Jonathan Massey

Crystal and Arabesque: Claude Bragdon, Ornament, and Modern Architecture

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Until now, Claude Bragdon (1866–1946) has received little attention from architectural historians. Some are aware of his writings on Louis Sullivan (Bragdon wrote the foreword to Sullivan’s The Autobiography of an Idea, 1924), while others have seen illustrations of his exotic crystalline ornament. Bragdon was a prolific
writer, a frequent contributor to architectural journals, and the author of numerous books exploring diverse topics from the fourth dimension to yoga. His most accomplished building was the now-demolished New York Central Railroad Terminal (1909–13) in Rochester, New York, with its arcuated façade and evocative ornament. In this meticulously researched monograph, Jonathan Massey has done a superior job of examining Bragdon’s life and career and arguing that he is an architectural and theoretical figure who warrants much greater attention in histories of modern architecture.

In the mid-twentieth century Bragdon faded into obscurity as ornament was purged from modern architecture. For Bragdon, ornament was the key to the betterment of society; according to Massey, “Bragdon absorbed a Victorian tradition of moralizing mathematics that had invested with ethical and existential significance the idea of a physically real four-dimensional ‘hyperspace’ beyond the range of normal sensory perception” (5). Bragdon, who did not attend college, was a self-taught intellectual who strived to unite myriad influences into what he introduced in 1915 as “projective ornament”—“a universal ornamental language applicable to all manner of designs” (5). Although he admired Sullivan, he concluded that Sullivan’s organic ornament was too individualized. As a Theosophist, Bragdon drew from both Eastern and Western traditions and sought to attain an “international ‘brotherhood of man,’ ” a “reconciliation of opposites, represented formally by the disciplining of sinuous arabesques to crystalline geometries” (7).

Bragdon learned his profession by apprenticing in architectural firms in Rochester, Buffalo, and New York City. The book begins with an examination of his early enthusiasms, ranging from the City Beautiful movement to Italian medieval architecture. Massey details the numerous progressive ideas in architecture that were then percolating in upstate New York. Buffalo was an eastern outpost for the Midwestern architecture of Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, which Bragdon knew firsthand. He was also directly influenced by the Roycroft Colony in East Aurora and was published in Gustav Stickley’s The Craftsman. Most significantly, Bragdon learned to be a superb pen-and-ink graphic artist through the mentorship of the highly talented Harvey Ellis, a Rochester native. Bragdon’s most intriguing early building was his own house in Rochester, “Cro’ Nest” (1902–3), with its restrained, shingled exterior and Arts and Crafts interior.

Massey explores Bragdon’s early theorizing on how “nature’s geometry” could provide a mathematical basis for architectural design through the melding of such diverse sources as the harmonic proportions of Pythagoras and the reconciliation of opposites found in Japanese in-yo symbolism. The complexities of Bragdon’s mystical and at times esoteric thinking were clarified by his exquisite diagrams, which showed how geometry generated by nature (including the human figure) could be the basis of architecture; these placed him solidly within a tradition running from Vitruvius to Le Corbusier. Curiously, the sophistication of Bragdon’s writings and diagrams was not matched by his architectural designs. Massey does not fully explore the paradox of why such an innovative and radical thinker produced such conventional-looking buildings. It is instead in a few examples of his ornament that Bragdon’s architectural vision is most apparent, as in “a magic line pattern” on the garage doors of a 1915 house in Rochester, or the “cruciform tesseract projection” on a radiator grille in the 1915–17 Rochester Chamber of Commerce (212–13).

The core of Massey’s book examines Bragdon’s quest for the fourth dimension via his interests in Theosophy, hyperspace, x-rays, and the uniting of Eastern and Western thought. Ultimately this led to his concept of “projective ornament.” The goal here was “exquisite acquiescence,” as the individual gave way to a universal greater good (154). Bragdon’s later ink drawings of fantastic settings festooned with projective ornament suggest a world of order, ceremonial spaces, and hierarchy, which Massey perceptively compares to colonial India (the “wisdom” of India was of particular interest to Bragdon). Curiously, the apex of Bragdon’s career was as the designer of temporary decorations for Festivals of Song and Light, which sought to bring together Americans of diverse foreign origins into a democratic community of mass singers (a topic previously explored by Massey in JSAH 65, no. 4 (Dec. 2006)). The 1916 festival in New York’s Central Park united an 800-person chorus with a singing audience of 60,000, as Bragdon’s screens and lanterns of electrified projective ornament created a “cathedral without walls” (189).

After falling out of favor with Rochester’s greatest patron, Kodak’s George Eastman, Bragdon’s late career moved from building permanent architecture to designing theatrical sets in New York City. He also continued his prodigious writing, and he experimented with devices such as a color organ (the “Luxorgan”) and with abstract animated films he called “color symphonies” (249, 276). Massey concludes with a fascinating discussion of how Bragdon influenced Buckminster Fuller and his 4-D designs. Bragdon emerges as an important link between the moralizing ornament of the nineteenth century and the utopian goals of geodesic design.

With its abundant illustrations, this is a beautifully produced book. (Its major lacuna is that it lacks a bibliography of Bragdon’s extensive publications.) Massey explains complex ideas with great clarity, and is wide-ranging and insightful in his interdisciplinary analysis. A few topics could have been further explored, such as Bragdon’s interpretation of Art Deco skyscrapers as “frozen fountains,” which Thomas van Leeuwen examined previously but which Massey does not mention.1 Nonetheless, this pioneering book is a major contribution to the study of early twentieth-century architecture, the history of ornament, and architectural theory. Although not all will be convinced by Massey’s assertion that in the early twentieth century Bragdon “was one of American architecture’s leading modernists” (8), Massey has shown that he was an extraordinary figure who warrants our close attention.

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