The preface convincingly balances aesthetic critique with historical analysis as concerns, for he offers a “history and anatomy of incongruities”: theorists and scholars from the early nineteenth-century John Soane to, more recently, Mark Girouard have found themselves oddly perplexed as they examine Elizabethan architecture. It is a world, a society, and a set of ideas difficult to pin down, never stationary—“transforming” at a “capricious” and unpredictable whim. A building might seem an easily comprehensible block, yet suddenly a ray of sun reflects blindingly off a large window and repulses the viewer’s eye. Symmetry might suggest regularly organized living spaces and so comprehensible patterns of daily life, but building plans can be puzzling symbols into which interior rooms are then compressed. Physically and intellectually, Elizabethan buildings slip from the viewer’s grasp. Nineteenth-century authors time and again sought to codify an Elizabethan style, yet they could at best say what it was not and suggest chronological limits. Twentieth-century scholars, in their turn, can fit Elizabethan complexity into orderly narratives only by narrowing to domestic architecture and so eliding ambiguities across building type. Occasionally, though, hints of unpredictability—a classicism of wonder and buildings in flux, for instance—unsettle this stability.

Mark Girouard’s Elizabethan Architecture straddles these nineteenth- and twentieth-century strands as he confronts Elizabethan strangeness head-on. In a beautifully produced tome with well over three hundred color images, he explicitly invokes nineteenth-century stylistic concerns, for he offers a “history and anatomy of a style” (vii). That is, he aims to dissect the characteristics of this style, but also, as a historian, to explain why they occur. The preface convincingly balances aesthetic critique with historical analysis as strangeness in building becomes a reflection of broad cultural modes of perception; Elizabethans sought startling novelty, Girouard claims, from emblem books to debates on the English language. The thematic structure of the following chapters promises this synthetic lens stretching across building type. Beginning with the architectural context of building practice and the social framework of entertaining at the country house, the book then moves to stylistic (classical) and iconographical choices in building design and the printed sources for those designs. The final two chapters, on the three most prominent designers (Robert Smythson, William Arnold, and John Thorpe) and on the continuing popularity of Gothic design, provide a coda of moments in practice and design when the classical, symbolic world could fragment into Elizabethan strangeness, unpredictability, and ambiguity. The epilogue suggests how these Elizabethan designs become a style that extends beyond an isolated historical moment; even the buildings of James Stirling, Girouard asserts, have something Elizabethan about them.

Yet Girouard’s highly structured thematic presentation can become as blurry as the Elizabethan world that it portrays. One could easily argue that the chapters double back on themselves as much as they develop a logical argument; chapter seven on prominent designers continues the discussion of architectural practice in chapter one. Within chapters, readers can become disoriented in blizzards of detail—descriptions and histories of buildings or lengthy analyses of craftsmen—that can obscure a chapter’s theme. Chapter six (“Serlio or Vredeman de Vries?”) suggests that it will discuss how foreign printed books were reinterpreted in English design but readers instead find pages analyzing interior decoration through the framework of varying craftsman responsibilities. At the larger scale of Girouard’s argument, the notion of an “Elizabethan style,” so clearly a goal in the preface, is blurry and uncertain by the last page of the epilogue. Not only might readers ask precisely of what this style consists, but Girouard’s description shifts from “style” to a “high-Elizabethan spirit,” a zeitgeist seemingly more about intangible mentalities than about identifiable motifs (457).

Perhaps, however, if one takes Girouard’s argument on its own terms, it does offer the reader what it promises. He warns us not to expect “a pioneering study” (vii); rather, he provides an accessible summary of his own and others’ scholarship on Elizabethan architecture. And his volume goes a long way toward making Elizabethan complexities and ambiguities more accessible. Pages are filled with photographs of both expected and unexpected buildings newly juxtaposed; Girouard’s descriptive excurses on buildings and craftsmen provide an unprecedented wealth of detailed historical texture; and 37 pages of meticulous footnotes on far-flung archives, secondary sources, and on-site observations are a rich foundation for future scholarly endeavors. The loose connections among chapters, as later chapters double back on earlier ones, could suggest a series of reflections offered for the reader’s further exploration. Indeed, Girouard particularly highlights points of debate; in some instances, blunt opinion startlingly ruptures the dense detail of the historian’s narrative. He steps aside, for instance, to describe an unbuilt palace plan at Hatfield House as “the most inventive and enjoyable palace plan ever produced in England” or to find an “engaging naivety” in the oddly proportioned columns of the Rothwell Market House (120, 195). In light of recent scholarly emphasis on early modern modes of viewing, one could well question Girouard’s assertions: why was the palace plan never built if it was so “enjoyable,” and are the columns naive or the result of calculated reinterpretation? But the heightened consciousness of such uncertainties is at least as important as are the questions themselves. That is, through the very lacunae, moments of bluriness, and bold opinions of his volume, Girouard firmly reminds his reader how compelling, even controversial, the complex, ambiguous world of early modern England still is.

In 1985 Girouard expressed the hope that his initial “impetus of great enthusiasm” remained evident in the revised edition of Robert Smythson and the Elizabethan Country House. It is this enthusiasm for a strange world that, by the end of Elizabethan Architecture, most strikes his reader.
And so paradoxically, Girouard suggests, this very strangeness that seems to resist scholarly analysis is also the primary point of entry; strangeness engages and unsettles, while safe predictability recedes comfortably into the background. *Elizabethan Architecture* invites one to halt the comfortable and steady flow of words and so expose, if but for a moment, the confusing murkiness beneath their current.

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Notes