Notes
1. See, for example, Anne Watson, ed., Beyond Architecture: Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin in America, Australia and India (Sydney, Australia: Powerhouse Publishing, 1998); David Van Zanten, ed., Marion Mahony Griffin: Drawing the Form of Nature (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2005).

Sir Hugh Casson PRA, Making Friends
Royal Academy of Arts, London
31 May–22 September 2013

Sir Hugh Casson PRA, Making Friends was a small exhibition that commemorated a man whose career spanned fifty years and included a period as president of the Royal Academy (1976–84). Curated by the architectural historian Neil Bingham, and designed by Casson’s daughter’s Dinah, the tune of the exhibition was set with the description of him as “a spirited leader and a uniting force in the arts, delighting the public and profession alike.”

The approach taken to the curation was chronological and biographical. The exhibition opened with an outline of Casson’s early life and architectural training (Cambridge, then the Bartlett School in London). Next, two of the first room’s walls were devoted, one to his war work, when he served as a camouflage officer, and one to “Exhibitions and Interiors,” describing his role as director of architecture at the Festival of Britain and commissions for interiors such as on the Royal Yacht Britannia. A central block of vitrines displayed family correspondence, sketchbooks, and examples of his design work. The second room was devoted to “Architecture” and began with Casson’s prewar work as assistant to the modernist designer Christopher Nicholson on schemes for Augustus John and the patron of the surrealists, Edward James. The main focus was on the longest period of his professional life in partnership with Neville Conder. Photographs showed the firm’s major educational projects at Cambridge University’s Sidgwick Avenue site, the University of Birmingham, and the Royal College of Art, as well as for London Zoo, and numerous private commissions. Space was made for a display of books that Casson authored over his career, as well as for a celebration of his achievements as president of the Royal Academy, during which time he achieved the not insubstantial tasks of getting the institution on a sound financial footing and establishing the Friends organization, the latter of which has since been emulated by most major British galleries and museums. This final display led us back into the first room. The exhibition finished with a wall of the watercolors for which Casson became renowned in his latter years.

As a journey through an architect’s career, Sir Hugh Casson PRA, Making Friends offered an agreeable and comprehensive (within the size constraints) trip. The images were well chosen with a pleasing balance in favor of Casson’s own drawings and sketches. Bingham was fortunate here in having access to the archive recently donated to the Victoria and Albert Museum. Of particular note were Casson’s designs for the camouflage of portable aircraft hangars—disguises that included a public house, “The Lion”—and drawings of the Dome of Discovery under construction.

In many respects, therefore, there is little to fault about the exhibition. Yet there remains a sense that, with a greater concern for context, and a more nuanced sense of how a building is created, the display could have presented both an informative biographical account of Casson and an understanding of the evolution of English architectural modernism more generally. That this opportunity was not taken may reflect the location of the show. Although it has paid increasing attention in the recent past to the exhibition of architecture (a discipline in its remit since its foundation), the Royal Academy more generally devotes itself to exhibitions that conform to some of the older conventions of art history: the individual painter or sculptor (Manet, Daumier) or the national school (with recent shows focusing on Mexico and Australia). Casson was presented here very much in this vein, as sole author if not quite genius creator of the buildings exhibited. The show gave little sense of the process of collaboration that produces architecture and this despite the fact that Casson’s role in his postwar partnership was presented somewhat opaquely. On one of the wall panels, Bingham noted that Casson “took a predominantly advisory role in the practice, although he coordinated and designed many fine buildings.” There was something to be said about how architectural practices work, especially those undertaking significant public buildings. Casson’s relationship with his wife, professional as well as personal, was also noted. But like Conder, her role was not discussed.

Indeed, it was reduced to a photograph caption that recorded Margaret Casson as the designer of the fabric of the dress she was wearing. This conceptual problem was also evident in the other architecture exhibition at the Royal Academy at the time Richard Rogers RA: Inside Out. The sin was worse in the latter exhibition, given that the first room of the show made much of the practice’s ethos of teamwork and collaboration with a good client. Meanwhile Su Rogers made but a fleeting appearance early on, a passing player in the greater story of her former husband’s unfolding vision.

The Rogers exhibition was also a reminder of the growing public status of the architect and the way that he, alone of that great 1980s generation of high-tech architects, has become the politician architect: advisor to New Labour and now a Labour peer. In this respect he has more in common with Casson than one might imagine, and taken together the two shows offer interesting insights into the trajectory of modernism in the postwar era. This is where the Casson show had real value. He is not paid much attention by architectural historians, except for his role at the Festival of Britain, which cannot be ignored. But as the exhibition made clear, from the early 1950s onward he was very much an establishment figure, not simply because of his presidency of the Royal Academy, but also as a favorite designer for the current royal family, for whom he purveyed a “modernism lite” in a number of domestic and nautical interiors. This is not, however, the establishment with which the English tradition of modernism is usually associated; the more familiar tale is that of the transition from strategic infiltration of arenas of influence in the 1930s to a hegemonic
hold on architectural training and state and local authority commissions through to the Thatcherite ax in 1979. Casson as a historical figure is interesting because he showed there were other paths to be taken. This may have made for a more “tasteful” modernism than that which prevailed latterly, but it was nevertheless part of a dominant design idiom. Moreover, as British architects seem ever more keen to become Royal Academicians, as the academy itself increasingly courts the profession, and the RIBA seems to be becoming less powerful, not least as patron of architecture exhibitions, Casson might be said to have been something of a trailblazer.

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Energy: Oil and Post-Oil Architecture and Grids
MAXXI Museum, Rome
22 March–10 November 2013

Architecture exhibitions are of two kinds: those that celebrate an epoch—or a practitioner—that has already left its mark, and those that give credibility to emerging movements. Curator Pippo Ciorra attempted to do both, situating the narrative in Energy: Oil and Post-Oil Architecture and Grids between a poetic reflection on the “Petroleum Interval” that is coming to an end, and a foreshadowing of a new era of energy production and distribution. He achieved this through a cogent organizational strategy, dividing the exhibition into two parallel sections: “Stories” recounted the past, while “Visions” presented projects for the future.

The content of the exhibition was not really about “energy” but rather about our cultural fixation with all that energy implies. Energy is the magic input that will bring Italy out of its postwar slump to realize its own American dream. And rethinking energy today, in the aftermath of decades of this American dream, will magically bring us back from the brink of ecological disaster. In the exhibition, energy was equated with mobility. No reference could be found to the 50 percent of the country’s energy that is consumed by its buildings; it was all about cars and speed. The unstated presence of the Futurists hung heavy in the air, especially in the “Stories” section, as if Marinetti and the Marshall Plan were joining forces to fuel an engine for rapid growth, snaking across the Italian countryside. But whereas in the United States, highway subsidies paralleled low-interest homeowners’ mortgages, spurring an exodus to the suburbs, in Italy postwar growth was divided between the architecture of the city and that of the road.

The “road architecture” that was the focus of the “Stories” section, curated by Margherita Guccione and Esmeralda Valente, offered architects of the early sixties a long-awaited respite from the monumentalism of the Fascist ventennio and melancholy pseudovernacular postwar neorealism. It built on the strong rationalist foundation formed, despite political obstacles, during the first half of the twentieth century, but infused it with an almost baroque dynamism.

But the architecture of Italy’s economic boom was not just about inventing a new formal language. Building types emerged without preludes: the service station, the roadside motel, and the “autogrill” (Italy’s roadside restaurant chain). Looking today at Angelo Bianchetti’s 1959 renderings of the Fiorenzuola, the first autogrill to bridge its highway, or his 1958 Villoresi project, which was more a sign than a building, we can sense the giddy excitement with which these must have been greeted (Figure 1).

This architecture refused to acknowledge scarcity and emerged out of no discernible context. A photo of an Agip station in Libya was identical to the Italian models displayed. Regionalism played no role in this world of cheap fuel. It rejected the weight of history, a discourse that would be sidelined until its return to the academies in the 1970s. It rejected the frugality that informed much neorealist architecture of the fifties, such as the INA-Casa housing developments, although some of those architects were also represented in Energy (for example, Mario Ridolfi with his entry for the 1969 Motel Agip competition). The architecture of the road left the city at breakneck speed like a Fiat, oblivious to the source of its power or the impact of its exhaust trail. Looking back at this work from the perspective of the postpetroleum era (well, the cusp of it at least), one has the sensation of witnessing an adolescent fantasy of the future, a world of speeding vehicles and weightless structures. A Jetsons world.

It is tempting to smile condescendingly, appreciating the design as we might a classic Vespa, while recognizing how dated it has become.

Figure 1 “F” model city gas station from the 1950s (lender Walter Berselli; photo Flaminia Nobili, courtesy Fondazione MAXXI).