do so only if it recognizes that historical discourse has been central to how racial inequalities have been represented—an important lesson to be drawn from Upton’s exceptional meditation on the state of monuments in the U.S. South.

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NOTE


Marc Treib

John Yeon: Modern Architecture and Conservation in the Pacific Northwest

San Francisco: ORO Editions, 2016, 282 pp., 68 color and 152 b/w illus. $40 (cloth), ISBN 9781935935278

While John Yeon’s overall creative output was relatively small, his life and career present an expansive and complex topic for any author to tackle. In John Yeon: Modern Architecture and Conservation in the Pacific Northwest, Marc Treib has undertaken this task in a manner as distinguished and thorough as his subject. Yeon was a self-taught architect, landscape architect, conservationist, preservationist, and art collector, whose architecture was widely celebrated during the later 1930s and early 1950s but ultimately faded from standard studies of the field.

Born in 1910 to Elizabeth Mock and John Baptiste Yeon II, a self-made businessman who accrued a fortune in lumber and real estate, Yeon was raised in Portland, Oregon. Following matriculation from the Culver Military Academy in Indiana and a short stay at Stanford University, he spent time in New York working for the architectural firm of Young, Moskowitz, and Rosenberg and attending extension courses in architecture at Columbia University, but he never registered as an architect. Following travel in Europe, Yeon returned home in 1930, where he initiated his lifelong passion for conservation when he purchased property along the Oregon coast, preserving it from development. Several years later he became involved with the movement to preserve the integrity of the Columbia River Gorge, in which he played a pivotal role.

During this same period Yeon produced studies for several architectural projects (nonrealized) and designed a garden for his mother. In 1936, at age twenty-six, he developed plans for the Portland home of Aubrey Watzek and his mother. Watzek turned to Yeon after rejecting plans by Pietro Belluschi, a friend of Yeon then working in the Portland office of A. E. Doyle; Watzek and Yeon had met in 1931 when both were serving on the Oregon State Parks Commission. Lacking the professional training needed to undertake the venture, Yeon brought the project to Doyle’s office, where working drawings and specifications were developed by the staff. Completed in 1937, the single-story Watzek House was arranged around a courtyard garden and sheathed in Douglas fir, with pitched cedar roofs echoing the slopes of Mount Hood visible to the west. Yeon likened the building’s form to those of the rural vernacular barns and chicken coops of the region. Fully integrated into its own landscape (also designed by Yeon), the house was lavishly finished inside with broad expanses of wood paneling and meticulously detailed joinery and moldings. A photograph taken by Walter Boychuk in 1937 perfectly captured the house’s relationship to Mount Hood and the Oregon landscape. The photo’s inclusion two years later in the Museum of Modern Art exhibition Art in Our Time and in 1944 at MoMA’s Built in USA, 1932–1944—and the accompanying catalogues—firmly cemented Yeon’s first major commission as an icon of Pacific Northwest regionalism.

Following this success—and working with the contractor for the Watzek House, Burt Smith—Yeon designed a series of inexpensive, speculative plywood houses for Portland and its suburb Lake Oswego (1938–39). In these, specially milled battens crisply expressed the module of the plywood sheets that were attached to standard balloon framing. Using this same system, Yeon designed the Jorgensen House for a heavily wooded site in Portland in 1939. Situated amid native shrubs and trees, it clearly expressed the relationship between architecture and place that so often characterized Yeon’s work. In 1945, following two years of service during World War II, Yeon purchased the Jorgensen House, where he would live until his death in 1994. In 1973, upon the death of Aubrey Watzek, Yeon also bought the Watzek House as a residence for his longtime companion, Richard Louis Brown. It was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2011 and now forms the centerpiece of the John Yeon Center for Architecture and the Landscape, which was founded by Brown in 1995 with the gift of this house to the University of Oregon. The center also supported the publication of Treib’s book.

After the war, Yeon resumed his architectural practice, in 1948 producing the Portland Visitors Information Center, which was also exhibited at MoMA. More conventionally modern than Yeon’s earlier residences, with flat roofs and wide expanses of glass, the building was oriented around open courtyards and pergolas and framed in wood, which loosely allied it with what was seen as a growing Pacific Northwest regionalism. In 1950 Yeon designed the Swan, Cottrell, and Shaw houses, all in Portland, and all of which shared seminal features with the Watzek and Jorgensen houses. During this time Yeon also produced a series of elaborate but never-realized schemes for more expansive formal residences, which he dubbed, somewhat facetiously, “palaces,” as opposed to the more modest wooden “barns” he had designed earlier.

By this time, however, Yeon appears to have become disillusioned with his earlier ambitions. In a lecture presented at the Portland Art Museum, for example, he noted that he had “once hoped to contribute architecture which translated the spirit of places into forms which were habitable. I accomplished merely a drop in the bucket of these hopes” (171). At the same time, he was turning to other interests, including a passion for collecting, ultimately assembling a museum-quality— and thoroughly eclectic—collection that included Asian ceramics and paintings and Asian and European furniture. In the early 1960s he purchased a large tract of land, nearly a mile long, on the Washington bank of the Columbia River, opposite Multnomah...
Falls; his aim was to preserve it from development. Calling it The Shire, Yeon spent the rest of his life reshaping this landscape into a series of winding paths, open grassy prairies, and natural glens.

After 1960 Yeon also produced a succession of carefully crafted gallery spaces for the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum and the Legion of Honor museum in San Francisco, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, and—later and on a smaller scale—the Portland Art Museum. As Treib emphasizes, Yeon, with rarely more than one employee in his office, was as passionately and personally involved in each of these projects as he was in everything else he touched.

While Yeon seems to have taken “only a skeptical view of the idea” of regionalism (171), Treib usefully situates his architectural production within this context in a chapter titled “Regionalism and Regional Modernism.” As Treib notes, during the 1910s a shift toward a regionally inflected modern architecture began to temper the more severe abstraction that Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock called the International Style. In Scandinavia, designers such as Gunnar Asplund and Alvar Aalto began to introduce native building materials and pitched roofs into their work. At the same time, Frank Lloyd Wright’s output and reputation resurfaced. Yeon was undoubtedly influenced by Wright’s use of low, horizontal forms and extended eaves, and by his integration of building and landscape. Likewise, he would have been familiar with the Bay Area houses of William Wurster, which merged modernist and rustic elements borrowed from rural California vernacular traditions with contemporary regionalist features comparable to those used by Belluschi.

If the taut, wood-sheathed volumes of Yeon’s work were interpreted as regionalist modernism, his interiors were more conventional. They lacked the interpenetration and unification of space that characterized houses by Wright or others holding to a purer modernist aesthetic. Yeon’s rooms were typically self-contained and eclectically varied in color and finish. His interiors, in fact, seem indebted to the earlier Arts and Crafts movement, particularly as it appeared on the West Coast. The extravagance, richness, and warmth of Yeon’s precisely crafted wood interiors, while often abstract and geometric in their forms—especially at the Wäxtæk House—exude a passion parallel to that found in works by Charles and Henry Greene, such as in their Thorsen House in Berkeley (1909).

As is all too often the case these days, given production costs and other factors in the publishing world, illustrations of Yeon’s built work are somewhat limited here; had they been included, it might have meant the loss of some of the many plans the book contains. Treib masterfully analyzes these, yet it is sometimes difficult to comprehend what they might have been had they been realized. “In this regard,” Yeon himself lamented in 1968, “architecture is the most unsatisfactory of all the arts because it doesn’t really exist until it is built.” The design of “an original house, tailored to the needs of clients, expressing, let us hope, something of their personality, and fitting to the land and its environment, is a total waste of talents and energies if it is never constructed” (127). In this respect, Yeon experienced more than his share of disappointment.

Nonetheless, Treib’s gracefully written and thoroughly researched account of Yeon’s many achievements is a long overdue and welcome addition to the field of architectural studies. Two and a half decades after his death, this passionate defender of the landscape and culture of the Pacific Northwest is finally being celebrated for his contributions to the place that he himself embraced and celebrated throughout his life.

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Todd Gannon with Reyner Banham
Reyner Banham and the Paradoxes of High Tech
Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2017, 254 pp., 15 color and 115 b/w illus. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 9781606065303

With Reyner Banham’s death in 1988 at age sixty-six, an iconic and complex career in twentieth-century architectural history, theory, and criticism came to an untimely end. Banham’s twelve published books and more than seven hundred articles engage a wide array of fields, including pop art, automotive design, and cultural geography. His career-long emphasis on the relationship of engineering to modern architecture and his professional emergence among postwar London’s artistic avant-garde made him a unique chronicler of the British high-tech movement, and of such related trends and groups as the New Brutalism and Archigram. His much-anticipated monograph on high-tech architecture, however, remained incomplete and unpublished at his death.

In Reyner Banham and the Paradoxes of High Tech, Todd Gannon takes this lacuna as a point of departure. Gannon’s inclusion of Banham’s previously unpublished introduction is a welcome addition to the book, as are his explorations of archival material from the Getty Foundation. The gist, however, is his broader reassessment of Banham’s long-term engagement with postwar British architecture, of which high tech was a peak, and its relationship to mainstream modernism and postmodernism internationally.

Banham seems to be undergoing a slow transformation from major figure within and contributor to a broader field into full-fledged topic of scholarly research. Entries in the literature are numerous, while thorough treatments are few. Nigel Whiteley’s 2002 biography Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future is an intellectual history that engages and analyzes a range of issues from Banham’s career with erudition, but that format does not allow the focus that Gannon aims for here. Similarly, while A Critic Writes is a valued anthology of Banham’s wit and reportage, Gannon’s research, to say nothing of his analysis or contextualization, underscores the fact that full engagement of Banham’s published texts—let alone his unpublished archival material—is still an ongoing excavation.

Banham’s prominent career and influential writing often create a sense that his position at the intersection of engineering and architecture is a known quantity. An engineer by training, he switched to art history and earned a PhD in the 1950s from London’s Courtauld Institute, working under Nikolaus Pevsner. His dissertation, later revised and published in 1960 as Theory and Design in the First Machine Age, boldly upended the history of modern architecture, asserting that the movement’s claims to functionalism were largely visual conceits, not technical realities. As Gannon’s evaluation of Banham’s