



Back Cover of the book 'Modern Housing' by Catherine Bauer, 1934.

Reflections on an Architectural Manifesto

Daniel Solomon and the Search for Humane Housing

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Abstract: Daniel Solomon is one of the great practitioners of humane housing design in the world today. His book amounts to a manifesto of sorts, though it is far from a systematic statement; it is, rather, partly biography, partly urban history and partly philosophy in a way that evokes the messy reality of and utopian hopes for great cities. Solomon is reaching for his star, and that fact that he often comes up short in terms of social theory takes away nothing from the sense of an honorable quest by a great architect and fine human being.

Daniel Solomon's latest book, *Housing and the City: Love Versus Hope*, is chiefly addressed to architects and planners, but it is much more interesting than that. It is intriguing precisely because it is a contradictory book in several ways. The publisher wanted it to look like a coffee-table book but the author had something very different in mind (though it is good to have high quality images). It is a thing of many parts – autobiography, urban history, and philosophical musings – but, in the end, a Manifesto for architects working on housing. Lastly, and very much in the spirit of Solomon's work, it is a creative blend of ideas in tension with one another rather than a systematic statement of principles.

I quite like the book because it evokes something of the messy reality and high hopes of great cities. As a geographer, I feel a kindred spirit to Solomon both for his attempt to wrestle with the possibilities of urban life and his close attention to the built environment or 'the urban landscape'. Though I write about political economy and he about urban design, we share a love of cities, a sense of history and an aversion to simplistic absolutes. When it comes to urbanism, it is necessary to wrestle with contradiction, uncertainty and dialectics, from the surfaces down to deep social relations.

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The book is arranged in three parts: the story of Solomon's education and career (chapters 1 through 10); tales of the monumental modernist housing schemes in Paris and Rome in the 20th century (chapters 11-13); and an attempt to pull together his insights into a more systematic framework (chapters 14-19). In fact, the first and last chapters stand apart as bookends: chapter 1 is a statement of Solomon's basic themes (and basic design scheme) and chapter 19 is a passionate *cri de coeur* for the displaced, unhoused and wretched of the earth. The latter needs no further comment other than I couldn't agree more.

Openers: Basic terms

The opening chapter of Solomon's manifesto lays out a set of key terms for looking at urban landscapes. They are chiefly addressed to architects, but speak to other urbanists, as well. They are posed as dualisms and it's clear which side he comes down on. They are:

- Continuous City versus Ruptured City: meaning, roughly, seeing the city as a whole across space and, importantly, across time. Ruptured cities are those where oversized projects try to remake the urban fabric according to their own, large-scale vision of what cities ought to be.
- Perimeter Blocks versus Slab/Geometric blocks: this refers to the way buildings are or should be organized in the spaces of the city. Solomon prefers buildings that address the street and the city while still providing tranquil interior spaces, in opposition to the kind of highrises in the park favored by the followers of Corbusier.
- Modernism versus New Urbanism: Solomon is a kind of New Urbanist with a deep distrust of the High Modernists of the 20th century, with their sleek, geometric designs and arrogant belief in their powers to cure the ills of city and society through monumental design.
- Love versus Hope: this is obviously a key relation for Solomon but is hard to pin down. I think he means that architects and planners should love the cities they interact with and not engage in flights of utopian fantasy and destructive mega-projects.

All these are useful dualisms, which have provided Solomon with a set of principles for his career as a practicing architect. Nevertheless, he recognizes the limits of such simple propositions and, after a long detour through his career and housing history, he returns in the last chapters to an attempt to overcome such dualisms and absolutes. It is an honorable effort to inject some philosophical and dialectical

thinking into the architectural milieu, whose goal is to move beyond the simple formulae of New Urbanism for which he is known and push the envelope of urban design into the future.

Life Story

The first major part of the book is a reflection on Solomon's own life and practice.

It follows his personal journey as a practicing architect, which he sees as profoundly intertwined with the history of Modernism and modern housing policy. And it traces his voyage of discovery from Missionary of Modern Architecture to Apostate of the New Urbanism.

Chapters 2 through 10 recount various episodes in the education and work of Solomon the architect, starting with Graduate School and the Venice Biennale of 1980; moving through three cases of public housing in San Francisco (Hunter's Point), Los Angeles (Jordon Downs) and Philadelphia (Carl Mackley houses); and ending with the story of a massive Chinese New Town development that was never realized.

The education of a housing architect and planner at Berkeley in the mid-20th century was clearly inspiring. Some of the great innovators of the time were there, such as Vernon DeMars, William Worster and Jack Kent. Catherine Bauer stood above them all in the mind of the young Solomon – and he has never forgiven her for it. The blazing criticism of Bauer for shaping modernist public housing in the United States is, at times, too much. I think a fairer assessment would acknowledge the forces beyond the leading lights of the housing movement, starting with Progressives, unions and social housing in 1920s New York; squeezing through the eye of the real estate needle – the National Association of Real Estate Boards and Urban Institute – to gain national legislation; and watching as urban renewal carved away the meat of New Deal public housing to leave only the bare bones of badly designed slabs as monuments to the misery of postwar ghettos.

Nevertheless, we see in Solomon's work the application of the principles of humane architecture for domestic living that he has crafted over many projects, many years and many places. He proves that it is possible to create livable places even in the toughest conditions of public housing in America. He further demonstrates that it is possible to fit into established neighborhoods in a way that allays the fears of even the worst obstructionists.

Two Housing Battlegrounds

The second part of Solomon's book home in on two of the most notable European cities, Paris and Rome. These three chapters go beyond the author's own work to look at what went wrong – and right – in two major battlegrounds of Modernism and housing.

Solomon's treatment of Paris is brief and a bit thin on the ground – the opposite of his intensely personal look at US cities and his own projects. Paris is really a detour on the way to the main story, which is about Rome. But Paris is both the 'capital of modernity' and the home ground of Corbusier, father of Towers in the Park urbanism that was so much the rage in the 20th century.

Paris is plagued by many horrible examples of Modernist inhumanity in its notorious *banlieu*, which have ended up as ghettos of Maghrebian immigrants and their children. Things should have turned out differently, given the radical pretensions of most French Modernist architects and the Social Democratic outlook of French governments in the postwar era. What went wrong? Poor design and planning, for Solomon; so his challenge is to come up with counter-examples of public housing projects that work successfully and fit into the context of Paris' streetscape. As he shows, the many lovely pre-modern, social housing 'villas' scattered around Montmartre and other *quartiers* are proof that another model of humane housing existed and was forgotten.

Perhaps because I know Paris well, I was more intrigued by Solomon's discussion of the Eternal City and its shifting politics of public housing. Solomon clearly knows Rome very well and he wants readers to see that another road to Modernism was not only possible but realized on a massive scale. Strangely, it was done by Mussolini's fascist regime and its leading housing architects.

If the Italian fascists are mostly remembered for bombastic projects like ploughing an avenue through the old Roman Forum, they nonetheless produced some surprisingly good mass housing in several neighborhoods. It is mostly done in Art Moderne style, which partly saved it from the worst of the later fetish of geometric, boring boxes. Yet, as Solomon shows us through a close reading of the urban landscape, this Roman housing offers a vibrant combination of Big Planning and Situated Design – a dialectic that Solomon loves, even if he cannot quite articulate it. In an attempt to do so, he takes a detour through philosophical territory in the last part of the book in order to ponder where his practical lessons and empirical cases might lead.

Grappling with Theory

In the third part of the book, Solomon attempts to go beyond the usual architectural fights between Modernists and New Urbanists. He is on a quest to push himself and the reader to reflect more deeply on cities and architecture and to think harder about how urban design might find new inspiration. He doesn't quite pull it off, but I respect the foray into the unknown.

In the opening chapter, Solomon waxes philosophical – even spiritual – as he ventures into the dark recesses of three innovative thinkers and artists: Fellini, Heidegger and Nabokov. Unfortunately, Solomon's three heroes are not only far out on the vaporous edge of film, literature and philosophy, they are notorious Idealists in the philosophical sense. Both things clash with his own materialist bent toward build-environments, situated practice and so forth.

In the end, Solomon plays the simple post-modernist card of using Carnap as a straw-man and logical positivism as a foil. The result is to leave a huge gap between thought and practice that does not solve the real problems he has posed about the need for a supple and dialectical approach to cities and design.

In the next chapter, Solomon goes after Michael Hayes and the Harvard Modernist dogma in architectural training. Hayes' ideas are incredibly annoying, but he, like Carnap, is a reductionist and philosophical simpleton (true of far too many scientists, social scientists and professionals who dabble in metaphysics and come away with slogans instead of critical insights). There is a sidebar to the ridiculous musings of Theodore Adorno on jazz – which serves to show that even a brilliant dialectical thinker can say stupid things because of his class and race blinders.

Solomon quickly pivots to three other great artistic minds to escape from the shadow of the deplorable Hayes. The shock is that they were all mid-20th century Modernists who revolutionized their fields: Coco Chanel in fashion, George Balanchine in dance and Duke Ellington in music. To this group he adds Otto Wagner, the great fin-de-siècle architect and city planner of Vienna – one the earliest Modernists. These are all wonderful characters and innovators, and they show that one could be a High Modernist and not a doctrinaire fool – a critical point in the debates of our time, when Modernism is usually relegated to the junk heap of history by oh-so-clever Post-Modernists.

Solomon never wraps up the discussion of great Modernists with a simple conclusion, which is admirable in one sense but also leaves the reader hanging. Hence, subsequent chapters oscillate between the hard ground of modern history and the high realms of post-modernist theory.

The first of these leaves high theory to focus on a key thread of modern urban history: the long ascent of mass production in housing. Solomon is unclear how this intersects with the loftier ideas of previous chapters, but I venture the guess that it puts the material conditions of the business of design in conversation with high theory of all kinds. I appreciate the tension this creates with the rest of the section, but it leaves too much to the reader to divine as to how to bridge the gap.

Shifting his sights from the Modernists to the Post-Modernists, Solomon devotes the next chapter to a critique of the doctrinaire side of the Congress for a New Urbanism, going back to the principles of Colin Rowe and Michael Dennis – with a detour through Borromini in Venice. He is nothing if not fair-minded, and there is a good deal of implicit self-criticism, given his allegiances.

After rejecting both Modernists and New Urbanists, Solomon proposes a third way in architecture. He sums this up with a neologism for the best in urban design – ‘buildings of the third kind’ – for designs that rise above the vernacular fabric of the city but are not intrusive, disruptive monuments to architectural brilliance. This is a wise formulation and suitably relational, contradictory and dialectical. Nevertheless, I had hoped that Solomon would go beyond this rule of thumb to something more abstract. He has a frustrating inability to formulate ideas in more theoretical ways – a well-known problem for great practitioners in all the arts, as John Berger noted in *The Success and Failure of Picasso*.

To his credit, Solomon makes one last attempt at theory in the penultimate chapter, where he introduces the Greek term “Metis” to refer to contextualized, relational knowledge (versus technical and rationalistic logics). The search for an appropriate ‘metis’ could have led him to take a deeper plunge into the early modern traditions of Hegel, Leibniz, and Marx, but that may be too much to ask of a working architect. Instead, he relies on two decidedly post-modern thinkers who have their virtues but do not really advance his project.

One is James Scott, whose *Seeing Like a State* is about the failure of grand Modernist schemes of social reconstruction, as in Brasilia. It is a post-modernist bible in the social sciences, which has much to teach but doesn't answer Solomon's question about where

to go beyond Modernism. The other thinker is Andres Duany, whose *Heterodoxia Architectonica* is a bible of the New Urbanists. This, too, is a restatement of the problem Solomon has already posed about continuity and edges in urban design. While Duany hails the virtues of urban heritage and context in the history of architecture, it all boils down to a simplistic Smart Code of New Urbanism. Solomon realizes this comes up short of where he wants to go, so he tries to bridge the gap with a dollop of Nabokov – who offers up lovely wordplay that is neither serious philosophy nor a theory of good urbanism.

City and Society

I agree with Solomon that cities and urbanization cannot be reduced to the social order, as in such classic tropes as capitalist city, feudal city, or communist city. Cities are material/spatial facts on the ground with a life of their own. Urbanization is, indeed, a force of history. Nevertheless, we have to talk about other social forces shaping the city, impinging on design, and paying the piper. To keep this simple, on the one hand cities are crucibles of the *macro*-political economic forces of capitalism in its various political formations – fascist, Social Democratic, Neo-Liberal, etc. On the other hand, urban areas are constructed by the *micro*-political economy of property development and real estate in which housing and design are deeply embedded.

Take the case of the United States' disastrous 20th century public housing programs.

Is Catherine Bauer really to blame for the failures of US public housing? Is Modern architecture? Big Planning? Solomon admits that public housing was starved, isolated and hated - but what did this have to do with the real estate sector, led by NAREB, and its relentless attack on government housing provision? What about the Republican Party's commitment to neutering New Deal and Great Society programs? And, what about class and racial divides that keep US cities segregated and the ideologies that the poor and dark-skinned are unworthy of help?

By contrast, in Sweden or Britain lots of high-rise slabs (though far from all) worked very well and were appreciated by the workers for whom they were built by Social Democratic governments. Cuba is another striking example, where poor sugar workers got their first housing in slabs. Even some US projects, like the New Deal's Harlem houses, worked well for their residents for a long time. Of course, formerly successful public housing has been degraded by

penny-pinching administrations, corrupt bureaucracies and hatred of immigrants – *Even in Sweden*, as Allan Pred has shown.

Another case is the great urban planning schemes of modern times – Haussmann's Paris, Mussolini's Rome, Wagner's Vienna, and Robert Moses' New York – all of which were successful in remaking great cities, bringing huge improvements in living conditions and realizing brilliant urban designs. Why did these happen? What did they have to do with the changes underway because of capitalist growth, modern transportation, and new forms of finance? How were property development and real estate capital tightly wound into these regimes of planning? How was the emergence of a new bourgeoisie implicated in the design of Paris or Vienna? How were these great planners able to muster the dictatorial powers they needed by calling on Napoleon III, Mussolini or the NY Transit Authority?

Solomon offers nothing substantial for understanding these great, practical experiments, nor does he try. Alas, that is a systematic problem with architectural approaches to urbanism. Even when someone as well-intentioned as he tries to push the envelope to embrace better contextual and humane design, he runs up against the limits inherent in the project of studying cities chiefly in terms of physical form.

Ambiguity in Philosophy & Science

Since Solomon has raised the flag of philosophy, I want to pick it up and wave it a bit. His excursions into higher theoretical and cultural realms are to be admired. While his essential concerns are grounded in the material world of cities and housing, he's not afraid to take flight; and even if his efforts to get airborne don't go too far, neither did the Wright Brothers, at first.

What admirable is his willingness to accept a measure of ambiguity, tension and contradiction in the world and in architectural and planning practice. A shared fault of Modernism and Post-Modernism is too many manifestoes declaring the One True Path to enlightenment and a better future. Don't believe it.

I have learned a bit about the history of metaphysics and science in my academic career, so I'll take this opportunity to offer four talking points for those who want to follow Solomon's lead and think more about how to think about modernity, complexity and ambiguity in urbanism.

•Science should not be thrown out with the Modernist bath. We need to explain the world as we strive to change it. The Truth will not set you free, but without understanding what you're working with – whether steel girders or municipal politics – the job of making a building function or housing people well is infinitely more difficult. The same goes for rational inquiry in architecture and planning; without understanding cities, the practitioner is likely to fail.

A full-on anti-Modernist or anti-scientific stance cannot hold. Of course, the histories of both are strewn with the wreckage of bad ideas and worse practices. Neither Modernity nor Science is a single thread to be worshipped uncritically. Just like Corbu, Descartes, Linnaeus and Lyell were brilliant thinkers who had much to offer, but were also trapped by seriously mistaken ideas that have been surpassed in time.

•Rejecting scientific reductionism for “complexity” is a dead end. It is fashionable among Post-Modernists to declare that science is wrong to try to reduce complex phenomena like cities to simple theoretical formulations, but that goes nowhere. It is undeniably true that things in the world are complex, even maddeningly so: does anyone think that Black Holes or global climate are simple systems? But to dismiss reduction is to misunderstand how science operates. The work of science is to cut through complexity to see what underlying patterns and forces can be discerned.

Science is hard work that gradually and painfully carves away intervening causes, holds certain things constant in labs or models, and musters data to confirm what is taking place. Even when science does come up with a Big Theory like continental drift, it does not translate back to simple explanations of facts on the ground because of all the secondary forces, intermediate theory and context needed to fill out the picture of reality. Good architecture operates similarly: it requires great ideas of design, building and purpose, but it must grapple with the difficult reality of real cities and people both in the conception and the realization of those ideas.

•Dialectical or relational thinking is needed. Dialectics got a bad name by being associated with the impenetrable discourse of Hegelians and formulaic tropes of Stalinists. Yet, dialectics is a useful way of thinking about reality and our approach to it. It means not dividing the world and categories of thought into clean boxes, but acknowledging fuzziness and tension in everything. That is, a single thing can contain contradictory elements, systems of things stand in relation to each other, and contradiction and movement are part of every system.



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For example, physics was once thought to be the domain of hard and fast objects in the Cartesian sense but is actually a world of weird particles that are waves, electrons that are there but not there, and more. Today's biology and ecology are almost wholly dialectical, e.g., DNA is both pre-determinant of the organism and unleashed in unpredictable ways during the process of growth. The same goes for social science, where Modernism/Post-Modernism is not a simple dualism, nor is design/building, architecture/planning, or city/society.

•Science is a human process. Science (social science) is not a nice, clean world of men (sic) in white coats, controlled experiments and congering up mathematical formulae. It takes place in institutions, comes laden with social prejudices, responds to power and money, and can be corrupted by all those. Scientists require commitment to seeking truth and a sense of honor about what they can and cannot do; science is thus emotional and moral at its root. The same is true of great architecture.

Scientific thought often uses logic, math, and distilled forms of rationality that are far from everyday thinking and hence strange to many people. Yet the scientific mind, like all others, uses many subtle but everyday modes of thought, such as metaphor, gestalt, and intuition, to grasp the world. Some of the greatest breakthroughs, like Einstein's, have taken a metaphoric leap from street cars to relativity. In short, science is a very human endeavor – like architecture.

My purpose in taking this detour to wrap up my reflections on Dan Solomon's *Love Vs. Hope* is to take up the challenge he has offered to think seriously about how cities behave and what the humanist practitioner can do to make them better for the people who live in them. Solomon's practice is brilliant architecture for living. Mine is trying to understand how cities work over larger sweeps of history and geography. Yet, we are asking the same question: how can we make cities and our interventions in them more truly humane?