

ABE Journal

Architecture beyond Europe

14-15 | 2019

Building the Scottish Diaspora

Recensions

Whither Internationalism?

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<https://doi.org/10.4000/abe.5708>

Référence(s) :

Mark Crinson, *Rebuilding Babel: Modern Architecture and Internationalism*, London; New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2017

Entrées d'index

Index de mots-clés : architecture moderne, modernisme

Index by keyword: modern architecture, modernism

Indice de palabras clave: arquitectura doméstica, modernismo

Schlagwortindex: Moderne Architektur, Modernismus

Parole chiave: architettura moderna, modernismo

Index chronologique : XXe siècle

Texte intégral

- 1 How tenable was the proposition that Modern Architecture could be a medium or method of attaining “internationalism”? For the generation of architects who were schooled in the polemical context of the post-modern turn in critical thinking about architectural design and culture, the notion of a universal “modernist functionalism” transcending culture and even history itself was one of the most fundamental givens—or so we understood—of the doctrine in question. For those, including the present reviewer, who were subsequently drawn to examine the architecture and underpinning cultural legacies of “the modern project” through a post-colonial lens, the profundity and, more often than not, the perfidiousness of these universalising premises as they played themselves out in the architectures of the colonised were all the more central to the critical project to which our scholarship would be addressed.

- 2 Yet, what Mark Crinson reveals in this wise and generous historical re-appraisal of this tenacious and influential ideal is just how variously it was conceived of over the long century, beginning in the nineteenth and culminating in the middle decades of the twentieth century, in which it was closely engaged in the formulation and



implementation of modern architectural thought. If the “International Style” of high modernist architecture propagated globally by corporate capital after World War II was one of the most obvious straw-man arguments for universalism to be demolished by postmodernist critics with their call for a return to meaning in architecture, Crinson reveals how much more robust—in the post-modernist sense of a “both-and” inclusiveness, rather than an “either-or” exclusivity—the notion of an architectural internationalism actually was at its height.

3 Crinson’s critical reconstruction of the history of this resilient idea hinges both theoretically and substantively, as it turns out, on the biblical fable of the “Tower of Babel.” This was the *ur* metaphor and object lesson for the tragic conceit of the modernist project that champions for a return to history and cultural studies were fond of invoking in the post-modern and post-structuralist critical discourses of the late twentieth century. As we learn, however, it was never far from the consciousness of several of the key protagonists in this particular thread of the story of modern architecture and town planning. Indeed for some, as the title of the book infers, the resumption and completion of the historically interrupted project of building a more human-centred world that might rationally transcend obstacles of communication and geography as readily as it could master the physics of structure was the very mission with which they identified themselves and their modern age.

4 The Babel myth itself—the “astonishingly abrupt and only apparently straightforward” (16) story of vain technical ambition thwarted by the loss of a common language that resides in the original biblical texts—has been remarkably influential and productive through its perennial exegesis over the past two millennia. The book begins with an insightful background chapter that establishes concisely how the image of the tower, and the syncretic ambitions and moral allegories embodied in it have been entwined “architecturally” in the cultural and political imagination of the West, in particular as the imperial expansion of Europe through colonial conquest in the modern era, and ensuing rivalries and tensions, heightened consciousness of a wider world and sense of “international” community. Vladimir Tatlin’s iconic re-imagining of the Babel tower, for instance, in his 1919-1921 project for a Monument to the Third International—transcendent Constructivist retort that it was to the previously most iconic image of the tower and its profoundly grounded architectonics, painted by Pieter Breugel the Elder in 1506—is one among a number of less well-known but equally extraordinary early-modern projects that Crinson acquaints us with in these early pages, and through which he serves the general argument of the book. Subsequent chapters proceed, first, to unpack the prospects of the internationalist project as it was invested in the formative development of modern architectural thought, and then to examine the experience and paradoxes it sometimes presented as these unfolded in practice.

5 The account of the neo-Babelian project in the modern era is extended and complicated, in chapter two, through a comparative discussion of the ideas and projects of three individual visionaries who championed, by one method or another, the systematic consolidation and integration of knowledge as the essential lingua franca that could re-unite the world in a new international order. The idea that shared knowledge could empower humankind and its collective potential for creative work rather than counter-productive conflict is a recurring one, the author notes, recognisable today in utopian claims for the world-wide web’s power for good. Crinson’s re-appraisal of these earlier iterations of that ideal by the Belgian encyclopaedist, Paul Otlet, the Scottish geographer, Patrick Geddes, and the Austrian statistician, Otto Neurath draws attention in particular to their mutual fascination with architecture. Well before anyone might have anticipated the potential of the digital architecture of the computer to create virtual worlds in which new “global” communities could be formed, it was apparent to these polymaths of the previous century (none of whom were architects by vocation) that the architecture of the physical world was a medium in which human knowledge and values were deeply invested and through which new understanding might be cultivated. However, Crinson articulates the distinctly different ways in which each imagined that architecture could advance

their particular projects—from the transcendental monumentality of the various unbuilt schemes for Otlet’s “Mundaneum” project, to the ad-hoc heuristics of Geddes’ “Outlook Tower,” to the ersatz norms of post-war functionalism that seemed to emanate from Neurath’s architectonic infographics and diagrams—underscoring the variety of forms and modes in which “internationalism” would be explored by others in the architectures that followed.

- 6 The final four chapters are a roughly chronological series of “episodes [of] an awkward and fragmented architectural history,” (231) as the author himself characterises his selective, chiaroscuro approach to the thread-worn received narrative of internationalism and the modern movement in architecture. Some of these illuminating case-studies are anticipated: the saga of the original League of Nations project of the 1920s, of course, and its reprise in the UN building projects of the post-World War II era; along with the canonisation of the “International Style” and its ideological aftermath. However, Crinson’s meticulous reconstructions of these presumed familiar episodes make apparent the relative shallowness of previous accounts and associated theoretical cant. Other cases examined, such as the close and discerning readings of Dublin’s Busaras complex, the Babelian conception of Tecton’s Penguin Pavilion for Regents Park Zoo (the subject of the enigmatic image on the book’s jacket-cover), and the dialectics of internationalism in the architectural discourses of South Asia before and after the end of British colonial rule, will be revealing new ground for most readers. Each of these case-studies reflects a wealth of original primary research that underpins the book as well as wide-ranging and intrepid scholarship of the relevant expert literature.
- 7 If Crinson allows any bias to impinge on his critical re-appraisal of the various ideological threads of this architectural history of an idea, it is evidently an affinity with the middle-path of internationalist thinking and advocacy initially blazed by Patrick Geddes, that the formidable social theorist and critic Lewis Mumford was to take-up and extend a generation later. Although grounded in Geddes’ notion of “region” as an ecological relationship between topography and human “habitat” (to use the term coined in later CIAM discourse), Crinson articulates the pragmatic, pluralistic and expressly non-essentialist understanding that Geddes and Mumford evidently shared with regard to architecture. For both of these passionate onlookers it was a medium of spatial and social production that could enable the creative synthesis of new social relations and realities, as readily as it could be analysed geographically, or sociologically, to explain past and present problems.
- 8 Mumford’s persistently critical (i.e. actively thinking and questioning) stance in the context of post-war modernist triumphalism, as Crinson discerns, sought to hold the difficult middle ground between what Mumford regarded as the comparable extremes of cultural and nationalist chauvinism on the one hand, and the straight-jacket of an increasingly hollow functionalism on the other. The UN complexes designed and built in New York and Paris between 1947 and 1958 were prime exemplars of the dominant tendency in the ostensibly “international” modernist architecture of the post-war world which Mumford described dyspeptically, in a 1957 article entitled “Babel in Europe,” as the “the normalization of the irrational.” (182) Anticipating the regional-cosmopolitanism of internationalist thinking and building in the context of post-colonial nation-building in India and Ceylon examined in the final chapter, Crinson illustrates Mumford’s syncretic notion of a “both-and” internationalism in architecture through the latter’s critical praise for the unbuilt designs for Chandigarh (ca. 1950) by the Polish architect, Matthew Nowicki. As Crinson paraphrases, these represented “a synthesis of [regional and universal] characteristics, one that was flexible to location and capable of dramatizing universal principles.” (181)
- 9 In the Introduction to his book, Crinson furnishes a striking and surprising image—a colour plate of a work entitled “U.N.” by the Congolese artist Bodys Isek Kingelez—that wryly seems to address Mumford’s criteria precisely. Made of cardboard, glue and plastic bling, and hovering “somewhere between an architectural model [...] a sculpture, [...] and a mantelpiece decoration,” (3) as Crinson describes this seemingly frivolous yet

critical simulacrum of the symbiotic architectures of a failing international order and the failed nation-building efforts of the artist's own region, Kingelez's work simultaneously invokes both the profundity and the *naïveté* of the hope that architecture could possibly help build a better world. In a book constrained and focused by a strict visual economy, Kingelez's curious but powerful art work is one of a number of carefully selected images that are perceptively interpreted with sensitivity and nuance. Here the author fulfils the duty of a critical historian of architecture, re-examining every artefact thoroughly, rigorously, but generously as well, to re-apprehend its historicity—the genius of the moment and place of its making—as well as its critical value for our thinking going forward. Time and again Crinson's probing but sympathetic reconstructions of the historical contexts and socio-spatial imaginations in which these ideals took their original forms remind us how easily the polemical pitching and testing of big ideas tends to reduce them to shallow caricatures of the original arguments. "Internationalism," as an ethical endeavour, appeared to have suffered that fate within architectural discourse some decades ago, but this critically impassioned inquiry into the presumed demise of the internationalist project in architecture is no post-mortem. In the context of Brexit, waning faith in the potency of existing international organisations, and the cynical surrender of many to the prescribed language of "predatory economic globalisation" (239)—architecture not least among the producers of the seamless semantics and essential syntactical structures that support this—Crinson concludes this timely and important book with a rhetorical challenge to his readers and peers: "What alternatives lie submerged in our common disposition as builders of worlds?" (239)

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

Peter Scriver, « Whither Internationalism? », *ABE Journal* [En ligne], 14-15 | 2019, mis en ligne le 28 juillet 2019, consulté le 03 janvier 2023. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/abe/5708> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/abe.5708>

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