Books

Neil Levine  
Modern Architecture: Representation and Reality  
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010, x + 364 pp., 30 color and 311 b/w illus. $65, ISBN 9780300145670

This book is a compilation of Neil Levine’s Slade Lectures in Fine Art given at the University of Cambridge in the academic year 1994–95. Published in 2010 under the title Modern Architecture: Representation and Reality, it is to some extent a recasting of the received history of Euro-American architecture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Comprising eight chapters plus an introduction and a conclusion, this sub-titular surprising eight chapters plus an introduction and a conclusion, this sub-titular opposition between reality and representation becomes qualified in the course of lectures by a number of other loaded terms, including: appearance, truth, abstraction, history, and imitation, all of which serve to articulate in different ways the discrimination between representation and reality in the evolution of modern architecture. Levine often employs these terms in a series of propositional, titular shifts . . . from a traditional rhetorically purifying Jesuit Greco-Gothic ideal was anti-Baroque, Soufflot, after Laugier, had no compunction whatsoever about using iron cramps in order to achieve the desired result. This overarching historical trajectory from the representational rhetoric of the Renaissance to the parsimonious structures of the French Greco-Gothic structures is summed up by Levine in the following terms:

The representational link Laugier forged between the primitive wood hut and the sophisticated stone temple served to rationalize the relationship between truth and appearance by limiting that which could be represented exclusively to that which might be believed to be the likely structure of the building. Artistic illusion and constructed reality now neatly coincided in the realm of the verisimilar . . . .

Laugier’s theoretical construct produced a relative equivalence between decoration and construction that seemed not only “simple and rational” but also “rational” and “precise.” In effect what Laugier did was to make truth approximate appearance so closely that the appearance of truth becomes one with the truth of appearances.

For Levine, as for Sigfried Giedion in his canonical account of the modern movement—Space, Time and Architecture—published in 1941, modernity is deemed to begin with Alberti in Florence in the mid-fifteenth century, where for Levine it begins with Alberti’s Palazzo Rucellai and its representation of the Roman Colosseum inscribed skin-deep into the façade of load-bearing masonry structure. Right at this moment we have an instance of that time-honored split between building and architecture, which runs as a latent theme throughout Levine’s historical account without ever once being fully acknowledged.

Taking his cue from Emil Kaufmann’s insight that the legacy of the Renaissance-Baroque system first began to disintegrate in the eighteenth century, Levine demonstrates through a painstaking analysis of the landscape of Castle Howard in North Yorkshire, England, how Sir John Vanbrugh’s grandiose but unfinished neo-Palladian mise-en-scène of the house will finally be overwhelmed by the various countervailing vistas of the picturesque. As Levine puts it: “Castle Howard provides early evidence of the fundamental shift . . . from a traditional rhetorically based mode of representation, characteristic of architecture since the Renaissance, to a historically defined one driven by the . . . descriptive possibilities inherent in a pictorialized mode of composition.”

While Levine eschews the engineering prehistory of the modern movement as this was first extensively documented in Gustav Adolf Platz’s pioneering magnum opus Die Baukunst der neuesten Zeit of 1927, he is only too aware how medieval masonry technique and iron reinforcement would prove essential to the realization of such Baroque masterpieces as Christopher Wren’s St. Paul’s Cathedral in London of 1700 and later in the protracted realization of Laugier’s ideal church, J.-G. Soufflot’s Ste. Geneviève, Paris, started at midcentury and finished exactly a century after St. Paul’s. Both of these churches employed arcuated vaults and hidden flying buttresses in order to achieve Baroque theatrical effects in the case of St. Paul’s, and free-standing, trabeated intercolumniation in the nave and crossing of Ste. Geneviève. Although the purifying Jesuit Greco-Gothic ideal was anti-Baroque, Soufflot, after Laugier, had no compunction whatsoever about using iron cramps in order to achieve the desired result.

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The terms imitation and abstraction come to the fore in chapter three, where Levine shows how Etienne-Louis Boulleé’s preoccupation with the sublime was integral to his vision that architecture could be revitalized by imitating nature at a vast scale. At the same time Boulleé’s proposal for the Metropolitan Church of 1781 was an inflated rationalization of the Greek cross plan of Laugier’s ideal church, with a double perspect of giant Corinthian columns lining the entirety of the interior. Classical representation and nature are here hypothetically combined under a zenithal light that is envisaged at such a scale as to sustain its own atmosphere with clouds suspended beneath its hemispherical dome. By virtue of his cosmological imagination, Boulleé was able to project a gargantuan architecture comprising unbuildable storm-swept neoplatonic solids—cubes, spheres, and Egyptoid pyramids, these last presenting a monumental image of barren immutability. And although such visions were totally unrealizable, Boulleé continued to entertain the Greco-Gothic ambition of achieving classic spatial effects by Gothic means. We shall find a comparable split between building capacity and acetic form in John Soane’s Consols Transfer Office at the Bank of England, built in 1797–99 and duly painted by Joseph Gandy as a brand-new “ruin” in precisely vaulted brickwork. Architecture versus building runs through the career of Karl Friedrich Schinkel, where the Boulleé-inspired prism of the neoclassical Altes Museum (1822–30) gives way to the articulate, astylar brick discourse of the and iron Bauakademie (1831–36). In this instance, Schinkel’s warehouse manner contains an intricate, tectonic labyrinth, which has little in common with the Olympian calm of Henri Labrouste’s Bibliothèque Ste. Geneviève (1838–50), built close to Soufflot’s church with which the French tectonic trajectory begins. This library may surely be seen as the ultimate refinement of the Greco-Gothic ideal. That Labrouste’s cultural allusions were as much Gothic as they were classic is borne out by Levine’s perceptive analysis of the central, lightweight cast-iron superstructure that served to support the twin barrel vaults that encompass the entire space:

Following the Gothic model, Labrouste reduced the thickness of the members to a minimum. The skeletal character of the structure is foregrounded by the black paint that contrasts with the light cream color of the vaults. Although the Gothic detailing of the refectory is transformed into classical terms—the reference here is to the refectory of the Gothic Abbey of Saint-Martin des Champs, Paris—the foliated capitals becoming composite and the banded columns fluted—a good deal of the Gothic structural diagram and logic are retained. Most revealing perhaps, is the rotation of the cast-iron capitals at forty-five degrees instead of turning their face to parallel the space, as a classical capital would, they are set diagonally, as in a Gothic rib vault.

This is Levine at his critical best and it is this, surely, that puts him in a class apart as far as the architectural historians of his generation are concerned, since his writing not only manifests profound erudition and logical judgment but also exhibits an exceptional capacity to perceive and interpret the spatial and technostatic feeling of a given architecture, not only within one particular work but also as a generic syndrome as it evolves over time to arrive at an even richer elaborations. All of this is especially true of Levine’s unsurpassed interpretations of Frank Lloyd Wright, as we find these in chapter six, rather curiously subtitled, “Representation without History,” which surely cannot be entirely the case given all the subtle references that gleam through Wright’s lifelong obsession with Japanese culture. Be this as it may, where else may one find such a penetrating appraisal of Wright’s Unity Temple (1905–1908) as when Levine writes: “The applied decorative strips and bands clearly do not constitute a virtual and independent structural system and therefore can in no way be described as constructed decoration . . . . They neither reveal nor express the actual facts of construction. On the contrary, they create with the surfaces to which they adhere, a unified non-representational field where the very distinction between construction and decoration is cancelled out.”

A similar hyper-sensitiveness is also evident in Levine’s characterization of the intense synthesis that Wright was able to achieve between culture and nature, particularly as we find this in his own home at Taliesin, Spring Green, Wisconsin of 1911 or again in his famous Fallingwater house completed for Edgar Kaufmann at Bear Run, Pennsylvania, in 1937. Of the former we read: “Wright made Taliesin an outgrowth of its natural surroundings. As the outlines of the building became blurred with those of the landscape, the imitation of nature in Taliesin assumed a directness and immediacy of effect that could no longer be related to history.”

A similar nature/culture fusion also occurs in the latter at the level of the floor finish itself in relation to the movement of the space:

The grey-blue flagstone paving of the bridge and loggia continues into the house to become the living room floor. The only difference is that the flagstones inside are waxed and polished to give them a shiny, reflective appearance. This causes the eye to skim the surface quickly, following the line of the diagonal axis across the room towards the light at the far side, which comes through the band of windows and doors opening onto a terrace projecting over the ravine. One is reminded of the arching vista in the living room at Taliesin; but where that room roots you solidly to the earth, the shiny surface of the flagstone floor in Fallingwater has a slippery look and feel that suggest the instability of the moving water undercut.

For all his pioneering research into the discourse of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in its prime and along with his seminal contribution to Arthur Drexler’s blockbuster Ecole des Beaux-Arts show, provocatively staged in the Museum of Modern Art in 1975, Levine has largely worked as a
historian of American architecture. Thus despite his attention to the representative role of abstraction in the American career of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, we find little here of the European modern movement, as this has appeared in various historical accounts since the late 1920s in the writing of such figures as Sigfried Giedion, Nikolaus Pevsner, Reyner Banham, Leonardo Benevolo, Manfredo Tafuri, and myself. In this regard Levine’s somewhat restricted take on the trajectory of modernity may well derive from the presumption that all of this has already been dealt with ad infinitum or that it has been somehow unduly compromised by political slants of one kind or another. In any event, avant-garde architecture in the sociopolitical sense is not a line that has been pursued here. Instead, as I have already intimated, a schism obtains in this account between building in the sense of the vernacular (i.e., the tradition of the Arts and Crafts) and architecture in a civa, institutional—that is, classical—sense without this schism ever being fully confronted. This split is more or less mediated in the work of Wright by his commitment to Japanese cultural values. However, a third term, namely advanced, modern, constructional technology is also present as an underlying modernizing force in Wright’s architecture, as it is, in different ways, in the modernist architecture of Mies van der Rohe and Louis Kahn. Here I am following Levine’s lead in adopting Clement Greenberg’s self-conscious coinage term modernism in order to distinguish the post–Second World War work of Mies and Kahn in the States from the avant-gardist, largely European, modernism of the interwar period.

Levine brings his Slade Lectures to a close with the modernist as opposed to modern architectures of Mies van der Rohe and Kahn and in so doing inexplicably elects to overlook the revisionist representational concerns advanced by Giedion, Jose Luis Sert, and Fernand Léger in the 1943 manifesto Nine Points on Monumentality. And while neither Mies nor Kahn will ever make reference to this document, it is obvious that in their separate way they were both equally haunted by the deliquescence of the utopian modern project, above all by the ideological void that this project had left behind, so to speak, in terms of the role that a public institution could be expected to adopt amid the instrumental, technological realities of the emerging postwar future.

Although Mies, like Kahn with his tetrahedral obsessions, was preoccupied, however unconsciously, with the creation of an “architecture degree zero” (his famous keinabe nichts, or “almost nothing”) he was at the same time cognizant of the monumental imperative to the effect that, as he himself put it, “not every building is a cathedral.” This, among other syndromes, accounts for the wide-span lattice steel girders that constitute a crowning roofwork above the horizontal dematerialized glass prism of his Mannheim Theatre competition proposal of 1952.

Levine ends his thesis by interpreting Kahn’s entire work as a culture of the unfinished, citing the parallel of Michelangelo’s non finito sculptures and further grounding the argument in Kahn’s reflection that the true spirit of a building is perceptible twice in its life, first when it is under construction and second when it is a ruin. However what is missing from this purview is that Kahn was just as preoccupied with the so-called engineer’s Aesthetic as Mies. I am referring of course to the dialectic of the Engineer’s Aesthetic versus Architecture as this opened Le Corbusier’s purist polemic Towards a New Architecture in 1927. Thus Kahn’s first take on monumentality in his opening essay on the topic in 1944 was to predicate his zero degree of an autonomous modernist architecture on the latest advances in building technology rather than on any form of rationalized typology. In this vein, aided by Anne Tyng, he would take as his point of departure the universal tetrahedral space-frame technology of Buckminster Fuller and in this regard, he would come close to Mies’s conviction of 1950, cited by Levine to the effect that “Technology is far more than a method, it is a world in itself.” Significantly enough, Levine does not complete the passage wherein Mies envisions technology transcending into architecture through the gigantic structures of engineering. Although Kahn would have never thought of according such a stature to civil engineering form, he was nonetheless committed to the assembly of his modernist architecture out of structurally articulate components, animated by gravity, circulation services, and light, that is to say a focus on the how of the technique rather than on the what of form. For this last, Kahn turned to the value-free, Phileban form of Etienne Boullée and Claude-Nicholas Ledoux, as he possibly first encountered these in Emile Kaufmann’s Three Revolutionary Architects: Boullée, Ledoux and Lequeu, first published in Philadelphia in 1952. Although, as Levine insists, Kahn surely had ruins in mind when he gave full rein to his penchant for constructing buildings inside buildings as in the unrealized meeting house complex projected for the Salk Institute in 1960 or the sheath of brick walls which serve to encase the body of library as projected for the Philips Exeter Academy in 1965. However, it was not so much that these works were “unfinished” as that they shared with ruins an aura of emptiness which, as Levine instructs us, Greenberg once characterized as “homeless representation.” And is it not exactly this homelessness that these two titans of postwar American modernist architecture have most in common. For although Mies was transfixed by technology, seeing it as the ultimate demise of the epoch, he was also, as Levine notes, equally aware of its dehumanizing and dangerous potential, following the critical lead given by Romano Guardini’s Letters from Lake Como of 1927.

It is here, in effect, that Levine leaves us without engaging the immanent representational value of space as an end in itself, which lies beyond verisimilitude as this applies to the reciprocity between structure and appearance.

It is not possible in the space available to do justice to the subtle oscillating intellectual fabric that the author has woven around what Hubert Damisch once characterized as “the space between,” the hiatus that is represented by the colon in Viollet-le-Duc’s formulation “construction is the means: architecture is the result.” To this ultimate end, Levine’s Modern Architecture is a richly detailed and provocatively didactic account of all the subtle representational possibilities of an
art form that is commonly regarded as non-representational, not to mention the confusing fact that it is invariably mixed up with all the complexities of everyday life. Kenneth Frampton Columbia University

Note

William L. Fash and Leonardo López Luján, editors
The Art of Urbanism: How Mesoamerican Kingdoms Represented Themselves in Architecture and Imagery

Mesoamerica is long due for a comparative analysis on urbanism, and this monumental tome is an important collective project in that direction. Gathering twenty-three scholars working in various parts of Mesoamerica, with research spanning archaeological and historical analyses, the volume focuses on “how communities at various points in the process of urbanization represented themselves in the art and architecture of several iconic” Mesoamerican centers (Fash and López Luján, 2). The volume explicitly sets out not to define urbanism or evaluate Mesoamerican centers and cities in a comparative context of past urbanism. Indeed, some hardcore archaeologists may object that some of the centers treated in the volume—e.g., San Lorenzo, Chalcatzingo, and San Bartolo—were not cities. Yet I agree with the spirit of this volume that urbanism includes long-term processes and practices that preceded and, in fact, produced the phenomena that most social scientists and architects consider cities.

As the title hints, the volume explores both art in Mesoamerican centers and Mesoamerican centers as art. It explores, on the one hand, elaborate artistic expression in Mesoamerican centers as narratives detailing mythico-historical origins (Mexica depictions of Quetzalcoatl and Tollan, pictorials legitimizing ascendant ruling authority (early murals in San Bartolo), and images anthropomorphizing divine powers (the multifarious deities depicted in Teotihuacan murals). The volume explores, at the same time, Mesoamerican centers as art; that is, the signficance of centers and cities as “political, aesthetic, and cosmological symbols” (Carrasco, 444). Across the pre-Columbian Americas, emergent centers and cities were constructed as “exemplary” places, to use geographer Paul Wheatley’s term; as cosmograms that not only presented core urban physiognomies as cosmic topoi, but through multiplex referential practices (sensory, material, ritual, and so forth), urban form embodied the powerful spiritual forces that inhabited those features. For example, Eduardo Matos Mocetzuma demonstrates that the Aztec Great Temple and its two summit shrines recreated the two mountains that Aztec considered to occupy the mythical center of their cosmos. This volume demonstrates that Mesoamerican centers and cities manifested powerful landscapes in their own right, the potency of which was enacted in material art, ritual performances, and cyclical reconstructions.

The volume sounds two chords that I find particularly salient for architectural historians. The first is a distinctly Mesoamerican notion of urbanism that is deeply rooted in New World pre-Columbian history. Many of the urban and proto-urban centers treated in this volume make particular reference to mountains. Attention to mountains is common across the native Americas, yet in Mesoamerica, centers came to be associated with a perception of mountains as conjoined mythic-physical places. When the Spanish arrived, every community was associated with a particular “mountain of water,” or “hill of sustenance,” denoted by the Aztec (Nahuatl) term altepetl. During the sixteenth century, altepetl were depicted as bell-shaped hills containing water. Several chapters indicate that Mesoamerica’s emergent urban history was tied up with the mythical concept of altepetl beginning at least during the Classic period, and likely much earlier, beginning with the Olmec.

Multiple chapters in The Art of Urbanism argue that the concept of altepetl transcended the urban center. Built centers explicitly referred to regional physical landscapes, as famously manifested in Teotihuacan’s visual relationships to surrounding peaks and Maya temples’ construction as human-wrought mountains topped with cave shrines. By the Classic period these monuments encapsulated and transformed, largely to elite ends, already ancient practical ecologies of peoples relating to their environments. Copan, Teotihuacan, Cholula, and Tenochtitlan centered on humanly wrought mountains, which as altepetl united diverse geographies and peoples under an emergent elite class.

Mesoamerican centers, construed as altepetl, promoted both centralizing practices and regional, communal integration.

Chapters focusing on Late Postclassic centers refer to the pan-Mesoamerican concept of Tollan, an ancient ideal to which later Mesoamerican centers ascribed—most famously the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. Tollan referred most generally to an ideal center—a Mesoamerican ancient template and urban utopia—and specifically a verdant, watery, fertile “place of reeds” (Fash and López Luján, p. 6). Chapters in this volume consider waterlike mountains central to Mesoamerican urbanism. Water surrounded early Olmec centers like San Lorenzo, and it is central to the Maya emphasis on watery caves as places of creation. Emphasis on water and watery caves continues into the Classic period, as resolutely manifested in the modified cave under the “House of the New Fire” platform in front of the Sun Temple at Teotihuacan, the location of El Tajín near permanent springs so that its ball court was flooded during rituals of regeneration, and iconographic depiction of water-management practices at Copan. Across the long history of Mesoamerican pre-Columbian history, urban centers emphasized the centrality of water.

The Art of Urbanism is an excellently produced, fabulously illustrated, and highly informative volume. It demonstrates some of the usual weaknesses that tend to characterize edited volumes; not all of the chapters directly address the central themes, and chapter quality varies. Yet the