around the same time as the Free University, that he chooses to illustrate. Almost all of their designers focused, like Woods, on diagrammatic planning at the expense of exquisitely conceived details. At the time such details seemed to be beyond technology’s capacity, and their absence rendered many of the results rather alienating. In this context, the subtle scale of the Free University, the attempt to create a façade whose texture provided visual variety, as well as the relatively comprehensible circulation plan, all stand out.

The focus of much of the best recent scholarship on modern architecture is no longer on the movement’s pioneers, but on the transformation as well as implementation of their ideas by a younger generation. Prouvé and Team X, hardly mentioned in classrooms a generation ago, are now among the precedent setters most cherished in studios and experimentally inclined offices. Many architectural historians still privilege, however, the championing of new heroes over the consideration of how buildings are constructed and inhabited. Although written with enormous affection for its subject, Free University Berlin is above all an unsentimental and timely reminder of the complexity of realizing even the most appealing architectural ideals.

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Notes

Philip Long and Jane Thomas, editors
Basil Spence, Architect

If Basil Spence is remembered in the United States at all today, it is solely as the architect of the new Coventry Cathedral, rebuilt after the war and completed in 1962. In his memoir Phoenix at Coventry (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962), Spence narrates his side of the story: the idea came quickly but the resolution of its elements took time; their refinement, detailing, and realization took even longer. From competition to consecration the project lasted over a decade. The Coventry project was monumental in both senses of the word, that is, in terms of its social function and the design and construction efforts necessary to realize it. It was the making of a grand hall, a collaborative effort undertaken with some of Britain’s finest artists and executed with a level of craft unusual so shortly after the war—and one might argue, even more unusual today.

Several years ago the Spence family donated the architect’s papers to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS). The donation spurred the organization of this exhibition—curated by the RCAHMS’s Jane Thomas and Philip Long, senior curator, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, and still traveling in the United Kingdom—and the publication of this book. The book is a catalog as they used to be, modest in format with condensed yet informative essays—particularly welcome in an era where every exhibition seems to require an accompanying publication that plops on the tabletop like a foundation stone, with a price to match. Instead, this is a sane and focused production that outlines the basics of Spence’s life, professional career, and architectural works. The various essays cover these themes: personal life (Gillian Blee and Anthony Blee, Spence’s long-term collaborator and son-in-law), the evolution of the practice (Jane Thomas, Clive Fenton), his work with artists (Philip Long), and the building types that constituted his major contributions—exhibition design (Brian Edwards), churches, urban architecture, and mass housing (Miles Glendenning), and university buildings (Louise Campbell). Together the essays form a tightly woven introductory look into the work of this influential architect.

In addition to Coventry Cathedral, two of Spence’s designs stand out to foreign eyes: the first is the extraordinary Sea and Ships Pavilion at the 1951 Festival of Britain in London (Figure 1). Here we see the updating and advancing of Gunnar Asplund’s maritime pavilion for the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition. Spence’s is a far more muscular statement: a single hall punctured and articulated by lozenge-shaped canopies, ship parts, and sculptural panels. The material was steel, and structure played a prominent role in the building’s expression. “A giant framework of steel towers and ganttries tied the composition together,” writes essayist Brian Edwards. “The overall effect was more deconstruction than construction” (55). Like so much of the Festival of Britain, the Sea and Ships Pavilion more than met its brief to instill a sense of accomplishment in the British people after the privations of wartime and invited them to look forward, positively, to the future.

Of the later projects, one could single out Spence’s designs for the 1962 Falmer House at the University of West Sussex, built during an era of university expansion in Britain, as it was in the United States. Essentially serving in the role of student union, the building complex created a topos for students where only agriculture had previously occupied the land. The building’s concrete vaults and brick walls recall certain of Louis Kahn’s projects from the 1950s, but in Spence’s hands the proportions are stolid and the forms more massive—flowing across, yet simultaneously anchored to the land. Like the office’s work in social housing, the West Sussex project provided a neat model for emulation by other architects engaged in campus commissions. In contrast to these designs, which balanced weight and fluidity, were the heavy-handed solutions for the British Pavilion at the 1967 Expo in Montreal and the 1972 British Embassy in Rome, in addition to several housing schemes from the same years. Here the density of the concrete masses and repetition of elements produced a relentless architecture that exudes little sense of hope—in stark contrast to the more elegant and sensitive designs that had preceded them.

One is reminded throughout the catalog of Spence’s exceptional drawing abil-
ity. His sketches and finished renderings are sensuous and stunningly beautiful. In an era when the Photoshop-collaged computer image makes every perspective appear to be the product of the same hand—or, better stated, the same machine—here is work of tremendous personality and engaging line work. Before graduation, in fact, Spence met many of his school expenses by taking on outside commissions for renderings, and one can probably assign a good deal of the credit for his winning of commissions and competitions—like Eliel Saarinen before him—on his adept drawing skills. Renderings of the Sea and Ships Pavilion and the early Misses Reid house at Easter Bel-mont, Edinburgh (1932) stand out as superb works in their own right, but virtually any of the panoply of Spence drawings reproduced in the book would be museum worthy.

Working in Central London was quite unlike working on the periphery of cities on what was sometimes former farm land. The complex commission for the 1970 Royal Cavalry Barracks tried Spence’s intellect, design skills, and patience—the project dragged on for some thirteen years. Given the site’s prominent position on the edge of Hyde Park, the neighborhood—one of considerable wealth and influence—was wary of new construction that might upset the architectural balance in their backyard. The most questionable aspect of this basically successful project was the high-rise tower with the flats for the Royal Guards—a density not at all to Spence’s choosing but determined by the program. While the architect, it seems, welcomed this vertical counterpoint to his primarily low-rise, horizontally oriented composition, in situ a building of that height appears ungainly and unfortunate. Understandably, not all were pleased with the project at the time of its completion, especially given London’s predilection until that time to foreshow high-rise construction. From a perspective some four decades later, however, the project appears to have aged gracefully and become an acceptable part of the urban fabric.

Like many architects of his time, Spence’s trajectory spanned an eclectic historicism, a tainted modernism, and a modernized contextualism. There are few moments when his work can be neatly assigned to any single category, however. In this he is typical of his times and typical of his country—that is, until the New Brutalism reared its head in projects such as the South Bank development, with its Hayward Gallery and Queen Elizabeth Hall, and Denis Lasdun’s nearby National Theatre (1965–76). As noted above, even Spence was not immune to the lure of exposed concrete, but his projects in that idiom will not be those for which he will be remembered. Looking back today, Spence appears to have eschewed an architectural style applied to the site for an architecture appropriate to the site. The results are not always successful in formal terms, nor are they always beautiful. But one can almost always discern the concept behind the form, the idea as a response to a complex web of factors, each given careful consideration. In our current formalist era, filled as it is with angular and biomorphic frivolity, this is a good time to take a renewed look at Spence’s buildings—to emulate their consideration, if not their precise forms.

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Katherine A. McIver
Women, Art and Architecture in Northern Italy, 1520–1580: Negotiating Power
London: Ashgate, 2006, 300 pp., 4 color and 18 b/w illus. £60, ISBN 0754654117

Scholars working on early modern Italian art and architecture have long profited from the peninsula’s highly litigious nature. Local and state archives are filled with the documentation of long-running legal cases, including disputes over inheritances that span several generations. Katherine McIver’s work in the understudied and under-exploited archives of Parma, Piacenza, Reggio Emilio, and the even smaller centers of Busseto, Corregio, and Scandiano is a reminder of how much we can learn by moving off the beaten tracks of Florence, Venice, and Rome. Her study focuses on a group of women from the Pallavicina and Pallavicina-Sanvitale families, related both by marriage and blood, whose power base lay in the small, highly contested feudal area between Bologna and Milan. As they married, were widowed, and fought for their own or their children’s inheritances, they left behind a large body of evidence documenting their legal rights, their possessions, and their sense of pride and

Figure 1  Sea and Ships Pavilion, preliminary scheme, aerial perspective. From Basil Spence, Architect