

Writing and representing space: Order and Disorder in British Architecture

Architecture can be defined as the art of organising space, an art expressed in building. It inscribes men's needs and desires in space, combining thought and imagination. But the forms it creates are intricately bound to certain material, practical and technical conditions as well as to political, economic and social contexts. As early modern Britain was shaped both by Continental influences and by national factors, architecture soon provided a privileged vector to express the uniqueness of its national identity.

With respect to order and disorder and in the light of recent research, the seminar will seek to re-examine established landmarks. It will also seek to provide an up-to-date review of current research in the field. Architectural history will give Britain 17-18 the opportunity to explore a topic that we have discussed very little in recent years, but which encompasses all the major disciplines. The seminar will, we hope, help define the relationship between architectural studies (on the early-modern period) and other fields: geography, the visual arts, cultural studies, religious studies and literature¹. The polymath John Vanbrugh, for instance, is also well-known for his abilities in garden designing, which can legitimately be considered as a form of architecture – architecture applied to gardens, consisting in arranging a circuit for the visitors to follow, with serpentine paths and rivers, ha-has also known as deer leaps, panoramic viewpoints overlooking the whole estate, etc. When he was hired by the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough in 1705 to reorganise Blenheim Castle's gardens, he opposed the couple's suggestion to have the old gothic Woodstock manorhouse knocked down. He argued that this building, though in poor condition and totally uninhabitable, could be integrated into the new landscape gardens which he was about to create. This is how the trend of *follies* appeared.²

¹ See for instance, Philippe Hamon, *Expositions, littérature et architecture au XIXe siècle*, Paris, José Corti, 1989 and the pioneering study of Cynthia Wall on literature and architecture after the fire of London (1666), *The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

² *Follies* were buildings which, though they often looked like real usable constructions, had no other purpose but adorning the gardens. *Follies* also conspicuously laid the emphasis on the owner's wealth, these buildings being most of the time extremely expensive to create. Hence the term *folly*. There existed classical *follies*, referring to the Antiquity with Greek and Roman temples (Temple of Apollo in Stourhead gardens), to the Middle Ages with sham gothic ruins (Wimpole gardens), to exotic places with Chinese pagodas (Kew gardens) or Indian temples (the Royal Pavillion in Brighton). *Follies* were later integrated into 18th-century French garden designing probably under the influence of Claude-Henri Watelet who published his *Essai sur les jardins* in 1777, thereby contributing to the introduction of the English landscape garden into France. He translated the term *folly* by the French *fabrique* and a number of these can be admired in the Versailles gardens (Temple de l'Amour, Hameau de la Reine) or the gardens of Ermenonville with a Temple of philosophy dedicated to Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

The question of whether architectural history forms a specific and autonomous domain will be raised, as well as its place within academia and the traditional disciplines. The history of public and private buildings, gardens and landscapes seems to be inextricably intertwined with political, social, cultural issues: the rise of a leisured society, religious controversy and the variable fortunes of the British monarchy.

A very brief outline.

In the Stuart period, Jacobean architecture evolved naturally from the Elizabethan age and its chief features culminated in the 1620s. Its main influences continued to be Flemish and German, evinced in mannered ornament and profusely decorated open surfaces. The great houses of the period strove to achieve symmetry and splendour in their use of volume. In the second quarter of the seventeenth century, however, the influence of the classical strain from Italy, primarily in the work of Inigo Jones (1573-1652) was increasingly felt. His contribution is essential: he is considered to be the first English architect, i.e. a designer who supervised the entire construction of the work from beginning to end. He made his own measured drawings and relied on first-hand information instead of using sources. His greatest architectural achievement is The Banqueting Hall, Whitehall, 1619-1622, which is completely classical in conception and treatment. Other celebrated architects of the period are John Webb (1611-1674) and Sir Roger Pratt (1620-1684).

In the eighteenth century architecture was the first visual art to show a properly English school consisting of native-born artists. At the turn of the century and at the beginning of the eighteenth-century, architecture was dominated by three names: Christopher Wren (1632-1723), Nicholas Hawksmoor (1661-1736) and John Vanbrugh (1664-1726). Most of Wren's work belongs in fact to the seventeenth century although Saint Paul's cathedral, begun in 1675, was finished in 1711. Wren's other masterpiece, Greenwich Hospital, was begun just before the end of the seventeenth century in 1696. Vanbrugh is more than a disciple of Wren's. Blenheim Palace (begun in 1704) is baroque in style but shows an obvious medieval inspiration. Vanbrugh was a

playwright as well as an architect, praised by Reynolds in his thirteenth *Discourse* (1786) and his specific case will be discussed in the seminar. The Wren-Vanbrugh-Hawksmoor generation had to wait until the end of the century for a full understanding of their aesthetic concerns. James Gibbs somehow continued the tradition, combining the medieval tradition and neo-classicism (St Martin in the Fields, 1722-26)

After the accession of George I a new school, the neo-Palladians, appeared, embodying a return to a more austere approach to Classicism, and headed by three names: Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington, Colen Campbell and William Kent, with Burlington emerging as their leader. Their guides and masters were also threefold: Vitruvius the famous Roman architect and military engineer of Augustus's time, who set down the rules of a proportion; Andrea Palladio (1518-1570) whose treatise based upon Vitruvius and upon a study of the archaeological evidence of classical buildings, developed laws of architecture, incorporating the ancient Roman style into modern buildings; Inigo Jones who went further than Palladio and concerned himself with features left out by the latter (ceilings, fireplaces).

The most characteristic architectural form adopted by the neo-Palladians is the villa, a form expressing the idea of rural retirement in a classical idiom (e.g. Mereworth designed by Colen Campbell in 1723). Neo-Palladianism also applied to town planning: one may think of Bath, the Royal Crescent (1767-75) and the Circus, described - and ridiculed - in Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* as the Colosseum « turned outside in ». By the second half of the century architects had access to new archaeological evidence in and outside Italy. Important names at the end of the century are Sir William Chambers (1723-1796), whose numerous house-designs are Palladian (Somerset House 1776-1786) and Robert and James Adam (1732-1794) who gave their names to a style adapted for the interiors of great houses. Horace Walpole illustrates the gothic revival in the second half of the century (although actually the gothic tradition had never died out) as evinced by his famous Strawberry Hall (1748-

1777), “a very proper habitation of...the author of the *Castle of Otranto*” in his own words.³

With regard to religious architecture, particular attention will be paid to the sweeping changes that overtook parish churches, both inside and out, after the Reformation, notably during periodic outbursts of iconoclasm. The competing claims of Anglicans, Puritans and separatists to know where sacred space is located, or even to know whether it exists, produced quarrels throughout the seventeenth-century. From the lavish innovations of the ill-fated archbishop Laud, to the rebuilding of the City Churches by Christopher Wren and the creation of post-Toleration galleried chapels for dissenters, English ecclesiastical buildings and furniture were affected by many competing forces. The preaching voice, the liturgy of the Church of England and dissenting hymn-singing all imposed new architectural constraints.

Among the speakers of year 1 of our two-year cycle, Prof. Elizabeth McKellar in her 1999 book has studied the birth of the modern house and shown that it included distinctive elements, none of which owed much to the canon of Palladianism (e.g. terraces of brick houses) and should not be seen as a prelude to the Georgian town house.⁴ The drawings of architects such as Christopher Wren have received far too much attention, Prof. McKellar has suggested. Renaissance architects, including Sir Christopher in the construction of St Paul's, frequently departed from their drawings. The status of the Great Fire as a cataclysmic turning-point should certainly be reconsidered in the development of English architecture...

More recently, in her *Landscapes of London*, McKellar has focused on the London suburbs, or what she calls “the London region” (“a Greater London”), using an interdisciplinary approach. Her introduction summarises key issues which the seminars will address: “This is a book about seeing and visiting, about how an area was viewed, represented and experienced...a book based on the identification and analysis of

³ Quoted by James Sambrook, 164.

⁴ Elizabeth McKellar. *The Birth of Modern London: The Development and Design of the City 1660-1720*. (Studies in Design and Material Culture.) Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999.

certain types of objects and texts”.⁵ McKellar examines a wide range of sources, from maps, paintings, prints and caricatures to literary works, bringing the spaces where people strolled, ate and drank, took the waters, played or were entertained to life. The session that she will share with Christine Stevenson in Year 1 will therefore give us the opportunity to explore contrasting views of the (urban) centre and the periphery, a topic on which our Research Centre, as a whole, has been working for a few years.

The relationships between public and private are also more complex than one may expect. In her recently published study *The City and the King*, Dr Christine Stevenson explores the unexpected alliance of Charles II and City financiers in redefining both public and private space in 17th-century London. The monarch became a great civic monarch, investing in building hospitals and other “public realm” facilities. “The sentiment that ruin is ageless, without familiar landmarks the city is made unrecognisable, taken outside history”, Dr Stevenson suggests, “was as pervasive after the Great Fire as it would be after the Blitz. Although we live in a time when few of us have lived through such disasters, these ideas still inform how we (...) reconsider events such as the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York and the debate over how epic tragedies can be best commemorated”.⁶

Contradicting a linear or teleological view of the history of architecture, a number of tensions or alliances can therefore be detected: stability and instability, public and private, tradition and innovation, England/Britain and foreign models, country and city, as well as challenges to the centre/periphery model of urban growth and a redefinition of suburbs and the suburban. The encompassing title of our new two-year cycle, « order and disorder », invites reflection on all these aspects and on a problematized vision of British architecture, based on recent research by scholars specialising in architecture, but also in history, history of ideas, history of religion and literature. The seminar will attempt to present varied approaches: from a focus on

⁵ Elizabeth McKellar, *Landscapes of London : The City, The Country and the Suburbs, 1660-1840*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2013, p. xii, xiii.

⁶ Review by Harriet Harris, “Crowning glories, regal aspects”, *Times Higher Education* (5 December 2013).

public, civic and religious buildings to a concentration on private and domestic spaces; from visual to textual sources; from literary to digital representations of space; from interest in the countryside to what can be seen as a metrocentric bias.

Attention will also be paid, in the wake of our previous topic (“Editing and Translating Early-Modern texts: New Directions in the Digital Age”) to the use of interactive tools in architectural design, as the lecture by Prof. Marie-Madeleine Martinet (« Les parcours interactifs comme exploration des espaces urbains – des ordres d’architecture aux lieux complexes des villes”) will show. The leading idea behind the seminar is the confrontation of established knowledge to recent advancements in research and to the new modes of investigation and edition.

References:

Colvin, Howard.M *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1660-1840*. 1954, rev. 1978 and 1995, Yale University Press.

Liliane Gallet-Blanchard, Marie-Madeleine Martinet, dir. *Georgian Cities*, Paris: PUPS, CATI, 2000.

Philippe Hamon, *Expositions, littérature et architecture au XIXe siècle*, Paris, José Corti, 1989

Elizabeth McKellar. *The Birth of Modern London: The Development and Design of the City 1660-1720*. (Studies in Design and Material Culture.) Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999.

Elizabeth McKellar. *Landscapes of London : The City, The Country and the Suburbs, 1660-1840*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2013.

Christine Stevenson, *The City and the King: Architecture and Politics in Restoration London* Yale University Press, 2013.

James Sambrook, *The Eighteenth Century. The intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature* (1986). Longman literature in English series, London and New York: Longman, 1993.

Cynthia Wall, *The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.