

*Craft, Space and Interior Design 1855-2005*, Sandra Alfody & Janice Helland (eds), Ashgate, 2008, 244pp, £55, 48 b&w illus., cloth, ISBN 978-0-7546-5706-4.

This volume is an eclectic mixture of essays united, at times somewhat tenuously, by the title - *Craft, Space and Interior Design 1855-2005*. Edited by Sandra Alfody and Janice Helland, the book contains thirteen essays by academics from Canada and the United Kingdom. Subjects range from a Scottish arts and crafts house to social housing in America during the 1930s, twentieth century studio ceramics and contemporary artist designed rooms at Toronto's Gladstone Hotel. In price, length, eclecticism and a number of the contributors this volume follows closely the template of the earlier Ashgate published book, *Women artists and the decorative arts, 1880-1935: the gender of ornament* (2002). Both books seek to bring together extremely disparate subjects, writers and approaches and package them under an over-arching title.

John Potvin's opening essay, *Hot by design: the secret life of a Turkish bath in Victorian London* is positively dripping with suggestive language from the description of the hot room as the 'climax of the homosocial ritual' (p20) to the supposition that the baths are 'spaces in which masculinity and sexuality are as slippery as the soapy passageways of the baths themselves' (p.22). Potvin offers a fascinating account of the first Turkish baths opened in Victorian London. Described as a venue where 'male homosociability was performed and enjoyed' the writer offers an insight in to the world of the Victorian male at leisure but when he seeks to link the Victorian Turkish bath to the modern gay bathhouse it seems rather crammed in to the final two pages, rendering the connection rather unconvincing. It is to be a recurring theme in this volume that a number of the papers end rather abruptly.

Jim Cheshire's *Space and the Victorian ecclesiastical interior* investigates the personal in the ecclesiastical space and the ways in which crafted objects could reflect this and therefore control the space. His description of the inclusion of heraldic encaustic tiles (p.34) as a way of appropriating space in a church via hand-crafted items gels perfectly with both the title of the book and its aims as expressed by the editors. The account of the church furnishing factories/workshops and how most had to also use craft as well as industrial skills is well made and adds complexity to an area of debate which has become rather simplified. An interesting counterpoint to Cheshire's discussion of Victorian church interiors is Joseph

McBrinn's *Crafts as union, craft as demarcation: the decoration at Belfast Cathedral*. Looking in some detail at the work undertaken in St Anne's Church of Ireland Cathedral in Belfast between 1925 and 1927 it deals with issues around space, craft, gender and politics. McBrinn outlines how in the cathedral 'spatial demarcation was clearly articulated in the sexual division of labour' (p.80). Despite having carved much of the decorative stonework in the Cathedral, the stone carver Rosamond Praeger was not credited, rather the architect Sir Charles Nicholson was. The essay begins with an account of the work done for the cathedral before looking at the role of women and the crafts but rather than returning to the cathedral it too ends rather suddenly. It is often good to leave one's audience wanting more but in this volume a number of the essays are just too short to allow the arguments to fully develop.

The role of women in the crafts during the 1920s is further explored in Janice Helland's *'Design beauty': sensuality, tea and gesso*. Businesswoman Kate Cranston employed Charles Rennie Mackintosh to design the Ingram Street Tea Rooms (1900) and the Willow Tea Rooms (1903). Mackintosh then commissioned Margaret Macdonald to design and make gesso panels for the tea rooms. Helland argues that crafts can 'control the way in which an interior is inhabited and how it is used' (p.45), offering insights in to the spaces and the social conventions they encouraged and enforced. One such insight is Helland's account of the fictitious working-class character Erchie, written about in short sketches in Glasgow's *Evening News* by the novelist Neil Munroe. In one such sketch, Erchie and his coalman friend Duffy visit Cranston's tea rooms and demonstrate the various reasons why the tea rooms were 'not for the likes of them'. In response to Duffy's request for a pie Erchie informs him that 'the chairs are not for eating pies on' and when Duffy declares his spoon was bashed out of shape 'I tellt him that was whit made it Art' (sic, p.48). Helland concludes that Duffy could not belong to the world of the tea room and argues that 'decorative craft might be employed to restrict or control how a particular space is used' (p.56).

Several of the essays in this volume look at the ways in which modernism was a rather more complex ideology than many texts allow. Elizabeth Cumming's *Scottish everyday art, or how tradition shaped modernism* looks at the *Exhibition of Scottish Everyday Art* held in Edinburgh in 1936 and designed by Basil Spence. The exhibition is used as a lens through which to investigate changing attitudes towards industry, Modernism and Scottish industrial decline.

Tag Gronberg's article, *Josef Frank's 'Aralia': from houseplant to 'Djungle'* begins with artist Simon Starling's 'vast printed textile curtain' (p.152) *Blue, Red, Green, Yellow, Djungle* (2002) – a reworking of the Austrian Architect and designers Josef Frank's 'Aralia' textile pattern. Gronberg is interested in the importance of textiles within modernism and whilst 'Starling's installation is considered in conjunction with Frank's 'Aralia' as part of ongoing debates on the transformative and utopian aspirations of modern design' (p.152), the essay concentrates on Frank's work during the 1920s and 1930s. Frank's approach was a more 'organic and 'humane' form of modern design than that offered by a 1920s machine aesthetic' (p.155) and Gronberg seeks to contrast Frank's 'organic' approach with the more hard-line modernism of the Wiener Werkstätte.

Cynthia Imogen Hammond, *The interior of modernism: Catherine Bauer and the American housing movement* offers an interesting counterpoint to Gronberg's account of Frank's desire to produce modern architecture which was responsive to the client's needs. Bauer was an advocate for modern architecture to respond to the needs of the poor and the homeless. Her career was focused on the question 'how do people really want to live?' (p.171) and on how to produce 'a new architecture for a democratic society'. Whilst in her early career she was a champion of modernist architecture and its ability to deliver social housing she came to lament its ability to ignore the needs of the masses when designing mass housing. By the late 1950s the 'modest public housing envisaged by Bauer and others had been eclipsed by a rigid, monumental formalism that flattered the privileged and ghettoised the poor' (p.181). Bauer criticised Le Corbusier, Gropius and Mies van der Rohe for 'building monuments to an affluent society' (p.181) rather than considering the people who had to live in their social housing.

As an undergraduate studying the History of Art in the early 1990s my annual exam consisted of a brown envelope containing a number of pairs of black and white photographs. The idea was to identify the images, date them and make a useful comparison between the pair. However, the lack of colour made the comparison between a Titian and a Giorgione painting somewhat dependent upon tone and line rather than the colour which was so crucial a part of the Venetian painting of the period. The exam was literally an academic exercise and its usefulness questionable. This volume suffers in a similar way – the images are all in black and white and for a book bringing together articles about craft, space and

interior design, the issue of colour is not insignificant. Design history, the crafts and interior design are part of our visual culture yet the articles we read are so often accompanied by illustrations which are there as little more than a way to break up large expanses of text. The images are rarely discussed or used in a meaningful or innovative way. Whilst one understands the economic reason for black and white illustrations in academic journals, the lack of them in a book which retails at £55 is harder to justify, although it is undoubtedly a matter of cost and the low print run of such academic volumes.

It is the eclecticism of this book which makes it an enjoyable and stimulating read and whilst there are themes running through it the reader looking for overall coherence between the essays and in keeping with the title may be disappointed. Whilst in these times of economic belt tightening I would not recommend that you go out and buy this frighteningly expensive volume, if you can persuade a friendly librarian to order a copy on your behalf then it is a book which merits persistence in the reader, provided you are not expecting any colour for your librarian's money.

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