

NOTES & COMMENTS

BOOK REVIEW: RELIGION AND MODERNISM

The Religious Imagination in Modern and Contemporary Architecture: A Reader. Edited by Renata Hejduk and Jim Williamson. New York: Routledge 2011, 424 pages, \$49.95.

On what do architects really base their designs? Pure “functionality”? “Creative intuition”? Personal aesthetics and judgment? The hardline realities of economics and the constraints of materials and methods? Social vision? Environmental considerations? The politics of sustainability?

Peeling back the rhetoric of these obvious considerations, we should consider something much more fundamental: a primary world view, a *Weltanschauung*: a theory of how the world is ordered (or not); how the human person acts in the cosmos; what are the relationships between matter and “spirit,” the observable and the intuitive, the measurable and the immeasurable, nature and artifice, the individual and the collective; the meaning of meaning; the proper role of economics, politics and, yes, religion. This is a matter of cosmology: an essential worldview that considers how the world is ordered (respecting that some architects hold there is no knowable order to the cosmos, or indeed that a *kosmos*, which speaks to the very concept of “order,” doesn’t really exist).

The history of architectural thought is a history of essential worldviews: Vitruvius’ myth of origin of fire, community, language, and the primitive hut; the Pharaonic temples; the Tent of Dwelling; Rome’s imperial architecture; the anagogic vision of Abbot Suger; Renaissance humanism; the various Enlightenment theories of Perrault, Blondel, Woods the Elder, Laugier, and Durand; the theosophy of the De Stijl; Wright’s “organic architecture”; the curious and fruitful convergence of rationalism and mysticism in Le Corbusier; the late-20th-century appeal to Deconstruction theory. Each of these appealed to various historical, religious, natural, sociological, mimetic, rationalist, scientific, or intuitive positions to inform the architecture.

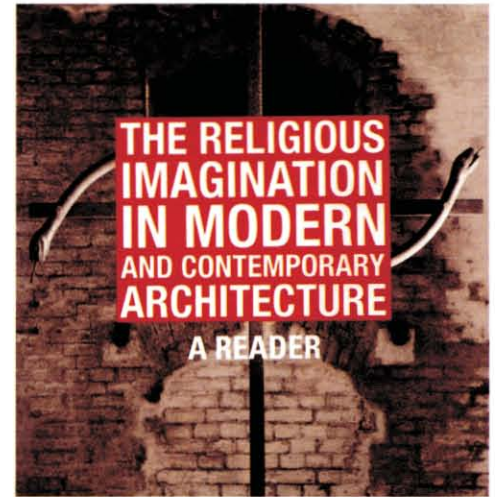
In the last quarter of the 20th century, academics have increasingly turned their attention to the study of these underlying worldviews. Ulrich Conrads, in his seminal *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture* (1964), collated the foundational documents that have shaped both the past several generations of architects and per force our built

environment. A whole generation of scholars has risen, thanks to the groundbreaking work of Joseph Rykwert and his epigones and colleagues, that seek to frame the contemporary architectural currents in the context of the cultural shifts from the Enlightenment, and to understand the deeper meanings of architecture that preceded the Enlightenment.

The most recent contribution to this general field is *The Religious Imagination in Modern and Contemporary Architecture: A Reader*, edited by Renata Hejduk and Jim Williamson. This anthology presents 50 essays, which offer a handy first effort to understanding the power of the religious imagination in the Modernist and secular discipline of architecture that ostensibly eschews religion and its content. The intent and intellectual framework of the book is laid out in the editors’ introductory chapter, “The Apocryphal Project of Modern and Contemporary Architecture.” This chapter is worth carefully reading to understand what the editors intend, and as importantly what they do not intend, in presenting this otherwise somewhat random collection of essays. I say “random” not pejoratively, but rather cognizant of the fact that the Western expressions of religion from the Reformation and Enlightenment onward have been increasingly fragmentary and idiosyncratic. Any attempt to reassemble a coherent picture of “religious imagination” from the chards of post Enlightenment thinking is susceptible to the same fragmentary and idiosyncratic considerations.

The editors carefully stake out their terrain: spending worthwhile time defining their terms of “imagination” and “religion.” While one can certainly disagree with the exact formulations of these definitions, this chapter serves as a touchstone for understanding and appreciating the rationale for who is included in the anthology. It is important to note that this book is not particularly concerned with the question of imagination in contemporary religious architecture, although numerous essays do touch on that, but rather how religion and the religious sensibility informs even contemporary secular architecture.

The editors wisely treat the remaining essays as objectively as possible: not chronologically which might be construed as presuming a thread of thought; not attempting a taxonomy of theory by categorizing the various authors under various “schools”; without betraying any personal biases the editors might hold by



ranking the articles in terms of importance; but rather by simply presenting the essays in alphabetical order of their respective authors. We are therefore free to explore the book and read as our interests draw us to essays by Barragán, Cacciari, Eliade, Pérez-Gómez, Rowe, Rykwert, Schwarz, or Tillich. In that sense it is a true “reader.”

In the interest of full disclosure, my own work is somewhat uncomfortably included in a footnote in the chapter essay from Kieckhefer’s *Theology in Stone* on the work of Rudolf Schwarz. Schwarz is certainly a dominant figure in 20th century Catholic architectural circles, and is aptly included in this collection with an important contribution from his own book, *The Church Incarnate*. Kieckhefer takes vigorous exception to my interpretation of Schwarz’s schema, from my *Architecture in Communion*, wherein I argue that the very idea of trying to develop a whole new iconography of church architecture based on a rather peculiar model of the life of Christ is fraught with problems. Without belaboring the issue, it is noteworthy that Thomas Beeby’s contribution shows Schwarz malleable enough to interpret as if he were advocating Protestantism, which suggests that my concerns are well founded. This will have to remain a matter for future conversations.

An essential part of an architect’s education is to help the student form a worldview that might inform one’s architecture. This collection is a worthwhile contribution to that process.

—Steven Schloeder, AIA

The reviewer is a Phoenix-based architect, theologian, and author, specializing in Catholic church projects across the U.S., and can be reached at liturgicalenvirons.com.

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