

A Banned Book and two Articles: The Individual and the Collective at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (1955–1959)

ARTICLE

Corporate Architecture, Skidmore Owings & Merrill, William H. Whyte, Large Architectural Offices, individualism and Collectivity

/Abstract

A 1955 pot-boiler novel, Edwin Gilbert's *Native Stone* described Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's New York office and its lead architect Gordon Bunshaft in unflattering terms. SOM threatened a lawsuit to suppress Gilbert's book and the book was withdrawn. Yet the issues raised in the book, most notably the relationship between the individual and collective continued to resonate leading to two significant articles about the firm. In the first, published in *Fortune* magazine (1958) entitled "The Architects from 'Skid's Row,'" the firm attempted to paint a picture of a happy collective. Its goal was to provide a healthy counter-narrative to the novel. Cheerful employees given a chance to express themselves within the context of the group were at the center of the story. A year later (1959) Gordon Bunshaft sponsored his own self-aggrandizing narrative in *Newsweek* striking back at the myth of the collectivity. There he claimed that he was the firm's leader, and the others worked for him. Though the picture of SOM seems like a nightmare from another time, having nothing to do with the firm today, the issues (of individual and collectivity) raised in this sequence of novel and two articles continue to resonate. They are ones raised by William H. Whyte in his best-selling study of corporate America, *The Organization Man* (1956). Whyte describes the tension between the collectivity and the individual in corporate America fearing that the rise of a group conformity would stifle the innovation and originality that originally gave rise to the corporation itself. These are issues that remain alive in all large architectural firms.

/Author

Nicholas Adams
Vassar College
niadams@vassar.edu

Nicholas Adams is Mary Conover Mellon professor emeritus in the Art Department at Vassar College where he taught the history of architecture (1989–2018). He received an A.B. from Cornell University (1970) and a PhD from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University (1978). He has been visiting professor at McGill University, Harvard University, Columbia University, the University of Rome. Adams is the author of *Gordon Bunshaft and SOM: Building Corporate Modernism* (2019) and the first independently authored study of Skidmore Owings & Merrill: *Skidmore, Owings & Merrill: SOM since 1936* (2007). He has published more than a dozen articles on the firm in *Casabella*, the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, and elsewhere.

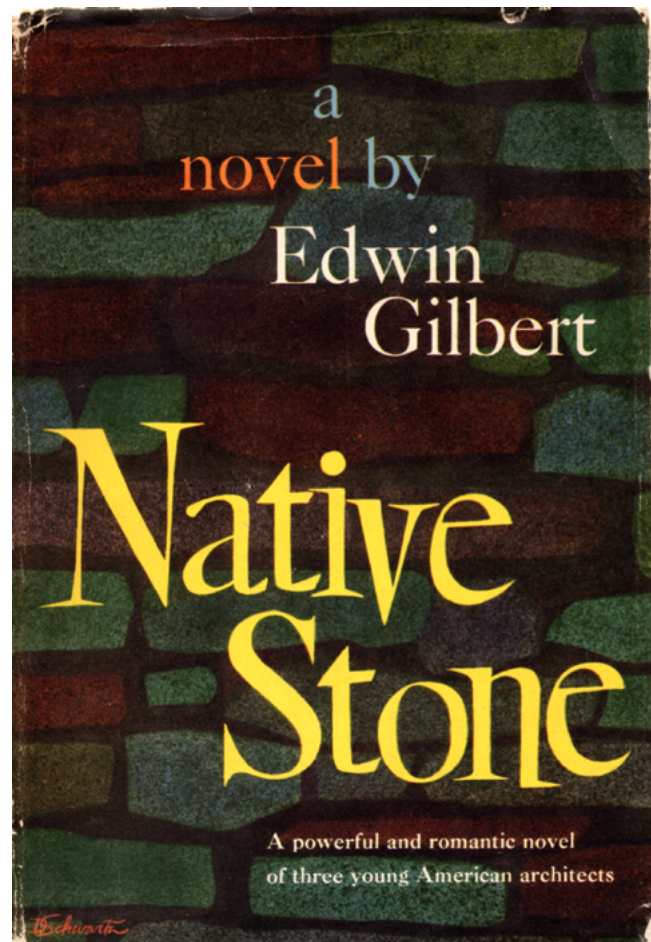
Other books include *Gunnar Asplund's Gothenburg and the Transformation of Public Architecture in Interwar Europe* (2014); *Gunnar Asplund* (2011); *Firearms and Fortifications: Military Architecture and Siege Warfare in Sixteenth Century Siena* (1986) with Simon Pepper. He edited two volumes of the *Architectural Drawings of Antonio da Sangallo the Younger* (1994 and 2000). He co-curated an exhibition of architectural books entitled *Building Buffalo: Books from Buildings, Buildings from Books* (2017) with Francis Kowsky. His article "The Early Years of Nathaniel A. Owings: A Portrait of the Architect as a Storyteller," in the *Indiana Magazine of History* (2022) was awarded the Madison prize for the best article to appear in 2021.

He has been a visiting fellow at the American Academy in Rome; the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton; the Canadian Centre for Architecture; and the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery in Washington.

Although little known, and of scant literary importance, a steamy novel published in 1955 stirred up a hornet's nest inside the architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM). Although sexual favors and innuendoes provide the main story line, the novel may also have led to an open conflict within the firm over the critical relationship between the collective and the individual. Four years later the events detailed here almost resulted in the firing the firm's design leader and partner, Gordon Bunshaft (1909–1990). Although some parts of this story have been told before; my aim here is to bring all the pieces together to create an account that will provide insight into a large architectural firm at the apex of its fame over 70 years ago.

Judging from the reviews, readers of Edwin Gilbert's *Native Stone* (New York: Doubleday & Co., first suppressed edition, 1955; second corrected edition, 1956) were untroubled to find that its main characters were by turns, sexist, racist, and anti-Jewish.¹ [Fig. 1] The novel told of the exploits of three young architects, graduates from Yale University's School of Architecture: Abbott Austin, son of a Boston Brahman, Vincent Cable, a clever New Haven boy from a humble family, and Rafferty Bloom, a half-Irish half-Jewish son of a butcher from Cleveland. Following graduation, each follows a different architectural and amorous path before they join in practice. Austin goes to work for his elderly patrician uncle. Cable and Bloom both move to New York City. Though there are excellent evocations of life inside the school's drafting rooms (Gilbert trained as an architect) the novel is a romance as each man selects a partner who, through the course of the novel, proves to be inappropriate: insanity, infidelity, and duplicity bubble away from page to page. As the book rushes to its conclusion, the anti-Jewish siren has been tossed aside; the hot-blooded liberal progressive has shifted her allegiance from the New Haven-born working-class climber to the supposedly sensitive half-Irish half-Jew, and Austin, the Brahman child, has divorced his frigid wife in favor of the attractive, loving, Phoebe Dunn. This is a novel for idle hours and not much else.

The closest readers of this book, however, were not sleepy commuters on the New Haven & Hartford railroad, but the lawyers at Isham Lincoln & Beale in Chicago, attorneys for SOM.² In the novel, the fictional Rafferty Bloom works



1

1 Edwin Gilbert, *Native Stone* (New York: Doubleday, 1955); corrected second edition (New York: Doubleday, 1956). All quotations are from the first edition unless otherwise noted.

2 The book was brought to SOM's attention by Jack Hennessy, a partner in the engineering firm of Syska & Hennessy. Hennessy, according to SOM's lawyer, saw an advance copy of the book at the office of the architect Wallace Harrison. Memorandum of Marshall Grosscup Sampsell to Owings, 27 April 1955, Library of Congress, Washington D.C., Papers of Nathaniel A. Owings, Container 2, folder "NAO Personal, January–June 1955."

Fig. 1
Edwin Gilbert, *Native Stone*
(New York: Doubleday, 1955),
book jacket



in an architectural office with a disguise so tissue-thin that SOM threatened a \$14 million lawsuit against the book's author and publisher. The threat was enough to force the withdrawal and destruction of the first edition, considerable rewriting, and the publication of a sanitized edition the following year.³ That Bloom's employer in the novel, Pierce, Pender and Reeves (referred to as P. P. & R.) represented SOM is beyond doubt.⁴ As he enters through modern glass doors Bloom admires color photographs of "hospitals, hotels, skyscrapers, universities, airports, embassies" displayed on its "stark-white" walls. He is startled by the time clock for employees to check in.⁵ He admires copies of the *P. P. & R. Bulletin* on heavy card-stock, a fictionalized version of *SOM News*, SOM's actual newsletter, and he notes that the firm has "offices in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, as well as field offices and drafting rooms in Bonn, Istanbul, Rome, Paris, Algeria."⁶ Bloom also observes that the firm does not build anything "as lowly as a dwelling," like SOM, and he is dismayed, in a familiar critique, to see that there is a "certain similarity between all these diverse structures." When he finally gets a view of the drafting room he is amazed by its size: "There must have been at least two hundred draftsmen at work in the area before him, fluo-

3 Doubleday agreed to withdraw all 4300 copies in the hands of retailers, to stop reviews, and ask Gilbert to write to those who had received free copies and ask for their return. Doubleday agreed to show any revisions to SOM prior to republication. Memorandum of Sampsell to Owings, 27 April 1955, Owings Papers, Container 2, folder "NAO Personal, January-June 1955."

4 It was common to write the abbreviation of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, "SOM," as "S.O.M." through the 1950s.

5 "Designers for a Busy World: Mood for Working," *Newsweek*, no. 97 (May 4, 1959). See also Roger Nicholas Radford, "Oral History of Roger Nicholas Radford," interviewed by Sharon Zane (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago), 40. In Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 158, the "personnel manager" explains to Bloom that the time clocks had been installed as the firm had a "big job for the Army last year."

6 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 164-165. Later, when the office goes to lunch, Bloom and his colleagues walk along 58th Street.

Fig. 2
Skidmore, Owings & Merrill,
New York, view of the drafting
room, ca. 1955 (©
ESTO, Ezra Stoller)

rescent light fixtures clamped to each drafting table, and it made him think of the grotesque configuration of T.V. aerials in one of those ranch house real estate developments.”⁷ These details coincide with other descriptions of SOM: from its many departments (that so impress Bloom) to the antiseptically white office desks. [Fig. 2]

P. P. & R, however, is not a happy place. As depicted by Gilbert, the staff are contemptuous of the firm and their employers. “Which box are they putting you on?” Bloom is asked by one of the designers referring to the firm’s ubiquitous right-angled designs. And the staff refer to themselves casually as “galley slaves,” albeit “the best paid galley slaves in New York.”⁸ Money holds them in place. “Thought I’d try it alone,” one of them says, “but Harriet got pregnant somehow.”⁹ Even a senior employee admits blankly: “I have a big family.”¹⁰ After a few drinks over lunch on his first day, Bloom blends in with the group by inventing a mocking nickname, “Firkydoodle,” for P.P.&R’s senior head of design, Munson Kirk.¹¹ Munson Kirk is the fictional representation of Gordon Bunshaft, the New York office’s chief designer. Already noted for his successful buildings, Bunshaft was also well-known for his acerbic tongue and his rigorous control over design.¹² As Ben Yates, Bloom’s draftsman-colleague explains sarcastically: “Oh, yes, there’s a definite design policy [at P. P. & R]. It’s all based on Munson Kirk’s first success for the firm. You know. Nothing succeeds like success. And I must say we are copping more awards than any other office around.”¹³ Gilbert’s physical description of Kirk also recalls Bunshaft. “He has heavy-lidded dark eyes, eyes made darker, smaller, recessed by the surrounding mound of gray flesh.” One sartorial detail exaggerates a Bunshaft fashion. “His trousers were hitched almost rib-high by a pair of violet suspenders.”¹⁴ His manner is unsympathetic: “Saul,” he tells his assistant in front of Bloom, “as soon as you can undo everything this man has learned at Yale or wherever it is he went, let me know.”¹⁵ In short, someone with decent knowledge of contemporary architecture in New York would probably have had little trouble guessing that the fictional office was based on SOM and that Munson Kirk was Bunshaft: the clinching detail, if needed, was a P. P. & R. project in Greenwich, Connecticut where SOM had, in fact, just built a hospital (1954).¹⁶

7 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 158. At this time SOM had offices in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Portland. SOM’s field offices cited by Gilbert were largely correctly identified.

8 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 161. The various staff members are not identifiable. One of the group of staff members around Bloom is a tweed-wearing Englishman. There were, in fact, at least three English architects working at SOM in this period: Roger Radford (1926–2009), Max Gordon (1931–1990), and John Penn (1921–2007). Thanks to Matthias Dicks for drawing my attention to Penn.

9 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 164.

10 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 170.

11 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 166.

12 See Nicholas Adams, *Gordon Bunshaft and SOM: Building Corporate Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), chapter 3. Manufacturers Hanover Trust, New York (1954) is named as the model for a bank that the architects design for “Taunton, CT,” *Native Stone*, 135–136.

13 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 164.

14 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 158.

15 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 159.

16 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 203.

Rafferty Bloom's experience at P. P. & R. hinges on Kirk's theft of a design. Bloom's first assignment had been to consider the entrance for a chemical research center in New Jersey. Rather than come up with alternatives, as he had been directed, Bloom had redesigned the entrance entirely.¹⁷ "My idea," he explains, "was to get rid of that stiff formidable feeling."¹⁸ Enraged, Kirk throws the sheet into the waste basket. But as Bloom leaves at the end of the day and attempts to retrieve the drawing--only to find that the basket has been emptied--as we learn later, by Kirk.¹⁹ Although the drawing would have belonged to the firm because executed by their employee while paid by the firm, Kirk's underhanded appropriation is devious. Later, after Bloom has left the firm, the design is developed and ultimately premiated. Following a health scare, Kirk acknowledges Bloom's hand in the design and rewards him for his contribution; but the idea that senior partners used subterfuge to steal ideas from their underlings hardly gave a flattering picture of teamwork at SOM.

Another detail of life at P.P. & R. was equally unwelcome: the implication that Kirk would be (or was) having an affair with one of the (three) women working on the drafting floor. When Bloom first arrives there, his eye is immediately drawn by one of them, Marion McBride, known as Mac. She is, evidently, the ideal for every man in the room. She is a first-rate professional, too, but her subdued wardrobe (tailored blouse, tweed skirt, flat shoes) indicates to Bloom that she is not looking for a husband.²⁰ Everyone agrees that she is "married to architecture."²¹ When Bloom calls on Marion one evening (uninvited), we learn more about her. The apartment is stark: walls black and oyster white. It has a "neo-Mondrian" painting on one wall (as did Bunshaft's own apartment that had recently been featured in *Architectural Forum*), a charcoal sofa, and two "anatomical-looking" birchwood chairs and a white marble table.²² Why has he stopped by? As he explains it to her: "I wanted to know why it is that a beautiful girl tries to pass herself off as drab and unfeminine, as a robot in a big office...."²³ Her honesty startles Bloom and it is to Gilbert's credit that he provides it space. "How would you like it' -- her voice was belligerent, uncalm--'how would you like it if you lost the use of both hands and couldn't hold a pencil any more?'" She then explains her ambition to be "'a registered architect, a practicing architect, a successful, a very, very, successful architect. A very, very, good one above all.' She said this with straight, hard-hitting conviction. 'But I have the misfortune of

17 See Walter McQuade, *Architecture in the Real World: The Work of HOK* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1984), 20, describes a situation with Gyo Obata, the head of design at HOK. Bill Valentine, later chairman of HOK, is quoted as telling new recruits: "If Gyo wants to do something, we are *bound* to do it that way. We are bound morally, and we're bound in a business sense. And we *will* do it that way. We're not going to look for a way to go around it; we're going to do it, even if we happen not to agree with it." Bloom has violated a general corporate understanding of hierarchy.

18 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 163. Kirk's assistant is named Saul Weintraub--a possible reversal of ethnic authority. Bunshaft was Jewish.

19 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 171.

20 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 177.

21 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 165.

22 "Quality in Quantity: Manhattan House, a full block of new New York apartments," *Architectural Forum*, no. 97 (July 1952): 144.

23 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 178.

being born with reasonably agreeable features and, worst of all, blond hair—though I think I'll dye it." And she voices her fear of marriage. "A very nice trap maybe, But I am the one who has ovaries, I bear the children, I take on the burden of the husband. I haven't a chance if I trust to nature or trust a man. Plus which, my friend, I know better than to let myself ever get involved."²⁴ "Why do you think I'm holding on at P. P. & R.?" she asks. "Because this might be a gilt-edged reference. Did you know that despite the fact that women practice architecture, despite the so-called age of enlightenment, a young female architect is—she mocked an imaginary male client— "well—sure, she's all right to do the kitchen or decorate the living room, but what about safe concrete footing? What about cantilevering? Drainage? Roof load? Uh huh! Nothing doing. Better not risk it!"²⁵ It is a woman architect's all-too-familiar complaint, and one wishes, having allowed his character to speak so forthrightly, that Gilbert had been more courageous. The scene ends with Bloom and McBride in bed—and she is converted to the idea of making herself more attractive to men.

Bloom is not the only person interested in McBride—and here the story turns back to SOM and what becomes the source of SOM's threatened lawsuit. Kirk, in one of the book's most vulgar phrases, is also keen on McBride. "After Kirk hired her," someone observes, you should have seen him "walking around all day with that I beam in his pants."²⁶ Subsequently, as McBride tells Bloom she has been invited out to Greenwich with Kirk. "He insists that I sit in with him...on the first design session with the president of the Greenwich Hospital Drive Fund." She is exultant: "I think I'll be able to practice architecture much sooner than I ever hoped." Kirk is "crazy about" her, Bloom says. She demurs. "But never to the point of letting me—or anyone—cut in on him. Which I have every intention of doing." Bloom is disappointed. "You shouldn't Marion. You don't have to do anything like that."²⁷ The "anything like that" she will do is clearly more intimate than just traveling up and back from Greenwich for presentations with Kirk. Team players at SOM are not selected wholly on merit is Gilbert's clear message.

Native Stone troubled the partners at SOM. Remembering events, Walter Netsch (1920–2008), a partner in the Chicago office unburdened himself awkwardly in his oral history (1977).

There was one novel that was written in which Gordon played a principal part as a hero, and one young lady in the office was supposed to be the woman in it—neither one actually identified. But our lawyers got a hold of this book, and I remember a partners' meeting with paper clips through every page in which there was some problem that the legal department...thought besmirched Gordon. And it was handled, I don't know how, either with the publisher or something, but it was taken care of.

24 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 179.

25 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 180.

26 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 165.

27 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 203.

When the interviewer, presses Netsch for the title of the novel, he refuses. "I will not tell you. I Fig., it's past and over with." And in his further comments he manages to sound both certain of the falsity of the charge, but at the same time hinting that it might have been true. "It wasn't true. I'm not saying that there wasn't a relationship of a partner and someone else in the office, or some other office at some other time. I'm not saying that this was a puritanical joint, but this was a case where it had gotten to be a problem."²⁸ From which one might wonder whether "the problem" was an actual affair (these things happen) or its public imputation in fiction? (SOM had policies against employees marrying one another.)

As events unfolded, Nathaniel A. Owings (1903–1984), one of the founders and de-facto chief partner, was told (27 April 1955) by the firm's lawyer, Marshall Grosscup Sampsell (1904–1973) that the Marion McBride character, "Mac," was modelled on Patricia W. Swan (1924–2012), who worked in the design department in the New York office of SOM.²⁹ This was, he said, "the most compelling reason for Doubleday's action" to withdraw the edition. In a letter to Sampsell, Owings complimented the lawyer, mischaracterizing the episode: "It would appear that when anything pornographic is involved, Sampsell is the man!"³⁰

Gilbert, for his part, "maintained that he had not talked to any former employee of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill," but admitted that he had been shown through the New York office by Ernie Durhan (1913–1973).³¹ Gilbert knew something about architecture having trained at Michigan State (1933).³² But Gilbert could not have deduced so much about Bunshaft's character from a walk through the studios. Did he make up the theft of drawings? Did he actually know Patricia Swan? Junior designers still claim their designs have been ripped off—and some, like Emanuel Turano (1917–2007), the senior designer at SOM's Lever House, resented working for Bunshaft for a related reason: Turano did the work and Bunshaft claimed the credit. At P. P. & R. the staff believed that the best work came from Kirk's assistant, Saul Weintraub—though Kirk took the credit.³³ Did

28 Walter Netsch, "Oral History of Walter Netsch," interviewed by Betty J. Blum (Chicago: Art Institute, 1997, revised edition, 2000), 185–86.

29 Swan worked at SOM in New York 1951–78; and then in Denver, 1978–86. Concerning *Native Stone*, see Memorandum of Sampsell to Owings, 27 April 1955, Owings Papers, Container 3, folder "NAO Personal, January–June 1955." The physical description of "Marion McBride," in the opinion of someone who knew her, fits her perfectly. (Conversation with John Winkler, 29 August 2023).

30 Letter from Owings to Sampsell, May 3, 1955. Owings Papers, Container 2, folder "NAO Personal, January–June 1955."

31 Inside the copy of *Native Stone* in the Howard Gottlieb Archive at Boston University, Gilbert has written: "FOURTEEN MILLION DOLLAR LAW SUIT" [author's note: written in red] This is a RARE COPY OF FIRST EDITION OF NATIVE STONE. DESTROYED by Publisher DURING LIBEL LAW SUIT THREAT by Architectural FIRM OF SKIDMORE OWINGS & MERRILL SUING FOR \$14,5000,000,000. This first printing was RE-PRINTED at COST TO AUTHOR OF \$10,0000.000. This COPY IS THE ONE IN WHICH AUTHOR MADE CHANGES That RELIEVED HIM OF ACTUAL LIBEL SUIT. ALMOST NO COPIES EXIST. E.G." Gilbert added too many zeroes for the figure he reports in words.

32 Obituaries describe him as graduating from the University of Michigan; when he graduated it was known as Michigan State College, see "529 Degrees to be Awarded at M.S.C. June 12," *The Herald-Palladium* (Benton Harbor, Michigan), May 25, 1933, 12.

33 Laurie Turano-Allis, daughter of Emanuel Turano, email message to author, 19 Oct. 2018. She writes: "As the project began, he said Gordon preferred our father's work and sent the other 3 members [assigned to the project] on his personal errands, such as retrieving his dry-cleaning and walking his dog, so our father would and did complete the entire project." The experience seems to have soured Turano on working at SOM and he left to open his own firm. For Weintraub, see Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 161.

Gilbert just invent an affair between a senior partner and a staff member? As Netsch blurted out: "I'm not saying that there wasn't a relationship of a partner and someone else in the office, or some other office at some other time." Or, as he had already said: "I figure, it's past and over with."³⁴ Whatever *it* was, *it* was what he remembered even though it can hardly have been the only grounds for a libel suit.

In revising the book for publication in 1956, Gilbert changed everything about the architectural firm. In the new edition the firm is called "Pierce and Pender" and is more traditional, its offices dowdy and old world. There is no *SOM Bulletin*, no timeclock, and Munson Kirk sits in a "disorderly old cubicle." Kirk has lost his suspenders, too, and in their place is "a bright tartan plaid shirt and black bow tie, unknotted."³⁵ Marion McBride appears, as she is essential to action later in the book, but she works for another firm that is sharing space with Pierce and Pender. The job in Greenwich has changed, too: not for a hospital, it is for a Greenwich Auditorium. In short, so much has changed that it would have been impossible for anyone to pin the story on SOM.

Though what stood out to the partners was the potential for a sexual scandal, can that have been their only concern? How did they feel about the representation of the antiseptic and mechanical New York office; its crude and self-centered chief designer; the cynical sexual and anti-Jewish badinage of its employees; the implication that sexual favors were available and sought; the mistreatment of employees' ideas. The male partners fixated on a little saucy gossip about a "lady architect" and a fellow partner.³⁶ Was that all that mattered?

In the internal SOM memoranda no one pretended that *Native Stone's* representation of life in the New York architectural office was either correct or incorrect. That Bunshaft could be an uncivilized boor was too well-known in New York architectural circles (and probably beyond), but he was a successful boor, as even Gilbert acknowledged. The staff--well, they were just the staff; the liquid lunch was commonplace.³⁷ Within the walls of the firm, indeed of any large architectural offices, using the ideas provided by the staff was what partners did. Kirk had been sneakier than needed but that was all. Perhaps Owings and Netsch thought there was nothing they could do about some of these practices--perhaps there was nothing they wanted to do about them except to keep them out of the public eye.³⁸

34 One inexplicable oddity is the use of the name "Jack Dunbar" in Gilbert's text. There was an identically named employee (1924–2017), in SOM's interiors department.

35 Gilbert, *Native Stone*, 2, 161.

36 From a comparable date, see Lee Wyndham, *Lady Architect* (New York: Julian Messner, 1957). Though Wyndham had evidently read *Native Stone*, her book, though romantic in nature, was intended for a juvenile audience and was much less racy.

37 SOM's reputation in this regard may have been damaged by noted alcoholic partners (Skidmore, Owings, Graham); lunches in New York at the Plaza Hotel and then at the Versailles Restaurant were lengthy. See Nathaniel A. Owings, *The Spaces in Between: An Architect's Journey* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 72.

38 This is ample evidence for Bunshaft's boorish behavior; that he failed to credit his colleagues sufficiently is the contention of Brown, see Adams, "William S. Brown's 'SOM The Formative Years' (1983): A New History of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, no. 78 (September 2019): 254–258. Romantic affairs are harder to prove or disprove. Though Bunshaft was Jewish, and anti-Jewish sentiment within SOM has been reported to me orally by more than one source—it was probably present there as through the larger



Did this novel and its sorry tale resonate for SOM? Did *Native Stone* provoke a rethinking of SOM's public face, a recognition that its social ethic needed to be defined in print, even made clear for clients? Public relations was then in its infancy. Even so, because "SOM" considered itself a brand—one that could be damaged—its defense required muscle.³⁹ With that in mind, after suppressing the book they constructed a counter-narrative.

In January 1958, *Fortune* magazine published a profile of SOM, "The Architects from 'Skid's Row'."⁴⁰ As the first extended portrait of SOM to appear in a national magazine, the article has long been considered the touchstone for understanding the firm in the later 1950s, at the high point of post-war businessman's modernism. The firm took the occasion seriously and though many of the issues in this article have been discussed before, it is interesting to reread the article in the light of Gilbert's book. As Walter Netsch recalled the article in his oral history: "It got to be a pretty interesting story about how the firm really worked and what a partnership meeting was really about. And boy, did the paper clips appear on that draft! That poor guy who wrote it really had the pressure put on him."⁴¹

The most remarkable thing about the article was the large amount of space dedicated to people and the relatively small amount devoted to completed build-

society.

39 There was no public relations department at SOM in these years. Most connections to the magazines were handled by Marion Vanderbilt (New York) and, later, Mildred Steelhammer (Chicago), both of whom also had general secretarial responsibilities as well. Partners often made connections with the editors and there were disputes between the offices over coverage. For a contemporary view of public relations see Asher B. Etkes and Raymond Dodd, "The Architect and Public Relations," *Progressive Architecture* (September 1952): 19; (October 1952): 114; (November 1952): 102–103; (December 1952): 104; (February 1953): 99; (March 1953): 116.

40 "The Architects from 'Skid's Row,'" *Fortune*, no. 57 (Jan. 1958): 137–40, 210, 212–13.

41 Walter Netsch, "Oral History of Walter Netsch," interviewed by Betty J. Blum (Chicago: Art Institute, 1997, revised edition, 2000), 186.

Fig. 3
"S.O.M.'s partners see a lot of each other as they move between the firm's four offices but they seldom see co-founder Louis Skidmore since he retired to Florida two years ago. So last spring they paid him a mass visit." Illustration used on the first page of "The Architects from 'Skid's Row,'" *Fortune*, January 1958, 137. (Photographer: John McDonald, Winter Haven, FL, Negative C-574-4)



ings. There was one group shot of the partners seated around a picnic table at retired co-founder Louis Skidmore's house in Florida (on the opening page), and eleven pictures of employees (partners and staff of different grades) elsewhere. [Fig. 3] Although there was a lengthy side-bar-article on the winning of the commission for the Chase Manhattan tower, New York (1961), in all only three buildings were illustrated.⁴² Camaraderie and lack of hierarchy—that picnic table—provided the focal point for the article and the opening paragraph stressed the team. An ebullient Owings enters the Chicago office and is greeted joyously by partners and staff alike. The atmosphere recalls a sporting victory or a collegial homecoming.

Suddenly a whoop and holler split the air. Past the reception desk charged a short, chunky, bright-eyed man, roaring with laughter, yelling greetings. He looked remarkably like Smokey, the bear in the Boy Scout hat on U.S. conservation posters. It was Nathaniel Owings.... In a moment he was surrounded by a clamorous welcoming group from all levels of the S.O.M. hierarchy....⁴³

Under the headline "Group Design' As Practiced by S.O.M" the article then described how designs progressed through the firm, explaining that there was no such thing as a single designer: the "S.O.M 'designer' is several men."⁴⁴

However, at this point in SOM's development, everyone knew that Gordon

42 For the only comparable profile see Buckminster Fuller, "Fuller's House," *Fortune* 33 (April 1946): 167.

43 "The Architects from 'Skid's Row,'" 137.

44 "The Architects from 'Skid's Row,'" 138.

Fig. 4
Natalie de Blois illustrated along with the project manager and partner-in-charge with the design for the Union Carbide headquarters building. "The Architects from 'Skid's Row,'" *Fortune*, January 1958, 139.

Bunshaft was the undisputed design leader of the firm—feared by underlings, respected (and even treated carefully) by equals: an individualist. He had received accolades for the buildings he claimed as “his” designs: Lever House, Manufacturers Trust, and Connecticut General. He had an unassailable position of authority not only in the New York office, where he was based, but across the firm. Oral histories reveal that he intervened mercilessly on anything within his reach, and his success had been such that he was often called in for consultation by other offices; and even when he was not physically present, designers in the other offices attempted to make their works look like his: his was the “house style.” He backed up his authority with a combination of surly silence and short-fuse irascibility.⁴⁵ From a certain point of view, it was odd that “Skid’s Row,” did not center its story on Bunshaft. In fact, what the article did was show that because he was so important, he created opportunities for others. At Chase Manhattan tower, as recounted in *Fortune*, the major figure was senior designer, Jacques Guiton (1914–2007). Bunshaft, the article stated, was absent in Europe during much of the design process, leaving creative freedom to Guiton. He ran the show working “one day with ten designers, another day with three...” and the article quoted SOM partner Roy O. Allen (1921–92): “No one man designs a building, at least not in this shop.”⁴⁶ According to the article the firm also offered opportunities to women. Among the photographs of the men, there was one woman: Natalie de Blois (1921–2013), described as a married woman. The caption described her as overseeing a five-person team working on the preliminary drawings for the Union Carbide skyscraper on Park Avenue in New York. “This is,” the caption read, “the first skyscraper that Mrs. de Blois has designed,” implying that more were to come and that she was the lead designer.⁴⁷ In her neat suit, looking directly at the camera, she was a model professional. [Fig. 4] Left unsaid was the fact that Bunshaft had final approval (she was the senior designer), that he was to whom the building would ultimately be credited.

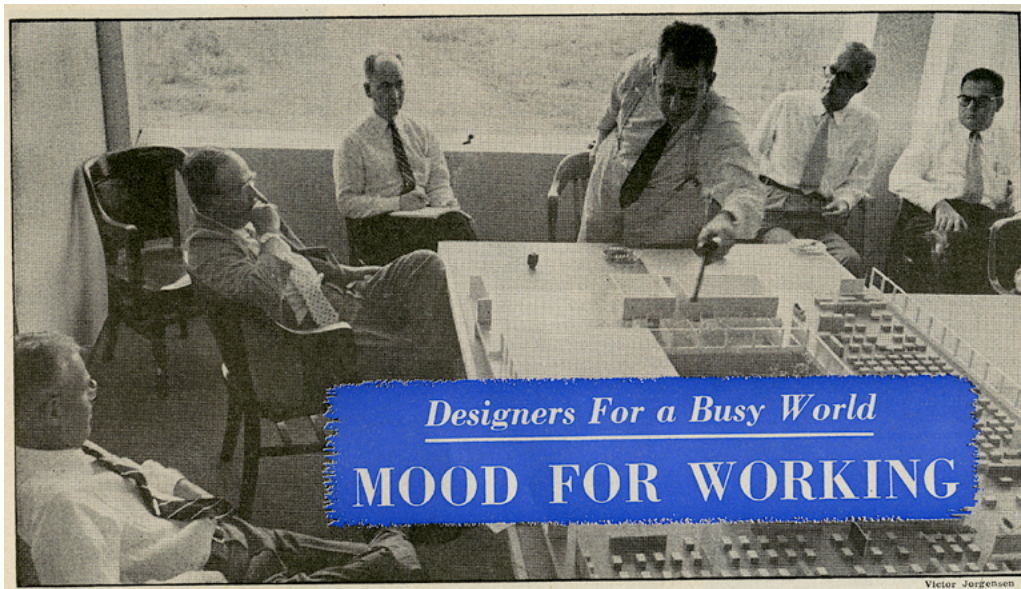
The second feature of the article that stood out was the dissonance of Bunshaft’s voice. When interviewed, Bunshaft emphasized his role: “The partners work as one big team,” he was quoted as saying, “the others take care of job getting, supervision, and all those headaches, and I am in charge of design.” This was not the picture of the social ethic advanced elsewhere in the article though in the succeeding lines, ostensibly Bunshaft’s opinion, he seemed to contradict his previous statements, softening them slightly to favor the collective. These comments are not given as a direct quotation—and from everything we know about what Bunshaft thought, they are probably not opinions he would have voiced at this time.⁴⁸

45 Bunshaft’s evidence that these were “his” buildings came from his combined position as senior design partner and senior administrative partner. This gave him not only control over the design, but also control of the purse strings. This authority was not enjoyed by others at SOM. See Adams, *Gordon Bunshaft and SOM*, chapter 4. On Bunshaft’s moods, see Nicholas Adams, “Gordon Bunshaft: What Convinces is Conviction,” *SOM Journal*, no. 9 (2014): 8–19.

46 “The Architects from ‘Skid’s Row,’” 210.

47 “The Architects from ‘Skid’s Row,’” 139.

48 “The Architects from ‘Skid’s Row,’” 212.



But in a serious discussion [as if everything up to that point had just been playful] Bunshaft is the first to declare that an S.O.M. building is designed by talk, endless communal talk that begins well before the job is actually in the shop and continues through every phrase of the operation. Any number of people contribute to these conversations, including the client and his representatives, the interested S.O.M. partners, and scores of others on various levels in the office. S.O.M.'s planning, in effect, is an exercise in group intelligence.

In short, the article implies that at SOM they had found a way to allow the individual and the collective to coexist.⁴⁹ Was the fictional comity in "Skid's Row" an adequate representation of reality? Not according to Bunshaft.

Angered by the "Skid's Row" article, Bunshaft was the protagonist for the publication of a counterblast, "Designers for a Busy World: Mood for Working," in *Newsweek* magazine, the following year.⁵⁰ Here, he presented himself as the star, the one person responsible for design at SOM. The first page photograph showed him standing over a model of the Connecticut General headquarters, his unlit pipe used as a pointer, leading a discussion between seated white-shirted men with ties, led by Frazier B. Wilde, the president of Connecticut General. [Fig. 5] The article took direct aim at the central arguments of "Skid's Row." Bunshaft was in charge: there was no such a thing as "architecture by committee."

There's no such thing as design by committee. There always has to be one dominant force, someone who comes up with the original design. The group and the conferences come in later, when we hammer the design to pieces to see if it makes sense.⁵¹

49 It may be possible to attribute this favorable statement about the collective to SOM partner William S. Brown who argued the collectivist position within the partnership and opposed Bunshaft's efforts to centralize credit and authority on himself. See Adams, "William S. Brown's 'SOM The Formative Years' (1983)," 254–58.

50 "Designers for a Busy World," 97–100.

51 "Designers for a Busy World," 97.

Fig. 5
Gordon Bunshaft leading discussion at Connecticut General. Frazier B. Wilde, president of Connecticut General, is to the left wearing a jacket. *Newsweek*, 4 May 1959 (photographer: Victor Jorgensen)

If Bunshaft's explosion in *Newsweek* was not what the partners expected—they did not know him very well.⁵² So irritated were they that they considered Bunshaft's severance from the firm, and in a closed-door New-York-partner-only meeting, Bunshaft wept when confronted by their objections and threats of dismissal; he was allowed to keep his position.⁵³ William S. Brown (1910–1999), a fellow partner, who had worked with Bunshaft since 1939, annotated his copy of the *Newsweek* article and made a list of ten points to raise at the meeting. He believed Bunshaft to have strayed from the firm's social ethic—and specifically on the issue of the partnership as a collective: "No longer a partner in spirit. Using his position to promote his own program rather than the firm. It will become more acute as time goes on because he can't curb his appetites." And later: "Having a love affair with himself."⁵⁴

In the end, the first uncirculated edition of a novel and two articles raise useful questions about how architectural firms functioned. *Native Stone* revealed egocentrism at the heart; "Skid's Row" constructed another narrative about the collective; Bunshaft's "Designers for a Busy World," ripped the mask away, again.

Admittedly, the link between *Native Stone* and the *Fortune* article is circumstantial. We cannot go back and ask people what they were thinking: but the sequence of a novel and two magazine articles seems more than coincidental; these are big issues for large architectural firms. Could a firm like SOM, sustain a high quality of design over time without a stubborn individualist? Did high quality design require an authoritarian with celebrity status to sell commissions to clients, critics, and the public?⁵⁵ It was a problem much to the fore in this period. William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), a best-seller on business practice, had emphasized a social ethic, grounded in faith in the group or the team as the source of creativity.⁵⁶ Whyte had lamented the devaluation of individuality and the rise of conformism—all those commuters in their gray flannel suits, he feared, would soon stifle the creativity and flair that gave rise to the corporation in the first place.⁵⁷ SOM modelled the tensions described by Whyte. What was the meaning to all those architectural boxes? Later, in the 1980s, after Bunshaft's retirement, SOM sought to dodge the stresses that came from an internal star

52 Adams, "Brown's 'SOM The Formative Years,'" 267. Unlike *Fortune*, where SOM apparently had significant control over the text (as recounted by Netsch), it seems unlikely that was the case with *Newsweek*. The article quoted an unnamed architect describing SOM as an "overgrown plan factory which produces T-square architecture." And there was no one to censor Bunshaft's off-the-cuff remarks. "The firm did some pretty lousy things when it first got started. I wasn't around then." "Designers for a Busy World," 98.

53 In the musical "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying," (1961) the character J. Pierrepont Finch asks the loyal mailroom clerk, Mr. Twimble, about the role of "a genius' suggestions" in the firm. Twimble replies: "Watch that genius get suggested to resign."

54 Brown's notes and comments on "Designers for a Busy World." (Columbia University, Avery Fine Arts Library Archives).

55 Magalli Sarfatti Larson, *Behind the Postmodern Façade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 114.

56 William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1956), 7.

57 While it might seem that the greater obligation fell on the employees (who could be fired if they stepped out of line), management was also restricted in what it could say. See Nicholas Adams, "Belonging as a Corporate Ideal: Nathaniel A. Owings of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill writes *The Spaces in Between*," in *L'architetto: ruolo, volto, mito*, ed. Guido Beltramini and Howard Burns (Venice: Marsilio, 2009), 323–342. See also, Robert Vanderlan, *Intellectuals Incorporated: Politics, Art, and Ideas Inside Henry Luce's Media Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2010), particularly chapter 4, "Intellectuals Incorporated."

by partnering with noted individuals outside the firm on specific projects: Frank Gehry, Charles Moore, Stanley Tigerman, and Venturi Rauch Scott Brown. SOM partner Bruce Graham, based in Chicago, thought he could introduce these strong outsiders without reverting to Bunshaft's organizational style.⁵⁸ The tension between individual and collectivity, between pyramid and circle (Whyte's metaphor), remains. We should be completely clear however about some things: the social environment of SOM today has nothing in common with life described by Gilbert seventy years ago: women have positions of significant responsibility within the firm; gender, religious, and racial stereotyping is unwelcome and sanctioned. Even so, issues around individuality and collectivity remain. In her assessment of SOM in 1981, the journalist Suzanne Stephens raised the same questions from twenty-five years earlier about the tension between "individuality and anonymity." From where would originality come, she asked?⁵⁹ And, she might have asked further, whether originality and novelty required a single figure to lead the way. It is a subject that has not passed from view.⁶⁰

58 Larson, *Behind the Postmodern Façade*, 114–115.

59 Suzanne Stephens, "SOM at Midlife," *Progressive Architecture*, no. 65 (May 1981): 138–149. Stephens dedicates a significant portion of the article to the issue of "Individuality vs. Anonymity," 141.

60 See, for example, Fred Bernstein, "Not Your Daddy's SOM: Roger Duffy's Quiet Demeanor Masks a Steely Determination to Remake One of Architecture's Behemoths," *Metropolis* 23, no. 4 (Dec. 2003): 118–123, 162–163.

Bibliography

- Adams, Nicholas. "Belonging as a Corporate Ideal: Nathaniel A. Owings of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill writes *The Spaces in Between*," in *L'architettura: ruolo, volto, mito*, edited by Guido Beltrami and Howard Burns. Venice: Marsilio, 2009, 323–342.
- Adams, Nicholas. "Gordon Bunshaft: What Convinces is Conviction," *SOM Journal*, no. 9 (2014): 8–19.
- Adams, Nicholas. "William S. Brown's 'SOM The Formative Years' (1983): A New History of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, no. 78 (September 2019): 254–258.
- Adams, Nicholas. *Gordon Bunshaft and SOM: Building Corporate Modernism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.
- Bernstein, Fred. "Not Your Daddy's SOM: Roger Duffy's Quiet Demeanor Masks a Steely Determination to Remake One of Architecture's Behemoths," *Metropolis* 23, no. 4 (December 2003): 118–123, 162–163.
- "Designers for a Busy World: Mood for Working," *Newsweek*, no. 97 (May 4, 1959): 97–100.
- Ettes, Asher B. and Raymond Dodd. "The Architect and Public Relations," *Progressive Architecture* (September 1952): 19; (October 1952): 114; (November 1952): 102–103; (December 1952): 104; (February 1953): 99; (March 1953): 116.
- Fuller, Buckminster. "Fuller's House," *Fortune* 33 (April 1946): 167.
- Gilbert, Edwin. *Native Stone*. New York: Doubleday, 1955 (corrected second edition, 1956).
- Larson, Magalli Sarfatti. *Behind the Postmodern Façade*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- McQuade, Walter. *Architecture in the Real World: The Work of HOK*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1984.
- Netsch, Walter. "Oral History of Walter Netsch," interviewed by Betty J. Blum (Chicago: Art Institute, 1997, revised edition, 2000).
- Owings, Nathaniel A. *The Spaces in Between: An Architect's Journey*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973.
- Quality in Quantity: Manhattan House, a full block of new New York apartments," *Architectural Forum*, no. 97 (July 1952): 144.
- Radford, Roger Nicholas. "Oral History of Roger Nicholas Radford," interviewed by Sharon Zane (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago).
- Stephens, Suzanne. "SOM at Midlife," *Progressive Architecture*, no. 65 (May 1981): 138–149.
- "The Architects from 'Skid's Row,'" *Fortune*, no. 57 (January 1958): 137–140; 210; 212–213.
- Vanderlan, Robert. *Intellectuals Incorporated: Politics, Art, and Ideas Inside Henry Luce's Media Empire*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2010.
- Whyte, William H. *The Organization Man*. New York: Simon & Shuster, 1956.
- Wyndham, Lee. *Lady Architect*. New York: Julian Messner, 1957.
- "529 Degrees to be Awarded at M.S.C. June 12," *The Herald-Palladium* (Benton Harbor, Michigan), May 25, 1933, 12.

Archival sources

- Edwin Gilbert collection, Howard Gotlieb Archive, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts.
- Papers of Nathaniel A. Owings, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.