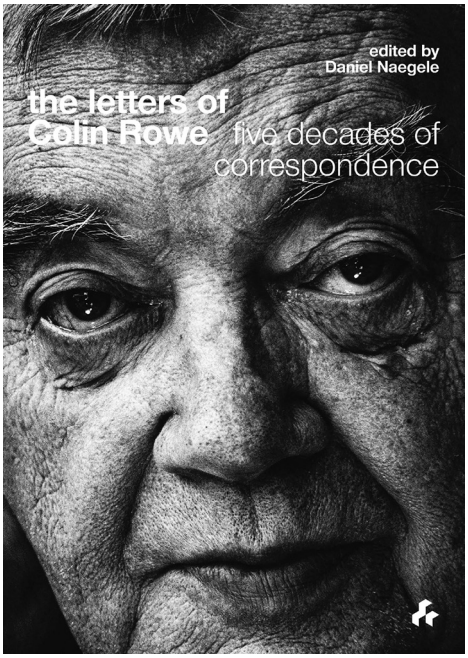
edited by
Daniel Naegele
the letters of
Colin Rowe
five decades of
correspondence

Flip Cards and Parables

Robert Campbell[1]

Abstract: Solomon writes to explore what he regards as the bad design of cities during the past century. He blames the hegemony of modernism, defining modernism as a vain atempt to solve problems through abstract reasoning while ignoring the obvious lessons of history and experience. He argues from examples, not theories. Much of the book is a series of short essays that function as parables. Each of these illustrates the author's view of a particular issue. He often embodies his argument in the person of one of his heroes (Balanchine, Chanel, Nabokov, many others) or villains (Descartes, Gropius, CIAM, etc.). The result is a wise and entertaining book that falls just short of being a classic. A clue to the problem is the meaningless title "LOVE versus HOPE." This is the first in a number of such either/or flip cards that occur throughout the text, each presenting a Manichean choice between two opposing visions – sprawl versus erasure, slab block versus perimeter block, etc. We sense that some broader truth may be shared by all these independent conundrums, but the title informs us that if so, it has yet to be articulated.

When I first discussed with Dan Solomon the possibility of doing a commentary on his book "LOVE versus HOPE," he asked if I'd seen a new book, "The Letters of Colin Rowe." I hadn't then but I soon caught up and the two books have been a pair in my mind ever since. With apologies, I'll start talking about Solomon by citing Rowe.

Rowe's book is a selection of letters sent to family or friends or colleagues. In a 559-page volume, weighing five pounds on my bathroom scale, there is only one passage in which this eminent scholar seeks to characterize the kind of architecture he prefers: «He didn't like the word 'taste' but, since he was willing to accept its use, his own 'taste' in architecture was for 'the carefully careless'– what he called a Hadrianic disarray assembled out of highly punctilious bits and pieces».

That's a general statement about architecture that isn't quite a statement at all but a refusal to settle on one. Rowe maintains an

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ironic distance from his text by writing in the third person as his own commentator. He offers poetic hints, not coherent values. "Hadrianic disarray" can bear any meaning you choose to project onto it. "Punctilious" sounds like a rhyme for "supercilious" in a lyric by W.S. Gilbert. What do these carefully nurtured references tell us about architecture or cities?

Both authors are brilliant and they largely agree with each other. Yet neither is willing to step forward to make the kind of general statement both seem to desire. They withdraw from commitment because they don't want to be seen as adding one more voice to what has been a century of too many know-it-all systems and labels, each promoted by one or another artist or critic or intellectual sect. Rowe shrinks from that shouted cacaphony into the soft-voiced vagueness of the quoted excerpt. Solomon, by contrast, multiplies specific examples of good and bad design, as if endless score-keeping would add to up to a coherent argument.

Solomon, as I try to say in my abstract, is writing for the purpose of exploring what he regards as the bad design of cities during the past century. He cites many causes of this poor performance, but the overriding one is the hegemony of the Modern Movement. He defines modernism as a vain atempt to solve problems through abstract reasoning while ignoring the obvious lessons of history and experience. Unlike Rowe, he argues from examples, not theories. Much of the book is a series of short essays, each of which can be regarded as a parable that illustrates the author's understanding of some particular issue. The parables are drawn from many different kinds of creative activity. Solomon often embodies his argument in the person of one of his heroes (Balanchine, Chanel, Nabokov, Duke Ellington, many others) or villains (Le Corbusier, Descartes, Gropius, CIAM, etc.).

The result is a wise and entertaining book. But it falls short of being the popular classic I was hoping for from this author. A clue to the problem is the meaningless title "LOVE versus HOPE." (Or is it HOPE versus LOVE? It's hard to remember.) The title offers no clue that urban design will be the book's topic. A subtitle, "Housing and the City," is merely generic.

The "LOVE versus HOPE" title, the reader discovers, is only the first of a number of what you might call flip cards. Each presents an either-or pair of options, a Manichean choice between two opposing visions for the city: Sprawl versus erasure, slab block versus perimeter block, object people versus place people, modernist abstraction versus

cultural memory, continuous city versus ruptured city, etc. The parables and flip cards are an educator's way, we suspect, of breaking down some larger lesson into teachable segments.

Earlier books by Solomon have been collections of fairly independent essays. At first "LOVE versus HOPE" appears to be another such Solomon anthology. But at some point, the reader begins to suspect that all the eloquent pieces of writing are in fact dealing with the same subject and that the book, far from being a loose patchwork, is more of a whole, gathering meaning and momentum as it progresses. Something is happening behind the scenes. Each parable, each flip card seems to express one aspect of a larger encompassing thesis, but no such thesis is ever made explicit. As readers, we begin to speculate. Coco Chanel and Le Corbusier, let's say, or Duke Ellington and Walter Gropius – why are they here? Are they linked in some way in a kind of existence we don't understand? Solomon is skeptical of simplified belief systems that seek to explain too much, citing those of Freud and Descartes among others. He evades that trap by presenting an immense diversity of thoughts and examples" punctilious bits and pieces," you might say. Perhaps a more summary view awaits us in a future book.

Solomon presents himself as a witness, someone who was there on the ground when history was happening. He calls himself a hybrid: a practicing architect, an urban planner, a teacher, and an activist. He refuses to call himself an autobiographer, but among the strengths of his book are the glimpses of his own experience from childhood on. Through them we become aware of the wholeness, the narrative connectednesss of the book. Personal history and cultural history begin to comment on each other.

"LOVE versus HOPE" is a set of brilliant notes for a book rather than a resolved work. It doesn't seem to know who it's written for. Different essays aim at radically different readerships. Only members of an inner group will fathom what is meant by a reference to "LEED-ND or the Smart Code." Other potential readers will puzzle over such terms as "floor plate" or "Stonorov."

Such lapses mean little. This is an endlessly fascinating book by a readable, sane, and savvy writer.