

Mainstream and Marginal

Situating the American Roadside Photographs of John Margolies

Beginning in 1972, the photographer John Margolies (born 1940) spent thirty-six years documenting commercial vernacular buildings across the United States. His body of work, now including an archive of thirteen thousand photographs and related ephemeral material, is an unparalleled record of the American roadside in the second half of the twentieth century. Margolies's photographs have appeared in numerous popular magazines, books, postcard collections, and even magnet sets. He has presented his work in slide lectures, for the general public and academic audiences alike, for more than three decades. He has attracted a devoted following of roadside enthusiasts, including many who, as is evident on the Internet, have followed in his tire-tracks, crossing the country to visit and photograph the same roadside buildings.¹ While most scholars of commercial vernacular architecture are familiar with Margolies's photography, his work as a whole has received little scholarly scrutiny. The current acquisition of the Margolies's archive by the Library of Congress is an opportune moment to consider the significance of this collection and to examine, in depth, the contextual and theoretical framework from which Margolies's work emerged. This consideration will reveal how his architectural photography evolved from his earlier activities as a critic and curator and will make evident the relationship between his work and the mainstreams and margins of architecture's evolving discourse during the past half-century. What follows provides the critical backstory for a singular documentary archive of commercial vernacular architecture in the United States.

From *Resorts of the Catskills* (1979) to *Roadside America* (2010), Margolies has published more than a dozen books.² *Resorts* is a serious exhibition catalogue in which scholarly essays on architectural and social history by Elizabeth Blackmar, Elizabeth Cromley, and Neil Harris accompany one hundred of Margolies's photographs. *Roadside* is a sumptuous coffee table book with a foreword by architecture curator C. Ford Peatross, a profile by design writer Phil Patton, and more than four hundred of Margolies's photographs packaged as a fine art publication. Most of the intervening volumes strike a different tone. With titles like *Fun along the Road* (1990), *Ticket to Paradise* (1991), and *Pump and Circumstance* (1993), these books are breezy, cutesy, even goofy, with jam-packed pages that idiosyncratically document a range of commercial building typologies through vintage postcards, maps, brochures, matchbooks, and, most especially, the photographer's own pictures.³ The one notable exception is *The End of the Road*, Margolies's first solely authored book, which appeared in 1981.

Introduced by a highly personal, almost elegiac text, *The End of the Road* is a collection of color photographs of gas pumps, neon signs, roadside stands, drive-in movie theaters, and motels. Each building is framed in dignified isolation emphasizing sculptural form and graphic sensibility in a manner that would characterize much of Margolies's subsequent photographic output. The *Trail Drive-In Theater*, on Route 66 in Amarillo, Texas is typical (Figure 1). Built in 1954 and in operation until around the time Margolies photographed it in 1977, the Trail Drive-In is past

Figure 1. Trail Drive-In Theater, Route 66, Amarillo, Texas. Photograph by John Margolies, 1977. Courtesy of John Margolies.



its prime, with a turquoise-painted exterior that is faded and peeling. The photograph depicts the side flank of the theater's screen tower with a ticket kiosk in the foreground. Shot with a 50mm lens and slow film, this is a straightforward portrait of a building, although Margolies obviously chose the façade with signage to individualize his depiction. With a deep depth of field, sharp outlines, and saturated colors, the subject is at the center of the frame. The sky is blue; the shadows are long; the scene is depeopled. There aren't even any cars—an especially noticeable absence in a roadside picture but a hallmark of Margolies's work, intended to present the building with as few distractions as possible.⁴

Not all of Margolies's subjects are buildings on the verge of abandonment. His 1979 photograph of the Alamo Plaza Motel on Route 70 in Memphis, Tennessee, depicts a building with a tidy lawn and a freshly painted façade (Figure 2). Here, Margolies pulls back far enough to capture the sign facing the highway and the full extent of the low-rise façade, especially the bell-shaped parapet above the projecting bay of the motel office. This swelling form, based obviously, if

loosely, on the Mission San Antonio de Valero, was the key architectural feature of the southern motel chain, which opened its Memphis unit in 1939.⁵ Here, as in so many of Margolies's pictures, the framing of the image enhances its representation of a particular, rather than a generic building. This distinction is not insignificant because it underscores the presence of Margolies's point of view and the subjectivity of what sometimes seems to be a neutral photograph. This partiality does not lessen the documentary value of the photographs for historians, preservationists, and enthusiasts viewing them today, but it signals that the individual images are part of Margolies's larger photographic project.

These images of the Trail Drive-In and the Alamo Plaza Motel, like the 124 other photographs in *The End of the Road*, were produced during a five-year, 100,000 mile, NEA-funded odyssey across the United States. In the book's Introduction, Margolies compares himself somewhat facetiously to Christopher Columbus, but Meriwether Lewis is a more appropriate parallel.⁶ This is not just because Margolies, like Lewis, explored the country's vast interior while

bankrolled by the federal government but because Margolies, like Lewis, paid attention to the kinds of things that were easily overlooked and would all too soon disappear as settlement and development progressed. For Lewis it was the flora and fauna; for Margolies it was the Main Streets and strips. Ivan Chermayeff's bold design for the book—its heavy black bands almost suffocating the photographs they bound—captures the tension between the continual modernization of a culture and its material and spatial detritus (Figure 3). That same tension sounds the cautionary note of the book's title and subtitle, *The End of the Road: Vanishing Highway Architecture in America*. When the book appeared in 1981, however, the commercial landscape it eulogized was finally receiving a measure of consideration from critics, academics, and architects.

Almost from the moment urban populations in the United States began moving out of central cities, and especially after World War II when automobiles (along with federal interstate and mortgage programs) engendered the decentralized growth of strips and subdivisions, the emerging commercial landscape provoked fervent critiques.⁷ Ranging from smug amusement to moral outrage, from social commentary to reformist polemics, from popular magazines to specialized journals, these critiques were united by recognition that the car had spawned something new and that the United States had

finally produced a culture that was entirely, and incontrovertibly, its own. As early as 1938, the editors of *Life* magazine summarized it this way: “along 3,000,000 miles of highway” the country had created “the Supreme Honky-Tonk of All Time,” cluttered, in the editors' view, with little more than ugly signs and “roadside junk.”⁸ In the succeeding decades, and well into the 1970s, this negative assessment of “the mess that is man-made America” and “God's Own Junkyard,” became commonplace, especially among American intellectuals interested in architecture and urbanism, many of whom accepted it as something very near a universal truth.⁹



Figure 2. Alamo Plaza Motel, Route 70, Memphis, Tennessee. Photograph by John Margolies, circa 1979. Courtesy of John Margolies.



Figure 3. *The End of the Road*, double-page spread with buildings from Missouri, Iowa, California. Graphic design by Ivan Chermayeff; photographs by John Margolies, 1977–80. Courtesy of John Margolies.

At the same time, however, critics like Douglas Haskell (beginning in the 1930s) and J. B. Jackson (beginning in the 1950s) defended the roadside as a populist landscape and forcefully argued for a nuanced consideration of its architectural value.¹⁰ Eventually, and for reasons that will be assessed in this article, this dissenting view fostered a new appreciation for the commercial landscape—or at the least an interest in taking it on its own terms—within the milieu in which Margolies operated.¹¹ Painters and photographers like Ed Ruscha and Richard Estes were exploring the artistic possibilities of gas stations and diners already in the 1960s. This interest continued in the 1970s in the New Topographics of John Schott and Stephen Shore, whose photography captured the “man-altered landscape” without affect. Tom Wolfe’s *New Journalism* offered a flamboyant, literary parallel in essays that examined the nexus of pop culture and the built environment.¹² Within architecture and academe, the historical studies of Reyner Banham, David Gebhard and Robert Winter, and Chester H. Liebs, among others, considered a full range of commercial typologies and precincts and began to push the boundaries of what sort of buildings and landscapes were considered worthy of documentation, interpretation, and preservation. The same was true of the theoretical propositions of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown,

which stimulated fierce debates about precedent, influence, popular architecture, and everyday landscapes.¹³

As interest in the commercial vernacular expanded, gas stations and roadside oddities so recently dismissed as honky-tonk and derided as kitsch found their way onto the National Register of Historic Places. Lucy the Elephant in Margate, New Jersey, one of the country’s oldest mimetic buildings, was listed in 1971; the Shell Service Station in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the only survivor of eight originals, was added in 1976. Two years later, the Modern Diner in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, joined them, the first—and for many years, the only—diner to be included on the register (Figure 4).¹⁴ Margolies photographed the diner the same year it was listed (1978) and included it in *The End of the Road*, adjacent to an image of the Miss Bellow Falls Diner in Bellow Falls, Vermont. This juxtaposition may have contributed to that diner’s own listing in the National Register in 1983, since *The End of the Road* was cited in its nomination report.¹⁵

With so much burgeoning interest in the commercial landscape, it is not surprising that *The End of the Road*, and the exhibition for which the book served as a catalogue, garnered a fair amount of critical attention in 1981. The *New York Times* sent three reviewers to the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers to look at Margolies’s pictures of “American junk architecture.” Art critic Vivien Raynor admired his depiction of what she called the “Disney side of America,” while architecture critic Paul Goldberger marveled at Margolies’s ability to avoid sentimentality even in photographs of buildings shaped like puppies. Still, neither critic was completely satisfied: Raynor was appalled by the “Salingeresque self-pity” and “sense of cultural grievance” that Margolies revealed in the text, and Goldberger was skeptical that the work, although undeniably delightful, had much architectural significance beyond its celebration of Yankee eccentricity and rugged, if market-driven individualism.¹⁶

Not everyone was impressed. Art historian Folke T. Kihlstedt reviewed the book negatively in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* in December 1981. It wasn’t the subject

Figure 4. Modern Diner, Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Photograph by John Margolies, 1978. Courtesy of John Margolies.



matter that bothered this historian, since his own work examined both scenographic buildings, especially of world's fairs, and the impact of the automobile on architectural design in the United States. Rather, it was Margolies's approach to the subject that Kihlstedt found problematic. Describing the book as a "nostalgic venture," he complained that Margolies had suspended "close analysis and critical judgment," concluding that "only the most uncritical enthusiast of roadside architecture . . . or vernacular Americana will be satisfied at *The End of the Road*."¹⁷ Kihlstedt had more sympathy for the other books he reviewed alongside Margolies's, including *White Towers*, a study of the architecture of the eponymous regional hamburger stand, by Paul Hirshorn and Steven Izenour. Kihlstedt appreciated their work in seemingly equal proportion to his dismissal of Margolies's, heralding their "greater discipline" while decrying Margolies's "loose manner" and lack of "any clear controlling idea."¹⁸ The distinction he saw between the two books provides an instructive comparison, for it reveals the myriad hierarchies and prejudices that afflicted American architecture—its history, theory, criticism, and practice—during the tortured transition from modernism to postmodernism in the 1970s.

White Towers had impeccable avant-garde credentials. When they became interested in the topic, Hirshorn and Izenour were working in the office of Venturi and Scott Brown where, the authors noted in their Preface, "roadside awareness was in the air," as their architect/theorist bosses were in midst of their infamous multiyear study of the architectural character of the commercial strip.¹⁹ Hirshorn and Izenour began photographing White Tower buildings in and around Philadelphia in 1970 and became serious about documenting them the following year when they met Charles Johnson, the company's in-house architect since 1935. While Hirshorn and Izenour continued to examine White Towers into 1972, Venturi and Scott Brown published *Learning from Las Vegas* to great controversy and ultimate influence. They listed Izenour as a coauthor.²⁰

In that book, and the earlier essays and architectural design studios on which it was based,

the authors had the temerity to claim that contemporary architects could learn something by studying the formal and communicative systems of urban sprawl in the United States. Even more, they had the audacity to claim that this urban sprawl actually possessed something that could be regarded as formal and communicative systems, that a logic and order drove the design of its buildings and billboards. As is now well known, the impressive compendium of serious analysis included charts, maps, site plans, diagrams, figure-ground studies, collages, and ephemera, as well as photographs—both black and white and color—documenting the structures and signage of what was then U.S. 91/Nevada 604/Las Vegas Boulevard—the legendary Strip.²¹ These famous images documented what Venturi and Scott Brown found on the Strip as they navigated from car to casino, from Caesar's to the Stardust. The purposeful emphasis on formal and semiotic density—on visual noise—is opposed to the deliberate quietude found in Margolies's roadside work (Figure 5).

The National Endowment for the Arts, which helped fund the first edition the same year it granted Margolies his first photography fellowship, described *Learning from Las Vegas* as "a comprehensive study of the commercial or popular roadside environment."²² That was misleading. Although Venturi and Scott Brown were genuinely interested in the design language of the Strip and in promoting its study as a model for a new kind of architectural and urban research, for them Las Vegas was the means to an end. Because it occupied a position on the outer edge of dominant culture respectability, Las Vegas possessed a shock value potent enough, they hoped, to topple the conventions and strictures of High Modernism in favor of a postmodern architecture that polemically deployed the symbolism and ornament that modernism had supposedly rejected.

Thus, while often described as populists, because they deigned to look at the popular landscape, Venturi and Scott Brown were just as elitist in their architectural agenda as the power-brokers whose hegemony in design studios and professional offices they sought to destroy. While

Figure 5. *The End of the Road*, double-page spread with buildings from Missouri, California, Oklahoma, Mississippi. Graphic design by Ivan Chermayeff; photographs by John Margolies, 1977–80. Courtesy of John Margolies.



the strip and subdivision were nice places to visit they assuredly did not want to live there. At the end of *Learning from Las Vegas* they observed that, “Learning from popular culture does not remove the architect from his or her status in high culture.” This was a frank rewording of a declaration they made on page one: “We . . . look downward to go upward.” In the entirety of their project they maintain, and at times reinforce, the hierarchical distance between high and low culture.²³ It was precisely this maintenance of the architectural status quo that was untenable for Margolies in his own examination of the commercial landscape.

Hirshorn and Izenour, however, had no problem with this hierarchy. Their own book was released in 1979, only two years after MIT Press published the best-selling, revised, and still-in-print edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*.²⁴ *White Towers* is a trim volume with a spare modernist design by Muriel Cooper, the MIT art director who was also responsible for the design of the first edition of the earlier book. Cooper’s page layouts for *White Towers* have much in common with the schema of *Learning from Las Vegas*, which, in turn borrows heavily from the art books of Ed Ruscha, whose deadpan, serial photographs of quotidian structures in and around Los Angeles were formative to Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour’s framing of the commercial landscape.²⁵ In fact, it is tempting to think of *White Towers* as “169 hamburger stands”—equivalent

to Ruscha’s *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* or *Thirty-four Parking Lots in Los Angeles*. But their project, like Margolies’s, was not artistic.

White Towers was a case study of commercial architecture, its signs, symbols, styles, and internal evaluative criteria.²⁶ This Hirshorn and Izenour accomplished in an analytical essay tracing the development of the “White Tower System,” and a photographic portfolio depicting the chain’s architectural evolution. Hirshorn and Izenour carefully examined White Towers from the perspectives of fast-food retailing, architectural prototyping, and the promotional value of standardized design. But theirs is a bloodless analysis, as if they are collecting specimens for an architectural morphological classification. Cooper’s design for the Introduction reflects their bias: its columns of stacked thumbnails and location-and-unit-number captions render nearly illegible any trace of individuality in the buildings represented (Figure 6). As a result, although it was Venturi and Scott Brown’s post-modern ideology that obviously prompted their study of popular architecture, Hirshorn and Izenour end up presenting the White Towers as exemplars of modernist seriality, lowbrow commercial versions of a Bauhaus dream of the factory-built house. As Hirshorn and Izenour put it, the architectural strength of the White Towers “lies in their numbers.”²⁷

The book’s photographic portfolio is an accumulation of standardized compositions: it pre-



look the same as the porcelain enamel buildings and renovated to accommodate new equipment. White Tower also needed to maintain a thread of consistency as the range of site conditions and the number of resultant building types expanded. White Tower needed a staff architect.

In November 1935 White Tower advertised for an architect in the New York newspapers. One of many who responded was Charles J. Johnson, an architect with twelve years of experience in large New York architectural offices, who for the past three years had been able to find work only as a surveyor. A week after responding to the ad, Johnson got an evening phone call from J. E. Saxe asking him to come to the White Tower office at once for an interview. When Johnson arrived, J. E. was ready to fire all sorts of questions at him. Johnson fielded the questions smartly, so J. E. offered him the job. Johnson was not at all sure what he was getting into ("What did I know about the restaurant business?") but he took the job ("After all, people always have to eat."). He began work in the small office above New York # 13, which doubled as the New York commissary and J. E. Saxe's base for real estate operations. The job was demanding from the start, since J. E. had fifteen new leases in hand and needed designs for them. Johnson had to work nights to keep up, but his energy and imagination were equal to the task.

At the start Johnson's designs set out in more than one direction. First, he modified the current porcelain enamel tower design by replacing the fussy, decorative, stainless-steel details with simpler plates and strips and thinning the black enamel base (Fig. 45). In one stroke he was able to abstract in a modern vocabulary the literal medieval imagery that remained on the earlier porcelain enamel towers and thus provide a smooth transition toward White Tower's new style (Figs. 46, 47). Johnson's simplified porcelain enamel design also fit easily over the bumps and steps of the brick towers, and the resulting modifications were almost indistinguishable from the new buildings (Figs. 48-51). This was the desired result, since the switch from glazed brick to porcelain enamel had given the White Tower chain a split identity. These renovations were actively pursued in the late 1930s even though most of the brick towers were less than seven years old and in good structural condition.

12



Camden #5 (1936)
Camden #5 was bought by White Tower in 1941. It had been built in 1936 by local entrepreneurs. The building was already a porcelain enamel box with a central tower and gooseneck lamps, all basic White Tower elements.

83

sents one towered white box after another, as the crenellations and modernistic detailing of the 1920s give way to the streamlining of the 1930s and 1940s, to the more austere modernism of the 1950s and 1960s (Figure 7). Here, however, a strange transformation takes place: although Hirshorn and Izenour assert that the White Towers are not "self-conscious Architecture" (capitalization theirs), they present them as self-conscious Architecture with a capital A by depicting them almost exclusively through historic photographs from the White Tower corporate archives.²⁸ No grease, no grime—these hamburger stands are iconic, frozen in time at their moment of completion.

The End of the Road stands in stark contrast to *White Towers*, and in some ways it seems almost its antithesis. It is all about the passage of time; the architecture depicted on its pages is worn, weathered, even abandoned (Figure 8). Formal and programmatic typologies are fully in evidence—in fact many buildings become more potent through their repetition, whether they are teapots or teepees (Figure 9). Repeated building components are likewise discernible, in the screen towers of the drive-in theaters, the

railroad car bodies of the diners, the dwelling units of the motels—even here individuality and not seriality is most prominent in the buildings Margolies depicts. Overall, though, customization is more prominent, as seen in hand lettering, paint jobs, and lean-tos, in sheet metal palm trees and the plaster and chicken wire icebergs. While it seems clear that Margolies wanted to document both "ducks and decorated sheds"—the heroic and monumental as well as the ugly and ordinary, to borrow Venturi and Scott Brown's overused but still apt analogies—his sympathies in *The End of the Road* lay more with individualized idiosyncrasy than with modern standardization. This is reflected in the book's overall tone as well.

Throughout *White Towers* Hirshorn and Izenour maintain a cool neutrality. They appear critically distant, even detached from their subject. Beyond a quiet acknowledgment in the Introduction of a "fondness" for the buildings they study, they adhere to Venturi and Scott Brown's admonition to use "withholding judgment" as "a tool to make later judgment more sensitive."²⁹ As a writer, Margolies is not detached; he is engaged. His Introduction to *The End of the Road*

Figure 6. *White Towers*, typical page of Introduction, page 12. Graphic design by Muriel Cooper; photographs courtesy White Tower Corporate Archives; text by Paul Hirshorn and Steven Izenour; copyright 1979, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; reproduced by permission of the MIT Press.

Figure 7. White Tower, Camden #5 (1936), *White Towers*, typical portfolio page, page 83. Graphic design by Muriel Cooper; photographs courtesy White Tower Corporate Archives; text by Paul Hirshorn and Steven Izenour; copyright 1979, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; reproduced by permission of the MIT Press.

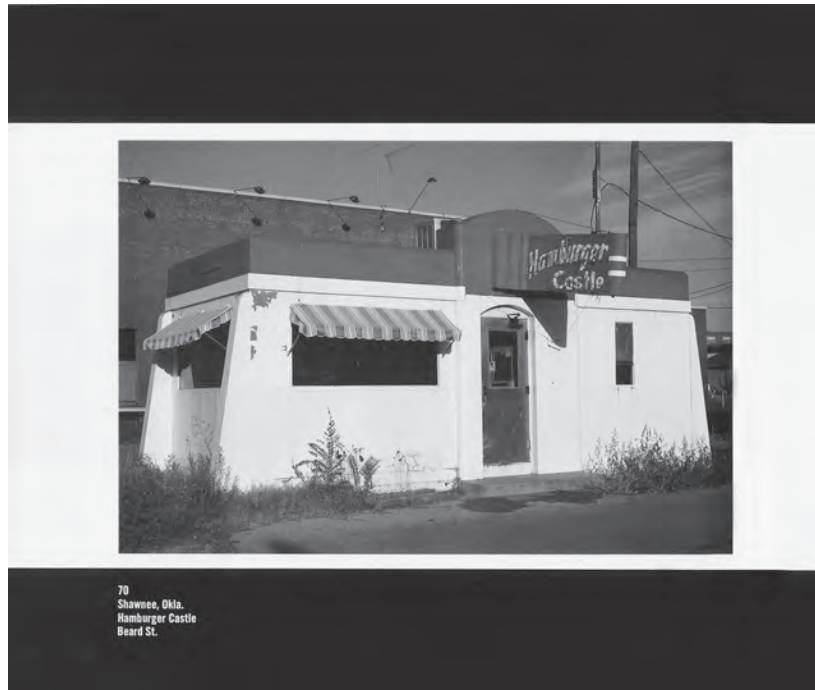
Figure 8. Hamburger Castle, Shawnee, Oklahoma, from *The End of the Road*. Graphic design by Ivan Chermayeff; photograph by John Margolies, circa 1979. Courtesy of John Margolies.

is not illustrative; it is evocative. Rather than a thoroughgoing analysis, we get an impressionistic periodization of roadside architectural development across “seven delirious decades.” This begins with Henry Ford’s production of the Model T and ends with the dual—and for Margolies—negative impact on the built environment of the interstate system and network television.³⁰ With his references to screaming billboards and hypnotically spinning gas pump gauges, Margolies is passionate and enthusiastic,

and his commitment to driving as the practice of freedom is as infectious as Jack Kerouac’s, to say nothing of Hunter S. Thompson’s or Tom Wolfe’s, with whom Margolies’s style here has clear parallels, especially in Wolfe’s essays on hot rods and electrographic architecture of the mid-1960s.³¹

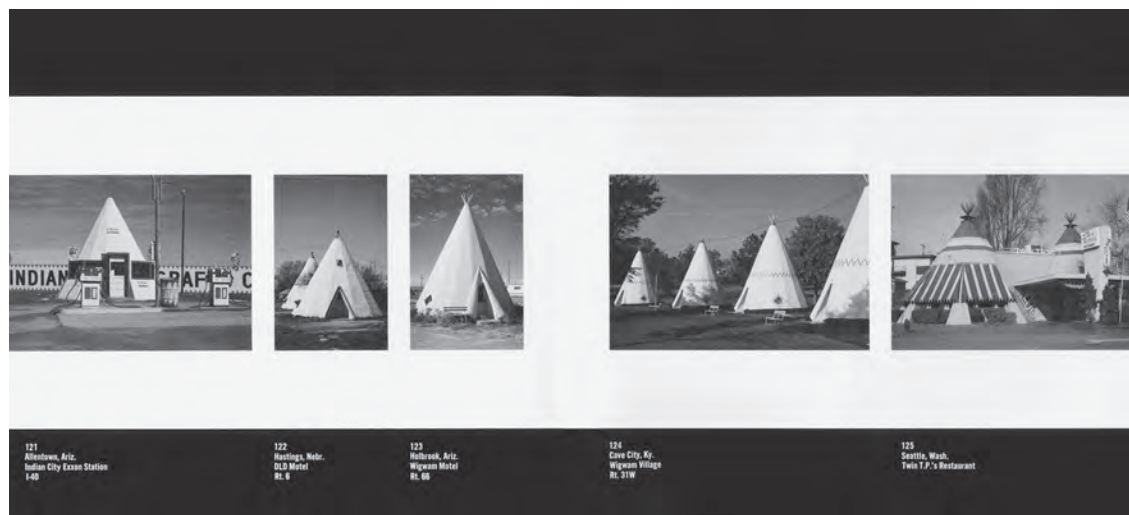
It is fair to say that throughout *The End of the Road*, Margolies does *not* withhold judgment, unlike Hirshorn and Izenour in *White Towers* (and Venturi and Scott Brown in *Learning from Las Vegas*). He makes nonneutral, value-laden declarations as fervently as any New Journalist. Thus, the text that accompanies the photographs is not adjunct; it is essential, revealing intentionality and ideology in a way that the photographs alone do not: “The commercial architecture by the side of the road is very important; it is America’s definitive contribution to the art of design in the twentieth century.”³² This is an emphatic pronouncement on the influence of the automobile, one guaranteed to rankle. But Margolies went even further: he did not admit mere timid affection for his photographic subjects; he unambiguously declared his love for them, without irony, without embarrassment, without condescension.

A decade earlier, on the opposite coast, Reyner Banham had done exactly the same thing, proclaiming his love for Los Angeles in a BBC documentary that included in its opening credits an outrageous pop billboard, designed by Debra Sussman and placed high above Santa



70 Shawnee, Okla.
Hamburger Castle
Beard St.

Figure 9. Teepee-shaped buildings in Arizona, Nebraska, Kentucky, and Washington, from *The End of the Road*. Graphic design by Ivan Chermayeff; photograph by John Margolies, circa 1977–80. Courtesy of John Margolies.



121
Alton, Ariz.
Indian City Excess Station
1-40

122
Hastings, Neb.
Old Motel
R. 9

123
Hartbrook, Ariz.
Wagon Motel
R. 66

124
Cave City, Ky.
Wagon Innings
R. 51W

125
Seattle, Wash.
Two 17's Restaurant

Monica Boulevard.³³ For architectural elites like Banham, loving some parts of Los Angeles was easy—the houses of Greene & Greene and Frank Lloyd Wright, of Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra, and the Case Study program. Even the freeway infrastructure, which Banham likened to Sixtus V's Rome and Haussmann's Paris, was so monumental that it was hard to discount. But Banham also loved the fantastic architecture of the commercial landscape. In the book on which his documentary was based, Banham situated these buildings within the four ecologies of suburbia, autopia, the foothills, and the plains. He dissected L.A.'s hamburger stands and coffee shops as “symbolic assemblages” of architecture that had much to tell us about the culture that produced them—not just in Los Angeles but as “a general phenomenon of U.S. life,” in which “doing your own thing” and movement and mobility were understood as distinctive cultural values.³⁴ More specifically, Banham argued that the roadside buildings of L.A.'s endless strips were the purest and most ridiculous embodiment of these values. Nonetheless, he loved them with, as he described his feelings for the city as a whole, “a passion that goes beyond all sense and reason.”³⁵

If Banham's conclusions were critically palatable in the 1970s, it may have been because he situated all that architectural mimesis and Googieness within a distinctly urban framework, within a vital, still-growing city, as opposed to Margolies's preference for “cities where growth came to a halt” and strips that “used to be main drags” but are now just in between.³⁶ Or maybe it was because Banham was British (he had not yet moved permanently to the United States), and there is a long tradition in this country of having foreign visitors explain America to us—from Frances Trollope to Alexis de Tocqueville to Charles Dickens.³⁷ Or maybe it was because Banham was a distinguished historian of modern architecture, author of the well-received *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* and *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*.³⁸ While these books were decidedly revisionist, they were grounded in the theory and practice of canonical modernism and its technofunctionalist foundations. Even in Banham's

radical work on Los Angeles, modernism was a point of departure. As Nigel Whiteley has shown, this helped Banham rationalize his enthusiasm for popular culture and legitimize its methodological incorporation into his work as a historian and critic.³⁹

As Margolies turned to popular culture at this same moment in the early 1970s, he began his own project of radical architectural critique, one that would have a direct bearing on *The End of the Road* and the thirteen thousand photographs that followed it. Although this project had some parallels with Banham's work on L.A., Margolies's starting point was entirely different. By his own recollection, Margolies had an intellectual reawakening in the late 1960s.⁴⁰ He majored in art history and journalism as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania and remained close to these disciplines while pursuing a master's degree at Penn's Annenberg School for Communication. Studying at the school while in its infancy, having been founded only in 1959, Margolies was exposed to the ferment of an emerging discipline. Thinkers like Gilbert Seldes—the school's first dean—were shaping a curriculum focused on “the study of the mass media in America.”⁴¹

The coursework combined what the catalogue described as the production of media in studio-like workshops, with the study of its philosophical concepts in lectures and colloquia, along with a practice of “self-development” through the writing of professional journals reviewed by members of the faculty several times a year. This program was more experimental than a standard academic balance of theory, practice, and criticism. It comes close to poststructuralist cultural studies, as it included not only the technical and creative processes of communication but also the relationship between mass media and society and the construction of the self of the author. An additional emphasis included exposing media's formal structure and analyzing its cultural ramifications, especially its public reception and its effect on “other contemporary phenomenon.”⁴²

In the mid-1960s, media critics and scholars regarded architecture as one of the more significant of such phenomena, and some, in

fact, viewed it as a system of mass communication in itself, including Marshall McLuhan, whose classic *Understanding Media* was published in 1964, the year Margolies received his M.A. In that book, along with his earlier studies *The Mechanical Bride* and *Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan saw architecture—individual buildings as well as settlement patterns—as a form of cultural production shaped and reshaped by the evolution of technologies of communication—from writing to the printing press to the automobile to television to other forms of electronic media whose properties and boundaries were as yet indistinct.⁴³ McLuhan’s ideas were such a part of the intellectual zeitgeist of the 1960s that it was inevitable they would contribute to Margolies’s critical development, but his direct contact with Gilbert Seldes was perhaps even more important.⁴⁴

Although McLuhan is often regarded as a pioneer in the field, Seldes advocated for the study of popular culture almost four decades earlier, notably in *The 7 Lively Arts*. This book called for the expansion of serious criticism to such popular arts as vaudeville, motion pictures, and radio. It appeared originally in 1924, but Seldes published a revised edition in 1957, updating his arguments to analyze television, to express skepticism about corporate domination of entertainment, to question the relationship between high culture and low, to scrutinize the increasing professionalization and specialization in the production of popular art, and to wonder if the transformation of popular culture into mass culture meant that what was gained in democratization was lost in the degradation of taste.⁴⁵

All of these issues became abiding concerns for Margolies in the early years of his professional practice as an editor, writer, photographer, curator, and programmer. Whether employed by *Architectural Record*, freelancing for *Progressive Architecture* or *Art in America*, or organizing lectures and exhibitions for the Architectural League or the American Federation of Arts, Margolies turned his critical lens on contemporary culture and gradually began to reevaluate what he called the “suburban reality” of his youth.⁴⁶ As he did this, Margolies realized that reevaluation was not

enough; he realized that it might also be necessary to reject the traditional cultural hierarchies that surrounded him, even in the late 1960s, even in the midst of the vibrant artistic and architectural movement known as Pop.

Margolies was not on the margins of Pop in the 1960s, he was right in the middle of it. He appeared in Andy Warhol’s 1965 film *Camp* as Mar-Mar, the guy with the yo-yo, and seems to have absorbed a degree of Warhol’s detachment and even diffidence—something that found its way into his photography, although not his writing. Margolies also promoted what would come to be known as video art, including Warhol’s *Underground Sundae* of 1968, a sixty-second piece commissioned as a television commercial by the Schrafft’s restaurant chain in an attempt to update its dowdy image.⁴⁷ Depicting an out-of-focus, super close-up of a chocolate sundae as it might have appeared on a poorly tuned TV, the video prompted Schrafft’s to place an “underground sundae” on its actual dessert menu; Margolies quoted the description in full in an essay in *Art in America*: “Yummy Schrafft’s vanilla ice cream in two groovy heaps with three ounces of mind-blowing chocolate sauce undulating with a mountain of pure whipped cream topped with a pulsating maraschino cherry served in a bowl as big as a boat. \$1.10.”⁴⁸

Margolies understood that Warhol’s *Underground Sundae*—like so much of his work—was about collapsing the boundaries between high culture and low, between art and commerce. It was also about blurring the boundaries between representation and reality, between imagery and the thing itself. His larger goal in that *Art in America* essay, called “TV—the Next Medium of Art,” was to consider how television was fostering these cultural shifts. In addition to a thoughtful analysis of the early work of Les Levine, Eric Siegel, and Nam June Paik, Margolies wrote an incisive, McLuhan-inflected critique of how television shaped perception and how artists were exploiting that condition. In particular, he noted that the “information explosion” of the electronic age was transforming the way humans assimilate and process visual and aural data, replacing prolonged focus with shifting attention and

simultaneous perception.⁴⁹ In other words, the static becomes mobile; concentration becomes distraction. Once Margolies got behind the wheel of an automobile, this perspective would, almost literally, drive his understanding of the architectural forms and cultural meanings of roadside buildings—and the way they were shaped by what later critics have called the mobilized gaze and the zoomscape.⁵⁰

It is worth quoting this essay at length, because in it Margolies provides a cogent explanation, even a theoretical foundation, for key parts of his subsequent practice, particularly as it would relate to his analysis and documentation of the commercial vernacular:

The process level [his term for how we process information] affirms direct, sensory perception, with content determined by individual relevance, rather than by formalized, intellectual considerations. It denies the traditional “critical” function of the critic, since relevant standards cannot be established beyond one’s personal experience. Art at the process level denies a fixed relationship between spectator and object or event because there is no fixed space or time, and there are no absolute distinctions such as right and wrong, good and bad, beginning and end. The process level generates such art forms as environmental art . . . happenings . . . and architecture considered as broad, interdisciplinary design.⁵¹

Margolies was well qualified to comment on the relationship between architecture and process-level perception, because at that moment he was in the midst of organizing the “Environment” series at the Architectural League of New York. Margolies began this program at the request of League president Ulrich Franzen who wanted help breathing new life into the fusty institution.⁵²

Founded in 1881, the League enjoyed a pre-eminent position in the New York architecture world from the Gilded Age to World War II, and its annual exhibition, of Beaux-Arts design almost exclusively, was an important venue for making or breaking establishment reputations. After the ascendance and institutionalization of modernism, the League struggled to remain rele-

vant.⁵³ In 1960, though, during the presidency of Robert Cutler, a partner as Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, it initiated new public programs intended to revive the League as a center for the discourse of contemporary practice. Reyner Banham and Philip Johnson debated the future of the International Style now that it had been assimilated into mainstream practice. Robert A. M. Stern, freshly graduated from Yale, presented the work of Charles Moore, Robert Venturi, and other young designers who were challenging the conventions of modernism and helping to shape what came to be known as postmodernism.⁵⁴

As chair of the League’s current work committee, Margolies added to this ferment: he curated a series of experimental installations and environmental exhibitions that offered an entirely different direction for pushing against modernism’s dominance. Described by the encyclopedic *New York 1960* as “one of the era’s most important demonstrations of new artistic trends,” the *Environment* installations presented an architectural avant-garde dedicated to affirming how designing for performative, participatory, and spontaneous experience might upend traditional notions of built space and form.⁵⁵

Environment 1 consisted of site-specific work by British pop artists Gerald Laing and Richard Smith, as well as a photoelectric pinball machine by Enrique Castro-Cid. The exhibition announcement, provocatively, featured a detail of Giulio Romano’s *Fall of the Giants* from the Palazzo Té in Mantua. The selection of this mannerist fresco—with its collapsing classical colonnade and shuddering brick walls—was surely meant to serve notice, however wryly, of an intention to shake the League, if not New York architecture culture to its very foundations.

Many of these shows involved kinetic and even kinesthetic transformations of space through light and sound. For *Environment 2* Charles Ross lined a gallery with polyurethane sheeting, dripping yellow water, and strobe lights. This “staggering super happening” was “guaranteed to discombobulate the senses,” according to contemporary reviews.⁵⁶ In *Environment 6* Lila Katzen built platforms embedded with acrylic sheets and ultraviolet lights, conjuring effects

that visitors compared to stained glass but which also echoed the pre-World War I glass architecture proposals of German Expressionists like Bruno Taut. His reputation as a modernist had recently been rehabilitated by Banham's revision of the Siegfried Giedion and Nikolaus Pevsner functionalist architectural canon.⁵⁷ Jackie Cassen and Rudi Stern's *Environment 5* was equally multicolored, but it induced a more intense sensory overload through their installation of plexiglass geometric forms, viewer-activated sound recordings, and moving light projections.⁵⁸ "Young people recline on the floor enraptured," one critic recalled, which is not surprising since *Life* magazine had labeled Cassen and Stern's work as a leading example of "LSD Art."⁵⁹

Environment 3 and *Environment 4* were the most conventionally architectural, in that they involved the manipulation of three-dimensional space rather than two-dimensional effects. This, perhaps, made them the most provocative installations of all. Like the mimetic and formally exhibitionist structures with which Margolies

would be later preoccupied, these installations used familiar architectural means—the stuff of building—to produce conditions of architectural otherness. If the ducks and donuts were figural architecture, these were its abstract counterparts. John Lobell's *Corridors* was about dislocation within repetition and collapsing the boundaries between architecture and music (Figure 10). As visitors negotiated a diagonal grid of kinked partitions, or freestanding corners, red on one side and yellow on the other, they tripped white noise recordings that served as their only means of orientation. This experience conditioned what the *Village Voice* characterized as "cool involvement."⁶⁰

In Les Levine's *Slipcover*, remaining cool was out of the question. Levine installed three galleries floor-to-ceiling with Mirro-Brite Mylar. He used some of it as a wall covering and some of it as giant pillows that deflated and inflated on a regular cycle in a more deliberately spatial and phantasmagoric version of Warhol's *Silver Clouds* (Figure 11).⁶¹ The effect, which distorted floor, walls, and ceiling to create a spatial continuum, was like entering a highly reflective cave, or, perhaps, a swinger's bedroom. During the run of *Environment 3*, Levine commented that a number of people had told him that *Slipcover* made them want to take off all their clothes and run around naked.⁶² This is hardly the kind of response Architectural League exhibitions had generally prompted in the past, and it is a testament to Margolies's success as an agent provocateur—a role that segued neatly into his guest editorship of a double issue of *Design Quarterly* dedicated to "Conceptual Architecture."

Figure 10. John Lobell, *Environment 4: Corridors*, 1967, installation view, Architectural League of New York. Courtesy of Architectural League of New York and Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

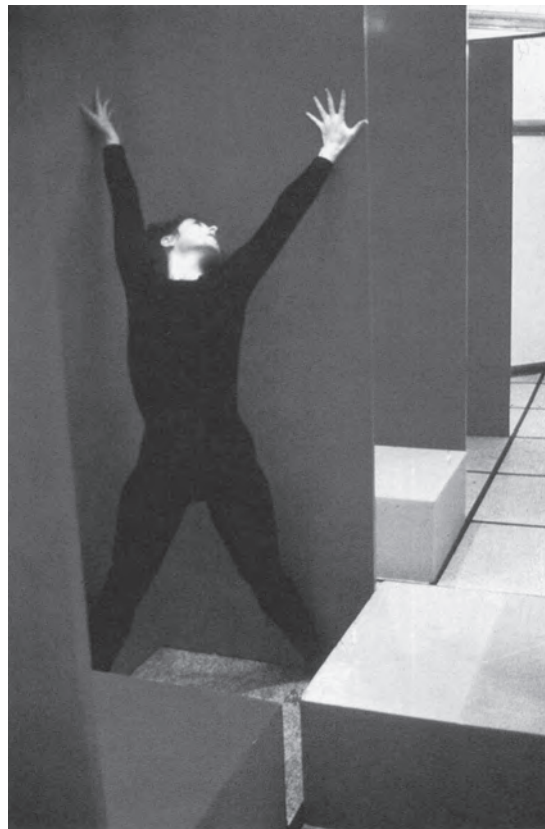


Figure 11. Les Levine, *Environment 3: Slipcover*, 1967, installation view, Architectural League of New York. Courtesy of Architectural League of New York and Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



If the *Environment* installations were largely abstract, or “far out” as Margolies described them recently, they were still principally physical and material.⁶³ The work he curated for *Design Quarterly* in 1970 was on another plane entirely. And yet, careful examination of the speculative, even absurd, projects he published in this issue reveals that, in defying the high-seriousness and supposed rationalism of modernism, these, too, pointed in the direction of Margolies’s burgeoning interest in the American roadside. In the 1970s, *Design Quarterly*, published by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, was the nation’s leading forum for debate and discussion of “everyday art,” which it defined as graphic, industrial, and architectural design. *Design Quarterly* was also one of the only publications where the work of these distinct professions and disciplines were analyzed and critiqued in a unified way. Its issues were generally devoted to a single theme—“Swiss Design” or “Signs and Symbols”—and *Design Quarterly*’s short list of invited guest editors was highly distinguished—Reyner Banham, Rudolf Arnheim, György Kepes, and in 1970, John Margolies.⁶⁴

The list of those who responded to Margolies’s call for submissions, and were subsequently published in the “Conceptual Architecture” issue, reads like a who’s-who of the international avant-garde of the late 1960s. Young architectural collectives, including those from the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Austria, were especially well represented. Ant Farm, Archigram, Archizoom, Haus-Rucker-Co., and Superstudio all eschewed traditional models of studio practice and rejected the idea of the building as the object of architecture. They embraced, in fact, reveled in the counterculture with a design methodology that favored utopian experiments and anarchic propositions. They combined the forms and ideas of modernism, pop culture, and mass media into an architectural mash-up of public performance and throwaway dissemination, of happenings and ’zines. Their work was antimonumental and ephemeral, everything that architecture was not supposed to be—which is precisely why it was so in sync with Margolies’s ideas.

The Haus-Rucker Co. submission documented

the events this group staged in New York as part of “Vanilla Futures.” The project imagined new intersections of public and private space and program. These “crazy kid architects,” as they were called in the press, set up a giant air mattress for people to flop on, baked an enormous cake for people to eat, and moved into what was then the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, in a brownstone on West 53rd Street, inviting people to shower, sleep, and shave alongside them.⁶⁵ That the Museum of Modern Art was right across the street undoubtedly gave their assault on modernist propriety an added kick.

Ant Farm offered a proposal for the “World’s Largest Snake.” This rainbow-colored inflatable structure was 220 feet long and powered by a fleet of “media vans” that would also move it from location to location, along the “universal mass consumption grid” of America’s shopping centers.⁶⁶ Once deployed, visitors would pass through a sequence of technologically mediated but still bodily erotic experiences before arriving at the “snake, rattle, and roll room” that was the structure’s participatory and spatial climax. Three years before the *Orgasmitron* debuted in Woody Allen’s *Sleeper*, Ant Farm managed to combine the mass-sexualization of Huxley’s *Brave New World* with the hyperconsumption spectacles of postwar theme parks and shopping malls.

However absurd the pneumatic architecture of the “World’s Largest Snake” might seem, the theatricalized sensuality of its sequenced interiors had an actual, material correlate in the contemporary commercial landscape, one with which Margolies was already familiar: those bastions of mid-century swank and glamour, the American resort hotels of the 1950s and 1960s. In Las Vegas, Wayne McAllister was designing buildings like the Sands. Low-slung and desert-toned, its structural exhibitionism was the perfect backdrop for the self-conscious cool of the Rat Pack. In Miami Beach, Morris Lapidus was designing buildings like the Fontainebleau. High-rise and tropically flavored, its ornamental exuberance was the ideal setting for the aspirational leisure of newly prosperous, middle-class ethnics, especially, as Alice Friedman has noted, Jews of Eastern European descent (Figure 12).⁶⁷



Figure 12. Morris Lapidus, Fontainebleu Hotel, Miami Beach, 1952–55, ocean façade, Gottscho-Schleisner Archive, Library of Congress.

The general public embraced these hotels as much as the architectural elite reviled them. Indeed, the East Coast architectural establishment spent the better part of two decades trying to ignore Lapidus’s work, in particular.⁶⁸ But ignoring the hotels of Morris Lapidus became increasingly difficult as he became one of the most successful architects in the country. He had more work on his boards than “Mies, Corbusier, and Gropius [had] to show for their collective lifetimes,” the editors of *Interior Design* magazine drily proposed.⁶⁹ In 1970, it became impossible to ignore.

That year, Margolies organized one final exhibition for the Architectural League. It was called “Architecture of Joy”—a solo show of the work of Morris Lapidus (Figure 13). As designed by members of the Lapidus firm, including his son, Alan, the exhibit featured two great curving walls that evoked the architect’s signature formal gesture. These were hung with large-scale photographs of hotel interiors and supergraphic quotes drawn from decades of skeptical if not damning criticism, which was also reproduced in the broadside that served as the show’s catalogue.⁷⁰ The show also included displays of Lapidus-designed hotel ephemera—bellhop uniforms, restaurant china, and matchbooks, including some from Margolies’s own collection.

Finally, two flourishes were typical of Margolies’s curatorial preferences and turned *Architecture of Joy* into a multimedia extravaganza. First, in a simulacrum of a Lapidus hotel lobby, Margolies arranged to have Muzak piped into the League’s gallery on East 65th Street. Reviewers of the exhibition dwelled on this feature almost fetishistically.⁷¹ Second, Margolies installed two simultaneous projections of still and motion pictures depicting some of the sixty-eight hotels and eighteen thousand rooms Lapidus had designed by 1970. Reviewers only occasionally noted this feature, but time has revealed its significance: the League’s Lapidus slide show was possibly the first public presentation of Margolies’s architectural photography.

It might also have been the most controversial presentation of Margolies’s architectural photography. Although he knew an exhibition devoted to a figure as culturally mainstream, and thus as architecturally marginal, as Lapidus would provoke debate, no one could have anticipated the acrimony that ensued. The old guard and the new guard of American architecture battled each other over what one side decried as a valorization of vulgarity that would damage the credibility of the profession and the other side proclaimed as a straightforward analysis of aesthetics and taste that would force the profession into critical self-examination.

Given the changing architecture culture of the times, the outcome of the contest was never really in doubt: the old guard modernists were trounced by the new guard postmodernists under the *nom de guerre* of Pop.⁷² “The revolutionists” are “now fully-installed,” outgoing League president Ulrich Franzen complained in the pages of *Architectural Forum*. They “persuaded their elders that their hour had struck,” he continued, “for only they knew the course through the multi-media sea since they were anointed with the taste of grass and were raised in the light of flashing strobes.”⁷³ One senses that Franzen regretted his decision to give Margolies a post at the League, and he, along with board member Sybil Moholy-Nagy, the architectural historian and critic, responded to the show with outraged, righteous anger over what they viewed as “Lawrence

Welk” architecture. In their view, Lapidus’s work represented a reactionary “aesthetic backlash” and “rampant anti-intellectualism” paralleling the social and political conservatism that accompanied the rise of Richard Nixon.⁷⁴

The debate raged for months—far longer, in fact, than the exhibition itself, which was on view for a mere five weeks. Tom Wolfe spoke at a forum on taste held in the ballroom of Lapidus’s Americana Hotel on West 53rd Street.⁷⁵ And architects as diverse as John Johansen, then known for Brutalist work, and Peter Eisenman of the New York Five spoke out on the show’s behalf, coming not so much to Lapidus’s defense as to Margolies’s. Eisenman, who had contributed to Margolies’s *Design Quarterly* issue, chided the League’s board—which he had just joined—for attempting to “limit debate and codify taste” by denying the exhibition a place on the schedule.⁷⁶ Margolies finally responded to the controversy in the September issue of *Progressive Architecture*, a journal whose name obviously indicated its editorial agenda. The title of Margolies’s essay indicated his: “Now, Once and for All, Know Why I Did It.”

Here Margolies explained that he was presenting Lapidus’s work as a serious investigation of the “silent majority.” He analyzed an architecture that gave full cultural expression to a middle class that saw itself as increasingly embattled during the social and political upheavals of the era. He boldly addressed the issue of taste:

Morris Lapidus continues to masterfully execute one tour de force after another in the worst taste imaginable to esthetes within the architectural establishment. Good taste? Bad taste? Such arbitrary value judgments are meaningless and interchangeable as concepts within the realm of human experience.⁷⁷

If one set aside what Margolies called “such superficial considerations of taste,” it was possible to understand Lapidus as “an eloquent spokesman of popular taste” and “a sophisticated humanist” whose work privileged the needs of “the people” first and foremost.⁷⁸

While this was obviously a defense of the exhi-

bition, in explaining how Lapidus combated the “intellectual elitism” of modernism, Margolies was, in fact, describing his own critical project. Peter Eisenman had also done this when he wrote that, in organizing *Architecture of Joy*, Margolies had identified the central issue of contemporary discourse: architecture “as a populist phenomenon” versus architecture “as an elitist fantasy.”⁷⁹ From 1970 on, mapping the limits of that *populist phenomenon* was to be Margolies’s singular vocation.

By October 1970, when the Lapidus exhibit opened in New York, Margolies had already decamped to the West Coast, where he had set up

Figure 13. *Architecture of Joy*, catalogue broadside, 1970, Architectural League of New York. Courtesy of Architectural League of New York and Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



GUEST EDITOR

John Margolies has been resident critic at the American Federation of Arts, New York, for the past year. He is currently living and working in Los Angeles, continuing as a consultant to the American Federation of Arts.

From 1964-68 he was Assistant Editor of *Architectural Record*, and worked as a free-lance writer and photographer on architecture, the arts and mass media for *Architectural Forum*, *Progressive Architecture* and *Art in America*. Mr. Margolies directed the Architectural League of New York's program of lectures and exhibitions from 1966-68. Exhibitions organized for the League by Mr. Margolies include: "Prisms, Lenses, Water, Light" by Charles Ross and USCO; "Slipcover" by Les Levine; "Light Floors" by Lila Katsen; "Morris Lapidus: Architecture of Joy," to be circulated by the American Federation of Arts.

John Margolies and Billy Adler are partners in Telethon, a company concerned with the documentation of commercial, home-screen television. Telethon's activities have appeared in *Show Magazine* and have recently been shown in the exhibition "Recorded Activities" at the Moore College of Art, Philadelphia.

Mr. Margolies is the second critic selected to develop an issue of *DESIGN QUARTERLY* for the Walker Art Center/Graham Foundation program in design criticism.



Lee — Lee's Barstools and Dinettes

Cal Worthington — Worthington Dodge

Figure 14. Photograph of John Margolies by Billy Adler, Conceptual Architecture issue, *Design Quarterly* 78/79 (1970): 67. Courtesy the Walker Art Center.

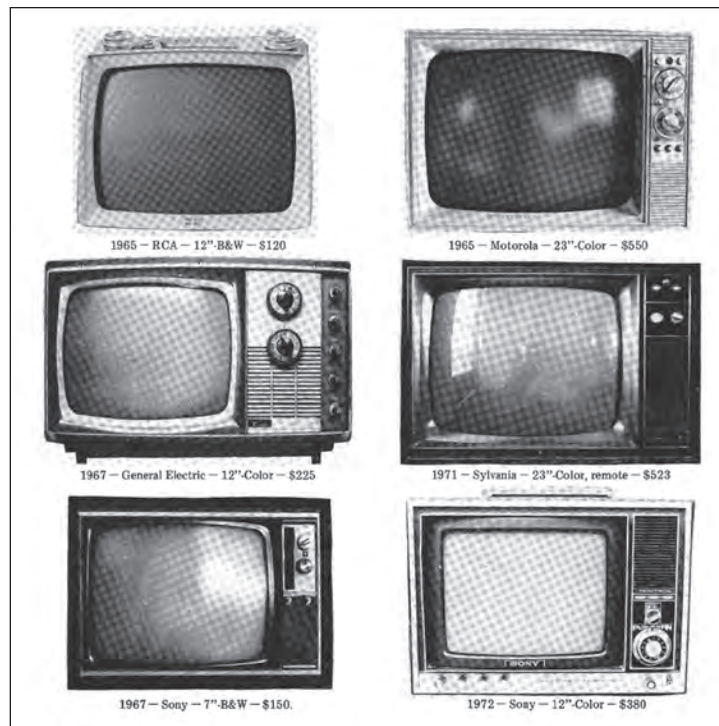
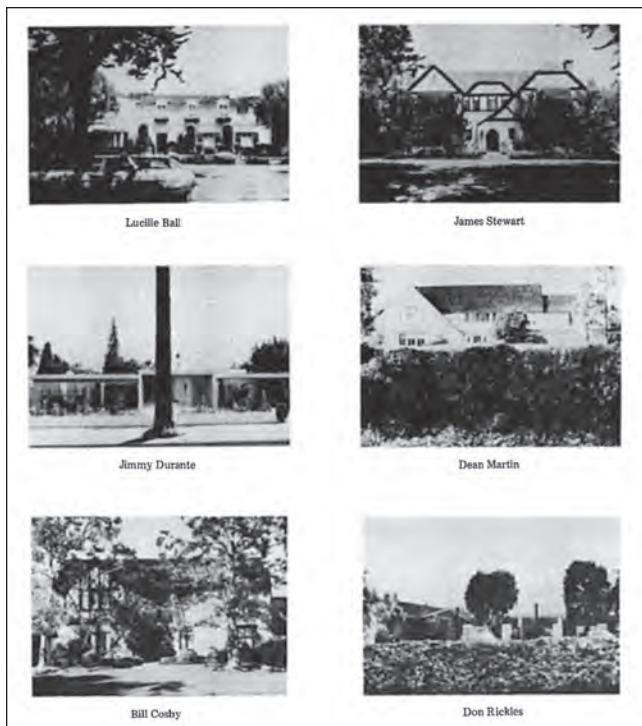
Figure 15. Telethon, "Commercials: Lee's Barstools and Dinettes and Worthington Dodge," *The Television Environment, Radical Software* 2 (1973): 33. Courtesy of John Margolies. Thanks to Davidson Gigliotti and editors Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot of *Radical Software*.

shop in Santa Monica and established a small collective known as Telethon (Figure 14). As organized by Margolies, Billy Adler, and Ilene Segalove, Telethon's earliest work was an obsessive documentation of what they eventually called "the television environment." Motivated by the notion that television was the most influential medium in the history of the world—the precursor to the Internet was still in planning stages at Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency—Telethon spent five years taking screen shots and videos from broadcast TV: news and sports programs, special events, game and talk shows, beauty pageants and commercials (Figure 15). This project was about making the ephemeral permanent, by capturing in fixed form those fleeting images that Telethon believed were "a vital force in determining our culture, our values, and our fantasies." Their conclusion was that it was becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish television from reality,

"to separate what is inside and what is outside the TV Environment."⁸⁰ In an era of 24/7 news and "Real Housewives" from Orange County to New Jersey, Telethon's conclusion might seem obvious to the point of banality, but in the early 1970s theirs was a fresh and striking analysis, as was indicated by the project's reception.⁸¹

Telethon organized a traveling exhibition through the American Federation of Arts, where Margolies was still a consultant, and in 1971 *The Television Environment* toured the country from Berkeley to Baltimore. The installation consisted of twelve projectors loaded with one thousand slides of everything from the Apollo 11 moon landing and Teddy Kennedy apologizing for Chappaquiddick to the Lone Ranger and Arlene Francis blindfolded on *What's My Line*. Simultaneously, four TV sets were tuned to random local channels with the stated purpose of relating art to life. The whole thing may have befuddled visitors, as *Time* magazine reported, but it won the attention of artists and curators back in New York.⁸² Parts of the *Televised Environment* were included in the 1975 Whitney Biennial (along with the early video art of Bill Viola, William Wegman, and Lynda Benglis), and it was featured in *Radical Software*, an influential but short-lived journal of video media.⁸³ In fact, Telethon was responsible for the entire special issue of *Radical Software* that appeared in 1973, and it signaled an important shift in the direction of their work.

Here, for the first time, Telethon's documentation of the television environment moved out of the environment of the television and into the environment television was shaping, from the homes of TV stars to the TV sets themselves as physical objects (Figures 16 and 17).⁸⁴ The degree to which this had become a primary interest for at least one of Telethon's members is evident in the final pages of the issue, a two-page spread of products and services available for purchase. On offer were lectures on Lapidus and resort hotels; on the "architecture of our lives"—those quotidian and overlooked places where our primary social interactions take place; and on "the city experience as a day-to-day reality," focused on the vernacular commercial architecture of "the urban, man-made environment."⁸⁵ In addition,



there were color slides—a set of a hundred cost \$75—of ice cream parlors and coffee shops, and of the Madonna Inn in San Luis Obispo, which was also featured in an article Telethon published in *Progressive Architecture* that same year.

With a witty, yet penetrating text accompanied by reproductions of color-saturated Kodachromes, “Roadside Mecca” chronicles the development of the resort complex built by highway contractor Alex Madonna and his wife Phyllis beginning in 1959 (Figure 18). It is a sprawling set of buildings with picturesque massing and vague Swiss chalet-styling housing over one hundred guest rooms, a five-hundred-seat restaurant, a coffee shop, and a gas station (Figure 19). Telethon characterized the Madonna Inn as “an extraordinary architectural monument, full of feeling and overflowing with layer upon layer of lavish detail.”⁸⁶ Indeed, it is the *details*, of the interiors in particular, that captured Telethon’s attention: the meticulous craftsmanship, the rigorous customization, the minutiae of formal expression found in huge boulders, stained glass, hand-sawn verge boards, leather bedspreads, waterfall urinals, and a consistent use of “Madonna pink” from lamp post to banquette to bread (Figure 20).

Describing the densely composed interiors as “super real,” Telethon likened the precise rendering of the details to a Jan Van Eyck painting.⁸⁷ Such observations would be sufficient to render “Roadside Mecca” an important document in the historiography of the commercial landscape, but a careful reading of the text shows it to be something else as well.

Highlighting the Madonnas’ lack of formal design training and rejection of architectural advice, Telethon noted how architects ranging from Richard Neutra to Charles Moore admired it. Addressing the astonishing variety of the Inn’s 109 highly differentiated thematic rooms—no two are alike—Telethon decried “the sterile, franchised reality of a Holiday Inn or Hilton.” Explaining the Madonnas’ spectacularly subjective approach to décor, Telethon noted that the proprietors were determined to remain “unscathed by the aesthetic criticism of those who know or think they know.”⁸⁸ A celebration of untutored design, a critique of modern homogenization, a refusal of the conventions of taste, a subject on the margins of architecture culture but in the mainstream of popular culture, Telethon might have started out documenting

Figure 16. Telethon, “TV Stars’ Homes,” *The Television Environment*, *Radical Software 2* (1973): 39. Courtesy of John Margolies. Thanks to Davidson Gigliotti and editors Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot of *Radical Software*.

Figure 17. Telethon, “Our TV Sets,” *The Television Environment*, *Radical Software 2* (1973): 60. Courtesy of John Margolies. Thanks to Davidson Gigliotti and editors Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot of *Radical Software*.



Figure 18. Madonna Inn, San Luis Obispo, sign, from Telethon, "Roadside Mecca," *Progressive Architecture* 54 (November 1973). Photograph by John Margolies. Courtesy of John Margolies.



Figure 19. Madonna Inn, San Luis Obispo, lamp post and main building, from Telethon, "Roadside Mecca," *Progressive Architecture* 54 (November 1973). Photograph by John Margolies. Courtesy of John Margolies.

the architectural fantasy of the Madonna Inn, but it ended up producing an architectural polemic, one that Margolies's work had been pointing toward for years.

It is easy to imagine how Margolies would have discussed the Madonna Inn in Telethon's vernacular architecture lecture. Rejecting a reading of contemporary architecture as "the lasting work of great masters," he would have explained it as part of "the ephemeral environment [that] appears, disappears and reappears."⁸⁹ By its own admission, in 1973 Telethon's knowledge of those ephemeral environments was confined largely to the coasts and focused mainly on New York and Los Angeles. The following year, with funding from the Architecture + Environmental Arts program of the National Endowment for the Arts—

with the largest Professional Education and Development grant the NEA awarded that year, John Margolies set out to study the three thousand miles in between.⁹⁰ He stayed behind the wheel for three decades, travelling more than a hundred thousand miles, visiting every state in the continental United States, and producing a body of work that stands now as an archive of impressive breadth and depth.

The work Margolies produced in these years has now entered the Library of Congress, taking its place alongside the photographic archive of the New Deal's Farm Security Administration, to which Phil Patton has aptly compared it.⁹¹ The parallels are obvious: as Roy Stryker's stable of FSA photographers moved beyond their initial mandate to record the living conditions of the

rural poor, they frequently turned their attention to the nation's expanding roadsides in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In the photographs of John Vachon, Dorothea Lange, Marion Post Wolcott, and Walker Evans, one finds ample evidence of the same type of programmatic buildings, shacks, stands, stations, and signage that attracted Margolies three decades later. It seems inevitable, and right, that we should come to value the Margolies collection for the same reasons we appreciate the FSA archive, for both contain a wealth of documentary evidence that has much to tell us about the United States in the twentieth century.⁹² But as we begin to use Margolies's photographs, expanding our understanding of commercial vernacular architecture by scruti-

nizing the buildings they depict, we do well to remember something else the Margolies's collection shares with the FSA archive. Margolies's pictures, like those earlier documentary photographs, resulted from a distinct ideology and embodied a deliberate polemic. For Margolies, these emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in his work as a curator, critic, editor, and journalist, and also in his initial projects as a photographer. By using his writings and exhibitions to question architecture's mainstream values and undermine modernism's apparent cultural hegemony, John Margolies made an important contribution to the emergence of what we now understand as post-modernism. The thirteen thousand photographs that came after this early work are not only a

Figure 20. Madonna Inn, San Luis Obispo, banquettes in Gold Rush Dining Room, from Telethon, "Roadside Mecca," *Progressive Architecture* 54 (November 1973). Photograph by John Margolies. Courtesy of John Margolies.



record of the buildings of the commercial landscape in the second half of the twentieth century, they are also an architectural and cultural critique of quiet pungency and enduring relevance.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Gabrielle Esperdy is an architectural historian and critic and associate professor of architecture at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. Her work examines the intersection of architecture, consumerism, and modernism in the urban and suburban landscape, especially in the United States, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She is particularly interested in minor or everyday buildings and the ways that social, economic, and political issues shape the built environment. She is the author of *Modernizing Main Street* (2008). Her current book project examines how architectural discourse absorbed the ideals and concerns of the commercial sphere after World War II. She is editor of the *SAH Archipedia*, an online resource of the history of the built environment published by the Society of Architectural Historians and the University of Virginia Press.

NOTES

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1. One of those directly inspired by Margolies, Debra Jane Seltzer, is perhaps the best known and most active. Her “Roadside Architecture” website, with links to related Flickr pages and a WordPress blog, includes tens of thousands of her digital images, arranged typologically and geographically. She is also a regular contributor to the *Society for Commercial Archeology Journal*. See <http://www.agilitynut.com/roadside.html>.

2. John Margolies et al., *Resorts of the Catskills* (New

York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), and John Margolies, *Roadside America* (Köln: Taschen, 2010).

3. See John Margolies and E. Gwathmey, *Ticket to Paradise: American Movie Theaters and How We Had Fun* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991); John Margolies, *Fun along the Road* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998); John Margolies, *Pump and Circumstance: Glory Days of the Gas Station* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993).

4. For a discussion of Margolies’s preferred conditions for shooting, see Phil Patton, “Real America, Where Sky Is Blue and the Buildings Run Wild,” *Smithsonian* 19 (November 1988): 112–21. Margolies also discussed his photographic habits at a Library of Congress Symposium in March 2011. See *Marvels of the Roadside and Main Street America: John Margolies*, webcast of event on March 9, 2011: http://www.loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature_wdesc.php?rec=5204.

5. For a full account of the Alamo Plaza chain, see “Remember the Alamo Plazas,” in John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, *The Motel in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 90–119.

6. “Just put me behind the wheel, preferably going nowhere, and I become Christopher Columbus—in Arkansas.” John Margolies, *The End of the Road* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 11.

7. While this growth has been documented by numerous scholars, its impact on the built environment is usefully summarized in Kenneth Helphand, “McUrbia: The 1950s and the Birth of the Contemporary American Landscape,” *Places* 5 (1988): 40–49.

8. “Speaking of Pictures—Road Signs,” *Life* (27 June 1938): 4–6.

9. See “Man Made America,” a special issue of *Architectural Review* 108 (December 1950). Victor Gruen, “Cityscape and Landscape (1955),” reprinted in *Architecture Culture 1943–1968*, ed. Joan Ockman, 194–99 (New York: Rizzoli, 1993); Peter Blake, *God’s Own Junkyard* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1964).

10. See, for example, Douglas Haskell, “Architecture on U.S. 40 and 66,” *Architectural Review* 81 (February 1937): 101–8; Douglas Haskell, “Architecture and Popular Taste,” *Architectural Forum* 109 (August 1958): 104–9; J. B. Jackson, “Other Directed Houses (1957),” reprinted in *Landscapes: Selected Writings of J. B. Jackson*, ed. Ervin H. Zube, 55–72 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970).

11. These changing attitudes toward the commercial landscape, and the role they played in shaping the discourse of architecture and urbanism in the decades after World War II, are the subject of my current book project, *Architecture and Autopia*.

12. See, for example, William Jenkins, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (Rochester, N.Y.: International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House, 1975); Tom Wolfe, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965).

13. See, for example, David Gebhard and Robert Winter, *A Guide to Architecture in Southern California* (Los Angeles: LACMA, 1965); David Gebhard, "Introduction," *California Crazy: Roadside Vernacular Architecture*, 11–25 (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1980); Chester H. Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985). Banham and Venturi and Scott Brown are discussed below.

14. See *National Register of Historic Places Database*, <http://www.nrhpfocus.nps.gov>.

15. See *National Register of Historic Places Database*, <http://www.nrhpfocus.nps.gov>.

16. Vivien Raynor, "On the Roadsides Again," *New York Times*, August 2, 1981; Paul Goldberger, "Breuer Furniture; Neon, Hotels and Diners," *New York Times*, July 24, 1981, <http://www.newyorktimes.com>.

17. Folke T. Kihlstedt, "Review of *The End of the Road*," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 40, no. 4 (December 1981): 339–40. See also Folke T. Kihlstedt, "Formal and Structural Innovations in American Exposition Architecture, 1901–1939" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1973).

18. Kihlstedt, "Review," 340. The other book reviewed was Richard J. S. Gutman and Elliott Kaufman, *American Diner* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979). This book was an expanded, though less academic, version of Gutman's essay "Diner Design: Overlooked Sophistication," *Perspecta* 15 (1975): 41–53.

19. Paul Hirshorn and Steven Izenour, *White Towers* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1979), vi.

20. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972).

21. For recent analyses and critique of *Learning from Las Vegas* see Aron Vinegar and Michael J. Golec, eds., *Relearning from Las Vegas* (Minneapolis: Uni-

versity of Minnesota Press, 2009); Hilar Stadler and Martino Stierli, eds., *Las Vegas Studio* (Zurich: Verlag Scheidegger & Speiss, 2008); Kester Rattenbury and Samantha Hardingham, eds., *Supercrit #2: Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown Learning from Las Vegas* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2007).

22. National Endowment for the Arts, *Annual Report Fiscal Year 1971*, 15, <http://www.nea.gov/about/AnnualReports/NEA-Annual-Report-1971.pdf>.

23. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972; rev. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 3, 161.

24. The revised edition is the one with which most readers are familiar. The revision transformed the large format folio of the original into a trade paperback. On the differences between the two editions, see "Reducks, 1972, 1977," chapter 5 in Aron Vinegar, *I Am a Monument: On "Learning from Las Vegas"* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 111–71.

25. See Ed Ruscha, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* [Los Angeles, 1963] and Ed Ruscha, *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* [Los Angeles, 1967]. On the relationship between the work of Ed Ruscha and Venturi and Scott Brown see chapter 3 of Alexandra Schwartz, *Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 116–62.

26. Hirshorn and Izenour, *White Towers*, vi. As they describe it, "its conscious use of both signs and symbols, how it incorporates contemporary styles, and the criteria by which it measures success."

27. Hirshorn and Izenour, *White Towers*, vi.

28. Hirshorn and Izenour, *White Towers*, v.

29. Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, (1977), 3.

30. Margolies, *End of the Road*, 14.

31. Margolies, *End of the Road*, 11, 13. See Tom Wolfe, "New Life out There: Electro-Graphic Architecture," *New York Magazine*, December 9, 1968, 47–50.

32. Margolies, *End of the Road*, 13.

33. *Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles*, directed by Julian Cooper (London: BBC, 1972), DVD.

34. Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of the Four Ecologies* (1971; rpt. London: Penguin, 1990), 112, 124. Banham discusses the commercial vernacular in the chapter "Architecture II: Fantastic."

35. *Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles*, opening narrative.

36. Margolies, *End of the Road*, 11.

37. For more on Banham's critical assessment of the built environment of the United States, see Gabrielle Esperdy, "Discovering America in Reyner Banham's Rear View Mirror," *Places* (March 2012), <http://places.designobserver.com/>.

38. See Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (London: The Architectural Press, 1960); Reyner Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

39. See Nigel Whiteley, *Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

40. Margolies, *End of the Road*, 12.

41. Annenberg School for Communication, *Course Bulletin 1962–63* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1962), 1.

42. *Course Bulletin 1962–63*, 6–7. See also Annenberg School for Communications, "1959–2009: Celebrating Fifty Years, Deans," <http://50.asc.upenn.edu>, and "Visual Studies at Annenberg," <http://www.asc.upenn.edu/centers/visual-studies.aspx>.

43. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964). For a recent analysis of McLuhan and his influence in the 1960s, see W. Terrence Gordon, *McLuhan: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2010), especially chapter 4.

44. Margolies acknowledged in *Time* magazine in 1971 that McLuhan influenced his thinking. "Television: Pap Art," *Time*, November 1, 1971. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,905496,00.html>. Margolies discussed Seldes's influence with the author by phone and e-mail, February 2011.

45. Gilbert Seldes, *The 7 Lively Arts* (1924; rev. ed., New York: Sagamore Press, 1957). See also Michael G. Kammen, *The Lively Arts: Gilbert Seldes and the Transformation of Cultural Criticism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

46. Margolies, *End of the Road*, 12.

47. *Camp*, directed by Andy Warhol (New York: The Factory, 1965). On *Underground Sundae*, see Elizabeth Athens, "Andy Warhol's Production Kitchen," *Gastronomica* 9 (Spring 2009): 45–50.

48. John Margolies, "TV—the Next Medium of Art," *Art in America* 57 (September–October 1969): 48.

49. Margolies, "TV," 50.

50. See Mitchell Schwarzer, *Zoomscape: Architec-*

ture in Motion and Media (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004). Schwarzer defines zoomscape as "the overall arena of transformed architectural perception brought about by industrial technologies of motion and media" (17). See also Cotton Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

51. Margolies, "TV," 50.

52. See "Architectural League of New York Moves Its Headquarters; Reasserts Its Purposes," *Architectural Record* 141 (January 1967): 36. Margolies discussed his charge from Franzen with the author by phone and e-mail, February 2011.

53. The League's history is charted in Gregory Wessner, ed., *The Architectural League of New York 125 Years* (New York: Architectural League, 2006).

54. For a discussion of some of these events, see Ada Louise Huxtable, "Architects Examine New Directions at Summit Meeting," *New York Times*, May 21, 1961, xii. Barbara Plumb, "'40 under 40'—Young Designs in Living," *New York Times Magazine*, April 24, 1966, 49–50, 99. See also "Press Release: 40 under 40," April 25, 1966, *Architectural League of New York Records, 1888–1973*, Box 91, Archives of American Art [hereafter, ALNYR/AAA].

55. Robert A. M. Stern et al., *New York 1960* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 1207. Margolies is not given credit for organizing these programs.

56. "Environment II," *Architectural Forum* 126 (January/February 1967), and "Environment II," *World Journal Tribune*, January 27, 1967, press clippings, ALNYR/AAA.

57. "Press Release: Environment VI: 'Light Floors' by Artist Lila Katzen to Be Presented at the Architectural League of New York," April 1968, ALNYR/AAA.

58. "Press Release: Exhibition Will Transform Gallery into Infinite Environment," 4 December 1967, ALNYR/AAA.

59. N. J. Loftis, "Environment V: Vibrations," *Craft Horizons* 28 (March–April 1968): 54. "LSD Art," *Life*, September 9, 1966. See also Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (1970; electronic rpt. ARTSCILAB, 2001), 396–98, http://www.vasulka.org/Kitchen/K_Essays.html.

60. John Perrault, "What Is It?" *Village Voice*, September 21, 1967, press clipping, ALNYR/AAA. See also "Press Release: Environmental Exhibition will

Transform Gallery into a Musical Instrument of Architectural Scale,” September 1, 1967, ALNYR/AAA. *Corridors* was a collaboration with sculptor Michael Steiner.

61. “Press Release: Slip Cover by Less Levine Will Be Presented at Architectural League,” April 20, 1967, ALNYR/AAA.

62. Harold Stern, “Compulsion to Strip,” *The Telegram Toronto*, April 22, 1967, press clipping, ALNYR/AAA.

63. E-mail correspondence with the author, February 27, 2011.

64. “Design Quarterly, 1946–1993,” *Walker Art Center Publications*, <http://design.walkerart.org/detail.wac?id=2116&title=Publications>. See also Steven Heller, “Design Quarterly’s Online Life,” *Imprint*, January 7, 2011, <http://imprint.printmag.com>.

65. Haus-Rucker-Company, “Vanilla Future,” *Design Quarterly* 78/79 (1970): 29–33.

66. Ant Farm, “World’s Largest Snake,” *Design Quarterly* 78/79 (1970): 6–10. See also Caroline Maniaque, “Searching for Energy,” *Ant Farm, 1968–1978* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 21. On Ant Farm’s other projects see Felicity Scott, *Architecture or Techno-Utopia* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), especially chapter 8.

67. See Alice T. Friedman, “Merchandising Miami Beach: Morris Lapidus and the Architecture of Abundance,” *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 25 (June 2005): 216–53.

68. See Gabrielle Esperdy, “I am a Modernist: Morris Lapidus and His Critics,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 66, no. 4 (December 2007): 494–517.

69. O. G., “Resort Hotels,” *Interiors* 116 (April 1957): 103.

70. See John Margolies, *Morris Lapidus: Architecture of Joy* (New York: Architectural League of New York and American Federation of Arts, 1970). See also “Morris Lapidus Papers” and “Records of Morris Lapidus Show” in ALNYR/AAA, box 97. Currently, there are no installation views of the exhibition accessible.

71. See, for example, Walter McQuade, “Architecture,” *Nation* 193 (December 1961): 457; “Talk of the Town: Playful,” *New Yorker*, August 5, 1961: 20–21.

72. It is worth noting that the architects and critics in the modernist camp were uninterested in differences of opinion that might have existed among those

across the ideological divide, i.e., how and why Margolies and Venturi, Scott Brown (along with Hirshorn and Izenour) diverged in their attitudes toward an embrace of a popular landscape.

73. Ulrich Franzen, “The Joy Boy,” *Architectural Forum* 133 (October 1970): 67.

74. Sybil Moholy-Nagy, letter to Arthur Rosenblatt, quoted in Morris Lapidus, *An Architecture of Joy* (New York: E. A. Seemann, 1979), 211.

75. “Best Bits,” *New York Magazine*, October 26, 1970: 55.

76. Peter Eisenman, “Letter to Arthur Rosenblatt, 17 July 1970,” reprinted in *Morris Lapidus: Architecture of Joy*, n.p.

77. John Margolies, “Now, Once and for All, Know Why I Did It,” *Progressive Architecture* 51 (September 1970): 118.

78. Margolies, “Now, Once and for All,” 118.

79. Eisenman, “Letter,” n.p.

80. Telethon, “The TV Environment,” *Radical Software* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1973), n.p.

81. The work of scholars like Robert J. Thompson and Lynn Spigel has demonstrated just how prescient Telethon was.

82. See “Television: Pap Art.”

83. See “Whitney Museum of American Art—Video Program,” Video History Project, <http://www.experimental-tvcenter.org/history/groups/gtext.php?id=102>.

84. Telethon, “The TV Environment,” 38–39, 60.

85. Telethon, “The TV Environment,” 62–63.

86. Telethon, “Roadside Mecca,” *Progressive Architecture* 54 (November 1973): 124.

87. Telethon, “Roadside Mecca,” 126.

88. Telethon, “Roadside Mecca,” 128.

89. Telethon, “The TV Environment,” 63.

90. National Endowment for the Arts, *Annual Report*, 1973, 21. National Endowment for the Arts, *Annual Report*, 1974, 14. That year the NEA’s Architecture + Environmental Arts Program, under the leadership of Bill Lacy, initiated a national theme on “city edges”—focusing on boundary conditions, like waterways, railroads, and highways, that “shape and define urban areas.” The following year, the program expanded its theme to “city options”—focusing on projects “concentrating on special settings within communities that provide distinctive character and identity.” Though Margolies’s funding was in a separate

category, it is hard to imagine that the NEA would have awarded him a \$55,000 grant if his proposal had been unrelated to these Bicentennial-designated themes. In fact, Margolies's project promised to deftly combine them: city edges were his project's literal location; city options were his literal subject.

91. Phil Patton, "Introduction," to *Roadside America* by Margolies, 10–11.

92. See, for example, the following FSA photographs: John Vachon's 1940 photograph of a gas station in Benton Harbor, Michigan; Marion Post Walcott's 1940 photograph of the Wigwam Village #2 near Bardstown, Kentucky; Dorothea Lange's 1939 photograph of a dog-shaped refreshment stand on U.S. 99 in Oregon. These images are available online at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fahome.html>.

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