

**Motivated by
the Horizons of Infinity**

Michael Sorkin

The masterful work of Carl Abbott grows at a singular convergence of climate and class. Distilling the very best meaning of “Florida,” his projects are propositions for a happier life. This embraces both a way of experiencing the everyday — a calm, a spaciousness, a connection to the sea, a leisured style of moving through space, an uncluttered, aspirationally spare, field of vision — and a sense of privilege, membership in the community of success, a place in the sun.

Today, the gentle dream of Florida is in so many ways corrupted. The hideousness of the ubiquitous strip, the ghastly profusion of theme parks and malls, the hypertrophic greed, the underwater mortgages, the decimations of nature, the Vicodin shops around every corner, the vulgarity of the brain-dead yet febrile cultures of consumption that lace too many over-crowded shores: these are the dark side of the vision of delight that impelled millions south. In search of calm and dignity, too many found license and despair.

Carl Abbott’s architecture retains the light. He’s a great artist of the good life and of the forms that not simply support, but invent and extend it. For him, living well is not sumptuary, not a matter of accumulation and excess but of the ceremoniousness of enjoying life’s true luxuries, the sunset and the breeze and the lapping of turquoise waters on a sandy shore.

*Abbott’s a subtle exponent
of an architecture beautifully
rooted in its own time
and place.*

For decades, he and his colleagues in the remarkable Sarasota “school” have explored a continuity between site and architecture that grows from the forms and precepts of modernism at its most clarified, the idea that a simplicity of surface and volume combined with a suppleness of flow has a rightness that seeps from the formal into the social, even ethical, realm: good places.

The buildings of Carl Abbott wear this sense of rectitude with consummate grace. They are lush without superfluity and geometric without harshness. His ability to find complexity in simplicity vividly shows in his command of the craft necessary to advance his program of stimulating repose. Project after project delivers on the modernist ideal of eliding inside and out, creating

the illusion of the “natural” flowing untrammelled through the constructed. This is not a simple matter of transparency but a far more refined modulation of space and view and climate in which the architectural membrane is ultimately commensurate with the retinal. The progression in Abbott’s houses from room to deck to stair to beach to sea is not simply an armature of convenient motion but

*a sequence of shifts
both tactile and tectonic
that create a richly compact
journey in which spaces
move seamlessly
and without confusion
to arrive at moments
of expansiveness and
relaxation both.*

A striking quality of these buildings lies in the sense that they are designed from the inside out, finding their motivation in the exigencies of framing views and orchestrating interior sequence, rather than the more constraining accommodation of incident to an envelope already fixed in mind. This means

that the houses, in particular, have appealingly informal perimeters that press their edges around their sites to capture both prospects and available spaces in lots that are sometimes relatively tight. This is accomplished with an easy, if exacting, way with plan forms and a freedom with section in which rotations off ninety degrees seem to have the same informative logic in both the vertical and the horizontal, sometimes resulting in compositions that are calmly angular, sometimes more fanned, but in which there's never a sense that geometry is the driver rather than the tool.

This open architecture is motivated by the horizons of infinity and virtually no space in Abbott's work is disengaged from a sense of what's beyond it.

In his lovely chapel of his St. Thomas More Church, there's a serene garden viewed through a huge window, articulated with episodes of stained glass and a steel cross that grows from the mullions. The garden is enclosed by a simple white wall that carves out a piece of landscape as a contemplative, private, present, extension of the Sanctuary but which is not so high as to obscure the continuation

of this same landscape beyond, a promise momentarily inaccessible but offering a vision of the infinite universe of creation. In the water-ward view from the House of Columns, the simple, thickened, vertical elements isolate the window wall into a series of floor to ceiling frames that segment the vista and impart an almost classical rhythm and the character of portraiture to its experience. By contrast, the prospect from the living room of the Seaside Estate is through a glass wall framed very lightly that turns not at the lines of support but in butt-jointed glass folds that create an ephemeral edge while the structural work is done by columns that sit outside the weather membrane, carrying the superstructure like a temple.

As a result of this concise and spare eccentricity — and this is surely his signature — Abbott's work has a simple complexity that prevents its being grasped in its all-at-once. Form always follows feeling, a proposition quite different from the kind of functionalist orthodoxies in which the signature of an efficient marriage of form and use so often devolved on a box or a system in which it was clear that boxes were being combined incrementally in a rigidly — if elegantly — cellular order. For Abbott, there is no irreducible geometric component of architecture, no fixed signature to externally affirm the logic of the process: his geometries never over-reach.

The meaning of his building seeps not from a fantasy of rigorously rule-based composition but from a collusion of effects,

orchestrated with maximum simplicity for which geometry is the servant not the driver. This is the very definition of elegance,

the idea of an asymptotic relationship between ends and means. What's important, though, is that Abbott's ends are effects, not symbols or signatures or the working out of systems that must be seen to fail if they are not literally marked at every scale and move. Carl Abbott's architecture marks place even as it is marked by it. It is indelibly his own.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael Sorkin', with a stylized, flowing script.

Michael Sorkin is an architectural critic. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and Director of the Graduate Urban Design Program at City College of New York. He was Director of the Institute for Urbanism at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. He has written many books on architecture and urbanism.