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The new Aspen Style: Bigger is better, bloated is best



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I fully intended to stay away from writing about that bloated wedding ceremony up on the back of Aspen Mountain.

I figured enough rural and remote mud has been churned up already by that heavy equipment hootenanny in the meadow. No need for me to sling any more.

But then, Monday morning, I choked on my Cheerios when I read an Aspen Journalism story quoting John Miller, the man on whose land the event was staged.

He said he was shocked at the size of the wedding. It caught him by surprise. Complete surprise! Hmmm. Let us remember that county planners started by insisting that the wedding was way too big, way too disruptive for that mountain meadow. And then, after that, Mr. Miller personally stepped in to exploit a loophole that allowed the event to wriggle out of complying with any county regulations.

But Mr. Miller's alleged surprise wasn't what got me. It was his statement that the father of the bride, the man bankrolling the entire affair, Robert K. Steel, was "the salt of the earth."

Yes indeed: former vice chairman of Goldman Sachs, CEO of Wachovia Bank, under secretary of the United States Treasury under George W. Bush. A man with a humble \$17 million shack on Red Mountain. And, let us never forget the current cherry on top of his resume, Aspen Institute chairman. Yup, salt of the earth.

Or, as someone said years ago, defending one of his super-rich buddies from an unfair attack in my column, "He's just your average billionaire."

Just your average billionaire.

Now, I don't know if Mr. Steel is a full-fledged billionaire, but he's got the attitude, if not the extra zeros on his net worth. And maybe he really is the salt of the earth— Aspen style.

Aspen Style.

What exactly is that these days?

It's hard to be sure because Aspen is overrun by a succession of tribes as the seasons change, each bringing their own version of Aspen Style.

Right now, we are catching our collective breath between the Food & Wine Tribe and the Aspen Ideas Horde.

The foodies are mostly a cheerful bunch of hedonists, focused on eating and drinking. Their celebrities are chefs. Their hangovers are from only the best wines. Their Aspen Style is, to borrow from the ancient orgiastic Bacchanalian Greeks, "Evoe!" Or, from the more modern orgiastic frat Greeks, "Party Hearty!" Can't complain about that.

Next, we face the Aspen Ideators, a bunch of official heavy thinkers, who know many things, including exactly how important they are — an importance that demands the biggest jet and the biggest security entourage. Their celebrities are themselves, of course. Their hangovers tend to be inflicted on others. (See, "Great Recession" or "War in Iraq.") And their Aspen Style is, to borrow from Mr. Shelley, "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" Or, to put it more simply, "Ain't I something?" Don't dare complain about that. (See, "security entourage," above.)

And once the last of their jets has hurled itself into the sky, we will be left with the Music Festivarians, the final, most enduring of the major summer tribes. A calmer, quieter bunch, they are here to enjoy beautiful music in an exquisite setting. Their celebrities are musicians. Their hangovers are from a touch too much chardonnay and maybe a little too much sun while sitting out on the lawn. Their Aspen Style is, well, forgive my obvious prejudice, but they are the true stalwarts of the last of the three legs of that famed Aspen Idea: "Spirit."

Having said the Music Festival was the last of the town-changing summer tribes, I do have to mention the group that is my favorite: the Fizzing Physicists. To be sure, they do not overwhelm the town by the sheer volume of their presence; but they bring an other-worldly genius that surely ought to outweigh mere numbers. Their Aspen Style seems to be quirky delight. And, unlike the Aspen Ideators, they are the true holders of the central leg of the Aspen Idea: “Mind.”

But the physicists make me think about dark matter and dark energy — which brings us full circle, back to Mr. Steel and his Institute-certified version of Aspen Style.

I worry that this latest Aspen Style has slipped, perhaps irredeemably, into Gigantism: Bigger is better, and biggest is best.

This could be an evolutionary dead end from which there is no escape. As the highway signs say, “Wrong way! Do not enter!”

The impacts of any ridiculous uber-high-end store, greedy landlord, or lunatic condominium owner are amusing, but, in the long run, irrelevant.

Think of it as a skinned knee or even a broken leg: The pain passes and the wound heals.

But rampant Gigantism may be an incurable disease. As Edward Abbey said, “Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell.”

I’m not going to waste time here on the DAMN (Despicable Art Museum Nonsense), except to note that it’s a gigantic wound that likely will never heal.

But consider the plans afoot to create a gigantic terminal at the Aspen Airport, to complement the inevitable creep toward longer, wider runways and bigger planes.

Consider the busy scurrying to open a zoning loophole that will give us a spate of four-story hotels, walling off the bottom of the mountain from the town.

Consider — and this, I know is a strange one to mention — the brilliant new Music Tent: a grand and glorious structure, to be sure (really), but no more a “tent” than the main terminal at Denver Airport is a “tent.” Its tent-ness is no more than a cheerful wave to the distant fading memory of the original circus tent pitched in a meadow for the inaugural seasons of the Aspen Music Festival.

The music is still brilliant — the best that hard-edged money can buy — but the ambience of the tent in a meadow, the true soul, has fled.

All wounds that will never heal.

And that, I’m afraid, is the new Aspen Style.

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