

The New REPUBLIC

BUSH'S ARCHITECT IS A PERFECT MATCH FOR HIS PRESIDENCY.

Legacy-Builder

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Now right-thinking people who stand at any place on the political spectrum can say that, in one instance at least, President Bush has demonstrated judgment superior to that of his father. Only twelve presidential libraries grace our land, all run with public funding by the National Archives and Records Administration. The first president to be honored with this by now *de rigueur* monument to posterity and the information glut of this Information Age is, of all the unlikely candidates, Herbert Hoover. In most cases the architects of presidential libraries have been chosen by the presidents whose terms they document and purport to celebrate; George H.W. Bush chose the 2,100-plus strong, international corporate firm of Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum, which fashioned a sorry affair in College Station, Texas, little more than an incoherent piece of bombast.

His son stands to do better. For his library, Bush *filis* has aptly--brilliantly, one might even say--chosen Robert A.M. Stern, who runs an active, 300-person practice in New York. Stern is deeply passionate about American architecture and is also a prolific historian, having co-written five enormous books on the history of New York from 1900 to 2000, which are fun to look through and which will, for the avalanche of archival information and detail they offer if nothing else, be indispensable sourcebooks for generations. One wonders if the man ever sleeps, as Stern is also a very active dean at the School of Architecture at Yale, where he single-handedly salvaged what had become a thoroughly moribund, indeed irrelevant school of architecture, transforming it into one of the most exciting, if idiosyncratic, institutions in the Ivy League.

Most significantly for the purpose of pondering his newest high profile commission, Stern led the charge in the 1970s and early 1980s toward what is best described as historicist postmodernism. While modernists advocated an architecture of progressive (sometimes radical) change, Stern argued for what he called a "traditional" rather than a "schismatic" modernism, one that would buttress the values of what he called western humanism. He rejected the notion that the technological, social, scientific, political, and economic revolutions of the early twentieth century obviate a traditionalist approach to design. He rejected the schismatic modernist insistence that the character of modern life was perpetually, and often radically, changing and the idea that a new architecture should reflect, accommodate, and respond to those changes. Architecture, he argued, must reassure its users, using forms drawn from the local character and regional identity of a given place. Architecture stemming from the acknowledgment that modernization has in fact occurred only runs the risk of further alienating that abstract construct, the alienated modern man.

Who should be surprised that Stern's brand of post modernism now dominates American architecture and urbanism and governs especially the vast low- and medium-end building trade in the United States? Whatever Stern's personal political convictions may be (for reasons too complex to parse here, one can justifiably hope that they diverge from those of his now-most famous client), Robert A.M. Stern Architects mainly serves the business and institutional elite.. His firm is known for cleanly detailed, well-designed super-luxury villas, country clubs, developer-built residential towers and hotels, and institutional buildings which seek to be august but not intimidating. Among the most familiar are two neo-neo-Georgian buildings that form the current core of the Harvard Business School: the Spengler Campus Center and Baker Library.

Stern's website says it all. His firm's philosophy is that "the public is entitled to buildings that do not, by their very being, threaten the aesthetic and cultural values of the buildings around them." Whatever already exists in a place, creating its "spirit"--whether good, bad, or indifferent--orients the overall design. This approach results in an insistent stylistic eclecticism--when in California, do Spanish colonial; when in Times Square, do neon; when at Harvard, faux Georgian lintels and brick. Stern once scoffed at what he deemed the grandiosity of those modernist architects who believed their work could help to change the world. He insisted that designers can not, should not devise an architecture of social transformation but should instead strive to "reflect" dominant social values. Hear this: "I have seen it as my mission to try to express, to represent the values of American culture as I see them, not to impose values on it."

Committing to a project of social transformation through architecture has its disappointments, setbacks, and pitfalls. But refusing to do so results in architecture that offers heavy buttressing to the status quo. Since the Republican revolution, Stern has played into the hands of the superrich, the .01 percent that his newest client has tried to ensure will run our formally democratic country for years to come. Bush is a president who speaks out of both sides of his mouth, insisting that measured conservatism is *the* American way, while simultaneously driving our country toward a radical rightist revolution. Our next presidential library, whatever it will look like (no design has been released), will be a monument to Bush's grotesque anti-democratic policies at home and follies abroad. Stern, like Bush, believes that measured conservatism is architecture's American way-- "the story I seek to tell" in his architecture, he once wrote, "is that of America, or precisely of what it means to be an American." And yet Robert A.M. Stern Architects, perhaps (or perhaps not) unwittingly, increasingly practices an architecture that not only houses but physically embodies the values of the superrich.

President Bush has found the architectural *mot juste!*

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