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Artistic genius or anonymity for Gordon Bunshaft's architecture?

Author: *Nicholas Adams*

Title: *Gordon Bunshaft and SOM*

Subtitle: *Building Corporate Modernism*

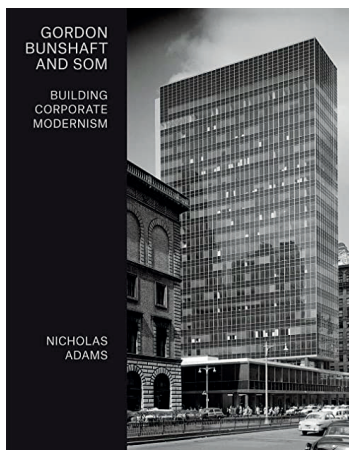
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The subject of Nicholas Adams's latest book is the architect Gordon Bunshaft (1909-1990). Almost forgotten by the critics in the last few decades, Bunshaft is a marginal figure in textbooks of architectural history, bracketed by the output of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) for whom he worked, though it was he who brought the firm its only Pritzker Prize in 1988. After nearly 40 years' profitable collaboration (1938-1979)¹ with one of the leading architecture practices of the age, the prestige award came as «the capstone of my life in architecture»². Adams's publication adds another chapter to a journey of discovery which began with his interest in thirty major buildings designed by SOM from their inception till the early 1970s (Adams 2006, 2007). Though they have been accused of over-slick professionalism, combining the interests of business with those of aesthetics – and resulting in some “unfortunate” monotony and repetition of details and solutions – SOM have continued to chart the history of American architecture³. All of which means there is clearly a need for a new appraisal taking its temporal distance and also the independence from the firm's own works of self-celebration.

The insights from Adams's previous research into SOM have served him in the tricky task of spotlighting a key figure in the practice, Gordon Bunshaft⁴, despite the extreme dearth of documentary evidence⁵. There was also another problem as Adams informs his readers: to piece together the origin and paternity of an architectural, structural and design choice within the SOM system is sometimes insurmountably hard. «We cannot always discern the logic of decision, Bunshaft's collaborators are not happenstance» (Adams 2019, p. 88). Undaunted by the challenge, the author set about a dogged and thorough operation of detection.

Bunshaft was “silent” as much in the critic as in the design output, indeed he broke the silence just in three interviews and a recorded memoir. Adams bases his study on an in-depth analysis of these oral sources, set within a broader exploratory canvas. The comments of clients, co-workers and assistants at the firm, along with other interviews of his own, flesh out the investigation and produce an exhaustive picture of the design phases and organization behind each of the firm's projects focusing on Bunshaft and not omitting details of his “peculiar and difficult” character. To the author's great credit the investigation never declines into the anecdotal: he has care-

fully selected his material and gives a lucid commentary going beyond mere description of the sources and delving into how the architect's work evolved and was received, as well as tying in some comments by contemporary critics with key decisions and events in the firm's development. He also provides prompts for future lines of studies conducted by other scholars, being aware that each study is never the last word about something.

In the introduction, Adams (2019, p. 2) makes the point that «Bunshaft's life is very much a history of his buildings, as he would have wanted. But which buildings?». Bunshaft claimed paternity for a group of 38 buildings in which he was the chief *administrative partner and/or design partner*, though he also took part in a host of other SOM projects. In 1988, architecture historian Carol Herselle Krinsky worked closely with him on the first exhaustive study of his output, focusing on those 38 projects that were "his". Adams's book comes 31 years after that Krinsky analysis. Though aware of the risk (Adams 2019, p. 253), he decided likewise to focus on those projects, but from a different standpoint, eschewing the sense of empathy that inevitably resulted from Krinsky's close working relationship with Bunshaft. The very title of the earlier biographical study supports this view. Bunshaft acknowledges his belonging to the SOM practice (Krinsky 1988), but his name dominates the Krinsky's cover in large characters. By contrast, Adams seeks to put architect and firm on the same plane: without one another they would never have developed so-called *corporate modernism*. Their joint hands shaped and perfected the modern idiom and materials for new architecture purposes.

But Adams takes this a step further. The eight thematic chapters are not confined to the «shiny surface of corporate modernism» (2019, p. 5) which clearly owed much to the extraordinary photographic reportage of the legendary Ezra Stoller to whom Bunshaft pays tribute as «an integral part of SOM from its beginning»⁶. Adams's latest book goes deeper, extending Krinsky's richly illustrated chronological presentation of the 38 design files (which he expressly acknowledges) into a far deeper psychological enquiry.

The subtitle to the book is eloquent: *Building the corporate modernism*. Bunshaft's ambitious temperament and tenacious organizational ability, twinning with SOM's structured set-up, succeeded in bestowing a picture of efficiency and modernity to the identity of the mushrooming *corporations*. From the economic reality SOM seemed to borrow (or imitate) their own hierarchical and organizational structure which set a premium on efficient *teamwork (design, production, structure, landscape and interiors)* both within the firm and as the outward image identifying their own architecture.

Building the corporate modernism figures as the title to the book's third chapter where we begin to understand via which buildings Bunshaft increased his ascendancy within the practice, without upstaging SOM reputation in the panorama of American architecture (Adams 2019, p. 88). Design of the iconic New York Lever House (1950-1952) was a turning-point in Bunshaft and SOM's fame⁷, heralding the arrival of still more important commissions. From the Fifties on, their headquarters for the great corporations, banks, private institutions, commercial centres and so on undeniably changed the face of American cities and projected their image far and wide. Some critics of the day, and others more recently, have suggested that the Bunshaft-SOM design approach pressed modernist design into the service of mere "architecture of bureaucracy". One first such comment came from

architecture historian Henry Russell Hitchcock (1947, p. 4)⁸ who blamed these buildings «from which personal expression is absent». In his view, postwar architecture was heading for a division into two categories: “architecture of the genius” versus “architecture of bureaucracy” – the second beginning to gain the upper hand. Bunshaft never denied his connection with major commercial architecture. But his attention to construction and design quality, and his ability to choose and place outstanding artworks to the greatest effect (Adams 2017, p. 5; Marchand 1988) – fully documented by Adams who stresses Bunshaft’s passion for collection – turned many buildings into authentic landmarks. Adams’s book clearly depicts the architect’s “inner struggle”: born of Russian émigré Jews, raised in Buffalo and a student at MIT, he sought to assert those principles as an architect in his own right and simultaneously as a member of a practice that stood as a *corporation* in architecture. «He provided an identity for SOM that was an alternative to Hitchcock’s binary of genius and bureaucracy. In an office that the founders intended to be anonymous, he mobilized the force at his disposal to create an identity that continues to inspire and shadow many of the firm’s designers» (Adams 2019, p. 252).

Adams’s book is not just a painstaking new analysis of an architect “forgotten” by the modern world, but an enlightening exploration of the design and identity rationale glimpsed behind the business organizations of the American postwar – from which today’s similar ventures still have much to learn.

Notes

¹ He became an *associate partner* in 1946 and, three years later *full partner* until his retirement.

² <https://www.pritzkerprize.com/laureates/1988-bunshaft>. This is part of the concise 57-word comment preceded by short acknowledgements to the Pritzker family and distinguished members of the selection committee. That year he shared the prize with the Brazilian architect Oscar Neimeyer (1907-2012).

³ In a slightly different timing context, the firm McKim, Mead & White likewise succeeded in changing the cities and architectural perspective of America.

⁴ Before the release of the present book, the author published some papers among which one should mention the five for the review «Casabella». See n.870 (2017), n. 874 (2017), n. 877 (2017), n. 880 (2017) and n. 883 (2018).

⁵ No private archive of the architect exists and the items in the SOM archives have mainly been lost.

⁶ Gordon Bunshaft, *Oral Memoir*, 108.

⁷ Other projects raising Bunshaft to a prominent position were: Manufacturers Trust Bank (1950-1952), Connecticut General (1953-1957), Chase Manhattan Tower and Plaza (1955-1961).

⁸ Besides SOM, Russell Hitchcock focuses mainly on Albert Kahn.

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