

Paul Hirshorn and Steven Izenour, *White Towers*. Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 1979. 189 pp., 315 illus., \$17.50

Anthony Jackson

Volume 7, Number 1-2, 1980

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076891ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076891ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Jackson, A. (1980). Review of [Paul Hirshorn and Steven Izenour, *White Towers*. Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 1979. 189 pp., 315 illus., \$17.50]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 7(1-2), 131–133.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1076891ar>

community of American artists in Paris, for Lucas kept in close touch with Whistler, William Dannat, Edward May, Henry Bacon, Frank Boggs, Henry Mosler, Daniel Ridgeway Knight, Ogeden Wood, and many more. (The letters of Whistler to Lucas were published, with an introduction and notes by John A. Mahey, in *The Art Bulletin*, September 1967.) Those who are conspicuously missing from his acquaintance are the women who spent many years in Paris: Elizabeth Nourse, Anna Klumpke, Elizabeth Jane Gardner, Cecilia de Wentworth, and others. Like Lucas, American artists who spent their careers in Paris are not well known in histories of American art, and some are even omitted from standard reference sources. Evidence of this lack of knowledge appears in the diary index, where, for example, Boggs is identified as a member of the French school.

Notations in the diary bring out the importance of the international expositions in promoting a taste for oriental art, and of the Salons as marketplaces for contemporary art. Even in the months which followed the spring Salon, Lucas continued to buy Salon *livrets* and illustrated catalogues to send to Avery and other collectors; orders were sometimes placed with painters for a work 'like the last Salon picture.' In the setting of recurring exhibitions, painters became celebrated for certain types of subjects: in 1880 Shreyer promised to block in a 'snow piece' for Lucas – which could then be taken, if preferred, instead of a 'vue of Arabs' being considered. Photography was much used to facilitate the purchase of art works, and it is not surprising that the works of the most successful painters of the day photographed very well. Prices were competitive, and the production of art was a predictable enterprise.

The Diary of George A. Lucas has much to reveal about the organization of specific events, the interrelations of particular individuals, the development of certain works, and the methods of buying works of art. It will contribute to a genuine knowledge of art and patronage in Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century, a period that has inspired so many meaningless generalizations based on ignorance. For making this primary source of

enormous value accessible to us, we can be grateful to Lilian Randall and her colleagues at the Walters Art Gallery.

LOIS MARIE FINK
National Collection of Fine Arts
Washington, D.C.

PAUL HIRSHORN AND STEVEN IZENOUR *White Towers*. Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 1979. 189 pp., 315 illus., \$17.50.

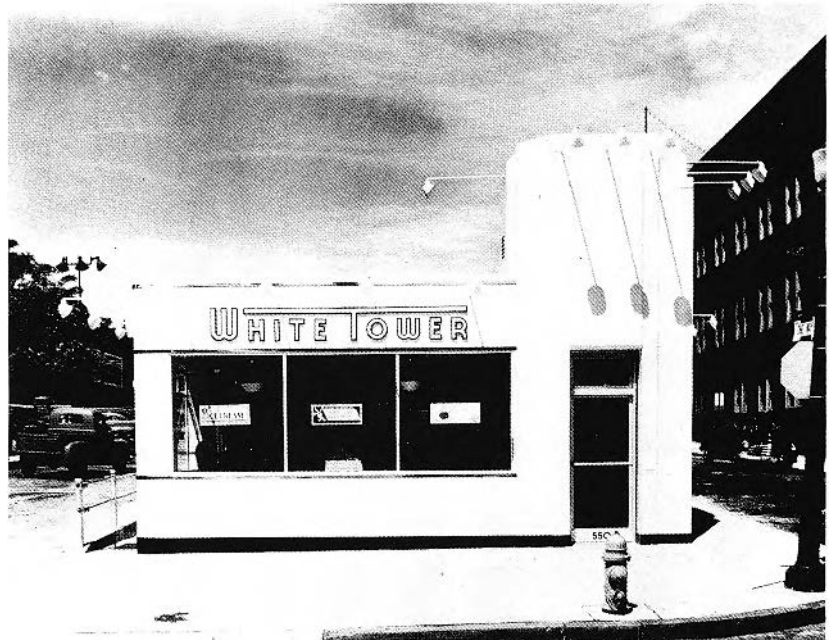
White Tower is an American hamburger chain which at its peak in the mid-1950s had 230 outlets (Fig. 4). The book is a photographic catalogue of its shops with a brief historical introduction by two architects who became involved in the project while working in the office of Venturi and Rauch. Other than the nostalgia it might evoke in those who grew up with them, what interest does such a study of one company's fast-food restaurants have? Two possibilities suggest themselves, one for architectural historians, the other for architects.

As microcosmic architectural history, this survey could have been subtitled the rise and fall of a twentieth-century stereotype, and used to validate Vasari's anthropomorphic pattern of birth, growth, and death. At the same

time, it also illustrates the kind and range of influences that affect the style-making process. At the theoretical extremes of architectural history are those like Henri Focillon who claim that form begets form, and others who believe that forms necessarily arise from the conditions of the time. *White Towers* provides support for both. The basic form itself – a white one-storey building with a token tower – was apparently conceived by the company's owner, a Milwaukee entrepreneur named Thomas E. Saxe, with the help of a construction company draftsman. The possible sources of this image are not discussed although mention is made of an earlier hamburger chain named the White Castle system. On the other hand, it is stated that an exotic architectural theme was not unusual for a commercial enterprise in the 1920s, so perhaps the first White Tower was a seminal design. Its subsequent symbolic transformations are of a major concern to the authors and will be considered separately. Of interest here are the non-design influences that act upon and modify forms.

The building type was a reaction to social conditions. The growth of suburban America produced an urban work force that could not get home to lunch and needed quick, cheap meals. It was the Depression

FIGURE 4. White Tower. Hirshorn and Izenour, p. 146.



that consolidated the workingman's eatery (women seem to have been discouraged by the maleness of the counter staff and clientele), and another social change, postwar affluence, that brought about its decline. The built form that evolved in response to these conditions was affected by other outside forces. Technology, in particular, led to an important change when the development of a technique for jointing and waterproofing allowed porcelain enamel to replace glazed brick as the exterior facing. But even more interesting are the chance contributions to the evolution of the design: a proprietor's insistence, for example, on curved corner windows which his competitors would not be able to afford, and an advertising man's suggestion for extending the horizontal of the *T* which thereby gave the logo its own particular character.

White Towers follows the conventions of standard architectural history in other ways as well. Even the unknown architect, Charles Johnson, who served the company for forty years, invokes posterity like his more famous counterparts, 'hoping that what I did would be good today and good twenty or twenty-five years from now'; while the authors, following their more celebrated precedents, also perform such traditional tasks as recording a high point of the style (Buffalo 1938: 'a significant improvement over previous roadside shops,' although that one equally failed to solve the integration of the gooseneck lamps which tended to give many of the buildings the look of wild west forts bristling with Indian arrows).

For the historian, there are further intriguing questions, such as the role played by human creativity in the evolution of this style (the streamlined look was first used in 1935 in a pre-Johnson design by architect B. Sumner Gruzen), or the life span of a style as compared to a mere fashion ('In those days the more "gingerbread" there was, the more luxurious it was.') But such theoretical concerns could equally well be evoked by the analysis of more interesting or influential building types such as the English country house or the American office building (although it might be argued that Seagram has little more to recommend it).

What else, then, has *White Towers* to offer its readers?

Obviously, for architects, this study of such an ordinary set of buildings satisfies the current vogue for semiology and vernacular architecture. Insisting that the modern style failed to endear itself to the general public (and incidentally themselves), the third generation of modern architects has looked two ways to find out what went wrong – to the nature of architectural symbolism to explain why the volumetric box did not catch on, and to those buildings constructed without the help of architects to see what sort of symbolic language ordinary people employ. This concern spanned the activities of different groups; Pop artists found inspiration in the commonplace, while socially-engaged architects sought to discover how to communicate with the public they served.

Unfortunately, vernacular architecture as the direct expression of a social group began to disappear long ago in the western world once the division of labour produced a specialized building industry. The closest equivalent today is to be found in builders' houses which are not necessarily what people would build for themselves, but have characteristics built in to attract custom. Such 'curb appeal,' as it is known in the trade, might be significant, although a definitive answer may never be attained, given the lack of creative choice at this level. Even further removed from our understanding of how effective (and affective) they are, are those commercial buildings that use themselves as advertisements. The customer here does not buy the building but the product being sold. The White Tower spokesman was probably right when he ranked location first, internal layout second, service third, and visual impact fourth in order of commercial importance.

The authors, however, see things differently from their point of view as architects. They assume that White Towers are symbolic, not just to architects but to their users. Three distinct periods are indicated. The first is most problematic yet initiates the sequence. The symbol, we are told, was the combination of its two terms: "tower" and its motifs evoked the social and gastronomic prominence of royal-

ty; white 'evoked cleanliness and wholesomeness.' While the hygienic look of white is commonly accepted, the association of medieval castles with royalty in Milwaukee is as difficult to believe as the statement of one serf-like employee who after having 'worked a twelve- or fourteen-hour day, seven days a week,' was able to assent that 'it didn't bother you. Everyone enjoyed it.' Unfortunately, the authors give no evidence to support the implied connection between form and meaning. Similarly when the medieval tower was modernized, when crenellations and buttresses gave way to art deco styling during the second period, the meaning is supposed to have shifted subtly to 'luxury, cleanliness, speed, and efficiency.' These more tangible qualities (except for the first), could be paralleled in fact; however, their appearance is not borne out by evidence which could have served to support, the authors' assumptions. On the contrary, one of the most influential designs was worked out by a competitor who sold it to the White Tower chain when his own business failed. 'In the end,' the authors note, 'competition in the fast-food business centered less on the subtleties of a building's image on the roadside than it did on the quality, price and service of the hamburgers on the plate.' Similarly, the deluxe White Towers 'may have been an aesthetic success along the roadside, but they were not an economic success.' How then may the reader evaluate the iconographic impact of this particular architectural form in order to ascertain whether any lesson may be learned from it? The answer is that no such evaluation is possible, based on this study which is not a sociological investigation of reality but rather the perception of two architects. This characteristic is evident in the section dealing with the third period of White Tower style, where kitsch becomes 'abstract form.' This term, however is inaccurate. Although a cube has replaced the earlier castellated structure, its meaning comes not through its geometry but from the fact that it still refers to a 'Tower.' The authors' interpretation suits current taste; the narrative art of earlier times is transformed into the conceptual art of today.

While such aesthetic concerns are important for contemporary architects, their packaging in this book is fraught with spurious inferences. Entrepreneurs are in the business to make money, not indigenous culture. American architects may have to make the best they can of their society's rampant materialism; others are not obliged to do so. People's needs are not represented by consumer ads but by far more complex prospects and dreams. The architect's role is to help form social values, not to reduce them to their lowest common denominator. *White Towers* is a deceptively simple and seductively elegant book. For Canadian readers who do not come from Detroit, Philadelphia, or New York, it should be labelled 'Imported produce - Handle with care.'

ANTHONY JACKSON
Nova Scotia Technical College
Halifax

HENRI LAVAGNE *Recueil Général des Mosaïques de la Gaule*. III: Province de Narbonnaise 1. Partie Central, x^e supplément a 'Gallia.' Paris, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1979. 169 pp., 72 illus.

This volume is the third part of a series dealing with the mosaics of Gaul. Part I, Province de Belgique, and Part II, Province de Lyonnaise, consist of three fascicules each. The first fascicule of Part III (Province de Narbonnaise) is entitled 'Partie Central.' The intention of the series, and of this text in particular, is to bring the old publications up to date. There is very little actual *new* material here (i.e., discoveries since 1909, the date of previous publications). But those past publications have been scattered, inadequate, and frequently inaccurate. For example, the old *Inventory for Narbon* listed 44 entries. The new one lists 223. However, only 75 of these are fully documented, the rest being only incomplete notes of mosaics which have since been lost or destroyed. And of the 75 only 35 are actual preserved specimens. The other 40 are known only from drawings or photographs.

There have been considerable confusion and many omissions in

the earlier publications, and M. Lavagne has included a concordance of old and new inventory numbers in an attempt to eliminate this problem. The reader can clearly identify the new additions, and the several instances of one mosaic having two or more numbers have been rectified.

The author describes three phases of mosaic production in Gaul. The first phase, in the first century A.D., is represented only in Besançon, but is the best preserved. The second phase, leading to the mid-third century, has far fewer examples, to be found mainly in Lyon; the third phase, which extends from the fourth to sixth centuries, is represented at St-Paul-Trois-Châteaux (Fig. 5) with very few examples. The first group is mainly black and white, retaining the early Italian forms as late as the beginning of the second century. The second series, with the introduction of floral motifs sprinkled amongst the geometric forms, demonstrates the birth of a distinct 'Gallo-romaine' style. (The question of when and how such a style arose was dealt with in the Introduction.) The third phase is believed to show the influence of eastern mosaics, in spite of the barbarian invasions.

There are also ten Medieval mosaics listed, of which only two are extant. One of these, found in a baptistry and in a very fragmentary condition, may not belong in the Medieval category. It shows two leopards attacking a deer; the animals are set on white squares within guilloche frames. Having noticed that each animal extends beyond the boundaries of its individual frame, some scholars have attributed this mosaic to the eleventh century, choosing to identify this stylistic element as a particularly Medieval phenomenon. As Lavagne has very clearly pointed out, however, this type of subject matter was very popular in pavements of the sixth century, and there is another example of a sixth-century mosaic with animals stepping out of their frames (M. Avi-Yonah, 'Relations entre la mosaïque juive et la mosaïque classique,' *Colloque du Mosaïque Greco-Romaines*, 1, Paris, 1963, p. 33, fig. 5).

In an appalling number of cases the catalogue entry is followed by 'détruite,' 'perdue,' or 'disparue-



FIGURE 5. Mosaic Pavement at St-Paul-Trois-Châteaux. From Lavagne.

non décrite;' occasionally, a mosaic, having been taken to the supposed safety of a museum, is 'aujourd'hui introuvable.' However some information has survived, hence the necessity for the catalogue entry. That information may be very sparse indeed, such as the passing reference to 'mosaïques riches' in unpublished travel notes or correspondence. Such documents, fortunately, often contain detailed descriptions and drawings. The author quite rightly includes every mosaic known to have existed; much of this information may not be of much use to the mosaic specialist, but such as there is does help to fill out the picture of the social and economic history of the area, giving evidence at the same time for roman civilization.

With each entry there is a section on 'observations.' This includes an annotated bibliography, summarization of any previous discussions of dating or interpretation, and some recent *comparanda* where the dating must be done stylistically. (This latter point is one on which there is not universal agreement amongst the publishers of mosaic *corpora*.) The illustrations are large and clear, only one or two to a page, and the details are easily visible. Wherever possible there are reconstruction drawings of the whole floor. In the text section there are several town or city plans showing the locations of mosaics.