

Covering the Issues

Fasten your seat belts... The housing crisis may be improving, but big problems in the commercial real-estate industry still loom, according to a *BusinessWeek* cover story (November 16, 2009). The statistics are staggering. Mara Der Jovanesian and Dean Foust report that “between now and 2012, more than \$1.4 trillion worth of commercial real-estate loans will come due,” while perhaps as many as three-quarters of the loans made during the height of the bubble will face trouble refinancing. Thirty US cities now have at least \$1 billion in “troubled” commercial loans, up from only one a year ago. Jovanesian and Foust predict the market won’t fully recover for at least another decade.

It’s a reach... Jeff Chu sends up a scathing account of “The Rise and Fall of Design Within Reach” (*Fast Company*, December 2009). Founded in the Time Before *Dwell*, Design Within Reach helped make Eames a household name via an online store and glossy catalogue that seemed to teach us about good design as much as it sold us furniture. Oh, life was so easy then. Fast-forward through an enormous retail-store expansion, multiple management transitions, an economic crash, and some eye-poppingly questionable DWR-sponsored knockoffs of signature design pieces (lawsuits included), and the glossy sheen is long gone.

Home, sweet home... The nation’s most innovative experiment in housing design and urban life is happening in New Orleans, suggests Wayne Curtis in “Houses of the Future” (*The Atlantic*, November 2009). Independent developers have stepped into the void left by federal government inaction. Curtis profiles five programs producing houses that exemplify both utopian thinking and

real-world innovation in formal design, environmental performance, financing, community participation, and self-construction. Though Andres Duany and the Tulane School of Architecture play pivotal roles, Curtis makes a strong case for the projects sponsored by Brad Pitt as the most ambitious and inventive of the bunch. And in the end, New Orleans offers a fascinating hybrid: the projects getting built are neither completely grassroots nor Robert Moses-style planning, and some of the most profound sustainable lessons are being learned from the old, pre-storm architecture.

Seventh-inning stretch... Ostensibly, art critic Michael Kimmelman has written a review of Dana Brand’s *The Last Days of Shea: Delight and Despair in the Life of a Mets Fan* for *The New York Review of Books* (November 19, 2009). But the delightful reality is that Kimmelman has actually written a lively, passionate, personal essay on the architecture of the new New York ballparks as only a lifelong fan can (the new Yankee stadium is “a big, pompous stage”). The lulls in the game—which provide time to reflect on the big questions of life, such as what the pitcher’s next move might be—have been replaced by forced entertainment, fancy food in \$1,000 seats, and shopping opportunities. Amid all the expensive noise of conspicuous consumption, what does this new generation of ballparks miss? Community. Shea’s immense concrete donut never looked so good.

Green Lite... Are LEED-rated buildings measuring up to their energy-performing promises? Not entirely, according to two new reports that Jennie Rothenberg Gritz discusses in “The Green Façade” (*The Atlantic*, online “Dispatch,” November 24, 2009). In one fall 2009



report, GreenerBuildings.com editor and LEED founder Rob Watson states that, despite good performance in other areas, LEED buildings are not producing energy savings as expected. Chicago’s USGBC chapter issued a similar report last fall, stating that LEED-certified buildings in Illinois were performing only 5 percent better than their non-LEED cousins, less than 30 percent of LEED-certified projects met Energy Star standards, and a full 75 percent of energy-modeled buildings fell short of predictions. Why? The problems lie in the mix-and-match point system, and the lack of incentives to measure or improve daily energy performance. With new LEED certification guidelines for operation and management of existing buildings, change may be coming.

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