... on the cusp between Western and Sri Lankan traditions ...

Richard Murphy on Geoffrey Bawa

plus two other reviews

Geoffrey Bawa: The Complete Works
By David Robson
Thames and Hudson, London, 2002
276pp, 235 colour and 285 mono illus
isbn 0 500 341877
Price £45 (hb)

Reviewed by Richard Murphy

Geoffrey Bawa died in May, so it is fitting as well as poignant that Thames and Hudson have published this new and lavish edition on his life's work, written by the indefatigable David Robson. It will undoubtedly prove to be the definitive publication. Interest in Bawa's work is clearly very high; the previous monograph by Brian Brace Taylor published in 1986, was revised and republished in 1995 by the same publisher. Robson's new work is more comprehensive and includes the very latest projects. It also sets the scene both in terms of Bawa's unusual career and life story and of the awesome legacy of his home, the fascinating island of Sri Lanka.

Bawa is one of the very few architects from what is today known as the developing world who rose to international prominence. Although one can make comparisons with Doshi and Correa in the nearby subcontinent, to my mind the most pertinent comparison is with the Mexican, Barragán. Both Barragán and Bawa, while being architects in the Third World, are decidedly not of it, with Bawa building a stream of elegant middle-class houses in Sri Lanka and other tropical destinations, luxury holiday complexes for First World tourists and prestigious government contracts. Those who expect architects from the Third World to address the pressing problems of population explosion and rapid urbanization will be disappointed for, with the exception of some work for the Catholic Church, Bawa's opus was built exclusively for the country's elite.

Architecturally, both Bawa and Barragán came to symbolize an architecture which was inextricably linked with the place in which they were building. Both succeeded in throwing off a colonial heritage and – especially in Bawa's case – in engaging sometimes quite explicitly with the reworking of vernacular forms. In this sense he parted company quite radically with that generation of architects on the Indian subcontinent who, having thrown off British colonial thinking, were mesmerized by the visits of Le Corbusier. Bawa's work fits perfectly into what became known as the Critical Regionalist school and also, of course, into sustainability: working with a tropical climate and, as much as possible, avoiding the importation of air-conditioning and Western materials. His reinterpretation of the courtyard planning principle, his use of local Roman-style tiles and generous verandas, and his interest in the indivisibility of inside and outside spaces with vertical tropical light reflecting from courtyards into deep-planned, white-walled interiors are very close to traditional Sri Lankan buildings. Indeed, with some of the earlier works, such as the house for De Silva in 1960/1962 or the house built for Doctor Bartholomeusz in the same period (later converted into Bawa's architectural office and even later into a delightful restaurant), it is sometimes difficult to realize that one is looking at a work of Modern architecture.

Striking, too, is Bawa's self-effacement. Not only do the buildings sometimes appear to be part of the vernacular, on occasion they do indeed use salvaged sections of demolished buildings – columns and windows from colonial structures are incorporated into new constructions, leaving the observer puzzling as to what is original and what is Bawa.

Running through the book is a generous supply of illustrations. One section is devoted entirely to drawings from Bawa's office, and it is a particular pleasure to look at his plans and try to work out what is exterior and what is interior space. Another characteristic of Bawa's work is the simplicity of his sections and the almost universal adoption of the pitched tiled roof with very deep overhangs. Only in his very latest work – including the fascinating hotel in the interior of Sri Lanka at Kandalama, or the house for Pardeepjayewardne, or...
the Jayakody house – does the flat roof re-emerge in almost a Corbusian sense as a usable part of the building. A further particularity of his work is a fascination with the detailing of landscaped and hard surfaces and the poetry of these small details is well photographed in the book.

Bawa’s career was closely associated with the politics of the island and his work prospered in the 1970s and ’80s with almost all major government commissions coming his way including, of course, the biggest and most prestigious of all: the building of the new parliament. Today, security considerations make it very difficult to visit this building and one can only look at it across the lake on which it appears to float. One is left wondering whether the building’s language – that developed in the small houses and taken from the vernacular – can be sustained at such a large and monumental scale.

Certainly the use of water, which one finds everywhere in Sri Lanka, and has been used in its buildings right back to the fifth century, is a characteristic of almost all of Bawa’s work. It is used extensively, but particularly effectively, in entrance sequences. These include the wonderful view to a reflecting pool on axis at the Bartholomeusz house, and the fantastic sequence of surfaces at the Triton Hotel, where the reflectance of pools of water, polished aggregate concrete and the distant Indian Ocean all merge to make a magical entrance carpet.

Bawa’s contribution to hotel design will probably be his lasting international legacy. The Triton and others, such as Blue Water, not only set standards for the generous use of landscape but also set a style for hotel building that was the antithesis of the type which destroys the place it sets out to exploit. Many have since adopted Bawa’s approach. Perhaps his most unusual hotel commission – and ahead of its time when we consider eco-tourism today – was the highly unexpected hotel in the interior at Kandalama. This sits on a wonderful plain with views out over a large tank towards the striking crag of the fifth-century city of Siggiryia in the distance. It represents an attempt by the hotel industry to draw tourists away from beaches into the spectacular and lush interior of the island.

Although the hotel is larger than...
Bawa intended, it provides another wonderful arrival sequence. One enters through a tunnel in the rock and emerges into an enchanting world of foliage, monkeys and wildlife, looking out at this spectacular view, as if one had gone down Alice's rabbit-hole. And now that the building has been festooned in landscape and is disappearing into the side of the hill, one can see Bawa's intentions literally bearing fruit. What disappoints both about this hotel and the beach hotels – and could be a criticism of Bawa generally – is the less than convincing major spaces and the absence of sectional complexity for buildings of such size.

The final chapter of Robson’s book describes Bawa's own house – a converted colonial villa on a hill – and, in particular, the extraordinary garden which Bawa created over several decades. Lunuganga was begun in 1948 and progressively expanded to become almost equivalent to a small park. Here again there is evidence of Bawa's eclecticism – or perhaps evidence of the slight awkwardness of his position on the cusp between Western and Sri Lankan traditions. Classical sculptures sit alongside ancient, enormous, local vases; the landscape is a modern tropical version of the Picturesque, with some stunning vistas; the use of local everyday plants, such as rice paddies or frangipani trees, is sublimely poetic. There are some spectacular photographs in this book, but Bawa reaches the senses in a way that is almost impossible to convey.

His legacy to Sri Lanka is enormous. How many developing countries can point to such a giant at the critical moment of their development? One hopes that his influence has generated a school of local architects. Bawa’s work was particularly appropriate to the place, the climate and the culture, and was at the same time of an extraordinarily high order. For followers, he sets a considerable challenge.

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**Surface Architecture**

By David Leatherbarrow and Mohsen Mostafavi

The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002

300 pp, 150 mono illus

ISBN 0-262-13407-1

Price £26.50 (hb)

Reviewed by Mohamed Sharif

Notwithstanding contributions such as those articulated in Kenneth Frampton’s Studies in Tectonic Culture (MIT Press, 1995), few authors have furthered a clear discourse concerning the relationships between construction techniques and formal ideas in architecture subsequent to the late twentieth-century critiques of Western Modernity. Moreover, such writing as there has been has tended to draw from the supposedly redemptive, recuperative and largely Heideggerian tenor of concerns regarding the relationship of humankind to technology and its desired capacity for architecture to mitigate, if not completely resist, the assumed imminent threat of technology to life itself.

David Leatherbarrow and Mohsen Mostafavi’s *Surface Architecture* puts forward an alternative and less pessimistic view. Stemming more from what may perhaps best be termed a secular understanding of the culture of architecture, the authors propose something of a critical middle ground. Fundamentally this is based on the supposition that ‘the alternative between technology and anthropology proposed in much reactionary criticism cannot be sustained’, and that a definition of design should draw from the consideration that it ‘cannot rely solely on extending the logic of the factory into the site, nor can the uniqueness of a project neglect the imperatives of mass production’. As remarked in their closing commentary, the authors do not ascribe to an originary or teleological discourse concerning questions of the relationship between nature and the man-made. Rather theirs is a Promethean view, that is one equipped with a foresight which holds that humankind’s instruments and techniques are not supplements to existence but ‘actually constitutive’ of them; and that these inevitably augur ‘a promise of failure upon which to initiate further projects and reclamations’. In this respect, the authors favour a practice informed by the idea of appropriation – an activity made possible by moving ‘back and forth between technical and non-technical conditions’ in order to elaborate on ‘human praxis’. This approach is predicated on research that closely scrutinizes notions of improbability, misuse, and modification so as to derive useful tools and conceptual devices to assert the possibility of newness.

This investigation concentrates on building surfaces – or the sites of resolution between a building’s structure and its skin. It is a problem that derives from the advent of the Chicago frame, the archetype of the dialectic of support and supplement. Inasmuch as the study presents a survey of exemplars of various expressions of surface treatment, it also proposes an illuminating historiography of Modern architecture itself. Hence Leatherbarrow and Mostafavi consider the worldly appearance and participation of architecture by means of developing a history of Modern building facades. They start with a reading of the shortcomings and internal contradictions of the historic problems of architectural surfaces. From there on, they develop a series of approaches to facade design that is exemplified in works by a range of architects like Albert Kahn, Mies Van der Rohe and José Antonio Coderch. The result is a nimble, refreshing and transparent discussion of informed and informative architectural concepts.

The first of the shortcomings is illustrated in the context of historicism. Here the facade, ‘through pictorial recollections of earlier styles and motifs’, is positioned as the site of mimesis and nostalgic scenography (a standpoint bound to ideas of
architecture because of its supposed capacity to represent and transmit a continuum of memories, traditions and values. The second is illustrated in the context of Functionalism. Here the facade is thought to be the seemingly inevitable, autonomous and ethical outcome of the simplified deployment, or assemblage, of cladding systems (a framework projected from early Modernist ideology and its desire to ally with the drive of industrialization and optimized production).

The authors argue that in the former mode the potential for architecture to engage with the present, and particularly through a combination of new and old building materials and techniques, is forsaken. Curtained in the latter, meanwhile, is an understanding of the spatial effects of building surfaces and their identities as the rich sites of ‘performance, of both a people and a place’. Moreover, the very possibility of the ‘project of representation’ is itself supplanted in the latter instance. And, as the authors contend in their introductory remarks, to ‘speak of the project of representation is to recognize the problematics of appearance’. The historic survey offered thereafter affirms that such recognition did indeed exist within the canonical works of many Modernist and pre-Modernist architects, and that grasping such a rich history of complex surface design allows for emancipation from naïve and reactionary ideologies.

The book is clearly structured, with seven chapters devoted to the explication of themes illustrating the evolution of the divorce between structure and skin and the resultant conceptual organizations by which such a separation may be registered. There is a slight disappointment in that the illustrations might have been more clearly correlated to the text – perhaps the use of captions, rather than simple credits, would have sufficed. But despite this minor peculiarity it must be acknowledged that the black and white illustrations are themselves very handsome and entirely demonstrative of the discussions at hand.

In the first two chapters, Leatherbarrow and Mostafavi provide a succinct overview of the primary thrust of their study and pave the way for an assessment of surface as both a site of formal experimentation and of profound effect. Beginning with the late Medieval and early Renaissance periods, the authors trace a history of the expressive and rhetorical capacity of architecture. This takes us first through notions of faciality or frontality as articulated in historic treatises on physiognomy, later on through the concept of architecture parlante, and latterly through the rejection of such ideas by early Modernists in favour of a formally reductive, planar, volumetric and mute appearance.

The strength of this exposé lies in the authors’ ability to unlock and broaden discussions of phenomena like alienation and anonymity as they apply to organizational schemas of generalization, simplification or type. For instance the discussion on minimalist art is particularly illuminating as it reveals a similarity between the idea of architectural cladding and the use of mass-produced elements, found objects and repetition in the work of sculptors like Carl Andre. Both derive their significance ‘from specific circumstances of their arrangement and placement’ and the argument proffered, in terms of the idea of representation, is that neither represents rationalism but invokes ‘a simple statement of order, or how things happen one after the other’. Accordingly, the appearance of the artistic object and the architectural facade may be understood as tools of perception, ‘a way of finding out what the world is about’. Then, as the authors demonstrate, wider questions of identity, singularity, and ubiquity may be rigorously addressed. For example, similarities between pre-industrial and post-industrial cities begin to offer themselves when this kind of attention is given. The authors’ case in point is the nineteenth-century row house, itself a product of repetition and therefore similar in structure to housing projects by Ludwig Hilberseimer. Here the authors correctly ask when anonymity is ‘alienating and estranging, and when to the contrary, is it reciprocating and community defining?’

Throughout the third chapter the authors trace the development of the ‘Window/Wall’ concept, in order to address the aesthetic consequences of performance characteristics and criteria of contemporary stock units or systems within a historical framework. Of particular importance to the authors is the problematization of the history of the effects of such a concept through the development of thematic case studies of architects like Le Corbusier or Jose Luis Sert. And this with a view to the reconsideration of the notion of performance as it applies to the ‘stereotypical traditional ideals’ of contemporary mass-produced windows or curtain walls. Following from this, questions of vertical or horizontal window alignments in Le Corbusier’s residential projects reveal complex ideas of the relationship of the body to view-frames, to landscape and so to experience. So too do questions that prompt the consideration of the notion of
transparency with respect to the idea of privacy in urban settings. The clear message is that architects must question ideas of performance and address ‘the visual and aesthetic repercussions of technological advancements in window construction’.

The authors then chart the history of cladding, ideas of thinness and thickness, the problematic of ornament and symbolism, and ‘alternative explanations of the modern inheritance’ of industrialization and panelized construction. Rather than adopt a reactionary or exclusive position on these matters, Leatherbarrow and Mostafavi ‘choose to describe how architecture can perform its cultural role while being variously thick and thin, transparent and opaque, and to envisage an architecture that acknowledges this performance as one of its roles’. To this end are illustrated various conceptual organizations of surface and many examples of different readings of the ideas of theorists like Gottfried Semper. For example, consideration is given to the various manifestations of a-tectonic facades, or ‘sliding surfaces’, in the work of architects like Josef Hoffmann and Gerrit Rietveld, and parallels are drawn between the pattern making and pointillism of Venturi and Scott Brown, and Max Fabiani. Also discussed are examples of the disclosure of ‘new modes of construction (and structural forms) through a novel treatment of old materials’ as exemplified by the ‘masking and revealing’ of projects by Otto Wagner. Other sections, like ‘The Impressed Facade: Tattoo’, propose an alternative reading of Adolf Loos’ argument concerning what he held to be the appropriate and necessary adjustment of men’s traditional costumes to then contemporary working conditions. Here the authors extend Loos’ thoughts on ornamentation to identify ‘propriety not as a moral code but as a standard of performance’, as such shifting ‘the emphasis from appearance to action or what people typically do’. Accordingly, the authors argue that ‘surfaces can be treated as figures, images, and ornament, but these must emerge from concrete practice’.

Chapter five, entitled ‘Adjusting Standards’, is pivotal in the development of a history of transatlantic Modernist buildings that illustrate a ‘synthesis between industrialized and tailor-made architectural elements’. For example, though both the Van Nelle Factory in Rotterdam and the PSFS building in Philadelphia share an interest in a kind of modern architecture that embraces the practicality of programme and the utilization of prefabricated components, nevertheless each responds through adjustment to ‘circumstantial conditions’ and, synthetically, through matters of ‘identity and style’. Such ‘reconciliation between prefabrication and ... human needs’ is illustrated in an overview of work and writing by Richard Neutra. With a marked preference for an architecture of assemblage and precisely controlled detailing at ‘the lines of differential movement’, Neutra’s seriality and uniformity presents two facets. On one hand it attests to the keen ability to conceive buildings ‘en serie, making out of so many elements a unified whole’. On the other it clearly illustrates ‘the places of performance failure’ and is therefore also testimony to the difficulty of resolving the middle ground between standardization and identity.

For the authors, it is Jean Prouvé who most successfully resolved such a problematic in his understanding of ‘constructional conception’. This is an idea based on a belief that the ‘individuality or identity of the project’ is predicated on the architect’s role as one wholly immersed in the authorship of industrial products and methods. It also relates directly to Prouvé’s belief that the fundamental ‘systematic unity of parts’ (its guarantee of specific character) in a building would arise from a ‘closed system’ and inter-disciplinary, collaborative approach. Such design thinking and desire for experimentation is evident in work by contemporary practices like Foreign Office Architects or the Renzo Piano Workshop.

Leatherbarrow and Mostafavi go on to develop a history of the ‘open process’ of building where modern standards of manufacturing were necessarily modified due to practical, social and economical constraints. While not forsaking the ‘rationality and coherence of organization that characterized Prouvé’s work’, architects like the New Brutalists set out to expound a revised Functionalist architecture that was ‘dependent on the facts of building for its identity and image’. Along with the proclivity for texture and the use of ‘traditional’ materials was ‘brought about a qualification or adjustment to the basic premise of modernism: the standards of contemporary industry were to be reconciled with earlier types of material and methods of construction’. Like bricoleurs, architects operating in this mode produced buildings whose surfaces reflected a diverse, fragmentary and quotidian matter-of-factness. Furthermore, by deploying the standardized as well as that which was modified, architects like Alejandro de la Sota produced unique and engaging works ‘justly poised between reticence and invention, dedicated to a sense of the real that mere representations neglect’.

Thoughts on the character of an
architecture consisting of the ‘assembly of fragments’ are extended to readings of projects by James Stirling and James Gowan and later to a critique of Frank Gehry’s resolution of ‘formlessness’. Tracing the development of Gehry’s constructional palette, the authors identify the architect’s latest volumetric expressions and ‘highly cultivated compositional synthesis’ as related to a consistent methodology for a logic of cladding. This is an approach that produces an ‘enveloping surface, an outer covering that disavows traditional distinctions between front and back’ and a way in which Gehry’s dynamic volumetrics achieve ‘great regularity and cohesion’.

The final chapter, entitled ‘Technique and Appearance: The Task of the Present’, serves as a reminder that architecture’s embrace of technology is inextricably linked to its ‘context, culture and circumstance’. Here, the authors engage with discussions on the relationship of Modern architecture to ideas of disciplinary autonomy, memory and typology. Through their analysis of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron’s position on Aldo Rossi’s ideology, the authors develop an argument for a reconsideration of surface in order for it to invoke an alternative reading to ‘tradition as an instrumental mechanism for architectural projection’.

Under discussion is Herzog and de Meuron’s engagement of the perceptual dimension of architecture and their desire to ensure its potency as ‘engaging and activating its connections with its users’. Instead of employing a formally or iconically mimetic approach, the architects’ strategy – of ‘montage of industrial products’ – invites questions on ‘the space between functional necessities and ornament, contingencies and supplement’. Ultimately it is the strength of such architecture – an exemplar of similar contemporary predilections – to focus on the possibility of materials and their properties as partial determinants of ‘unprecedented architectural and spatial effects’. Importantly, the material itself is not thought to be representative of some epochal strategy or transcendental signification. What is interesting to the architects is the capacity of a material to yield a multitude of phenomena or readings. Consequently the building surface is neither historically nor technologically predetermined. Rather the surface is treated as the site of performance where, as illustrated in the example of glass, its ‘operative possibilities have replaced its role as signifier’.

By carefully deliberating on matters of appearance and performance as they apply to surface, the authors cover considerable distance in situating a clear dissertation on an informed and practical reconciliation of the histories of ‘aesthetic impulse and technological imperative’. And so is introduced a way of framing a significant discussion on the engagement of technique and intelligence, between the normative and the bespoke, both historically and with a view to augmenting present knowledge. In Surface Architecture, the authors outline a set of careful readings of surface and the complex historic contest between ‘expression and technology’. And this, as Leatherbarrow and Mostafavi entreat, makes possible a historiography that signifies construction, and particularly that of the surface, as substantial material and a ‘prominently visible evidence of care’.

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Modern Color / Modern Architecture:
Amédée Ozenfant and the Genealogy of Color in Modern Architecture
By William W Braham
Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot, 2002
170pp, 43 colour and mono illus
ISBN 0-7546-0722-4
Price £40 (hb)

Reviewed by Louisa Hutton

William Braham writes that this book has been conceived as a genealogy of modern architectural colour, explaining that he uses the term ‘genealogy’ in the (Deleuzean) sense of it automatically bringing one to an understanding of the distance travelled since the particular origins under research. Such an analysis is useful to Braham who wants to bring to the practising architect an informed view of the use of colour in architecture by investigating the discussions that have surrounded it since the 1830s.

The controversies over the use of colour in architecture are, one discovers, intricately entwined with the ‘tradition’ of Modern architecture. This leads Braham to parallel his search with a critical look at the foundations of Modernism. He explains the reason behind the authority that has been given to whiteness in buildings, and discusses values such as authenticity which support the use of natural materials and ‘natural’ colour by architects, who are relieved to be able to side-step the emotive issue.

The author describes the symbiotic relationship between painting and architecture – ‘a painter’s palette is literally a conceptual space where the logic of colour can be considered’. The reason behind Braham’s selection of Ozenfant as the bridge between the ‘Modern Color’ and ‘Modern Architecture’ of his title is that – unlike others such as Le Corbusier, Theo van Doesberg, Taut or Léger who were also experimenting with the same theme – Ozenfant was researching the use of architectural colour in general, looking for ‘some method of arriving at some sort of order’. His much-stated aim was to provide a psychology of the subject.

The book is constructed as a story which accompanies Ozenfant on his (meandering) journey: firstly his pre-Purist days; then his eight year Purist collaboration with Le Corbusier; and finally his personal exploration into the theme of architectural colour. This was conducted simultaneously via one-to-one spatial experiments in the laboratory of his London flat, and through his writings which appeared in a series of six articles for The Architectural Review in 1937 (reproduced in the book’s appendix).

Ozenfant’s research was driven by two things. On the one hand was the (self-imposed) dogma of Purism (in which form held a relentless primacy over colour), and on the other was the inspiration provided by his friendship and respect for Signac, whose work acknowledged the changed nature of modern visuality (and gave primacy to colour over form). Ozenfant’s struggle (and indeed Braham’s) becomes one of reconciling these contradictory positions. The painter’s oscillation between the duality of objective and subjective perception is accompanied by the author’s exposure of similar polarities throughout the book such as the (conscious) linguistic perception of colour versus the (subconscious) corporeal perception of colour; control versus chance; classic versus romantic; scientific versus artistic.

The story includes flashbacks to the 1830s and thereafter, including reference to, among others, Newton, Goethe, Semper, Britzcher, Wnllflin, Loos, Wittgenstein, as well as various scientists, chemists, psychologists and painters who were all searching for a theory of colour perception. The sum of these flashbacks, culminating in the architectural polychromy debate between van Doesburg (de Stijl) and the Purists in the 1920s, forms the basis of Braham’s analysis.

Ozenfant at last overcame the ties of Purist dogma and, in his Architectural Review article on ‘Colour Solidity’, described a method of controlling the appearance of architecture while preserving integrity of form. However, one realizes that it is neither this essay on architectural ‘solidity’, nor the promised revelation of the psychology of colour, which are the subjects under investigation in this book, but rather the painter’s understanding of the condition of the modern wall. This becomes the focal point in Braham’s story.

Ozenfant attributed the conceptual separation of the wall from its surface to the changed nature of modern construction (and the mobility of modern life), and understood its implication for the use of colour in architecture – referring to this phenomenon as ‘the divorce of architecture and painting’.

Towards the end of the book we discover that Ozenfant, in any case, never delivered his much- promised psychological analysis of colour, by which time his role seems to have shifted to that of an anti-hero. (Braham asserts that his intention is neither to redeem Ozenfant nor ‘to find him a place in the architectural canon as the tragic (unlistened-to) prophet of colour’.) But we can appreciate that Ozenfant’s (failed) search has been a useful vehicle for the author, who has taken advantage of his (meandering) journey to unravel the latent contradictions in Modernism and so to expose the genealogy of architectural colour.

In the end Braham’s conclusion is not dissimilar to Ozenfant’s in that it permits the coexistence of antitheses: ‘to think differently about color requires that we relinquish the whole opposition between relative and absolute values. As Deleuze has explained, “genealogy” is as opposed to absolute values as it is to relative or utilitarian ones, reminding us that our particular logic of color practices has been formed steadily over the last two centuries though our encounter with the conditions we call modernity.’

Braham then allows for the charting of the various positions of modern colour in architecture in his creation of a single 2-d diagram comprising two co-ordinate axes (linguistic, corporeal) and four paired ‘extremes’ defining the limits of the latter (symbolic –
therapeutic, and ornamental – natural. He reminds us that the use of any particular palette reveals ‘the cycling and recycling of specific values (such as solidity, authenticity etc)’, and concludes that ‘all the arguments for and against colorful colours, or for or against natural color, are disputes about the nature of architecture, about what it should or should not display, represent or include.’

This book has been well researched, as testified by the copious and thorough notes and, for those who become engaged in the subject, the suggestions for follow-up reading are ample and clearly documented. It is coherently presented and the research itself is valuable. Braham is particularly informative on the relationship between Ozenfant and Le Corbusier, and he is good at teasing out the symbiotic relationship between painting and architecture in general. His mapping of the various theories encountered along the journey enables an informed critique of Ozenfant’s research within the broader space of his discussion.

In general Braham’s analysis is very good, but it is a pity that, in effect, he reduces his whole research to the surface of a simple diagram (with irritatingly gratuitous use of colour). He does admit that this is only a starting point for discussion – but it would have been helpful if he could have ‘mapped’ some particular buildings or approaches. Without necessarily committing oneself to a Jencks-type table, one could possibly have attempted a kind of (genealogical) ‘family-tree’, which would have been the first test as to the usefulness of the device.

It is also strange that Braham limits his discussion to the concepts and values embedded in colour palettes (as symptomatic of particular philosophical stances). Given the breadth of research, it seems a pity not to have applied it to a more general discussion such as colour’s spatial role as opposed to purely decorative role in architecture (and the question as to whether these two are irreconcilable polarities). Perhaps more space to Semper and his comments on the atmospheric ‘function’ of the wall could have helped to address this imbalance.

For a book on colour this is a remarkably non-visual book. There really should have been more examples of the use of colour in architecture. Notwithstanding this, the author’s computer-rendered reconstructions of Ozenfant’s interiors are quite off-putting – and not only on account of the strange colour combinations. I would have preferred either a more compact book (with many of the personal anecdotes relegated to the notes) or, preferably, a fuller one, which could have given space to relevant illustrations along the way. To be fair to Ozenfant, as his fruitless quest has been used as the – unwitting – vehicle of Braham’s investigation, his six articles (worth reading) could have been reproduced both full-size and, of course, in colour.

Braham’s genealogy of colour in Modern architecture has been approached mostly with regard to the selection of particular palettes, to the exclusion of a discussion of the spatial role of colour. In our experience there can be no dependence on rules or systems (or palettes). Rather one must develop a (personal, subjective) sensibility to colour (as was eventually understood by Ozenfant) and its effect in particular situations (as eventually noted by Braham). But for anyone with more than a passing interest on the use of colour in architecture, or indeed in the history (ies) of Modernism, I would still recommend this book.

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