



Scene from the movie "La Dolce Vita"; Source: Wikipedia (public domain).

Wisdom and Whimsey

Love and Hope by Daniel Solomon

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Abstract: Solomon's book *Love vs Hope* mixes personal accounts with rumination, profiles of the protagonists while has to balance his own passion with the legacy of the New Urbanists, his very personal convictions with a sober reality-bats-last appraisal of the current state of urbanism, with a glum recognition of geopolitical forces, the aspirations of architects.

If you are ever up for a romp from Brunelleschi, on to Diaghilev, then on to Anita Ekberg, and back again (believe me, you should be) then Daniel Solomon's multifaceted plea for walkable, engaging cities should be at the top of your list. My goodness, the man has managed to embrace nearly the whole of urban history in a few pungent pages that leap from Nabokov's love of butterflies to the urban design theories of Heidegger and Colin Rowe. Within those bookends lies a field of elegant prose that veers from near manifesto to romantic description, with sometimes agonizing reflections on a promising personal project set adrift by the imperatives of specialist legislation.

Of course there are villains and heroes. A subtext (well, more overt than that) indicts Modernist architectural principles for the human costs associated with contemporary urban form, but valorizes the dark alleys where noirish transactions are wont to take place. In his relish for the full spectrum of human urban experience, Solomon often has to balance his own passion with the legacy of the New Urbanists, a powerful if tarnished movement which he helped to form.

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That tension, and its considerable intellectual demands, forms the backbone of the book, which mixes personal accounts with rumination, profiles of the protagonists – Catherine Bauer Wurster is singled out in detail as a siren whose infatuation with all things modern led to widespread adoption of the principles of Modernism – and historic references, to construct a thoroughly researched, fair-minded discussion.

What Solomon calls “the tyranny of empiricism” and its progeny: slab cities, swaths of vacant land, the residue of barely digested Corbusian imperatives, is weighed against a city in which “soulfulness – myth, history, memory, love of place, the hopelessly subjective” determine form as well as experience.

In Solomon’s view, cities like Rome, which lay behind cinema masterpieces like *La Dolce Vita*, exemplify the layering of history, politics, and architecture he holds up as models of urbanity, while utopias like Brasilia, and rational settlements such as those in China, are proof positive of the failure of modern city planning.

In support of his argument, there are examples drawn from his own work, with cogent, well-reasoned explanations of the frustrations born of the modernist hegemony as he wonders aloud whether it might be possible to re-enact the charms of the Parisian courtyard apartments, which have only one staircase, «in an era of rating systems, points, and prerequisites, of universal codes and prescriptions, of measures that measure the measurable».

If this sounds like a contradiction in terms, don’t be alarmed – because Solomon feints and fakes with consummate skill, revealing his “tricks” to cloak generic, program-driven projects with context-savvy articulation. The key to that strategy is his determination to assert the primacy of a livable city over any theoretical mandates, making it clear, by naming names – Derrida *et al* – that he considers architects so besotted to have been hopelessly subverted.

Thus the confrontation between Love and Hope in the title. The principles he follows, and cites, favor irregular sites bounded by buildings that hug the streetscape, ideally with a base of continuous retail uses. «It is about place-making in a complicated world in which many forces are unleashed to rob places of their distinctiveness, meaning, and sustaining power over the quality of our lives». Its counterpart, the city of Hope, is a vast plain, marked by isolated free-standing buildings, with few destinations. Regulations dictate spacing according to height for

solar access. Hope, in that case, is for the future, when the regulations are relaxed, and proper infill can be built.

Throughout, Solomon balances his very personal convictions with a sober reality-bats-last appraisal of the current state of urbanism, with a glum recognition of geopolitical forces, the aspirations of architects, and the pervasive effect of the Internet. Prognoses aside, Solomon perseveres, with against-the-grain examples of his firm's current work which, one imagines, might seem retro to today's up-and coming cadre of designers. "Hang it up!" One can hear them saying. But they'd better think twice, because Solomon's passion, his resourcefulness, and yes, his wry humor, can clearly go the distance. As a scholar, a storyteller, and committed urbanist, his prescriptions could well turn out to be a much needed RX for our ailing cities.