Multimedia and Websites

Nikolaus Pevsner, Hugh Honour, and John Fleming

Lexikon der Weltarchitektur
Berlin: Digitale Bibliothek, 2000, CD-ROM, €30, www.digitale-bibliothek.de (order in North America through Swolfe6999@aol.com)

Hasso Braeuer, editor
Archiv des deutschen Alltagsdesigns
Berlin: Digitale Bibliothek, 2002, CD-ROM, €189, www.digitale-bibliothek.de (order in North America through Swolfe6999@aol.com)

Johann Georg Sulzer
Allgemeine Theorie der Schoenen Kuenste
Leipzig: Weidmanns Erben und Reich, 1771–74; Berlin: Digitale Bibliothek, 2002–4, CD-ROM, €45, www.digitale-bibliothek.de (order in North America through Swolfe6999@aol.com)

The three publications in digital format that are examined here have more in common than their Berlin “publisher” Digitale Bibliothek: they are compendia of their respective subjects and are hence rather dense and cumbersome, in every way the product of the times when they first appeared in print editions. Digitale Bibliothek, established in Berlin in 1997, chiefly produces CD-ROMs on literature, history, philosophy, and art, based in part on excellent existing lextica and text editions, sometimes on superseded ones (as in the case of Friedrich Nietzsche or Kindlers Maiereilexikon). The publisher’s proprietary software can be downloaded by clients and an online service is also available (www.digitale-bibliothek.de). So far, all texts are in German, and the lion’s share of the CD-ROMs extend the long-established tradition of German lexicography into the digital age.

For obvious reasons, lextica, inventories, indices, classic literary texts, and digests were among the earliest books to be digitized and sold on CD-ROMs. Profiting from word-processing programs that offer word searches, hypertextual links, and an enormous range of intertextual combinatorial calisthenics, these CD-ROMs relieved lextica of their weight and unwieldy structure. The CD-ROMs promise to whisk the reader, accompanied by the periodic swoosh of the disk drive, onto a magic carpet, to allow him or her to survey vast landscapes of knowledge rather than being earthbound and limited to the patchy parcels of homespun information. But flying soon grows tiresome, even for jet-setters, and so the split-screen format, the small print that constantly needs enlarging, the incessant flipping among toolbar icons, and the need to bookmark and excerpt inevitably wean new carpet pilots of their illusions and make them feel more like French weavers of old.

I do not want to complain about the fact that CD-ROMs may fall short of the answer to every problem of research or that the endless fishing for information may turn the desired object into a moving target, which when encoded on a moving disk can spin out into hyperspace before one’s fingers are able to pin it down on the keyboard, much less move its scraps into one’s personal files. I merely wish to alert the weary reader that the CD-ROMs under review belong to that first generation of digitized publications that both established the standards and stripped them of their glamour.

The old adage “what comes out cannot be better than what went in” is painfully borne out by the Lexikon der Weltarchitektur, the handy Penguin classic that Nikolaus Pevsner, Hugh Honour, and John Fleming stuffed with pithy information and published in London in 1970. The German edition now offered on a single CD-ROM derives from the heavily illustrated (if padded) edition produced by Prestel in 1992. Written when James Stirling was still alive and none of the younger architects in the United States, Japan, or Spain had yet come to attention (nor, for that matter, numerous contemporary phenomena both theoretical and physical), Weltarchitektur has an antiquated feel about it, and its value is now chiefly historical. More recent dictionaries, such as Hattje/Lexikon der Architektur des 20. Jahrhunderts (edited by Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani), not to speak of various national and international indices of architects—the comprehensive Macmillan Dictionary of Art (first published in 1996) and the flawed but detailed Dizionario dell’architettura del XX secolo of 2000–1—offer information on the same subjects in more systematic and updated form and also add a good deal that is not to be found in the rather slender Pevsner, Honour, and Fleming publication.

What distinguishes our second entry, the Archiv des deutschen Alltagsdesigns, from the same publisher’s Lexikon der Weltarchitektur is its subject and its rich visual documentation. Gathering five key publications on the nature, qual-
ity, and significance of housewares and furniture of all types, Alltagsdesign chronicles the efforts of the Werkbund from World War I through the 1930s with its eingedeutschte design, mandated by the regime, as well as its vigorous postwar initiatives. The selection might have been more comprehensive if the Werkbund Yearbook and other cognate publications had been included, but one may have to accept some arbitrary limits around a subject that possesses an innate tendency to overrun its own category.

While the Lexikon der Weltarchitektur weighed in at 69 deutsche marks when it was published before the adoption of the European currency (now the equivalent something around 30 euros, or approximately 50 U.S. dollars), its digital advantages pale by comparison with the print edition, of which it is an exact replica. Things may be somewhat better with Alltagsdesign, although the price has now shot up to 189 euros (or over 200 U.S. dollars). Its hypertextual possibilities, thousands of illustrations, and the options of manipulating, rearranging, and downloading any combination of data has its advantages and inevitably also carries a price. Nonetheless, CD-ROMs of this kind and cost will probably end up on institutional shelves rather than in private libraries.

Matters are different again with our third CD-ROM, Johann Georg Sulzer’s Allgemeine Theorie der Schoenen Kuenste (first published in Leipzig in 1771–74), which renders one of the key works of German aesthetics available to the sort of analysis that is most useful in probing and elucidating Sulzer’s treatise in his university lectures in Berlin, Sulzer attempted a comprehensive study, at once staking out his own ground and extending Baumgarten’s when he singled out the deliberate cultivation of “feeling” (Empfindung) as the very basis of artistic impulses.

The rehabilitation of sensory perception as a valid cognitive capacity was destined to render aesthetic experience a serious subject of vast consequences for such eminent figures as the Berlin philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte and the entire culture of Empfindsamkeit and Biedermeier Innerlichkeit. Sulzer gave an enthusiastic endorsement to the idea that the arts are vital to society and indispensable to civilization. While fundamental to a civilized society, the arts and artistic education find their ultimate purpose in the refinement and Bildung of the self. Fired by a desire for beauty and its civilizing powers on the heels of Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums of 1764, Sulzer broached an enormous range of aesthetic phenomena from all of the arts, including music, literature, architecture, dance, and theater, while steering clear of technicalities and insider knowledge. His vision of the arts was as broad as his claim for their place in philosophical reflection. If I qualify Sulzer’s treatise as the work of a genuine popularizer (in the sense of the Dictionnaire and mission of the French philosophes), I do so only to underscore its lasting and formative impact on German culture.

The fact that the popularity of Sulzer’s work outlasted its author by decades is perhaps best illustrated by its subsequent republication and further enlargement.

Regrettably, the CD-ROM version under discussion contains only the first edition of Sulzer’s treatise from the early 1770s, whereas the later so-called Blanckenburg editions—of 1786–87, 1796–98 (with its index of 1799), and especially the last, amplified edition produced by Johann Gottfried Dyck and Georg Schatz in eight volumes between 1792 and 1808—would have allowed the reader to cover the ground extending from Kant to Hegel. This last stretch in the life of Sulzer’s treatise coincided with the lifespan of Berlin architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781–1841). Schinkel’s many notes and aphorisms ring with some of the same convictions Sulzer cast in a language that was both precise and evocative. Schinkel drew directly on Sulzer’s text in a number of key instances when he attempted to express the fundamental purpose of architecture and its civic role. (When scrutinizing Sulzer’s treatise on our CD-ROM, the reader should bear in mind that the search term architecture turns up nothing, because the relevant category is Baukunst! It was to remain the preferred term for architecture well into Mies van der Rohe’s time, while the cross-references for Baukunst, on the other hand, may be too plentiful to plumb.)

A single probe into Sulzer’s dictionary of aesthetic terms can point us in the right direction when we scan Schinkel’s writings in search of a more accurate grasp of his thinking and practice. Schinkel, who traveled widely and knew Europe from Paris to the Baltic, from Sicily to Scotland, also sought out John Soane’s house in London during his visit to the city in 1826. He jotted down his impressions in his diary, stating that he found the interior of Lincoln’s Inn Fields to harbor an abenteuerlich array of objects.2 Schinkel was clearly dismayed by Soane’s autobiographical montage of casts, originals, images, and ornaments nested in complex spaces and mirrored correspondences, but one may be tempted to take him to mean that his English colleague was being adventurous in the sense of being daring and extravagant. Skim, or rather scroll, through Sulzer’s compendium, which individually defines several hundred terms as they were commonly used in aesthetic parlance, and you discover that abenteuerlich really
means things that have been combined without any rhyme or reason; or, as the German word goes, things whose relationship to one another is ungeriebt, as arbitrary and incomprehensible as in a dream. Sulzer's definition puts a fine point on the oneric quality of things that appear to be abenteuerlich—rather than intending the more familiar current meaning of "exploratory" or "adventurous." The case only goes to show that we do need a dictionary when reading a text that is two centuries old, although it is written in a familiar language and an apparently spontaneous fashion. But scrutiny of Schinkel's language with the help of Sulzer's dictionary of aesthetic terms also draws attention to Schinkel's way of observing Soane's collections: it is their dreamlike disarray rather than their poetic assemblage that struck Schinkel at Lincoln's Inn Fields. What better purpose could a Lexikon have than that of providing a handrail for our exploration of things both adventurous and abenteuerlich.

It comes as no surprise that the familiar tools of textual editions, even when not based on a modern critical edition but simply on the text as originally published, offers a good deal of scholarly value. Instead of tiresome searches through often inadequate tables of contents and indices, word searches speed up the process and may prove more comprehensive. What is lacking, though, in Sulzer's Allgemeine Theorie as we leaf through its pages on the CD-ROM, is its original typography. To be sure, not every book is a model of the font-designer's art and typesetter's craft, and to read an eighteenth-century treatise in a modern, somewhat taeniform font (though not in modernized spelling) may smooth our way, but it can also cause a text to assume a strangely anamorphic appearance. KURT W. FORSTER

Yale University

Notes


2. The pertinent passage in Schinkel's entry reads: "Dieses Haus ist wie alle Londoner Privathaeuser klein, in demselben aber auf die abenteuerlichste Weise eine grosse Masse von Abguessen, Bruchstücken anstiker Statuen, Architekturmalereien, Vasen, Sarkophage, Tier Figuren, Bronzen auf das abenteuerlichste in engen, von oben und seitwärts beleuchteten Raumen, die oft nur 3 Fuss breit sind, aufgestellt," quoted in Gotfried Riemann, ed., Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Reise nach England, Schottland und Paris im Jahre 1826 (Berlin, 1986), 172. Note that Schinkel uses the term abenteuerlich twice in the same sentence in order to characterize the nature of the display and its impact in accordance with Sulzer's definition, which derives the "specific character of the Abenteuerliche... from the fact that it descends from a world without adequate causes as is the case in dreams" (L3). This and all other translations are by Kurt Forster.

Thomas Gronegger, director

Monument in Motion: San Pietro in Vaticano / Palazzo dei Conservatori, Roma


Monument in Motion, a box set of two DVDs by Thomas Gronegger, contains insightful and sophisticated videos generated from three-dimensional computer models of Michelangelo’s Palazzo dei Conservatori and the Basilica di San Pietro. The videos include carefully choreographed experiential animations that explore important aspects of the architectural forms and spaces; they also contain dynamic diagrammatic models that analyze specific compositional and tectonic conditions to illuminate underlying conceptual ideas.

In the past decade, sophisticated computer programs have revolutionized architectural graphics and the architectural design process, and Monument in Motion demonstrates how effectively CAD programs can be used to represent and analyze important works of architectural history. Gronegger exploits the potential of the computer to produce dynamic representational walk-through videos and analyze and explain complex spatial and formal architectonic conditions. Gronegger’s team built models that could be dissected, disassembled, and reassembled. However, the DVD segments consist of videos; viewers cannot control views and movement, as in computer video games. Nonetheless, the models suggest the experiential phenomenon of moving though space and time, which is vital to any understanding of Michelangelo’s architecture. While many of the video segments are long and occasionally repetitive, they provide a thorough formal understanding of the two monuments.

In Palazzo dei Conservatori, Gronegger thoroughly analyzes all of the architectonic components of the building’s façade, loggia, entrance corridor, and cortile, and he clearly explains Michelangelo’s complex yet coherent systemic design. The depth of Gronegger’s analysis is especially evident in the sections on the palace’s loggia and entry corridor, where components of the color-coded diagrammatic model are dynamically reconstructed to illustrate various architectonic relationships. Initially, Gronegger studies the loggia’s morphology—in particular, what he refers to as the “primary principle” of the design: the four-columned baldachino-like “column canopy units,” which alternate with wide piers connected overhead by broad beams (called here the “wall pier units”). He then examines the morphology of the entrance corridor that connects the loggia to the courtyard and how the articulation between the column canopy units and wall pier units differs from that of the loggia.

Next Gronegger introduces the category of elements comprising his “second principle”: the brick infill walls between the bays of the loggia, the concave “coupling units” behind the columns, and the infill walls between the piers and columns of the central corridor. From there we move to his “modular system hypothesis,” illustrating the potential of the systemic units of Michelangelo’s design to be multiplied exponentially along axes parallel to both the loggia and the entry corridor to produce a multibayed structure. In the following segment, Gronegger adds the