

Jonathan Noble & Pattabi G. Raman

Collaborations: The Architecture of Ahrends, Burton and Koralek (ABK)

edited by Kenneth Powell

Abstract

This article on one of the enduring British partnerships is not a vanity publication that we are accustomed to in our profession. Edited by Kenneth Powell, it contains illuminating essays of overlapping themes. The editor provides the overview. Jeremy Melvin writes a sensitive piece on the formation of the practice. While Elaine Harwood and Frank Macdonald respectively describe early works and Irish projects of the practice Paul Finch contributes an intelligent essay on collaboration. The essays are not presented in succession but in layered colour strips on the top and bottom of pages with images in the body under the thematic titles of private/public, context, light/space and process. One does have to overcome the initial irritation of this unconventional layout before realising the importance of the ABK story. Indeed the interlocking of different narratives and the images has a resonance with the character of the practice itself, with three distinct personalities of Ahrends, Burton and Koralek, each with unique but complementary interests and predilections.

Keywords: British Architects, Ahrends, Burton, Koralek

Abstrak

Hierdie artikel oor een van die langdurigste Britse vennootskappe, is nie 'n waardelose publikasie soos waaraan die profesie gewoon is nie. Soos deur Kenneth Powell geredigeer, bevat dit verligte essays met oorvleulende temas. Die redigeerder verskaf 'n oorsig. Jeremy Melvin skryf 'n sensitiewe essay oor die vorming van die praktyk, terwyl Elaine Harwood en Frank Macdonald wedersyds die eerste werke en Ierse projekte van die praktyk beskryf. Paul Finch se bydrae is 'n intelligente skrywe oor samewerking. Die essays word nie opeenvolgende aangebied nie, maar in lae gekleurde stroke op die bo- en onderkant van bladsye met grafieke in die teks ingedeel onder die titels: privaat/publiek, konteks, lig/ruimte en proses. 'n Mens moet aanvanklik die irritasie rondom hierdie manier van uiteensetting oorkom om die belangrikheid van die ABK storie te besef.

Sleutelwoorde: Britse Argitekthe, Ahrends, Burton, Koralek

The thrust of the editor's overview is that we must see ABK's work as an illustrative example of critical modernism. In all branches of humanities there always is a disjunction between intellectual reading of works and the outlook of their authors and architecture is no exception. Thus, only exceptionally architects would use terms such as critical modernism, minimalism, critical regionalism and even deconstruction to describe their work. And, yet architecture, more than any other discipline, reveals a parallel between the prevailing intellectual concerns at any point in time and the output of leading practitioners. Here are three examples: a) the affinity between Nietzsche's view that artistic creativity is the transforming vehicle of mankind's being as a mode of becoming and the energetic works of LeCorbusier b) the parallel between Aalto's thinking and the philosophy of 'vitalism' and c) the common ground between Louis Kahn's views on architecture and phenomenology. It would thus appear that in the case of ABK there is a parallel between their work and Habermas's views on the modernist project.¹

In recent years, Habermas has debated his commitment to the 'incomplete project of modernity' with Lyotard, who supports a more reactionary 'postmodern avant-garde'. This celebrated debate gave rise to a wide body of critical commentary and, in the process, it became clear that Habermas and Lyotard's cultural position are not as opposed as one might think. A certain blurring of the boundaries between their conceptions of the modern and the postmodern is possible. Architectural postmodernism has, however, (and particularly in this country) stubbornly remained ignorant of these and other important intellectual debates. Consequently much contemporary architectural thought poses a trite set of criticisms against the failures of the modern movement, but is often hard-pressed to provide truly critical alternatives to the status quo. For instance, the widespread commitment to an orthodoxy of contextual design nevertheless finds itself re-working the same tired 'Disney World' architecture on a global scale. As social critics, we may be excused for thinking that postmodern design now represents the 'Second

¹ Having said that one would have thought this parallel would help to avoid the usual schism between the academic world and the professional world. In fact this not the case as revealed by Peter Ahrends short-lived stay as the Head at Bartlett School of architecture in London. It is a pity that the authors of this monograph do not probe this episode, as it would have helped ways in which academia and the profession could resolve their quarrels.

International Style' of the current globalising age. If architectural postmodernism has tended to overstate and confuse its own relation with the modern project, then a turn to Habermas's thought might provide a useful way to re-imagine what a contemporary, critical architecture could be like.

The so-called 'Discourse Ethics' initiated by Habermas, and more recently modified and extended by his sympathetic critics, requires a democratic politics to be framed upon a principle of ethical reciprocity. This participatory politics is one based upon a procedural rather normative conception of human value. A procedural conception of value requires a social discourse which operates within a radically open terrain. Radical openness needs an equally open, creative engagement with the particularities of each circumstance. If we apply this to architecture, we will require a mode of design practice which is sensitive to the unique needs of each social situation. The historicising debates of style characterized by postmodernism, as well as the reductive design repertoire based upon the artistic hero worship which plagued orthodox modernism, would need to be replaced by a more open-ended and flexible engagement with society at large.

Essentially the modernist project of Habermas argues that orthodoxy of any kind, be it the mechanical functionalism of the modern movement, or the static style grammars of the post moderns, are constructs which distort and disturb the assumed openness of human communication. One immediately sees resonance of this in ABK's approach to architecture. No other practice has attempted to base its architecture on an uninhibited communication with clients as much as they have done. This they do without being too voluble about in-terms such as participation. Their project for Cummins Engine Factory at Shotts in Scotland is a supreme example of full involvement of management and workforce in all design decisions (Figure 1). ABK's defense of this enlightenment concept of modernity carries a political import of some weight, especially in Peter Ahrend's thinking. Hence his involvement in anti-apartheid movement and the formation of Architects' Support Group for South Africa. Socio-political engagement of this kind is not a highly valued in the Anglo-Saxon world and hence the book hardly mentions it. Be that as it may, Paul Finch does highlight the ability of ABK to derive their design conceptions through an intense

exchange with clients, no matter what their socio-cultural backgrounds are. Academia, municipalities, commercial world, visual arts, government organisations, health boards, ecologists, clergy and diplomatic world are some of the clients with whom ABK have exercised the Habermasian openness of communication and developed a body of highly acclaimed work. However, Finch points out one instance where there was a severe break down of communication and this was in their project for the extension of the National Gallery in London. Finch attributes this to the shotgun marriage between the world of visual arts and a property speculator as clients and to some extent the ignorance of the British establishment. Amusingly, he describes the famous intervention of Prince Charles, namely his

one-liner, that the design was a 'monstrous carbuncle' (on the face of a much loved and elegant friend) had been borrowed from a novelette by his wife's step-mother Dame Barbara Cartland, and had the same level of intellectual rigour.

ABK's work represents a quite but vigilant critique of the dogma and excesses perpetuated in the name of scientific functionalism. There is also a resonance of Habermas's doubts about an exclusively technological thinking. Like him, they do not believe that emphasis on tradition alone would provide an effective opposition to technolism, for tradition too can be unwittingly blind to values that are not its own. Therefore, once the claims of an authority of tradition are raised, the user of that tradition need not use it passively but can reappropriate it by means of critical involvement and extend its claims. Only a moment of reflection on the way ABK used timber building tradition in their Hook Park project reveals the benefits of this line of thinking (Figure 2). Other examples of appropriation of tradition and extension through critical engagement are provided by ABK's projects in collegiate settings such as the interventions at Trinity College Dublin (Figure 3), Theological College at Chichester (Figure 4), and Keble College in Oxford (Figure 5). An extension of the very modernist tradition of freestanding blocks to provide plenty of light and air is their attempt to reconcile this with a respect for street and it can be seen in their building for the British Embassy in Moscow (Figure 6).

The latent intensions of the authors of this monograph are to explain ABK's work in terms of the modernist project and by and large they succeed. Kenneth Powel in his over view uses the term critical modernism to hint at the fact that ABK's work transcended the familiar one-dimensional functionalist modernism, its rather dogmatic outlook on form, structure, materials and expression. The unswervingly consistent use of the principles of modern architecture with openness and a sense of freedom is what distinguishes ABK's work from those of their British contemporaries like Denys Lasdun, James Stirling, Edward Cullinan, Norman Foster, Richard Rogers and Michael Hopkins.

One always sensed tinges of dogma in Denys Lasdun's work. The London architects always used to say that Stirling's architecture changed according to who his chief assistant was. This small talk might come across as being cruel, but there is here an element of truth. Serious and exceptionally committed professional though Cullinan is, his work often verges on the romantic and often dominated by details. Not surprisingly, in a workshop organised by one of the author's of this review, Henri Ciriani posed the rhetoric question "why everything in British architecture is detail?" ABK also eschew the euphoria of the so-called high technology, as they know fully well that it degenerates into a mere style. Looking at recent developments in high-technology architecture, one often wonders whether the battle of style is being reenacted in a different guise. For instance an outsider might be forgiven for asking whether Jean Nouvel is more stylish than Forster. The answer could well be, yes, in exactly the same way a French apple pie looks better than the English one, although it was the invention of the latter and often one does not even care which tastes better.

It is no coincidence that Paul Koralek often refers to Ananda Kumara Svami's views that styles are not the essence but incidents of art. The Eastern outlook of not allowing technology to be an end itself but means to ends is also firmly embedded in ABK's thinking. Jeremy Melvin hints at this when he discusses Richard Burton's AA study of Ottoman architecture and his bold and youthful assertion that in some ways they may be superior to Byzantine (after all, the flying buttresses added to Hagia Sophia disturbed the great Ottoman architect Sinan because he preferred the idea of harmony of parts rather than structural expression) and these views were probably

reinforced when the three partners studied Persian architecture with the benefit of a travel scholarship.

Hopkins's work of course began with an unwavering faith in high technology in his own Charles Eames inspired and perhaps over-refined house. It went through a different phase in works like Mellor Cutlery Factory, Lords Cricket Ground and Braken House, which were hybrids of high technology and conventional construction. The next phase was the Glyndebourne Opera House, which for all intents and purposes was traditional construction with load-bearing brick using lime mortar. If these developments cannot be construed as inconsistency at least they represent changes of heart.

The authors attempt to show how ABK avoided dogma, waywardness, obsessive detailing, technology as an end in itself as opposed to it being a means to ends (See Figure 7), opportune shifts in direction and so on. In the end Melvin's essay throws the most light on the secrets of ABK's success. He attributes a great deal to their formation as architects. All three had connections to Modernist ethos. But they were fortunate not to be inculcated into a purely rational outlook, the hero-worshipping tendency of their colleagues (apparently their fellow students at the AA carried Le Corbusier on a podium round the Bedford Square after he gave a lecture) and were taught by personalities such as Arthur Korn who instilled in them the view that emotions are essential determinants of design.

The book is very important as a demonstration of the unrealized emancipatory potential of the modernist project. Perhaps because, nearly all ABK's buildings have been published in leading journals of the calibre of the *Architectural Review*, which in itself is no mean feat, the book includes very few plans and sections of buildings. One particularly misses them when the authors come out with statements like Koralek felt that the best thing about the Trinity College Library project was its plan. Let us hope this defect will be remedied in future editions. Let us also hope the notion of "modernist project" will be probed more deeply.

Captions for the images Figures 1-7 are to read as follows:



Figure 1: Cummins Engines Factory, Scotland. The factory has views to landscape outside. The lay-by areas are for seating during breaks.



Figure 2: Hooke Park College, Dorset. Timber building tradition interpreted to suit the context and materials available.



Figure 3: Trinity College Library, Dublin. The modernist block is an extension of the collegiate tradition of a quadrangular disposition of buildings.



Figure 4: Theological College, Chichester. Modern architecture of ABK takes its proper place in this beautiful garden setting.



Figure 5: Keble College, Oxford. Traditional courts reinterpreted with student social areas exploiting the views to well maintained garden areas.



Figure 6: British Embassy, Moscow. It attempts to reconcile modernist tradition of free standing buildings to gain plenty of fresh air and light with a respect for streetscape.



Figure 7: Dockland Light Rail Station. Designed to be used as a kit of parts for all stations.