

Public Art Fund, Lever House, New York, USA

For Hal Ashby's film *Shampoo* (1975) the Hollywood scribe (as well as director, producer and actor) Robert Towne hid a complex dissection of a place and time within a story about a skirt-chasing Tinseltown male hairdresser. For Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) he envisioned a burgeoning LA built by a government so rotten it steals water from its own citizens. Derived from a painting in her 'Los Angeles' series (2005-6) and partly inspired by this now legendary 'industry' figure, Sarah Morris' installation, *Robert Towne*, injects a degree of inscrutable geometric chaos into Lever House, an irreproachably elegant glass-and-steel high Modernist gem on Park Avenue whose open, ground-level courtyard and arcade, punctuated by steel columns, were designed to allow pedestrians to walk through and under the building. The building seemed to signal a new transparency in urban design if not in modern life. One of Morris' familiar abstract grids-gone-haywire, with intersecting hard-edged lines and planes infilled with a palette ranging from turquoise and canary yellow to black and grey, the painting covers the ceiling in the glass-enclosed lobby as well as the pedestrian arcade, linking the interior and exterior spaces.

When the building - designed by Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill - was completed in 1951, some criticized its innovative ground level. Morris plays on the contrast between that area's subterranean, almost irrational quality and the austerity of the rest of the structure. In discussing the work, she has said that she considers Towne an 'elliptical figure'; she also clearly invokes the labyrinthine plots and subplots he created for movies such as *Chinatown* and *Shampoo*. The mystique surrounding the eccentric Towne - script doctor *extraordinaire*, occasional visionary screenwriter, hypochondriac, epic talker - perhaps helps account for the fancifulness of *Robert Towne's* conceit. Although tying together two historically antagonistic but economically linked cities in such a way is intriguing, some might wonder how much Towne has to do with the mid-century period. However, Bunshaft's sleek Cold War-era design was quickly seen as evoking the emergent power structures of the time, even though his beautiful skyscraper merely housed a soap company. *Shampoo*, made in the mid-1970s but set in 1968 (notably during the days surrounding Richard Nixon's election and inauguration, so as to evoke an encroaching moral corruption), makes use of a similar temporal dislocation, while *Chinatown's* mordant neo-*noir* transposed 1970s' political paranoia and revised ideas about gender to a 1930s' setting we thought we knew.

Towne (who acquired that name after changing it from Schwartz and acting in two films under the pseudonym Edward Wain) can be an elusive figure, no matter how much his work is discussed.

Of the difficulty in defining the contours of his influence - which may be over- or underestimated, since his work has so often been uncredited, sometimes at his own request - critic David Thomson writes in his *New Biographical Dictionary of Film*: 'Sometimes, Towne has been in the air, like the scent of eucalyptus, or fluoride in the water. And, generally, he's been as sweet and beneficial.' Thomson goes on to describe Towne's 'deft command of narrative structure and natural dialogue in the service of a warm, untidy humanism and a special love of southern California'. Others claim that he has struggled with structure while pursuing his complicated storylines.

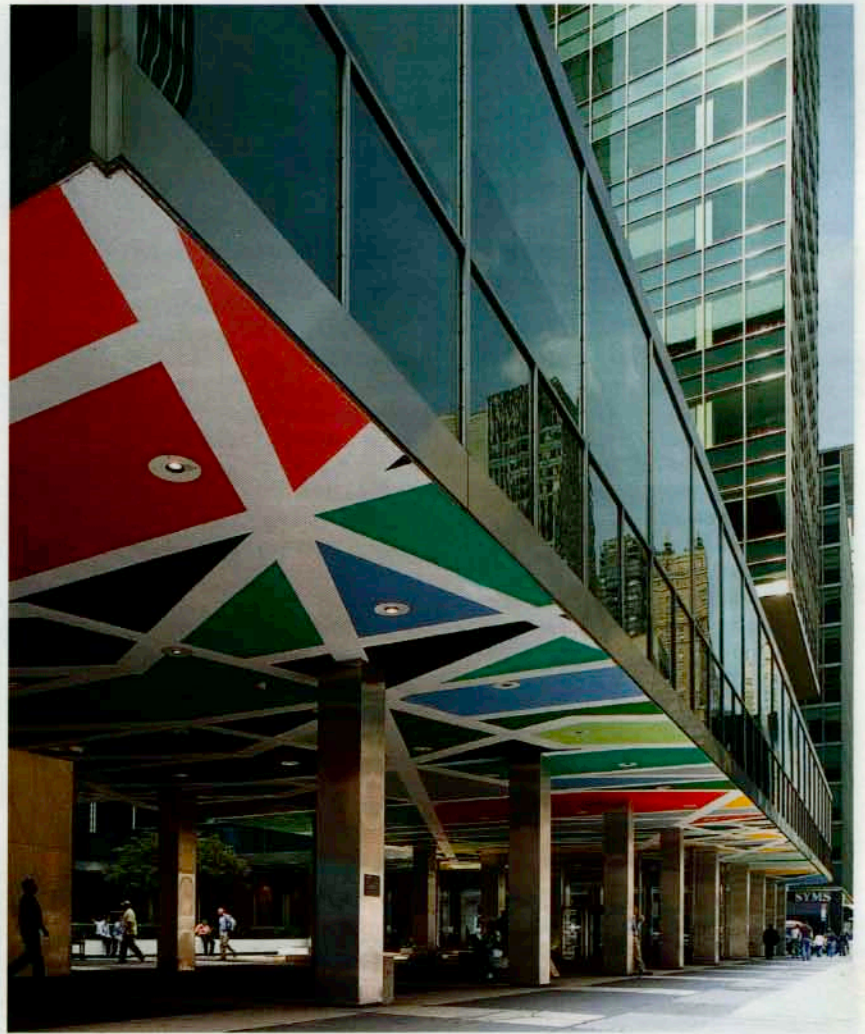
On paper the concept for *Robert Towne* may seem tinged with pretentiousness, but in reality it has an odd, unexpectedly affecting resonance not often found in Morris' work, which can verge on cinematic glibness. The Lever arcade, as some remarked when the building was finished, is reflective while being somewhat dark, and that deep shadowiness combined with Morris' bright shards of colour meant to suggest LA does obliquely evoke the intersection of tough realism

and glossy surface, the collisions of American optimism and disillusionment, in Towne's screenwriting. The lobby, which sits beneath the blue-green glass-curtained tower and is itself enclosed in glittering glass (over which the tower's graceful rectangle appears to float), is more luminous, and the reflections in the glass of the outdoor ceiling lights join those inside in producing long, illuminated paths like motorways trailing away into the night.

One of Morris' white vectors extends from the south-east corner and through the lobby to reach the middle of the north side; another veers towards it from the building's east side, but the two never meet, as if denying the possibility of narrative resolution. Morris often makes reference to the Venn diagram, and here overlapping areas of colour echo not only shared or blurred responsibilities in the film industry, as exemplified by Towne's collaborations, but also, more interestingly, through his fascination with power, the opaque surfaces of American society and moral ambiguity.

Kristin M. Jones

Sarah Morris
Robert Towne
2006
Public mural
Installation view



Sarah Morris