



Annali di architettura



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Recensioni

Cammy Brothers

James S. Ackerman, *Origins, invention, revision: studying the history of art and architecture*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 2016, XVII+177 pp.

James Ackerman's last book, *Origins, invention, revision* was published only months before his death at 97. The eight essays in this new collection consider topics ranging from photography, to the evolution of art, to the architecture of India, to remembered reflections on his wartime experience. Varied in tone, encompassing the scholarly, the contemplative and the personal, the essays allow the reader a portal into the mind of a wide ranging thinker, always questioning our shared assumptions and his own.

Ackerman was trained by generation of recent European émigrés who had reason to be suspicious of grand theories and aesthetics for its own sake. His most significant teachers at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York were Richard Krautheimer and Erwin Panofsky, two of the twentieth century's most important art historians. He followed their model of scrupulous scholarship based on archival research and a close reading of buildings and objects, but he surpassed them in his ability to enliven his subjects and engage his readers. He succeeded in transforming historical sources into a vivid account of an architect's life, personality, and design decisions, as well as the surrounding historical and economic circumstances. In the acknowledgements, Ackerman points to the writings of Georgina Mason (whose real name was Marion Johnson), Michelangelo Muraro and Manfredo Tafuri as formative models, particularly in the way their scholarship pointed out into the world, towards architecture's broader societal circumstances and conditions.

In the essays contained in this volume and throughout his career, Ackerman's writing suggests an ethical commitment to clarity. He never stated it in these terms, but it came through in everything he wrote. He was that rare thing among scholars: not a populist, but widely read. His books on Michelangelo and Palladio, published in the 1961 and 1966, are still standard, required reading in architectural history courses across the US, the UK, Italy, and Germany, the worldwide centers of Renaissance research. Architects who have discovered the Renaissance have done so through Ackerman's books. Yet remarkably, his books are as highly regarded by fellow scholars and specialists as they are by architects and general enthusiasts, as carefully footnoted and as scrupulously researched as the most arcane scholarly article.

For readers already familiar with Ackerman's scholarship, this new book offers a more personal window into his formation as a scholar, as well as an opportunity to see how his thinking changed over time. True to scholarly conventions, Ackerman kept himself out of most of his writing. But here, he allows himself a bit more latitude, and for example includes an account of his World War II service in «The liberation of Mantua and other unintended consequences of my military service during World War II». In some sense this was my favorite chapter, showcasing a more expansive, personally reflective mode. It includes vivid details such as his experience sleeping in a bathtub in a delapidated house in London, learning Russian, and working as a code cracker. The es-

say was occasioned by the chance discovery of a trove of letters and drawings from North Africa and Tuscany. He wrote to me in 2012, «A while back I was asked by the Yale ROTC to contribute to a collection of graduates' experience in the Army; I discovered a huge file of letters that my mother had saved from my service in Britain, Africa and Italy in WW 2, and, to my great surprise, about thirty drawings and watercolors I made in the huge amount of time I wasn't employed. I was amazed because 1, I didn't remember having done them, and 2, I didn't know I had the ability». His watercolors and sketches, with their deft representation of light and use of color, are indeed a revelation. Eventually, Ackerman was given the wartime assignment he had sought, with the Monuments and Fine Arts office in Milan, the so called «Monuments Men». As he describes, this brought him to the Certosa of Pavia to retrieve papers that had been stored there for safekeeping. At the Certosa he found not only papers but also the subject of his first published article, and his life's vocation.

The book also includes a return to favorite topics, such as architectural drawing. In the volume's first chapter, «The origins of sketching», he describes how artists and architects came to use drawing to record a quick thought. It is a practice that architects take for granted, but Ackerman traces its beginnings to Villard de Honnecourt, Pisanello, Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, while also examining its theoretical underpinnings. This essay parallels his reflections on the staying power of architectural conventions that he published in *Origins, imitation, conventions* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2002), to which this volume forms a more wide ranging pendant.

The book includes essays that demonstrate Ackerman equally at ease discussing Andrea Palladio and Frank Gehry. Writing about Gehry in «La Fondation Louis Vuitton», he brings a depth of historical perspective few contemporary critics of architecture can offer, for example comparing his loose pen sketches to Vasari's account of artistic *furor*. He understands Gehry's work not only in light of twentieth-century works such as Jorn Utzon's Sydney Opera House or Louis Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum, but also Michelangelo's *Waking Slave* and Erich Mendelsohn's Einstein Tower in Potsdam. The essay includes reflections on Gehry's style, as well as meditations on structure, construction method, and the typology of the privately funded museum. The historical depth and nuance Ackerman brings to bear are all too rare in criticism of contemporary architecture, and made me wish he'd written more of it.

In his essay on Palladio, «The magnificenza of Palladio's late works and its legacy broad: a study in selection», Ackerman examines longstanding problems of interpretation regarding Palladio's façade designs. Specifically, he analyses Palladio's proposal for the façade of San Petronio in Bologna, as well as his original schemes for San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice. His analysis is sharpened through his collaboration with architect Scott Schiamburg, who produced digital representations of the unexecuted schemes, both of which included projecting porticoes. The reconstructions allow Ackerman to consider the façade with portico as part of a long typology, stretching to Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia design and San Francisco City Hall. This kind of generous historical framing of an architectural problem also characterized his approach in *The villa: form and ideology of the country house* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1990).

The last essay in the volume, «My passage to India» documents Ackerman's conversion experience, beginning with his first trip to the continent in 2006. When I saw him at the College Art Association conference in Boston that year, over an impromptu lunch he described how his recent trips to India, Turkey and Egypt made him realize that the way he'd taught survey classes at Harvard for many years was all wrong. He said he would have done it all differently. In the essay, he writes, «The visit to Ranakpur led me to examine the limitations of my approach to architecture and, for the first time, the history of the role of narrative in religious architecture in the West». While one might quibble that there is little indication that Ackerman had read or absorbed the art historical literature about Indian architecture, it is nonetheless impressive that having devoted his career to the study and teaching of Western architecture, he could be so profoundly affected by another tradition so late in life. From this perspective, his reflections are moving and important. A combination of familiar themes, revisited and (as the title suggests) revised, and new reflections, the book is a fitting coda to an exemplary scholarly life.

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Emanuele Lugli

***Building regulations and urban form, 1100-1900*, a cura di Terry R. Slater e Sandra M.G. Pinto, Routledge, London-New York 2017, XX+329 pp., figg., tavv.**

Building Regulations and Urban Form, 1100-1900 has the most transparent of titles. It is a collection of essays on the ways legislation has shaped the architectural fabric of cities from the Middle Ages up to the modern era. The selection prizes itself for inclusivity: the fourteen, scholarly, data-packed chapters range from Tunis, in Algeria, to Tartu in Estonia, going through Antwerp (Belgium), Stratford-upon-Avon (the United Kingdom), Istanbul (Turkey), without any one country emerging as dominating. The volume thus provides a much more diverse perspective than similar collections on the subject, such as *Urban Landscapes: international perspectives*, edited by Jeremy W.R. Whitehand and Peter J. Larkham in 1992, whose focus, despite the subtitle, was mostly on England and the United States (plus a few references to Italy, Spain, and Germany).

I find the comparison between these two volumes helpful as it serves to highlight a conceptual shift. *Urban landscapes* of 1992 was anchored to structuralism and while rereading it for this review, I was reminded of the predilection of that approach for labels, so that the courses of streets and the shapes of blocks of a «market town» are presented as fundamentally different from those of a «coastal town». Little of this stance returns in *Building regulations*. In their introduction, its editors Terry Slater and Sandra Pinto still speak of «plan-units» (pp. 18-19), that is urban areas with a morphological homogeneity that sets them apart from their surroundings. Yet, as they reflect, legislations played a fundamental role in determining and maintaining the specific design of districts. Their collection sets to focus on this particular mode of control of urban space.

Many of the essays of *Building regulations* take this shift in emphasis literally, skirting morphology to zoom in on legislation. In some cases the authors do not even assess the physical impact of norms.



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