

British Architectural Theory 1540-1750: An Anthology of Texts

C. van Eck (Ed.)

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This book is the work of Caroline van Eck, a research fellow at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, and forms part of a fascinating series published by Ashgate entitled 'Reinterpreting Classicism: Culture, Reaction and Appropriation'. The editor of this particular volume (and of the series) has sought out inaccessible texts by a broad range of writers active in Britain from the mid 16th to the mid 18th centuries. These have been presented in chronological order of actual writing and arranged into five themes that explore changing definitions of the terms 'architect' and 'architecture'; the use of buildings for religious purposes; and attitudes towards antiquity and the past in general. Each section is preceded by a brief yet informative introduction, echoed in turn by explanatory paragraphs accompanying every extract. Together they provide essential biographical details, suggestions for additional reading and information about the sources of the texts. This links well with the bibliography, divided as it is into primary material relating to the anthologized authors and secondary literature which provides a broader academic context. This strategy goes a long way to achieving the stated intention of "open[ing] up avenues of enquiry and discussion" (p. 6).

At the outset the editor acknowledges two earlier anthologies without which "this book could not have been written" (p. xiii). First and foremost is Howard Colvin's *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*, first published in 1954. In his revised version of 1995, Colvin accredits 'continuing research' for expanding the field of knowledge in this area, whilst cautioning that his volume "is still far from definitive: of many of the architects included far too little is at present known to make their careers intelligible" (1995, p. 7). Five years earlier the second compendium mentioned by van Eck was published: *English Architectural Books and their Writers, 1556-1780*, by Harris and Savage (1990, p. 11), sought to treat authors' books as Colvin had tackled architects' buildings. These two magisterial works constitute the intellectual precursors to this newest addition to scholarship.

Van Eck's approach was informed by Robert Cawdrey's 1613 definition of 'theorie' as the "contemplation, or inward knowledge of any art" (cited on p. 2). So, the texts are as equally concerned with visual analysis as they are with 'inward knowledge'. This is just as well, as it is admitted that during this period (1540-1750) there were 'very few' British writers producing texts that fitted 'the Italian formal mould' of the Vitruvian tradition (p. 5). This potential problem is deftly sidestepped by Eck's 'wide definition of theory'. Indeed, as a result of this she is obliged to admit that "there is far too much to include in a reasonably sized and affordable book" (p. 5). A slightly disappointing consequence of this is the fact that texts "in which architecture is used as a metaphor or allegory" (p. 5) are omitted for reasons of space. Perhaps this eminently capable author might be encouraged therefore to edit a companion volume on this theme? It is, after all, a very interesting aspect of architectural writing, and those texts in Eck's stimulating book that touch on the wider, more symbolic aspects of architecture are of especial note. This is particularly in evidence when Sir Christopher Wren stirringly declares that "Architecture has its political Use ... it establishes a Nation ... [and] makes the People love their native Country" (cited on p. 218). The prospective scope for such grandiose pronouncements either in prose or in built form is hinted at by Adrian Tinniswood's entertaining book *Visions of Power*, which commences by outstripping Wren with the assertion that "architecture does more than establish a nation. It establishes a ruler, a regime, an ideology" (Tinniswood, 1998, p. 7). Tinniswood goes on to touch upon a welter of stupendous case studies evidencing "ambition and architecture from ancient times to the present". A more rigorous, focused examination prompted by written pronouncements akin to those that feature in *British Architectural Theory 1540-1750* would make absorbing reading.

A particularly meritorious aspect of this volume is its pedagogic potential. It promises to provide productive starting points for seminar debates. On the whole the reading is not too demanding or too long, and most extracts include many issues and thought-provoking concepts. Some are accompanied by one or more of the book's 30 black-and-white illustrations.[1] Where these appear they inevitably enhance the texts. A case in point is Inigo Jones's imaginative 'Stone-Heng Restored' (pp. 146-155). Moreover, the architect's belief that the stones were erected by the Romans points toward the interpretative, contested nature of the past. This issue is taken up in the

final two sections concerning ‘The sense of the past’ and ‘Following the example of Antiquity’. These have particular resonance given current obsessions with history and ‘heritage’ (the use made by the present of the vestiges of the past).

The comparative, competitive aspects of architecture implicit in Jones’s analysis are enthusiastically taken up in Sir John Evelyn’s proposals for rebuilding the fire-ravaged London of 1666. This confirms the twin strands of architecture in terms of ‘Use and Ornament’ (cited on p. 80). His (unrealized) proposals, Evelyn claimed, would enable London “to emerge out of these sad and ruinous heaps, as may dispute it with all the cities of the World; fitter for commerce, apter for government, sweeter for health, more glorious for beauty; and in sum for whatsoever indeed could be desired to render it consummately perfect” (cited on p. 86). What would he make of today’s capital city, one wonders?

The ‘virtuoso’ Evelyn warrants inclusion in Colvin’s *Biographical Dictionary* (1995, pp. 357-358) due to the fact that his ‘theoretical knowledge of architecture’ ranked alongside that of either Roger North (?1653-1734) or Sir Roger Pratt (1620-1685). There are frequent references to Evelyn in Harris & Savage (1990), but he is not merited with his own entry. In van Eck’s volume, Evelyn’s loquacious forays into the realm of architecture are accorded proper significance. Her book can therefore be quite legitimately seen as a fertile offshoot of both Colvin’s and Harris’s tomes, and as such it expands our knowledge of architecture in this period and is suggestive of innovative future developments.

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Note

[1] These are all from the Yale Center for British Art (New Haven), Paul Mellon Collection or the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

References

Colvin, H. (1995) *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).

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