



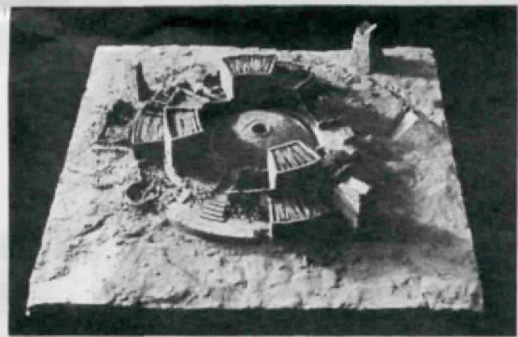
Charles Simonds, (Untitled), Downtown Houston, 1982.

## Clay Castles: Recent Work by Charles Simonds

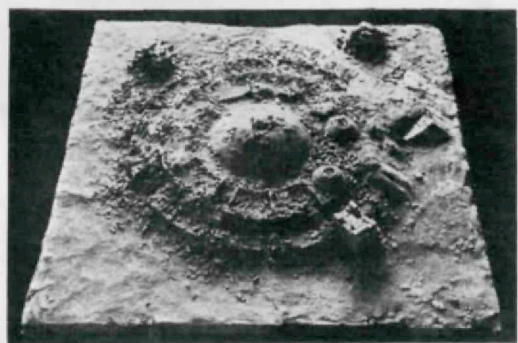
William F. Stern

Works of artist Charles Simonds, including the piece entitled "Circles and Towers Growing" are on view through August at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. The exhibition, organized by John Neff of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, is traveling around the country and will be seen finally in March, 1983, at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

"Circles and Towers Growing" consists of 12 clay tablets. Each sits on a plywood base and measures 30 by 30 inches; other materials used are sand, pebbles, bones and shells. The 12 parts are like stills from a movie: numbers one through three show times before and during the genesis of two imaginary civilizations which Simonds has named Circles and Towers; parts four through 12 continue the saga as each of the civilizations goes through a complete cycle from conception through life to death. Though the pieces in the show can be read in order, they were not made in sequence. For Simonds, progression in time is circular rather than linear, and the lines between built environment, growing things, the earth, and the forms of human sexuality are blurred to the point of obliteration. Shapes grow from cracks in the earth, are built upon and recapitulated in constructed forms, and themselves give birth to seemingly living structures. The span between each of the frames in "Circles and Towers Growing" might be eons or years, or it might be only a day. Simonds relies on our imaginations to fill in the missing time.



Charles Simonds, Number 5 (Observatory), 1978.



Charles Simonds, Number 7 (Untitled), 1978.

The art of Charles Simonds speaks to a primal urge of humankind to create, destroy and recreate civilization. As sculpture, the work is to be viewed as abstract object. As literary chronicle, it is to be read as vignette within a larger story or myth. As architecture, it is a miniaturized record of human building brought into an archaeological present.

"Circles and Towers Growing," made in 1978, documents an aspect of the artist's work, but comprises only a small portion of his entire *oeuvre*. Since 1971, Simonds has been concentrating on a series called "Dwellings," over 300 pieces constructed of tiny unfired clay bricks, built into the cracks and crevices of walls from the Lower East Side of New York to sites in Europe, Africa and China. "Dwellings" traces the migrations of an imaginary race of Little People. Simonds attempts to capture their social structure, culture and religion by building their minuscule villages. Simonds has installed two "Dwellings" in Houston. One can be found six feet above street level at the Paul Building, 1018 Preston Building, near the corner of Preston and Fannin. Another is 10 feet above ground in a wall of the Cross Auto Garage building on Main Street between Jefferson and Calhoun. A third is still in the planning stage. The "Dwellings" link Houston and the Little People to other cities and places around the world. Critic John Beardsley has written of these installations:

# Reviews

## Skin Deep



**The Skyscraper.** Paul Goldberger. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1981. 180 pp. Left: detail from *American Radiator*, Georgia O'Keeffe, 1927.

Reviewed by Bruce C. Webb

Paul Goldberger begins this entertaining history of the skyscraper with a paradox: "The skyscraper," he writes, "is at once the triumphant symbol and the unwelcome intruder in the American City." The paradox is never resolved. In the concluding sentence describing the present situation in architecture he leaves with a similar quandary: "It is a time of excess but also a time of promise." In between, Goldberger, architectural critic for the *New York Times*, has assembled a fast-paced and extensively-illustrated review of America's most distinctive building type.

Goldberger's concern here is primarily for the aesthetics of the skyscraper rather than for the technology which made tall buildings possible. He is unabashedly attracted to architectural theatrics, which is why he prefers the flamboyant eclecticism of the New York skyscraper to the "more intellectually rigorous skyscrapers of Chicago." Both the innocent pre-modern historical revivals of the early twentieth century and the not so innocent post-modern decorations of Philip Johnson and Michael Graves interest him much more than the ubiquitous examples of the high rise computer aesthetics of the fifties and sixties. Understandably so. But the attraction appears to be literally only skin deep. The book rarely takes us inside any of the buildings, thus creating the impression that skyscraper architecture is essentially the costuming of formula buildings or wrappings around floor efficiency ratios. A reasonable understanding for a developer, perhaps, but not for a critic.

The skyscraper certainly had some remarkable moments of artistic and even spiritual achievement. Some of these like the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building or the Chicago buildings of Adler and Sullivan are well known. But there are also some entertaining side shows, like Frank Lloyd Wright's anti-city Mile High, or Theodore Starrett's 1906 proposal for a 100 story building that would have housed industry at the bottom, businesses above, housing above that and a hotel in the topmost region, with each vertical section separated by a public plaza. Then there are the marvelously witty entries to the Chicago Tribune building competition of 1922, together with the prophetic modern submission to that same competition by Walter Gropius. Goldberger also presents the realization of new highrise urban prototypes, like Philip Johnson's IDS Center in Minneapolis, combining the abstract tower with the traditional concept of urban public space.

Goldberger contends that the high rise is making an artistic comeback in a new and more modestly sized version, one which transcends the rational lessons of modernism through a romantic interest in historical design principles. By fixing his attention on the best of the skyscrapers, he manages to maintain a spirited optimism.

Somewhere along the way, however, that optimism becomes more self-conscious, as Goldberger's scene shifts from the magnificent pioneering towers which gave the

"This deliberate juxtaposition of indoors and out, private and public, forces the art audience to acknowledge that these works have an extraesthetic function: to draw us into contemplation of the physical environment and how we live in it."

The "Dwellings" can be viewed by most in the city only by chance, and they often do not survive the ravages of urban life, human and meteorological. "Circles and Towers Growing," on the other hand, makes a permanent record, amplifying the meaning of life and civilization according to Charles Simonds, as interpreted by a museum audience.

"I've always thought of my work as transsocial, transpolitical, transsexual and transparent(al)," Simonds has written. He has spoken and written extensively about his own interpretation of his pieces, and he has put together several performances—shamanistic enactments, really—to demonstrate them. One, a 1970 work called "Landscape↔Body↔Dwelling," was photographed: Simonds lies naked on a beach, partially covered with clay and sand, arranging the little bricks of his "Dwel-

urban skyline its animation to the menacing high rise stereotypes which have grown together to create the new city fabric. Goldberger treats the apocalyptic warnings of urban critics who saw the skyscraper as a monstrous threat to the historical city like good advice the old generation gives to the young—a combination of truths distorted by alarmist overstatement. The economic adventurism which viewed the tall building as a means for maximizing the development potential of valuable urban real estate through the stacking up of more and more rentable office space was clearly at odds with conventional notions of the city. A series of now famous zoning ordinances were passed, chiefly in New York, to give this essentially laissez-faire building type a conscience. Sadly these restrictions were less instruments for planning than for conformity. But it was that special American collaboration between economic entrepreneurship and technical ingenuity which gave shape to the skyscraper and which the skyscraper would come to symbolize. Francisco Mujica, in his 1929 *History of the Skyscraper*, saw the inexorable energy of this collaboration when he wrote, "Behind the skyscraper stands the leading parts of the nation. . . Those who advocate its abolition will certainly have no success."

Contemporary interpretations of the high rise are never so innocent: in a very direct way the high rise has become a metaphor for the morbid regimentation and mind-numbing routines that it harbors. Romantics might long for those days when the race between William van Allen's Chrysler Building and his former partner, H. Craig Severance's 40 Wall Street, for supremacy of the New York City skyline was front page news. Today the triumphs of the latest big buildings are no longer much of a spectator sport and usually are exiled to the business section.

Houston figures briefly in Goldberger's book by way of Philip Johnson and John Burgee's two completed buildings in this city, Post Oak Central and Pennzoil, and their soon to be constructed RepublicBank Center and Transco Tower. All four come in for some high praise, particularly Pennzoil. This paradigmatic abstract compositional work is described as a just right symbol for Houston: "A place eager to make its mark yet desirous of appearing strong and stable at the same time." But I wonder how long it will be before the splendid view of that building's *pas de deux*, which is best seen from I-45 coming in from the airport, will be lost in the excesses of other less distinguished but more massive structures.

When I think of the skyscraper I am reminded of the story which Roland Barthes tells about Maupassant always lunching in the restaurant in the Eiffel Tower. The famous novelist said he didn't like the food, but it was the only place in the city where he didn't have to look at the thing. Then I think of the experience of going up to the Spindletop on the downtown Hyatt at two or three year intervals to show someone from out of town the view from the revolving restaurant. Each time the view is closed in a little more. Now nearly three-fourths of the trip around is spent watching maintenance workers in offices across the way. The point is that going up was always a trip away from the world, a kind of bridge between earth and sky. The best of the skyscrapers realized this and filled the upper regions with places for imaginable experiences and the bottoms with pieces of the street. When bottom, top and in-between are all the same there is no romance and no imagination, only the loss of the meaning of the tower to a matrix of numbing uniformity.

lings" on his own body. Nothing is dead in Simonds' view, and nothing lasts. His civilizations are made and grow from the earth's materials and, when destroyed, crumble and recede back to the very soil from which they emerged.

However, Simonds acknowledges that his views are not the only ones possible, and in fact wants individual viewers to find their own meanings and associations in his work. Differences in countries and races make viewers see different things. Simonds' is an art that can be appreciated and understood by all cultures and ages of humankind, regardless of formal education. There is an engaging, magic quality about Simonds' work, and there is not a select or specified audience for it.

Simonds' art can be seen in a tradition that begins with Marcel Duchamp, who most emphatically stretched the nineteenth-century definition of art. Simonds captures the narrative aspect of art and gives audiences the latitude to explore and understand the work on their own terms.