Vincent Scully’s newest book, Architecture: The Natural and the Man Made, is a synthesis of his many years of teaching and research. This book has the potential to become a classic textbook which would complement any introductory course in architectural history. At this level of criticism, the division of the book into specific time frames leaves gaps which would need to be filled by other sources. In addition, the photographs are often blurry or of such poor quality as to be more of a hindrance than a help. Yale students have the benefit of seeing movie-size images, and are presented with a more complete sweep of history.

Scully states in the preface that the book has been “conceived visually” to shape his argument that Western architectural critics and historians are blind to “everything that is not itself,” especially to the relationship of nature to architectural form. Although a book is an easily produced form of communication, Scully feels it is not an adequate way to communicate his most fundamental ideas and the book as we see it certainly reinforces this view. Scully believes films could provide the answer to this visual communication/teaching problem, and he plans a series of eight films to accompany the text. With luck, the films will convey Scully’s message with more success than the photographs are able to do.

The reader who has listened to Scully lecture over the years will be familiar with his point of view and may be less discouraged by the more academic portions of the text. It is hard to forget Scully’s distinctive lecture style once you have experienced it, and the book manages to capture his spirit although in the tamer version of the printed word. One day we may find the professor performing a ritualistic dance in front of a backdrop of Pueblo architectural images. On another day, tragedy may arise, as in the case of Taliesin, and a solemn silence will descend upon the audience — the lecture ends on a soft, sad note, tears visible in the professor’s eyes. These physical connections to architecture begin to inform the emotional and intellectual components of built form. The films accompanying the text should be an asset to the readers who are unable to experience Professor Scully first hand; but even without the physical presence of the man, the book begins to convey his love for the silent messages of architectural form.

Vincent Scully’s book differs in its approach from the standard textbook by developing a single theme. Essentially, he asserts that the earth demands respect, and then describes instances where this occurs or does not occur. The book thereby avoids pedantries and brings vitality to the business of history. At the same time, the book falls short in terms of completeness and visual presentation. If the book is to find a place as a classic academic text which can be used for introductory and/or survey courses of architecture, the scope of information is just as important as its ideas and emotional impact.

The idea that guides Scully’s quest is posed as a question of architectural form: “Do they (buildings) attempt, for example, to echo the shapes of the landscape or to contrast with them?” The approach he describes begins to make sense of current
relationships between landscape and building. In part, his goal is to reassert the importance of the instinctual response: "The impulse remains to respect the integrity of the earth, to find a truth in it and, beyond dying, to shape a community with it for the common good."

The book covers a period of time stretching from early Pit houses in Mesa Verde to Maya Lin's recently completed Vietnam Veteran's Memorial. He picks time periods which best explore his idea of the natural and the man-made. As stated before, the 'building' of a specific time period will either imitate natural forms, or very consciously compete with them. The Navajo hogan is seen as an "imitation of natural forms by human beings who seek thereby to fit themselves safely into nature's order." The Greeks, on the other hand, are credited with more or less inventing architecture which confronts nature with its own order. The Hagia Sophia is posited as the building "that set the course of European architecture for a thousand years... to control nature or to keep it out." The Italian gardens such as Villa Lante by Vignola illustrate the wild terror of dark hillside forests and grottos, while the classic French garden is described as the "whole earth becoming architecture," with land, trees, and water composed in such a manner as to reflect the will of man. Turning to our own time, Scully is not kind to the modernists who, when they came "to design their cities, failed to consult anybody who knew anything about how cities are made or how people lived in them."

The Natural and the Man Made sets a course for discussion of architectural form as related to community, a much needed debate during these difficult times within the city. Through Scully's selective presentation of architectural history, the reader is forced to consider the problems inherent in shaping the environment; and students, in particular, are pushed to seek new and more complete solutions to these problems.

Like races and nations, professions want to see their origins as epic; they therefore like to write their histories as Testament. Accounts of post-classical physics typically sound something like "And Maxwell begat Planck, and Planck begat Einstein, and Einstein fathered multitudes;" American lawyers love the role-calls of clerkships chaining back to Justice Holmes. Behind such prideful professional chronicles is a fundamental insecurity, for the unstated sentiment is that while we (physicists, lawyers, architects) are now of smaller stature, if more numerous, our tribe had giants in its days of genesis.

American Modern architects since the nineteen-twenties have linked together the careers of Henry Hobson Richardson, Louis Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright, and regarded the resulting narrative as their own special originary epic. As with the translators of Iliad and Odyssey, great are the names of those who have offered versions of the story; Mumford, Hitchcock, Gideon, Scully. James O'Gorman now enters the banqueting hall to sing the great tale again.

He does not question its central place in the architectural history of this country. This version elaborates on those which have