The Absence of Presence

If one doesn’t talk about a thing, it has never happened.
— Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

**WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR THE RENOWN** of some buildings, even when they suffer significant problems, and the obscurity of many other buildings of great merit, not to mention greater physical integrity? This question presented itself urgently as I stood in the Schindler House in Los Angeles on a rainy day in January. Strategically placed buckets caught the rainwater that streamed down from various leaks, and even the furiously burning fireplaces and the press of many bodies failed to relieve the bone-chilling cold. Surely the fame of this building came only at the price of ignoring serious problems. Since I can find no substantive justification in the notions of poetic license and the power of the solitary genius, I want instead to turn to the field of architectural production itself, using one building as a means of exploring how power relations in society are reproduced in architecture, and also some of the mechanisms that ensure their reproduction.¹

The building I want to discuss is the Knickerbocker, located in the Bushwick district of Brooklyn, New York. Largely abandoned after riots in 1978, the neighborhood has since become a mecca for African Americans and immigrants, many from the Caribbean, particularly the Dominican Republic. Lacking the relative wealth and middle-class NIMBY clout of Queens, Brooklyn today has more than its share of low-cost housing of various types, of which the Knickerbocker is merely among the most recent.

Completed in 1958 and designed by Architrope, a small New York firm, the Knickerbocker Residence is a single-room-occupancy project for homeless and mentally ill veterans. With apartments for forty-four individuals and four couples, it contains facilities for a range of services, including a clinic for the supervision of medications, a common dining room, and even a library. Each apartment has a private bath, kitchenette, and furniture designed by the architects; ceilings are one-half-foot higher than the eight-foot standard. Although small, the units radiate warmth and light.

From interior to exterior, the Knickerbocker is of unusual quality, far more than could be expected at $117 per square foot. Principal designer Jonathan Kirschfeld of Architrope avoided anything that looked remotely institutional, and instead inserted the structure into the neighborhood as a typical brick apartment building, referring to that topology without being limited by it. A townhouse-type unit projecting out from the center of the facade emphasizes its residential character; the finely detailed brickwork, with eight-inch brick returns and handsome white precast concrete lintels and slits at the windows, give it a decidedly upscale aura. Kirschfeld managed to transform every obstacle or problem into a positive result. In short, the architecture lends dignity to a building type that too often lacks it, and does so despite a modest budget and uncommonly complicated code requirements.

Kirschfeld followed the standard practice of offices that want to draw attention to their work: he sent the project to the major magazines *Architecture, Architectural Record,* and *Progressive Architecture* each noting it briefly (in a page or less) as an example of worthy social design and little more. It was mentioned in the *New York Times* Real Estate Section.² Kirschfeld also sought to interest New York’s most prominent architecture critics, Paul Goldberger and Herbert Muschamp, hoping they would cover the project more extensively in the *Times.* Both ignored the building entirely, and Goldberger remarked to Kirschfeld, memorably, that he was currently involved more in “cultural” than in architectural criticism.

What “cultural criticism” precisely has occupied Goldberger of late? For one, he was among a group of prestigious architects and critics convened by Peter Eisenman in fall 1996 for the opening of his Aranoff Center for Design and Art at the University of Cincinnati, coinciding during the same ten-day period when the Knickerbocker officially opened. The videotape of the event, an edited version of which was broadcast on *The Charlie Rose Show,* is hilarious; it is a full-court display of the rituals associated with the cult of art and artists. This gathering of architectural luminaries was clearly intended to certify the building’s merit. That “greatness” can be in significant measure associated with circles of class and friendship was clarified by Goldberger when he remarked that the group had assembled at least partly because they are “Peter’s friends.” As famous architects, dears, and critics, they lent some of their cultural status to the building and its architect.
Viewing displays of elitism and self-proclaimed superiority such as this event, members of the audience rarely possess the knowledge that would enable them to recognize that the cultural status of the work, or the designer, is ultimately arbitrary, and chiefly a reflection of the extent to which authorities invest their cultural capital in certain objects. And, of course, the authorities' conferment of status on this building largely reinforces their own status and values as a self-proclaimed elite.

To what values do they subscribe? At the Aronoff event, what was most striking about many of the comments was the contempt they conveyed for the audience. Eisenman, for instance, referred to Walter Benjamin as a “German philosopher unknown to most of you in the audience.” Sanford Kwinter remarked that the “interesting people, the intellectuals, admire [the] building.” David Childs asserted that it was “good” that taxi drivers in Cincinnati found it hard to find the building’s front door. Making it difficult for ordinary people to find the front door, asserted Eisenman, would counter the “sedentary culture” by “bring[ing] the body back into the mind-eye relationship.” Beyond this underestimation of “ordinary” people, the values expressed collectively and individually by this group often seemed clichés. They wanted to “shake things up,” to make “another kind of home,” to “bring down classicism,” and to “embrace infrastructural-scale architectural thought.” What is remarkable, given the vacuity and even incoherence of much of the discussion, is that such groups have been able to convince so many of their cultural superiority. Entry into this charmed circle is obviously not based primarily upon any objective measure of quality, either of thought or work. Most significantly, this group excludes which does not fit — which returns us to Golderger’s lack of interest in the Knickerbocker: it did not “fit” the concerns of “culture.”

The fact that it is designed for the lowest level social groups and hence clients possible in our society — the working class, the homeless, and mentally ill veterans — sealed the Knickerbocker Residence’s obscurity.

Top: Knickerbocker Residence, studio apartment; bottom: Knickerbocker Avenue elevation.
at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in the 1970s, and both occasionally teach studios at major northeastern universities. Architrope was a finalist for the prestigious Palladio Prize in 1991, and the firm won New York Art Commission awards in 1993 and 1996, and a Distinguished Architecture Citation from the New York City AIA in 1991.

So how can we account for the relative obscurity of this building? The forces at work within any field of cultural production are complicated and twine together in markedly different ways in individual cases. Without a far larger study, it is not possible to make convincing generalizations. And yet, I do think that there are key points to make here about the politics of recognition in architecture, and I want to approach them by offering an example from another part of the cultural world—movies.

In May 1986, I saw a movie that I regard as one of the best of the 1980s, _At Close Range_. Seemed to have everything that would make it a hit: excellent cast (including Sean Penn and Christopher Walken), compelling story based on real events, strong cinematography, and even a successful title song recorded by Madonna. Yet the movie was withdrawn from release after a few weeks. No critic came forward to champion it; the film dropped from view, neither a popular nor a critical success.

That the movie would disappear was obvious the first time I saw it (sensing this, I saw it two more times), but I have puzzled over the reasons. Perhaps, given its basis in real life, the pain and horror of the story were simply too devastating, much more so than in the mock thrillers or sensationalized bloodbaths of standard multiplex fare. Moreover, the director did not attempt to psychoanalyze the protagonists or to "explain" their behavior, thereby adding to the shock of the final scenes. Walken's character was the very personification of Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil."

Still, American moviegoers rarely reject a film on the grounds of too much violence. I believe that this film faded from view because its drama takes place in the working class. Further, this working class has none of the stylized phonicness of David Mamet's characters, nor the angst-driven moodiness of Sam Peckinpah's. Unflinchingly and sentimentally, the film depicts the sordid behavior of some unendearing young men whose petty crimes seem to them simply pranks, and who are drawn into a more complex, deeply criminal world whose true nature eludes them until the very end. You will be thinking of other movies in which protagonists succumb to evil, but that is precisely the point. In most movies such protagonists are middle class, or, even better, upper class; thus their fall is dramatically satisfying because they have plunged from the heights. In such movies audiences find characters with whom to identify. _At Close Range_, with its unflinching working-class men and women, offers no such opportunities for comfortable identification.

The parallels to the Knickerbocker Residence are obvious, as is the list of "negative prestige" factors working against this fine building. Its Bushwick location is no doubt the first negative prestige point; but the fact that it is designed for the lowest level social groups and hence clients possible in our society—the working class, the homeless, and mentally ill veterans—sealed the Knickerbocker Residence's obscurity. How to address the needs of low-status populations is a profoundly uncomfortable question, not only for the architectural profession, but for society as a whole. Both the homeless and mentally ill are stigmatized in contemporary America; misunderstood, demonized, and marginalized, neither group is allowed to participate fully in our society. Communities do not invite social service agencies to develop programs for these groups, nor do they encourage the construction of appropriate facilities in their neighborhoods.

To the world of architecture as currently constituted, such client groups and their invariably downscale districts are not worth lionizing in order to cultivate them for future work; nor are the for-profit groups that typically fund and operate such enterprises. At its core, architecture today is supremely elitist, drawing most private and public commissions from various elite groups. Due to their political and social aspirations, many leading American practitioners—Gehry, Eisenman, Graves, Pei, Pelli, Meier, and others—do not invest their prestige, their symbolic capital, in projects for the homeless or the mentally ill; their professional purpose is to address the taste culture of very different segments of the population. To design such facilities therefore transgresses the fundamental premises of Architecture with a capital A. And even if some enlightened practitioners see a certain nobility in such projects, there is certainly little attendant fame. Architects who primarily design low-cost or SRO housing are acknowledged as socially responsible but are never invited into the star hierarchy—nor are their buildings. Although I reject the notion that a museum or library is inherently a more valuable project than an SRO, I want to draw attention to the widespread disinterest in challenging the hierarchy of professional architectural values that ranks housing for the poor and ill among the least desirable kinds of commission. I understand too that this valuation is not an innocent act: as a mechanism for the reproduction of the power of the privileged, it operates also to deny architectural resources (among other resources) to less privileged groups. Need I add that this attitude is primarily responsible for the fact that the architectural profession is now, at the end of the 20th century, largely superfluous in efforts to find solutions to some of our society's most urgent problems?

Notes
3. _At Close Range_ (1986), directed by James Foley.

_Diane Ghirardes_ is professor of architectural history at the University of Southern California, editor of the _Journal of Architectural Education_, and author of the recently published _Architecture After Modernism_.

**SUMMER 1997** 19