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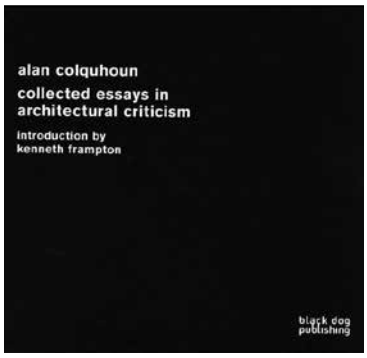
'..creative research reacquaints us with the world we thought we knew...'

'...his way of *thinking* is directly tied to his way of *seeing*...'

David Leatherbarrow on shared dedications to architecture



Collected Essays in Architectural Criticism
By Alan Colquhoun
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Reviewed by David Leatherbarrow

> *In the blink of an eye one is able to eliminate everything secondary; the only things I absolutely remember are the marvels.* – Le Corbusier[1]
>
> *As in poetic metaphor, the elements of contradiction are resolved without losing their independence.* – Alan Colquhoun[2]

No special training is required for grasping the basic order and sense of architectural works. Each of us makes our way through buildings, gardens, and neighbourhoods without much effort; as if some by some prior agreement or thanks to some forgotten encounter, we had already been made aware of the café, courtroom, or clinic we happen to find ourselves within. Tacitly understood in the normal run of affairs, rooms and buildings call for attention either when they fail to work as they should, or are unusually beautiful. A positive outcome of passing time in atypical situations can be the renewal of expectations: cafés can also be like this. The architecture critic, historian, or theorist must not give up living in the world in order to grasp its structures and articulations, even those that give rise to thought.

The difficulty arises when one tries to describe the connections between the prosaic and professional sense of settings, since a fuller understanding requires some distance, a voluntary suspension of involvements. The outcome of reflective distance takes the form of *disengaged participation*, contradictory though that term may seem. The configurations that had been taken for granted reveal the desires and ideas that brought them into being – the same windows and walls that silently accommodate everyday living also give us something to think about. The prompt could be perplexity or admiration, as I said; or professional interest. The latter can take the form of either design or study. Creative research – Colquhoun's being the exemplary case I'll consider in what follows – reacquaints us with the world we thought we knew, not only by revealing what had been there all along, but by reshaping it through means proper to the craft. Thanks to this collection of essays, we have much deeper insight into the ideas and projects of the modern period, which have, through countless imitations of varying quality, given shape and substance to the world we inhabit, mostly unreflectively.

More largely and importantly for what I want to say, this set of chapters demonstrates a particularly productive way of working and thinking in architecture. My concern here is not so much with what Colquhoun discovered and explained, but with his indication of what can be done in architectural research, and what can be, by extension, undertaken by us. I do not think he aimed at anything like a research programme, nor do I think he would have been pleased to be described as the founder of a school of thought, for he was much too focused on his own work for that.[3] In fact, I suspect he would have opposed any repetition or restatement of his observations and arguments as a betrayal of their basic impulse: thinking for oneself. He did, however, admit ''preoccupations', lines of thought that he followed but didn't conclude, pursuits that can be in turn be resumed by us. These concerns only became known to him, he said, after the fact of several studies produced over several years, under 'the impulse of specific themes and occasions'.[4] Maybe not. There is direction and momentum in his thought, and he repeatedly returned to a number of key issues; typology and design method most famously, Le Corbusier's architecture and ideas most regularly, also history and historicism, and the city, intertwined with the processes of societal modernisation.

His work cannot be reduced to what he wrote, and his problems can be seen – I recommend they be treated – as a preamble to ours. It

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wasn't so much modesty as realism that led him to observe that ideas are not the property of individuals – not his, mine, or yours: ours. This means there should be no shame in borrowing some of his questions to clarify the ones we see as pressing today, for it is equally true that we make of him an author who has something to say to us. Far from being violent or unwarranted, reciprocal reshaping such as this is sanctioned by shared dedication to the field we study. Colquhoun's essays reward reading because they invite us to think with him and beyond him – not because his writings are incomplete or insufficient, but because the times are no longer what they were, even if our shared concern is still architecture.

Architecture is doubly contextualised in Colquhoun's research and writing: within the discipline – as it exists today and as it was developed in the past – and among other fields, particularly philosophy, or more narrowly, the history of ideas. Of course not all modern architects interested him equally. One is surprised by the relative infrequency of references to Mies van der Rohe, for example. Nor are the several departments of architecture given equal weight. Today's readers will find rather striking the conspicuous absence of landscape architecture in his studies; likewise, considerations of ecology or so-called sustainability. Yet he moves with great fluidity between key topics in architectural theory and practice; broadly speaking, urbanism, technology, and representation; more narrowly, urbanisation/regionalism, structural rationalism, and typology. Similarly fluid is his movement through the history of ideas, though once again his areas of concentration are clear: nineteenth- and twentieth-century German thought, mid-century structuralism and semiology, and the philosophy of history.

Still more impressive: he travels with great ease between images and concepts, depiction and conceptualisation, as if close description were capable of giving rise to thought while simultaneously serving as its expression. On most accounts, the outcome of 'close reading' in architecture and other fields is the disclosure of content that had been overlooked, through haste or inattention. Although Colquhoun's unhurried readings are often revelatory, more important for contemporary research is the fact that they preserve and renew connections between what can be seen – that facade, this street, those details – and the questions, desires, and risks that motivated them. Even if it will seem odd to credit such (formal) perspicuity to an author whose insight into the history of ideas in and outside of architecture is so much in evidence, I've come to think that his way of *thinking* is directly tied to his way of *seeing*.

Giudizio dell'occhio

We tend to view thinking (and more narrowly theorising) as a personal affair, something each of us does individually. Further, we tend to assume that it is something done internally, for its labours – unlike those of the hands – are unseen. Hannah Arendt made this point in *The Life of the Mind*. But surely when the full picture is considered – when thinking and the objects of thought are considered together – it is equally true to say that reflection is also a form of engagement with the world, with what is there to be seen, felt, and more broadly sensed. Intentionality, a recurring theme of modern philosophy, indicates that all consciousness is consciousness of something, something in the world, a world it neither summons into existence (upon reflection) nor fully comprehends. This is to say that in our intellectual craft there is not thinking *and* seeing, any more than there can be thought without language. This thesis is neither mine alone nor new. Since the sixteenth-century architects have acknowledged that architectural judgments are made in the mind and the eye, each borrowing attributes that will serve the other. Cennini, Donatello, and Alberti allowed the adjustment of canonical proportions when placing a work in its specific context. Modifications of this kind, which would give the work eurythmic beauty, as Vitruvius advised, relied on *visual intelligence*. Michelangelo, too, thought the eye capable of calculation; he spoke of 'compasses in the eye'. He valued on-the-spot optical assessment so highly that Bartolommeo Ammannati, his collaborator on the Laurentian Library, was to make the final decision on the proportions and ornaments of the great entry hall staircase. Why? Because Ammannati was *there*, on the site, and could see the consequences of greater or smaller, more or less. Of course one needn't be in front or within a building to have it on one's mind, for designed work gives architectural reflection its proper subject matter, even when it appears in drawings, photographs, or 'mental images'. It is no more plausible to deny visualisation to concept formation than it is to sever speaking from thinking.

Perhaps one example from Colquhoun's research can stand for the rest on this point. In explanation of the composition of elements in Le Corbusier's Salvation Army building in Paris, Colquhoun concluded as follows:

> *The reversal of poché space found in his houses is repeated here; instead of a series of concave spaces carved out of the building, such as one might have found in a Beaux-Arts scheme, we are presented with their negative – a small collection of architectural volumes. And now, instead of being disposed within the cube of the building, these objects are placed in front of it, and the table on which they are displayed is tilted upward and becomes a vertical plane of reference. It seems impossible to separate the sensuous and intellectual pleasure derived from this arrangement of architectural forms from the site to which it owes its origin …*[5]

As much as this reading seems well suited to Le Corbusier's purist paintings, it is an interpretation of a building's way of occupying and transforming an urban location, a reading that also attests to an architect's rethinking of Parisian, Beaux-Arts, and even modern types. The arguments of August Choisy also come into Colquhoun's account, as does the architecture of antiquity. Yet, the intentions and motivations he discerns are inseparable from the 'intellectual and sensual pleasure' he takes in what appears before his eyes.

It is, however, incorrect to say that thinking and seeing are operations that run in parallel with one another. Intelligible form is thought's legible indication or recognisable mark. Yet, the adequacy of a reading can never be assessed against some full disclosure of intentions, what survives from the past is always incomplete. Colquhoun indicated that Le Corbusier's reasons for

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capping the Swiss Pavilion's front facade with a high, blank cornice were not fully explained by the architect himself. But that does not mean what we see does not suggest intentions, nor that Le Corbusier's thinking exists perforce in some place other than that wide stretch of white stucco, proportioned to the height of the window wall. The elements that strike us – that give rise to reflection – are the wake of thought, evidences of intentions that survive the departure of their source. And as we try to make sense of them we draw upon images, terms, and ideas that came before: yes, it is like a cornice, but different, differently sized, under-articulated, and unexpectedly punctured by a couple of large apertures, rather like a load-bearing wall, though it is clearly not that because the facade as a whole is made of glass and supported by a frame.

Of course one can think about thinking, theorise theories, but that is not what Colquhoun does in this book, nor what seems most useful in our field. Minds alone do not communicate with one another; words, images, and gestures are required, forms of articulation that can not only be differentiated from one another but discovered to be more or less adequate to the subject matter of expression and the person to whom the expression is addressed. Though far too common today, theorising theories is surely a second-order practice in architecture, derivative of (or contingent on) a more basic wonder about things in the world.

As such, architectural thought of the kind Colquhoun practices is not so much caught up in the world – as is the physical work of construction – but *oriented toward* it: inclined because fascinated. Orientation preserves distance, but indicates strong interest, whether that takes the form of perplexity or admiration.

Notes

1. Le Corbusier, Letter to his parents, 1907.
2. A. Colquhoun, 'Architecture and Engineering: Le Corbusier and the Paradox of Reason', in *Modernity and the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 89–119.
3. At the outset, I should admit that my affection for Colquhoun's work is both personal and longstanding. In the second year of my postgraduate studies my professors Joseph Rykwert and Dalibor Vesely contacted Colquhoun and recommended that he give me some teaching work in the history and theory programme he was leading at the Polytechnic of Central London (now the University of Westminster). Though our contact in those years was never more than occasional, from the time of that appointment until the present day I have seen Colquhoun's work as exemplary for any scholar or researcher in architecture.
4. Colquhoun offered this admission in the Foreword to his *Essays in Architectural Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1985), np. Coincidentally, one year earlier, the great Irish poet Seamus Heaney published his first collection of prose essays with the same word as its title: *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980). There is no evidence that Colquhoun knew of Heaney's collection, though he certainly may have, but the aim seems the same: 'central preoccupying questions', in Heaney's phrasing.
5. Colquhoun, *Collected Essays* (London: Black Dog, 2009), p. 223.

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