ARCHITECTURE VIEW: PERSONAL LANDMARKS ALONG THE HIGHWAY
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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Personal Landmarks Along the Highway

It is that getting-out-of-New-York time of year, and if you are driving on I-91 through Connecticut don't miss the Colt Firearms Building as you pass Hartford on your way to New England diversions. You can't miss it anyway; how many expressways offer a view of a deep cerulean-blue onion dome, gilt-trimmed and studded with stars, set on a crown of white columns, atop a large 19th-century brick factory with a miragelike 20th-century Hartford behind it?

I have been watching that building, en route, for a good part of my life, and I find that these places seen in transit through a car window, with the changing vision of motion, have a special kind of image. The eye is really a camera, and the image is kinetic and transient, but timeless in the way that makes cinema a haunting art of transfixed, passing shadows. Perhaps because these buildings are a repeated and anticipated experience, such places and structures that may only touch our lives tangentially stay permanently fixed in the mind's eye.

But they change, from one year to the next. Over the decades I have watched the Colt Firearms Building (which instantly tells me that I have gotten to Hartford) transformed from a shabbly relic to renewed splendor, with growing general recognition of the fact that it is a superb example of what art historians now call industrial archaeology. This summer it is really something to see. An anonymous admirer, whose name is supposedly unknown even to Colt, donated $5,000 to put back the stars on the dome that have been missing for the last 50 years. The stars were part of the original building of 1857, which burned in 1864 and was reconstructed in 1874. They disappeared around 1920, probably for economy reasons.

Obviously, Colonel Colt was quite aware of the symbolic and status value of architecture. The Hartford Architectural Conservancy, in its notes on the building, tells us that he meant the exotic dome on its circle of decorous columns to be seen by travelers passing through Hartford by barge on the Connecticut River. Today they see it from the thruway, at high speed. They may miss the details—the gleaming gold ball at the top is surmounted by a casting of a rearing colt and there are 80 stars. But the fine vernacular brick building, a prime example of typically pragmatic and handsome 19th-century American design, has even gained in visual impact.

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I find, when I think of it, and generally I don't, that I have a set of such landmarks—personal, transient and indelible—that mark the stages of my journeys and the stages of my life. I wait for these particular places on trips year after year; they are all old friends. It is more important than I have ever consciously admitted that they should be where I expect to find them. If they are gone, I have a real and shocking sense of loss; if they have been refurbished I am suffused with a surprising joy.

Sometimes I admire these buildings for years without knowing what they are or anything about them. They can be encountered on country roads or on those curious routes by which one is forced to leave large cities. They loom up along New York's potholed, poverty-blitzed avenues that turn abruptly onto bridges of surpassing beauty or on boulevards of oppressive banality; the city's exits and entrances are a surreal mix of scales and references, from graffiti praising Bessie Smith on the crumbling wall of a corner bar to pocket handkerchief gardens bordering a superhighway and anonymous public-housing wastelands where even grass and trees despair. The omnipresent urban glue is dust, litter and weeds.

Just past the cemeteries on the approach to La Guardia airport, with their legions of carved angels like stone hiccups from the same mortuary sulptor's pattern, is the Bulova watch factory, a long, streamlined Art Deco structure that never ceases to be satisfying. Time stands still there in more ways than one; the building is a frozen custard of architectural optimism—these were the soft, rounded forms of the world of the future in the 1930's—and the entrance clock no longer has its hands.

Driving along the superlimbo of Bruckner Boulevard, in an ambience of grubby small factories, Kansas Fried Chicken and derelict housing, I have for years watched and loved a building that is the sole anchor for one's sensibilities in that grim stretch of road. It seems like a miraculously misplaced bit of Claude Nicholas Ledoux in the bottle barns and Sachs-Quality-Furnitureland of the South Bronx.

This building is a severe and serene example of a kind of disembodied classicism, not grand enough to disdain its neighbors—it is no aloof white temple—but still able to be part of its surroundings with a plain sort of dignity. It is an extremely well-proportioned building, with a brick pediment and unadorned stone architrave, and a curious odd number (seven) of attached flat columns or pilasters along the front. These pilasters alternate stone and brick courses for a lively formality. Between them are large open bays topped by lunette windows framed in round arches of beautifully laid brick with proper keystones. This is a strong, simple design and I have always bowed respectfully to it, in this surprising place, without knowing the building's name or purpose.

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I found out only recently, when the New York Landmarks Conservancy undertook an inventory of public buildings in the city, that this distinguished and workmanlike structure is a "grit chamber" built in 1936 by McKim, Mead and White, long after the famous principals were working members of the firm. A grit chamber is a sewage plant. Disposal trucks go through those classical bays. There are no limits to elegance.

Another building that I look forward to seeing on annual New England excursions is a factory in Beverly, Mass. This is one of those structures that always elicited a pleased "there it is" long before I knew what it was. An early reinforced concrete-framed industrial building with great expanses of many-paned sash, it stretches far along a meadow with singular assurance and surprising grace. Impressive and pleasing proportions combine with the direct expression of structure to create an outstanding esthetic.

Twenty years ago, when I was doing research in innovative concrete construction in the United States, I found an illustration of the United Shoe Machinery Plant in Beverly, designed by the pioneering engineer of reinforced concrete, Ernest Ransome. It was a picture of my building. And the dates were an astonishing early 1903-05, putting it slightly in advance of the celebrated Detroit automobile factories by Albert Kahn. To find that the structure that so pleased my eye also rewrote an important chapter of architectural history has increased my contentment on every subsequent viewing.

These are some of my personal landmarks, and there are many more. I am catholic in my tastes, possessive and passionate in my responses. And response is the key word—the point of these buildings that become one's geographic and cultural signposts is that it is impossible to be neutral toward them. From high art to high camp, they are a source of satisfaction and delight. I am as fond of Violet's Lounge, a humdrum little house raised to spurious glamour with mauve plastic panels and a glittering silver sign at a busy intersection on Mass. Route 114 (I always wondered what Violet was like), as I am of the Bruckner Grit Chamber. Violet's Lounge disappeared last year. Sewage is forever. ■