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Fragments: Architecture and the Unfinished. Essays Presented to Robin Middleton

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In the modern era, architects wanted to give ideal form to society as a whole, and their proposals were aimed at forever changing everything from chair to town. But they were also eager to produce examples of new forms wherever the possibility occurred, whatever small fragment of the vision was possible. Towards the end of the modern era, the dream of wholeness and finality was shattered, and in the postmodern era the “unfinished and the fragment” became positive connotations and even goals in themselves.

In short, “...fragments may be construed in both negative and positive ways: as remnants of achievements and a plenitude that is irrevocably lost, or as elements of a restorative power that can provide symbolic and poetic meaning to newly constituted wholes.” With this statement by Robin Middleton from 2002, Barry Bergdoll opens his introduction to the festschrift honoring the South African scholar whose career as a teacher and librarian unfolded between London, Cambridge and New York. The book is divided into five parts and a bibliography of Middleton’s writings, 1959–2005.

Part 1 is devoted to “Theories of the Fragment.” Peter Carl tries to capture the idea of fragment and the danger of fragmentation by examining the way Daniel Libeskind (referring to Benjamin) starts designing by looking for fragments as distant as possible from each other. This attempt to reunite fragments into a (design) field is coupled with Aristotle’s use of the particular and the universal. Accepting fragments as a way in which catastrophe constructs renewal is demonstrated by Paul Valéry’s reading of the poem “Un Coup de Dés” by Mallarmé. This leads to the way Le Corbusier tried to combine the fragmented chaos of the world into the order of his iconostasis sketched in lines and words in his “Poème de l’angle droit” (1955), thus constructing a veil between daily experience and transcendent abstraction. Even more complicated and particular is the chapter, “LA coi RELama-pré-fer en sac-OSE-deux Sa-fine S aid SONEC-LA” by Philippe Duboy.



Dalibor Vesely's contribution can be read as a second introduction, starting with the Middle Ages and its use of spolia (spoils) as a way to create continuity by active use of fragments, through the origins of the modern fragment in which the historical role of ruins and the design of artificial ruins evokes the Sublime but also, in contrast, stimulates a new search for wholeness. The hope of achieving this completeness flickers for the last time in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Sometimes this longing for wholeness leads to finishing a project ages after the architect left the fragments of his vision, as Ian Gow demonstrates in his "Fragmenting Adam's Charlotte Square, Edinburgh." But even in elegantly finished interiors such as those Robert Adam was famous for, "Discord and Dissonance" could seep in, as Eileen Harris tells us. The hero of Part 2 about "Fragments in British Architectural History," however, is certainly John Soane, who appears in the other three articles of this section, and is the master of a sublime play with the fragments of our memory of the grandeur of antiquity. It is a pity that the monograph on the illustrator of Soane's vision, Joseph Gandy, was published too late to be taken into consideration by the three authors.

It is interesting to see that the theme of Gothic plays a far more important role in the contributions in Part 3, "Fragments of Continental Practices." Contributions range from Werner Oechslin's "Janus-head Figure of Greek-Gothic..." to Richard Wittman's tale of "A Fictive Debate on Notre-Dame in the Journal de Paris in 1780."

Part 4, "Landscape as Fragment," is itself the most fragmentary and starts with "Natural Histories and Sylvan Aesthetics from Bacon to Evelyn" by Vittoria Di Palma and ends with Jean Michel Massing's "From Dutch Brazil to the West Indies: The Paper Image of the Ideal Sugar Plantation," which could hardly be even a fragment in an ideal society, since it was only conceivable when based on the hard labor of slaves.

Part 5 is entitled "Modernity and the Fragment," but almost all contributions concentrate on classic modernists: Mary McLeod on Le Corbusier, Neil Levine on Louis Kahn, Alan Powers on Ernö Goldfinger and Kenneth Frampton on Carlo Scarpa. The only exception is Sylvia Lavin, whose text and subject are as post-modern as it can get: "Twelve Heads Are Better Than One," about the sculpted horseheads in the oeuvre of Frank Gehry.

How much a love of fragmentation, collage, and hide-and-seek is a central part not only of Middleton's research but also of his life is demonstrated by Perry Ogden's photographs of his dwelling/study in Manhattan's Tribeca neighborhood. Middleton lived there from 1994 until 2002, and the visual record in the heart of the book is all that remains of this intriguing environment.

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