even a mix of chronology and biography, the exhibition might have more effectively demonstrated the complex workings of influence. Nevertheless, the show succeeded in asking viewers to search for shared attributes and languages across this brilliant constellation of Japanese architects.

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Related Publication


Mavericks: Breaking the Mould of British Architecture
Royal Academy of Arts, London
26 January–20 April 2016

In 1936, the leading British journal Architectural Review reconsidered its medium and its message by punching holes out of one of its thick interior sheets, displaying round sections of an image on the following page, to readers’ delight. Playfully revealing and concealing, and connecting word, image, and magazine design for a 1930s audience, these well-placed holes reminded readers that even a robust and established critical voice could have a little fun. Mavericks: Breaking the Mould of British Architecture, at the Royal Academy, was also shaped by the spirited circle. The cover of its catalogue used the same circular trick as the 1930s AR issue. It was, too, an exhibition based on revealing and concealing, and it played fast and loose not only with the academy’s interior ground floor Architecture Space and café rooms but also with the idea of an exhibition itself.

This was an exhibition without any exhibits, but it was no mere display either. Curated by Owen Hopkins, who is also the author of the accompanying yet arguably stand-alone book, Mavericks pulled together the career highlights of twelve architects across three hundred years of building and designing in Britain. Four were eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century classicists, and seven were from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; there was only one woman. That woman was Zaha Hadid, and the chronological exhibition concluded with her work. In the wake of Hadid’s untimely death in March 2016, all corners of the architectural press have emphasized her gravity-defying designs, relentless ambition, and vision. Like many of her maverick companions in the Royal Academy’s exhibition, such as John Vanbrugh and James Wyatt, Hadid was occasionally at odds with authorities and critics owing to her tireless pursuit of a particular path.

The exhibition’s working definition of an architectural “maverick” was compelling: an individual who refuses to conform, who harnesses design (and perhaps more than a touch of personal) eccentricity to push stylistic and material boundaries, and thus runs the risk of having limited opportunities to build despite the wealth of paper architecture produced. Strong imagination and bold form did not, for Hopkins, necessarily indicate genius. The twelve architects in this exhibition might or might not fall into a “lone genius” mythology, but each was a risk taker who marshaled a unique type of architectural shock and awe in her or his own time. The principle of outré architecture that might oscillate between the margins and the mainstream center of architectural culture is reminiscent of the ideas recently published by Timothy Brittain-Catlin in Bleak Houses, a maverick book of its own that charts failure and architectural subcultures, setting out an architectural conflict across hundreds of years between the built environment’s “bullies” and “sissies.”

Mavericks at the Royal Academy took up this gauntlet to an extent, valuing design not wholly for its fame or commercial success but for its daring innovation.

There were notable pitfalls, however, to this approach. It was refreshing and stimulating to explore John Soane’s projects alongside FAT’s and Cedric Price’s utopian fantasies. The collaborative architecture firm FAT, which stands for Fashion Architecture Taste, is well known for its striking combinations of styles, ornament, and materials, riding the line between seriousness and fun without derailing into the territory of frivolity. The Royal Academy exhibition also highlighted the work of many architects outside the chosen twelve by including their names on colorful circles swirling throughout the building, perhaps prompting the curious to find out more (Figure 1).

(Temple Moore’s name even appeared twice, perhaps as a double maverick for the early twentieth-century Gothic Revival.) Although there was acknowledgment of the maverick in relation to women in architecture, the Pritzker-winning Hadid was only one twelfth of the exhibition, and women’s names were few and far between on the accompanying circles. By the exhibition’s own definition, nearly any woman venturing into the lion’s den of British architecture across the past 150 years could be described as a maverick. The Women in Architecture Awards, founded by Christine Murray, will see many more designers justly lauded in
the years ahead. May they all push the boundaries and stimulate new possibilities in the architectural wilderness. In 2017, the Architectural Association will celebrate 100 years of women at the AA, and the programming leading up to this celebration has highlighted many new ways of understanding how and why women’s presence in architecture is as significant and innovative as it is—still, tragically—ignore and suppressed. The definition of “maverick” adopted in the Royal Academy exhibition did not allow for those whose risks in architecture took place not only at the drawing board but also in their very selves.

The exhibition’s principal aim, however, was to open up discussion of what constitutes exciting architecture and how tough it can be to produce such architecture, and at this it succeeded admirably. The design at the Royal Academy took hefty buildings like Harry Stuart Goodhart-Rendell’s St Olaf House and Charles Holden’s Senate House, both bold interwar gems for central London now listed and broadly admired, and transformed their bulk into bubbles, with an array of circles arranged to form fragmentary renderings of these buildings’ striking façades. George Aitchison, master of Queen Anne splendor and Islamophilic fantasy for Frederic Leighton, the prolific Gothic Revival polemicist A. W. N. Pugin, and the visionary Victorian castle crafter William Burges were present too, although their names in aquamarine bubbles floating around a sign indicating where exhibition visitors could find coffee and sandwiches did not do them justice. The need to assemble a large cohort of British architectural maverickhood within a challengingly tight space no doubt gave birth to this exhibition design idea, and the range of colors and summaries of selected radical designers and their projects made for pleasurable viewing. Ultimately, however, even within the restrictions of budget and space, just one object per architect—a plan, an elevation, a model, a swift sketch on a cocktail napkin, a witty telegram—would have brought this exhibition to life and drawn out many of the strong points regarding surprise, innovation, and resilience that Hopkins makes in the accompanying book. As it was, the exhibition served as an eye-catching spur for the curious to seek out the nearest (or, even better, most eccentric) building by one of the show’s many mavericks, burst the bubble of the exhibition’s jaunty floating design, and journey out into the streets to see this risky architecture firsthand.

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Related Publication
Owen Hopkins, Mavericks: Breaking the mould of British Architecture (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2016), 128 pp., 60 illus. £12.95, ISBN 9781910350393

Note

Architecture of Independence: African Modernism
Vitra Design Museum Gallery, Weil am Rhein
20 February–31 May 2015
Graham Foundation, Chicago
29 January–16 April 2016
Maison de l’Architecture, Geneva
20 May–30 June 2016

Architecture of Independence: African Modernism was curated by Manuel Herz, with photography by Iwan Baan and Alexia Webster. The exhibition’s title situated the buildings displayed in the West African postcolonial period, spanning the decades from the end of World War II to the late 1970s and early 1980s, when all West African states attained self-rule or independence from colonial rule. This era was dominated by an architectural shift from the typical colonial “public works department” style to the International Style. This architectural movement was espoused in Africa mainly by groups of young expatriates, including a few indigenous architects whose Western training had been influenced by the design theories of Bauhaus pedagogues such as Walter Gropius, the manifestos of CIAM, and the architecture of Le Corbusier. In the tropical climate zone, which comprises much of Africa and Southeast Asia, this new version of the International Style was adapted to respond to the climatic concerns of these warmer regions; it became known as tropical modernism, a theme echoed in this exhibition’s title. The exhibition was unusual in that it followed from the curator’s similarly titled 2015 book. This edited volume gives a more comprehensive account of Herz’s examination of African modernism, comprising a set of essays that support the book’s pictorial content. The exhibition therefore provided a curated set of photographs and supporting exhibits from the more extensive material to be found in the book.

The main exhibition, as mounted by the Graham Foundation, consisted of a series of curated pictures arranged by country across different rooms and floors of the foundation’s building. Most of the photographs displayed had originally been commissioned for Herz’s book and were taken by Iwan Baan and Alexia Webster; these were juxtaposed with some historical photographic material. The photographs were supplemented by a collection of documentation and artifacts related to the planning projects of the modernist era that the exhibition covered, displayed in a vitrine on the second floor.

As visitors walked through the unassuming entrance of the Graham Foundation in downtown Chicago, they were transported into a curated space of what, from a distance, seemed like a well-designed display of holiday snapshots of the past (Figure 1). On closer inspection, and having fully absorbed the introductory information, they gained a better understanding of the meaning of the exhibition’s two connected spaces. Organized by country, collections of photographs of “snapshot” size produced a photo album–like collage of building views in contemporary settings. Viewers were guided by the terse commentary placed alongside the photographs but were otherwise left to contemplate the images, which depicted a body of architectural work evoking a bygone era.

On the second floor, the large vitrine mentioned above dominated the main gallery space, attracting scrutiny of its contents. More varied sets of pictures appeared on the walls—the majority were larger than the postcard size of those on the ground floor, and a few were blown up to a larger scale. This variability enhanced the “curated” visual effect of the walls. In the vitrine, documents relating to projects conceived and projects built were on display. The rare and unique nature of this documentation was clear, and the accompanying text provided some context for the often incomprehensible sociopolitical and socioeconomic background against which the noncompletion