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Author

Lyndon, Donlyn

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Caring for Places

As though on cue, following the Republican convention in New York City, the *New York Times* ran an article on impending changes in the skyline of Manhattan, featuring prominently and approvingly a slender tower made up of staggered \$30 million condominium units. The *Times* hastened to assure us in a subhead that these and their like are “the new Vanderbilt mansions, far removed from the little miseries of everyday life.”

Presumably, they are even further removed from the gut-wrenching miseries of Iraq’s daily life, where thousands are displaced from basic human security by lawlessness, violence, and the deliberate destruction of infrastructure, while its “liberators” talk vainly about progress toward democracy and stability, consolidate corporate power, and divert funds for reconstruction.

Little miseries, indeed. Like hunger, fear, powerlessness and shame that our country has lost its bearings. But what of Vanderbilt mansions?

A half century ago the American Institute of Architects commissioned for their Centennial *The Architecture of America: A Social and Cultural History*, written by John Burchard, Dean of Humanities at MIT, and Albert Bush-Brown, former President of the Rhode Island School of Design. The book scarcely mentioned the fabled mansions, save as home to “enclaves in the halls of Vanderbilt, where the throbbing pulse of America could not be heard.” “It was inevitable,” the authors observed, “that the first class achievement [of Richard Morris Hunt’s Vanderbilt design] could have no important place in serious architectural history.”

An exhibit now traveling through Canadian schools of architecture documents a different thrust of attention, architecture that seeks to hear the pulse of daily life (both the throbbing and the quiet pulse) and to ease the “little miseries” of those with little means. It shows professionals taking steps, small but engaged steps, toward a better life for all. The exhibit documents the work of Sanford Hirshen, recently retired Dean of the School of Architecture at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, and a group of friends and colleagues, who began their work at Berkeley in the early 1960s. The show highlights a continuing search for ways to make dignity accessible, to care for the mundane, not the sensational. That search included not just solving problems posed by clients, but exploring means of working more effectively for understudied groups and creating buildings with limited means that yet yield graceful accommodation. It is an elegant, purposeful body of work made possible both by the dedication of its authors and by a society then politically intent on broadening, not hoarding, the reach of its benefits.

What will take hold in a serious assessment of our times will be the similar efforts of many to consider everyday life — the lives traced by myriads of individuals and groups through landscapes of both wonder and desolation — as the source of creative energy. The pulse of our society beats not with a single ecstatic rhythm, but with a multiple, nuanced and variable cadence, a broad resource that can prompt imaginative action and give purpose to investment. Positive change in our future will come from seeking many subtle but pervasive adjustments to the expectations that we bring to our environment.

Care for the common realm, for the multiple ways in which we build the fabric of our lives together and with one another, must — yes, will — be the foundation of our freedoms and our responsibilities.

— Donlyn Lyndon