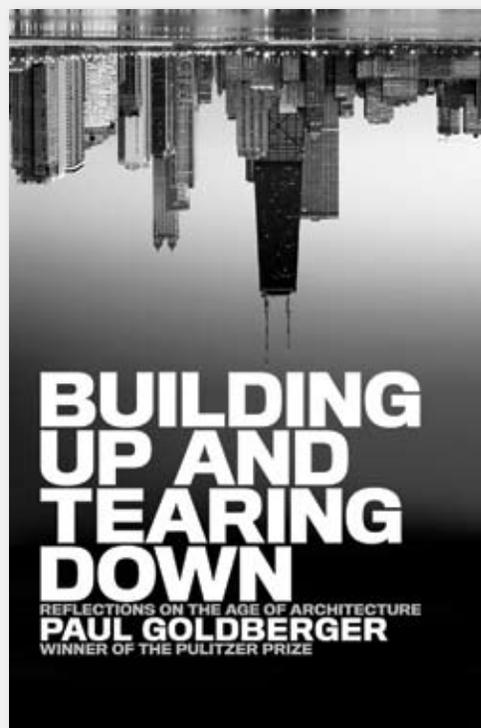


Reviewed by Mark Lamster

The Goldberger Standard

The critic's
collected works
pay tribute to
architecture's
raucous boom
years.



BUILDING UP AND TEARING
DOWN: REFLECTIONS ON THE AGE
OF ARCHITECTURE

By Paul Goldberger
Monacelli Press, New York
320 pages, \$35.00 (hardcover)

Architecture, at once the most solid and stolid of media, generally does not conjure flights of melancholy. But a certain wistfulness nonetheless envelopes *Building Up and Tearing Down: Reflections on the Age of Architecture*, a new collection of essays from critic Paul Goldberger. The book, an assemblage of Goldberger's writings over the past decade—primarily his “Sky Line” columns for *The New Yorker*—serves as a kind of warm-hearted cenotaph for an era of architectural exuberance now since passed. (Another volume, the cri de coeur *Why Architecture Matters*, is also out this fall from Yale University Press.)

With his privileged perch and insider's perspective, Goldberger was ideally suited to chronicle this indulgent period, and his deft narrative style makes for easy reading. Indeed, his prose has always been the literary equivalent of a club chair: comfortably genteel, at home in any situation. In the book's introduction, he approvingly cites the 19th-century poet Matthew Arnold,

who characterized criticism as “a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.” To this, Goldberger adds his own injunction that “a critic who does not love his field can not last long in it.”

The knock on Goldberger is that he has always loved his chosen field a bit too much, and a bit too indiscriminately. A quarter of a century ago, Michael Sorkin famously lambasted him in *The Village Voice* as a toadying stooge of the architectural establishment. “Why Goldberger Is So Bad” was the title of his jeremiad. Goldberger, then the house critic of *The New York Times* and no slouch himself in the quip department, responded that Sorkin was “to thoughtful criticism what Ayatollah Khomeini is to religious tolerance.” Ah, the good old days.

There isn't so much reason for anger now. In 1997, Goldberger abdicated his position at the paper of record to revive *The New Yorker's* dormant “Sky Line” column, a longtime franchise of the magazine that was written for some 30 years, beginning in the early 1930s, by Lewis Mumford. Mumford was a champion of the common man who liked to view things from the ground, but Goldberger's concerns have always aligned more closely with the magazine's affluent demographic, and he has expressed them from a safely elevated

perspective. If Mumford was the “sidewalk critic,” Goldberger is surely the “co-op critic.”

His essays, here arranged thematically and handsomely illustrated and presented (the design is by Michael Bierut), exhibit the evenhandedness and natural sense of decorum one expects from the voice of the urban elite. Even his negative columns tend to be more of the rap-on-the-knuckles variety than outright slams. One exception, his harsh treatment of the late Charles Gwathmey's Astor Place condo tower—“an elf prancing among men”—drew attention not only for its uncharacteristic spleen but also because it inevitably brought to mind Goldberger's own rather checkered history, cataloged so viciously by Sorkin, of advocating such ill-conceived projects.

Generally, you know what you get with Goldberger. If you're looking for a collection that will challenge received ideas about the nature of architecture over the last decade, he's probably not the man for you. If, however, you're interested in an elegantly delivered record of architectural developments over that same period, you won't find a better companion.

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