

**SMOOT'S EAR:
THE MEASURE OF HUMANITY**

By Robert Tavernor
Yale University Press, 2007

In the late 1700s, the streets of Paris filled with blood and riot as the Terror raged throughout France, gnashing its insatiable guillotine jaws while in distant Barcelona, Pierre Méchain, a French gentleman-scientist, prepared to take a secret to the grave: his measure of the earth's circumference was flawed by his own mechanical error, his life's work thus compromised and the great universal measure for all nations, the metric system, rendered arbitrary.

This is just a fraction of the trouble that plagued the metric system, as Robert Tavernor details in a lively 192 pages. It seems everyone has had an opinion on measure: Newton, Boullée, Pythagoras, Duchamp, ancient Egyptians, Heidegger, Le Corbusier, and Einstein have all weighed in. In a sense, this is the kind of book that is a joy *not* to read, each new page laced with references that send fingertips scuttling across keyboards, the kind of book that is responsible for server overloads at Wikipedia and revenue spikes at Google. The side reading is not essential, however, as the author provides clear summaries and insights. Tavernor investigates the very significance of mensural systems and

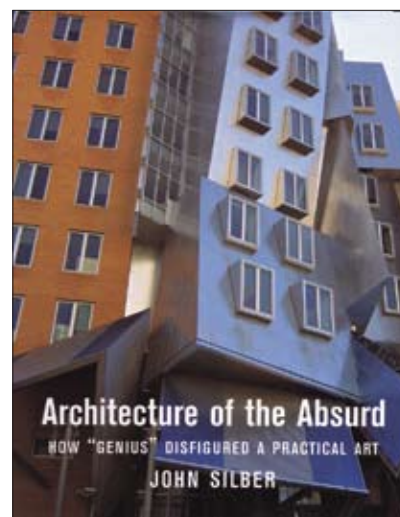
uncovers surprising meaning in the units we choose.

How can human activity be specified, the experience of space be quantified? Whether expressed in feet, meters, or modulators, measure is the linchpin between the amorphous, subjective experience of space and its quantified description — the Panama Canal between the twin oceans of mind and world. Measure is language, the fundamental tool of architecture.

Tavernor contrasts the unexpectedly uniform history of anthropomorphic measures (give or take a few inches) over the course of Western civilization with the convoluted birth of the meter, which was conceived as pure abstraction apart from any reference to any one human (read: king). We follow the sweaty-palmed grasping for universal certainty that characterized the search for a natural length on which to base the meter: past permutations of the seconds pendulum (whose full swing takes two seconds), and through poles, meridians, and latitudes (variously examined for their ease of measure and decimalization), each new candidate proving as flawed as the last, until we at last come to the aptly named Uncertainty Principle and the eventual adoption in 1983 of a standard based on the distance light travels in a vacuum.

The book is not about the smoots and ears that measure the Harvard Bridge spanning the Charles River (a calculation based on MIT student Oliver Smoot, determined to be 364.4 smoots, plus or minus an ear). Instead, it is about the triumph of obstinacy, the irrationality of reason, and the reason for irrationality. It is about the subjectivity and usefulness of measures, and even more so, about the humility of trying to know what we don't. If this book persuades you, you will be proud to measure your creativity in smoots and ears, draw your buildings in feet and inches, and revel in the fact that the US stands tall with Liberia and Myanmar in withstanding the onslaught of the metric system.

Conor MacDonald is a writer in Boston.



**ARCHITECTURE OF THE ABSURD: HOW
"GENIUS" DISFIGURED A PRACTICAL ART**

By John Silber
Quantuck Lane, 2007

Over the years, John Silber, who holds a doctorate in philosophy, has used his bully pulpit as president and chancellor of Boston University and as a candidate for Massachusetts governor to declaim on whatever subjects engage his withering attention. Most recently this has been architecture, a discipline he first absorbed at the knee of his father, a Beaux-Arts-trained architect, and then apparently mastered at BU, where he oversaw 13,729,143 square feet of new construction. (He evidently kept close track.)

Silber believes architecture has succumbed to the avant-garde fallacy that "all great art is shocking," which he believes is particularly unfortunate because it mistakes the practical art of architecture for a fine art. He ascribes this to the "genius worship" instigated by Siegfried Giedion, who suggested that certain seminal Modern architects have access to special shaman-like knowledge. Like Ayn Rand's fictional Howard Roark, such architects have come to believe they are above criticism and "owe nothing to their clients or the public beyond the gift of their genius."

Among those Silber singles out for

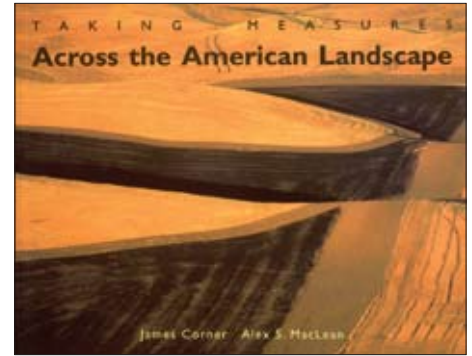
scorn are Le Corbusier, for his hubristic dictum that “the plan must rule”; Josep Lluís Sert, whose BU buildings Silber found repetitive and problematic to maintain; I.M. Pei, whose Louvre pyramid creates a “constant disturbing tension ... with the courtyard surrounding it”; Daniel Libeskind, whose Denver Art Museum resembles “a carcass of a crashed space shuttle”; and of course, Frank Gehry, whose Stata Center at MIT reflects “contempt for the interests of clients and ... narrow dedication to his sculptural conception.”

Silber has his favorites — Gaudí, Gropius, Caltrava, Utzon, and Fay Jones. And herein lies the problem: Silber’s screed is in search of an underlying theory. Much of the book simply proclaims his aesthetic judgments which, based on the unremarkable buildings built during his BU tenure, are not infallible. He does not probe the broader social or technological forces shaping contemporary architecture, nor does he attempt to address why the trend toward architectural astonishment has gained such cultural currency, preferring to belittle the practitioners and their clients

and champions instead. For a philosopher, Silber has written a surprisingly unreflective book. (One is tempted to conclude he actually favors genius worship as long as he can choose its subjects.)

It’s a shame this is not a more thoughtful book, because we could use one. Has “starchitecture” become too noisy, disorienting, and wasteful? Are we witnessing an episode of iconoclasm that presages a new order, or has architecture been permanently liberated from “style”? Will this profusion of experiments lead to breakthroughs for the next generation of architects to refine? Is it possible to sustain such profligate expressionism in the face of looming climate change and the resulting imperative toward resource efficiency? These questions seem worth examining. Let’s hope someone more insightful than John Silber will attempt to address them soon.

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TAKING MEASURES ACROSS THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE

By James Corner and Alex S. MacLean
Yale University Press, 1996

Decoding the landscape to better understand American culture has long been in the cultural geographer’s province. But the tools of measure — maps, surveys, aerial views — are often disengaged from metaphorical meanings. Cultural geography entails enriched data but less sophisticated visual thinking than is called for by design professions. Yet, landscape architects are easily seduced

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into picture-making, dragging their 18th-century predecessors' views on romantic scenery into their work.

In this book, James Corner, a landscape architect and principal of the design firm Field Operations in New York City, and Alex MacLean, the Boston photographer celebrated for his aerial landscape images, propose fresh revelations through their interweaving of text, map-drawing, and aerial photography. Corner's narrative, juxtaposed with MacLean's images, examines the ironies and ambiguities that are idiosyncratic to the American landscape, especially when topographical lines meet and violate the authority of the grid. The authors are intrigued by the working landscape (the agrarian Midwest with its lines of contour plowing and the southwesterly irrigation designs) and by engineered landscapes (canals, dams, networks of rail lines, terminals, and highways) — a presentation of landscape as process rather than as pictures or, as Corner succinctly puts it, "landscape as a densely measured construction site."

This book includes a key essay by

Denis Cosgrove, the late British-trained cultural geographer based at UCLA. Having long been engaged in the cultural politics of the American landscape, Cosgrove reflects on the history of "taking measure" in American life. He pays homage to Thomas Jefferson and the National Land Survey that laid the anonymous, indifferent grid on the Midwest. He focuses as well on the United States Geological Survey and its ubiquitous maps that form the base of large-scale planning projects. His overview engages such engineering wonders as Grand Coulee Dam and the Tennessee Valley project. He speculates on noteworthy differences between European settlement patterns and the overwhelming scale of the American landscape with its inevitable issues of control and individual freedom.

A dense thinker and original writer, Corner draws on French literary theory, German philosophy, and American earthworks artists to enrich his ideas, but never allows the narrative to drift off from the land. Alternatively, MacLean draws on geometry that's implicit in modern art.

To disagree somewhat with Corner, who says that MacLean's photographs are documentation, "showing the land as it is," anyone can see that his images of landscape patterns are artfully framed — composed, color-saturated, aestheticised images meant to surprise and enthrall the viewer.

To the authors' credit, their work is speculative, not prescriptive. They open broad windows onto the landscape, free from the simplistic pieties of environmentalism or the professional language of designers. Their book persuades planners and designers to expand the territory of their investigations and engage the synoptic view — the view of the bird.

Phyllis Andersen is a landscape historian and author of a forthcoming book on pleasure gardens.

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