for any design publication, it is a powerful signal of how the globalization of the book trade, the emergence of English as the lingua franca of high culture, and the seemingly limitless international appetite for publications on modern architecture already impact its reception and study. Time will tell whether architecture and design journals such as *domus* remain relevant in an increasingly diverse and polycentric world or reinvent themselves as blogs, websites, and forms of communication we cannot yet imagine.

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Note

Mark Crinson
Modern Architecture and the End of Empire

At the turn of the 1990s, the almost-simultaneous publication of books on colonialism and architecture by Norma Eveson, Gwendolyn Wright, Timothy Mitchell, and Zeynep Celik all provided stimulus for more research on the subject. Using Edward Said’s concept that specular alterity—the dichotomy of “self” and “other”—was the dominant form of power through which imperialism asserted itself at home and abroad, many subsequent “postcolonialist” works on architecture and display have periodically claimed to complicate and extend this dichotomy. At the same time, they offer few hints of any other possible analytical frameworks through which the history of empire and globalization could be understood. Mark Crinson’s earlier book, *Empire Building: Orientalism and Victorian Architecture* (1996), was a well-researched installment in that Saidian frame; his current offering, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire*, is a kind of sequel to that book, and it brings us up to date, mutatis mutandis, on developments in British architecture in the twentieth century. It makes available essential historical chapters whose import, if pursued further from the specific instances examined here, can help us tremendously in understanding the complex relationships between architecture and globalization.

The book’s most original contributions appear in four sections covering areas of research where the author has gone beyond the standard fare of train stations, city halls, and triumphal arches when it comes to examining questions of power. Crinson calls attention to the contributions and influences of the Liverpool school of architecture; the architectural politics embodied in a company town built by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (now a British protectorate) in Abadan in pre-Mussadiq Iran; and the efforts of the British, after the loss of India, to secure a legacy (and the continuity of investments) through managed forms of decolonization in both Ghana and in Malaya-Singapore. In this late-imperial penumbra, a whole new slew of architectural actors come to light—sahibs white and brown—and though they are not necessarily recognizable within the usual modernist canon, they are nonetheless in complex ways still of it.

The first generation of native architects in Ghana and Malaya are faithfully rendered as classic “mimic men,” caught between imperatives of global capital (of which the nation-state is arguably an effect) and their charge of producing the cultural content, the fabulous narratives of origin, that gave legitimacy to specific national projects. Mediatory mechanisms such as “tropical” modernism—at the time deemed particularly apropos for former colonies—are the center of attention here, although we are not provided with reasons as to why such epistemological formations may have “emerged” in this period. In this context, two names that will be recognizable to modernist historians, Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, and their prolific work across varied continental contexts, receive a much-awaited but (for the interests of at least this reviewer) all-too-brief consideration. Crinson’s contribution makes us want to know more about the lives and practices of this extraordinary partnership. The book delivers a parting shot at contemporary (Blairite) “multiculturalism,” which as an element in protracted postcolonialism deserves much more scrutiny than is its wont from those who deplore its supposed lapses. Crinson’s research, strongly circumscribed by the debate within British journals, nonetheless brings up much fascinating detail about them. Some of the literary citations in the book are also dazzling: Kingsley Martin in South Africa, Anthony Burgess in Malaya, and so on, not least Virginia Woolf, who viewed empire as an aberrance among the forces of nature, one that will eventually erode under their cosmic onslaught. Here is Woolf, quoted by Crinson, on the Wembley Exhibition of 1924: “Pagodas are dissolving in dust. Ferro-concrete is fallible. Colonies are perishing and dispersing in spray of inconceivable beauty and terror which some malignant power is fallible. Colonies are perishing and dispersing in spray of inconceivable beauty and terror which some malignant power illuminates. Ash and violet are the contours of its decay” (79).

Nonetheless, the theoretical claims of Crinson’s book should be seen more as organizing rubrics rather than theoretical innovations. One of its axioms is that in order to make itself present, empire must represent, and architecture is a key device of such representation. Another seeks to loosen a frequently conflated political shift from an aesthetic one, emphasizing how the transition from colonialism to postcolonialism was marked by the move toward modernism in both metropolis and colony. These commonplaces, posed here as straw men, provide the author with the license to pursue several empirical vignettes of architectural transition from colony to postcolony whose relationship to these inoffensive claims is only anecdotal. Without the burden of elaborating a theory of historical causation or transition, however, what results is a freewheeling taxonomy of the stylistic lurches that accompany or constitute shifts of power.

The content of this power, in terms of its theoretical elucidation, remains
resolutely offstage. The best that one comes by on this point is the exercise of something like a good, liberationist sense of conscience. Thus, of the Afrikaner regime in the context of the 1936 Empire Exhibition in Johannesburg, we are helpfully informed, “all this was underwritten by a cheap and disenfranchised African labour force” (84). The move here is explicitly toward what Gayatri Spivak has described as a “pluralist sensibility”: the use of historiography to assert the past as overdetermined by the desire for (an abject) homogeneity, thus inscribing contemporary readership—and the writer—in the avant-garde role of asserting heterogeneity. The book senses this ambiguity as it approaches its own time of writing—the chapter titled “Discrepant Cosmopolitanism” on the Regent’s Park Mosque built in the aftermath of the 1973 oil crisis is revealing here—but appears unable to relieve itself of this multiculturalist pabulum through most of its bulk.

Particularly limiting for the book is the resolute form of analysis through which the entire spectrum of architectural objects and social phenomena is weighed: an art historical dyad of perceived and reported stylistic “conflicts” between form and content on the one hand, and on the other, a narratological determinism that marries certain kinds of behavior to certain kinds of shapes and layouts. “If spatial centrality signifies symbolic supremacy, is this not an ethnographically specific concept, and if so might the central area of the [dome] have no particular resonance for some of its visitors?” (153) One wonders what paradoxical omniscience enables Crinson to make this claim. Is “centrality” merely an expression of power imposed from above, therefore necessarily unrecognizable as such by marginal subjects? There is a kind of lethargic culturalism throughout the book that, even as it makes certain requisite judgments about the forms through which colonial power both asserted and exerted its hegemony, situates its recipients as merely formulaic auxiliaries or contrasts.

In this book, an art historical attitude that correlates formulaic social effects with formal causes has become fully hermeneutic, posing the problems and limitations of the analysis itself as one evinced in the evidence. The outlines of that strain are established early. Lutyens’s Delhi and Le Corbusier’s Chandigarh are the contending chess pieces—the white against the black—that are set up in this story to illuminate the different shades of grey. What theoretical support that the author brings to his aid, in this case the usual suspects—Said, Homi Bhabha, Spivak, Roland Barthes, Benedict Anderson, and for contemporary globalization, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri—are used selectively as bland prophets who here seem merely to say that in power, things are not what they seem. The sections on imperial exhibitions particularly overwork this linear theme of power—display—knowledge and join the legions of the already existing material on colonial exhibitions with more or less interchangeable claims. The analysis of Norman Foster’s Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank Building, although an appropriate case for the book, seems completely out of depth in dealing with the rationales of finance and technology that it attempts to describe. At points, the entire book is substantially compromised by this attitude, allowing it to evade some of the broader currents that are at work in the scenes whose pictorial features it so reverently describes. One cannot help feeling that the principal service being done here is to a certain strain of the art historical discipline rather than the object—phenomenon itself.

Hence, Britain’s slide into a kind of vassal state from its earlier predominant place in the empire after the Bretton Woods agreement, or after the new impulses provided by the Cold War to the late British Empire—particularly during the Malaya crisis—is left unaddressed.

Crinson’s book works within a circumscribed epistemological realm claimed as the dominant frame of the “discipline” of architectural history: thus questions of “style” and phenomenological analysis (the figures of centrality, orientation, materiality, and so on) remain paramount. As a subsequent generation of scholars—both so-called postcolonials and others—have recognized, this formalist frame is patently inadequate to understanding the informal skeins of power. One finds very little of the analytical models through which more recent analysis has made its headway into this conundrum: biopolitics, managerial discourse, organizational logic. Sometimes the author leaves out what for scholars today would be crucial facts, for example that the Department of Tropical Architecture, fleetingly headed by Fry but more importantly by Otto Königsberger, one of the authors of the Singapore plan, was in fact first established in the School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and not at the Architectural Association, as Crinson asserts. The role of the department in monitoring British foreign “aid” in the 1960s—that spurious tool of neo-colonial benevolence—is similarly expunged, while our attention is brought instead to the usual formal litany of brises-soleil, wing-shaped roofs, courtyards, concrete screens, and what-have-you.

The import of Crinson’s book, for all that, may be in its dogged attempt to blend the older, formalist preoccupations of art history with somewhat newer forms of cultural critique. That said, the book’s strong contribution is to collate a series of scenarios explicaded by forms of analysis attuned to the understanding of complexity. Its tantalizing portrait of an ancient architectural profession far more hybrid and global than the one in the usual canonical accounts points us in the direction of roads not taken, and these are paths where prospective scholars will find much of interest, should they choose to pursue them.

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