our House is the pervasive influence of left-wing pop culture ideology in the architectural community and its fake, pretentious and anti-consumer air.

Style

Perspective

The perspective of From Bauhaus to Our House is that of its author, Tom Wolfe. The book is written largely in the third-person, as a historical narrative which tells the story of the importation of the Bauhaus school to the United States, its quick rise to power and transformation into the International Style, and the subsequent ideological and architectural development of the school. However, Wolfe often moves into the first-person when he testifies to seeing many of the events and publications he describes first-hand.

Wolfe's perspective may come off as politically "conservative". Many readers will see his critique of the radical left-wing culture of the American architectural establishment as coming from the American Right. However, Wolfe denies this. Instead, he simply seems to be to the right of the architectural establishment. It is clear that Wolfe rejects socialism, and especially Marxism. But most on the American left do. Instead, he is disgusted by hypocrisy, ugly buildings, a refusal to serve the customer and a snobby, condescending attitude to the very people the architectural establishment claims to represent.

Wolfe is a well-known journalist and art and literary critic. He brings his sharp wit and first-class writing talent to bear on his critique. His perspective is therefore often satirical, biting, hilarious and cutting, though he can often seem glib and vague. Many of Wolfe's critics claim that he does not know what he is talking about, and so readers should be careful and watch for generalizations that may not accurately reflect the subject matter.

Tone

From Bauhaus to Our House has the tone one would expect from a classic work of popular art criticism given from the perspective of an outsider and one who mostly identifies with classical American economic and artistic values. Wolfe's tone is scathing because he has little more than contempt from the major figures in the architectural establishment in the twentieth century. He also castigates them for exiling architects who had differing visions from them. He consistently attacks them for being hypocrites, snobs and making ugly buildings purely in the name of architectural theory.

However, Wolfe does not come off as angry and has no clear vendetta. At least, it does not come off in the tone of his writing. Wolfe has a somewhat detached tone, as one who is watching the establishment as a distant person with interest but not an insider. The tone reflects the attitude of one who aims to mock, but in a witty and light-hearted fashion. Wolfe's tone indicates that he does not take the American architectural

establishment seriously. Instead, the tone is full of bafflement that anyone would take it seriously, particularly those who are commissioning them to build their buildings.

From Bauhaus to Our House is short and crisp; its tone reflects its length and structure. Wolfe rarely goes into detail. Anything that interrupts the narrative flow of the work seems underemphasized. The book reads more like a historical novel, which fits with Wolfe's style of New Journalism.

Structure

From Bauhaus to Our House is a short work, with a brief introduction and seven short chapters. The chapters are arranged in chronological order, tracing the history of elite American architectural culture from its roots in post World War I Germany to its internal debates and common elements in the present day. However, each chapter also seeks to make a self-contained point about the architectural community. Thus, the book has two intertwined structures, one as a chronological narrative, and the other as a series of short essays, each with their own theme. Though this is not to say that From Bauhaus to Our House lacks overarching themes.

Chapter one, The Silver Prince introduces the reader to Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus School. It begins in the 1910s during and after World War I, taking the reader through Gropius's emigration to the United States. Its primary point is that Gropius intended to imbue architecture with a post-war socialist ideology that did not fit well with the United States, its people and its history. Further, Gropius, in Wolfe's eyes, was pretentious and worshipped by his students.

Chapter two, Utopia Limited explains how the Bauhaus School transformed into the International Style and how Gropius and others co-opted the elite architectural institutions in the United States. Chapter three, The White Gods, shows how Gropius and the others rose to god-hood and how their ideas demolished all competing traditions. Chapter four, Escape to Islip, shows how many people among the working classes moved to the suburbs rather than deal with International Style architecture. Wolfe describes the ugly forms that the International Style architects imposed on their buildings' inhabitants.

Chapter five, The Apostates, explains how easily threatened the architectural establishment was by those who dared to depart from their modes of thought and Wolfe documents some talented architects who were excommunicated from the elite architectural community. Chapter six, The Scholastics, tells the story of how internal divisions within the architectural establishment led to competition in the theoretical realm. This competition generates more and more abstract approaches to architecture, making architecture theory irrelevant to architectural practice.

Finally in Chapter seven, Silver-White, Silver-Gray, discusses the fight between the Whites and the Grays for the soul of architecture but how both groups were still, unfortunately, descendants of the Silver Prince.

Quotes

"O Beautiful, for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain, has there ever been another place on earth where so many people of wealth and power have paid for and put up with so much architecture they detested as within they blessed borders today?" Introduction, p. 3

"And why? They can't tell you. They look up at the barefaced buildings they have bought, those great hulking structures they hate so thoroughly, and they can't figure it out themselves. It makes their heads hurt." Introduction, p. 7

"To the young American architects who made the pilgrimage, the most dazzling figure of all was Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus School." Chap. 1, p. 10

"'Painters, Architects, Sculptors, you whom the bourgeoisie pays with high rewards for your work—out of vanity, snobbery, and boredom—Hear! To this money there clings the sweat and blood and nervous energy of thousands of poor hounded human beings—Hear! It is an unclear profit ... we must be true socialists—we must kindle the highest socialist virtue: the brotherhood of man." Chap. 1, pp. 14-15

"O young silver princes set against the rubble!" Chap. 1, p. 35

"How could such vulgarities come into being? Simple: American architects stood still and listened to the client." Chap. 2, p. 39

"The White Gods! Come from the skies at last!" Chap. 3, p. 46

"Every building must have ... its own soul." Chap. 3, p. 65

"In short, the reigning architectural style in this, the very Babylon of capitalism, became worker housing." Chap. 4, p. 68

"Not even the bottom dogs, those on welfare, trapped in the projects, have taken it so supinely." Chap. 4, p. 80

"Stone retorted that it represented 'twenty-five hundred years of Western culture rather than twenty-five years of modern architecture.' The man was not even a backslider. He was an apostate pure and simple." Chap. 5, p. 88

"Less is a bore." Chap. 6, p. 104

"Syntactic meaning as defined here is not concerned with the meaning that accrues to elements or actual relationships between elements but rather with the relationship between relationships." Chap. 6, p. 122

"Immoral! Corrupt! American!" Chap. 7, p. 129

"We used to give prizes to architects for doing buildings. Now we give prizes to architects for drawing pictures." Chap. 7, p. 131

"Inside the compound, one could relax a bit. Johnson had committed apostasy, probably, but they still hadn't gotten it. They only paid for it. The outside world remained as out of it as ever. The new masses still struggled in the middle-middle ooze. The bourgeoisie was still baffled. The light of the Silver Prince still shone here in the Radiant City. And the client still took it like a man." Chap. 7, p. 143

Topics for Discussion

What historical and ideological conditions inspired the Bauhaus School?

How did the Bauhausians so easily take over the American architectural establishment?

What is architectural theory? How is it crucial to Wolfe's narrative?

What is Wolfe's critique of the American architectural establishment?

Why does Wolfe think that American business, non-profits and government commission buildings they hate?

Is Wolfe right to argue that there is no fundamental distinction between modernist and post-modernist architecture?

To what extent are Wolfe's claims about twentieth century architectural theory accurate?

Is Wolfe's fundamental critique fair?

What lesson does Wolfe draw from the battle between the Whites and the Grays?