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2000

Review of *Wren's 'Tracts' on Architecture and Other Writings*, by Lydia M. Soo

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**Custom Citation**

Cast, David. Review of *Wren's 'Tracts' on Architecture and Other Writings*, by Lydia M. Soo. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 59 (2000): 251-252, doi: 10.2307/991600.

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produced new monograph? In this respect, as in so many others, one finishes reading Boucher by taking one's hat off to Palladio. That in itself is a great tribute to this book.

—PIERRE DE LA RUFFINIÈRE DU PREY  
Queen's University at Kingston, Ontario

Lydia M. Soo

### **Wren's "Tracts" on Architecture and Other Writings**

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,  
1998, xv + 320 pp., 63 illus. \$60.00, ISBN 0-521-57369-6.

Christopher Wren was an eminently practical man. Like all his colleagues in the Royal Society, he knew the value of experience. As John Aubrey tells us, he was willing to show interest in producing a machine for making silk stockings; and he was capable of designing and bringing to completion the vast expanse of Saint Paul's Cathedral and the fifty-one churches scattered throughout the rebuilt city of London. But if this was a life of action, it was also one of research and even of writing. If, as Thomas Sprat so aptly put it, the site for all new knowledge was to be the laboratory rather than the school, then the experiments performed in these newly free and newly disciplined spaces not only had to be tested and retested to demonstrate their basis in fact, but had to be discussed, orally and in writing, so as to put in order the discrete events upon which the procedures of this new research were set. Hence, the experiments; hence also the tracts and writings issuing from the Royal Society and the transformation of these empiricists into what Thomas Blount referred to in 1656 as tractions. And if the role of the writings of the ancients was to be reconsidered, Aristotle above all, it was clear that any further expansion of natural knowledge depended upon this very note taking and writing for which, paradoxically, he could be a model still.

The texts that Wren wrote on architecture, the so-called "Tracts," and the "Discourse on Architecture" pub-

lished first in 1881, have long been used by historians: by John Summerson in his still seminal essay of 1936, and by Margaret Whinney, Eduard Sekler, Kerry Downes, and most notably and most recently by J. A. Bennett. And the history of their writing and printings can be traced in Eileen Harris's distinguished study of English architectural books. But, as Soo notes in her opening paragraph, the earlier publications were either flawed or are not now easily accessible, and it is of great advantage to have them here, in a single volume, accompanied by a scholarly commentary—the texts taken either from the originally printed source, or, where necessary, from manuscripts retranscribed with the conventions standard in the field. There may be some particular historical pleasure to be experienced from using the original edition of the *Parentalia*, even in the flattened facsimile of 1965, or the Essex House Press edition of 1903 by Ernest Enthoven, with its thick pages and richly printed script. But Soo's handsome edition is in every way a more usable and useful book to work with.

The bibliographical history of these writings is interesting still. It was Christopher Wren, Jr., angered perhaps by his father's unceremonious dismissal from the Office of Surveyor General in 1718 at the age of eighty-three, who began to collect materials for the volume he called *Parentalia*. The term was first used by the late Latin author Ausonius, and then by George Herbert, and made its first appearance in a dictionary in 1706 (compiled by John Kersey). It is clear that Christopher possessed many of the manuscripts in Wren's hand, some in good condition and easy to collate; but, as he said in a letter of 1739 to John Ward, others were "a first sketch, blotted and interlined (as my father's Papers generally are)" and these he had to transcribe as well as he could, adding notes and interpolations. By 1728 this task was complete but nothing further was done until 1737, when Ward asked Christopher for more information toward a book he was writing on the members of the original Royal Society (this came out

four years later under the title *Lives of the Professors of Gresham College*), which evidently rekindled Christopher's interest in the project. For the next few years he added more notations to the manuscript. In his own volume, John Ward referred to this intended publication as a volume of plates of Wren's works, which "will . . . oblige the public with a full account of the just debt due to his memory for adorning the country with so many of its finest buildings." But nothing came of this and in 1747 Christopher died, passing on the manuscript of *Parentalia* to his son Stephen who then approached Joseph Ames, secretary of the Society of Antiquaries. A subscription for publication was announced in 1750 and specimens of the book were exhibited; but the proposal received a disappointing response, only forty-six subscribers signing up, most of them Ames's friends. The publication was finally rescued by a group of booksellers, Thomas Osborne, Richard Dodsley, Samuel Harding, and Charles Marsh, for whom it was brought out on 15 January 1751. This was an important juncture in architectural politics since at that very moment Wren was being restored to a position of honor, after years of attacks by the Palladians. For example, in his publication in 1749 of the plan for London, John Gwynn claimed that its defeat was the reason why the largest and richest city in Europe (in his view) was "destitute of all regular beauty."

These texts then are arranged by Soo in five separate sections: Notes on the Antiquities of London; Notes and Reports on Gothic Churches; Letter from Paris; Letter on Building Churches; Tracts on Architecture. She comes to this task with particular interests in the relationships among architecture, architectural theory, and cultural history, and these serve her very well in the understanding of Wren's writings. Each part of the edition is preceded by an introduction; each is documented with full and helpful notes, maps, and illustrations. Thus, among others we are presented with William Dugdale's plate of Saint Paul's, Francis Price's plate of

1753 on Salisbury Cathedral, and two interesting smaller drawings of Wren's reconstruction of the Temple of Halicarnassus (by Nicholas Hawksmoor) and his reconstruction of the tomb of Lars Porsenna, "the king of Etruria," taken from Pliny (by Robert Hooke). There is much important and interesting material here, and not the least of the virtues of this edition are the two indexes at the end, one on people and institutions, the other on buildings, places, and subjects. This last is especially useful since it allows the reader to trace both in the texts and the commentaries such vital but often elusive topics as the authority of the ancients, matters of beauty, or the imagination of the architect, and some many more specific, like the catenary curve, the problem of the encroachment of buildings, the defects and inferiority of Gothic buildings, and so forth.

At the end, bravely if necessarily, Soo offers us an account of what she calls Wren's methods of designing and suggests connections between the objectives of his many scientist colleagues in the Royal Society and his own. Here Soo is prepared to say that Wren's understanding of the architect's work was in many ways analogous to the contemporary conception of scientific instruments: tools to gather the data necessary for broader investigations. Indeed, what Wren did with the telescope, the microscope, the perspectograph, and the weather clock may well supply us with a model of his intellectual interests. And yet, as Soo also notes, for Wren architecture was always more than function or stability. History also supplied him with a set of principles, or, as she puts it, at least showed him how architects had worked out these issues in the past. On this basis, Soo can say that Wren worked with a twofold program: the first part being for an eternal architecture, arising from certain fundamental principles, that would produce a design useful, visually beautiful, and structurally sound; the second, making an architecture that could be an appropriate expression of English society restored under the Stuarts by using a style that was also grounded in the history of England. This

is certainly interesting. But I am not sure if, for all the richness of the account here, Soo offers us any way to get closer to Wren's architecture or to reconcile the two apparently discordant possibilities in it that she speaks about. But even if a more coherent picture of Wren himself and his place in the traditions of English architecture is still beyond our reach, there is an immense amount of historical and cultural material here that anyone interested in the history of English scientific and architectural thought at the end of the seventeenth century will necessarily want to use.

In the entry he wrote in 1900 for the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Francis Cranmer Penrose, himself an architect, archaeologist, and astronomer, was prepared to say that Wren, if overshadowed by the genius of Isaac Newton as a natural philosopher, stood far above all his competitors as an architect. Perhaps less enthusiastic, when speaking of the city churches, Summerson said that it seemed as if Wren's designs never grew, that once stated they were either abruptly altered or wholly superseded, and that if Wren's strength was the discipline of the geometer, it was his weakness also. His example was Saint Stephen's, Walbrook, so long praised, where the problem of the space within is not solved by "the pure judgment of intuition," but mechanically. In his ringing defense of Saint Paul's against the attack of Maxwell Hutchinson, Robert Venturi concedes that perhaps something in the design of Saint Paul's remains unresolved, yet in his view this does not make it any less of an architectural masterpiece than, say, Bernini's colonnade at Saint Peter's, so completely integrated and worked out. And if we follow Venturi's account of the great mannerist tradition of English architecture that stretches from Jones to Lutyens, we might borrow what he says and use it for Wren himself. It was a style based as much on naiveté as on supreme sophistication, "and at times from both at once"; so too Wren, a person—like all his colleagues—supremely sophisticated, yet in visual matters in some measure naive.

—DAVID CAST  
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James Ayres

### **Building the Georgian City**

New Haven and London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Center for British Art, 1998, vii + 280 pp., 345 illus. \$65.00, ISBN 0-300-07548-0.

The world is divided into two sorts of thinkers, wrote Isaiah Berlin, citing the ancient Greek poet Archilochus: foxes who know many things and hedgehogs who know one big thing (*The Hedgehog and the Fox. An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* [New York, 1953]). The hedgehogs of the intellectual world relate all knowledge to a single, overarching idea that motivates vast experience (Plato, Pascal, and Nietzsche are among Berlin's examples). The foxes (e.g., Herodotus, Montaigne, Goethe) have no desire to fit the world into one great pattern. Their centrifugal interests are "scattered or diffused" and they follow experience where it leads.

James Ayres's study of the building history of eighteenth-century England displays all the characteristics of the fox: wide-ranging, diverse, and without any dominant theme other than to describe the history of construction in all its rich detail. Unlike John Summerson's *Georgian London* (London, 1945) or Dan Cruickshank and Peter Wyld's *London: The Art of Georgian Building* (London, 1975), Ayres is not interested in the development of a new classical style or the patterns of urban form. Through the accumulation of vast amounts of historical detail and visual evidence he has described a history of the building processes of the past. There are few mentions of the good and the great, the debates over style, the publication of theory, or the interest in the architectural developments of the Continent. These are all distractions, and the author's goal "has been to eschew distracting historical particulars and questions of taste except insofar as some details may have resulted from, or been influenced by, a particular material or method" (1).

The Georgian city of London and beyond is defined in the broadest