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NEW YORK REVIEW OF ARCHITECTURE REVIEWS ARCHITECTURE IN NEW YORK.

Less than Heroic
DAN ROCHE

NYRA contributor Dan Roche talked to Gabriel Cira, James Heard, and Emma Pfeiffer, curators of The Architects Collaborative 1945–1995: Tracing Diffuse Architectural Authorship, about the office's importance to the history of modern architecture in Boston and beyond. The exhibition, which recently opened at pinkcomma gallery in the city's Shawmut neighborhood, positions The Architects Collaborative (TAC, pronounced like "tack") as a much more innovative firm than its corporate peers. TAC's original partners, including a late-age Walter Gropius, designed durable buildings in keeping with the Brutalist mood of the times, while also allowing for contingency and change. The curators chose to jointly respond.

Dan Roche (DR): Your exhibition focuses on the work of The Architects Collaborative between 1945 and 1995. Why are you doing a show about them in 2021?

Curators (C): TAC has really not been well understood, even in Boston. On the one hand, all we have done is filled in a missing chapter in the historical record and corrected some common misconceptions—for example, minimizing the role Gropius played in the firm's output. But on the other hand, we also wanted to make a plea for the humble rather than the heroic, as preservation discourse around concrete architecture and embodied carbon is evolving here in Massachusetts as well as more broadly.

In terms of the role of architectural practice within the world, if TAC is an inspiration for us, there is definitely an asterisk there, as there should be with any precedent. We think their story is very instructive for young practitioners today.

DR: Architecture firms are collaborative by nature. But explicitly stating this in 1945 America was new, wasn't it?

C: Yes, but TAC was novel for their time in a few ways. For instance, already in 1945, two of the eight founding partners were women. The office was cooperatively run, and several partners were a part of the antiwar movement, contributing to TASK, an anti-fascist magazine. Their early engagement with public schools is also worth noting; they viewed public education as a cornerstone of a democratic society, and from their earliest stage were actively constructing public school buildings and innovating the type.

They hitched their wagon early to state-funded architecture and became reliant on those commissions, which guided the domestic practice for decades but ultimately became perilous. As the federal government subsidies began to shift away from education toward correctional facilities and defense in the 1980s and 1990s, the practice followed that money. One of their first projects overseas was the University of Baghdad, which led them into a lot of big government commissions in Iraq and Kuwait, and in some instances communicating with the large oil companies there.

When TAC closed its doors in 1995, the office had strayed from its core values and were taking projects that were antithetical to its founding principles in ways that the founders weren't comfortable with. There wasn't another female partner at TAC after the first two female partners [moved on]. TAC was in dire financial straits, so the surviving original partners really made a deliberate decision to shut down the practice at that time. The internal tensions within the office, the generational differences, the decisions they made with good intentions—

these are the lessons of TAC that are most telling for young practitioners and architectural collectives today. The research we've done carries great optimism but also cautionary tales.

DR: Part of the curatorial project was creating a digital database of TAC's work. How do you see it evolving and being used?

C: It remains an open conversation about how to write a history of authorship for an office like TAC. This was our attempt to wrestle with the complexity of TAC's authorship. It became apparent very quickly that there were too many TAC projects to archive in one person's mind. To create a good historical assessment of their work, and to even begin to trace internal lines of authorship, it was necessary to take a multi-author approach. The web "archive" is multiple people's intelligences uploaded into one place. These are the components of the project borrowed from the digital humanities.

The database we built was designed to be easy to add to and easy to access, for academics, historians, or anybody interested in checking if their hometown library was designed by TAC. This was in contrast to many of the archives we came into contact with to prepare the exhibition, where there were often multiple hurdles between multiple institutions to overcome just to get an image or piece of text. The idea of our database is that the archive should be the opposite and easy for anybody to access.

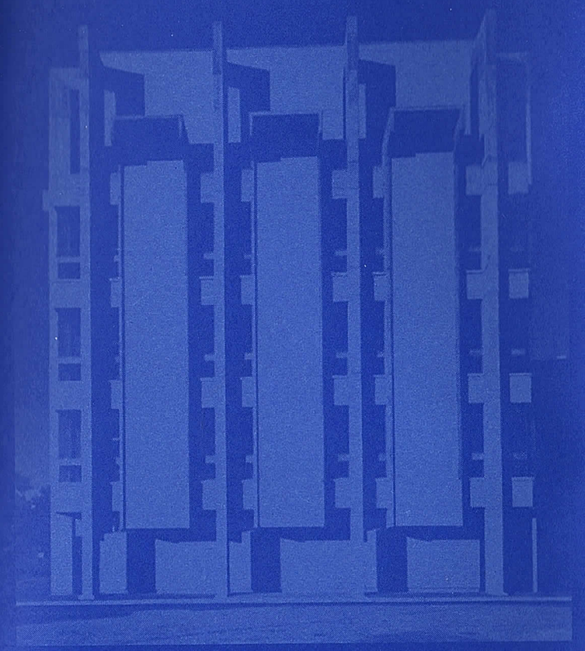
DR: What are some of your favorite TAC buildings?

C: It's hard because there are over 200 projects throughout Massachusetts to choose from! There are so many amazing schools that we haven't even visited yet. Some of the local library branches in Boston come to mind first, as well as some of the gentle Modernist homes they designed that haven't been documented at all until now.

The Josiah Quincy School in Boston's Chinatown and the Chelmsford Junior High School, outside of Boston near the city of Lowell, are two others that come to mind. The Chelmsford Junior High School is a virtuosic Brutalist building in a very rural, old part of the state, with old farmhouses and rocky topography. It's so perfect for a place like Chelmsford. We just love that building in its context. At the same time the Josiah Quincy School is so perfect in its urban location. It's a solid block building but with a corner entry point that creates this multilevel sequence of amazing and generous public outdoor spaces across the stepping roof levels of the school. Both schools are wildly different from one another, yet both have this amazing sensitivity to their context.

DR: The exhibition is happening at an interesting point in Boston's history. Brutalism is starting to become part of Boston's image in a way that it is not in New York or other cities. For the first time that I can remember, Boston has a mayor who loves City Hall's architecture. At the same time, several of Boston's most notable Brutalist buildings are under threat or decaying. Where do you contextualize your project within this conversation?

C: In this show we wanted to do two things at once. We are both talking directly about TAC but also about the politics of today more broadly, and the question of taste today, how tastes swing back and forth. This question of taste, perception, and change is crucial to the argument of the book Heroic: Concrete Architecture and the New Boston, too. That book is about how 50 years after any type of architecture was built, the buildings have started to wear out and people's tastes have changed. There's a moment of crisis where if those two things converge directly, you can



The Architects Collaborative, Tufts University Chemistry Research Building, 1965. Elevation photo of the Tufts University Chemistry Research Building, completed 1965.

lose these buildings very easily.

We learned from that book about the special legacy of these heroic, unique, and monumental buildings made as entries to the local architectural canon in the Northeast. The book taught us how we should value and change our interpretation of these buildings. What we think [authors Mark Pasnik, Michael Kubo, and Chris Grimley] got right is the obsession with details and all the wonderful drawings and photos showing the buildings as they are meant to be seen, in public space.

We, however, are not actually interested in the heroic. We are interested in the adequate, the ordinary, the way the TAC buildings we study are recessive rather than overly energetic. We've learned that concrete architecture was not trying to be oppressive—in fact, it was trying to be very generous and humanistic. So much so that it could even fade away, be modified, or updated, without much anxiety from the architects about being altered. There wasn't much concern about disrupting the original idea. That's why we'd call their architecture humble rather than heroic.

DR: How did TAC encourage their buildings to change over time?

C: Their buildings were never designed to be these jewel boxes that are to be perfectly maintained. TAC's work was extremely modular and encouraged to be changed over time. For instance, a lot of their school plans were designed to be connected via the corridor with pods

to be added onto over time. So it's a little bit ironic to see municipalities demolish these buildings that were designed this way at the same time that TAC actually intended these buildings to be added onto when necessary.

We don't think there's a need to be overly precious with their work, but at the same time there are some of these schools that are in immaculate condition for buildings that are 60 years old. The idea that some of these buildings are aging or unable to be repaired, or that they can't be expected to last a long time, we just don't think that this is the case. Surely some of these buildings aren't worth the upkeep, but there are others, fantastic examples of midcentury architecture like Hillside Elementary, that would be a shame to lose. None of the TAC employees we interviewed were interested in keeping their buildings in the perfect condition. They thought of their clients as though this was their building that they could do whatever they wanted with. They wanted these buildings to run out their full lives for as long as possible but not necessarily beyond that.

DR: And yet, part of the exhibition looks a century ahead!

C: It's true that one of the things we are really interested in is the afterlives of these buildings. The exhibition is about TAC from 1945 to 1995, and the conclusion of the exhibition is about the future of these buildings from 1995 to 2095. We have paid close attention to how these buildings were modified and valued by their users. This is meant to be an open-ended conclusion.●

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We Have Always Been Postmodern
JACK MURPHY

In the twenty-plus years since Wes Anderson's Rushmore established the director's style, popular culture has grown only more intensely flat and image-focused. Similarly, as Anderson's career has progressed, his films have become more ornate in both scenery and plot and more heavily staged through visual devices. His latest, The French Dispatch, is about a fake literary magazine of the same name, modeled on The New Yorker, operating in the fake French city Ennui-sur-Blasé, modeled on Paris. Led by charismatic editor Arthur Howitzer Jr., played by Bill Murray, the film skips forward and backward in time, showing the magazine writers at work and, later, gathered around in the wake of Howitzer's death, when the publication is contractually due to shutter.

Rather than one long plot arc, four closed loops tell the story of individual articles, held together by a combination of editorial processes and flashbacks. This structure is matched by a heightened bag of visual tricks to tell the stories, including, in one instance, an extended animated chase sequence. Anderson has long practiced sectional thinking—his movies include dollhouse-model views of boats, trains, hotels, and planes—but this is a busy bundle. Each story is nuanced in plot and imagery, but it all doesn't quite hold together. We meet groups of characters, but only briefly. It feels like we are expected to mourn Howitzer's passing alongside his writers, but we didn't really get a chance to know him, other than secondhand or through quick scenes. Here, due to their