



Almost every day for many years now, I have walked the few blocks from my apartment to the Subway station at Astor Place, to take the 6 train uptown to work. Most of those years, just to the south of the station there was a parking lot. Every now and then I would think about how great the site was for a great building; something that added to my neighborhood in a positive way, economically, culturally and aesthetically.

I am not sure when or how I finally noticed the new fecal matter deposited by Gwathmey Siegel but I do remember my blurting out, "Fuck context indeed". I am referring here to the December 1994 Rem Koolhaas interview in Art Forum, where he is discussing how modernism is all about "fucking context". This building still leaves me livid with rage as I must pass by this steel and glass turd on a daily basis. Now I understand why Roark commits an act of terrorism in the Fountainhead (a fascist book I otherwise despise). It defines all that is going wrong in New York, architecturally.

"Green Monster" is the title of Paul Golberger's May 2, 2005 review of the building in the New Yorker. He is too kind. Green Monstrosity would have been a better title, but I guess that it is not as personal with him as it is with me.

"The first thing you think when you see the new luxury apartment building at Astor Place—a slick, undulating tower clad in sparkly green glass—is that it doesn't belong in the neighborhood." And yet the sad thing is that the building tries to fit in. In concept the building is very simple. A masonry clad base (the supposed contextualism?) with a steel and glass tower. But clearly this is well beyond Gwathmey's talent to develop. The building is lightweight both literally and intellectually and Golberger almost captures the inadequacy of this building by noting, "The new building, designed by Charles Gwathmey, is an elf prancing among men." Too kind actually, as the building is more malnourished than elfin. It looks as if the glass is going to shatter merely from being in the presence of the heavy masonry buildings around it.

Gwathmey, "...wanted to make freestanding sculpture. That, in itself, was a good idea, especially at a time when so many New York apartment buildings are knockoffs of prewar brick boxes, based on the idea that blending in is the greatest virtue." I disagree with Golberger on three counts. Considering that Gwathmey is an architect of average ability it would have been far better for him to have produced a decent brick box. Secondly, a freestanding sculpture is not appropriate for the site as the buildings to the south do not allow for a true sculpture in the round. A relief sculpture to be viewed from three sides would have been a more appropriate concept. Thirdly, the isolated modernist icon, standing out and aloof from its surroundings needs to be killed once and for all.

"At one point, he [Gwathmey] told me that the building was inspired by Mies van der Rohe's famous unbuilt designs for a curving glass skyscraper." Actually, I got the impression that the building was more an homage to John Hejduk's wall houses, which makes more sense as the building is up against the exterior walls of the buildings to the south and opposite the Cooper Union Foundation building where Hejduk was Dean of the architecture school for so many years. But Gwathmey does not have the talent to turn Hejduk's graphic designs into three dimensions. And the hubris of trying to refer to a genius such as Mies is pathetic and laughable. You damned well had better produce something good or keep your mouth shut about your sources of inspiration.

"Yet the architect didn't follow Mies enough. He put Mies in the middle, but not at the bottom, where the squat limestone base tries too hard to fit into the surrounding streets, or at the top, with its crown of miniboxes." Actually, Golberger is wrong here. The parti is an appropriate one, beginning with neighborhood forms. Masonry or other heavy massing is required here. But this limestone box is dull, the stone being treated as a mere skin. Why bother with stone if you are not going to carve some light and shadow? Most importantly there is no exploration of the possibilities of transition from base to tower.

"... the highly reflective glass the architect chose is inexplicable. It is the sort of pastel hue you would expect to see in a suburban office park." Actually, having so much transparent glass would have presented a problem. If all the glass is transparent, you get the fishbowl effect. Why some sort of system of translucent as well as transparent glass was used is not clear. Golberger is right though. The glass is embarrassingly cheap looking.

"This building could have been one of the best new buildings in New York—if only the architect had kept it simple." No, if only the architect had talent. When is it going to be acknowledged that Gwathmey Siegel are mediocrities? Should not the desecration of the Guggenheim be evidence enough? And what does he mean by making this building simpler? One cannot deal adequately with a complex context by designing something simple. Oh, you can have simplicity of form but not a simplicity of relationship to the surrounding neighborhood.

And do not get me started about the invasion of the rich folks this building expresses so obnoxiously. It is one more flipping of the bird at us working class folks who have been here for so long.

ROARK IT!!!