

# Broadening the mind

Early in 2010, the *Journal of Design History* commissioned a review of three new books, but when they saw the unruly copy submitted in July 2010, they took the unusual step of sending a review out for peer review itself.

The conclusion was that this text was utterly unsuitable for publication in the *Journal of Design History*.

---

*Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean: Vernacular Dialogues and Contested Identities*, edited by Jean-Francois Lejeune and Michelangelo Sabatini, London: Routledge, 2010

*Pride in Modesty: Modernist Architecture and the Vernacular Tradition in Italy*, Michelangelo Sabatini, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010

*Travel, Space, Architecture*, edited by Jilly Traganou and Miodrag Mitrasinovic, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2009

---

Implications from the truism that travel broadens the mind, enriches it and interrogates it, and thus that contested identities inevitably surface, underlie all three of the variably fascinating books under review.

The academy in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has breathed a particular air. It was fed in the UK by the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), fed across English-speaking academia by the sudden explosion over a generation of doctorates in our disciplines - unknown when I was young, and now *de rigueur* on the CV of anyone wanting to write, teach or think about the subject all around the rims of the Pacific and North Atlantic.

Moreover, with English ever more as the academy's *lingua franca*, all nationalities scramble to produce doctorates in this language; this hermetic language of the academy which increasingly becomes the only 'English' known by those scholars whose parents' native tongue, with its inflexions and nuances, its allusions and the history behind each phrase, is quite different.

One real advantage of this new Esperanto is that PhDs and conferences in this language no longer privilege Anglo-American experiences. This is a wonderful boon for us limited scholars for whom English is our first or, often, our only language. For others, just as important is the pooling of much more diverse stories in their shared second language than would have been possible a generation earlier.

However, not very many write well in a second or third language, particularly when still young. At the same time, this peculiar academic language of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, into which they are inducted by their graduate programmes, is paradoxically probably spoken *more* fluently by those not brought up by native English-speaking parents. It is, at times, not an English I easily comprehend.

Of the Japanese furniture designer and educator Kogure Joichi's travels a century ago, we learn (in *Travel, Space, Architecture*, one of the three books under review) that "very real linguistic barriers would have limited the extent of his overseas interactions." Today's hybrid academics have no such problem. But, as with any Esperanto, their language tends to offer an increasingly limited space for nuance or open-endedness - for what the architect Aldo van Eyck<sup>1</sup> would call

“both/and” - in a context where so much is carefully wrapped, caged and pinned down to avoid ambiguity.

+ + + +  
Tim Parks, translator, teacher and novelist, contrasts a second language learned for a purpose with a first one internalised by osmosis: “A word spoken at home or school can be dense with nuance and shared knowledge in a way unlikely to occur in a casual exchange at rail station or airport, however fascinating and attractive an exotic traveling companion may be. This is not an argument for staying at home, but for having a home from which to set out.”<sup>ii</sup>

The problem is that contemporary academic English, however exotic, is not a home from which anyone sets out.

+ + + +  
There are various consequences for published scholarship. The PhD itself develops a certain form and in recent decades, led by the ever more refined doctoral machine of the USA, it has become honed to a razor-sharp tool; if one suitable only for certain tasks. As one must know more and more about less and less, and theoretical method has priority over wider knowledge or understanding, the contextualising generalisations can seem strangely crude. The literature search needs to be felt in the bibliography. Everything needs justification by citation. (And citation is a peculiar device - as anyone who has put together a Wikipedia entry will attest: to say that a subject is published by OUP, an easily verifiable assertion, carries no weight alongside a brief dismissive review in a Sunday paper.)

A book, though, is not a thesis for examiners, but it is for readers. It is for sharing insight and knowledge, not for displaying proof that one has gained the knowledge, foot-slogging or book-worming one’s endless lonely hours in archives and bound volumes of old magazines which only other similar students have ever bothered to open for ages. All that should be digested, and the scholarship and its linguistic expression should feel secure in a book of any value.

As Parks comments elsewhere, translations - and I here apply this to translations into “PhD-English”: “are full of stylishly incomprehensible moments but readers rarely notice them. So long as there are words to keep it turning, the mind rattles on, content to be centre stage.”<sup>iii</sup> Unless, when tasked to review books like these, we stop and interrogate the meanings of words, phrases, sentences, pages, chapters.

+ + + +  
Inevitably the book from the PhD is itself an item in the bag taken for a new job, for tenure and, at the least in the UK, for what were called through this decade RAE brownie points. In a parallel way, the papers from those ubiquitous RAE-brownie-point-driven conferences are collected, topped and tailed and now masquerade as chapters in a book. We see calls for papers and are encouraged to shoehorn our work to fit. One little, lively insight could be a bright facet of a new whole; but we have to make it publishable itself - a paper, a book chapter. And so it grows, incorporating our previous research far from the conference title.

Thus the subsequent book is all ‘facets’ and no ‘big picture,’ no-one deals with the randomness of the contributions, while ‘editors introductions’ can seem desperate attempts to hide lacunae or overlaps, or justify certain contributions. For today everyone’s paper is so precious - each a rung on the ladder towards tenured professor, or invitations to give a keynote, or in the bag hawked around for the next job. Always a worthy document of itself, more treasure for the RAE - a process, of course, where the individual paper or chapter and not the larger book is being judged. With such anthologies, the reader longs for someone big enough, wise enough or just bold enough to take all this assembled scholarship and make a genuinely worthwhile book out of it.<sup>iv</sup>

Of course the systems are refining and reflecting and changing; everyone in UK academia is only too aware how government's views on 'research outputs' are changing, but generally speaking, this is still how the books are coming out.

As Anthony Grafton remarked recently:

"There was a Slow Food feel to British university life, based on a consensus that people should take the time to make an article or a book as dense and rich as it could be. Good American universities were never exactly Fast Food Nation, but we certainly felt the pressure to produce, regularly and rapidly. By contrast, Michael Baxandall spent three years at the Warburg Institute, working in the photographic collection and not completing a dissertation, and several more as a lecturer, later on, writing only a few articles. Then, in 1971 and 1972, he produced two brilliant interdisciplinary books, which transformed the study of Renaissance humanism and art, remain standard works to this day, and were only the beginning of a great career. [T]he Warburg [staff] knew how to be patient. Their results speak for themselves."<sup>v</sup>

Recalling Richard Sennett's masterly - and wonderfully short! - *The Uses of Disorder* written in his early twenties, or two very different and equally exemplary student writings from half a century earlier: William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* first drafted as an undergraduate and Kenneth Clark's *The Gothic Revival* as his 21-year old's dissertation, I wonder at the models offered to today's participants in the intensive PhD hothouse.

Many of the volumes which today are spewed from academic and serious presses encourage such thoughts. The three under review here, all containing fascinating material, often not otherwise available in English, are no exception.

How does one essay become a paper in *The Journal of Design History* and another find itself between hard covers; is it luck? It is, of course, a quite different question to wonder which location is likely to be more influential or valuable. Where would it be more likely to be read?

In *Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean*, one of the most fascinating essays - that on the so-called 'anti-Modernist' architect Schulze-Naumburg - veers nevertheless completely off the book's 'Mediterranean' title. In *Travel, Space, Architecture*, one chapter is simply a short and ordinary newspaper report of a conference. Another, a valuable and clearly-written article 'Travel-writing the Design Industry in Modern Japan, 1910 - 1925' would fit perfectly in *The Journal of Design History*; but is rather lonely in that book.

+ + + +  
Typically in such volumes, the student writing mentality remains. In too many essays "I would like to thank my committee" footnotes seems to forget that they are actually in a published book. Some generalised statements are truisms others are arguable, and occasional citations are decidedly strange. The insight that 18<sup>th</sup> Century Edinburgh (to take a random example) was "an extraordinary forcing ground for talent" is footnoted to a 1955 German book on 19<sup>th</sup> Century panoramas; that 19<sup>th</sup> Century European cities had "burgeoning suburbs" is carefully footnoted to a page in Frampton's *Modern Architecture*. Bibliographies can seem of disproportionate length. (The five central chapters, numbers 6 to 10, in *Travel, Space* have more than a page of bibliography for every six pages of text, quite apart from extensive - yes, and often very interesting - footnotes.)

That these three volumes float in and out of each other in the reviewer's consciousness is only partly because the two anthologies find it impossible to

develop an individual shape - each having scattered contents diverse in approach, material and in a range of expression from barely intelligible jargon to clear insightful essays. There are also simple links: Michelangelo Sabatino is author of an original monograph which views Italian Modernist architectural culture through its vernacular heritage; he is also co-editor of the wider anthology linking Modernist ideas to the Mediterranean. And one of their contributors also writes in the third, the least focused, volume which seems to centre on investigating the architectural implications of how travel broadens the mind. (It opens with the words "This book aims to explore how conditions of physical and metaphorical dislocation affect spatio-architectural practices..." which I think is code for the same thing.)

If the threads Sabatino draws (in *Pride in Modesty*) build into the richest tale here, there are also times when a reader longs for wider reference beyond Italy. Pagano and Levi-Montalcini's 'colli cottage' is so like Muncie's 1923 Haus am Horn in plan - but the Bauhaus is nowhere mentioned. Italians in the 1930s, advocating the courtyard house as "Pompeian classical vernacular", saw it as "an expression of *Italianità* that could be flaunted to the rest of the world." By 'world', of course, they mean transalpine Europe. The courtyard traditions of Arabia, India or China somehow escape the radar. While Sabatino's carefully researched material is a rich mine from which others will be able to develop further insights, Sabatino & Lejeune's (*Mediterranean*) collection and on occasion Traganou's (*Travel*) one do also enrich the picture. And even the range of the anthologies' contents - from infuriatingly meaningless to simply descriptive, abstruse to fascinating, and well as the widely diverse subject matter somewhat randomly alighted on - even this invites readers to argue with them and inevitably try to build coherent patterns in our own heads. No mention of Camillo Sitte in one book? Ah but he comes in briefly in another. No mention of Paul Oliver in any of these books? That is a more peculiar omission from this 'vernacular' discipline.

+ + + +  
'Travel' and 'vernacular' are natural frames for discussion of 'contested identities'. Here some essayists are well aware of post-colonial theoretical positions (even if at times replacing their own structure with a swarm of buzz words); others are much more simply descriptive. But there is no space for a contest between these authorial identities. Each builds on some differently quoted expert's analysis of nomad versus migrant, vernacular versus folk, enclave versus ghetto, and so on.

But there are certain kinds of contested identities around the Mediterranean in the 1930s and '40s which clearly are simply not mentioned in polite society. And the politics is a constant theme resounding in its absence. (To be fair, Lejeune does mention in a footnote that the Spaniard Coderch - later to join leading Italian anti-Fascist De Carlo in Team-X - was an active Falangist (Fascist/Nazi ally) at the same moment as Sert was designing the government (Republican/anti-Fascist) 1937 Pavilion in Paris, to house Picasso's Guernica.)

As I read Sabatino's subtle use of his vernacular trope seamlessly to link Italian themes in the 1930s to the 1950s, it is astonishing to remember that for much of the centre of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Europe was being brutally ripped apart. The perseverance of interesting Italian architectural work and theoretical debate through to 1942 seems - from Britain - extraordinary enough; then 1943 to 1945 quietly fades from Sabatino's account. One of the most recent tales of that time is called *Italy's Sorrow*<sup>vi</sup>; it depicts a world where Sabatino never treads.

No sorrow here; but tiny hints, for sure. In *Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean* we learn that Bruno Taut "was exiled from Germany"; at another point, reading of the Werkbund's attempts to define what was meant by "made in Germany", we learn that, between the world wars, "this trend eventually

overlapped with a rising interest in cultural anthropology as well as eugenics as a way of sorting out what was the 'local' and 'authentic.'" Here Kai Gutschow, in a fine essay, is - I presume - being intentionally dry and sharp; Sabatino himself seems to follow the *Lex Cleesensis* on reference to the war. This is a real pity, as the Italian context is so little understood abroad, and Paolo Nicoloso's important works over the past 20 years on architecture under Fascism have not been translated from Italian. This sentence from Sabatino, I suspect, must baffle most readers in English:

"Collaboration with the fascist regime had tarnished the reputations of many Italian architects both at home and abroad, despite mostly unsuccessful attempts of left-wing fascists to persuade the regime to adopt the progressive platform of the rationalist movement."

And it really deserves unpicking, for an Anglo-Saxon architectural culture whose understanding might be limited to Peter Eisenman's obsessive fetishising of Terragni.

Certainly, in these volumes, there is much discussed in English for the first time, and monoglot scholars will be grateful also for really valuable translations - Sabatino from Italian, Lejeune from Spanish, Akcan from Turkish, and so on. Esra Akcan writes a valuable and very different essay in each anthology, one (in *Mediterranean*) on Taut in Japan and Turkey, the other on the 'Turkish house', linking Corbusier in Turkey (which is a journey also discussed by Benedetto Gravagnuolo in *Mediterranean*) to Eldem in Paris.

The politics of Pagano and De Carlo's important 1936 and 1951 Milan exhibitions (entitled "rural" and "spontaneous" architecture, respectively) is underplayed by Sabatino. That it is a charged subject is clearer when Caroline Maniaque (in *Travel*) describes how, in 1975, Paris exhibited Drop City as America's "spontaneous architecture" - to the fury of the US Ambassador and the exhibition's immediate removal from Paris' American Cultural Center.

From among these varied volumes, we are offered a rich kaleidoscope of memorable images:

- the influence of Rio and Cape Town as stopover ports to Australia on the future imagining of Sydney;
- the iconic roles of Capri and Ibiza for Modernism (intriguingly pointed to by various authors);
- the role of their being sons of expat diplomats in the architectural imaginings of Sedad Eldem and David Adjaye;
- Hans Hollein building a slide collection in '50s America, and publishing, back in Germany, the Mediterranean hilltown clusters he photographed in the pueblos of New Mexico.

Yes, much of the tales in *Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean* are not, in fact, particularly 'Mediterranean' at all - as Bruno Taut had argued so well. And Taut's goal, the "search for synthesis between old tradition and modern civilization" is exactly the great legacy of the Wagnerschule of fin-de-siècle Vienna: the critical fusion of modernism and tradition. In Plecnik, Fabiani and the others is a thread clearly leading to De Carlo and his post-war (one could argue post-modern) contemporaries. No such line of thought appears here.

+ + + +

Two adjacent short essays in *Travel* intrigued this reviewer as they centred on people known to me personally - Giancarlo De Carlo and Geoffrey Bawa - and they seemed central to the theme. Hermann Schlimme's clearly written and engaging 'The Mediterranean Hill Town: A travel Paradigm' is an insightful and fascinating essay around De Carlo. Though short, it is based on an idea, is developed and

researched using primary sources some of which are previously untapped. Katherine Bartsch's 'Roots or Routes? Exploring a New Paradigm for Architectural Historiography Through the Work of Geoffrey Bawa' is entirely taken from secondary sources, is contentious where it is not vacuous, and could probably be condensed to two clear sentences.

Yet perhaps it is Schlimme's which is really in the wrong book. While a rich study of 'roots or routes' (a polarity Bartsch takes from James Clifford) might really get into the meat of this fascinating subject - of migrations, cultural layerings, and yet yearnings for home. Franz Fanon (as Akcan quotes) saw the colonised subject as either unfavourably criticizing his own national culture or taking refuge in passionately defending it. Various authors here - exemplified by Sophia Vyzoviti's sensitive, ethnographic picture of immigrant life in Athens today (in *Travel, Space, Architecture*) - show us that life, with its varied roots and routes, is rather more complicated than that.

Meanwhile, designers have to get on and create. And as the great German architect of the second half of last century, Gunther Behnisch, said when it was suggested that traditional building reassures the traumatized, 'If people want comforting they should get a cat'. Here is fertile soil wherein different ideas could take root, and deservedly flourish.

---

John McKean 26 July 2010

*John McKean is an independent scholar based in Cividale del Friuli, Italy. He has recently published three very different essays in widely scattered anthologies, one growing from an international research forum, one from a conference, the third by invitation. We are all guilty!*

---

<sup>1</sup> Whom, with his important 'structuralist' focus on traditional African architecture, I am surprised does not feature more than fleetingly in the two anthologies under review.

<sup>2</sup> NYBooks.com Tim Parks blog, 19 Jan 2012

<sup>3</sup> Tim Parks, *Teach Us To Sit Still*, Vintage, 2011 p.324-5

<sup>4</sup> With *Travel, Space, Architecture*, the long introductory text by Traganou, attempting to theorise 'travel' as a new subject, has little value and her paragraphs précising each subsequent chapter are pointless. The role of the other editor, whose biography we are given but who never otherwise appears in the book, is unclear.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Grafton, 'Britain: The Disgrace of the Universities', *New York Review of Books*, April 8, 2010, Vol 57, No 6

<sup>6</sup> James Holland, *Italy's Sorrow: A Year of War 1944-45*, Harper Press, 2009