Review: Ian Baldwin

The Architecture of Harry Weese

You might have heard the name Harry Weese. If you've spent much time in Chicago or Washington, D.C., you've almost certainly come across his work. But can you name one of his buildings?

Harry Weese & Associates built constantly from 1948 to 2000 but never reached the high profile of contemporaries like I.M. Pei and Philip Johnson. Weese's architecture is highly original and often stunning, but has not been elevated into the late-modern canon alongside the less prolific work of Louis Kahn or Paul Rudolph (unlike them, Weese never taught at Yale). Yet Weese's hundreds of built projects, unrelenting urban boosterism, and deep commitment to public life and preservation made him arguably more influential than any of his contemporaries.

It is hard to avoid that conclusion after reading The Architecture of Harry Weese, by historian Robert Bruegmann with Kathleen Murphy Skolnik. Extensively researched, honestly written and generously illustrated, this is a first-rate monograph, and the first on Weese. Weese was profiled in architecture and general-interest publications throughout his career, so it seems surprising that the only previous books on his work are a 1979 Japanese-English softcover [1] and a 1987 book on Weese's houses, [2] authored by his wife. This makes this new volume, and especially Bruegmann's biographical essay, a long overdue survey of an architect whose talent and energy could not be confined to practice.

Weese grew up in Chicago's North Shore suburbs, and returned to the city to practice after training at MIT and Yale. Known as an architect's architect early in his career, his experience and interests stretched well beyond building. At various times, Weese found himself working as a mechanical engineer on a Navy destroyer, a real-estate developer, a magazine publisher, and a furniture designer, importer and retailer.

Weese's urbanism was equally wide-ranging. Believing suburbs wasteful, he argued for giving middle-class families a comfortable place in the city with nature close at hand, an aim achieved in several infill rowhouse and apartment projects. A ceaseless stream of watercolors, sketches, essays and letters to the editor promoted sailing marinas, streets reborn as glazed shopping arcades, novel high-rise structures and Burnhamesque visions, including a 1992 World's Fair on Lake Michigan. He was an ardent if not orthodox preservationist, who tried to put Chicago's “L” stations on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. Largely through Weese's efforts, the Navy Pier was added to the register that same year.

Real-estate investment was also an avenue of urban design. In the 1970s, Weese and his partners bought two buildings in the South Loop and converted them into residential and artists' lofts, a risky bet at a time when the only similar developments were in New York's Soho district. The group ended up controlling two whole blocks of South Dearborn Street, and their name for the reborn neighborhood, Printer's Row, stuck. That adventure in capitalism was a success, but many others, like Weese's underwriting of Inland Architect, were acts of benign profligacy. Rescuing and running the magazine cost $40,000 to $50,000 a year for 13 years [3], with Weese contributing office space, staff,
and articles to maintain the lone Chicago-based design periodical.

Prolific Eclectic

Had Weese never built a thing, he would have done enough for a modest legacy in Chicago. But build he did. His firm completed over 200 new buildings and major renovations, including that of Adler & Sullivan's structurally challenged Auditorium Building. The majority are in Chicago and the upper Midwest, but commissions took Weese as far afield as Ghana, India, Saudi Arabia and Singapore. According to the book's list of projects, most are still standing.

Weese avoided specializing in a single building type, and his work covers an astonishing range of scales and programs, from transit systems to townhomes and hotels to corporate headquarters. The commission that first put Weese on the map, in 1958, was the U.S. Embassy in Accra, Ghana, a handsome rectangle of offices with projecting bays of louvered mahogany. It is elevated on white tapered columns around a central courtyard, leaving the entire ground floor accessible — too much so for the security concerns of later decades, which forced the embassy to relocate. It is now, in something of a rebuttal to Weese's postcolonial critics, a Ghanaian government ministry.
Weese's most poetic work includes a pair of churches built in the early 1960s: First Baptist of Columbus, Indiana, and St. Thomas in Neenah, Wisconsin. The latter is disappointingly undocumented in the book, save for a striking photograph that shows the church's raw concrete and timber interior, as Weese described it, "Devoid of pomp, yet bold in belief; material luxuriousness, no; richness of space and light and sound, yes." [4] It seems to match the best work of Marcel Breuer, who at the same time was also building spare, dramatic beton-brut churches in the upper Midwest. And slightly later, the Seventeenth Church of Christ, Scientist, resolved the constraints of an awkward triangular site on Wacker Drive by turning the rear of its large auditorium into a travertine-clad curve that holds its own against the backdrop of the Loop's most famous skyscrapers. Taking advantage of Wacker's elevated deck, Weese used a sunken garden to glaze an entire wall of the Sunday school.

The Weese oeuvre is mainly one of brick, concrete and timber, and these obvious material sympathies led him to be labeled an alternative to the "mainstream" modernism of Mies van der Rohe, SOM and C.F. Murphy. Essays on Weese predating this book bear such titles as "Opposing Mies," "More than Mies," and "Chicago Architecture after Mies." [5] Bruegmann rightly questions the historiographical validity of this notion, and two of the book's documented projects show Weese himself challenging Mies in steel and glass.

One is Shadowcliff, a corporate president's vacation office: a glass box jutting out from a sheer rock cliff above Lake Michigan, hanging from castellated Corten beams anchored into the rock face. A horizontal porthole cut into the floor looks straight down. The other, Chicago’s Time-Life building, looks at first glance like a humorless corporate box, Weese’s own contribution to what he termed “the hard edge bar-graph of downtown.” [6] But Ben Weese, for 20 years one of the chief designers in his brother’s office, framed the project as though it were a forerunner of postmodern camp: “[Harry] delighted in making an un-modernist modernist building. From the octagonal columns to the scooped-out spandrels giving the curtain wall a three-dimensional presence, details were twisted to make an editorial comment on the drab rectilinearity of the Miesian system.” [7]

If Time-Life was Weese's skeptical take on the Miesian skyscraper, the University of Wisconsin's South Lower Campus complex of 1970 showed a similarly critical approach to the brutalist campus megastructures then being built all over Europe and North America. Oblique walls at the base and elevated monolithic volumes do the street no favors, but outdoor circulation on pedestrian bridges and walkways connecting through a generous courtyard provide a dynamic spatial sequence. Local limestone cladding is a richly textured complement to the concrete, and what in similar buildings would be self-consciously chunky columns here become slender pilotis. As with so many buildings of this era, inconsistent maintenance, mechanical shortcomings and changing perceptions of architectural quality have taken their toll, and what is now called the Mosse Humanities Building may be demolished when the university's budget permits it.
At the other end of what might be called Weese's period of brutalist sympathies is a skyscraper as pure as any by Mies. The Metropolitan Correctional Center uses one of Weese's favorite plan geometries, a right triangle, and extrudes it 28 stories. The facade is irregularly perforated with slit windows (5 inches wide by 7 ½ feet long) marking inmates' cells, creating a perforated monolith. A homage evoking "La Tourette on its

If the Weese vs. Mies opposition is to be believed, this would seem Weese's clearest rebuttal: triangular instead of square, loadbearing concrete instead of steel frame, perforated openings instead of curtain wall, prisoners exercising on the roof instead of corporate titans lunching in the Four Seasons. The tower's triangular footprint, shunted to the far side of the site, opens up a plaza originally planted with trees (which would now be a mature green canopy had the Bureau of Prisons not cut them down). Pedestrians can cut diagonally across without ever confronting the building head-on, a contrast to the Miesian practice of making the base a stage.

**Weese Goes to Washington**

Weese is, and should be, indelibly linked with his hometown of Chicago. So it is strange to realize that his imprint on my hometown of Washington, D.C., will likely be more enduring.

His first foray was Arena Stage, a theatre-in-the-round that opened in 1961. The site itself, in an urban-renewal area in Washington's Southwest quadrant, was influenced early on by Weese and his friend and MIT classmate I.M. Pei. They convinced developer William Zeckendorf to mix small-scale row houses and apartment blocks, and Weese went on to build one such complex a few blocks away. The theater itself extended Weese's vision of urbanity with a large glass vestibule leading to a gently sloping stone floor and a grand stair up to the lobby, which held the theater entry, a bar, and a large balcony. Unlike the bombastic Kennedy Center of a decade later, lording over the Potomac and severed from the city by a tangle of highway ramps, Arena Stage made its cultural embrace at a neighborhood scale. The blank walls necessitated by program could have easily made this an aloof building, but it is not.

Many times I remember standing on the balcony, or in the crowd gathered on the small entry plaza, basking in the buzz of the city and imaging living in one of the row houses. This is no longer possible; a recent expansion swallowed Arena and the companion theatre Weese added in 1972 inside a three-story curtain wall topped by a cantilevered roof. For a nonprofit theatre in our culturally crowded but financially pinched era, the architectural histrionics may well be appropriate, and the parti — a rehash of Rafael Vinoly's Kimmel Center in Philadelphia — at least preserves Weese's theaters as solid brick specimens within the glass menagerie.

Weese's last contribution to D.C. is almost unbelievable: the Vietnam Memorial as we know it today would never have been built without him. After Maya Lin's entry board to the 1981 competition had been rejected, Weese, always uneasy with final decisions or consensus, dragged it out from the rear of the airplane hangar where it had been consigned. He swayed the rest of the jury and later championed Lin in the face of intense criticism.

In between these two interventions came Weese's — and the city's — enduring monument: the Washington Metro. Weese's *New York Times* obituary ran under the
headline "Harry Weese, 83, Designer of Metro System in Washington." Given Weese's belief in grand civic spaces — and the fact that 123 million people now ride the Metro every year [9] — it is hard to argue with that epitaph.

The Metro’s aesthetic vision has hardly altered in 45 years. The only other subway system defined by architecture is Moscow's, but in the Russian capital hundreds of designers have been involved as high Stalinist Baroque gave way to Kruschevian austerity, Brezhnevan heroism and New Oligarch sizzle. Weese's firm stewarded the expanding Metro from 1966 on, consistently adhering to the original design as the system grew from 5 stations to 83.
A transit system is far more complex than a building. It is a dynamic architecture where one inhabited construction slips in and out of another, an enduring reference point sheltered from the waves of change at the surface, and a series of nested public spaces burdened with intense programmatic demands. Weese resolved these competing claims with cool gravitas.

Every station is slightly different but looks the same. From an entry marked by a curved marble wall, a long, slow escalator delivers riders to a mezzanine floored in rust-colored hexagonal tiles. Low precast barriers topped with dark brass railings float a few feet from poured concrete walls curving gently upward into a cylindrical vault. Lamps in trackside trenches and pillars wash over the vault, highlighting its dramatic coffers and leaving the platform untouched by direct light. [10]

The passenger walks through turnstiles, down a short escalator, past pillars topped with ventilation grilles, all finished in the same dark bronze, to sit on a bench of speckled granite. Dark brown station signs — unusually important on these identical platforms — show the station name in a white Massimo Vignelli typeface (almost identical to the one deployed later in the New York City subway). When a train approaches, circular lamps set in the platform edge blink on and off. The decelerating whine of the electric motor, the announcement of the train's destination, the shuffling of passengers' bodies on and off are all absorbed by sound panels set into the coffered vaults above. Only a passing clutch of loud tourists breaks through the sensory blanket.

A Monument in Motion
Weese's client, the presidentially appointed U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, specified a simple, elegant and easily reproducible design with a "spirit of the classical." Answering that brief would have been difficult above ground; to do so in a far-flung regional infrastructure was Weese's great success. Somehow the stations, from their bus bays to their farecard machines to their trains, whether under downtown D.C. or in the hinterlands of Virginia, cling to an uncompromising style throughout. The Metro created an urban transit experience very different from the anxieties of New York, whose subway system was then spiraling downward into a mythic miasma of track fires, muggers and graffiti. The D.C. Metro was, as the title of Zachary Schrag's comprehensive history labels it, "The Great Society Subway," recasting the very identity of mass transit at a time when an expanding economy and shrinking commitment to the city drove suburban expansion at full bore, especially in the postwar metropolis of Washington.
What had sold the client on Weese was his attention to human concerns. In interviews, the other shortlisted architects detailed the latest concrete construction techniques, while Weese spoke of providing the rider with comfort and dignity. [11] Key to this aspiration was the large spatial enclosure of the vaulted section, originally proposed by Weese in 1966, then sloughed off by his engineering partners De Leuw, Cather & Co. It was resurrected in dramatic fashion by Gordon Bunshaft (Weese's former boss in the Chicago office of SOM), who at a Commission meeting sketched it in crayon on the back of Weese's presentation board.

The project has had its critics. Where Weese envisioned citizens moving through underground public buildings of "dignity and even elegance," Marshall Berman saw passengers encased in a repressive monolith. Berman's visit to Washington a decade ago extended his critique of Modernism underground, to the Metro's "crushing landscape" of "primal design." He writes:

Walls and ceilings were massive monoliths, with facades unbroken by colors or diverse materials or signs. We passengers were encased in enormous voids shaped by barrel-vaulted ceilings, and by vast blots of blackness at the platform's ends, pressing us toward them like black holes in outer space. Meanwhile, pulling us upward, escalators seemed to surge up from the bowels of the earth. Lighting was not only too dim to read by, it also transformed people of every color into shades. You couldn't get a clear view of the person next to you, or else, getting off a train, you lost your view of the person next to you. ... Before long, I realized that the system was a kind of theater of absurdity and cruelty, whose scenery seemed contrived to create anxiety. [12]

On a 42-day trip during the planning of the project, Weese and his lieutenants visited 16 subway systems around the world and distilled transit system design into three approaches: utilitarian, commercial and public. [13] Weese defined his approach as the latter. In setting up this trichotomy, however, Weese effectively rejected the possibility that a successful subway might have elements of all three. And while most riders wouldn't agree with Berman's appraisal, it does suggest that the highly controlled and unified design approach, even in the name of the public, may have gone too far. In this Weese is not entirely to blame. The Commissioners, who besides Bunshaft included landscape architect Hideo Sasaki, architect John Carl Warnecke, and critic Aline Saarinen (Eero’s wife), were overwhelmingly concerned with "continuity of experience," as Sasaki put it. More prosaically, Bunshaft wanted an environment "like the inside of a Thermos bottle, one station after another." [14]

For a visitor, or a local kid from the suburbs, there is unarguably a sense of wonder conveyed by the monumental scale and the hushed, smooth ride. For an adult living downtown and used to the rough and ready convenience of the New York subway, the continuous monumentality becomes tedious and stuffy. The singular vision of style looks obdurate and overbearing. The designers went to great lengths to suppress geological and landscape variations along the routes rather than to synthesize those differences into a family of spatial experiences. One yearns for variation, a break from the line of clones.

Circulation is similarly unimaginative. A transfer through New York's Times Square or Boston's Park Street or London's Tottenham Court Road is, for the tourist, a trail of signs.
For the native rider it is a route blazed through inconspicuous stairs and passages in an effort to outflank the sign-led herds, to connect an exact spot on one platform to another or to the rabbit hole above that minimizes walking to a destination. Multiple paths of movement absorb the exigencies of the commute, injecting otherwise mundane spaces with the ownership of knowledge.

But the Metro was not really intended to be owned or even overwhelmingly loved by those who depend upon it. [15] It was always a symbol for the nation and a long-distance commuting mechanism for the suburbs first, and only second a working instrument for the city (one wonders if this might have been different had design commenced after the mid-70s transition to home rule in D.C.). Transfer stations demonstrate this rejection of functional richness for grand, rational spaces. Two vaults intersect in a bilevel cruciform with no transfer mezzanine, forcing nearly every passenger to squeeze through the same narrow widths of platform at the center. Spatial majesty comes at the price of inefficiency and crowding.

Such tradeoffs are perhaps inevitable. The Metro must be both an infrastructural program for urban movement as well as a repository of identity for the capital of a nation that styles itself both powerful and benevolent. Whatever its faults, the Metro, which nurtured my own urban and architectural consciousness from a young age, remains the defining environment for both Washington and Weese's architecture.
Assessing Weese

Though many important and innovative projects followed, Bruegmann places the opening of the Metro's initial segment in 1976 at the peak of Weese's career. The firm at the time was based in a three-story loft at the top of a 19th-century heavy-timber warehouse, but the picturesque office concealed chaotic organization, a lack of planning for succession, and tensions with the Washington office, which would eventually lead to several top staffers breaking off on their own. Weese's drinking, health problems and inability to compromise led him to abandon the day-to-day life of the firm by the mid 1980s.

Simultaneously, the failure of the Chicago World's Fair plan in the mid-80s brought on his withdrawal from public life, and the city quickly forgot the man who had once been called "Chicago's Conscience." In 1998, he died in a veteran's hospital in a far-flung town 15 miles beyond the end of the commuter line to the Loop. Harry Weese & Associates, begun in 1947 in the back of the modern-furniture store that Weese ran with his wife and a partner, was acquired by San Francisco-based behemoth Gensler in 2000.
Why is Harry Weese's work not better known? One reason, suggests Bruegmann, is that its "intensely pragmatic" nature, combined with its tendency to experiment and to leap across material and programmatic boundaries, meant it "never quite attained the level of sustained exploration that was possible in some of the larger commissions that came to [Eero] Saarinen, Paul Rudolph, or I.M. Pei." To that list we might add Bertrand Goldberg and Walter Netsch, fellow Chicago-based un-Miesians whose distinctive aesthetics, writ large at Marina City and the University of Illinois-Chicago, have accorded them a highly visible place in the city’s built history. Weese’s only project of similar scale was a new town for airport workers in Saudi Arabia, but the lack of documentation makes it unclear how much of the plan, principally designed by Ben Weese, was ever built.
Another reason might be that Weese refused to align himself with any particular movement. His eclectic approach was bound into "a profound suspicion of any overarching theory of architecture," and this limited his experimentalism when it came to aesthetic statements. He moved with stylistic trends but never led them. After the University of Wisconsin project, for example, Weese built other institutional megastructures for the State University of New York at Buffalo, Williams College in Massachusetts, the First National Bank in Albuquerque, and the city of Middletown, Ohio. By the time of the last of these projects, the megastructural fervor epitomized by Montreal Expo '67 was a decade old.

In 1977, Weese was commissioned to build a new engineering building for Stanford University. His design responded to the oil-embargo energy crisis with shuttered French balconies, passive ventilation shafts, and a pool for evaporative cooling. Given its program, the building has an almost shockingly unmodern appearance, with a pitched red-tile roof and stucco infill within an exposed timber frame.

The Stanford commission could have easily positioned Weese as a principal exponent of the newly fashionable postmodern movement. The First Baptist Church of 1965, which features two volumes covered in steep-pitched roofs and oversized triangular brick pediments, was featured prominently in the 1976 "Chicago Architects" exhibition and catalog, organized by Ben Weese and Chicago's leading postmodernist spokesman, Stanley Tigerman. Yet Weese reacted vehemently against what he saw as the postmodernists' glibness and lack of social commitment. "As personal and whimsical as Weese ever got," Bruegmann concludes, "he still believed deeply in the modernist project, that architecture was about solving human problems and that it had to be based on rational analysis." Or as Weese himself wrote: “Architecture’s main duty is to innovate. It is not to pander to trivia.” [16]

Weese’s place in history, then, is entrusted largely to books like The Architecture of Harry Weese, to scholars willing to examine Weese in the light of his own beliefs and milieu. He must be accepted as an architect who was neither a stylist nor an iconoclast, whose work and words responded to a set of progressive social values and a straightforward concern for bettering the built environment. It may not be fashionable today to speak of design in such terms as human comfort and civic vision, but for Harry Weese, it was enough.

Notes

3. This was between 1977 and 1990; if adjusted for inflation the amounts would range from one and a half to three times as much.


6. Process: Architecture, 6


8. Ibid.

9. Zachary Schrag, The Great Society Subway (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 9, 269-270. Lighting designer William Lam deliberately used low ambient light levels to render the vault as an "underground sky," but the lighting fixtures did not meet Lam's specifications and actual levels were much lower than intended. This problem was overcome, oddly, not by replacing the lamps but by redesigning the vault in later stations to replace the characteristic deep waffle slab with a shallow ribbed design.


11. Schrag, 76.


13. Schrag, 77.

14. CFA minutes, Oct. 17 and June 20, 1967. Quoted in Schrag, 86.

15. After a honeymoon period in the 1970s and '80s, financial, maintenance and operational problems came to the fore in the 1990s and 2000s. These are summarized by Schrag, 244-260, and washingtonpost.com carries frequent stories on the subject. One blog devoted to Metro problems is Unsuck DC Metro.