Belonging as a Corporate Ideal: Nathaniel A. Owings of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill writes The Spaces in Between (1973)[1]

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ABSTRACT

A study of the autobiography of the American architect Nathaniel A. Owings (1903–1984), founder of the architectural firm Skidmore Owings & Merrill (SOM). In The Spaces in Between: An Architect's Journey (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1973) Owings recounts his life from his youth in Indianapolis, Indiana to the foundation of the firm that bears his name in 1936, to the development and expansion of that firm and its role in the construction of large and important post-war buildings (Lever House, New York, 1952; John Hancock Center, Chicago, 1967) and many others. Using a manuscript copy of the text in the Library of Congress, Washington, the article shows Owings' tortuous experience writing the book. A comparison between manuscript and printed version of the book reveals significant differences that probably result from the intervention of SOM's lawyer, Gross Sampsell. The story Owings wanted to tell was racier and would have been more interesting to readers; the book he published was a compromise, designed to avoid law suits and maintain good relations with colleagues at SOM. Keeping his relation with his colleagues was, in the end, more important to Owings than a spicy narrative.

https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0075/6724
ISSN 2611-0075

KEYWORDS

Nathaniel A. Owings, Louis Skidmore, Skidmore Owings & Merrill (SOM), Gordon Bunshaft; architect's autobiography, corporate life and culture, american corporation, Library of Congress

It is altogether remarkable that the architect Nathaniel A. Owings (1903-1984), one of the founders of the architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) wrote any books at all. He was not a natural author. He was rarely still for any length of time, never learned to spell, and when he did write, ideas poured forth in a jumble without respect for chronology or subject matter.[2] Still, Owings believed in the lasting power of books and so, after completing *The American Aesthetic*[3] his description of America's architectural values, he set to work almost immediately on another.[4] *The Spaces in Between: An Architect's Journey* [Fig. 1] was a juggling act, part autobiography, part company history, and part prophecy: it was not well received.[5] *Publishers Weekly* succinctly caught the major objections to the book: «Essentially it is a salesman's story, replete with promotional style descriptions and many anecdotes, some perhaps apocryphal but heavy with name-dropping».[6] Nevertheless, though the book was not a popular success and is of uncertain value as a work of history, it is a work that reveals an enormous amount about the evolving role of the American architect as an entrepreneurial businessman in the middle decades of the twentieth century. These revelations come in part from the printed book, but they are pushed to greater relief by a series of typescript drafts deposited by Owings in the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.[7] So thoroughly entailed to the organization he founded and that was the source of his fame, Owings was unable to see into print a narrative account of its creation expressed in his own spontaneous words. Lawyers, editors, and the magnetic pull of SOM, all played a role in dimming his natural expression. Comparison between typescript and printed text offers an extraordinarily vivid picture of the Owings' quandary when it came to telling his own story.

In a draft for the book Owings perfectly described the forces that had propelled him and Louis Skidmore to create the firm in 1936. Owings compares himself to a volcano. «Inside, I felt like that: violent, compulsive, driving to put on our own show, to get at the business of building. Jobs, jobs, jobs!».[8] Thirty-three years later and almost seventy years old, Owings now had other things on his mind. He had new interests in urban planning, ecology, and preservation, and he was deeply troubled by some of the architecture his firm was building. So he wanted to tell about the creation of SOM, but he also wanted to explain his new beliefs, demonstrating to his colleagues how the firm that bore his name could now become a critical agent for change.

Making the story more complicated was the fact that Owings' account could not be a tale of architectural design. Despite the subtitle of the book, *An Architect's Journey*, his position as one of the original founders of the firm, and its nominal leader since Skidmore's death in 1960, he had designed none of SOM's great buildings.

> I as an individual cannot point to any major building for which I am

1. For a full list of Owings' publications, see N. Adams, *Skidmore, Owings & Merrill: The Experiment since 1936*, Milano, Electa, 2006, p. 300.

2. In answering a publicity questionnaire from Houghton Mifflin, Owings described his avocations and hobbies as «eating, sleeping, and talking», Questionnaire, 25 August 1972, p. 5. Container 50, Folder: Speeches and Writings File: *Spaces in Between*, Correspondence 1972-1974. Division of Manuscripts and Archives, Nathaniel Alexander Owings Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. Hereafter Owings Papers. Note that I have preserved all Owings' original spellings and those used by his secretary Peg Ireland in the typescript drafts to give a flavor of his unvarnished style.

3. N. A. Owings, W. Garnett, S. Dillon Ripley, *The American Aesthetic*, New York, Harper & Row, 1969.

4. Owings' faith in the book comes through at many points. The book would be his lasting legacy. «As my younger partners created their own legends about SOM, coming up with startling statements as to why Skidmore and I did thus and so, it became clear to me that there would be legends, so I might as well have a hand in their creation», N.A. Owings, *Spaces in Between…*, cit., p. VII. The second paragraph of his introduction also reflects genuine respect for writing. «Believing that the printed word is the most lasting form of human effort…» it starts, *ibid*. Or, as he puts matters in answer to Houghton Mifflin's questionnaire of 25 August 1972, p. 3: «The power of the written word is without question superior to any other form of propaganda…», Owings Papers. His two elderly spinster cousins, Grace and Georgia Alexander, were both writers of a sort. Ironically Georgia had written a noted spelling book for grade school students, called colloquially the Alexander Speller. G. Alexander, *A Spelling Book*, Indianapolis, Bobbs Merrill, 1910 (1906); Grace Alexander was an editor for Bobbs-Merrill and wrote *Judith: a story of the candle-lit fifties*, Indianapolis, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1906, and *Prince Cinderella*, Indianapolis, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1921. Georgia brought him Edmund Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* when, stricken with Bright's Disease following his freshman year at the University of Illinois, he thought he would die. The book had thaumaturgic powers, creating a world in which he could take refuge from what seemed the terrible truth of his illness. N.A. Owings, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

5. Owings began work on *The Spaces in Between* in the fall of 1969 and Houghton Mifflin published the book in May 1973.

6. "Publishers Weekly", 30 April 1973, p. 113.

7. Owings Papers, Containers 49, 50, and 51. Most are in Owings Papers, Container 50, Folder: Speeches and Writings File: Books *Spaces in Between*. It is difficult to evaluate the relationship of all these drafts to the completed book: many are short two or three page narratives, others are full chapters. The main drafts are dated 20 April, 27 November 1970; 168 March, 5 April, 15 May, 1971. Miscellaneous sections are also in Container 51, Folder: Speeches and Writings File: Books *Spaces in Between*, Drafts Miscellany. Missing from the containers is an entire final draft, proof, and galley pages. No typescript shows the handwritten corrections of Owings or others.

> solely responsible. But I can point to individual, brilliant architects like Gordon Bunshaft, Charles Bassett and Walter Netsch who are products of this entity.[9]

So the story he had to tell was an arcane one about architectural practice, about how he and Louis Skidmore had created the environment to nurture great architects and how the institution they had created came to have so great an impact on the American city. Owings recalled a period before World War II when

> the architect was called in at the end of the decision-making process and told what to build, was treated as an artist too dumb to know the facts of the profit-making system . . . Even the location of the project on the ground, or the use to which it would be put, was almost always decided before the architect got into the act. These predecisions cut off most of the areas of creativity. SOM had to earn a place as equal with these decision-makers. To gain the respect of the client, SOM had to be powerful, had to have national coverage.[10]

And now the architectural world had started misusing SOM's creations, as he wrote in a draft:

> In 1955 we were being heralded as knights in shiny armour astride our white chargers, our lances carrying the banners of enlightened urban planning. We enjoyed this a lot. But by 1960 we found that we were leading a parade of taudry giantism.[11]

And marching along in step! In private moments he called SOM an «octopus», a «monster», and a «Frankenstein».[12] His anger at the firm's architectural direction could even emerge when least appropriate. In a public lecture, he had denounced the insensitivity of the Bank of America building in San Francisco (completed 1969) where SOM were the associate architects: «What the hell has that shiney monster got to do with a human being?» he said out loud and the quotation was picked up by the newspapers.[13] So he had created this astonishing powerhouse of an architectural firm, for which he wanted to claim credit, but he now felt deeply ambivalent about what it was doing. Even in the printed book, we can sense Owings' discomfort from the outset. Chapter one begins with an account of a Fourth of July nightmare. In his dream a pinwheel spun out the shapes of the buildings built by SOM in fireworks:

> Park Avenue's twenty-one story Lever House . . . Number One Chase Plaza…the United States Air Force Academy…the green glass shaft of the Crown Zellerbach Building…all these and more the designs of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, architects, planners and engineers; all of these tumbling from the charring pinwheel spokes in a rush of terrifying violence.

And then he awoke, dazed with

8. Owings Papers, Container 50, Folder: Speeches and Writings File: Books *Spaces in Between*, typescript, 15 May 1971, p. 167. This statement is softened to: «I had felt like that too: violent, explosive, driven to get back to the participation in the business of planning some of the basic needs for the family of man on a permanent basis», see N.A. Owings, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

9. *Ibid.*, p. VIII.

10. *Ibid.*, p. IX.

11. Owings Papers, Container 50, Folder: Speeches and Writings File: *Spaces in Between*, typescript 19 March 1971, p. 5

12. In a lecture at Cornell University in October 1976 Owings described SOM as «the KING KONG of Architectural Dynasties» and as a firm built on the "Illusion of the infallibility of the U.S. Industrial Hierarcky"». Owings Papers, Box 56: Folder: Lectures. Writing to his sister Eloise in 1979 he complimented the partners for creating an effective business: «But when it comes to human scale or warmth of human kindness – or simple lovely things – no one can do that in SOM– or if they can arnt allowed to» Letter from Owings to Eloise Owings, 26 August 1979, Louis Skidmore Jr. Collection, Houston, Tx., letter files.

13. Owings Papers, Container 50, Folder: Speeches and Writings File: *Spaces in Between*, Typescript 19 March 1971, p. 6. He received a call the next morning from Rudy Peterson, chairman of the board of Bank of America saying: «Nat, according to the headlines this morning, we read what is either the world's greatest misquote or you were drunk!»

> this miscellany of twentieth-century architecture still falling around me. Was this evidence of forty years of designing constructs simply detritus? What parts were relevant? What was their place? For me these designs were intended to be "form givers," for purposes deeper than mere shelter––but had they turned out that way? Were they any better than what had gone before? If the images I had seen in my nightmare dream reflected in any way a social implication, then I had to ask: where were we headed?[14]

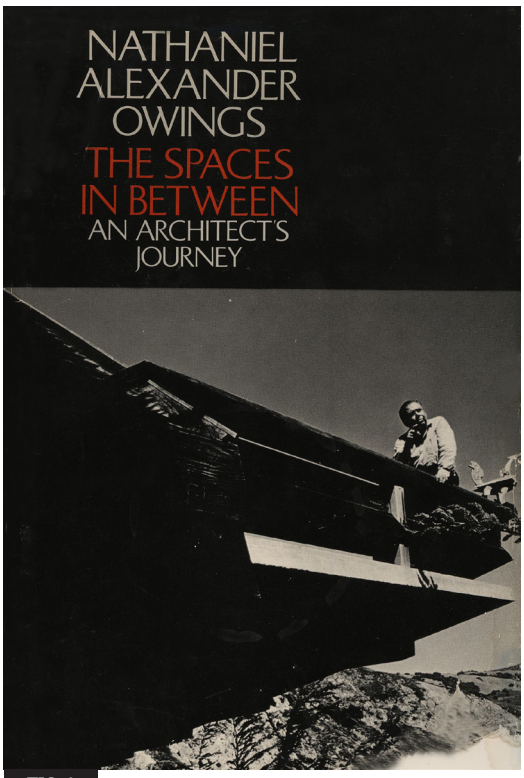

FIG. 1 N. A. Owings, *The Spaces in Between: An Architect's Journey*, Houghton Mifflin, 1973.

Any writer, even a good one, would have a hard time telling this story coherently.

None of these misgivings emerged in Owings' book proposal to Paul Brooks, senior editor of the trade division at Houghton Mifflin in Boston. His idea, he said, was to «write a narrative history on the history of SOM» in the context of the history of American architecture. Using «humor and seriousness» he offered to illuminate «a period of growth and development that would be of interest to many people». But he also suggested that there would be a visionary aspect to the book. He might also project «into the future up to the year 2000» to show what sort of «complete change-over will be necessary in order to match planning with the actual evolving cyclonic development in this country». He proposed to tell the story informally and promised delivery within two years.[15] Brooks' reply was welcoming with only one word of caution: Owings should not try to write a «company history», but should, instead, write about SOM and American architecture «as it appeared to you from your unique vantage point as the founder and head of the firm».[16] Owings embraced the caution and promised to address issues from his personal point of view. In his enthusiasm, he asked: «Is there anything else you will need before a go-ahead signal can be given since this is of enormous interest and fascination to me?»[17] Publisher and author agreed that an outline might be a good thing.

In an early outline draft dated 12 September 1969 he struggled to give the book shape.[18] Typed by Owings himself, the draft outline is marked by his eccentric spellings and erratic typing, preserved here in the transcription. The larger metaphor for the book was biological.

Book 1: The compost from which SOM aparing.; 1900-1929

a. Ruchville Indiana laurance ville Indiana

Indiana Black dirt and Ohio River water

Fine woods and the Alexander speller

an Eagle Scout… th. Ist jamboree the Cathedrals of Eaurope..

14. N.A. Owings, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

15. Nathaniel Owings to Paul Brooks, 18 June 1989, Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract Spaces in Between. Owings also approached John Macrae III at Dutton about possible interest there. McCrae recommended Reinhold and Winston, Praeger, MIT Press, and Viking. Correspondence in the Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*.

16. Paul Brooks to Owings, 21 July 1969, Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*.

17. Owings to Brooks, 25 July 1969, Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*.

18. Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*.

A R.R. brakeman and a restless mind.

c. Bradley Teck .. world war I. Oxford .. MIT Roce foreign Schollarship.

d. Eloise Owings.. the polination occurs.. Nepotism in flower.

Book 2; Root trunck and branch .. 36---45

S&O. SOM and 5 partners .. Master builders ..Wrigles chewing gum

Book ~~3~~. [possibly replaced by] 4. Myrical Fruit –By your ~~fruit~~ [replacement illegible] shall ye be known

S.O.M. Builds.

a. Oak Ridge Tennessee. Cloak and dagger

b. A crap game at the Xhicago Club..Leverhouse is born.

d. Chase Manhatten Plaza (A [followed by word above the line] sparks

Wallstreets 1oo Billion Dollar Renweal)

[ellipsis]

Book 4 [replaced by] 3 The Modern Medeci.

Rufus Dawes..Chcago Century of Progress.

Jack Heinze ..a founding father..from a kitchen to a world response

Jd Zelerback .. San Franciscos founderbuider. 1950 raineasance. CZ.Bldg.

~~David Rockefeller. Chase~~

~~Lawrence Rockefellr.~~ open space… muana Kea.

The outline concludes with a couple of paragraphs, drawn from a recent lecture, setting out his current beliefs.

> Commerce and industry are running out of new field to conquor. Dollar inflation turns their eye to raw land as a stable hedge. Ignorant of the first principlesof land conservation ecology; trained to demand his yield quick returns; the trend is far more dangerous than any heretofore since the Virgin forests were cut down.
>
> Alternative to disater. Establish the Environment as a first class Citezen. One way would be to the follow the examples of theEssenes and go underground 2with our master plans for utopia.

In his next draft (undated) he gave his work a provisional title "Confessions of a bad Architect" and he now identified three parts to the book:[19]

Book1. ROOT TRUNK AND BRANCH = S.O.M. 1900-1940

Book 2. The Fruit OF THE TREE -1940-1970

Book3; The TREE AGAINST THE Whirlewind – 70 to the year

19. Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*.

2000

On the same sheet he also played with another title: "Autobiography of a labourer in the Garden" as a way of strengthening the biological motif allowing him to shift naturally into the theme of ecology and environmentalism at the end of the book.

The final draft lacked a title but was carefully typed (not by Owings), correctly spelled, and consisted of a mixture of numbered points and short two-hundred word narrative tales designed to give the flavor that the story would have when completed.[20] In the last section of the book, entitled "Come the Whirlwind", Owings briefly raised his anxiety about SOM. A final section, chapter four, had the dark title "A Dim View of the Future".[21]

On 2 October 1969 Brooks, cheerfully signaled his approval. «I have never read a more enticing prospectus. It all seems so alive and immediate that I can scarcely believe the book does not already exist. No doubt it does ––in your head».[22] Owings received the contract 15 October 1969, signed it shortly thereafter, and set to work in earnest.[23] But how to write it?

Owings' first instinct was to adapt the techniques of the large-scale architectural firm to the task. Starting in September 1969 and over the next year he wrote to a wide range of friends and associates, explaining his book project and asking for their impressions of him and of SOM. He wrote to old friends from Indiana as well as to his surviving relatives, former clients involved in the construction of Oak Ridge, Tennessee (Major Edward Block, Colonel T.T. Crenshaw, Captain J.T. Ware) and early clients (Frank Armour of the Armour Meat Packing Company and Jack Heinz II of Heinz Foods). He wrote to former employees (Ambrose Richardson, Tallie Maule, and Karl Anderson), as well as William S. Brown, a former partner, asking for accounts of the early days.[24] He wrote to former secretaries (Ruth Allen, Eloise Connelly Little) and to old acquaintances from the Century of Progress Exposition of 1933. He even wrote to the developer George Fry whose gambling debts he had absolved and who, in exchange for Owings' generosity, had steered SOM to Charles Luckman and the commission that ultimately produced Lever House in New York. The results of these inquiries varied. Some recipients begged off or asked for clarification. Others replied. He especially sought help from Mildred Steelhammer, the long-serving (and long-suffering) administrative secretary in Chicago asking her to go to the warehouses and pull out material covering the years 1936-1946 and then to type up the «special events you can think of that have stuck in your mind».[25]

Houghton Mifflin received a draft chapter early in February 1970. Brooks assigned editors Richard McAdoo and Ruth Hapgood to work directly with Owings. Hapgood quickly identified the major problem with his text.[26] He had, she thought, little sense of his audience. She wrote a memo to Brooks that was forwarded to Owings: «He might find it useful not to have

20. Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*.

21. He labeled the chapters "1. The crossroads. 2) SOM – Octupus or crusader? Creator or mass producer? An architectural General Motors or a monastic order? 3) The calm – my new marriage develops the theory of the Matriarchy. 4) I become a conservationist first, an architect second; open space takes the lead; I relate tentative encounters". Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contrac*t Spaces in Between*.

22. Brooks to Owings, 2 October 1969, Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*.

23. The contract is dated 15 October 1969. Owings consulted with Gross Sampsell, the lawyer at SOM, before signing the contract. Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*.

24. Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*.

25. All copies of letters are in Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*. The letters are dated mid-September 1969 through early January 1970. The letter to Mildred Steelhammer is dated 6 November 1969.

26. I am grateful to Ruth Hapgood, Lincoln, Massachusetts, for her recollections of working with Nathaniel Owings, telephone interview 25 July 2006 .

in the back of his mind some a faceless 'gentle reader' but some specific one person––someone sympatico [sic: spelling] but totally ignorant of his whole story». And, she wondered aloud, «if he can get used to a medium that unrolls in time rather than standing in space? They [readers] must follow him from sentence to sentence along a logical track, one idea after another; expectation raised, expectation satisfied. He is so full of his story, bits of it bud out where they shouldn't. Telling so a stranger can follow will help here too».[27] Owings worked throughout the spring of 1970 and in May sent off a revised version of chapter one but his editors were still not satisfied. The chapter was too long and too choppy. McAdoo wrote: «I'm afraid I find the introduction of Big John [John Hancock Center, Chicago] in the beginning pages of the manuscript somewhat confusing».[28] In August Owings sent off a revised version of chapter one, revised but still not satisfactory. The process of writing had turned out to be more difficult than he had thought and Owings, now thoroughly engaged in the process, described McAdoo and Hapgood as «the most extraordinary psychologists. I wish my mother had known how to handle me as well as you two do. Your tacit approval of my foregoing efforts makes my own dissatisfaction more poignant». He was desperately searching for a way to construct the story. As he wrote to McAdoo at the end of August 1970: «I am pushing ahead on all fronts like a blind squid, thrashing up the past and the near present to a fury of inconsequential information».[29]

By October 1970 Owings had sent in enough material (albeit much of it unsatisfactory) so that Hapgood and McAdoo could make a number of highly specific recommendations. Hapgood wrote Owings in October 1970 reminding him to just tell the story. «Not some slick jazzy slam-bang book that is all I-I-I, but not a straight philosophical expository work with no first person in it either. You are telling the story of a firm and your part in it, of the growth of some architectural ideas and your part in them, of the genesis of some saving ideas for the modern world and your part Marshin them. And the operative word as far as technique goes is story. This doesn't mean that you can't stop along the way and ponder the meaning of the happening–– in fact, to be able to share your ideas about these subjects is part of the special value of your doing this book. But it does give you a chronology, and an approach, and a pace and suspense».[30] Hapgood returned chapter two with the caution that too much was happening in it. «To my mind», she added, «Oak Ridge is a perfect little unit by itself».[31] And McAdoo wrote to Owings in May 1971 describing the chapters as a «series of magazine essays» with the account of the construction of Oak Ridge as the model.[32]

Finally, in October 1971 Owings delivered a manuscript about which Hapgood and McAdoo «were enthusiastic at the sight of the whole shape at last». She enjoyed the fireworks opening («a real 'feu de joie.'») and found «the book very exciting, and exciting in the way I hoped it would go in the beginning, being of a journey of an artist at work, rather

27. Hapgood to Brooks, 20 February 1969. Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*.

28. McAdoo to Owings, 29 June 1970. Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*. The material on the John Hancock Tower (Big John) appears in Chapter 4 in *The Spaces in Between*, somewhat confusingly placed as an introduction to a discussion of the Century of Progress Exposition, 1933.

29. Owings to McAdoo, 28 August 1970. Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*.

30. Hapgood to Owings, 30 October 1970. Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*.

31. Hapgood to Owings, 3 November 1970. Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*.

32. McAdoo to Owings, 15 May 1971. Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*.

than being reminiscences of a famous man or a history of a firm. It is on the other hand the most difficult and soul-searching and elusive and demanding book to write».[33] Hapgood and McAdoo had brought the book to completion, more or less.

33. Hapgood to Owings, 15 October 1971. Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*.

How had Owings actually constructed the book that they now had in front of them? How did the man whose spelling and paragraph structure bear more relation to an early draft of James Joyce's Finegans Wake than to a conventional magazine article turn out a text that met the editors' standards? The key figure seems to have been Owings' secretary, Peg Ireland, working out of San Francisco. Owings followed a standard process during the winter of 1970. He typed up his thoughts single-spaced on sheets of paper and then read them into a tape recorder, editing as he went. This process might be repeated before the tape then went off to Peg Ireland, who transcribed Owings' tapes producing double-spaced two or three page "vignettes". Owings then corrected these versions.[34] Ireland turned Owings' grammar into Standard English, linking ideas in typescript that Owings was only able to get down in disconnected form. While a comparison between the typescripts in the Library of Congress and the published version reveals how much linguistic adjustment his editors had to undertake (and Ireland's own spelling was not perfect), perhaps the most interesting changes have to do with the opinions Owings dropped from preliminary typescripts to final printed version. A thorough account of these changes would be tedious, but the broader picture is illuminating. Where the book is by and large balanced and even tempered, the typescript can be quite scabrous; where the book seems always to be skating around issues, the typescript comes to the point quickly and directly; where the book often sounds like a public relations blurb, in the typescript one hears the timbre of Owings' own voice and expression.

34. Owings described her as indispensable. She has, he wrote, «the patience of a saint and the precise ability to transmit my ideas, even though they are not in writing. A kind of God-given computer, she has no weaknesses». Houghton Mifflin questionnaire, 25 August 1972, p. 4. Owings Papers, Container 50, Folder: Speeches and Writings File: *Spaces in Between*, Correspondence 1972-1974.

For example, a typescript account[35] of the formation of Skidmore and Owings at Paddington Station in 1935 dated 18 March 1971 contains a number of phrases not found in the printed version.[36] For example, the typescript gives a vivid picture of some of the differences between the Owings and the Skidmores.

35. Owings Papers, Container 50, typescript, 18 March 1971, p. 1.

36. N.A. Owings, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-67

> There was Emily [Owings' wife] and I: threadbare, broke, quite ready for home after nearly a year away, overlapping a month with Eloise [Skidmore's wife and Owings' sister] and Skid following the route marked by the Tudor homes of rural England of Skid's book. They sat there, their American prosperity still glistening, their wallets fat, their tipping gross. Whenever I could I subtracted a substantial portion of those tips from under the plate, partly to maintain our prestige in the eyes of the waiters and partly to bolster my waning funds.

Owings sense that it was somehow foreordained that he and Skidmore would enter into architectural practice together contains the following

interjection, eliminated from the printed text.

> I always claimed, half in jest, that anyone who said they knew what Skid was thinking was either lying or drunk.

And the vision of the modernized medieval guild of builders within which they would practice is described in quite different terms in the typescript. Particularly noteworthy is the stress on novelty.

> Skid and I would form a protective blanket, a medieval concept of the master builders within which we would take as our nucleus, our goal, the designing and building of structures that had never been built. We would attempt to build a perfect solution within the golden circle of improbability and we would tackle all the areas where man had specialized himself into complex requirements in his ever more involved search for habitat and the ancillary purposes of worship, trade and festival. We would find brilliant young designers and give these fresh, urgent, passionate youngsters a chance to design their own ideas into a hospital or a school or a church before they had been smacked down by the plan factor, by those who said you could not build a hospital until you had done one. Nonsense, we said. Our nucleus would be a small, compact satellite with a backup of research, programming, management of finances and the client. We would try to isolate out and introduce in the concrete structure pure design, undiluted by pragmatism. We could have a series of satellite teams.

Each sentence could have been eliminated for any number of reasons––a developing clarity of expression, an episode that reflected poorly on the author, or its irrelevance to the subject at hand.

Owings' personal animus was carefully eliminated from the book. His account of the opening of the SOM office in San Francisco[37] contains one reference to the architect Gardner A. Dailey[38] an associate in the renovation of the Hotel Del Monte at Pebble Beach, California. In one draft (3 May 1971), Owings spilled his anger at the aristocratic and well-connected Dailey whom, he accused of blocking Owings' access to high society in San Francisco. As Owings wrote: «Any male San Franciscan who isn't a member of the Pacific Union Club standing in ornate elegance on the top of Nob Hill, or who wasn't a member of a Camp at the Bohemian Club, was a virtual social outcast – or a Jew».[39] Elsewhere Owings' colorful opinions are blanched. John Merrill, the third of the original founder-partners appears only as a shadowy presence in the printed book. Merrill's brother Edward and son John also worked for SOM and together the three Merrills, Owings writes in the book, «furnished a powerful additive, contributing continuity, integrity and hardest of all to define, a kind of homely but unspectacular dependability, unspectacular but irreplaceable».[40] The draft of 15 May 1971 adds a significant detail. «As the saying goes, John Merrill couldn't have given away red flannel underwear to freezing Eskimos,

37. *Ibid*, pp. 138-41.

38. *Ibid*, p. 140.

39. *Owings Papers*, Container 50, typescript, 4 May 1971, p. 1.

40. N.A. Owings, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

but put in charge of a job with a specific program, he was invaluable as Partner in Charge».[41]

Absent too from the book is Owings' own anxious sense of inferiority. In organizing the outline in the fall of 1969 he included what he called "Vinyettes" (vignettes). One reads as follows:

> I have often thought If I had had the talen of genius..and it does take genius..the education and the patience to have been a great Architectural designer..such as ~~Gordon Bunshaft~~ [corrected in pencil, possibly with the name of "Walter Netsch"] that SOM never would have been formed. The creative compulsion that is in men could only be consumed by a mass affort a Master builder technique.. and so this might as well be called the confessions of a bad architect. Without sufficient education with time running out as to need for income and with no patience to wait for results I turned to improvise.[42]

In one typescript account of the formation of Skidmore and Owings at Paddington Station he puzzles about what he will contribute to the partnership?[43]

> Skid was the decanted essence, bold in contents, all architecture. My mind was on something else. . . . I was concerned about what I was salesman, huckster, manure spreader? I had ideas, yes – boiling over with them. My mind turned ideas into three, often four, sometimes five dimensions. I had a built in converter of ideas into action somewhere making what I thought buildable. The problem with me was the detail. Excited impatient, there never was enough time. . . . So what did I have to bring Skid or Eloise? The idea of group practice. Well, it just could be that it was the other way around. Perhaps I was bringing Skid to group practice. Perhaps the triangle would need all three legs on which to stand. Perhaps we could find a way to create great design, distill the essence like the Athenian Erechtheion and market it on a volume basis, a Roman Forum or aqueduct. That it could not be done never entered my head.

Nothing of the kind finds its way into the printed version.

One significant omission from *The Spaces in Between* is any real sense of how relations were managed between the partners in the SOM offices and how work developed within them. In the printed book, each colleague has his qualities of genius brought to life, «like kernels of wheat in the Egyptian tombs, seeds of genius needing only soil and water and a benign climate to bring them to fruition».[44] The organization was a «modern 'Gothic Builders' Guild'" and an "august brotherhood».[45] Only very occasionally in the printed book do the real tensions that we now know ran like hot lava through the offices emerge.[46] Owings reports an exchange between Gordon Bunshaft and Chuck Bassett that concludes

41. *Owings Papers*, Container 50, typescript, 15 May 1971, p. 145.

42. Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*

43. Owings Papers, Container 50, typescript, 18 March 1971, p. 4.

44. N.A. Owings, *op. cit.*, p. 269

45. *Ibid*, p. 66, p. 267.

46. On life in the Chicago office, see N. Adams, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-36.

with Bunshaft telling Bassett that he has "no future in the firm". But the episode is concluded happily. «It was only a year later … that Bunshaft proposed Bassett for partnership».[47] And elsewhere Owings wonders out loud whether SOM is strong enough to resist the «abrasive power drive» of Bruce Graham.[48] And at another point Owings admits that he could irritate his colleagues, as happened with his cover story in *Time* magazine, «sufficiently to cut out normal communications for months».[49] What they said about this breach is left to silence alone. The typescripts provide a breath of reality.

In one draft Owings explained his ideas for the development of the Chicago office of SOM. They mesh entirely with the picture he has already provided of a man uncertain of his abilities.

> I evolved my own cycle and my own series of satellite individuals revolving with me around the areas of influence in the Chicago office. With the perspective of distance I could see the disadvantages of a dominant design leader like Gordon Bunshaft and chose to develop a "stable" of designers: Ambrose Richardson, Walter Netsch, Harry Weese. I suppose there was something in the idea with one strong designer to deal with, he became the dictator. With two, I could divide.[50]

Owings relations with Bunshaft, in fact, were never good. Bunshaft was, in essence, Skidmore's man and later in life he often expressed openly his disdain for Owings.[51] In the printed book Owings' description of Bunshaft is evenhanded. He is «fiercely intolerant and at times arrogant», but he is «always sincere in his commitment to his personal design ethic». He is, Owings says, «hot to handle» and quotes Bunshaft: «The partners work as one big team. The others take care of all the headaches and I am in charge of design», a quotation already in the public realm.[52] Still, as Owings notes evenhandedly, «he can be as gentle as a dove when he chooses».[53] In end Owings acknowledges rather blandly that Bunshaft has many sides to his character. But Owings actually had a more acute view of Bunshaft expressed in typescript, one that revealed his difficult combination of brute strength and willfulness.[54]

> Basic, primitive, Bunshaft soon established territory within which no competitive designer dared to enter. Possessive, egocentric, he consistently claimed credit for brilliant performances attributable to all four [Bunshaft, Brown, Severinghaus, Cutler, the four New York partners in addition to Skidmore]. He was in favor of group practice as long as he, as an individual, was the creative master architect and any other role was not for him. Though he was strangely dependent upon the other three and whenever he was faced with a choice of going on his own and becoming independently famous, or staying with us and exercising a certain degree of anonymity, he always chose group practice for its benefits and comforts – and

47. N.A. Owings, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

48. *Ibid*, p. 266.

49. *Ibid*, p. 270.

50. *Owings Papers*, Container 50, typescript, 31 March 1971, Chapter 7, p. 3.

51. For example, he described Owings as a «mere salesman»: *Oral History of Gordon Bunshaft*, interviewed by Betty J. Blum, Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2000, p. 49.

52. *The Architects from 'Skid's Row'*, in "Fortune", January 1958, No. 57, pp. 137-40; 210, 212, 215. The quotation reads: «The partners work as one big team––the other take care of job getting, supervision, and all those headaches, and I am in charge of design». See *ibid.*, p. 212.

53. N.A. Owings, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75.

54. *Owings Papers*, Container 50, typescript, 12 April 1971, p. 2

tried to break the anonymity.

In another typescript draft (3 May 1971) entitled *Workers in the Garden – Invisible Partners*, Owings took up the relations between Bunshaft and Netsch. Bunshaft he called the «Great Classicist». In the New York office there is «no second, no Number Two. There are no second Bunshafts». Owings writes that he calls Netsch «the Professor» and his libraries at the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, the University of Iowa are, in Owings' opinion, «simply brilliant».[55]

> Labeled by Gordon Bunshaft as atrocious architecture, I responded in Netsch's defense with the comment that without Netsch's architecture, SOM would be dead and buried if we had to depend on Bunshaft's baroque, obsolete Classicism. I still had a way of keeping myself popular in the firm with comments like that.

In a split second we learn more about Owings' role in the offices than we ever learn in the well-tailored printed text of *The Spaces in Between*.[56] We are suddenly witness to a conversation between the architects: thrust and counterthrust. Whatever its value as historical source material, this exchange is far more compelling as a narrative than the balanced distribution of favors in the pages of *The Spaces in Between*.[57] Owings' frustrations with Gardiner Dailey, passed over in the book and spoken in the typescript, tell us more about Owings' humble Midwestern Unitarian background than all his descriptions of his Mother's pious reading habits.

When proof went out to magazine editors for possible serialization there was interest from the local newspapers where Owings had lived (Chicago, San Francisco) but national publications were not interested. C. Michael Curtis, just beginning his career at *The Atlantic* was particularly scathing. «We see this as a good opportunity gone awry. Just when we ought to hear something specific and eye-opening about architecture, we're flooded with trivia about social life among the rich and famous».[58] And when the reviews came out they reflected a similar disappointment with the book. Old friends like Douglas Haskell, formerly the editor of "Architectural Forum", and Wolf von Eckhart were supportive, but generally there was silence.[59] Roger Jellinek in the "New York Times Book Review" lamented that Owings' own role was «quite out of focus» in the book, «which collapses into a nostalgic scrapbook (the title is apt) about his colleagues, his second marriage . . . his semi-retirement to Big Sur». Owings' «unrelenting good humor and slight company anecdotes are no substitute for what the reader wants to known: the details of how this giant enterprise works, why S.O.M. outperformed its rivals and what happens in the drafting room».[60] Mary Holtz Kay in *The Nation* lamented Owings' closed-mouth style: «Those who know, don't say; those who say, don't know. Nathaniel Alexander Owings, prime candidate for category one, knows, but isn't saying. It's disappointing to have so few disclosures from the Owings of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, the architectural

55. *Owings Papers*, Container 50, typescript, 3 May 1971, pp. 1-2.

56. Owings somewhat resented Bunshaft's success at Lever House («weighted down with medals») and the fact that no one seemed interested in his role in its creation which he told, at least partially, in N.A. Owings, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-10. In one poignant moment in the typescript he writes. «There was a movie taken day by day by Lever of the progress of the construction which was put together so that one could see the building rise in a fifteen minute film. I found it more interesting to run the film backwards. I liked the idea of taking the building down before one's eyes». Owings Papers, Container 50, Folder: Speeches and Writings File: Books *Spaces in Between*, typescript, 19 March 1971, p. 11.

57. Relations with clients are also carefully edited. The history of the Rockefeller resort at Mauna Kea is one of many examples. Relations between Bassett and Rockefeller so deteriorated that Bassett never visited the completed building, an element of the story overlooked in Owings' account of construction, N.A. Owings, *op. cit.*, pp. 169-73. Bassett notes: «It's a gorgeous building. I've never gone back since it was finished, for reasons I am not about to go into here. I had a very bad taste in my mouth about the job». See E.C. Basset, B.J. Blum, *Oral History of Edward Charles Bassett*, Chicago, The Art Institute of Chicago, 2006, p. 98.

58. Owings Papers, Container 50, Folder: Speeches and Writings File: Books *Spaces in Between*, Correspondence 1972-1974, 10 November 1972.

59. For Haskell's review, see "Architecture Plus", November 1973, No. 1, p. 14. There were generous reviews in "Chicago Sun Times", 20 May 1973; "The Arizona Republican", 27 May 1973; "The San Francisco Chronicle", 28 May 1973; "Albuquerque Journal", 27 May 1973; "Park Forest Star", 7 June 1973; "Indianapolis Star", 8 July 1973; "Lincoln Nebraska Sunday Journal", 8 July 1973; "Fort Wayne News Sentinel", 28 July 1973; "The New Mexican", 29 July 1973; "Lafayette Journal and Courier", 24 August 1973; "The Savannah News Press", 5 November 1973 among others. See Owings Papers, Container 51, Folder: Speeches and Writings File: Books *Spaces in Between*, Reviews.

60. R. Jellinek, *American Architect as Ephemeralist, Witness, Memoirist*, in "New York Times Book Review", August 1973, No. 26, pp. 444-45.

handmaidens of big business». The book, she concluded, «intrigues more for what it omits than for what it says».[61]

Why did Owings' book up end up being so tame? Owings' message about ecology and the protection of the environment might have resonated well with audiences in the early 1970s as these subjects gained national attention under the impact of writers like Jane Jacobs, Rachel Carson, Wallace Stegner, and others. But the ecological message came wrapped tightly in a self-serving history of SOM, a firm that was increasingly under attack for its anti-environmental architecture.[62] Owings might have compensated with a lively tale of its early struggles or might have offered some revelations along the way, but in creating an organization that prized anonymity, Owings was already stepping over the line by writing a book about SOM that highlighted his achievement. Whoever sucked the life out of the typescript and replaced it with banal promotional prose had the social fabric of the partnership at heart, at least, if not its financial security: a lost client was in no one's interest; a lawsuit over a stray remark would be costly. The culprit may have been Owings himself, who, given a chance to reflect on the typescript, have thought better of it. More probably, SOM's lawyer, Marshall Grosscup Sampsell, read the entire manuscript (there is direct evidence that he read sections) and suggested or mandated changes. Owings, like all the founding partners, greatly admired Sampsell whose nickname was "Gross" («Gross is orderly where I am not, calm where I am not, cautious where I am not») and the few changes ordered by Sampsell recorded in the Owings Papers in the Library of Congress suggest that given a chance he could wield a heavy hand. He was, indeed, eager to see the manuscript and check it over.[63] But whoever played the role of editor is only of tangential concern: Owings had been trimmed. There is no record of any regret (or any gratitude) for the changes. All that exists in the Library of Congress are his draft typescripts. Versions marked up or corrected by others are not there.

In the end, it is the entire file of Owings' texts, both the typescripts and the printed book, that together tell us about the role and face, if not the myth, of the twentieth century architect. Surrounded by collaborators (who did the hard day-to-day work), prudent advisers (to help avoid lawsuits and ensure future financial stability), and wealthy clients (with their own egos and their connections to future commissions), the modern architect in the corporate world lives in a world of contingency. What right did Owings have to express himself freely, putting fellow partners at risk? Once he had created the idea of SOM as a guild and subscribed to the myth of the Gothic brotherhood, no value exceeded "belonging". John Ruskin's sentimental ideals about the middle ages blended with the values of William Whyte's «organization man».[64] For guildsman and organization man "belonging" was more important than «personal expression».[65] Autonomy existed only in the typescripts he carefully deposited for later historians in the Library

61. J. Holtz Kay, *Books on Architecture*, in "The Nation", 12 January 1974, No. 218, pp. 57-58. Kay also wrote the review for the "Christian Science Monitor", 20 June 1973, in which she wrote «Owings is unable or unwilling to reveal the private self behind the public architect. He opens no corporate closets either, giving too slight an accounting of what pushed Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill to the top».

62. See, for example, A. L. Huxtable, *Anti-Street, Anti-People*, in "The New York Times", 10 June 1973.

63. N.A. Owings, *op. cit.*, p. 70. See Sampsell's letter to Owings, 22 June 1970. To Owings line «At best Oklahoma is a desolate, arid waste of red gumbo», Sampsell corrected him: «Large areas of Oklahoma are desolate, arid wastes of red gumbo». He went on to point out that Oklahoma also contains areas with lakes and rivers. Owings Papers, Container 49, Folder: Correspondence and Contract *Spaces in Between*. See his comments 13 March 1972 that end with: «I am looking forward to a further look at your manuscript when you think the time is right». Owings Papers, Container 50, Folder: *Spaces in Between*, Correspondence 1972-1974. Sampsell was not the only lawyer who might have looked over the manuscript. Ruth Hapgood, in a telephone interview (25 July 2006), reminded me that in addition to changes introduced at the editorial level the manuscript would be shown to sales and advertising as well as passing through copyediting and that galleys would be shown to Houghton Mifflin's lawyers as well. Since the Owings Papers do not contain any galley proofs we cannot know exactly when changes were made. It seems like that the Owings Papers contain the text as written by Owings before others requested changes.

64. See, W. H. Whyte, *The Organization Man*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1956, pp. 36-51. Whyte describes the work of Elton Mayo, a professor of industrial research at the Harvard Business School. Mayo's conclusion, highlighted by Whyte, was that «the feeling of security and certainty derives always from assured membership of a group». *Ibid.*, p. 39. In place of the clear social hierarchy of the Middle Ages, the modern corporation offered «belongingness», a quality SOM offered in abundance. In that respect SOM was a kind of utopian community. To realize its benefits (comradeship, efficient practice, wealth) one would have to make sacrifices. Owings' printed book was one such sacrificial offering.

65. Compare, for example, the wholly unchained autobiography of M. Lapidus, *Too Much is Never Enough*, New York, Rizzoli, 1996. Published when he was past 90 years old, it is charmingly frank, at times exposing his own foolishness, even some of the less savory tricks of his trade. Why not? Most of his former clients were dead and he and his son had divided their architectural partnership in 1975.

of Congress where one may find out more about Owings and SOM than he could print. The tension between book and typescript are the "spaces in between", and form Owings true face and the complicated legacy of the business of architecture in twentieth century America.

Postscript (January 2017): In October 2016, through the kindness of former SOM partner John Winkler, I had the pleasure of meeting Philip Purcell, who succeeded Sampsell as the lawyer for SOM. I discussed with Purcell the disparity between manuscript and printed text. As a young lawyer, Purcell had first alerted Sampsell to problems in the text as they related to a description of Bruce Graham. In an electronic communication (18 October 2016) Purcell wrote: «I know that Gross read all the draft chapters…and made comments to Nat who looked to Gross for guidance in many things….Gross could be very persuasive, but he was not an assertive personality like Graham or Bunshaft in any way. He was a respected, old world patrician Nat looked up to. Gross most likely asked Nat if he really wanted to say what he said and let Nat ruminate about the suggestion. How many times that might have happened I have no idea».