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Street Furniture Design: Contesting Modernism in Post-War Britain.

Eleanor Herring, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 224 pp., 60 b&w illus., cloth,

£60.00. 13 digit ISBN: 9781474245616.

Eleanor Herring's *Street Furniture Design* is an account of the ordinary stuff that is part of every encounter with public space: the lamps, bins and bollards that punctuate our lives as we navigate through the modern world. But more than this, Herring's book reveals the multiple voices and perspectives that are part of any public design process. Looking beyond debates within the British post-war design establishment's cosy enclave, Herring encourages us to rethink how we understand public space: who cares about it, who it is for, what it means and how it is used. Through this lens, design - even of seemingly 'authorless' objects such as street furniture - becomes a complex process of mediation.

Herring's book, a reworking of her PhD project, is set over five loosely chronological chapters, each of which focuses on a different group with a particular interest in the development of street furniture. This takes us beyond those who designed or initiated the objects to 'the multiple interests, agendas

and alliances' (1), which have influenced and shaped them. Herring contrasts dominating, 'noisy' voices (those of agencies such as the Council of Industrial Design, the Royal Fine Art Commission and the Civic Trust, for example), with 'quieter' ones (2) such as the views of municipal planners and borough engineers, civil servants, MPs and members of the public whose opinions might otherwise be overlooked within historical accounts. Unlike the previous, limited histories of British street furniture design, which have been typological - themed round chapters on phone boxes or bus shelters, for example - this offers a compellingly polycentric account of a contested area. Herring describes how for several public bodies discussions on the form that street furniture should take was implicitly about social control, focused towards creating appropriate behaviours for those who used public space.

Herring shows how fraught and divisive such decisions were in the particular context of post-war British austerity and the export drive, where a moralising concept of 'good design' informed bureaucrats' rhetoric and compelled them to focus both public and manufacturers towards a particular set of 'appropriate' designs. This concept of 'good design' is central to the book (and one which Herring capitalises as 'Good Design' to highlight its importance, a detail which at times seems reductive, implying a fixed definition for an unstable and amorphous concept). But through her analysis of 'good design', which builds on earlier work by Jonathan Woodham (in the British post-war context) and Javier

Gimeno-Martínez (in the Belgian one), Herring mounts a fascinating critique of the post-war design establishment, particularly from the inception of the Council of Industrial Design (COID) in 1944. COID - to which Herring devotes a substantial first chapter - earnestly engaged with the idea of 'good design'. But the concept was also championed by many other agencies and designers immediately after the war, as Herring explains, until its ultimate failure by the 1970s, when there was a turnaround of a design elite that had lost faith in the uncompromising rightness of certain designs, with architectural commentator Reyner Banham and others pointing out the narrowness of the previous generation's view.

Herring's account, which is drawn from a careful reading of material from a number of archives, focuses on the two decades after World War Two and is enlivened by some wonderfully resonant period voices. Here is Lady Norah Ritson, whose fury at the new lamps outside her home in north London's Highgate Village and matching sense of entitlement, led her to go straight to the top, with a letter to the Housing Minister. Then there was the dispute over whether to replace Victorian lampposts in Kensington, which prompted set designer Oliver Messel to weigh in. Meanwhile, sculptor Arnold Machin asked his wife to padlock him to a gas lamp on a Victorian estate in Stoke-on-Trent in protest at its possible removal. There is also the well-known, belligerent voice of architectural critic Ian Nairn, who used *Architectural Review* magazine as his

platform in a long-running protest against the continuous sprawl of 'subtopia', with ill-judged street furniture being a totemic part of blighted townscapes.

These examples are important, not only in offering engaging details of contemporary characters, but in demonstrating how discourses of power in and through the establishment shaped design in post-war Britain.

As is perhaps to be expected from an account with discourse analysis at its heart, Herring is less interested in analysing how things looked or in highlighting particular designers' work, except as relevant to this set of debates. She interviewed influential designers Margaret Calvert and Kenneth Grange and their insights form an important counterpoint to those of other contemporary voices. Kenneth Grange's work is discussed through the frame of a detailed case study: the development of the parking meter that Grange designed for Venner Ltd., in 1958 and how it came to seep into British public consciousness. While Calvert explains the torturous process which she and partner Jock Kinneir had to go through in order to see their designs realised by the Ministry of Transport.

The book includes a useful select bibliography, is appealingly designed and generously illustrated, including black and white pictures from a plethora of trade magazines, contemporary journals and COID sources and showing some wonderfully incongruous images such as *Country Life* magazine's 1960 fashion spread where a lady in pearls, fur hat and long gloves is pictured lovingly

feeding a parking meter, the cipher of urban sophistication. Herring's account ends in 1974, before the abuses of the public realm associated with the Thatcherite regime had been felt, before the passion for heritage and revivalist street furniture had been ignited and before vandalism of the public realm had become of widespread concern, discussed urgently by policy makers. These subsequent decades would benefit from a similarly close reading, as Herring acknowledges in her epilogue.

This is an important account of an overlooked chapter in post-war design history, which also demonstrates that design histories can - and should - include multiple voices.

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References:

1. E. Herring, *Street Furniture Design* p3
2. *op cit.* p5

Image: cover of *Street Furniture Design* (courtesy, Bloomsbury).