Leslie Topp
Freedom and the Cage: Modern Architecture and Psychiatry in Central Europe, 1890–1914
University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017, 256 pp., 1 map, 3 color and 114 b/w illus. $99.95 (cloth), ISBN 9780271077109

Leslie Topp’s Freedom and the Cage explores seven public psychiatric institutions built between 1898 and 1914 in the late Habsburg Empire, the Austro-Hungarian territories whose major cities included Prague, Vienna, and Kraków. The central idea of the book is that each of these hospitals offered a degree of freedom within a highly controlled environment. Such freedom of movement made the psychiatric hospital seem more “normal.” This paradoxical notion—that one could move about in a seemingly normal way even though confined—comes from Michel Foucault’s influential work on the asylum in History of Madness. Topp warns that for architectural historians who work on institutions, “there is no escaping Foucault” (13), and thus her six-chapter, generously illustrated book also serves as an example of how to use the French philosopher’s work as a historical source rather than as a theory to be wholly accepted or rejected.

The seven hospitals at the center of Topp’s book range in scale from 350 to 2,200 beds and extend in location from Kraków to Trieste. They exemplify the so-called villa system, a progressive arrangement developed in Germany that took over the more oppressive corridor or “closed” system of design for mental hospitals by about 1900. A corridor-system hospital was a large, monolithic structure with repetitive floor plans featuring large wards and ubiquitous corridors. Patients were literally enclosed in one building, which gave the impression of a prison because of this containment. In the late nineteenth century, Topp explains, a group of psychiatrists pushed for a more enlightened system based on separate villas, which would offer the appearance of an urban district or a neighborhood within the institution. The new type of hospital featured smaller, free-standing “houses” distributed over massive sites, and thus it prescribed more movement, both indoors and outdoors. Not surprisingly, the architects of villa-system hospitals engaged the principles of urban planning, as the spaces between the separate pavilions—paths, exterior grounds, and walls—became significant aspects of the healing institution. The villa system also meant that pavilions could be custom-designed to accommodate particular patient groups, from highly restrictive to unrestricted. Topp notes in her first chapter that the hospital Alt-Scherbitz, outside Leipzig, Germany, and a detailed publication by its director, Albrecht Paetz, were particularly influential for the Habsburg institutions showcased in the book. Paetz believed that even the sight of walls, locks, and bars was detrimental for patients and that the illusion of free movement was a powerful healing tool in psychiatry.

By far my favorite two chapters of Topp’s book are those titled “Spaces” and “Boundaries,” chapters 5 and 6, respectively. While the first four chapters take on thematic issues illustrated by one or two of the seven case studies, the tone and rhythm of the book changes in this superb double act that analyzes them all at once. In “Spaces,” Topp examines the spatial codes of the Habsburg asylums by looking closely at the plans. She takes readers on a tour through corridors and cells, arguing convincingly that the image of confinement in the corridor-system hospitals was as dependent on the arrangement of these elements as it was on walls, locks, and bars. The climax of chapter 5 is Topp’s revelation that the plan for Otto Wagner’s Lower Austrian Provincial Institution for the Care and Cure of Mental and Nervous Disorders, or “am Steinhof,” in Vienna, which opened in 1907, is the most conservative in the group, featuring the problematic corridor from days gone by and a grid-like site plan that meant pavilions were seen as undifferentiated. Among the case studies Topp presents, the Steinhof psychiatric hospital is likely the one best known to readers, given its famous architect and the predominance of its domed church.

In “Boundaries,” Topp turns to the surroundings of the Habsburg hospitals. She notes that asylum architects carefully placed walls, fences, and hedges so that they would appear “natural,” in the same ways the interiors of the pavilions were meant to simulate “normal” spaces like private homes. And it was the outer boundaries of asylums, she argues, that made them coherent. I particularly like the section in this chapter on boarding out, where Topp bravely looks beyond the actual walls of the hospitals as a way to understand the sheer power of institutional boundaries in this precarious dance of containment and movement. “The progressive asylum was a kind of living exhibition of how the most unstable members of modern society could be established, the uprooted rerooted, so that they could be trusted with freedom,” she states (186).

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Freedom and the Cage contributes enormously to the literature on hospital architecture produced in the past twenty-five years, complementing excellent work by scholars such as Thomas Markus, Christine Stevenson, Jeremy Taylor, and Carla Yanni, with whom Topp explicitly engages in her book. Most obviously, Topp covers a geographical area and a range of primary sources not previously covered by English-speaking scholars. Like Markus’s Buildings and Power (1993), Topp’s book tackles the relationship between power and the plan. Like Stevenson’s Medicine and Magnificence (2000), it shows that hospital design was often counterintuitive: If fresh air was key to healing, as miasmatists believed, why did it make sense to contain the sick in an inward-turning building? As Taylor does in his work on the pavilion-plan hospital typology, The Architect and the Pavilion Hospital (1997), Topp posits hospitals “in conversation,” viewing each of the seven institutions she discusses as a different position on the challenge of designing a cage that appears to support free movement.1 “I have seen these plans not as mute technical diagrams to be deciphered by the architectural historian but rather as positions in a debate,” she says (157). Carla Yanni’s 2007 book The Architecture of Madness, on American asylums, shares with Freedom and the Cage a deep understanding of how psychiatry and architecture were entwined in this period.2

Unmentioned by Topp but significant in this literature is Jeanne Kisacky’s Rise of the Modern Hospital, also published in 2017, making this a banner year for the architectural history of hospitals.3

Additionally, Freedom and the Cage serves as an excellent model for research on institutions beyond hospitals, such as schools, prisons, convents, summer camps, day-care centers, dormitories, long-term residential care facilities, and any other typologies that comprise multiple buildings and complex, mixed functions designed to keep people in. The book’s lessons come from broad and clear arguments about institutional design: that building design is often a critique of past buildings, propelling the evolution of the building type; that specialized buildings often work in conversation with each other, almost as if they were participating in an architectural debate; that architecture holds tremendous power in setting the “impression” of how a place works, even from the curb or from the air; and, perhaps most important, that institutional architecture controls its users but not its historians.

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Notes

Vincent L. Michael
The Architecture of Barry Byrne: Taking the Prairie School to Europe
 Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013, 248 pp., 11 color and 99 b/w illus. $60 (cloth), ISBN 97802520237536

Jane King Hession and Tim Quigley
John H. Howe, Architect: From Taliesin Apprentice to Master of Organic Design
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015, 232 pp., 157 color and 55 b/w illus. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 97808166683017

In a bitter diatribe published in the May 1914 issue of Architectural Record, Frank Lloyd Wright harshly criticized former employees for plagiarizing his architecture. While the accusation may have been justified in the cases of some of Wright’s draftsmen, Barry Byrne and, later, John Howe stepped out of the master’s shadow and successfully developed their own personal interpretations of organic architecture. Byrne worked in the Oak Park studio during the early days of Wright’s independent practice. Howe, years later, became the “pencil in Wright’s hand” at Taliesin. The positions of these two men in the story of midcentury modern architecture have remained largely overlooked until now.

While a generation separated Byrne and Howe, numerous parallels connect them. Both came from relatively poor families in the Chicago area and developed their interest in architecture as young boys, spending free time visiting modern buildings. Both talked their way into Wright’s office as teenagers without any formal training and then quietly learned the trade by listening and observing, eventually rising to become central members of the studio staff. Both were industrious and diligent workers, “lacking the architectural ego” of their employer, as Vincent L. Michael observes of Byrne in The Architecture of Barry Byrne (2). And both went on to have successful independent careers, producing their own aesthetically accomplished, functional architecture. Two recent monographs provide new insights into the careers of these designers. Both books are valuable resources for anyone interested in gaining a deeper understanding of midcentury modern architecture and, more specifically, the work of these former Wright employees.

Francis Xavier Ignatius Loyola Walter Barry Byrne (1883–1967) came to Wright’s Oak Park studio with no previous training in architecture or construction. Having experienced the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition as a child, Byrne later recalled, he would have been “desperately unhappy” had he not become an architect.4 Impressed by the large display of Wright’s work exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1902 as part of the annual show presented by the Chicago Architectural Club, Byrne sought employment with the architect. Wright hired him as an office boy, and after several years of hands-on training, the bright young apprentice became a full-fledged member of the practice, spending much of his time producing working drawings and supervising construction.

While Michael’s book The Architecture of Barry Byrne: Taking the Prairie School to Europe touches on Byrne’s time with Wright, most of the monograph addresses his later, independent career. Michael focuses mainly on Byrne’s innovative, ecclesiastical building designs and his writings on modernism and developments in progressive Catholic church architecture