‘... the new culture of accommodation ...’
Jeffrey Cook on Architecture for Nature

plus two other reviews
The government architect, Wytze Patijn, representing the client, states ‘I am not in favour of green principles merely dictating the outward styling so that you can see from miles away that the building is “organically grown”. What matters is that the principles of environmentally sound, healthy building start finding their way into ordinary everyday building practice’. But Stefan Behnisch does not regard himself as a ‘green’ architect. He says, ‘I have no wish to draw a distinction between mankind and the environment. If we continue overtaxing and polluting the environment, our personal well-being will eventually suffer too. I believe that the well-being of the user is at present badly defined. Well-being is defined in purely quantitative terms – instead of qualitative ones, for quality cannot be measured. We find it hard to define what we cannot measure. It is as though man were defined by the fact that he consists of 80% water.’ Nor does Behnisch wish to overstate considerations of form: ‘I do not claim that we always succeed in finding the best possible formal organisation. Buildings are 90% determined by external principles of organisation such as the requirements specified in the brief, the extant building regulations and so on. We try to project as much as possible from the undetermined 10%. In architecture, as in figure skating, you have compulsory elements and a free programme’. The Wageningen building emerged as a non-conclusive, flexible, open building concept with a commercial greenhouse glass roof and lots of passive control opportunities for heating, cooling, and ventilation. The laboratory wing had to subscribe to regulatory mechanical conditioning. But the balance of the complex allows worker control in environmental adjustment, including the choice to move out into the enclosed gardens, each of which has its own designed microclimate.

Stefan Behnisch’s fluid design processes were not ideal for the authorities, and distortions of his design intention due to conflicts with regulations are acknowledged. But no legal exceptions were made to allow an exceptional building, although it took a few creative reinterpretations. As the impassive Government Building Agency says: ‘For us as clients, the IBN building’s exemplary function was not a reason to put it in a separate funding category... [it] has been realized in accordance with normal planning procedure and a normal budget’. Predictably, the Behnisch approach was also challenging to those who calculate environmental quality and technical feasibility, since apart from the laboratories there was no mechanical ventilation or cooling systems. The project manager reports stolidly that ‘the building would only maintain an acceptable internal climate if the users did exactly what they are supposed to. They have to open a window at one particular moment, and close it at another. Otherwise, it will get too hot inside. It’s not catastrophic, but as the Government Buildings Agency, we do have our norms. These norms are based on “weighted hours” and they are quite unequivocal’. As in many other arenas, the fact that buildings driven by electricity stop performing properly when the electricity stops must be so well known that it is unmentioned.

After all this, the author’s praise seems a little faint: ‘The IBN building is not what by conventional standards one would call “beautiful”. It is neither impressive nor seductive, nor does it strive to represent the status of the organization. (Yet) one does not have to be acquainted with the rules of architecture to appreciate a building for its sensory qualities. The inevitable paradox of explicitly non-elitist designs of this kind is that, like the Pop Art of Andy Warhol, a small group of initiates esteem them highly for the way they break the artistic rules, while the non-initiates for whose benefit the designs are intended dislike them because they fail to meet their expectations of the “beautiful”.’ Perhaps. Then again, Koster claims that ‘Stefan Behnisch’s building is a form of non design’, as though he does not appreciate what an architect must do to get anything of substance built. ‘The welfare of its users and of the environment are clearly more important than architectural beauty. Indeed, the very informality of this “aesthetically imperfect” building is meant to serve the convenience of the users and visitors and put them at their ease. Its “utilitarian beauty” lies in the unpolished character of the detailing and in the elementary materials used’.

The building is better than that. ‘New Nature’ is the term used in Holland for the process of returning unused agricultural land to a natural or wild state. But that term could also be used to describe the designed yet free fusion of building and art, physics and form, nature and manipulated landscaping exemplified in this apparently casual building that seems not to be on the main highway. It is, and it should not be missed.

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Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture
by Adrian Forty
Thames & Hudson, London, 2000
336p., 216 mono illus.
ISBN 0-500-34172-9
Price £28.00 (hb)

Reviewed by Hildi Hawkins

‘Good architecture cannot be written’, said Adolf Loos. Modernism in all its forms, Adrian Forty contends, was characterized by a suspicion of language, and a corresponding shrinkage in the vocabulary that could be applied to buildings. As Modernism wielded its secatures, it was not only architectural ornament that was consigned to the clippings basket; on to the compost-heap of history, too, went the anthropomorphisms that had characterized nineteenth-century approaches – ‘bold’, ‘robust’, ‘masculine’, ‘stress’ – to be replaced by a limited set of terms that, between them, characterized the new movement: ‘form’, ‘space’, ‘design’, ‘order’ and ‘structure’. Wherever two or more of these five words are gathered together, Forty writes, you can be sure the conversation is about Modernist architecture.

Luckily for him, however, they are not the only words that made it into what we have come to call the Modernist discourse; or else his book, Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture, would have been a short one. Forty’s Modernist line-up is in fact a broader one, including a number of the usual suspects – ‘form’, ‘function’, ‘simple’, ‘type’ and ‘user’ – but it also embraces some more complex and unexpected terms: ‘memory’, ‘context’, ‘truth’, ‘nature’… Arranged in two parts, the book takes the form of a critical and historical dictionary of ‘the words that formed the core vocabulary of Modernist architectural criticism’ – modelled on Raymond Williams’ celebrated Keywords (1976) – preceded by a number of essays on the relationship between language and architecture.

That that relationship is a troubled one must be obvious to anyone who has struggled to put experiencing architecture into words; but in Forty’s account it tends to feature as a kind of competition in which buildings are allowed to appear unselciously as themselves, while mere words are lambasted as being ‘inadequate to meanings’, or even ‘letting architecture down’. He is too conscientious a historian to allow himself to descend to polemic, however; these are true essays, in the sense that we are invited to travel hopefully with him on a journey of exploration, and some of the most valuable insights of the book concern the ways in which meanings, ideas and experiences, and the words which are used to describe them, change with time.

One of the most startling of these occurs in the essay on ‘function’, in which he discusses Louis Sullivan’s celebrated motto, ‘Form follows function’. Tracing the evolution of the term from its first architectural use in the 1740s (as an immigrant from the mathematical theories of Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz), through the German Romantics to the explicitly biological ideas of the American sculptor and art theorist Horatio Greenough, generally cited as the first English-speaking writer to have applied the word to architecture, he suggests that, for Sullivan, function connoted not utility or the satisfaction of the needs of the user, but the spiritual essence that determined ‘organic’ form. Synonyms, for Sullivan, included ‘destiny’ or ‘inner purpose’ – metaphysical, not utilitarian, concepts. It was in this way, Forty suggests, that the language developed to talk about buildings and the life within them came to be founded on an inappropriate, or at least widely misunderstood, metaphor.

The book’s painstaking historical and etymological approach yields other treasures. The fact that, before the 1890s, no one talked about ‘space’ in architecture – it simply didn’t exist as an architectural term – suggests that ‘designing space’ may not, after all, lie at the heart of the architectural endeavour. That the architectural concept of ‘circulation’ derives from Sir William Harvey’s discovery, in 1628, of the way in which blood moves round the body, is well-known; but Forty reveals other fascinating cross-fertilizations between scientific and architectural concepts – the ‘function’ of not only Leibniz, but the biologists Lamarck and Cuvier, or the adoption of the notion of ‘character’ from the genre of eighteenth-century French poetry and drama.

The dictionary format of Language and Architecture is a misleading one – it is a long time since the encyclopédiste of the French Enlightenment, and no one expects, any more, to be able to get to know the world from an A-to-Z. Forty quotes Daniel Libeskind saying that his Jewish Museum in Berlin is intended to be ‘not easy to organize, because history is not like that’; and the same goes for writing about the past. The true benefit of the arrangement under key-words is a different one: it allows Forty to tell his central story – which is no less than the story of architecture, from its very beginnings until the present day, or then the end of Modernism – again and again from different viewpoints.

But that apart, Forty does clearly have a thing for order. His sections are numbered, his ideas neatly paragraphed; his sentences roll on in regular rhythm until they reach their point of rest. There are, in his writing, none of the disjunctions and surprises that characterized the Modernist experiment. If it were a building, Forty’s book would surely be in the Classical style, following the grammar of its chosen language with unwavering and stately elegance. To read about architectural Modernism in language that seems untouched by the twentieth, let alone the twenty-first, century is an unsettling experience. But a strangely hilarious one. I cannot have been the only reader to have been dogged by the suspicion that, in electing to play the straight man so convincingly, Forty was subtly sending his subject up.

Hildi Hawkins is the editor of _things_ magazine (www.things.org.uk). Her most recent book (co-edited with Solja Lehtonen) is Helsinki: a Literary Companion (Finnish Literary Society, Helsinki, 2000)
Automobiles by Architects
by Ivan Margolius
Wiley-Academy, London, 1999
160 pp., 118 mono illus., 40 colour illus.
Price £27.50 (pb)

Reviewed by Doug Allard

Many of the world’s greatest architects have lent their considerable talents to the design of furniture, some have branched out into other related fields: stage design, lighting, and painting, to name but a few. Ivan Margolius’ new book Automobiles by Architectscatalogues their automotive designs and, in doing so, explores the flow of ideas between the subjects.

The format is relatively simple: a brief summary of automobile history, influences and advocates is followed by a sizeable section devoted to designs by a number of architects and concluded by an analysis of architecture’s relationship to the automobile and the crossover of technologies. This fills the 150 or so pages of what – externally – is a very pleasing book. The squarish format is comfortable and the cover image of the 1993 Superbus project by Future Systems (whose Lord’s Cricket Ground Media Centre bears a striking resemblance to an old racing car nose-cone) is a good choice of one of the more accomplished motor car designs described within. Although, visually, the layout is quite complex, the typeface is clear, simple and elegant and there is no shortage of images, presented in both colour and black and white with a welcome clarity.

Ivan Margolius appears to have researched the subject thoroughly. His list of architects does include many of the famous (Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Gropius), but also the less well known (such as Carlo Mollino, the designer of the extremely beautiful Osca 100), and it is often they who have designed the more accomplished motor cars. Taken together, what comes across very clearly is that there are very few successes. Many architects appear to have dabbled purely with aesthetics, paying little or no heed to practicality or technical considerations; a freehand napkin sketch by Adolf Loos in 1923, for example, does not demonstrate a significant contribution to automotive design (and nor, one could argue, does it warrant inclusion). Others, such as Boulanger, did study architecture but then seem to have spent a lifetime working in the field of automobile design and manufacture, effectively leaving architecture behind.

There are a few architects who have gone further than the napkin approach to understand a complex manufacturing process and who have intelligently investigated radically new methods of design, construction and production. Among them, Buckminster Fuller, Renzo Piano and Jan Kaplicky are perhaps the most interesting and the sections on these provide a brief insight into the complexities of the subject. Piano seems to be the ideal candidate to move into car design, as he possesses the ability to understand the importance of materials and manufacturing techniques in the process of realizing a finished product. His collaboration with Peter Rice on the Fiat VSS experimental car in the late’70s is a good example of a gifted architect and engineer applying rigorous design and construction theory in this way. Similarly, Buckminster Fuller’s Dynaxion project could provide enough material for a book in its own right. In contrast to these, the sketches of Frank Lloyd Wright’s ‘Road Machine’ of 1955 and 1958 appear to have had only the most tenuous link with reality, last seen being raced by a certain Mr D. Dastardly.

For any book related to design, the standard of the work included is vital, and when the decision is made to write on a very particular area, the author is dependent upon, and in some ways hostage to, the quality of the subject matter. But this book – as its title suggests – is a quantitative, rather than a qualitative, assessment of the subject and, moreover, one which clearly shows that the thousands of architects who have sketched cars, boats and aeroplanes are not necessarily qualified to design these machines and that their designs are not inherently more interesting or valid because of their architectural background. In short, too often, Automobiles by Architects has to describe work of a standard which does not do justice to a very challenging and fascinating design field. Heath Robinson fans should look no further. Architects should look sheepish.

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