2010

REVIEW: Richard Whitman, Architecture, Print Culture, and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France

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In *Architecture, Print Culture, and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France*, Richard Wittman tells the story of the relationship between architectural discourse and political power in France from the creation of the Royal Academy of Architecture in 1671 to the end of the ancien regime. Inspired by Jürgen Habermas's seminal *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Wittman argues that the development of a community of writers and readers of architectural criticism anticipated the creation of an open forum for political discussion and consensus, Habermas's "bourgeois public sphere," that superseded absolutism and served to legitimize nineteenth-century Western democracies.[1] If some art historians have long claimed Habermas's thesis as their own, notably Thomas Crow's influential *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* of 1985, Wittman is the first to highlight architectural criticism's unique contribution in the development of public opinion.[2] The most visible and politicized of the fine arts, architecture had always nurtured an intimate relationship to power. Wittman argues that the late eighteenth-century pamphlets that, using royal buildings as a foil, condemned the crown's legitimacy, found their origin in the seventeenth-century paeans that had praised architecture's supporting role in the celebration of the monarch. Unlike most architectural historians that tend to focus their textual analysis on the evolution of theoretical concepts or scour the architectural press to delineate contemporary discussions of buildings, Wittman reveals instead the structural role the architectural media played in the advent of political modernity in France.

Wittman's project is an ambitious rewriting of the history of eighteenth-century French architecture--or rather its convenient surrogate, the buildings and urban designs sponsored by the crown in Paris--through the words of its critics. Relying on some 3,000 printed primary sources collated as part of his 2001 Columbia dissertation (some of these texts are announced in a forthcoming anthology in the same series), Wittman brings new resonance to familiar episodes in eighteenth-century French architecture.

Wittman begins his account with the surge in architectural publications that followed the foundation of the Royal Academy of Architecture by Louis XIV's minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert. Part of Colbert's propagandistic cultural arsenal, the academy had been charged with the formulation of rules for a monarchic and nationalistic brand of classicism devised to quash any lingering appreciation of medieval forms. Wittman shows that the academy's denigration of the Gothic and its will to codify precise rules presupposed a fictive public consensus, one staged in state-sponsored publications. Thanks to the academy, Wittman argues, a nascent readership began viewing and evaluating buildings in purely aesthetic terms. As it sought universal, transhistorical principles for architectural beauty, Wittman explains, the academy bound architectural meaning to the abstraction of printed words. It negated in the process the local, physical reality of embodied experience that had marked the art of building since its inception. In this, Wittman notes, the academy acted like other agents of absolutism who sought to sever local allegiances. The disconnect Wittman finds between pre-modern forms of architectural meaning resting on embodied spatial experience (Wittman's "ethical-social" apperception of buildings)

and those residing in linguistic descriptions (Wittman's "critical-aesthetic" mode) would still preside over the reception of architecture today.

Wittman recounts how, by the turn of the eighteenth century, a growing number of architectural writers from outside the academy vied for its elite readership. The generalist press--the *Mercure Galant* and its successor the *Mercure de France*, the *Journal de Trévoux*, the *Journal des Sçavans*, and countless later periodicals whose significant role Wittman brings to light--began featuring more frequently articles on architecture penned by engaged amateurs. One such author, the guidebook writer Germain Brice, renewed this plebeian genre by incorporating pointed critiques of buildings patterned on academic dictums. Non-professionals such as the royal administrator Michel de Frémin and the canon Jean-Louis de Cordemoy published the inaugural discussions of architectural theory by lay individuals in the first decade of the eighteenth century.[3]   Inspired by academic publications that celebrated architecture as one highly visible component of national policy, these writers judged the merits of recent Parisian constructions in patriotic terms. Wittman demonstrates how they also began to question the government's motives in the guise of aesthetic discussions of building and town planning schemes.

In the wake of the prolonged debates over the papal bull *Unigenitus* that pitted the crown against the *parlements* and that fostered unprecedented political engagement, the 1740s witnessed the increased politicization of architectural discourse. Wittman highlights how critics such as Louis Petit de Bachaumont and Étienne de La Font de Saint-Yenne used architecture to castigate openly royal policy. Despite the absolutist claim of political autonomy, a French monarchy in crisis responded by energetic efforts to cajole public opinion. With special vigor under the directorship of Abel-François Poisson, Marquis de Vandières and then de Marigny (1727-81), the Marquise de Pompadour's brother, the Bâtiments du Roi launched a series of ambitious building projects. State agents such as Charles-Nicolas Cochin the Younger appropriated at the same time the techniques of persuasion of the crown's opponents in propagandistic pamphlets and articles. As Wittman recounts, highly visible initiatives in Paris like the project for a place Louis-XV (from 1748; now the place de la Concorde), the completion of the East façade of the Louvre (from 1754), and especially the new basilica of Sainte-Geneviève (from 1755; now the Pantheon) show that, by mid-century, the government had fully engaged, and not simply censored or ignored, the public debate on architecture generated in the press.

Wittman's story ends with the heightened political climate that followed the accession of Louis XVI to the throne. As the construction of a new Comédie-Française (begun 1767) and a new Théâtre-Italien (begun 1780) unfolded, the state's manipulation of public opinion reached new levels of sophistication adapted to a more strident press. Wittman notes that, by the end of the ancien regime, the emissaries of the crown and their opponents were not the only ones seeking publicity. Architects had also taken to the press to justify their designs or simply to promote their careers. Pierre-Louis Moreau, Charles de Wailly, Victor Louis, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, even Marigny's protégé Jacques-Germain Soufflot felt the need to defend in print architecture's very relevance against a widespread condemnation of its blamable role in the economy of noble luxury and royal excess.

Architecture, Print Culture, and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France successfully foregrounds the socio-political functions of architectural writing. By considering the full range of architectural criticism, and not only its consecrated milestones, Wittman reintegrates to the story of eighteenth-century French architecture previously obscure texts and hitherto peripheral figures. He also brings an altogether new level of sophistication to the analysis of the propagandistic techniques architectural writers used. This is especially apparent in Wittman's superb analyses of the complex debates that took place in the fully developed press after mid-century, particularly those surrounding Sainte-Geneviève. Wittman's study is destined to discredit any historians who would dare, in their discussions of eighteenth-century architectural criticism, to disregard the political agendas of ancien regime spin doctors.

Wittman's casting back of the Habermasian thesis to earlier times proves less convincing, however. As Wittman himself acknowledges, Habermas's project was not that of a historian; rather it was a political scientist's endeavor to find the origins of the modern configurations of power in ancien regime culture (p. 5). Habermas's teleological emphasis undermines the effectiveness of Wittman's thesis, in particular when he examines Louis XIV's reign and the subsequent Regency. Wittman's portrayal of louis-quatorzian rule as an authoritarian regime propped up by propaganda leads to overly simplistic conclusions (pp. 8-10). The alleged opposition of a centralized absolutism associated with classical forms to a localized, residual feudalism represented by the Gothic is too schematic to account for the subtleties of real power struggles. If the crown had found the condemnation of the Gothic so central to its political project, how could one account for Louis XIV's personal decision to impose a Gothic design for Orléans cathedral's west façade, in direct opposition to the classical project proposed by an academy he nominally established (p. 37)? And if, as Wittman supposes, the academy had been so invested in overcoming medieval architecture (p. 24), why did François Blondel, its first director, comment favorably on and even include an elevation of the late-Gothic Milan cathedral in the official *Cours d'architecture* that enshrined academic architectural instruction?[4] Wittman may subscribe too much at times to conceptual generalities to the detriment of concrete evidence.

One can raise similar objections against Wittman's discussion of Regency domestic architecture. He relies here on studies by Katie Scott that depict the rococo as a formal system developed by a marginalized nobility in rebellion with the royal monopoly over politics and the arts.[5] Scott's desire to assign formal systems to political positions distorts the empirical evidence. The rococo forms that would have symbolized noble autonomy were in fact also found at Versailles before the death of Louis XIV. The king's architects, those alleged vectors of academic orthodoxy, also built for the very nobility that opposed the monarchy. Following Scott, Wittman sees the publication of engravings of early eighteenth-century hotels as symptomatic of a decline, resulting from the printing press, of the traditional meaning of buildings that rested on social ritual. Thanks to these engraved surrogates, Wittman argues, plebeian viewers could now experience spaces they would never have accessed otherwise (pp. 40-41). Yet, were not representations of noble dwellings made available in print much earlier that the eighteenth century--one thinks immediately of the suites published by Jean Marot in the 1660s or even Androuet du Cerceau's *Plus Excellents Bastimens de France* from the late 1570s, among countless less famous examples--without a corresponding overturn of the social order or any mutations in the civic public sphere? In fact, as Corinne Le Bitouzé has shown for the first half of the eighteenth century, consumers of such prints belonged themselves to the social elite.[6] These representations functioned more as mirrors of the nobility's ambitions than as instruments for the social empowerment of the lower orders. By wanting to track the earliest signs of democratization generated by the press, Wittman tends to minimize the importance of hierarchic patterns of consumption that regulated printed images and words in court society.

Wittman might have benefitted from fuller discussions of those lucid theoreticians of the ancien regime public that were Jean-Baptiste Du Bos and Antoine Houdar de la Motte (examined by Wittman respectively on p. 38 and p. 74). These authors recognized that the rigid social hierarchies of their time were much more resilient that later Republican advocates of the masses or even twentieth-century political scientists may have believed. Du Bos and Houdar maintained that noble social ordering largely prescribed the legitimacy of the eighteenth-century "public." Thus, as with any luxury products marketed to the elite, social segregation played a major role in the circulation of books. If one wanted to demonstrate the crucial contribution writing made in the severing of traditional social ties by the absolutist monarchy, other documentary sources than books might prove more effective. As analyzed by Daniel Roche, the vast body of administrative and judicial records that governments imposed on their citizens to sanction social relationships after the Renaissance had a much more pervasive impact on eighteenth-century French households than did the press.[7] The choice discussions of architectural matters that concerned only the most privileged of the French king's subjects could never match the omnipresent role that the mandatory possession of legal documents played in the formation of a delocalized public sphere and in the shaping of modern citizenry.

Finally, Wittman's repeated opposition of two models for architectural meaning--the lived-world experience of physical symbols, staged by society's usages and hierarchies, and the abstract universality of aesthetic discourse afforded by the printed word--is perhaps too schematic (pp. 5, 92, and 121). Accounts of the type of embodied spectatorship of architecture that Wittman situates before the invention of printing are conspicuously absent from medieval testimonials, for instance. Thanks to his discussion of Jean-Louis Viel de Saint-Maux's prescient *Lettres sur L'Architecture des Anciens et Celle des Modernes* of 1787, Wittman is well aware that meaning in pre-modern architecture was profoundly symbolic: buildings could "communicate" only insofar as they referred to concepts situated *outside* their physical reality.[8] In their consideration of religious architecture of the Middle Ages, for example, Richard Krautheimer and Günter Bandmann have shown that medieval churches incorporated complex numerologies and learned references to far-away prototypes that encapsulated their significance for the privileged members of these societies.[9] Some of these buildings even featured elements that spectators could never see, such as detailed carvings at the top of spires. Elite medieval observers could only hope to grasp the meaning of such designs through metaphorical exegesis, therefore in language, never solely by means of their personal sensory perception. The symbolic and linguistic nature of architectural meaning in the Middle Ages calls into question whether the invention of printing during the Renaissance constituted an epistemological shift of the same magnitude as the one, in late Antiquity, that transformed into metaphor the hitherto immanent, talismanic presence of architectural form.

None of these observations should diminish the importance of Wittman's remarkable achievement. *Architecture, Print Culture, and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France* is poised to reinvigorate studies of French architecture during the long eighteenth century. Not only does Wittman's publication stress the imperative of a critical use of textual sources by architectural historians. Thanks to the unprecedented range of primary documents and to the detailed discussions served by an elegant writing style, Wittman demonstrates vividly how Paris became a veritable laboratory for architectural modernity at the end of the ancien regime. The publication of the companion volume to this investigation will surely seal the significance of Wittman's contribution to the study of eighteenth-century French architecture, politics, and culture.

NOTES

[1] Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Darmstadt and Neuwied: Hermann Luchterhand Verlag, 1962); translated into English by Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An inquiry into a category of Bourgeois society* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1989).

[2] Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985).

[3] Michel de Frémin, *Mémoires Critiques D'Architecture* (Paris: Chez Charles Saugrain, 1702); Jean-Louis de Cordemoy, *Nouveau Traité De Toute l'Architecture* (Paris: Chez Jean-Baptiste Coignard, 1706).

[4] Nicolas-François Blondel, *Cours d'Architecture Enseigné Dans L'Académie Royale D'Architecture* (Paris: De l'Imprimerie de Lambert Roulland and chez Pierre Auboin & François Clouzier; and Chez L'Auteur et Nicolas Langlois, 1675-83), 774-78, plate on p. 777.

[5] Katie Scott, *The Rococo Interior: Decoration and Social Spaces in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1995).

[6] Corinne Le Bitouzé, "Le commerce de l'estampe à Paris dans la première moitié du XVIIIe siècle," (Ph.D. dissertation, École nationale des chartes, 1986), 216-17.

[7] See for instance Daniel Roche, "Les façons de lire," in *Le peuple de Paris: essai sur la culture populaire du XVIIIe siècle*, 2nd edition (Paris: Fayard, 1998), 271-320; translated into English as *The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture in the Eighteenth- Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).

[8] Jean-Louis Viel de Saint-Maux, *Lettres sur L'Architecture des Anciens et Celle des Modernes Dans lesquelles se trouve développé le génie symbolique qui présida aux Monuments de l'Antiquité* (Brussels: s.n., 1787). Wittman introduces Viel de Saint-Maux on pp. 1-2.

[9] Richard Krautheimer, "Introduction to an 'Iconography of Mediæval Architecture'," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942): 1-33; Günter Bandmann, *Mittelalterliche Architektur als Bedeutungsträger* (Berlin: Gebrüder Mann Verlag, 1951), translated into English as *Early Medieval Architecture as Bearer of Meaning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

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