This was Nickel’s essential intention, and this book represents the success of this effort.

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Notes
2. Richard Cahan, They All Fall Down: Richard Nickel’s Struggle to Save America’s Architecture (New York: John Wiley, 1994); and Richard Cahan and Michael Williams, Richard Nickel’s Chicago: Photographs of a Lost City (Chicago: City-Files Press, 2008).

Michael Rawson
Eden on the Charles: The Making of Boston

The removal of cows from Boston Common was a burning political issue of 1830. The anti-cow faction saw the 631-acre pasture on the western edge of the Shawmut peninsula as a potential site of leisure, recreation, and refinement. These petitioners often resided in the wealthier adjacent areas of the city. A counter petition emerged from pro-cow advocates who more likely earned their living, in part, from the keeping of animals. Boston’s town council decided in favor of the petition to ban cows; the common people appealed that decision the following year and lost again. This seemingly benign change in agricultural and social practice is presented as a turning point in the attitude of Bostonians to nature in the most important book published in recent years on the city’s nineteenth-century environmental history. Michael Rawson’s Eden on the Charles succinctly summarizes the relevant literature, opens new research territory, and provides a larger context for understanding the human relationship to nature in American cities.

The book features five fascinating and interlocking chapters: “Enclosing the Common,” “Constructing Water,” “Inventing the Suburb,” Making the Harbor,” and “Recreating the Wilderness.” An admirer of Raymond Williams’s writings on the social construction of nature, Rawson examines the ways that Bostonians redefined their relationship to nature and how that process informed not only the history of this city but of American urbanism at large in the nineteenth century: “America’s most commonly experienced ways of relating to nature . . . were invented in the nineteenth century with the construction of the nation’s first cities, and many were invented in Boston . . . Bostonsians also helped to invent the new environmental relationships that came to define what it means to be ‘urban’” (viii).

For Rawson and Williams nature is both cultural and physical. Rawson explains: “Williams recognized this when he famously wrote that ‘what is often being argued . . . in the idea of nature is the idea of man . . . indeed the ideas of kinds of society.’ Williams applied this to the creation of literary representations of the city, but I am exploring its implications for the creation of the city itself” (ix). Even since William Bradford’s oft-quoted “City on the Hill” sermon, delivered before the landing in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Boston was to be exceptional: “Bostonians believed that they had a divinely sanctioned destiny to create a model community” (13). Rawson, a native son, also rehearses many Boston firsts, but this is serious history, not community boosterism.

Having dispatched the cows, Rawson next turns to the invention of a public water system. Blending together the arguments of clerics, politicians, and taxpayers, the author helps us understand how contested basic public services were in the mid-nineteenth century. When free water began to flow in 1848, Boston citizens rejoiced in the moral uplift and hygienic advantages suddenly available to all. Once again, the battles had raged between those who saw this as a symbol of progressive civilization and those who resented the added tax burden it represented. Cleanliness and sobriety were the war chants of the winning side. Significant advances followed, especially with the establishment of the country’s first State Board of Public Health in 1869.

Water also demanded attention in the harbor, where changes were constantly monitored. The primary, if inaccurate, theory of the mid-nineteenth century was the concept of tidal scour, where the harbor channels removed silt from the bottom twice daily. As Boston built out into the harbor and removed land for ballast and other uses, the shape of the port radically changed, raising fears that the harbor’s economic might could be affected. In 1859 the federal government and the city established the Boston Harbor Commissioners, a panel of engineering experts to study and supervise all changes in the harbor. Ultimately, a paradigm shift emerged as dredging replaced scour, and leisure recreation began to challenge commerce and redefine the nature of the harbor. When hydraulic engineer John R. Freeman issued a report in 1903 that advocated damming the Charles River at the harbor’s mouth, long held hostage to the scour theory, a new concept of the harbor and its freshwater tributaries emerged. The future of Boston harbor would be an artificial one, controlled by science and man.
In discussing the suburbs, a new landscape type in which Boston again took a lead, Rawson recounts the suburbanization stories of Roxbury and Brookline, two of the city’s earliest and closest suburbs. These communities debated annexation by the central city in the 1860s and 1870s: “The lines ran deep between town meeting and representative government, between rural and urban, between rich and poor, and between native-born Protestants and foreign-born Catholics” (178). Dorchester was the earlier town to be re-annexed to Boston, joining the central city in 1868 to achieve the basic services that the suburb felt it could not afford to provide as cheaply on its own. Brookline, however, resisted multiple attempts at annexation through the 1870s, becoming the first suburb in the nation to repel successfully the overtures of its central city. Brookline realized that providing urban amenities, like public water, would allow it to remain separate. These case studies illustrate the battles between town meeting versus elected government, democracy and nature.

Finally, Rawson turns to the issue of “recreating wilderness” through conservation, restoration, and construction—a program in which Boston again led the nation. He excavates the key, but often forgotten, players in this chapter of environmental history: from the sermons of the Rev. Samuel Lothrop; to the contributions of Elizur Wright, a nearly forgotten early conservationist; to Charles Eliot, campaigner for the first regional landscape planning commission in the country. Rawson paints a landscape of the interlocking interests of advocates for public health, wilderness preservation, land conservation, historic preservation, the colonial revival, and parks as sites of leisure. But here, he jumps too enthusiastically into a cult of Brahmin survival that plays a minor role in the region’s environmental discourse but that gets overstated in his argument. In seeking to create an “Eden on the Charles,” these leaders were looking forward more than backward, building a Progressive future more than reclaiming a Puritan past.

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Alexander Clement
Brutalism: Post-war British Architecture

Mark Crinson and Claire Zimmerman, editors
Neo-avant-garde and Postmodern: Postwar Architecture in Britain and Beyond
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010, 420 pp., 103 illus. incl. 76 in color. $65 (cloth), ISBN 9780300166187

Owen Hatherley
A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain

“For many years since the war we have continued in our habit of debasing the coinage of M. le Corbusier and have created a style—‘Contemporary’—easily recognizable by its misuse of traditional materials and its veneer of ‘modern’ details, frames, recessed plinths, decorative piloti,” Theo Crosby wrote in a 1955 editorial on the New Brutalism.1 For Crosby, “contemporary” functioned as shorthand for a bastardized version of modernism—a modernism that had already been liquidated of its ideals and reduced to nothing more than a style for up-to-date living. As an antidote to such degradation, Crosby positioned New Brutalism as an archaeology of the modern movement that would include a rigorous reevaluation of its key architects—Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe in particular—as well as a thorough reexamination of its programs and intents. New Brutalism, for example, would push modernism’s truth-to-materials rhetoric to its limit with its interest in the “as found” just as it would reaffirm the earlier movement’s commitment to housing and the social. Though Alison and Peter Smithson, the figureheads of New Brutalism along with the critic-historian Reyner Banham, first used the phrase in conjunction with their design for a single-family house-like house for Soho, in the following years the term became most closely identified with institutional building, giving rise to schools, council flats, and city halls frequently cast of rough concrete. In an age of postwar reconstruction, Brutalism positioned itself as a new kind of civic language—more vernacular slang than received pronunciation—and in time more and more architects came to speak its language.

As the word spread, however, the critical contours of Brutalism often lost their shape, and the term quickly transformed into yet another style. Indeed, Brutalism is often employed today as nothing more than a vague epithet lobbed at vast expanses of postwar institutional building—a dour precursor to the colorful signs of a permissive postmodernism. Now a half-century past the height of its popularity, a new generation has taken interest in Brutalism’s fate. Alexander Clement’s Brutalism: Post-war British Architecture, the essay collection Neo-avant-garde and Postmodern: Postwar Architecture in Britain and Beyond, and Owen Hatherley’s A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain are emblematic of this resurgence in interest. Ranging from a textbook-style history to a critically nuanced compendium to a manifesto-like travelogue, these accounts betray a longing for a historical moment when architecture took an ambitious—and often antagonistic—role in relation to society, and seek to position this moment in relation to the present day.

In Brutalism: Post-war British Architecture, Alexander Clement offers up a catalog of architectural projects that have all been characterized as Brutalist, ranging from Chamberlin, Powell, and Bon’s massive and vertiginous Barbican Centre (1952–82) to Denys Lasdun’s expansive and angular East Anglia University (1970). He also pays visits to less typically Brutalist projects, including J. Seymour Harris Partnership’s dynamic and ornamental Queensgate Market in Huddersfield (1970) and Basil Spence’s contextual and red-brick Kensington and Chelsea Town Hall (1977). Investigating a range of buildings...