

Parallel (of Life and) Architecture; Not Quite Architecture: Writing Around Alison and Peter Smithson

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Parallel (of Life and) Architecture

The Andrew Brownsword Galleries, Edge Arts, The University of Bath, UK.

Friday, 22nd September–Saturday 4th November, 2017.

M. Christine Boyer, *Not Quite Architecture: Writing Around Alison and Peter Smithson*.

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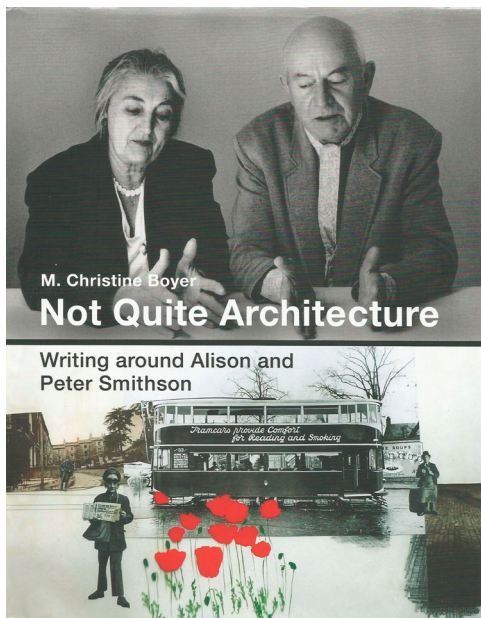
Two recent works—a book and an exhibition—draw attention to the wide-ranging activities of Alison and Peter Smithson, shifting the focus away from their built work. *Parallel (of Life and) Architecture*, which was exhibited at Edge Arts in Bath during the autumn, was a riff on the often-mentioned (but perhaps less well-known) 1953 Exhibition *Parallel of Life and Art* at the ICA, London, planned by Eduardo Paolozzi, Nigel Henderson and the Smithsons. As M. Christine Boyer notes in *Not Quite Architecture*, ‘The original title [“Sources”] referred to the exhibition’s images being drawn from life, nature, industry, building, and the new landscape revealed by scientific instruments ... The exhibition’s creators believed that such material formed a background for anyone trying to look closely at the modern world, a background so taken for granted that it sank beneath the threshold of conscious perception.’ (p. 53) In many ways this intention can be read as central to both Boyer’s book and the Bath

Exhibition. Whilst neither is reverential, both remain loyal to the Smithsons’ working practices, drawing our attention to their breadth of interest and reference, and the many ways in which they attempted to look again at a familiar environment.

There were three contributions to the Bath show, by three ‘duos’ of architects, artists and designers—Assemble and Simon Terrill; The Decorators and GOIG; Sophie Warren and Jonathan Mosley. The location itself provided a quietly resonant backdrop to the work presented, as the Exhibition was situated in the Andrew Brownsword Galleries, Feilden Clegg Bradley Studio’s 2015 extension to the Smithsons’ University Arts Theatre (which was never fully completed) on the ‘Edge’ of the Bath University site, with which the Smithsons were so closely associated. Their 6 *East* building sits just across the way. Each collaborative ‘duo’ in the show produced a large-scale multi-media installation that explicitly responded to ideas that the Smithsons developed during the 1950s.

The process of working collectively in a gallery space was a significant activity within the Smithsons’ developing *œuvre*, rather than a show-and-tell display of work already done, ideas already formed. Making a broader point concerning a series of the Smithsons’ writings on ‘Initiators and Successors’, Boyer describes their attitude towards found objects and inherited sites as ‘elaborative acts’ that acknowledge the originator while taking up the challenge and responsibility of re-energising these. (p. 259) The three contributions to the Bath show were elaborations on particular concerns, ways of looking and communicating that characterised the Smithsons’ *œuvre*.

Figure 1. Cover,
M. Christine Boyer, *Not
Quite Architecture:
Writing Around Alison
and Peter Smithson*.



Boyer's well-illustrated book (Fig. 1) covers a great deal of ground, supported by exhaustive archival work, including a significant range of little- and un-known material. It delivers on the promise of its subtitle: *Writing Around Alison and Peter Smithson*. Rather than focussing on their built output, Boyer's interest is expansive, and works to situate the Smithsons' interests and activities within a range of post-war cultural, artistic, architectural and urban contexts. Throughout the first half of the book, the Smithsons provide Boyer as much with an anchor as a focus, one that allows her to revisit the complex inter-related, inter-generational histories of CIAM and Team 10, the rival publications *AR*

and *AD*, and the competing architectural and urban agendas they were promoting, caricatured by many as a choice between memory, craft, sentimentality and character (promoted through the *AR*'s quasi-Picturesque *Townscape Analysis*) or a forward-thinking, bricolage and pop-culture influenced advocacy of bold change.

Boyer borrows her main title, *Not Quite Architecture*, from an occasional column Alison Smithson wrote in the *Architects' Journal* (under her middle and maiden names Margaret Gill) during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Boyer's analysis enjoys the double-edged overtones of this title, rebuffing criticisms of the Smithsons' approach to practice (as not quite architectural enough for many people's acceptance) while signalling the sheer breadth of their prodigious interests and output (not quite, or not just, architecture).

Boyer's own agenda is explicit, joining the disputed definitions of 'New Brutalism' with a very particular reading of continuity across all spheres of Alison and Peter Smithson's lives, and through five decades of work: not so much a parallel of life and architecture as an inseparable mixture. Boyer argues 'that contrary to a widely credited narrative, Alison and Peter Smithson had never been stridently anti-Picturesque to begin with. Nor did they refuse to acknowledge the traditions of predecessors, or to accept less than a full ethical responsibility for place and people.' (p. 33) Boyer collects enough archival ballast (the main text runs to just shy of 400 pages) to provide almost single-handedly a revisionist reading of the Smithsons.

The trajectory of the book moves from this very wide social and architectural context, where earlier

chapters present various topics that can be read in parallel, through to later chapters that focus increasingly on later, and more fragmented, aspects of their thinking and (auto)biographies. In the first half of the book in particular, Boyer retains a certain focus on the terms and modes of communicating that were central to, and underscored the development of, the Smithsons' thinking, with particular attention to the scrap book, the found object and their invention of new or compound words and playful textual/graphic layout. Boyer effectively redeploys the Smithsons' collaged approach to writing, with her treatment of the various chapters here running through the same time period but using different threads (magazines, fashion, cars, the IG, America, AD, AR and so on), requiring the reader to develop a sideways look that can make creative connections between them.

Separately and together, the three contributions to the Bath Exhibition instigate a similar, knowing play with the Smithsons' approach to collaging and the creative de-coding that this inspires (or requires). Whereas Boyer judiciously side-steps any temptation to speculate openly about the Smithsons' relevance today, this was a challenge the three installations could not avoid, invited as they were to respond to the legacy of Alison and Peter Smithson. In particular, the works by Assemble and Simon Terrill (*The Ostrich and the Kipper*) and The Decorators and GOIG (*Transformations of the City. Bath: a Re-contextualized, Re-scaled, Re-enactment*) presented 'elaborative acts' that operated through a faithful collaging of specific works by the Smithsons (figs 2, 3).

The Ostrich and the Kipper riffed on and remixed images from the film 'Smithsons on Housing' (Editor

Dan Rae; Produced by B. S. Johnson, 28 mins, colour), broadcast in the UK on BBC2 television on 10th July, 1970. The gallery was organised around a recreated façade section from Robin Hood Gardens (1966–72), the focus of the original film and still in process in both film and gallery (the latter smelling of plaster and cement and augmented by a heap of damp sand). Around this central section, various flat-collaged 'portraits' and objects were arranged, and a looped remix of the film projected. This gathering and curatorial approach made explicit reference to 'Parallel of Life and Art' and to a later installation the Smithsons produced, again with Paolozzi, Henderson, called 'Patio and Pavilion', part of the 'This is Tomorrow' Exhibition (1956).

Similarly, *Transformations of the City. Bath*, faithfully recreated at half scale the Smithsons' *Transformations of the City*, which was installed at the 1968 Milan Triennale *Urban Decoration* (it never opened due to student protests and occupations). The Smithsons' original intention had been to celebrate 'dressability,' the capacity of buildings to respond temporarily to everyday and festive change. Within the inherited format, the content was altered to relate to contemporary uses of Bath, both as a tourist (and especially a hen-party) destination and as a location for traditional festivals enjoyed by its citizens. The physical centre of the installation mapped out Peter Smithson's favourite walks around Bath, which he published in *AD*, along with remarks on walks in Oxford and Cambridge, a telling triumvirate of cities singled out for the ways they revealed a certain continuity of their past within the present.

Figure 2. "The Ostrich and the Kipper" by Assemble and Simon Terrill. (Installation image by Paul Blakemore, photographer.)



Whilst Boyer links this process (to which she refers in a more theoretically developed form as 'transmissability') to the Smithsons' particular identification with the Picturesque, and thus to their ideas of responsibility and continuity in architecture, the installation by The Decorators and GOIG pointed to the recent failures to maintain 'dressability' or 'transmissability' in this city. Mixed into the examples of festival architecture around the wall panels was a more pointed account of a current dispute concerning park-and-ride provision in the city, emblematic of a broader discontent

voiced by Bath's populace concerning the city's struggle to accommodate the modern needs of its citizens. Coinciding with the Exhibition's run were significant local protests, including those fronted by the internationally respected film director and Bath resident Ken Loach, about the lack of provision for residents. Loach's criticisms of the local council's attitude towards architectural and urban heritage were voiced in very similar terms to the Smithsons' attack on irresponsibility in architecture, linked explicitly to consumerism and tourism.



Figure 3.
“Transformations of the
City” by The Decorators
and GOIG. (Installation
image by Paul
Blakemore,
photographer.)

Although Boyer never suggests the Smithsons were out to develop a ‘theory of everything’, her consistent address to their whole *œuvre* reinforces the breadth of interests and continuities they believed should be acknowledged in architectural responsibility. Reflecting the desired flexibility of architecture and urbanism, the Smithsons’ playful, unstable language was integral to fostering the development and communication of their core ideas and understanding, yet it is precisely in the operation of this language that Boyer’s most far-reaching critique is located. While acknowledging their determination to ensure that words and terms changed along with the ideas and concepts

they were wrestling with, Boyer points to a significant blind-spot within the Smithsons’ *œuvre*, namely, their ‘inability to develop a critical position on the language they were inventing’, a shortcoming that led to ‘disillusionment and bitterness in the 1970s and 1980s’. (p. 88) Boyer also notes a certain bitterness in Alison Smithson’s reflections on their ill-fated Robin Hood Gardens, where she blamed the residents for failing to develop or sustain sufficient social collectivity for the architectural arrangement to work.

Boyer also draws critical attention to Alison Smithson’s contradictory conceptual developments from this project and the state of the nation more gener-

ally, described as a 'full retreat from the utopia of the present and ideals of "identity", "association", or "cluster"' (p. 281) These ideals ran through much of the Smithsons' thinking, and were influenced by the anthropo-sociological writings of Erwin Anton Gutkind. The Smithsons believed architecture should respond to these observed tendencies for people to gather and interact in particular ways with 'groupings' across all scales. As they explained in their own words, this manifested in '[t]he search for groupings answering *patterns of association*, *patterns of movement*, also able to give *identity*, response to place, to topography, to local climate'. (Alison and Peter Smithson, 'Cluster (1950–55)', in *The Charged Void: Urbanism*, [New York, Monacelli Press, 2004], p.19.)

Rather than a larger-scale architecture and mixed community envisioned by their earlier ideas, within which more specific 'patterns of associations' would form between 'like-minded people', these later developments (or 'retreats', to stick with Boyer's critique) seemed to promote more fragmented solutions, a shift that was put under pressure by the Sophie Warren and Jonathan Mosley installation at Bath, *A Nodding Acquaintance*. This installation was a direct response to the Smithsons' diagram showing a 'Hierarchy of Association' (1958, published in *Ordinariness and Light* [London, Faber & Faber, 1970], p.11). Observing the complex relationships between people at different scales from house to city, the Smithsons developed the notion of 'cluster' to guide an architecture that they believed would respond to and support these complex, quasi-natural patterns of human relationships. Whilst Warren and Mosley's installation included a

timber framework that quotes from the Smithsons' abstract cluster ideograms, the size, intention and material realisation of this framework was such that it began to undermine the Smithsons' mega-structural propositions with a more delicate, human scale. In this sense, Warren and Mosley's framework drew upon Michelangelo Pistoletto's 'minus objects' such as *Structure for Chatting while Standing Up* (*Struttura per parlare in piedi*, 1965–66) in its detailed attention to the dynamics of standing, leaning and sitting.

Whilst this framework made a nodding reference to the abstract cluster concept, the broader environment of Warren and Mosley's installation put the cluster, and the attendant discourse concerning individual, group and national identity, under greater scrutiny. Described as the location for a possible street party, the gallery space was hung with lengths of Union Jack bunting which had been painted over in ghostly white, through which the familiar flag was barely legible. These moves both echoed and troubled the Smithsons' own considerations of 'Englishness' as these were in play in the post-war era, updated for a Brexit-era uncertainty. A further unsettling was provided by a live-feed taken from an overhead camera and relayed to a large screen lying horizontally on the floor, catching the viewer in a disconcerting, disembodied and looped spectacle of their own presence. With an economy of means that set this apart from the other two installations, *A Nodding Acquaintance* played on the promise, awkwardness and ambivalence of the cluster concept and the notions of identity it supported (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. "A Nodding Acquaintance" by Sophie Warren and Jonathan Mosley. (Installation image by Paul Blakemore, photographer.)

This fragile sense of identity, and of 'Englishness' in particular, runs through Boyer's text. Some of the historical discourse she relates, from specific examples such as the Festival of Britain to the broader bucolic notions of the English countryside, both chime and jar with the current discourse on national identity boiling up as Britain prepares to leave the European Union. The Smithsons placed great importance on driving around the country, and on continental and global travel and experience more broadly for their sensibility and work. Boyer notes Peter Smithson's childhood impressions of the slag heaps around

Stockton on Tees where he grew up (referenced as landscape features in Robin Hood Gardens), as well as the broader 'literature and landscape of northern England, where such places [enjoying layers of inhabitation marking each part and blending into a whole] abounded'. (p. 394) Despite these pointers, the impression that comes across is that England is like Bath, Cambridge or Oxford, those cities valorised by the Smithsons in their work and discussed much more extensively by Boyer.

This skewed version of what might constitute the English Picturesque is important, given how much

of Boyer's analysis is organised around this particular issue. The Smithsons' advocacy of the as-found that informed their understanding of the Picturesque is increasingly pitted against the promise of modern, technologised architecture for a new society. In her analysis of this debate, Boyer is generally very down on Rayner Banham, or more precisely his contribution to (and claims for propriety concerning) 'new Brutalism' and the disputed take on the Picturesque. Indeed, Banham comes across as the *bête-noir*, and is probably the most consistent through-line in the book apart from the Smithsons themselves. The arguments they had regarding the social and technological role of architecture, as well as more particular concerns around the housing crisis and the role of infrastructure, draw our attention to how current some of these issues remain, while at the same time acknowledging the gulf separating the post-war situation from the present. In contrast perhaps, their concern regarding a collective understanding of and investment in a 'language' of architecture reads as a pursuit from a bygone era. Boyer presents the Smithsons as the conscious inheritors of a modern

tradition, who tried to curate and care for this, invigorate it and pass it on to a younger generation. They 'belonged to the last notable cohort of twentieth-century architects to be collectively concerned with social issues, owning a complete set of concepts and methods for dealing with the land and creating places worth inheriting, their local character preserved or reclaimed'. (p. 394)

The significance of Boyer's work as an architectural historian is to scrutinise and make sense of the vast archive produced by the Smithsons during half a century of life and work, rather than to indicate their ongoing relevance directly. As the three installations at Bath made plain, such connections can be fruitful and provocative, despite—or because of—the tensions internal to their *œuvre* and those produced across time.

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