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Reviews: The Architecture of Happiness by Alain de Botton (New York: Pantheon, 2006) and From a Cause to a Style, by Nathan Glazer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007)

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Abstract

One might reasonably expect that Nathan Glazer, in his *From a Cause to a Style: Modernist Architecture's Encounter with the American City*, and Alain de Botton, in *The Architecture of Happiness*, would take many similar positions. Like Jane Jacobs and Robert Venturi in the 1960s, and like many architectural theorists since, both Glazer and De Botton take issue with Modern architecture. However, both books are something other than theory, and neither author is a designer. And unlike Venturi or Aldo Rossi, Colin Rowe or Charles Moore, neither proposes architectural solutions to his concerns.

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REVIEWED BY DANIEL NAEGELE

The Architecture of Happiness

by **Alain de Botton**

New York: Pantheon, 2006

AND

From a Cause to a Style

Modernist Architecture's Encounter with the American City
by **Nathan Glazer**

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007

One might reasonably expect that Nathan Glazer, in his *From a Cause to a Style: Modernist Architecture's Encounter with the American City*, and Alain de Botton, in *The Architecture of Happiness*, would take many similar positions. Like Jane Jacobs and Robert Venturi in the 1960s, and like many architectural theorists since, both Glazer and De Botton take issue with Modern architecture. However, both books are something other than theory, and neither author is a designer. And unlike Venturi or Aldo Rossi, Colin Rowe or Charles Moore, neither proposes architectural solutions to his concerns. Yet one suspects that De Botton's *Happiness* is far too personal and individual to appeal to Glazer, and Glazer's "conclusion that the answer to improving [public architecture] lies in the raising of public taste" (44) is far too unrealistic to sway De Botton. Despite their sharing a cause, the respective convictions of Glazer and De Botton are at odds. The dichotomy makes

reading the two books in tandem worthwhile.

On two counts the title of Nathan Glazer's *From a Cause to a Style: Modernist Architecture's Encounter with the American City* suggests something very different from the content of the book itself. First, the scope of Glazer's concern is far less than what his title suggests. The essays in this collection discuss not "the American City" but New York City — and bits of Washington, DC, Boston, and Cambridge, Massachusetts. While these eastern areas constitute important examples of the American city, their encounters with "Modernist architecture" differ greatly from those of Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, the river cities that dominated the 19th century, the post-World War II Sunbelt cities, and most urban areas between.

Second, Modernist architecture began in America not as a cause but as a style. Examples include Neutra's *Lovell*

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Health House and Howe and Lescaze's *PSFS Building*. Both appeared — together with their European ancestors and a few American “filling stations” — in Hitchcock and Johnson's 1932 *The International Style*, a book whose influence was pervasive in stylizing American Modernist architecture in the image of the European Modern movement but without a social cause. Modernist architecture, some in the form of drab functionalist housing, was built in America in the decades that followed this publication. Much of it in New York City, this housing was more concerned with satisfying immediate needs than with either cause or style. Glazer, a preeminent sociologist and activist born and raised in NYC in the 1920s and 1930s, knows all this. Yet his introduction and conclusion wrap the book's twelve chapters in the transparent bias of its anti-Modernism title. A more appropriate title for the book might be *Nathan Glazer's Encounters with the Urban Design of New York City*.

From a Cause to a Style's essays were published over fifteen years. Although its being a collection brings benefits — the book is personal, of its time, and accessible — it also brings detriments. It lacks unity; criteria introduced in one essay are seldom applied in subsequent essays; and recent developments in timely subject matters are not considered. This being said, the book offers relevant case studies in urban design — almost always of particular moments in the history of New York. Its primary foci are issues of planning, public architecture and places, the monument, and the processes of urban change. To his great credit, Glazer never indulges in simplistic answers to the complex issues he examines; and unlike De Botton in *Happiness*, he never demonizes architects and urban planners, but treats their involvement as a symptom of 20th-century Modernism, not its root.

What, then, is its root? In Glazer's words, *From a Cause to a Style* records “the observations of an urbanist confronted by the revolutionary onslaught of modernism” (20). It views “Modernism” as an invading entity, fully formed and revolutionary. Its root, one suspects, is to be found in how Modernism came to be

and why it was at odds with an urbanism Glazer might find acceptable. Yet despite having a profound knowledge of sociology and political science, Glazer never speculates on the conditions and context that gave rise to this Modernism. He makes little attempt to define the essence of Modernism or to better understand its relationship to the traditional. Instead, he reverts to his conviction that Modernism in America was based on the promise of social good, a “cause,” and that later this cause was crippled by a style with a life of its own.

In the first chapter, Glazer writes, “The architect as artist worked well enough when architects designed within traditions that limited and guided them. . . . These traditions simply don't exist any more. For the serious architect every new major commission is a temptation to shape a new vision. He responds like a painter or sculptor, expressing himself” (41 – 42). That the death of tradition is related to a contemporary tendency toward self-expression seems entirely plausible, but again Glazer never pursues this point as a sociologist. Instead, he laments the tendency without speculating on its cause.

Glazer's best chapters interrogate the architecture of the Modern monument in three essays: “Subverting the Context”: Olmsted's Parks and Serra's Sculpture”; “Monuments in an Age without Heroes”; and “Modernism and Classicism on the National Mall.” The monument represents collective memory, and Glazer believes that it must “say something,” and notes that with the figural artists of the past, “it was clear what they meant” (96). Today, however, “The mute monument is all around us, and the most successful monument of the last decades — the *Vietnam Memorial*, in its original form, before groups of human figures began to be added to it, to the dismay of its youthful designer and sophisticated critics — symbolizes this muteness” (99). Glazer links the overwhelming popularity of the *Vietnam Memorial* to its non-judgmental, non-specific nature: “It does not tell us that these men died for their country, or for liberty or democracy, or that they died in vain. Indeed it says nothing except that

they died. And in view of the ambiguity that surrounds the Vietnam War, this is probably all for the best. The fact that it asserts nothing, in contrast to the monuments of the past, undoubtedly helps make possible its universal popularity” (99).

Although I would take issue with Glazer's insistence that the *Vietnam Memorial* “asserts nothing” and that Modern memorials, in general, are mute, undoubtedly the language of Modernism differs from that of the traditional. Modernism tends to elevate particulars to universals; a positive ambiguity prevails in many of the best Modern buildings and monuments. Is there something inherent in the modern condition that encourages Modernism's preference for abstraction and ambiguity, its reluctance to speak in traditional representational terms? Glazer neither asks nor answers this question, though the question seems germane to any reasonable understanding of monumentality, memory, and Modernism.

In the book's final paragraph, Glazer reiterates his thesis while rendering frivolous an architecture that he believes has abandoned social cause. “From attempting to design an environment that reflected rationality and good sense and economy,” he asserts, “modernism evolved into something that wanted to surprise, to astound, to disorient, perhaps to amuse. That was fine on occasion — at the World's Fair, on vacation, in the fun fair. But it was not an architecture for ordinary life, and ordinary life has fled from it” (291 – 292). Though his disappointment in Modernism as a remedy for social ills is understandable, the trajectory that he suggests — that Modernism evolved from the rational and economic to a surprising, astounding, disorienting World's Fair architecture — is inaccurate. World's Fair architecture is not the end result of Modernism's evolution. Rather, the fair was an essential site for Modernism from its inception. The *Crystal Palace*, the *Eiffel Tower*, the *Barcelona Pavilion*, the *World of Tomorrow* hemisphere, Expo '67's housing — all must have “wanted to surprise, to astound, to disorient, to amuse,” and none could seriously claim to reflect “rationality and

good sense and economy.”

This tendency toward experimentation and play, toward the ephemeral, and even toward the immediately useless was and is fundamental to “advancing” architecture in the modern age. Not to recognize this, not to recognize that Modernism did not first subscribe to a cause, and only later evolved into “something that wanted to surprise,” is a basic fallacy of Glazer’s thesis. Modernism had “wanted” from the beginning; the modern condition engendered it. It’s arguable, too, that Modernism was never really an architecture for ordinary life, as Glazer would have it. Rather it seems to eschew the very notion of the ordinary, while contemporary American culture — not just in architecture but in all manifestations — encourages the astounding, the self-indulgent, the amusing.

Alain de Botton’s *The Architecture of Happiness* understands Modernism differently. Its dust jacket is of an antique-like paper, cream and earthen red, and features two images: John Nash’s 1811 *Keeper’s Cottage* in a wooded setting, complete with gabled roof and smoking chimney, and an exterior perspective of an early version of Le Corbusier’s quintessential “machine for living in,” the *Villa Savoye* (no trees, no grass, but lots of pipe rails). The rhetoric is abundantly clear: *Keeper’s Cottage* occupies the heavenly realm; the *Villa Savoye*, its opposite. De Botton has scripted Le Corbusier as the century’s villain, the Big Bad Wolf of Modern architecture, and nearly all examples of architecture problematic to *Happiness* are from the 20th century. By contrast, his examples of make-me-happy architecture are from earlier times, either back-in-the-woods houses or urban architecture imaged as isolated from an urban context. If Glazer asks, “What happened to concern for the public realm in architecture?” De Botton’s prescription for self-indulgence as a means of achieving an “architecture of happiness” might serve as one answer.

The Architecture of Happiness offers short, seductive, diary-like entries that owe much to Marcel Proust — not surprising given De Botton’s earlier *How Proust Can Change Your Life*. Like

Proust’s, De Botton’s expression is personal and reflective, never coldly theoretical, although theory is suggested when the book is considered as a whole. His Proustian manner of writing personal thinking, not immutable declarations, allows him to be simultaneously absolute and relative. He makes absolute statements but casts them as “merely” personal. Such presentation serves as metaphor for De Botton’s architecture of happiness: a personal smiley face in a public, often difficult place.

Distilled, De Botton’s message is something like this: Trust and believe in your own senses regarding architecture; have your own thoughts about it; know what it is you like and surround yourself with it. If you do this — if you shroud yourself in what you regard as beautiful — happiness will result. Your personal condition will improve tremendously, and, though the world’s problems are too extensive and complex to be considered immediately, your self-improvement will serve as an example. Eventually society in general will follow, and ultimately the public realm will improve. Secular Puginism in an age of high capitalism? Perhaps, but at the same time De Botton offers a kind of consumer philosophy that can’t help but appeal to a contemporary “Enjoy, today is almost all there is” mentality.

De Botton’s concern is primarily for the private sphere, for domestic architecture. He does not preach but rather exhibits a connoisseurship that communicates his ideals. Preferences and manners are primary. He cites buildings and building fragments, furniture, and the occasional unexecuted city plan as examples of things he likes, reassuring the reader that he prefers no one period to another, is highly individualistic in his choices, and is undoubtedly a man of sophisticated, elevated taste. Citations include: high-backed Windsor armchairs, ornate Sèvres Blue Cameo tea services (emanating “distinct conceptions of fulfillment” [72]), Hector Guimard’s *Cas-tel Béranger*, Urbino’s *Ducal Palace*, C. F. A. Voysey’s *Moorcrag*, Leverton’s fanlight windows, the decorative plaster of the *Alhambra*, the *Näs House* in Rö, Sweden,

Robert Adam’s library in Kenwood House, *Casa Malaparte*, the Royal Crescent in Bath, the Queen’s Hamlet at Versailles, rue de Castiglione in Paris, Nash’s *Park Crescent*, Kahn’s *Yale Center for British Arts*, Robert Maillart’s *Salginatobel Bridge* in Switzerland, a Shaker staircase in Kentucky, and the exposed arches of Labrouste’s *Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève*, with their “small flowers fashioned out of wrought iron” that “stand,” De Botton insists, “as markers of patience and generosity, of a kind of sweetness and even love” (211). Elitist? No doubt. But with these preferred letters carefully selected from an alphabet soup that is all of architecture, and conjoining precisely cropped illustrations with elegant writing, De Botton constructs well the message he wishes to convey.

If all this seems superficial and easily dismissed, De Botton, in a very soft voice that guides but never directs, assures us that it is not. His argument, like Pugin’s and William Morris’s more than a century earlier, relies on an educated and shared moral vision — less likely in the 21st century than in the 19th. Christianity and Islam, he writes, proposed that “beautiful buildings had the power to improve us morally and spiritually. They believed that, rather than corrupting us, rather than being an idle indulgence for the decadent, exquisite surroundings could edge us towards perfection. A beautiful building could reinforce our resolve to be good. . . . Attractive architecture was held to be a version of goodness in a non-verbal idiom — and its ugly counterpart, a material version of evil” (117). De Botton understands that “even those who privately harbor a notion of the operative principles behind architectural beauty are unlikely to make their suppositions public, for fear of committing an illogicality or of being attacked by the guardians of relativism, who stand ready to censure all those who would dress up individual tastes as objective laws” (171). Yet certainly in our world, good and evil, beautiful and ugly, *are* relative values, and to understand them as absolute *is* “an illogicality” — no matter how comforting it might be to think otherwise. But that we “think otherwise” is fundamental to De

Botton's proposition. His *Architecture of Happiness* depends on it.

For De Botton, happiness cannot be of an ordinary sort but must be "of the highest and most intelligent kind." To obtain this, we need "constant external guidance" to assist "our visual and emotional faculties . . . to help them decide what they should take note of and appreciate." De Botton notes that "'Culture' is the word we have assigned to the force that assists us in identifying which of our many sensations we should focus on and apportion value to" (260). But from where does culture come? In the past, De Botton claims, "Writers, painters and theorists . . . have actively shaped the sense of the beauty of their nation" (260). And apparently at present, it is they — particularly the writers (particularly De Botton?) — whom we should trust, for obviously "our elusive discomforts . . . can in the end always be traced back to . . . architects who forgot to pay homage to the quirks of the human mind, who allowed themselves to be seduced by a simplistic vision" (248).

In all of this, De Botton establishes himself — connoisseur, writer, individualist — as arbiter initially of fine taste, but ultimately of morality, spirituality, and acceptable culture. Writers, not architects, shape the "sense of beauty" of their nation, pay appropriate homage to the "quirks of the human mind," and are never seduced by a "simplistic vision." Apparently De Botton believes that one can *write* an architecture, for he never proposes the *creation* of architecture, only the appropriation of a highly select portion of that which already exists.

There is cause for hope, however, and De Botton concludes *Happiness* by assuring his reader: "Lest we begin to despair at the thought of how much might be required to bring about a genuine evolution in taste, we may remind ourselves how modest were the means by which previous aesthetic revolutions were accomplished" (263). Is it mere coincidence that like Glazer's, De Botton's concluding remarks employ that still contested and apparently still scientific notion of "evolution"? And not unlike Glazer's World's Fair "proof," De Botton cites as an exam-

ple of modest means "a single structure, Brunelleschi's *Foundling Hospital*, and one treatise, Leone Battista Alberti's *Ten Books on Architecture* (1452)" as "enough to impress a new sensibility on the world" (263, 265). Yet even if one accepts the Italian Renaissance as a "genuine evolution in taste," these works, important as they may be to today's notion of the Renaissance, were but two of many contributions to what De Botton labels an "aesthetic revolution," and both, of course, were authored by architects — the source, for De Botton, of "elusive discomforts."

The Architecture of Happiness is easily dismissed as just so much overtly elitist, let's-indulge-ourselves-in-the-tastefully-charming-and-elegant-and-what-a-pity-about-all-the-rest sentiment. As a life goal, happiness seems overrated; yet in an age of images in which absolutes are outlawed and all is relative, one wonders if serious fault can be found with self-indulgence of the sort that De Botton proposes. Can one justifiably deny the concerned individual the comforts of Prozac, Happy Meals, or smiley faces? I suspect that Glazer would affirm this denial, for if the concerned are encouraged to attach themselves to the boob tube, who will remain to instigate necessary change in the public realm? De Botton seems to believe that the public realm will correct itself by following "intelligent" private examples. Whereas Glazer's denial of individual comfort until all is resolved for everyone might appeal solely to martyrs (an ever-dwindling type), De Botton's "lead by example" theory assures his followers of a guiltless good life but seems unlikely to affect the public realm.

Clearly both writers are fairly ignorant about the history of architecture; and just as clearly both writers' arguments are riddled with "illogicality" and the subjectivism of elevating taste — public or private — to the position of moral imperative. Yet the issues they raise concerning Modernism and the current state of architecture and planning should be carefully considered. Glazer, the sociologist, understands architecture and planning to be relevant to large segments of the public. He laments that the public

realm is no longer of primary concern to these professions and that currently professional interest lies in the astounding and surprising rather than the necessary. De Botton suggests that we can achieve happiness by building a small world of our own comprised of what we (after having read his book) feel is good. Neither seems to accept "the public" as it is or to offer insight into how the unacceptable current condition came to be.

Both books aid in the understanding of architecture as a medium of our condition. And although propositions put forth do not withstand intelligent scrutiny, the books should be read and read together. As separate arguments their limitations are obvious, yet together their opposed but intimately linked propositions illuminate, if only partially, some important theoretical issues of building in this century — style and cause; collective and individual; ephemeral and permanent; astounding and necessary. □