celebrating human physical movement forged the basis for Anna Halprin’s choreography and movement studies. These are interpreted and codified in Lawrence Halprin’s 1970 book The RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment and incorporated into his concept of “notation”—an iconoclastic system for recording design processes and identifying human interactions in and with space.¹ Such methods point to a foundational tenet of Halprin’s urban design: people activate and create spaces.

Halprin’s expertise and interest in urbanization are demonstrated in his reports and studies, and by his participation on national panels and committees. His influential 1960s books Cites and Freeways have become touchstones for those championing the value and relevance of civic and urban works.⁴ One of his early projects, Ghirardelli Square, set forth ideas for preservation and adaptive reuse of industrial settings that became standard in subsequent decades. That said, Helphand is careful to highlight other projects that display Halprin’s range and facility. The Willamette Valley planning report, for example, shows a prescient sensitivity to issues of ecological balance in the face of growth and development. Halprin’s work at Yosemite explores another dimension of the same problem and illustrates his deftness in negotiating access and balancing external impacts on a sensitive site.

Halprin’s “bigger than life” character was no doubt instrumental in creating public and professional awareness of his firm and its work. In Helphand’s assessment, however, it becomes clear that Halprin’s intellectual range, grasp of issues, willingness to test boundaries and experiment, and dedication to his principles are what sustain his legacy. As Helphand states: “Halprin was an innovator in both method and design who created memorable places. His works demonstrate his design skill, attention to choreography and performance, passion for art, and idealism. While he worked at all scales, he excelled as a site designer. . . . He had a masterful sense of scale, creating places that are studied calibrations between areas of intimacy and the larger whole” (58).

This volume serves as an admirable, accessible, and synthetic study for those already familiar with Halprin’s work. For the nonexpert, it provides an essential introduction to Halprin’s innovative practice and his most significant projects and publications. It highlights his design process, his conceptual contributions to the field, and his intellectual relevance. In doing so, it points to Halprin’s critical impact on our built environment. This book is highly recommended and would make an important addition to any library. Halprin influenced generations of planners and landscape architects, and the lessons and ideals he brought forward resonate widely today.

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Notes


The Letters of Colin Rowe: Five Decades of Correspondence is an extraordinary book, one of gravitas and density, a compelling record of a life devotedly spent in pursuit of the idea of architecture. There is much to praise and little to criticize. In fact, in the preface, editor Daniel Naegle preempts criticism of the book’s most obvious shortcoming, admitting that it includes few letters, or none at all, to Rowe’s most important colleagues—James Stirling, Alvin Boyarsky, Colin St John Wilson, Robert Maxwell, Fred Koetter, John Hejduk, and Alan Colquhoun, among others. There is, by way of compensation, a rich body of letters to Henry-Russell Hitchcock. That so many letters are absent underscores just how prolific Colin Rowe was, for this volume is 560 pages. Its five-pound weight makes it feel like a little monument, or at least a block of marble.

Naegle’s labor of compilation and transcription here is considerable. He has written cogent biographical essays and introductions to each of the sections into which the letters are clustered: “Injury,” “America and Austin,” “Cambridge,” “Cornell at First,” “Disillusion,” “Publishing,” “Renown,” “Withdrawal,” “London,” and, finally, “Washington, D.C.,” where Rowe died in 1999. The editor’s footnotes, however, are dizzyingly excessive. While helpful for truly obscure references, does this book’s presumably well-educated audience really need to be schooled that à bientôt is French and means “see you soon”; that NYT stands for The New York Times; or that “Pyramid in the Cour Napoléon” is I. M. Pei’s Louvre entrance? Are we to interpret this mania for notation as ironic, since Rowe never provided any notes? Or are we instead to deduce that the editor or publisher has judged our cultural facility so diminished that we’ve become intellectually enfeebled and need such hand-holding?

The book’s subtitle is Five Decades of Correspondence, but it includes letters written by Rowe only, making it a one-sided conversation. We feel to be standing next to a mirror looking at Rowe looking at himself. The reflections are sometimes stingingly blunt, often enigmatic, and consistently absorbing.

Just as architects sketch to shape and test ideas, Rowe’s letters are sketches, and each unfolds as an act of thinking, not merely corresponding chattily. From the earliest letters through the final ones, Rowe is continually fleshing out his point of view: probing and critiquing; describing places and their impressions; hypothesizing, honing, and countering; veering off into tangential lines of thought; or spontaneously dropping in anecdotes or verse. Letters move through his life as an educator and lecturer; his writing, travels, and collecting; his relations with his brother, David, his sister-in-law, Dorothy, and their two sons. We hear him tapping away on one of his manual typewriters, the carriage bell dinging, propelled late into the night by countless cigarettes whose aroma one can still detect in his library, particularly on the damp days that Rowe detested.³

Letters to his parents about his first transatlantic travels are marvels of observation and wit, with Rowe playing the intrepid
I remember once asking Charles Moore what he thought of Rowe. He paused a few moments and said with quiet awe, “I think he knows a lot.” He didn’t elaborate. In this simple summation there was the essence of something, the essence of Rowe’s lifelong pursuit. Rowe sought to know in a fundamental way—“I am a believer in rigorous analysis,” he said—building upon Karl Popper’s and Isaiah Berlin’s epistemological and philosophical structural foundations.

Among this generation of architects who wrote—and whose writings were fundamental to how they taught and designed—only Colin Rowe, Robert Venturi, and Charles Moore stood as equals. Rowe was born in 1920 and was called up for the military defense of Britain in 1943. Moore and Venturi were both born in 1925, which made them just too young for military service at the outbreak of World War II. While Venturi was still in high school and Moore already in college (he enrolled when he was sixteen), Rowe landed badly in parachute training and a respirator strapped to his back crushed his lower spine. His lengthy recovery and completion of interrupted undergraduate studies shifted his chronology into closer alignment with Moore and Venturi’s. Yet while they rose to worldwide fame as architects, Rowe admitted that he remained a manqué. His architectural career seems to have evaporated in dusty Bakersfield, California, where he first worked in 1953.

While the three men could not have been more different in terms of origins, personalities, and tastes, they had much in common. All three studied architecture as undergraduates and then expanded their studies as graduate students: Rowe at the Warburg Institute; Venturi and Moore at Princeton. They all taught architecture: Rowe and Moore continuously, Venturi episodically. All read deeply from large personal libraries, giving them a staggering knowledge of architectural history, troves of references into which they continually dipped for illumination and illustration. All three were superb writers who often collaborated with coauthors. And all trespassed boundaries between architect, historian, theorist, and critic.

As they completed their graduate studies, the young men launched independent critiques of modernist dogma, as if three snipers triangulating their quarry. The attack was completely uncoordinated but supremely effective. Rowe dismantled modernism’s naïve political positions, its delusional Marxist assurances that it would save society’s wounds. He questioned its slavish obsession with “order” and its simultaneous rejection of hierarchy—social, political, and architectural. Venturi faulted modernism’s monotone expression, its censorship of symbolic language, its insistence on simplicity. Moore criticized modernism for prizing generalization over specificity, for dismissing vernacular wisdom and form, for abandoning poetics and memory as intrinsic qualities of place making. All three found value in precedent as an antidote to modernism’s ideology, its often-intractable restrictions. Their ideas carried generations of students and architects in new directions.

Surely, The Letters of Colin Rowe will be among the last books of its kind. While some might suggest we have merely migrated to different platforms, the habit of deeply introspective and extrospective correspondence seems to have withered. We are crammed today within an ever-widening chasm, a void that echoes with much noise but little discernible message or identifiable substance.

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Note

1. The library, which accompanied Rowe everywhere he moved, finally settled in Austin, Texas, when his estate entrusted care of the collection to the Charles Moore Foundation.