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. . . the road

César Daniel Sirvent-Pérez

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.
Ithaka gave you the marvellous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.[1]

While I had never previously travelled to the eastern half of the United States, I travelled many times to the Farnsworth House, Fallingwater, the Glass House, and Manhattan. I had encountered them in books, explored them through plans, analysed them in drawings and photographs, and visited through models. Today, technology allows us to see almost any point on our planet in real time without leaving home. Videoconferencing and remote work eliminate the need for travel. The proliferation of airlines and connections has replaced slow and dangerous road trips. My brother – a typical representative of the *millennial* generation – once asked me: 'Why travel if you can see everything on Google Maps?' So what, if anything, does a traditional architectural journey offer in the twenty-first century?

Travel is a powerful tool for the education of architects. This has been true since the so-called Grand Tour, the seventeenth-century equivalent of today's Interrail ticket for young European aristocrats. The greatest architects were arguably the first great travellers, and their experiences shaped their professional lives. The young Charles-Edouard Jeanneret's *Journey to the East* was pivotal in his transformation into Le Corbusier.[2] The same could be said of the travels of Barragán, Bofill, Asplund, Kahn, Aalto, and so many other members of the (male) canon with which we have become familiar.

However, not all travels are the same, and we can speculate about a taxonomy. The tourist or *Instagrammer* is perhaps the most superficial: flocking to popular attractions to pose in front of places seldom truly observed. They pass through the world, but the world does not pass through them. Then we have the *backpacker*. They carefully select their destinations, observe places and people attentively, seeking intense transformative experiences. Taking the next step is the *adventurer*, risking uncharted territories and driven by adrenaline. Nomads or wanderers, they seek challenges testing mental and physical limits. Finally, we have the *explorer*. Their ultimate goal is not only personal fulfilment, but also the expansion of human knowledge through field research.

Travel, as an intense life experience, has the power to forever transform individuals by nurturing ideas latent within them. Ernesto Guevara's curiosity led him through South America and ultimately transformed him into Che. Jack Kerouac's perseverance in traversing North America yielded the autobiographical novel that established him as a hero of the Beat Generation.[3] Bernard Moitessier's passion for the sea led him to abandon the 1968 Golden Globe Race he was leading, just miles from the finish line, sailing instead towards Tahiti: 'I keep going nonstop to the Pacific islands because I am happy at sea [. . .].'[4]

Driven by similar curiosity, perseverance and passion, in February 2025 I embarked on a 2,800-mile American adventure from Boston (MA) to Amarillo (TX). A week's road trip, aboard a Ford Mustang, under a winter storm warning. Half a coast-to-coast, seeking to (re)discover modern American architecture after a quarter-century of professional practice because, as Proust said, the 'real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.'[5]

[Massachusetts] The adventure begins at the controversial Boston City Hall (designed by G. Kallman and M. McKinnell, 1968). A descendant of the Convent of La Tourette (1953), cited by some as the pinnacle of brutalism, it holds the dubious honour of topping several popular rankings of the ugliest buildings in North

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America, surpassed only by the infamous J. Edgar Hoover Building, the FBI headquarters in Washington, DC. Exemplifying a long-standing rift between architects and society, the demolition needed to create the arid and impersonal plaza designed by I.M. Pei did not help its public acceptance.

By the Charles River, which Houdini jumped into in chains in 1908, I encounter a multitude of runners. The Boston Marathon is one of the five majors and was the scenario of a regrettable incident in 1967: Kathrine Switzer struggled to prevent the race director from tearing off her bib number. Kathrine was not the first woman to finish this race; Roberta Gibb had done so a year earlier, though she was not officially registered.

On the horizon, three concrete towers stand out: Peabody Terrace (Josep Lluis Sert, 1964), an attempt to introduce the concept of apartment blocks to an American society accustomed to the suburban sprawl of single-family homes *[1]*. Unsurprisingly, the 22-storey towers were as well received as their London counterparts, Balfron (1967) and Trellick Towers (1972) by Erno Goldfinger – that is to say: not at all.

I complete my brutalist trilogy of Boston not far away, at Le Corbusier's Carpenter Center (1963). Its composition evokes the *Palais des Filateurs* (1951), which I visited on a previous epic journey to Ahmedabad. At the entrance to the building, which houses the Harvard Film Archive, a poster of the movie *Eraserhead* (1977) paid tribute to Lynch, recently deceased.

[Rhode Island] Night falls and the snowfall intensifies. The snowstorm warning was serious. The road becomes impassable, and I need to find a place to rest. From the outside, all motels look the same, reminiscent of sets from Tarantino or Coen Brothers' films. Cinema has helped create a collective imaginary, a set of common places, which I can now confirm seem strikingly real.

[Connecticut] After a fleeting visit to the Frederick Smith House (Richard Meier, 1967), I arrive in New Canaan to see Philip Johnson's Glass House (1949)



1 Peabody Terrace (Josep Lluis Sert, 1964), Boston (Massachusetts).



2 Glass House (Philip Johnson, 1949), New Canaan (Connecticut).

where he lived until his death in 2005 *[2]*. At first glance, it resembles a mere pavilion, an elegant baldachin. Despite the spectacular views from within, the house does not particularly invite one to take shelter. The materials do not convey warmth and, as someone who also lives in a glass house, I cannot stop wondering how Johnson managed to live in such a fishbowl for so many years, especially on a day like today: five degrees below zero, a foot of snow, and relentless rain.

Not far away, SANAA recently built another minimalist pavilion, organic in form, like an oil stain winding down the hillside. This is Grace Farms (2015), and my attempt to visit ends like many others in this country: 'Private property, my friend: you can't enter.' Imagining how American gun owners can behave, I decide to make my way towards the Big Apple.

[New York] I park the Mustang on Fifth Avenue, not far from Frank Lloyd Wright's famous Guggenheim Museum. My first impression of Manhattan mirrors that of Le Corbusier ninety years ago when he disembarked from the Normandie: 'Finds American skyscrapers much too small; thinks they should be huge and a lot farther apart.'[6] The low, persistent clouds obscure the true scale of these giants and lend a ghostly aura to a city that is not particularly busy (today is Sunday) *[3]*. I get the impression that at any moment, the massive Marshmallow Man from that unforgettable Ivan Reitman film could appear around a corner.

A few hours later, after many miles on foot, I walk past the United Nations headquarters. In 1961, Josep Antoni Coderch quoted the words of 'an old and famous American architect': 'Behind every building you see, there is a man [*sic*] you do not see. A man; he didn't even say an architect.'[7] I invite the reader to explore the backstage of this building's creation: you will get a more accurate picture of the man behind the iconic thick-rimmed glasses.

Another highlight of the Big Apple (and not particularly in a good way): massive infrastructure, avenues, highways, bridges, and trains crisscrossing the vast metropolis. 'When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your



3 New York. Low-angle shot, 5th Ave. and E 59th St.

way with a meat axe', said Robert Moses, quoted in a Pulitzer Prize-winning bestseller.[8] Citizen resistance was crucial in stopping these disastrous plans. Jane Jacobs, who played a leading role in such movements strongly criticised savage 'urban renewal' projects.[9] I end my pilgrimage with a visit to another urban intervention where emptiness takes centre stage – but this time, for very different reasons.

[New Jersey] The snowstorm grants me a brief respite, although temperatures remain freezing. I wake up not far from Willingboro, where I meet the first of a series of Futuro houses (Matti Suuronen, 1968) that I will visit throughout the trip. Spoiler: the Futuros don't have a beautiful end.

[Pennsylvania] In the suburbs of Philadelphia, I find two residential projects by Louis Kahn: the Fisher House (1967) and the Esherick House (1961). Just a few metres separate the latter from an icon of 'postmodern' architecture: the Vanna Venturi House (1964) built by Robert Venturi for his mother. I start walking in circles around the well-known mint-green building, like thousands of pilgrims circumambulate the Kaaba in Mecca. Far from worshipping this building, my goal is to grasp its meaning, decipher its complexity, and understand its historical significance. By the third lap, a famous Hans Christian Andersen tale about an emperor comes to mind, and I return to the Mustang.[10]

I venture deeper into Pennsylvania, passing through several Amish towns. In one of them, I read: 'Come for a tour, leave with an experience.' Everything seems to be a potential business in the land of opportunity. The temperature drops as I head northwest, and the roads begin to accumulate snow and ice. It is time to stop. *Welcome to Punxsutawney*. The town where Bill Murray was also trapped by a snowstorm.

My alarm clock goes off at 06:00 but there is no *I Got You Babe* by Cher on the radio. The thermometer reads -14°C. Just fifteen days ago, Phil predicted six more weeks of winter. The damned groundhog was right. Inside the Mustang, my soft drinks have turned to ice. Before leaving town, I head to Gobbler's Knob, the epicentre of a legend imported more than a century ago by German immigrants and transformed by Americans into a full-blown spectacle every February 2nd. A 'kitsch' tradition: a 'posmo' festival.

I drive south to visit a legend: Wright's Fallingwater (1939). Forests, snow, Pearl Jam, more snow, more forests. A small booth marks the entrance to the private area; the gatekeeper informs me that the iconic house is under renovation, and the only available access is a winter walking tour around the plot for $15. It is exactly what it seems: paying to walk on ice to see scaffolding. Two hours later, I leave convinced that the visit was worth every cent.

[West Virginia] I drive through snow-covered forests in a vehicle not particularly suited to icy roads. The snowstorm does not relent, forcing me to abandon my original plan of reaching Columbus by sunset. This city served as the setting for Kogonada's delicate and intimate film, named the same as the city. Convinced that (good) architecture could improve people's lives, businessman Irwin Miller launched an extensive public works programme, inviting the country's best architects. 'Architecture has the power to heal', says Casey at one point in the film, standing before the First Financial Bank (2006) designed by Deborah Berke.

[Ohio] I reach a set of cabins in the woods – a sort of 'glamping' site consisting of about thirty prefabricated structures mounted on wheeled chassis, carefully designed 'tiny homes' that serve as the perfect setting for Instagram reels. Architecture manipulated to be a desirable photocall in a world of appearances *[4]*. Yet, I cannot deny that these small mass-produced artefacts are genuinely cozy. I bet Philip Johnson would be happier in this fashionable caravan than in his glass prison. I certainly was.

Next morning I head to Dayton, home to the National Museum of the US Air Force. Its four enormous hangars have no special architectural interest but

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4 Postcard Cabins Hocking Hills (Addison Godine, 2018), Nelsonville (Ohio).



5 Trainer crash diorama in the Early Years Gallery. National Museum of the USAF, Dayton (Ohio).

are a must-see for aviation enthusiasts. The museum houses an impressive collection of over 400 aircraft from all eras and countries. However, its peculiar obsession with setting up artificial dioramas populated by bizarre mannequins shatters any sense of rigour or authenticity *[5]*. The forced inclusion of panels specifically about women's roles does not help either; aviators like Amelia Earhart or astronauts like Eileen Collins earned their place through merit and should be naturally integrated into 'halls of fame' without the need for segregation. The result: maybe a stale museum that smells stale and is visited by stale people. Thought this last observation does not speak well of me … It is time to leave.



6 Marina City towers (Bertrand Goldberg, 1964), Chicago (Illinois).

[Indiana] The urgency of this journey prevented me from witnessing the Eskenazi School of Art at Indiana University. Based on some 'forgotten' drawings by Mies, this anachronistic zombie building opened its doors in 2021, even though its designer had been dead for over half a century. A new example of 'de-extinction', adding to cases such as the Chino Canyon residence designed by Al Beadle in the 1970s and recently constructed in Palm Springs (CA), 280 miles away from its originally intended site in Phoenix (AZ).

[Illinois] After a frustrating night trying to find an open jazz club and enduring temperatures of -10°C, I walk through the (freezing) Windy City of Chicago in search of several Miesian buildings (this time, authentic ones): Lake Shore Drive apartments (1951 and 1956) and McCormick House (1952). Again, security guards repeated those hateful words, 'private property'. The same response at the Marina City towers (Bertrand Goldberg, 1964), famously featured on the cover of Wilco's album *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot [6]*. A brief stop at the corner of Adams Street, where the sign marking the beginning of Route 66 stands, and then into the Mustang to head to Crown Hall (1956). The building houses the IIT College of Architecture. Hundreds of models populate the upper floor's tables. It must be a privilege to learn in such a space. Several men in suits begin setting up stands. It turns out to be a job fair. Large architecture firms (as they call themselves) showcase their best to attract students and convince them to join their teams of … 800 architects. I try to imagine what it would be like to work in a place with more architects than the population of any of Spain's interior villages.

Finally, to the Farnsworth House. I drive parallel to the Fox River until I reach a metal fence crowned with three rows of barbed wire. *No trespassing*. I call the listed number, somebody informs me that visits are only allowed – upon payment, of course – on Fridays and Saturdays (today is Thursday). On my insistence, they warn me that surveillance cameras are in place in case I get any bad ideas. I decide to be a law-abiding citizen and simply walk the fence, observing the refined lines of this epic construction from a distance *[7]*. A beautiful sculptural object, an unbearable home. Here was where the divorce between architect and client, indeed between art and society, began: this house was the catalyst that led a significant portion of the Americans to see the 'cult of austerity' in the International Style as a 'threat to the next America.'[11] Even Wright joined the party, labelling avant-garde architects as communists and totalitarians, another detail that helps to form an idea of 'the man you don't see behind every building you see' as Coderch put it. In those postwar years, McCarthy's 'witch hunts' were at their peak.



7 Farnsworth House (Mies van der Rohe, 1951), Plano (Illinois).



8 Futuro House (Matti Suuronen, 1968), Livingston (Illinois).

After an emotion-filled day, the Mustang roars down Interstate 44 as night falls. A brief stop in Livingston, near the Missouri border, allows me to closely examine my third Futuro House of this trip. Approximately one hundred units of this peculiar lightweight prefabricated dwelling, evoking a spaceship, were produced. This one now lies in complete disrepair, part of a playground at a highway rest area. A sign highlights its uniqueness and the importance of preserving it to inspire future generations, yet the filling of its dilapidated polyester shell with mannequins to emphasise its alien-like nature seems at odds with the principle *[8]*. The trivialisation of art and its transformation into spectacle.

[Missouri] From a distance, all American cities seem to look the same: vast stretches of single-family homes and a financial centre where the height of buildings is proportional to the value of the land beneath them, forming a skyline that resembles a Gaussian bell curve. But Saint Louis has a distinctive element: its massive parabolic arch designed by Eero Saarinen in 1965. The scale is striking, especially when approaching at night *[9]* – a metaphorical 'gateway to the West'.

Route 66 seems a utopia, a new Ithaca. A nostalgic journey to a time when road travel was closer to exploration than



9 Gateway Arch (Eero Saarinen, 1965), Saint Louis (Missouri).

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10 **Blue Whale (Hugh Davis, 1972), Catoosa (Oklahoma).**



11 **Gemini Giant (International Fiberglass, 1964), Wilmington (Illinois).**

tourism, and the path to the Far West was 'a migrant route through deserts to California's rich valleys, the road of escape.'[12] American pop culture linked this highway to notions of freedom, individualism and rebellion, embedding them into the collective imagination of *Easy Rider* (1969), *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971), or *Vanishing Point* (1971).

[Kansas] Buried beneath massive highways, today's 'Historic Route 66' consists of a network of service roads that, in many sections, run parallel to the Interstates. Only a short 13-mile stretch crosses the state of Kansas, stitching together towns with evocative names like Joplin or Miami.

[Oklahoma] The small towns that once thrived thanks to Route 66 traffic are now experiencing a second youth thanks to the rise of revival-vintage tourism *[10]*. The (not-so-giant) 'muffler men' that once served as long-distance beacons for travellers are now tourist attractions, obligatory photo ops *[11]*. It is surprising to see Google applying that same label to places like the old City Meat Market in Erick – which, in our latitudes, would likely be classified as a severe case of hoarding disorder.

This is the kingdom of *faux façades*, kitsch in all its glory. Horror. Absolute Evil, as Antonio Miranda would say.[13] It is unclear whether these consequences stem from architectural legacies such as the previously mentioned Vanna Venturi House. Postmodernism 'reveals its vulgarity alongside architectural fraud', … 'when goodness, beauty, and reason retreat, Absolute Evil advances', wrote the Spanish professor and critic. The last night on 'Yankeeland' ends in a Comanche casino packed with locals playing slot machines. A spectacle that is both intriguing and disheartening.

[Texas] Everything surrounding the Mother Road generates great interest. New businesses flourish and seemingly erase the last traces of authenticity, transforming the entire area into a massive theme park. 'I never knew how much this road is travelled', remarked the owner of Spinning Jenny's, a record store in Shamrock opened in 2017, which has already been swallowed up by a new business *[12]*.

Finally, I arrive in Amarillo, *home of the free 720z steak*: the inspiration for The Simpsons' 'Sirloin Challenge'. Heading towards Adrian, the midpoint of Route 66, I come across the Cadillac Ranch. Someone thought (curiously, two architects) that planting ten Cadillacs in the middle of a wheat field was a good idea. Later, someone else thought that selling spray paint cans for $7.50 each so tourists could graffiti the Cadillacs was an even better idea – again proving that the US is the land of entrepreneurs. After enjoying a good cut of meat, I bid farewell to the Mustang and started thinking about a new adventure.



12 **Spinning Jenny's house of music (permanently closed), Shamrock (Texas).**

[Epilogue] Countless hours of radio (climate change deniers, evangelical sermons, and local 'rock FM'), (non-)conversations at bar counters with locals wearing MAGA caps, anti-abortion billboards on highways, omnipresent and undulating Stars and Stripes of all shapes and sizes, endless highway construction zones full of holes, roaring GMC and RAM pickups, threatening *Duel*-style trucks. 'The United States is a great nation, and Americans are very American and much American', as a certain Spanish comedian once said.

The epic, almost heroic, role of the brilliant and rebellious architect creating masterpieces in a rapidly expanding country seems to have faded, absorbed by enormous and impersonal firms largely generating dull, uninspiring buildings. At best, merely competent. Those imagined solitary geniuses who once embodied the ideal of the American Dream are now nostalgically revived in films like *The Brutalist* (2024). It is a film that every architect can watch to travel without leaving their living room. Because travelling, as Le Corbusier once said about architecture in general, travelling '*c'est pour émouvoir*'.

Notes

1. Constantine P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975). The poem *Ithaca* was first published in the journal *Grammata* in 1911.
2. Le Corbusier, *Le voyage d'Orient* (Paris: Forces Vives, 1965).
3. Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1957).
4. Bernard Moitessier, *La longue route: seul entre mers et ciels* (Paris: Arthaud, 1971).
5. Marcel Proust, *La Prisonnière* (Paris: Éditions de la nouvellerevue française, 1923).
6. Le Corbusier, *Quand les catedrales étaient blanches: voyage au pays des timides* (Paris: Éditions Plons, 1937).
7. José Antonio Coderch, 'No son genios lo que necesitamos ahora', *Domus*, 384 (November 1961).
8. Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974).
9. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York, NY: Random House, 1961).
10. Hans Christian Andersen, *The Emperor's New Clothes* (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel, 1837). Originally published as *Kejserens nye Klæder* in the third booklet of the collection *Eventyr, Fortalte for Børn*.
11. Elizabeth Gordon, 'The Threat to the Next America', *House Beautiful*, 95 (April 1953), 126–30.
12. John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1939).
13. Antonio Miranda Regojo, *Diccionario de la modernidad* (Madrid: E.T.S. Arquitectura, 2018).

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