

Turning Twenty

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By: Daniel Solomon, Principal
dsolomon@solomonetc-wrt.com

PHILADELPHIA

Wallace Roberts & Todd, LLC

260 South Broad Street
8th Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19102
T 215.732.5215
F 215.732.2551

CORAL GABLES

Wallace Roberts & Todd, LLC

191 Giralda Avenue
Penthouse
Coral Gables, FL 33134
T 305.448.0788
F 305.443.8431

DALLAS

Wallace Roberts & Todd, LLC

1509 Main Street, Suite 1207
Dallas, TX 75201
T 214.403.8557
F 214.323.0606

LAKE PLACID

Wallace Roberts & Todd, LLC

61 Main Street
Lake Placid, NY 12946
T 518.523.0224
F 518.523.1378

SAN DIEGO

Wallace Roberts & Todd, Inc.

1133 Columbia Street
Suite 205
San Diego, CA 92101
T 619.696.9303
F 619.696.7935

SAN FRANCISCO

WRT/SOLOMON E.T.C.

1328 Mission Street
Fourth Floor
San Francisco, CA 94103
T 415.575.4722
F 415.436.9837

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Think what faced a twenty-year-old in 1960. Frank Mankiewicz, a high official in the incoming White House, announced that what Dwight David Eisenhower had done for golf, John Fitzgerald Kennedy would do for sex.

In New York at twenty, I could get standing room with my dancer friends and watch incredulously as Balanchine himself did Balanchine at the New York City Ballet, with Edward Villella as principal dancer. So hypnotic—those geometric, formal ballets—just bodies, just movement, just absolutely beautiful. This was the transcendent experience that religion is supposed to be about, but for my friends and me it wasn't any form of religion that did it. It was this blazing sense of modernity.

At home in San Francisco, as soon as I turned twenty-one, I could catch the late set at the Jazz Workshop and sit ten feet away from John Coltrane, the largest, darkest presence ever to fill a room. Coltrane just there, ten feet away, huge and black in his huge black suit, would take a solo and it would go on and on—thirty minutes, forty minutes, but forty minutes of eternity—an unbearable white light, like Hiroshima in your head, ten feet away, on and on and on. What could there possibly be after Coltrane? Like insects, we had to know what there could be on the other side of the light.

Architecture students at the beginning of the 1960s found their version of the white light in the late works of Le Corbusier, as crazy and spell-binding as Beethoven's last quartets. After such works, the world could never be the same. Like practically every architect in the world, I remember the overwhelming, life-shaping power of my own first real encounter with Le Corbusier. In 1960, American students could bum around in Europe for less than it cost to stay at home. I

had spent days looking for Le Corbusier's monastery of La Tourette. It was next to impossible to find, because the monks had cleverly kept the name La Tourette when they moved away from the village of La Tourette, precisely to escape people like me. To those who succeeded in overcoming their ruse, they were friendly enough, and I was allowed to wander all through that incredible place. I remember standing transfixed outside the bright green metal door of a raw concrete monk's cell, listening to Stravinsky booming away on the other side of the door. The strength, the austerity, the sheer genius of every space and every vista were enough to give a twenty-year-old the dilemma of whether to become a monk or to become an architect. The downside of monkishness was clear enough, that of architecture less clear, so my fate was sealed.

For all of us, who as kids had moments like that outside the green door, there could be no backward glances, no sentiment, no failure of the valor it took to proceed into the unknown. So we followed that magnificent crowd of the coolest people ever, the final moderns: Coltrane, Balanchine, Le Corbusier, Jackson Pollack, whose careful explosions of paint were like the works of those physicists who had unlocked the energy of the stars.

We followed the last moderns because we had to be the ones after them, the ones to discover the world on the other side of the light. What we could not know was that we had arrived at the festival in the final hysterical blaze of the fireworks. Soon, very soon, it would be over, and there would be a long, slow, painfully slow dawn, and we would see, dimly at first, and bit by bit more clearly, what was left, what had been wrecked, what had been neglected in the Dionysian frenzy of our elders, and we would see the overwhelming work that lay ahead—our lifework.

When it was finally light, we saw the world after Balanchine, after John Coltrane, after Jackson Pollack, after Le Corbusier, after the final moderns, after Jack Kennedy, after Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, after the craziness between the pill and AIDS, after Vietnam and 1968, after dope got really ugly and after they blew up the public housing at Pruitt-Igo, because it was one of the postwar dreams turned nightmare that dynamite could get rid of.