

# THEIR SINS

One morning while eating breakfast, a picture of the Queen Mary II coming into New York Harbour in *The Times* got pointed to and we all agreed: how could anybody look at that hideous behemoth and think it's anything but an unsightly apartment building turned on its side, possessed of no more elegance than a floating shopping mall? Completely devoid of any aesthetic merit and an affront to maritime history's legacy of beautiful watercraft, in essence the Queen Mary II is a piece of shit, and it's strange since it wasn't so long ago that almost all ships were a wonder to behold, utilitarian objects of often sublime grandeur and craftsmanship. Clippers, galleons, tall ships, caravels, schooners and sloops all had those qualities and you could say the same for steam ships and early ocean liners like the original Queen Mary and the Lusitania. Hell, an old tugboat has more charm than the Queen Mary II. Let's not even get into powerboats, or the bloated, obscene yachts of the super-tasteless rich. Can the person or persons who designed the junk pile called the Queen Mary II sleep at night? That photograph of the hulking, seafaring cattle car got us pondering when and why everything started going downhill. What happened? Everything got uglier. What changed? What caused the inexorable slide from things looking better, costing less and working better too? How did appalling ugliness win out? That was the question, and there were varying opinions as to an answer, but one thing we could all agree on is that there's no denying it happened and that it did boggles the mind.

And while we're on the subject, how is it that most contemporary architects can live with themselves? Buildings used to be beautiful too, or at least almost universally pleasing to the eye – civic buildings, town halls, railroad stations (a moment of silence for Penn Station, so ignominiously erased from the cityscape),

castles and churches – the list goes on and on. From the grandest palace to the lowliest hut, they were across the board maybe not always attractive, but definitely less unlovely, misshapen and grotesque than nine out of ten buildings built today. Even the humblest barns, sheds, or tenement apartment buildings built in the 1890s to house poor immigrants had more architectural grace than 99 percent of the edifices we have to look at now. Also, they were constructed with real artisanship and infinitely more attention to detail. What went wrong? It's a strange paradox. Structures that were built by people with limited funds in which everything was done by hand, with absolutely no ambition to be impressive, turn out in the end to be infinitely more beautiful and aesthetically satisfying than almost everything that unlimited funds and bogus pretensions to importance can produce in this era.

It's odd; you'd think it would be the other way around. I defy anyone to look at one of the cookie-cutter apartment buildings or god-awful 'luxury condos' that have sullied the skyline of New York in recent years and say with a straight face that they aren't complete crap. Just utter monstrosities. Not that everything that came before was amazing and awe-inspiring —certainly not— but the proof is in what is left behind and whether it was built by a justifiably remembered genius or a forgotten, unheralded journeyman. The comparison is just as damning. Do these hotshot, magazine cover-gracing, jet-setting architects fall asleep at night deluding themselves into thinking they are carrying on the grand tradition of Palladio and Christopher Wren (and if you want to get more modern Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe)? How can these pretenders and mountebanks not hate themselves and consider suicide as the only possible atonement for their sins?