Empire Builders: 1750–1950
Victoria and Albert Museum, London
30 November 2013–15 June 2014

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Britain established the largest territorial empire the world had ever known. Stretching around the globe from Norfolk Island near Australia to Newfoundland, it covered, at its peak, roughly one-quarter of the earth’s landmass. It is often said, as the Cambridge historian J. R. Seeley quipped, that this empire was acquired in a fit of absence of mind. But this is to understate, if not downplay, the intense and systematic way in which the imperial enterprise was pursued, particularly during the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Empire had become more than just an economic strategy; it had acquired the status of a “mission” for which responsibility had to be taken, for “civilizational” as much as political and economic reasons.

As the British empire, virtually from the outset, was predicated upon colonial settlement, it necessarily followed that architecture and urbanism were fundamental components of its success. As British soldiers, explorers, and settlers continually extended the boundaries of Britain’s empire, buildings of all types and sizes were required to facilitate and maintain the power structures put in place by the massive cultural and political transformations that ensued. The built infrastructure that accompanied this enterprise was immense.

The Empire Builders: 1750–1950 exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum was therefore, if nothing else, a welcome foray into the architectural history and legacy of this “great fact” of modern world history, as Seeley would have put it. To date, too little has been done, in terms of exhibitions, to bring to public attention the great amount and variety of architectural design that drove and characterized British imperialism. The subject is, of course, a sensitive one, and, certainly in Britain, had been an embarrassment until recent times. But we are now in a new post-postcolonial era in which such topics can be studied and reflected upon with a degree of critical distance. As all the big names in the history of British architecture were involved in this enterprise—G. G. Scott, Edwin Lutyens, Herbert Baker, William Burges, G. E. Street, William Butterfield, A. W. N. Pugin, William Emerson, to name but a few—it is undoubtedly of interest to the architecturally oriented public.

The exhibition was put together by Charles Hind, the in-house curator of drawings at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), using material (mostly in two-dimensional formats, such as drawings, with a few small models and the odd painting) almost exclusively from the RIBA Drawings Collection, which is housed at the V&A (Figure 1). The exhibits were arranged typologically, for the most part, in categories such as “Housing,” “Religion,” “Trade and Commerce,” “Imperial Memorials,” “Education,” and “Social Order and Civic Amenities,” although this format was not always maintained. The

Figure 1 View of the Empire Builders: 1750–1950 exhibition, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, showing the temporary architecture gallery where the exhibit was installed (author’s photo).
sequence, moving from left to right, was also broadly chronological, although, again, not strictly. Some of the drawings included were truly impressive, such as the 5-foot-high detail drawing of G. G. Scott’s design for the Nikolaikirche, Hamburg (1844), or the marvelously exotic and exquisitely rendered perspective drawing of William Burges’s original scheme for the Crimean War Memorial Church, Istanbul (1856). Here, in some form or other, were also to be found a number of the “greatest hits” of British imperial architecture, such as the Viceroy’s House and St. Martin’s Garrison Church, Delhi; the Parliament Buildings, Ottawa; and the Victoria Terminus, Bombay. But Hind has also managed to dig out some intriguing and little-known gems, such as Robert Weir Shultz’s neo-Byzantine design for All Saints’ Cathedral, Khartoum (1906–21), and C. F. A. Voysey’s 1905 design for a house for Dr. Leigh Canney in Aswan, Egypt (1905).

Attempting to curate an exhibition dealing with such a large and geographically expansive subject was always bound to run into trouble. For a start, the title Empire Builders was a misnomer. Much of the material exhibited was in locations that were not in fact part of Britain’s empire. This led to confusion as average visitors were left with little sense of what Britain’s empire actually encompassed (unless they knew already), as they perused urban planning schemes from 1820s Kentucky, church designs from 1870s Rome, and cast-iron market halls from late nineteenth-century Chile. If the exhibition was never really intended to be about Britain’s empire, then it ought to have been given an alternative, slightly more innocuous title.

This problem was not helped by the fact that no contextual information was provided about the nature of British imperial expansion and decline. Such context would have helped situate the material much more effectively, both historically and intellectually. To be fair to the curator, he was not given much space. The temporary architecture gallery at the V&A is tiny—far too small for an exhibition of this potential scope. This left little room for explanatory captions, as the walls on both sides of the gallery were taken up almost entirely with drawings. In this respect, the exhibit was only ever going to scratch the surface of this vast subject.

The choice of drawings was at times odd, too. For instance, the section on religion included a pencil sketch of a half-timbered church building erected in Shanghai. The RIBA Drawings Collection has many better images than this, showing structures that not only were located within British colonial territory but also are important examples of climatic adaptation in modern ecclesiastical design.

The other problem was that the exhibits seemed to have been restricted to material held in the RIBA collection. The reasons for this were unclear, particularly as the V&A itself has a large and superb collection of historic photographs and architectural drawings that could have been used to supplement the RIBA material. The result was an artificially circumscribed and therefore not particularly representative picture of the type and nature of architecture that constituted the British empire (for example, nothing by Pugin was included). To be sure, what was exhibited was arranged clearly, with appropriate and informative captions, but there simply was not enough of it for the exhibition to present any kind of coherent picture. If the V&A was serious about putting on such an exhibition, it ought to have given Empire Builders greater scope (and space), drawing on material from outside its own collections. In this respect, the exhibition was a missed opportunity.

This situation was in stark contrast, it has to be said, to what was touted as “part two” of this display, The Brits Who Built the Modern World, held down the road at RIBA headquarters, 66 Portland Place, 13 February–27 May 2014. That exhibition showcased the global work of mostly still-living British architects—most notably, Terry Farrell, Norman Foster, Nicholas Grimshaw, Michael Hopkins, and Richard Rogers—a kind of “cool Britannia” for architects. It is clear that many more resources were poured into this exhibition, partly, one can assume, as a self-promotional tool for the RIBA and the architects themselves. If only half as much effort had been put into organizing and curating the V&A exhibit, the outcome might have lived up to its billing—after all, the amount of work carried out by Foster and company’s now almost forgotten predecessors, both in terms of quantity and duration (even quality, in some cases), far outstripped what was on display at Portland Place.

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Designing Modern Women 1890–1990
Museum of Modern Art, New York
5 October 2013–21 September 2014

It is hard to describe Designing Modern Women succinctly. The exhibition provided an overview of one hundred years of design by women. It also attempted to present the role of women as “clients, consumers, performers, and educators” in promoting modern design. Further, in the introductory wall text, the curators invited viewers to “consider the varied messages about femininity that are encoded through design, the importance of role models in visual practices where women remain underrepresented, and the need to recognize and encourage varied forms of creativity.”

The rationale behind the exhibition is clearer if read in parallel with curator Juliet Kinchin’s essay in Modern Women published by MoMA in 2010.1 In it, Kinchin criticized the museum for its historic era- sure of midcentury women designers. She argued that women were excluded because of how the museum defined the canon of modernism. Under the leadership of Philip Johnson, sleek lines, abstract forms, industrial production, and utility were valued over the aesthetics of craft production historically associated with women, such as ceramics and weaving. Even when work by women was included, it was done so selectively to reinforce the dominant aesthetic. The emphasis on individual designers ignored collaborators and the role of patrons and consumers. Kinchin also argued that female curators were important in promoting midcentury design to a broader audience. During World War II, Elizabeth Mock (curator of architecture, 1942–46) and Susanne