

## BOOK REVIEW

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Murray Fraser with Joe Kerr

***Architecture and the “Special Relationship”: the American Influence on Post-War British Architecture***

Abingdon: Routledge, 2007, 591 pp., 50 line illus., 230 b & w photos and 16 pp. color section, £ 55

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Looking across at the USA during the Bush years, European intellectuals had to try hard not to be anti-American. Many, indeed, did not even try – perhaps too complacently sharing Baudrillard’s perception of the USA as “the only remaining primitive society” (p. 14). *Architecture and the “Special Relationship”* sets out explicitly to attack this lazy hostility, starting from the premise that “British architecture became modernized and globalized primarily through the emulation and absorption of Americanized ideas and values” (p. 5). Murray Fraser and Joe Kerr make an overwhelming case for this, drawing upon evidence from finance, industry, commerce, architecture, planning and popular culture.

After a wide-ranging introduction, the first chapter provides a pre-history of the subject from the Declaration of Independence through a century and a half to the Second World War. It identifies manifestations of growing US influence on the architectural, urban, industrial and commercial development of Britain. Larger case studies of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American influence on Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester and particularly London are punctuated with relevant and engaging cameos of influential Americans in Britain: these include the “pathological polygamist” Isaac Singer (of sewing machine fame) and William Waldorf Astor who “improved” Hever Castle – Anne Boleyn’s childhood home – with a new moat and new Tudor village to satisfy his contorted snobbery (pp. 64-5 and 84-5).

Another chapter discusses town planning, unpicking the complex interactions between Britain and America in the theory of Geddes, Unwin and Mumford; in the



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influence of the car; in the American ideas behind British New Towns; and in the development of prefabricated housing. A substantial part of the book is devoted to commercial architecture. Office blocks, shopping centers, and suburban industrial and commercial campuses, too often passed over by an academic world more interested in socially progressive or artistically expressive buildings and types, are here given their full weight.

What might be seen as the core of the book covers the ground one would expect: Banham, Price, Archigram, Foster and Rogers are examined over two chapters, tracing the history and effects of their interactions with US architecture, theory and technology. Drawing their material overwhelmingly from published sources and conference papers, the authors (who express doubts about the value of interviewing architects – p. 6) situate architectural developments in the wider cultural contexts of Cold War politics, popular culture and scientific progress.

If the technophiles of British postwar architecture receive sensitive analysis so do their opponents, classified here under the banner of “monumentality.” From Kahn and the Smithsons the argument moves urbane on to Venturi and postmodernism, making a convincing case for American influences on James Stirling, an architect who is more routinely discussed in terms of his influence on America. A particular pleasure of the chapter is a more detailed examination of Eero Saarinen’s disappointing US Chancellery in London; here architectural, symbolic and cultural readings are supported by analysis of the hotly-worded attacks on the building by British critics.

The final chapter brings the story up to date with unashamedly Americanized supermarkets, airports, “loft apartments” and spec houses – a vindication of the book’s argument that modernity and globalization in Britain have been driven most importantly by the influence of the USA. The discussion concludes elegantly with some observations on a recent spate of American commissions for prominent British architects.

*Architecture and the “Special Relationship”* is a model cultural history, doubtless profiting from the decade-long collaboration from which it arose. Where it engages explicitly with critical theory it does so to a clear purpose, and its great breadth of reference never comes at the cost of clarity. It is not only consistently informative and authoritative, it is also a great pleasure to read. Fraser and Kerr introduce each new idea and topic in such a way that no one could feel excluded by lack of prior knowledge, but then pursue it with an originality of approach which guarantees new ideas and insights for the specialist.

For all the apparent specificity of its subject matter, the authors trace US influence into so many areas of British architectural life that the resulting book provides an authoritative and compelling history of postwar British architecture, wide-ranging in its coverage and original in its approach.

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