

The First Rule of the Architect

by

Michael Benedikt

The University of Texas at Austin

For Graham Owen, Ed., *Architecture, Ethics, and Globalization* (Routledge)

"The first rule of the architect is...*to get the job!*" This durable maxim is attributed to Stanford White, who said it around 100 years ago. It was often repeated by Philip Johnson, a man who loved to say scandalous things about his chosen profession, including how the architect—or *he*, anyway—was a prostitute.

I had heard these titillating opinions years ago, but I came across them again, recently, reading a book I recommend to you highly, called *Architects of Fortune: Mies van der Rohe and the Third Reich* by Elaine S. Hochman. (Johnson knew Mies van der Rohe in the late 1920s, before the National Socialist Party's rise to power, which was all but complete by 1935.) At issue for Hochman is to understand why Mies was so reluctant to leave Germany, which he only did in 1937. Gropius had by then emigrated (to London), and so had many others long before left the country. Jewish architects, artists, intellectuals, had totally disappeared, but not to such pleasant places as London. All this Mies knew. Moreover, the Nazis had repeatedly closed down the Bauhaus in Dessau and in Weimar. It had arrested Bauhaus students; it had meddled in its faculty affairs. Was Mies van der Rohe a Nazi sympathizer, as Philip Johnson was, because Philip Johnson was, or vice versa?

The answer Hochman gives from the evidence is: neither. Mies simply thought (or *said* he thought) that architecture was *above* politics, *above*, even, morality, and in a sense untouchable by either. At a personal level however, Mies also wanted desperately to *build*—i.e., to *get the job*—and for this he would put up with almost anything. As one of Germany's leading architects, indeed, Mies thought he could build for Hitler, and that Modernism could and should become the official architectural style of the Third Reich. Was Modernism not already the favorite style of Mussolini and the Italian Fascists?

Mies miscalculated. He hung on, and hung on, reading the invitations to competitions he received from the Party as "positive signs," and trusting rumors from high officials that he might finally get a significant commission for a public building. Mies had no idea, it seems, how ambitious Hitler himself was as an architect and how committed Hitler was to imposing upon Berlin, and upon all of Germany, the neo-classicism of a gargantuan scale that Albert Speer was to help him visualize.¹

Now, I have to say that I don't particularly like talk about Hitler at venues where ethics in general are discussed. The period was too brutal to discuss coolly, and it's too easy to "score points" there. The Nazi era was an ethical black hole. So this is the last you'll hear of it directly.

The trouble with not discussing it at all, however, is that Modernism's origin—I should say *architectural* Modernism's origin—is inextricably tied up with German history and German ideas from the turn of 20th century until the beginning of the Second World War.

Of particular interest is the bitterness of the attack on bourgeois (or middle class) taste over that period. I often like to show a pair of matched posters used to advertise the Weissenhof Siedlung housing project in 1927 Stuttgart. This is not a slide lecture so you'll have to imagine these two posters, identical in size, similarly composed, and side by side. On the left, a picture of a plush, Victorian-era, living-room interior (lots of furniture, carpets, and drapery, texture, pattern, exotic artifacts). This image as a large, red-painted X through it, still dripping with "paint." On the right, a collage of perhaps twenty images from the Weissenhof project: white cubistic apartment blocks, undecorated and antiseptic room interiors (metal beds, sliding windows without curtains, naked light bulbs, open radiator heating...you get the picture...), an aerial view of the whole development, and so on. My point? *It took the complexity of a collage of over twenty images drawn from the modern project to match the complexity of a single bourgeois interior.* To go "one-on-one," room for room, would have been to reveal the obvious: that was what being touted on the right—the "good" side—was, in fact, impoverished and un-homey, a *less* that was not at all the *more* that Mies would later claim *less* to be, just cheaper.

Architectural Modernism in America grew up with two faces, and both spoke of the virtues of simplicity. These two faces belonged to two men: Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius. 1937 was the year that the United States became refuge to them both. Gropius became chairman of the department of architecture at Harvard, where he reigned for fourteen years. Mies left Germany to become director of the School of Architecture at Chicago's Armour Institute (later the Illinois Institute of Technology), where he ruled for twenty years. These two men revolutionized architectural education in America, training it away from historical evolutionism, away from romantic notions of the city, away, even, from the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright—with his regionalism, his love of the domestic—and from the later Le Corbusier—with his primitive, even erotic, forms, his preference for raw materials, and love of life as lived by ordinary people.ⁱⁱ Together, Gropius and Mies van der Rohe promoted the ideal of modern architecture as nothing more or less than the perfect marriage of constructional economy to painterly abstraction, a "style" that could claim to embody a way-of-life suited to its times, a style that was proper to a fault in its formal restraint, in its idealization of the clean and transparent, in its rejection of the feminine and the domestic, and in its commitment to appearing to be the result of applying the most efficient technical means and most logical design methods to the (manly) task of optimizing a building's functions. Mies played these ideas to evolving upper-class tastes (e.g., restrained but expensive materials, refined details, open space, and, of course, much glass onto pristine landscapes). Gropius, for his part, emphasized systematic design methods, urban-scale social projects, and the use everywhere of industrialized construction techniques. These two versions of Modernism book-ended a seemingly-complete ideational spectrum: Art (with class!) at the one end, Industry (with social purpose!) at the other. Young architects in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, could position themselves between these two poles according to their temperament and means. They could point to either man's work, Mies's or Gropius's, as it suited them, and call themselves unquestionably *modern*.ⁱⁱⁱ

The profoundly reductivist and elitist nature of the whole program went ignored by mainstream architects: economy and efficiency were the watchwords, hard and empty was cool; and the rich client—the rich client who had any *taste*, that is—could simply have *more* of this lessness, with better materials and detailing.

Now, for architecture like this to be accepted, in order for it to flourish, it takes more than architects wanting *to get the job*. It takes a social milieu that finds the style, and the whole simple-is-good (“less is more”) argument, economically, politically, and culturally congenial. And this International Style modern architecture found. But it was the *combination* of applying the architect's first rule—*getting the job*—with the rhetoric of simplicity, efficiency, functionalism, etc., that was especially potent. It was this combination that fed, and continues to feed, architecture to the furnaces of the marketplace. Why? In part because Modern was *cheaper* per-square-foot to build than the earlier Beaux Arts style with its thick walls and operable windows; in part because it appealed to the Calvinist-Protestant nothing-fancy-just-the-facts temperament of a certain class of Americans, and in part because it catered nicely to the American understanding of freedom as personal freedom, and that freedom as freedom (also) *from* care for, or attachment to, any particular place or environment.

This last cultural syndrome—i.e. freedom *from* care for, or attachment to, the environment—is something I want to look at for a few minutes, because it is, I think, peculiarly American, and because I think architects—*some* architects anyway—had a great deal to do with perpetuating it. I call the syndrome *place machismo*.

I would now like to draw from Chapter Ten of my forthcoming book, *Value*. The part I want to read to you is called “Combating ‘Place Machismo’”:

"There is a strain in American culture that judges sensitivity-to-place in general to be a weakness. Where this strain comes from is unclear; it has not, to my knowledge, been studied. It seems plausible, however, that place machismo, allied as it is to the ideal of *independence*, is an expression of values formed in America's pioneering days. After all, conditions were harsh on the frontier. Life on the trail, on the farm, and in new towns was dangerous and difficult. One had to ignore its discomforts; one had to become hardened. As late as the mid-19th century, Europeans, as well as cultivated Americans visiting frontier towns from cities like New York or Chicago or Kansas City, were dismissed as fops and softies—what with their demands for daily baths, soft linens, fans, and comfortable beds. No one intending to thrive ‘out West’ could afford to be that fussy.

"Then too, interior-making was a civilizing and essentially *female* occupation. If a man was going to be "environmentally sensitive," it would be to things *outdoors*: to trails and spoors, to the weather and the soil.

"These images are cultural clichés to be sure, based, very possibly, on historical inaccuracies. But in matters of culture and belief, clichés win, whether or not they were made in Hollywood. Certainly, the overall gender bias with respect to place-sensitivity—the idea that women are ‘soft’ and men ‘hard,’ that women care about their surroundings and men could not care less, that women cultivate and men pioneer, that women decorate and men design, that women thrive indoors and men outdoors, and so forth—can be found equally in the European psyche, based less on the memory of frontiersmanship, perhaps, than on millennia of warfare. Certainly it is a bias lodged also at the origins of Modernist art and architecture as Christopher Reed argues in his 1996 book *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in modern Art and Architecture*. "To this day the profession of interior design is dominated by women, while male interior designers are presumed to be effeminate. Architects, male and female, have to be careful not to

like curtains, or to know too much about fabrics. *Erecting* things must remain at the core of their expertise—or battling the weather, or courting danger, or deploying the latest technologies (for their "performance"), or exploring geometry for its own sake. Here architecture is edifice, tool, weapon, or sport, not *place*, not shelter, harbor, or succor; here architecture is an object among objects with shapes that *do* things, rather than an enwrapping, a cradling, an inside always inside other insides.^{iv}

"Imagine the following situation. A young man is interviewing for a job and is shown his possible future workplace: an over-lit, windowless, noisy little cubicle with a computer and an exposed duct or two. "Great!" he exclaims, not wanting to appear a *ninny*. He thinks: What kind of soldier, scanning the horizon for the enemy, would complain that the sun is in his eyes, what farmer that the flies are bothering him, what mechanic that the lube-pit is claustrophobic? He knows that the comforts of place are the perquisites of power, not the prerequisites of productivity. Besides, *this* company is so 'lean and mean' that even the CEO works in an open cubicle down the way! How *macho* is that? Would a woman interviewing for the same job 'rise' (or is it sink) to occasion? Possibly: it depends on how badly she needed the job, and what she thought the possibilities were for transforming the space.

"The fact is that away from the extreme conditions that would justify it (war, exploration, imprisonment), studied indifference to the environment—which I want to call "place machismo"—cannot be considered a virtue if we want the designed environment to be valued, which I assume *as architects* we do.

"But how could so ingrained a mental habit as place machismo be reversed? Public relations efforts to make it manly to manage the finer points of where you live or work? Perhaps. Al Gore going on about sprawl? Maybe. Action-movie heroes brought down by sheer depression at their environment? Won't happen.

"I would suggest we look at the design of schools, and especially of high schools. For, setting aside the influence of television and movies, not to mention the appeal to young men of the military mind-set, high schools are where place machismo is to *taught*. In situ.^v Let me explain what I mean.

"Visit the average suburban high school, vintage 1965 or after. As bland as a warehouse, as hardened as a prison, are you inspired to do anything but escape its echoing din? Is its design indicative of the high regard in which we hold youthfulness, or for the long days our children must spend in education? Is there an ounce of romance in those classrooms—a tall window, a sparkling laboratory with birds outside? Is there a place for the shy to dream? The answer, I venture, to all these questions is "no," and one has to wonder why.

"Surely it is for all the reasons I have hinted at here. In particular, it is thanks to the "pioneering" efforts of architecture firms like CRS in Houston (now CRSS) that new high schools responding to the post-war baby boom of the 1950s fell victim to the same optimization and rational planning principles that had been used hitherto for manufacturing plants, and that were at the heart of the modernist, Bauhaus project."

"The book that began the revolution was William Wayne Caudill's 1954 *Toward Better School Design*. Certainly it started CRS/CRSS on the path to immense success as a firm: it was a brilliant strategy move for a young firm with not work. It followed the first rule of architecture:

to get the job! and the appeal was to efficiency defined in narrow engineering and economic terms. This was the argument:

"If kids are to learn, they shouldn't need to look out of windows. If kids are messy, schools should be as easy to clean as bathrooms, all linoleum and tile. If 75 foot-candles at desk height is the ideal illumination, then so be it, everywhere, steady. Energy consumption? Build as tight as a refrigerator, with tiny or no windows and fluorescent light. Most efficient size? Bigger is better. Is theft a problem? Locks and bars. Misbehavior? Video cameras scanning every room, stair, and hallway bend. Communications? Public address system. Furniture abused? Make it steel and rock-hard plastic. Bolt it down.

"The sum of all these credos produced the environment in which millions of American middle- and upper-middle class teenagers spent, and continue to spend, five or more years of their lives at a time when they are sorting out who they are, what counts, and what their value is to their peers and to society at large. What message could they possibly receive from schools built on these principles of design other than that they—teenagers—are quasi-criminals from the start, whose sensitivity is best covered over, and whose individuality is to be fought for, tooth and nail, by strategic choice of clothing and by stoic, aggressive, or subversive behavior? Whatever these young people might learn about social interaction (or math or biology...), they learn that the only response to the *place itself* is abuse, or neglect, or total non-response to the physical discomfort it causes and the insult it implies to them, as individuals, and to the whole process of education.^{vi}"

We all know that school choice is a hot-button issue—and it's not one I'm going to debate here. But I would say that, if we were going to debate the issue, it would make sense for us to talk about school-building choice alongside all the other issues. The fact is that people will talk about everything, from the quality of teachers to the age of the books to what's served in the cafeteria, without ever talking about the basic institutional horrors of the buildings themselves, beyond basic upkeep issues. Like windows. Maybe this shouldn't surprise us, given what we understand about place-machismo. The parents—and remember, these are our potential clients and users—haven't been trained to have any more regard for their environments than their children. Back to the book:

"Indeed, there would be no reason to broach the subject of high school design at all if sensitivity to the designed environment was not one of the casualties of the system we have, and if it wasn't *architects*—quick to jettison the finer points of their art for modern "systems solutions"—that were not partly to blame. For with whatever else students might have learned at school about history or geography, about each other and their worth to society, millions of eighteen-year-olds leave high school each year—as they have for decades now—with much-lowered expectations of the quality of their future workplace and of the whole built environment, not to mention a proud imperviousness to what might be good, *or* bad, in either.^{vii} What goes around, dear colleagues, comes around."

This much from the book.^{viii}

At a symposium about professionalism and ethics like this, it would be natural for design issues, and certainly for *style* issues, to take a back seat. I would suggest to you, however, that discussion of design and style cannot be divorced from social and ethical ones, and not just because of the economics of who can or cannot afford what kind of architecture.

If the first rule of the architect is *to get the job*, then we should not be surprised when the successful among us, looking the other way, consort with evil regimes or exploitative developers.

If the first rule of the architect is *to get the job*, then it's no wonder that economics—and the battle to make more with less money, materials, time, care, or complexity—rules our professional lives and over most of the other things we want to care about.

If the first rule of the architect is *to get the job*, then we cannot complain that our fees are low and that people do not value what we do. Worse than that, if the first rule of the architect is *to get the job*, we cannot complain that what we do *deserves* to be valued more, for more and more of our work can only *be* cheap and uncomfortable no matter how well slathered over it is with "theory" issuing from New York and Cambridge, Mass., or public relations pap from the AIA.

No, the first rule of architect should be *to preserve, honor, and promote life on earth through the shaping the material world*. Shaping the material world so as to preserve, honor, and promote— so as to protect, enhance, and enrich—all forms and instances of life is the only "rule" that deserves architects' committed following. Call it the architect's Hippocratic Oath. Its challenge to us is both esthetic and ethical. If it doesn't look like we can live up to *this* first rule, I say, *pass up the job*.

.....

NOTES:

i In fact, from Hochman, it would seem that very reason Hitler wanted dominion over Germany and Europe was *so that* he could practice architecture (= get the job), and this in partial revenge for his not being accepted to architecture school in Vienna as a young man.

ii In America, despite all the admiration he received from students and academics, the influence of that other giant of modern architecture, Le Corbusier, was strangely limited; at best secondary and through intermediaries. (His only building in America was the Carpenter Center for the Arts on the campus of Harvard University.) Inventor, in his younger years, of the "Domino house," a simple concrete frame with a staircase, inventor too of the immortal phrase "a house is a machine for living in," tireless polemicist, and inspired designer, Le Corbusier's strongest influence was in Central and South America, in Greece, India, and the Middle East, not America. Perhaps this was because, especially in later life, Le Corbusier became very much an *artist*, a sort of architectural Picasso, a lover of beach and sun (and, perhaps not incidentally, voluptuous women), rather than the cool, suited servant of industry that Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius had become in pushing a more Protestant style of building, one that could make more of real-estate with much less vision, passion, and fuss. Good reading here is Charles Jencks's *Le Corbusier and the Tragic View of Architecture* (Harvard University Press, 1973).

iii I simplify, of course. One could always point to (and emulate) modernists who did not subscribe to the International Style, such as Alvar Aalto, Gunnar Asplund, Marcel Breuer, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and

later, Louis Kahn—architects who represented more complex admixtures of other ideals (e.g. regionalism, domesticity, emotive expression, physical warmth, monumentality).

iv What I mean is that the feeling of interiority—of being always *inside* a place, immersed or surrounded—can extend beyond just the experience of rooms and other indoor enclosures: to the "out-of-doors," to streets, squares, and parks bounded by trees and the facades of buildings, and also to untouched natural environments where the stars or a tree canopy are a roof, where the earth or bed of leaves is the floor, and a nearby rise or rock-face are the walls. Embeddedness is the metaphor; or immersion in a field.

Equally, and alternatively, one can feel oneself to be always *outside*, an object among objects, always in orbit around other closed *things* or on some trajectory with respect to them. These are things whose interiors are inaccessible, or that reveal, when breached, yet more outsides: smaller things with unbreachable shells, "components," jostling, poised, or whirling in emptiness.

These are two, I think very deep, orientations to human-being-in-the-world (or *Dasein*, to use Heidegger's term), and they are influential in areas far from the design of buildings. Aristotle, Leibniz, and Einstein, were "insiders," I suggest, while Plato, Newton, and Bohr were "outsiders." I am also suggesting that the two orientations are *somewhat* gendered, with women being more apt to be insiders, and men outsiders.

If I am right on this last score, then there is something to watch in architectural education. Once predominantly male, the student body at schools of architecture over the last two decades has become equally divided between men and women. Faculty composition is still predominantly male, as are the dominant ideologies, along the lines I have been discussing, (although not so explicitly stated). It has been my observation that women's approaches to architecture are "masculinized" far more readily than men's are "feminized," and this is cause for concern. Perhaps this will change over time. If so, then one major field of contestation, I believe, will be interior design. As more departments of interior design become absorbed into schools of architecture, they will begin to realize that they must *resist* standard architectural sensibility in order to preserve their own. Interior design teachers are going to have to develop their own body of theory and, yes, academic jargon, one that does *not* shrink from technicality or from articulating its extreme and "female" sensitivity to the insider, environment-dependent, view: to texture, pattern, color, style, fabric, touch, placement, propriety, nestedness, domesticity, "personality," complexity, atmosphere, and so on.

One more observation. The idea that architectural design is about *shaping space*—an idea developed almost entirely in the 20th century and made commonplace by the popularity of two books, Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time, and Architecture* (1941) and Bruno Zevi's *Architecture as Space* (1957)—still has a strong hold on the architectural imagination and vocabulary. One would think that this would have been an essentially "feminizing" notion. After all, if architecture is properly "about space," then it is not about things or tools.

But this is to overlook the fact that thinking of space as "shape-able" by design is to think of it as a *sculptor* would. It is to transform space from something oceanic or atmospheric, fecund and field-like, into something stone- or clay-like; it is precisely to make space itself a thing that has "male" object-character, something to which to apply a tool. "The architect models in space as a sculptor in clay," wrote Sir Geoffrey Scott as early as 1915 in his *Architecture of Humanism*. Every major architect and writer has agreed since. Thus, once again, an opportunity was passed over to read the world as "endless interiority" and densely relational—a sensibility all but driven to extinction by men's reductive, if organizing, desire to shape and command things that have no interiors that count.

In sum, and regardless of simple gender assignments (to which *numerous* exceptions can *always* be found), sensitivity to place presumes that one understands oneself to be *inside* a place and subject to its inputs, which flood in from all around. What I have called "place machismo" begins, emotionally, in delivering oneself from feelings of embeddedness in and dependency on the environment, and into feelings of independence and autonomy. Cognitively, it means construing the world not as a series of environs, each nested in a larger one, and all centered on a subject, but as a system of "atoms," sentient or not, exerting forces on each other across a void that is the scene and permitter of free motion.

v Notwithstanding what I have said in the note above, there is place *machisma* too. Among young women in high school, imperviousness to the physical environment is encouraged—or made possible anyway—by their all-consuming focus on the acceptability/desirability of their bodies and clothing, as well as on human relationships. Certainly the books, movies, and TV-shows marketed to young women revolve around these issues. Facebook amplifies these tendencies.

Probably the only important room for young women at high school is the bathroom. With its large mirror and relaxed companionship, this is where many of the secrets of beauty and problems of sexuality are first learned about. Here is where they are safe from male eyes—otherwise everywhere—and from surveillance by authority...

Or so one might imagine. For in fact, for many young women, the women's bathroom at high school is not a relaxing place at all, but a terrifying one. These girls "tumble into the stalls and hide, desperate for privacy and an

escape from judgment and ridicule." (Anon. Private correspondence.) "Girls are most cruel to each other" when among only each other and in such liminal spaces as bathrooms, dressing rooms, as so on, and this is only indirectly caused by actual competition for local beaus.

Needless to say, beyond providing the basics and a modicum of cleanliness, the *design* of average high school bathroom takes none of this into account. Nor is it expected to.

^{vi} Part of the reason for all this is that high school students have no say in the shape of their environment. They are not the clients of the school's architect, for all that might be said over the tops of reading glasses about how they "really are." As legal minors and without independent monies, they have no choice as to where to go to school. And even if these last two limitations were unavoidable and parents were fully attentive to the matter on behalf of their children, the state holds so complete a monopoly over providing secondary education—the where, what, when, how, by-whom, and to-whom—that commercial monopolies pale by comparison. Primary and secondary education may rightly be compulsory, but this should not mean that the *sites* of education should have to drive the point home with such force. And as though to make matters worse, no industrially developed nation in the world devotes as small a fraction of its public spending to pre-college education as does the U.S.

In correction, and short of a massive overhaul of government programs (including a doubling of state budgets per student and *per square foot* for construction, and a ban on talk of "efficiency"), I would urgently recommend creating properly-incentived markets in the provision of public high school education, parallel to the ones that exist for college-level education. Perhaps then the physical setting of learning will become one of the grounds for competition between schools, *along with* better teachers and programs.

^{vii} Perhaps imperviousness, or indifference, is not the word that best describes everyone's response. *Toleration* or stoicism might be the larger term for how most respond to the "aesthetic" of cafeterias, hospital wards, schools, public bathrooms, etc., not to mention the commercial strip mall, a feeling which, when embraced, becomes "macho." Clearly, people prefer nicer places and will go to them if they have the choice for the same expenditure. (In the meantime, their general de-sensitization makes it necessary to create ever more sensational, cartoon-like buildings—from the Bellagio in Las Vegas to the Guggenheim in Bilbao—to "get through.")

Another response, of course, is *anger*, which turns some to destruction, and others to a determination to change things. Some of the latter enter architecture school. Yet a fourth response is *escape*. Thankfully, most college and university campus environments provide just such escape—for a few, restorative years. How today's graduates of Schools of Education can go back to work in, and, worst of all, work hard to perpetuate, the school-making system currently in place is almost beyond understanding.

^{viii} This paper was written in 2001, at a time when I thought that my book, then called *Value* and soon to be called *A General Theory of Value*, would be published. As it turned out, the book was commercially unpublishable, and remains in 600-page manuscript to this day. Nonetheless, the piece quoted here did see publication as part of "Environmental Stoicism and Place Machismo: A Polemic," in *Harvard Design Magazine* 16, Winter/Spring 2002, 21–27. For more on the "first rule" as I outline it in the final paragraph, see my *God Is the Good We Do: Theology of Theopraxy* (New York, Bottino Books, 2007)