

BOOK REVIEW

Sarah Bonnemaïson and Christine Macy, editors

Festival Architecture

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The title of this volume recalls an influential publication of 1984 by Werner Oechslin and Anja Buschow that placed *Festarchitektur* firmly in the field of architectural history. That book reconstructed the use of festival architecture as an important arena for architectural experiments, in which the architect could test architectural form and expressive ornamentation, or could try his talents as *Inszenierungskünstler*, versed in the temporal art of theatricality, bending the rules of propriety that governed regular and permanent, or even monumental and eternal architecture. In this volume the designs for the investiture of Queen Wilhelmina in Amsterdam in 1898 (Stieber) are presented as breaking away from the accepted verisimilitude of a festival architecture of heavy gates and triumphal arches, replacing it with symbolic expression through a spatial reconfiguration of the history of the city and the use of new and modern decorations.

The transient character of festival architecture means that we can only study the intended spectacle as it was represented with its desired meaning, rather than the actual objects and events. This is what makes the study of ephemeral architecture so exciting and multi-faceted. Because it is ephemeral, the impact that it may have had on patrons, creators and the public, on society and architectural culture, may be easily overlooked or misinterpreted. Yet many temporary reconfigurations of urban spaces have had lasting influence. Festival architecture was thought-provoking, was effective symbolically, and ritualized presentations to establish new hegemonies or altered social constellations. Or as the editors of this volume in the Routledge series *The Classical Tradition in Architecture* put it: “ephemerality is the joker’s card in architectural history.” This volume of articles provides a varied geographic and chronological treatment of ephemerality, thus filling a gap in recent architectural history for the English-reading scholarly community. A broad range of scholars has investigated the ephemeral as an architectural

Fireworks display on the Grand Place in Lille, erected to celebrate the birth of the Dauphin in 1729, from Monin in Bonnemaïson and Macy, eds., *Festival Architecture*, plate 7b



Willem Kromhout, Sketch for a canal decoration on the occasion of the 1898 coronation of Wilhelmina, 1897, from Stieber in Bonnemaïson and Macy, eds., *Festival Architecture*, plate 8a



laboratory, the field of experimental test cases for new projects and their dissemination; as a strong means of persuasive communication; or as specific political expression, either representing aspects of a regime, a political situation, or manifesting an important “historic” event in an idealized form. The articles include a reasoned reconstruction of festival processions in Ancient Rome (Favro) as “full-bodied interactive events operating in four dimensions” and a study of Venetian festivals (Visentini) of increasing opulence, which magnified the memory of past events and the republic’s glory in times of political decline. Another contribution focuses on the lasting effect on modern life and urban experience of the merging of art and technique through light, music and architecture in the Paris exposition of 1937 (Weddle), while another recaptures the complete range of festivities and their pedigree that surrounded the presentation of the brides of the dukes to the people of Renaissance Ferrara (Ghirardo). In nineteenth-century Basel we learn that the carnival celebrations or *Fasnacht* (Macy) can be considered a form of temporary urbanism that offered newcomers a *rite de passage*, a ticket to acknowledged citizenship. Most of the contributions identify festival architecture as a typical urban phenomenon, in which rituals employ architectural form for their symbolic expressiveness. The exception is the article on paper architecture and the demarcations between the virtual and the real, the solid and the ephemeral in seventeenth-century England that supported a persuasive representation of ideal kingship, and assimilated Stonehenge as an Anglo-Roman antiquity (Van Eck).

The ephemeral could be festive, commemorative and experimental at the same time. Often, ephemeral architecture could convey messages that were to be repeated in permanent architecture. Thus the dedication rite of the new basilica of Saint Peter’s and a procession in 1625 gave credibility to the church of Barberini Rome as a pre-eminent incarnation of the heavenly Jerusalem and Urban VIII as its prophetic ruler (Delbeke). Similarly, the public festivities organized in eighteenth-century France (Monin) cannot be understood without the context of an emerging policy for urban beautification, the regulatory framework and the rethinking, reorganization and cleaning up of the city and its institutions in the Age of Enlightenment. The ways in which the magnificence of a festival could appeal to the emotions of the audience, disrupt the city, and also transform the way it was appreciated by its citizens was already explored in the Paris of the 1660s, as Monin shows, making

an interesting parallel with the experience in the crowds that took over the streets in the French capital three centuries later that are described in the last article (Bonnemaison). The street became the arena for the collective celebration of joy, pleasure and sensuality in public spaces that started with a radical denial of modern bourgeois life, the “festival” of May 1968 – as the filmmaker Louis Malle would later recall – and the author sees concluded in the organized and controlled festival space of Centre Beaubourg.

The book is well-illustrated, with the color plates emphasizing the festive nature of the events that are usually only documented through texts and black and white illustrations. The articles show a broad geographical and chronological diversity, as well as an interesting variety of approaches to the architecture of the festival, of temporary, ritualized (urban) space. Some approaches are more descriptive than interpretative, and theory as a guiding principle in architectural analysis is limited to a few articles. Some articles have been translated for this publication. It helps to explain that these contributions refer almost exclusively to French or Italian literature, making us aware of the limits of the internationality that still seem to compartmentalize the history of ephemeral architecture. The general impression that one has of the book, however, is that of an important contribution to the versatility, meaning and richness of this temporary and celebratory architectural world.

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