



Space, hope, and brutalism: English architecture, 1945–1975

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BOOK REVIEW

Space, hope, and brutalism: English architecture, 1945–1975, by Elain Harwood, with photographs by James O. Davies, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2015, 736 pp., with 340 colour + 8 b/w illustrations, £60 (hardcover)

Hulking, uncompromising, gorgeous: Elain Harwood has produced a book worthy of her subject. *Space, Hope, and Brutalism* takes readers on a tour through the buildings of England's welfare state, from its town centres to housing estates, schools to universities, hospitals to churches, coach stations to concert halls. Eighteen years in the making, this lavishly produced book – a credit to the Paul Mellon Centre and Yale University Press – aims to redeem a period and style that have attracted more than their share of opprobrium. Despite opening by apologizing for inevitable oversights and omissions, one of the book's signatures is its breathtaking range – indeed, as an account of the architecture of mid-twentieth century England, it is unlikely to be surpassed. That achievement is shared by the book's photographer, James O. Davies, whose stunning images adorn nearly every page, turning this historical monograph into something more like an art object.

Each chapter begins with a sketch of the historical context most relevant to the buildings at hand, before devoting most of its discussion to architects' practices and achievements. Two features of the text warrant particular citation. A 57 page appendix offers biographies of the figures – mostly, but not entirely, architects – who populate these pages, an invaluable scholarly contribution in its own right. And in a largely no-nonsense text, Harwood includes an abundance of fascinating details and insights: about, for example, the spatial consequences of the decline of domestic service; the relationship between licensing legislation and changing pub interiors; and Alan Bullock's painstaking brief to Arne Jacobsen for St Catherine's College in Oxford. No less useful than the appendix (if more of a truffle hunt) are the pithy explanations of such tricky subjects as bank rates and building booms, recruitment procedures to new towns, and the confounding cost 'yardstick' that bedevilled public sector housing architects. Along the way, Harwood offers up shrewd observations of her own, for instance when she notes that, with each passing decade, it is not modernism but post-modernism that increasingly figures as the fleeting product of a brief historical moment.

Harwood conveys modernism's diversity, arguing that the movement was unified less by its materials, or even its aesthetic, than by a remarkable and transformative self-belief. Cumulatively, however, the text's comparatively sober march from genre to genre – across the same chronology and, as she acknowledges (294), the same narrative arc – compromises its ability to convey the exhilaration of living and building during modernism's heroic hour. There are a few gestures in this direction, for instance in the eyewitness testimony about 'a story-book atom-age hospital' (295), since demolished, in Swindon, but for the most part the chapters work less by conveying the thrill of these buildings than by rendering them – no matter how avant-garde at the time or maligned ever since – routine once again. Harwood's demystifying tone clashes with the parallel story unfolding, largely unremarked, in the photographs that share the same pages, which steadily and silently attest to the audacity and grandeur that surely remain central to modernism's appeal.

Ultimately, more than elaborating an argument, this book itself constitutes one: *Space, Hope, and Brutalism* now stands as a powerful rejoinder to those who would question the architectural achievements of the past century. And here, again, lies the significance of Davies's photographs, which date not from the mid-twentieth century but from the early twenty-first century: eloquent testimony that these buildings represent not historical curiosities, whose time has now passed, but inherited achievements, worthy of protection. '[T]he battle for the hearts and minds of those with power', Harwood concludes, 'has still to be won' (569), and in that ongoing battle this magnificent book offers a vital and lasting contribution.

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