

# PIN-UP

**MAGAZINE FOR ARCHITECTURAL  
ENTERTAINMENT**

**ISSUE 10**

**SPRING SUMMER  
2011**

**USD 15.00**

**FEATURING**

**SANTIAGO CALATRAVA  
OFFICE KGDVS  
BETHAN LAURA WOOD  
SIMON FUJIWARA**

**THE PIN-UP NIGHTSTANDS  
by**

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Paul Kopkau, Paul Lee, Shawn Maximo, Leon Ransmeier,  
Rich Brilliant Willing, RO/LU, Situ Studio, and Michael Stipe**

**PLUS**

**Lina Bo Bardi, Victor Bisharat, Beatriz Colomina, Horace Gifford,  
Roberto Burle Marx, Rogelio Salmons, and John Currin & Rachel Feinstein**





**A formal portrait of the architect, circa mid-1960s: “Fresh off building the Jordanian Pavilion at the 1964 World’s Fair in New York City.”**

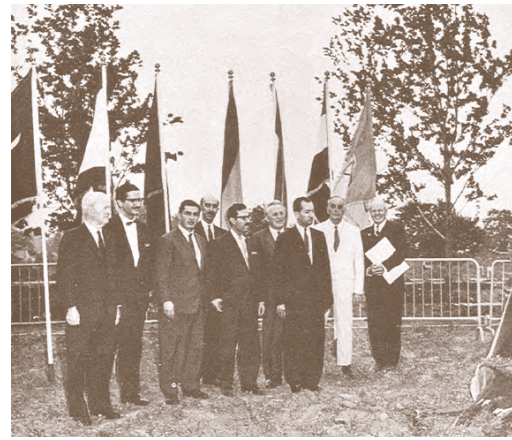
ESSAY

## **VICTOR BISHARAT**

The man behind the postwar urban planning fantasy of Stamford, CT

by Justin Fowler and Dan Handel

Stamford, Connecticut, 2011: The white-collar workers who start their day in the monumental bowels of Manhattan's Grand Central Station roll into their Connecticut outpost an hour later via Metro North Railroad, exiting the train beneath Interstate 95 before breaking formation and fan-



**Victor Bisharat (fourth from left) at the opening of the Jordanian Pavilion at the 1964 World's Fair: "Complex structural acrobatics."**

ning out across the empty parking lots that flank the gleaming curtain-walled temples of finance. Trailing the traders and hedge funders is the live studio audience, a handful of devoted — or perhaps just curious — fans of daytime trash television who are gradually making their way to the Rich Forum where Jerry Springer and Maury Povich are about to begin taping their daily talk shows. This 120,000-inhabitant commuter city which bills itself as "The City That Works" is a town of two minds — to anyone familiar with Stamford's curious evolution from postwar American urban-planning dream to something of a case study of the same, this should come as no surprise.

San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1965: Fresh off the Jordanian Pavilion at the 1964 World's Fair in New York City, architect Victor Bisharat is on his tenth roll at the roulette table. His wife Clarita, his child, and his canine companion are back in the U.S. after making the crossing from their home in Beirut, Lebanon. They are bidding their time with \$2,500 and a car bought with an additional \$2,500. The remaining \$5,000 of the family's life savings is about to be graciously donated to the casino by Mr. Bisharat. He was invited on this almost all-inclusive site visit by the F.D. Rich Company, Stamford-based contractors-turned-developers who had been brought in to realize the complex structural acrobatics of the Jordanian Pavilion, and who were now about to see what the 45-year-old Palestinian-born architect could

do with their newly acquired properties in Puerto Rico. Only a year previously, Bisharat had been standing beside a white-suited Robert Moses at the pavilion's groundbreaking ceremony in New York. The next day he would be asked to take on the role of master architect of an entire North American downtown — but not before asking Mr. Rich for an advance on his design fee to cover the evening's lost wagers.

Stamford, late 1950s: Nearly two thirds of the businesses and row homes that comprise the city's modest downtown have been deemed sub-standard. The quaint main streets of Stamford's southeast quadrant, which had served as the bucolic backdrop for Elia Kazan's 1947 film *Boomerang*, have seen better days. In 1959, Stamford's Urban Redevelopment Commission decided to follow in the footsteps of so many American cities and invest in the future by starting from scratch. Eminent domain was invoked to reclaim the quadrant's 66 acres, whose 3,000 residents were relocated. There would be a new downtown core and, by extension, a new tax base. Victor Gruen, the father of the American shopping mall, was soon commissioned to draw up plans for the site. Stamford's downtown would be organized around a vegetated outdoor pedestrian mall. Automobiles, those ambivalent entities that, at least in the view of postwar planning, were to be both celebrated and denied, would be left in garages built at the corners of the quadrant, and light industry would serve as a buffer between the mixed-use core and the interstate just to the south. This was the master plan inherited by the F.D. Rich Company, whose mandate was to reconcile the generic future conjured by Gruen with the realities of city-making. In the years to come, Robert N. Rich, the company's CEO and Stamford's postwar patriarch of sorts, would become a collector of architects, commissioning designs from the likes of Moshe Safdie, Romaldo Giurgola, Hugh Stubbins, and César Pelli. Bisharat, however, was the first, and, over the course of the 1960s and 70s, was given nearly unprecedented latitude in the shaping of a modern American downtown — a freedom unlikely to be granted to any architect in the near future.

Born in Salt (formerly in the British Mandate of Palestine and now in Jordan), in 1920, Victor Bisharat studied architecture and engineering at the American University of Beirut and later trained at the University of California, Berkeley, under noted German Expressionist architect Erich Mendelsohn who, like many others of his generation, had settled in the U.S. after fleeing the Nazis. In his 1926 photo-essay *Amerika*, a paean to the promise of

the New World, Mendelsohn cautiously identified the fledgling power as a country that "contain[ed] all potentialities within itself," but also noted that it remained to be seen "whether or when it will use them to form a new reality, a new world, a new faith." For Bisharat, postwar America had yet to fulfill this promise. In a 1968 essay, he decried the 1950s in the U.S. as an "aimless" period for society and for architecture:

*Since the Modernists killed God, we have not built a great cathedral — since offices have been inhabited by mechanized human beings we have not had a great office building — and since the human being has been killed in man, we have not had a hospitable house or an exciting apartment building.*

The moment when man was ready to "resurrect and become a human being," Bisharat would offer



**Aerial view of Stamford in the 1980s (top) and Bisharat's planning model, circa 1968 (below): "Increasing dilution of Bisharat's vision."**

his services to provide the new form and faith, rooted in the belief that "if one is totally acquainted with the problem, one is automatically acquainted with the total solution." As utilitarian and high Modernist as these proclamations may seem, Bisharat's approach to architecture was largely intuitive, perhaps mirroring the contradictions between his formal training and his flamboyant and exuberant personality. This is also what would allow Bisharat's high-flying premises to be so easily swayed both by the demands of anonymity in the corporate box and by the expressive plastic potential of concrete construction.

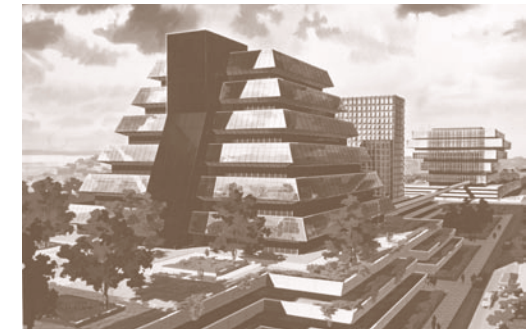
By 1967, just two years after the F.D. Rich Company hired him, Bisharat had already completed High Ridge Park, his first big Stamford design, comprising a cluster of office buildings on the city's northern outskirts. Nestled at the perimeter of an artificial pond, these peculiar Modernist gems followed the architectural examples established earlier that decade by Eero Saarinen's Bell Labs complex in New Jersey (1959–62) and John Deere headquarters in Illinois (begun in 1961, a week after Saarinen's death). While resonating with the glass box/water/foilage trinity that characterized Saarinen's creations, Bisharat's architectural orchestration of High Ridge Park — six buildings in total — represented a consortium of corporate identities rather than a sweeping vision for one company. The most noted of the six projects was the General Time building, which, through its squat, rotund form featuring sweeping upward curves and a central atrium capped by an overwrought sculptural timepiece (complete with a 10-foot-long second hand), was intended to evoke "eternity." It was a singular and unapologetically literal grafting of the client company's image onto a total design and garnered both high praise and harsh criticism.

Bisharat and Rich would soon have to face challenges far greater than those presented by mixed reviews for High Ridge Park. Bisharat's use of form in an attempt to resolve the conflict between his view of the holistic continuity of experience with the specificity of place or purpose produced an array of projects whose successes and failures (as singular artifacts and as urban complexes) can be read as a diagram of both the conflicts inherent in postwar planning in general and the Janusian nature of Stamford's operative logic in particular. Nowhere did that become more evident than at downtown Stamford, when the architect shifted his vision from the city's outskirts to the center. In the view of Robert N. Rich, the first major hurdle was the 1965 decision to allow new

commercial zoning in the Bull's Head district just to the north of downtown, closer to Stamford's more affluent neighborhoods. The move effectively put Bull's Head — and its first anchor store, Lord & Taylor — in direct competition with downtown for the attraction of local dollars and high-end retail. In response to this new policy stunt, Bisharat largely jettisoned Gruen's proposed vegetated pedestrian mall in Stamford's southeast quadrant as well as the prescribed light-industry corridor along I-95. Instead he planned to create generic tower slabs and a raised pedestrian platform that included housing for relocated residents, iconic commercial anchor projects, and a buffer zone insulating the city from the raised interstate. The initial scheme's rigid geometries appeared like a sinuous cousin of Ludwig Hilberseimer's 1924 *Hochhausstadt* (high-rise city), the serial-block repetition of that model being replaced with more humanly scaled clusters, their arched concrete shells seamlessly emerging from the sides of the circulation platform. It was Bisharat's most holistic and integrated downtown scheme, yet it still remained an ambivalent design, allowing the involuntary fragmentation of his city planning vision to be clearly visible, and capturing the seductive potential of seamlessness in the moment of its first betrayal.

While Bisharat was busy drawing up his architectural visions for Stamford, the F.D. Rich Company was in search of future tenants to fill them. In May 1970, the New York City headquarters of GTE, IBM, and Mobile were the target of bomb attacks initiated by Revolutionary Force 9 in protest against the companies' alleged profiting from U.S. involvement in Vietnam. This incident provided Stamford with one of its biggest breaks: GTE, which had nearly closed on lease negotiations for new office space in Manhattan, quickly scrapped its plans and agreed to relocate to Stamford, thereby becoming one of the first major companies to have headquarters buildings in the Stamford-Greenwich area, an unassuming swatch of metropolitan satellite territory that would at one point boast the largest concentration of Fortune 500 firms outside of New York and Chicago. As William H. Whyte suggests, city followed suburbs in this case, as corporate migration was compounded by CEOs who had settled in Connecticut and wanted to bring their companies along with them. Like a detached fragment of Manhattan, Stamford offered the promise of a concentration of corporate strength amidst a background of mixed-use development, an urban microcosm without the congestion and the social strife, a city away from the city.

If the arrival of GTE marked the beginning of a surge in new major-company headquarters being created in Stamford, it also heralded the increasing dilution of Bisharat's vision for the city. The inverted-glass ziggurat that became GTE's home in 1973 had little in common with the formal lan-



**The originally proposed design for the GTE building: "A Monument for the people of Stamford."**

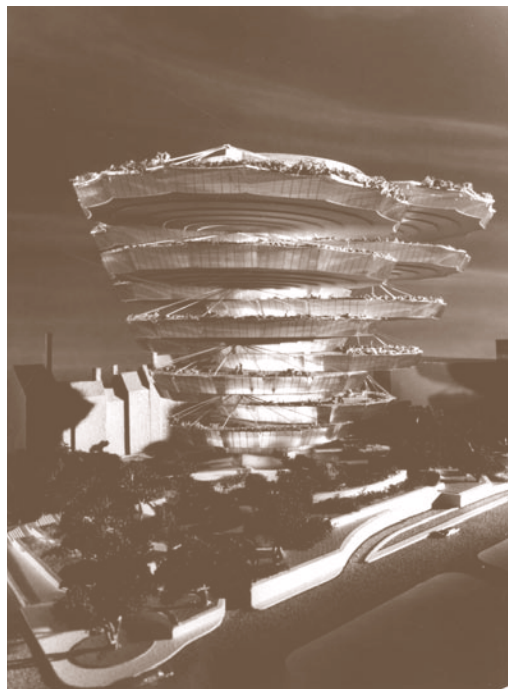
guage, or even the atmosphere, of Bisharat's original master plan. Instead, its outward appearance was foretold by a later version of the plan which proposed an arrayed series of buildings comprised of clumsily-stacked rectangular masses. What, in earlier iterations, was designed as an



**The GTE building as it is today: "Little in common with the formal language of Bisharat's original master plan."**

elevated circulation network was now formalized into a plinth of stacked parking garages running parallel to the interstate, effectively severing the downtown from the sight of the highway, turning an integrated vision into an exercise in phasing, composition and scale. All parking infrastructure would be consolidated into an urban levee as a means to preserve downtown as a safe haven for pedestrians, shopping, and entertainment, a buffer zone of sorts in which the GTE building was the keystone piece. With its flattened appearance, bulbous massing, and curtain-wall glaz-

ing, the building (today known as One Stamford Forum) somehow managed both to anticipate and outshine the generic monuments that would come to flank it. Complicating Stamford's formal mix were Bisharat's St. John's Towers (1971) and Marriot Hotel (1976) — habitable counterpoints to the city's prominent commercial icons. Due in part to issues of cost and ease of construction, the designs of these buildings were derived not from an initial formal gesture but from the modular aggregation of largely prefabricated living units. Perhaps the only structure built in line with Bisharat's original ideas is the radically different Landmark Tower, completed in 1973. If GTE is Stamford's public face for the minute or so it takes to speed by on the interstate, then Landmark was Bisharat's monument for the people of Stamford — along with the executives who would later proudly come to survey the city from the dining club on the building's top floor. With its graceful concrete fins



**Bisharat's submission to the Centre Pompidou competition (1970): "Threatening a member of the jury with fisticuffs."**

that evolve symmetrically from generous arched enclosures at ground level to an elegant taper as they approach the sky, Landmark is a rare sequel to the sculpted expressionism Bisharat had pursued at High Ridge, and gained him a compliment of sorts from Philip Johnson who described it as admirable, but "too bizarre" for his taste.

With each passing year and each new compromised execution of his original intent, Bisharat's hold on the image of Stamford weakened.

As he was slowly edged out by the F.D. Rich Company and a fresh crop of buildings, such as the 853,000-square-foot Stamford Town Center mall (by Lymn Smith Architects and opened in 1983), were constructed in downtown from the mid-1970s onwards, Bisharat began to vocalize his dissatisfaction with the city that he had been unable to fully harness. In a 1980 interview he went so far as to say: "I hate how it looks... I even look the other way when I go by on the highway." A year later, in a biting critique of the pitfalls of chasing fashionable design cheekily entitled, "It's Stylish, but is it Art — or Spinach?," Ada Louise Huxtable, then the reigning queen of architectural criticism at the *New York Times*, interpreted Bisharat's statements as a *mea culpa*, adding, "While confession may be good for the soul, it doesn't do Stamford much good." In the same article — laden with images of Bisharat's Stamford work from the 1960s and 70s, including the earlier buildings at High Ridge — Huxtable deemed his projects to be mere stylish knock-offs of others' work or, as she put it, "sticky fingers reaching for Wright and Saarinen." For her, Bisharat and his contemporaries were not only seduced by each emerging fad, but also packaged seduction in the name of pluralism, entirely in "denial of the existence of good and bad, calling it a matter of changing needs and preferences" and ignorant of what was "constant, universal, enduring, or valuable about our buildings."

Bisharat, who had recently completed the austere Martyrs' Memorial and Military Museum in Amman, Jordan, was enraged. He fired back a letter to the *New York Times*, entitled, "I Stand by my Architecture." In it he argued that his comments were not apologies for his buildings, but rather that he was sorry not to have had the power to design the entirety of the downtown and craft a "total environment of architectural integrity." He ended his letter by proclaiming his belief in "the duality of existence," rather than the "extremes of either saints or devils" — something he accused Huxtable of peddling in her "gossip column." In his view the problem was a one of a lack of control, although he never specified what exactly he would have liked to do if granted full control. His unrealized project for a housing complex for 20,000 people in San Juan or his submission to the Centre Pompidou competition might offer some clues. With the former looking like a lost page from Bjarke Ingels's design playbook, and the latter looming above Paris like a Frank Lloyd Wright tower on performance-enhancing drugs, they stand for the most advanced expression of his architectural ideas: broad, figural curves con-

structed from the repetition of discrete horizontal elements. After allegedly threatening a member of the Pompidou competition jury with fisticuffs, Bisharat would spend the later days of his career working on projects for Abu Dhabi and elsewhere in the Middle East — but never was he granted the



**A housing complex for 20,000 people in San Juan, Puerto Rico: "A total environment of architectural integrity."**

same scope of mandate or promise of creative latitude offered in Stamford.

When Bisharat died in 1996, the F.D. Rich Company was no longer the only developer actively planning new projects for Stamford's cityscape and contributing to downtown's persistent lack of formal cohesion. The fragments it had realized, which now stand as registers of the irreducible conflicts inherent in form-giving and city-making, are perhaps themselves of greater import to the humanist spirit that Bisharat so earnestly pursued. Despite his later reservations about Stamford's skyline, Bisharat and the "The City that Works" were in fact not such a bad match after all, as it may very well have been the only environment that could complement, and to a certain extent realize, the paradoxical nature nested in both his own personality and his architecture.

— Justin Fowler coordinates research and editorial projects at the Columbia Laboratory for Architectural Broadcasting in New York City. Dan Handel is an architect and a Ph.D. candidate at the Technion Israel Institute of Technology. Their favorite scents are a freshly opened vacuumed coffee bag, and a glass of Jefferson's Reserve, respectively.

The authors would like to acknowledge the generous support of George Arbid, Hashim Sarkis, and Robert N. Rich.