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American Architecture 2

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BOOK REVIEW

"American Architecture 2"

by David P. Handlin

Review by Noel J. Brady

David P Handlin's book *American Architecture* was first published in 1985. This second edition has been updated to take account of more recent developments. As an introduction to its subject it is also about settlement, colonisation and a search for permanence. It is a guide to the concretised reality of American colonial culture, a book of four centuries, set between Colonial Farmhouses of the 1600s and Samuel Mockbee's Rural Studio of the late 1990s.

This is no accident of design, beginning and ending with the land. Given the limits of representation for a country the size of a continent, Handlin's book appears to transcend these to map a route through the country of American architecture. Divided into eight thematic chapters, it manages to tie the threads of some fundamental ideas about the nature of the work. Inevitably some of the potential themes cannot escape the confines of the survey but it is still a valuable starting point for anyone wishing to uncover the generative processes within American architecture. These themes include "Temples in Arcadia", "The Cause Conservative" and "The International Style and Beyond" and assist us in understanding, for instance, that America was always a "suburban" country.

"By the end of the seventeenth century most New England towns were spread out over as much as a hundred square miles; the centre usually contained only a meeting house and a few other straggling buildings". (P 15)

We find that the there has always been distrust of extravagance and an officialdom that has become institutionalised to such a degree that the opportunities for architecture are more limited than in Europe.

"During the seventeenth century, Puritans in England reacted against the extravagance of previous regimes, often citing lavish buildings as evidence of excesses of the past. Colonists from England bought this attitude with them. If they were not overtly hostile to architecture as a fine art, then they were largely indifferent to it." (P 16)

It is ironic therefore to find that within this agrarian democracy conservatism would be celebrated and encouraged, where the dramatic opportunities that modernism would offer were firmly set within a neoclassical mindset. Perhaps it is no surprise to find Mies at home deep in the heart of America, in arguably America's true modern heart: Chicago. It should be remembered however that from the very earliest time Americans sought to forge a particular American identity in their public and private works, from their white painted houses to their grand neo-classical state capitols.

William Van Allen: Chrysler Building, New York City, 1930

"But this convention (painting buildings white) also showed that architecture had become an important medium of expression, one which Americans could use to show their shared identity as citizens of a new nation." (P 63)

"Although some European practitioners found American grain elevators, warehouses and factories suggestive of a new architecture. American architects ignored these sources. The lesson they drew from the cataclysm of the First World War was not a new path to be taken, but that it was all the more necessary to preserve traditions." (P 170)

Fuelling this conservatism and tendency towards sameness that dominates the highway-based culture of contemporary America is a belief in restraint and economy and a search for a permanence not afforded in life.

"Many favoured the Doric order, not out of any sense of appropriateness, but because it was easier and cheaper to build." (P 47)

But with this foundation came invention, an ability to transcend the limits of their epoch. America is right to claim the honour of developing a high-rise architecture and key individuals are identified in this volume that may not be normally known, such as the engineer Albert Kahn who built 521 factories in the Soviet Union between 1929 and 1932 and George Post who essentially invented the typology of the skyscraper.

"(...) Post, in effect, initiated the quasi-science that has been one of the significant factors in determining the bulk of skyscrapers." (P 130)

We also learn that while American architecture sought its initial inspiration form Europe, the separation of housing from the architectural discourse has contributed to a discontinuity between the two poles of American life, home and work. We learn that Hitchcock and Johnson's exhibition and book singularly contributed to this schism. However, shortly after the war this would be subject to a critique that would be formalised later by Venturi and others within the Post Modern movement of the 1980s.

"In the 'Post-Modern House' of 1945 he (Joseph Hudnut) argued that a house was not just a machine; it also had to express 'the idea of home'." (P 238)

Unfortunately the schism still remains. Nonetheless the honour roll of American architects, natives and émigrés, is extensive and their location within the broader culture should be acknowledged. With luminaries such as Jefferson, Bullfinch, Sullivan, Wright, Neutra, Mies, Meier, Gehry and others it would be foolish to ignore American architecture's influence in the world. Finally it was clever to finish with Samuel Mockbee's Rural Studio, which in part re-ignites Americans link to its homestead origins while setting the agenda of sustainability in Architecture for the 21st century.

While Handlin exhorts that we should concentrate on the artefact, the limits of the frame make it difficult to explore any building in depth. Nonetheless the main points give us more than a complete outline of their essential aspects.

"The focus of architectural history should, therefore be about buildings." (P 14)

As an introduction to some of the most influential architecture of the western hemisphere it is an excellent starting point with a substantial bibliography that will provide a suitable foundation for further scholarship. The weakest part is the contemporary section, not through any fault of the author but because the distance necessary to identify the cultural dynamics is not available.

Noel Brady is principal of NJBA Architects & Urban Designers and a studio master in the School of Architecture, DIT Bolton Street. He was educated at DIT and at MIT Department of Architecture, USA.