Looking at contemporary architecture through the prism of popular media, one might be tempted to conclude that the only buildings of significance and consequence today are authored by an exclusive club of internationally operating brand-name architects who incessantly travel the world, leaving behind a trail of head-turning and headline-grabbing structures – vain monuments that usually speak more of professional one-upmanship than of a genuine interest in architectural innovation or the locale for which they were designed. With an insatiable public eagerly awaiting the next immediate and easily digestible architectural icon, an increasingly breathless design profession finds itself in an unwinnable race to catch up with the ever-accelerating and over-mediated forces of cultural globalization.

It is against this backdrop of professional hypertension driven by a universal longing for instant gratification that the work of James Shields emerges as an inspiring alternative, exemplifying how practitioners at the periphery of the global design circus can find their own voices and develop an architecture that is relevant – relevant not only within the limited geographic boundaries of their own practices, but for the architectural discourse at large. At a time when many architects choose to frame their work in the future tense, often subscribing to a primitive brand of utopianism whose vagueness is less about the future per se than it is about avoiding the scrutiny of the presence, Shields counters with an unambiguously precise architecture, one that prefers materiality over equivocality, pragmatism over idealism, and today over tomorrow: an architecture of the here and now.

It is no coincidence, then, that the ten projects presented in this volume are all built and, perhaps more importantly, located within a few hours’ drive of Shields’ office in Milwaukee, his hometown and now the epicenter of his professional career. Propelled by a sincere love for a community that has not always been enthusiastic about progressive aesthetics, Shields has devoted the majority of his creative endeavors to the physical rehabilitation of this rustbelt city, a place whose physiognomy continuous to be marred by decades of economic disinvestment, tragically misguided planning ideologies, and a general ambivalence vis-à-vis architecture as a civic art. It is Shields’ intimate familiarity with the region’s historical and cultural forces that gives his buildings, unapologetically modern as they are, an aura of authenticity and an instantaneous sense of belonging.
More than thirty years after Aldo Rossi’s "L'architettura della citta," the curative impact that so many of Shields' buildings have had on Milwaukee's cityscape – rebuilding street edges, reknitting the fabric, redefining public spaces – suggests that the postulate of architecture as a principal urban design tool still has critical currency. But Shields' work also echoes another Rossian precept: the importance of typological clarity. Deliberately rejecting today’s obsession with the formal acrobatics of bending, warping, and twisting shapes, Shields' buildings are instead composed of simple volumes, diligently grouped to respond to the particularities of a site and to create carefully calibrated spaces – public and private, intimate and monumental, open-air and enclosed – within and in between them. A project like the Discovery World Museum is so powerful not despite but because of its volumetric simplicity: a cylinder and an elongated box linked by a transparent glass spine along Lake Michigan’s shoreline, the purity of the precisely proportioned figure a calming antidote to the kinetic gimmickry of Santiago Calatrava’s neighboring Milwaukee Art Museum. A similar formal parti organizes the Stayer Center, a sublime stone and glass structure that anchors Marian University's fragmented campus. Its simple material palette, drawn from the college’s existing building stock of solid but entirely ordinary mid-century modern blocks, reveals another important dimension of Shields work: the level of tectonic intuition and technical sophistication with which his building envelopes are crafted, their detailed elegance bearing witness to the designer’s emphatic concern for materials and their means of assembly.

Tectonics, materiality, permanence, craft: if these are attributes that strike the casual observer as oddly archaic, they may very well be; but archaic is not synonymous with obsolete, and Shields' work eloquently argues that they are enduring ingredients for what Kevin Alter has called an architecture of “self-sufficiency,” marked by a firm commitment to the idea of building as a physical act – an architecture that does not rely on semiotic or rhetorical exercises or on sources extrinsic to the discipline of architecture proper to validate itself. And yet, neither Shields' embrace of time-honored architectural principles, nor his obvious contempt for today's sophomoric technophilia that seeks salvation in the gadgetization of architecture, should be confused with a lack of interest in technological innovation. In fact, his work is a case study in applied building technology and environmental sustainability. One early example is the Butterfly Vivarium, a luminous appendix to a foreboding, sprawling museum complex in downtown Milwaukee. The simple transparent volume with a soaring, elegantly detailed roof plane gives this important civic institution the street presence it never had, choreographing a new entry sequence and creating one of the city’s most exquisite new urban spaces, a sunken, tree-lined courtyard that serves as the museum lobby’s virtual outdoor extension. Perhaps more significantly,
the Butterfly Vivarium features one of the first double-envelope building skins in North America, a sophisticated multi-layered glass curtainwall whose ventilated cavity provides the superior thermal performance that the building’s delicate inhabitants demand.

Shields’ portfolio includes many other environmentally sensitive buildings, some of which have received coveted LEED certifications from the United States Green Building Council. And yet, his most important contribution to the field of sustainable design arguably transcends clever technology and LEED standards altogether: it is his work with existing dysfunctional or obsolete structures that exemplifies the aesthetic possibilities embodied in the concept of “architectural recycling.” The ecological benefits of extending the life cycle of existing buildings and utilizing their embedded resources are obvious, but it requires an unusual amount of intellectual curiosity and a bold architectural vision to catapult adaptive re-use projects beyond the realm of mundane renovations and literal, pontificating preservation. Shields’ redesign of St. Anthony the Hermit, a beloved 19th century church that had become inadequate for its growing congregation, illustrates the rejuvenating impact that a set of respectful and precisely articulated architectural interventions can have on an existing structure, recharging its tired bones and breathing new life into its worn shell. At St. Anthony, Shields designed an elegant ceiling vault composed of heavy timber arches and a filigree of thin wood slats, a dramatic spatial device stitching together the old church and its contemporary addition. Refreshingly unconcerned with stylistic platitudes, the louvered vault enters into a compelling dialogue with the original building and its newly exposed, beautifully crafted structural limestone walls, framing the past not as an abstract concept but as an integral part of the presence.

As much as this book focuses on James Shields’ accomplishments as a practitioner, it would be impossible to assess the significance of his architecture without recognizing his role as an educator. Shields’ built work puts him in a select group of prolific designers who have left their lasting marks on Milwaukee throughout its architectural history — H.C. Koch, Edward Townsend Mix, Eschweiler & Eschweiler, and yes, Donald Grieb, come to mind. What sets James Shields apart from these professional predecessors is his involvement in academia, his sincere commitment to the education of the next generation of architects. His former students can now be found at the helm of architecture studios and design agencies around the country, their works clearly carrying Shields’ architectonic DNA. His is an architecture designed for a particular place at a particular moment in time, but its legacy is beginning to extend far beyond the here and now.