



Berthold Lubetkin: Architecture and the Tradition of Progress

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The very last chapter of the book, however, is a great piece. Dennis Maher's essay on architectural dilemmas in the declining rust-belt city of Buffalo, New York, points out that the literal ruins, which are the obverse of the shiny surfaces of signature architecture, entail situations in which despair is not the only option. Nor does Maher take "death" at face value, noting that complexities in how death is understood both medically and anthropologically might have implications for how we understand what – analogically – we call the death of buildings or cities. His writing is attuned to the specificities of place and history in

a way that most of the essays in this collection are not; it tries out ideas as an essay/assay should, without its theoretical apparatus being overbearing – could a general revivification of architectural theory be as engaged and as deft?

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NOTE

1. Adolf Loos, "Architecture", in *Architecture*, trans. Michael Mitchell, (Riverside, Calif.: Ariadne Press, 2002), 83. First published 1910.

Berthold Lubetkin: Architecture and the Tradition of Progress

John Allan

Artifice Books on Architecture

London; 2012

632 pages

If John Allan's architectural biography of the Russian émigré architect Berthold Lubetkin were itself a building, its careful attention to detail, as well as its capacity for intellectual synthesis, would make it an impressive construction. The book takes the reader into the very nitty-gritty of Lubetkin's architectural planning and detailed design, while also providing a resonant, historical account of modernism in the United Kingdom and Europe. First published in 1992, the book was reprinted in 2012 with the inclusion of more illustrative content and a colour photo essay documenting many of Lubetkin's extant works in their current condition. In the case of several of Lubetkin's best-known buildings, including Highpoint, the Penguin Pool at London Zoo and Finsbury Health Centre, their current condition is the result of significant conservation and restoration work carried out by Allan's own firm, Avanti Architects, over several decades. *Berthold Lubetkin: Architecture and the Tradition of Progress* is not, however, a book

that draws attention to Avanti's contribution to protecting Lubetkin's architectural legacy, considerable though that has been. Rather, the book is unswervingly focused on Lubetkin himself and his work. The depth and range of sources that Allan has consulted to document Lubetkin's life and work would be impressive for a full-time scholar, but is quite remarkable when we consider that this is the labour of a career architect. When originally published in 1992, Allan's account of Lubetkin's life was based on nearly a quarter of a century of interest and research, an interest that might now be described as lifelong. This book is unusual, and commendable, in bringing together Allan's insights as a practising architect intimately engaged with Lubetkin's oeuvre, combined with his sensitivity to the language of architectural history and theory.

The book is organised into four parts. The first part includes an account of Lubetkin's childhood, the impact of the Russian Revolution on his outlook and his years of wandering and architectural education in Poland, France and Germany. It also considers the circumstances by which he settled and established himself in England, as well as the formation of his architectural practice Tecton and the development of his intellectual and architectural world view. Part II examines the work of Tecton in the 1930s, the period in which the firm designed all of its best-known work. The successive chapters in this section examine houses, the surprisingly extensive range of zoo work, the multi-unit housing –

especially Highpoint – and, finally, Lubetkin's productive collaboration with Finsbury Council that produced, among other things, the famous Finsbury Health Centre. Part III focuses on his disillusionment during the postwar years.

In that period, the large-scale intervention of the state into architecture and planning promised to deliver precisely the kind of socially directed architecture that Lubetkin had championed since his coming of age in Russia in the days of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. But the reality proved to be a denial of Lubetkin's architectural dream. This period was punctuated by Lubetkin's ambitious, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to shape the planning and design of a major new town for coalmining families, which was to be known as Peterlee. The demise of Lubetkin's vision for the new town precipitated his partial withdrawal from architecture and retreat to a farm in Gloucestershire. Allan reveals in this section that this was not the retirement from architecture that has sometimes been depicted, and that in many ways this period of settled family life in the country saw Lubetkin refresh and renew his architectural concerns. A final, very brief, fourth part looks at the revival of Lubetkin's reputation and of interest in both his work and his political outlook in the 1980s.

In the early parts of the book, Allan relies heavily on Lubetkin's own recollections to reconstruct the key events and influences in his early life. These recollections were formulated much later in Lubetkin's life, both in writing and interviews. The author treats these recollections with some scepticism, as they often involve tremendously lucid reconstructions of key moments and insights connected to the developing culture and politics of the Russian Revolution, for example, or his impressions of Paris in the 1920s. Writing in the 1970s, recalling his impressions of the Paris of the 1925 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, Lubetkin notes:

[I]t seemed to me that the synthesis of reason and emotion is most clearly visible and expressed in classical buildings in Paris, which is not by any means all Art Deco, but is permeated with the spirit of classicism in the sense of unity and order that precipitates consistency and meaning over the entire town. Such classical monuments appear as

nodal points in which aesthetic judgement, systematic thought and creative imagination overlap in a rigorous orchestration of parts. (58)

Allan treats this carefully constructed observation on architecture and urbanism by Lubetkin not as the unmediated impressions of a young man, but as the thoroughly digested architectural philosophy of Lubetkin in his maturity. Allan's sceptical reflections on his sources reveal a genuine historian at work. Nevertheless, his rather narrow reliance on Lubetkin's writing in this early part of the book creates the impression that the insights of the book might be somewhat limited.

It is an impression, however, that is quickly dispelled. For example, Allan's panorama of European modernism in the 1920s demonstrates how the author's understanding of different strands of architectural education goes beyond the well-known clichés. In doing so, it provides a powerful background to the account of Lubetkin's architectural training and experiences in the period before he arrived in England. When Lubetkin arrives in England, Allan's hand is only strengthened. Allan looks at London, English architecture and his own society through the eyes of Lubetkin. The text conveys a palpable pleasure in examining and depicting the cultural history of England in the 1930s through the filter of his rootless, sometimes militant, but brilliantly observant subject. Allan concludes a section on Lubetkin's early impression of England by confirming that Lubetkin's attraction to "such an apparently somnolent culture" was, indeed, genuine. In these impressions, Allan concludes:

[It] is invariably the positive side of the English cultural stereotype that is emphasised – the tolerance rather than the inertia; the informality rather than the muddle; "social discipline" as a force for change rather than social convention as an intractable obstruction. (104)

Allan's attempt to come to terms with Lubetkin's fundamental convictions regarding the role of the artist in society, the significance of technology in architecture and the social obligations and implications of modernism also point to Allan's erudition. His capacity to convey the stakes involved in architecture for Lubetkin,

as a committed Marxist, with a clearly articulated set of theoretical commitments, reveals Allan's capacity for writing engaging cultural history. To read this book is not only to learn a great deal about a set of influential architectural projects by Berthold Lubetkin, it is a cogent portrait of a society in transition: its planning problems, its building regulations, its constructional habits and its cultural tastes. These are all brought together through the eyes of this energetic, politically engaged and personally ambitious architect.

Architecturally, the portrait of Lubetkin is complex. There is no mistaking Allan's admiration for Lubetkin's work. But its failings and its obvious sources of inspiration are also brought unfailingly to the reader's attention. Allan recognises, for example, that some of Lubetkin's most salient motifs and planning devices had already been developed by others. His emphasis on the promenade at Highpoint, for example – the sense of formalised passage through a series of changing space – was overtly indebted to Le Corbusier, as was his propensity for a curving entrance canopy in counterpoint to a strictly rectilinear arrangement in the main block.

On one or two occasions the long gestation of the book is revealed by seemingly odd comparisons, such as when Allan makes an argument for the complexity and contradiction of Highpoint Two – the building that controversially included two prominently placed

caryatids supporting the entrance canopy. The unmistakable impression is that Allan wrote the section, or at least structured his thinking about Highpoint, around an architectural problematic introduced by Robert Venturi in the late 1960s. But this sense of being out of sync, or unconcerned with scholarly trends, is also a strength of Allan's book. It is not as though the book is lacking in ideas. Allan's discussion of Lubetkin's attempts to resolve the perennial tension between formal innovation and political and social utility is one of the most engaging I have read.

The book's long period of research also perhaps accounts for its immense size. It weighs too much to be easily carried around, and the load could have been lightened by the omission of some of the pictorial material. I am not convinced, for example, that the inclusion of Lubetkin's report card from his time studying at the Warsaw Polytechnic is really justified. Nevertheless, in terms of architectural publishing, where over-scaled, empty gestures are all too common, this book sits decisively on the other side of the ledger. It is a work of genuine scholarship and a handsomely illustrated volume that rewards both deep reading and casual perusal.

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Fascism, Architecture, and the Claiming of Modern Milan, 1922–1943

Lucy M. Mulsby

University of Toronto Press

Toronto; Buffalo; London; 2014

247 pages

Milan, the economic capital of Italy, has experienced radical transformations throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Recent publications have looked with interest at the

impressive urban redevelopments of contemporary Milan, including Maria Vittoria Capitanucci in *Milano: Le Nuove Architetture* (2012) and my own book, co-authored with Marco Biraghi, *Storia dell'Architettura Italiana 1985–2015*. Conversely and somewhat bravely, Lucy M. Mulsby's new book deals with a less popular period in the history of Milan, that of fascism, viewing it without political prejudice. In this light, the fascist period can be seen as a rich and constructive experience for the city, one that radically transformed and improved the urban quality of Milan, adding numerous institutional and civic buildings as well as infrastructure projects to the city that still serve its connection to the nation beyond.