David Rifkind

The Battle for Modernism: Quadrante and the Politicization of Architectural Discourse in Fascist Italy

Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2013, 304 pp., 12 color and 102 b/w illus. $45 (paper), ISBN 9788831713481

David Rifkind’s masterful new book is a welcome addition to Italian fascist studies as well as architectural history. It is refreshing to have an in-depth study of one of the formative institutions of Italian modernism: the journal Quadrante, which transformed the practice of architecture in fascist Italy by helping to establish coherence to the modern architecture movement during this time. As we learn, Quadrante, more than any other journal, was the most devoted to developing a unified theory of “architecture of the state,” specifically rationalism, to promote its fascist political agenda. The journal was the most ideologically committed publication of the interwar period. That this even happened is striking given that the short-lived journal was published for only three years between 1933 and 1936 in thirty-one issues.

The most inventive aspects of this solid, well-written, and thoroughly researched book (more than twenty archives were consulted) lies in exploring how the history of architecture is simultaneously a history of mediation and a history of networks. Rifkind’s study emphatically shows us the extent to which media venues (journals in this case) can be valuable, if not pivotal, architectural building blocks.

Quadrante promised an interdisciplinary approach in its mission statement, and it is thrilling to see how Rifkind successfully mimics this structure in The Battle for Modernism: Quadrante and the Politicization of Architectural Discourse in Fascist Italy. The history of the journal is told in terms of networks—of buildings, master plans, other journals, key players (whether they be architects, engineers, writers, or filmmakers), films, exhibitions (V Triennale di Milan), conferences (CIAM), patrons (Valderami), industrialists (Olivetti), painters (Soldati, Ghiringhello, Picasso), competitions (such as that for the Palazzo del Littorio), government officials (Bottai), and even bars (meeting places such as the Bar Craja). The reader comes away with a real understanding of the period—what and who (Bardi, Bottoni, Ciocca, Del Debbio, Faludi, Fasolo, Figini, Fiorini, Griffini, Libera, Lingeri, Monotti, Nervi, Pagano, Persico, Piacentini, Pollini, Ponti, Ojetti, Rava, Rogers, Sartoris, Terragni, et al.) were important in terms of the built environment. Some of the figures we meet are household names, some are not. Given all the people, places, and projects mentioned, an index would have been useful.

While we are thoroughly convinced of the importance of Quadrante and the architects circling around the journal, writing articles, serving as editors, and so forth, we are left hungering for information about its reception. Rifkind mentions that as many as five thousand copies of each issue were printed. But where did they go? Who had subscriptions? What schools, libraries, institutions? Were there contemporary subscriptions in the United States? Elsewhere in Europe? How does the circulation of Quadrante compare to other period journals such as Architettura, Domus, or Casabella? How did a wider audience become familiar with the journal? These are important questions since the journal and circle of contributors was very Milan centered (even if the journal was purportedly based in Milan and Rome), and the projects discussed seem very northern. Even Rifkind himself seems reluctant to mention key players from a wider Italian geography such as Michelucci and other members of the Gruppo Toscano. As such, one would like to know how the journal was viewed and received in its time.

Scholars have recently discussed the tremendous aesthetic dissonance during this period and the multiplicity of modernities. This is not Rifkind’s interest. He does not cite these scholars, and we should not necessarily expect it in a study of one journal’s history, a history that was militant in promoting a fascist, rationalist architecture as well as devoted to interpreting international modernism.

We would also like to know more about how Quadrante shaped the field of architectural history. Rifkind remains puzzled by the extent to which Quadrante ignored the work of Luigi Moretti, Gio Ponti, and Angelo Mazzoni, all of whom undertook work that certainly supported the regime. Here we think of Moretti’s stunning fencing academy built at the Foro Mussolini in Rome, Ponti’s tireless efforts editing the influential Casabella, and Mazzoni’s seemingly universal design language developed for Italy’s train stations and post offices. Did Quadrante’s intentional disregard of these projects have important historiographic implications? Does it explain why Mazzoni took so long to catch on? To answer this, we first need to know how influential Quadrante really was. And this speaks to reception.

Quadrante ceased publication in 1936, just as the regime was embarking on its most aggressive imperialist and racist acts (invading Ethiopia being the first of many). It would have been interesting to see what this most fascist of journals had to say. Of course, it would also have been interesting to see how foreign architects such as Le Corbusier might have been rescripted for a country that was becoming increasingly autarchic and anti-French (among other things).

Finally, this is a well-illustrated book. The many illustrations and pages reproduced from Quadrante give the reader a good sense of how the journal was laid out. These are coupled with strategically placed color plates and photographs of extant buildings taken by the author. That said, the book is not pretty. And for this, no blame
Inha Jung

Architecture and Urbanism in Modern Korea
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Inha Jung’s Architecture and Urbanism in Modern Korea is a comprehensive overview of Korean architecture and urbanism from the late nineteenth century to the present. This text, the first survey of its kind in English, offers a thorough examination of the built environment of modern Korea by systematically moving from larger urban issues to vernacular housing and canonical architectural designs. Based on the assumption that architectural trends have kept in line with the formation of urban space, the book provides a detailed analysis of planning idioms and regulatory regimes that resulted in the significant changes of urban structure of the 1930s, 1970s, and the early twenty-first century. Equal emphasis is given to the historical transformation of urban housing from urban banok to apartment buildings. Close analysis of the changing patterns of residential space not only adds to our understanding of everyday urban life but also offers a wealth of insight into the formation of architects’ spatial consciousness.

The main thesis of the book, as clearly indicated in the introduction, is to examine Korean architects’ odyssey toward a “modern identity that can be called their own” (xii). Despite its encyclopedic coverage of architecture and urbanism throughout the last century, the author’s interest revolves around two opposing but complementary goals: one, an investigation of historical changes and discontinuity in Korean architecture, and the other, an identification of its unique nature and continuity. As the built environment of modern Korea has been largely shaped by the nation’s unique modernization, one that has been imported, delayed, and rapidly processed, its trajectory is characterized by the complicated process of conflict and negotiation between foreign influence and regional specificity. As such, the issue at stake is to critically assess the discrepancy between Western modernism as a prior model and local reality as defined by the deficiencies of construction techniques and new materials. The author considers the belatedness of Korean modernism not merely as a symptom of backwardness but as an inevitable condition that would prompt a distinctive treatment of materials and forms in its own way. For him, the limits of technology encouraged architects to “[focus] on seeking an alternative that would reconcile advanced technology with aesthetic principles” (98). The widespread use of precast concrete curtain walls that gave a unique look to Korean high-rise buildings in the 1960s and 1970s, an attempt to substitute for a more advanced aluminum curtain wall system, demonstrates such a move.

Although a fair amount of attention is given to the continuous process of conflict and negotiation between imported modernism and regional characteristics, Jung’s ultimate aim is to argue for genuine Koreaness through the “identification of the elements that have remained unchanged” (xi). Here, he takes on the decades-old debate over what is “Korean” in Korean modern architecture. In the face of aggressive foreign influence, many architects tended to find design approaches grounded in Korean tradition in order to establish a sense of cultural identity distinct from the West. Some were interested in reinterpreting formal motifs of historical building; others were drawn to its spatial arrangements. Jung delineates a shift in emphasis, triggered by Swoo-Geun Kim’s Space Group building in 1971 (the book’s cover image), from formal to spatial dimension in readopting tradition in modern use. A dramatic spatial sequence of the Space Group building, the author argues, found its origin in the peculiar treatment of the void space in banok (traditional Korean house), and this unique spatial character in turn has affected the work of younger architects such as Hyo-Sang Seung and Young-Joon Kim.

Expanding this thread of thought on traditional space, Jung identifies the madang (courtyard arrangement) and the manner in which void is conceived and treated in banok as unique DNA running through Korean architecture and urbanism despite processes of rapid modernization. At times, the author takes an essentialist approach to the notion of “Korean” or “Korean space.” For instance, he argues that the madang survived because “it emanates from the core of the spatial consciousness of the Korean people” (144). One might wonder, however, if placing a multifunctional open space is only specific to Korean architecture. Also one might be curious about how the treatment of void space in traditional Korean architecture is similar to and/or different from that of other architectural practices. While Jung describes the nature of the madang in terms of “emptiness,” “indeterminacy,” and “in-between-ness” (144), these spatial qualities were often employed by Japanese commentators who attempted to identify the distinct characteristics of Japanese space.

There is no doubt that the madang is one of the unique features of Korean architecture. However, the idea of madang is not a fixed entity that arises from the essence of traditional Korean architecture but it is rather a historical one that has been periodically recalled in the name of “Koreanness” at certain junctures. How has the idea of madang been revisited by particular agents and what stimulates such an impulse? It would have been more productive for Jung to historicize the invention of tradition and ascertain its practical and discursive effects than to identify unchanging elements in Korean architecture. Similarly, it would have been more helpful to know more about the circumstances under