

The Organizational Complex: Architecture, Media, and Corporate Space. *By Reinhold Martin*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003. xix + 304 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN: 0-262-13426-8.

Reviewed by Richard Longstreth

From around 1950 to the middle of the following decade, the office building sheathed in a sheer wall of glass and opaque spandrel glass panels became an emblem of what seemed right, then what seemed wrong, about American architecture. For their clients as well as for many observers, these “glass boxes,” as they were often called, symbolized a new era—one of technical and organizational supremacy in the world, of enlightened management, and of economic growth. They housed corporate headquarters and research facilities for many of the nation’s leading businesses, from Bell Telephone to Chase Manhattan Bank, from Inland Steel to Pepsi-Cola. Some rose in the city center, offering sharp contrast to nearly everything around them; others were set in lush landscaped parks on the urban periphery—latter-day equivalents of great English country houses. To the architects who created them, these gleaming, semitransparent quarters represented the first serious embrace of avant-garde modernism beyond the domestic sphere in the United States and indeed a distinctively American contribution to the field. Corporate America had come a long way in a generation.

Soon the glass box had its detractors, too. This minimalist approach to design lent itself to formulas and banal imitations. One sleek slab of glass could be startling; a street lined with them could be deadly. In town or country, this genre of building also came to be associated with conformism and anonymity, where systemization ostensibly rendered the white-collar employee no more than a replaceable cog. As icons of American architecture, they represented not an important new direction, but one that drained all the social imperatives that had once helped foment the avant-garde. The glass box was modernism bereft of meaning.

Recent historical studies of the leading architects involved have tended to skirt the debates of the period, instead focusing on the formal design qualities that characterized

their work and the factors that helped shape it. Reinhold Martin, an architect himself, takes a decidedly new course in *The Organizational Complex*. His objective is not to bolster the reputation of either the designers or their buildings, but rather to explore the basis for their designs and the cultural ramifications of this legacy. His journey, as one soon finds out, is neither a simple nor a direct one, for it entails corporate as well as artistic thinking. By his account, the clients (the most attention is given to General Motors and IBM) were not concerned solely with pragmatic issues or consumed just with the stature of fine architecture. Behind the glass wall lay new approaches to organizing space and work that emerged from the core of new ideas of business management. The glass wall, furthermore, was far from a neutral veneer driven strictly by a penchant for artistic minimalism, but rather was itself a telling expression of those evolving concepts.

Martin seeks to demonstrate that the ideas spurring this convergence of art and business were interrelated. In the first two chapters he probes the interdisciplinary research of mathematician Norbert Wiener, historian Siegfried Giedion, communications guru Marshall McLuhan, design pedagogue Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and visual theorist Gyorgy Kepes, among others, to demonstrate how cybernetics—the comparative study of systems of human automatic control and of communication by mechanical and electrical means—had a major impact on the aesthetic of the immediate postwar era, bridging the realms of nature and technology. Martin charts the impact of this thinking on the design of urban office buildings, showing how it led to the embrace of the glass curtain wall and the open, modular, and eminently flexible spatial grid that lay behind it. The glass box was not just an image: it was a three-dimensional system, ostensibly tailored to the demands of evolving business organizations in a way that traditionally divided work space could not match.

In the two case studies that follow, Martin examines architect Eero Saarinen's General Motors Technical Center in metropolitan Detroit—a long-recognized icon of corporate modernism—and the IBM manufacturing and training center in Rochester, Minnesota—a less well-known example of his work. Both complexes are examined to illustrate how the practices of client and architect coincided. At the former, which housed GM's legendary styling division, “the anatomy of this open-ended organizational system [connecting military, industrial, and academic functions] is inventoried by the statistics

compiled by the company to describe its scope, while its physiognomy is given by the curtain wall, an infinitely repeatable surface designed to mirror the infinitely variable desires of a corporate subject—the consumer of planned obsolescence—peering into and through the glass at 30 miles an hour” (p. 155). At IBM, whose identity could be encoded in one of its then ubiquitous punch cards, the architect designed the building so that “rather than merely dematerializing the industrial object into the ethereal dissimulating haze of corporate spectacle, the thinness of Saarinen’s wall and the primacy of its patterns substituted for the reassuring solidity of structure a *modulation*, in which organizational logics are programmed into the very substance of the building itself” (p. 164).

These heady analogies, and others subsequently developed, may induce skepticism. Is the analysis no more than high-brow posturing? Martin’s inquiry draws far more from architectural sources and theoretical texts than from corporate archives and pays scant attention to technologies (air conditioning, for example) that made the glass box possible. One learns little, too, about the evolving organizational systems to which the architecture was so directly tied. And just how much did architecture help reshape business practices, rather than just respond to them? Many pertinent aspects of the subject remain unaddressed here. Yet the author’s unyielding concern for the conceptual bridges between nature and technology, art and business, is a worthwhile thesis, and he pursues it with discipline as well as imagination. Martin offers a thoughtful as well as provocative examination of the relationships. Through systemization, architects and corporate leaders sought a reintegration with natural patterns and, through them, with humanity itself. The brave new world of the glass box ultimately failed, Martin concludes. His final message contains little sympathy for the subject to which he has devoted so much time. One may disagree with some of his findings, but his book gives new meaning to architecture too long dismissed as cliché.

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