Forty Ways To Think About Architecture

Architectural history and theory today

Edited by Iain Borden, Murray Fraser and Barbara Penner

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Iain Borden
Murray Fraser
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To Adrian

A brilliant and generous teacher, writer, colleague and friend.

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Acknowledgements

When, in June 2013, we first began this volume to celebrate Adrian's career, we set ourselves two very ambitious goals: first, to produce the volume *before* Adrian's official retirement (in September 2014); and second – and even more optimistic – to keep the volume a secret from Adrian until publication. We gave our project the code name 'Quaranta', and swore everyone – all 40 contributors and the many others who were involved in editing and production – to secrecy.

Miraculously, to our knowledge, nobody slipped up. We are most grateful for the amazing efficiency, enthusiasm and, above all, discretion displayed on the part of everyone who made this volume possible. It is hard to believe that a collection of essays like this one can be produced in such a short space of time – surely there is no better testimony to the regard and affection in which Adrian is held than this.

In particular, we would like to gratefully acknowledge the help and support of Briony Fer. From digging out images from Adrian's slide and photo collections to giving us by-proxy permission to reprint 'Future Imperfect', this would have been a much poorer collection without Briony as our co-conspirator.

This project has benefited greatly from excellent administrative and editorial support. Danielle Willkens did a truly exceptional job at keeping on top of contributions and coordinating the submissions – she acted with real skill, patience and tact. Helen Castle and the editorial team at Wiley (especially Calver Lezama and Miriam Murphy) provided outstandingly efficient support in terms of editing and production. We thank them most sincerely for their efforts.

While not being a 'Bartlett' book per se, it never could have happened without the generous financial support from the Bartlett School of Architecture and its then Director, Marcos Cruz, who wished to recognise Adrian's outstanding contribution to the school over forty years in a suitably substantial and lasting way.

Thanks also, of course, to all of the many contributors, who responded so magnificently to our request for ideas, texts and images in a ridiculously short time frame. Without you, it never would have happened.

Introduction

IAIN BORDEN, MURRAY FRASER, BARBARA PENNER

Adrian Forty started teaching at the Bartlett School of Architecture in autumn 1973. At the same time he was taken on as a doctoral student by Reyner Banham, and soon became regarded as a protégé of that renowned British architectural historian and critic. Banham left The Bartlett for the State University of New York at Buffalo in summer 1976, at which juncture Mark Swenarton, another of Banham's doctoral students, joined The Bartlett's history and theory staff. Together, Forty and Swenarton founded a new master's programme which ran for the very first time in the 1981–2 academic year. At that point the course was called the MSc History of Modern Architecture; later on it would become the MA Architectural History. Adrian continued to teach the first-year undergraduate programme in architectural history and theory while co-running the MSc course, first with Murray Fraser, then with Iain Borden, and then with a group of colleagues that included Ben Campkin, Barbara Penner, Peg Rawes and Jane Rendell. Adrian has also been a revered doctoral supervisor, world-famous scholar and a much-valued mentor and colleague. Finally, he retired from the Bartlett in summer 2014, fittingly 40 academic years since he first began there.

This book is not intended as a simple festschrift to celebrate Adrian's retirement. Rather, we see it as an opportunity for a wide spectrum of scholars and architects – again, 40 in total – to use the opportunity to write about what has happened to architectural history and theory in the four decades that Adrian was at The Bartlett. Some of the contributors refer to Adrian's ideas and writings, while others choose to write on themes which might be inspired from having read his books and essays, or which they simply feel he might enjoy. The essays look at the many scales of architecture from its

urban manifestations to how buildings are conceived, built and occupied, then down to a closer look at construction materials and details. We have invited art historians and design historians as well as those who are more directly engaged in designing or teaching architecture. The net result is a rich mix of contemporary thinking about architecture, summed up in readable and lively essays rather than scholarly prose.

'FUTURE IMPERFECT'

The essays in this book bear testament to the richness, diversity and influence of Adrian's thinking, teaching and writing about architecture. Indeed, we are delighted to be able to include here, in the opening essay, the text of Adrian's inaugural professorial lecture at UCL, which he delivered in December 2000 (see Chapter One). Entitled 'Future Imperfect', this lecture provides a valuable insight into some of the main ingredients of Adrian's approach to architecture, including his reflections on how these relate to Reyner Banham's own inaugural professorial lecture at UCL which had been delivered exactly – to the day – 30 years previously. 'Future Imperfect' thus takes us through a remarkable range of considerations, including the value of studying actual works of architecture as well as their representations, the significance of everyday buildings as well as the canonical works of famous architects, and the dialogue which the historian can construct between 'theory' and architectural objects.

Adrian photographing the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, closely watched by his younger daughter, Olivia.

But this lecture was also far more than a reflective consideration on methods and principles. Typically, and essentially for Adrian, it is also a reflection on both an unusual theme – imperfection – and a series of actual objects. So in his talk Adrian takes us on at once a conceptual journey, guiding us through notions of perfection and imperfection from Aristotle and Alberti to Ruskin and Godard, and also a tour of architecture as buildings and objects, from the medieval Abbeville Cathedral to 20th-century works by Perret, Le Corbusier, Price, Gehry and Koolhaas, as well as to much less well-known buildings such as a social housing estate on the edge of Paris.

Equally typical of Adrian is the fact that none of this is 'difficult' to follow: although he studiously takes apart the abstract term of imperfection, he does so in a manner which is always clearly comprehensible and accessible to all. He also does so with a wit and occasional idiosyncratic flourish (the ending line is pure delight) which maintains a sense of his own personal charm and eloquence – we are always aware that this is Adrian, a real person, who is speaking, and that we are not just hearing an enunciated text.

There is one further aspect of this lecture which gives another insight into Adrian's working and intentions, as signified by the first word of its title: 'future'. Despite having written one of the seminal books on design history (*Objects of Desire: Design and Society since 1750*, 1986), and having recently completed another equally influential book on architectural theory (*Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*, 2000), Adrian leaves these largely in the background of his talk. This is not a grandiose display of previous successes and achievements. Instead, the lecture is about the future – a future that is of Adrian's own work – and in particular on his then-just-beginning research into the culture of concrete in relation to architecture. And this, perhaps, signifies above all else a quality which is always evident in Adrian's work, namely a restlessness to move on, in this case from design to words to materials, and so always to consider new aspects of architecture and the world in which it operates. The 'Future Imperfect' lecture is therefore not just a reflection on the past, or a consideration of where we are, but of where we might be heading in the years to come.

EXPANDING THE FIELD

Before turning to 'Future Imperfect', however, as well as to all the other essays

in this collection, we would like to outline briefly how Adrian has contributed in significant ways not only to architectural history and theory teaching at The Bartlett, but also to its development as a discipline in the UK and internationally. As Adrian himself has noted, architectural history in the UK has only relatively recently come to occupy a more secure and settled place within academe – a situation that Adrian's own efforts at The Bartlett have helped to bring about.[1] Prior to the 1960s, many of the most noteworthy scholarship and architectural history initiatives were produced independently of universities and architectural schools. To cite just two examples: the *Survey of London* series, begun in 1894, has been, until very recently, an independent initiative (and in 2013 left the auspices of English Heritage to join The Bartlett); and the RIBA Drawings Collection was assembled by John Harris, who had no affiliation with any institution of higher education. Architectural history was pursued largely by scholars who were based at museums (for instance, Sir John Summerson at Sir John Soane's Museum) or were of independent means. Voluntary associations from the Georgian Group to the Victorian Society and learned societies such as the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain played crucial roles in supporting the discipline through conferences and publications. Certain journals, such as the *Architectural Review*, also emerged as important platforms for the dissemination of architectural history.

Of course, there were a few important exceptions to this rule. By the time Adrian entered the scene, architectural history in the UK was already in the midst of change. Some opportunities for doctoral training did exist by the 1950s and 1960s, thanks largely to the influx of European émigrés fleeing from Nazism in the 1930s. Located just down the road from The Bartlett, the Warburg Institute had been transplanted to London from Hamburg in 1933 and Rudolf Wittkower was employed there between 1934 and 1956. Wittkower's educational impact was notable, as he trained Colin Rowe among others. Equally – if not more – critical was the arrival in London in 1935 of Nikolaus Pevsner, who then in 1941 began to work at Birkbeck College (also very near to The Bartlett), and whose *An Outline of European Architecture* (1942), *Buildings of England* publications (begun in 1951), and co-editorship of the *Architectural Review* were all so crucial to establishing a popular understanding of what architectural history should be – that is, the story of the aesthetic and spatial intentions of architects. Pevsner also began to take

on doctoral students at Birkbeck and also at the University of Cambridge (where he was Slade Professor of Art), including Reyner Banham and Robin Middleton.

The general expansion of higher education in Britain in the 1960s was significant for the fortunes of architectural history. This period, for instance, saw the establishment of the University of Essex's Master's course in Architectural History and Theory, under the leadership of Joseph Rykwert, which, from 1968, trained a large number of well-known historians and theorists, from Robin Evans to Mohsen Mostafavi. (Rykwert, with Dalibor Vesely, then went on to establish the research programme at the School of Architecture at the University of Cambridge in 1980.) Overall, however, it is notable that architectural history training in the 1960s was still largely taking place within art or art history departments rather than in schools of architecture; following an undergraduate degree in History at Brasenose College, Oxford, Adrian's own master's was in Art History at the Courtauld Institute and his first teaching position was at Bristol School of Art (1971–3). This situation slowly began to change in the wake of the 1958 'Oxford Conference', which decreed that schools of architecture should not only train architects but also conduct architectural research – a decision which was to have far-reaching consequences for architectural education. At The Bartlett, it led to the appointment of Richard Llewelyn Davies in 1960 who renamed the School of Architecture the School of Environmental Studies – a tale expertly summarised in Peter Hall's contribution to this volume (see Chapter 32) – and committed it to an ambitious multidisciplinary programme of research that saw architects working alongside psychologists, economists, planners and physicists. Llewelyn Davies also decided that an architectural historian should have a place at the table.

Enter Reyner Banham, who was appointed to a senior lectureship at the Bartlett School of Environmental Studies in 1964, and who produced some of his best-known studies during his 12-year tenure at the university.[2] Banham also took on doctoral students including Charles Jencks, Mark Swenarton and Adrian himself. While Banham rebelled against many of the aesthetic tenets of Pevsnerian architectural history (a questioning that is more quietly continued by Adrian too), he never wavered from Pevsner's belief that architectural history should not be the preserve of an elite, but that it should be something very

Adrian in the Chilean desert.

active and alive within a culture. This anti-elitist commitment has been carried through into Adrian's famously lucid lectures and writings on architecture, which have been enjoyed by Bartlett students since he began to teach at the school in 1973, and may also help to explain why Adrian has never disdained teaching undergraduates. Indeed, one of Adrian's most important contributions to The Bartlett has been his Year One introduction to architectural history, a course which he has run for several decades, and is now something of a legend, being massively popular with students and tutors alike. As with all of Adrian's teaching, the course places a firm emphasis upon looking: students are required to visit buildings and then to write about them, drawing upon their own first-hand observations and experience.

In terms of entrenching architectural history as a subject of academic research within architecture schools in Britain, however, probably the most significant move on Adrian's part was to establish in 1981, with Mark Swenarton, the aforementioned MSc History of Modern Architecture (now the MA Architectural History). This was among the earliest of its kind in Britain, or indeed anywhere in the world. A large number of the scholars who are now teaching architectural history and theory in British schools of architecture, as

well as in many schools abroad, have taken this course over the years, and so it can claim to have had an incredible impact on the field. Many alumni of the course are also contributors to this volume.

EVERYDAY AND EMPIRICAL, STRUCTURAL AND SOCIAL

What, then, has been Adrian's contribution to the teaching of architectural history and theory, as exemplified by the Master's course? Perhaps the first aspect to mention is its openly socialist stance, or what is often labelled neo-Marxist (who can possibly be classified as a real Marxist these days?). Certainly the key founding principle of the MSc History of Modern Architecture was its polemical introduction of political analysis into architectural history and theory – something which was simply not being done elsewhere in 1970s and 1980s British architectural academia. Perhaps the closest parallel elsewhere was Manfredo Tafuri and others at the Venice School, which was defiantly hard-line Italian Marxist, and happened to fire up many of those of a left-wing disposition at that time. In essence what Adrian did – as a PhD student of Banham – was to adopt his own version of the Tafurian sense of politics as a means of displacing Banham's training in German Idealist history (something which Banham had acquired from Pevsner). And influenced in turn by Banham, Adrian went on to cross-fertilise his highly political approach by mixing it with the best traits of the British tradition of empirically based history writing.

Another important difference in the new approaches was that while Tafuri and his colleagues were deeply interested in critical theory from the Frankfurt School et al, in Britain the political approach to history was always more infused with what is usually described as cultural studies. To understand what Adrian was trying to do with the new Master's programme, one has to see it as emulating British left-wing social historians such as Raymond Williams, EP Thompson, Raphael Samuel and Stuart Hall. As well as being much more interested in conditions of everyday life and actual lived social processes, as opposed to the more abstract concepts favoured by critical theory, it also meant that the British historians were never really seen as being such overt or hard-line Marxists as were their continental European counterparts. Yet with the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Bloc, and the near eclipse of Communist parties in most European nations, it is the culturally driven approach which has served the passage of time the best.

A further key point is that Adrian was always consciously open-minded about ways to expand his politically and culturally driven approach to architectural history and theory, and so he too has since the 1980s willingly incorporated a great deal of critical theory into his thinking and teaching – yet without ever becoming what is referred to as a 'theory merchant', which is the sort of scholar who by inclination doesn't want to look at empirical examples based in real life. His penchant is more for French structuralism, especially of the Barthesian mode which uncovers deeper cultural meanings behind everyday artefacts and activities. Adrian was always painfully aware that Reyner Banham was militantly anti-theoretical, this being part of Banham's character to the extent of having been a real chip-on-his-shoulder. Adrian thus instead has consciously kept abreast of new theoretical developments, while taking care never to overstate that side of things or to turn into a cheerleader for a particular theoretical approach. This degree of openness, and lack of any dogmatism, also meant that Adrian has always been very keen for students to try to expand the field of architectural history and theory, embracing postcolonial theory, gender studies, feminist theory, psychoanalytical theory, etc. A mark of the Master's programme is that it has been so open to new approaches and different views, which helps understanding of why it has lasted for so long and been able to take on board such very different kinds of students over the decades. As Adrian memorably remarked to colleagues not long ago, 'The Bartlett is not a seminary'; referring to the fact that it has never been, and hopefully never will be, doctrinaire in its approach.

Also crucial is the interest in the practices of architectural design and construction which characterises The Bartlett's Master's course, something which has helped to bridge the link to practising architects. Adrian is one of those few architectural historians who can talk equally passionately and intelligently about old buildings and the latest designs today. Something to realise, and which also links him in a sense to Tafuri, is that Adrian absolutely loves the architecture of the Italian Renaissance. He might not ever write a lot on that subject, but he is immensely knowledgeable about the period. He shared with Tafuri, and many others of course, the belief that the modern conception of what we have come to understand as architecture – both for better and for worse – began in the Renaissance. Adrian is of course best known as a historian of 19th-century British architecture and also 20th-century modernism in many

countries, but as his book on concrete shows, he is just as much at ease when looking at contemporary developments as well. When teaching students, what interests Adrian are the reasons why architecture has changed – and will continue to change – over time as a consequence of social, economic and political factors. And if one is genuinely interested in such processes, then one is by definition interested in all periods of history so as to be able to trace how these sweeps of historical change occur. In terms of the kinds of architectural examples that Adrian teaches about, while he talks extensively about the canonical works, he has also always been strongly interested in the more quotidian, even banal, architecture of our cities.

A final and concluding thought on all this. In his first book, *Objects of Desire*, Adrian took it upon himself to read a very long book about the history of soap, which it is doubtful if any other architectural historian has ever done before or since. This first book, with its interest in everyday design history, was an obvious sign of the scope of his intellectual concerns. His broad range of interests and encyclopaedic knowledge are also evident in the range of doctoral students he has supervised at The Bartlett over the last four decades, who among them have tackled subjects from Irish state housing to the impact of the profits of the slave trade on British aesthetic culture in the 18th century to Portuguese vernacular modernism. Above all, then, Adrian remains the opposite of an elitist historian. In his teaching, in his talks and in his writings on architecture, he constantly seeks to draw in everyday cultural understandings of buildings and cities, while also appreciating the more specialised and rarefied design processes and intellectual discourses which tend to shape the field of architecture. The world of architectural history, and indeed of architecture, is much indebted to his work.

Notes

1 This account of the development of architectural history training in the UK is greatly indebted to Adrian's own account of it. See Adrian Forty, 'Architectural History Research and the Universities in the UK', *Rassegna di Architettura e Urbanistica*, Vol 139, 2013, pp 7–20. See also Helen Thomas, 'Joseph Rykwert and the Use of History', *AA Files*, Issue 66 (2013), pp 54–8, and Peter Hall's contribution to this volume (Chapter 32).

2 The extraordinarily prolific Banham published eight sole-authored or edited books in total during his time at The Bartlett (1964–76), including: *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, Architectural Press (London), 1966; *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment?*, Architectural Press (London), 1969; and *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Allen Lane (London), 1971.

Future Imperfect

ADRIAN FORTY

Adrian Forty's Inaugural Professorial Lecture, delivered at UCL in December 2000

The last time there was an inaugural lecture in architectural history at The Bartlett was thirty years ago – in fact it was exactly 30 years ago, to the day. It was held on this same day in December 1970, in this room, and it was given by Reyner Banham, and the title was 'At Shoo Fly Landing'. I wasn't there – I missed it – but I know what he said, and I'll tell you quickly. Shoo Fly Landing was the name originally given to the spot on which the Santa Monica pier stood – 'shoo-fly' because the stench of the local tar pits made this the instinctive gesture of anyone in the vicinity. The Santa Monica pier, which was the real topic of the lecture, appealed to Banham because it wasn't the sort of thing architectural historians normally took any notice of. Although it was such an obvious, familiar feature of the Santa Monica coastal landscape, it turned out to lack any documentary records whatsoever, but, with a certain amount of poking about underneath the pier, Banham managed to piece together its origins and successive transformations. If part of the purpose of the lecture was to show that architectural historians usually failed to notice what was under their noses, the other point of it was to show that it was the pier that had triggered the entire subsequent development of Santa Monica, and that without knowing the history of the pier you could not grasp the rest of the history of Santa Monica's urbanisation. In other words, no pier, no Santa Monica.

Besides telling the story of Santa Monica pier, Banham in his lecture made three general remarks about architectural history as a discipline, which, thirty years on, it would be worth considering again. The first of these was that architectural historians spent too much time looking at photographs of works of architecture, and not enough time crawling about on, in or under the built works themselves. Works of architecture, Banham pointed out, are fixed to

the ground, and this fixity is a necessary feature of their property as works – but a feature that photographs always obliterate. Now one of Banham's more useful pieces of advice I remember as a young lecturer was 'never talk about anything you haven't been to see, because there'll probably be somebody in the audience who has'. I would endorse this advice – although I'm going to lapse from it once or twice in this lecture – but there's a sense in which it can now be qualified. A growing familiarity with semiotics and structuralism in the last 30 years has allowed us to see that – to paraphrase Roland Barthes – the reality of an object is not exhausted by its phenomenal existence, but extends into each and every representation of it. In other words, we have works, and we have photographs, and it is not that the photograph is simply a poor substitute for the work, but rather that it is another facet of the work's being, and one that can be thought about in its own right; as a result, of course, the work is never 'finished' – as long as images of it continue to go on being produced, it will, so to speak, always still be in development. No-one has done more to show us how to think about all this and to develop our understanding of photographs as part of the system of modern architecture than Beatriz Colomina. We might take as an example a fashion advertisement from last October's *Vogue*. The sharp-eyed among you will already have spotted that the background scenery is provided by Case Study House #22 in Los Angeles, designed by Pierre Koenig; this same building happens to have been the object of what must be one of the most famous architectural photographs of all time, taken by Julius Shulman. Now to consider the building *without* these images would be absurd – they have become part of the work; and I think I can say that architectural history has become reasonably sophisticated at dealing with built objects *and* their representations without confusing one with the other. It is no longer so necessary to make the distinction that Banham emphasised between the 'hands-on' historian and the library-bound scholar who only experienced the work through images.

Banham's second observation was that architectural historians spent too much time looking at 'canonic' works, at acknowledged masterpieces, and not enough time looking at what was staring them in the face or under their noses – in other words, the everyday and the ordinary. Banham presented this very much as an 'either/or' scenario, and it is certainly true that as a historian you tend to develop a reputation either as a 'high art' person, or as

a ‘popular culture’ freak; as someone who has paddled in both ponds, I don’t really see why one should have to stay in one or the other, and indeed I’d prefer to see the two ponds not as two but just as one big one. If we take this pair of buildings, one might say that the corrugated iron affair longs to be the 15th-century parish church; or so too that the railway carriage in an orchard dreams of becoming Palladio’s Villa Barbaro – but on the other hand, there is a sense too in which the Villa Barbaro longs for the primitive Arcadian simplicity of the railway carriage. In other words, there is something to be gained by thinking about each in terms of the other; to grasp the significance of any particular object, it is an advantage to think of the entire system in which it belongs. Architecture is unusual among the arts in that it has a very large significant ‘other’, usually called ‘building’ – architecture is a relatively small and specialised sector within the general field of building. This isn’t a situation that arises with the other arts – in literature we have high art and popular fiction, and although people certainly distinguish between the two, it isn’t that one is an art, and the other isn’t – they are simply different genres within the same practice, and it is perfectly possible for an author to produce works in both genres. The same is true of cinema, painting and any other art you can think of. But in our field we have a situation where, while all things fixed to the ground are ‘buildings’, only a few of them are ‘architecture’. Now, for architects, this distinction is very important, in fact it’s a matter of life or death – their entire occupation depends on preserving it and one can understand why so much is invested in the upkeep of the defences; on the other hand, for everyone else outside the construction industry, the distinction doesn’t really matter. In so far as buildings provide the setting for everyday life, it’s not of great importance whether you call some of these ‘architecture’ and some ‘building’. And though it may well be that some works will make us more conscious of who we are and what our relations with our fellow beings are than others – and on that account might be said to be better, or more interesting – considered from the point of view of the recuperation of social consciousness, the distinction between architecture and building isn’t all that important. So again, I’d like to suggest that we can afford to be more relaxed about the rather categorical distinction that Banham made between the study of high architecture and ‘ordinary’ stuff than he felt able to be in 1970.

The third of Banham's distinctions was between historians who got their material from investigating built works, and those who got their material from other sources, from 'theory'. Banham was very blunt about this: 'The strength of architectural history is that it is fundamentally about physical objects and physical systems, not about abstract categories or academic disciplines. It will always rejuvenate itself by going back to those objects and systems in order to ask new questions about them.' Now here Banham described a distinction that has become normative in architectural history – and put himself very firmly on one side. You know the scene – on the one hand there are the theorists, for whom works of architecture are just a means of illustrating a theoretical discourse; and on the other hand we have the train-spotters. Both types will be familiar to you, but I don't think they cannot mix – and indeed I would suggest that part of the pleasure of architectural history comes on the one hand from examining the work, and using that experience to test out theoretical propositions; and on the other hand from bringing theories to interrogate the work. It's a two-way process, as a result of which both works and theories are enriched. And certainly the best of our students' work has been very successful at this, at moving from object to theory, and back again from theory to object, thinking through objects, and seeing through theory.

I am going to leave Banham's inaugural lecture now, but I want to say a little about Banham's work as a critic of architecture. Banham's reputation as a critic of architecture rests in part on the analogy that he drew between architecture and non-architectural objects of all kinds. Simply put, the argument was that if architecture were to be judged by the criteria applied to consumer goods, and if the techniques and values found in, say, automobile or aircraft production were applied to architecture, we would have some significantly different results. Although Banham seems to have changed his mind about this analogy at the end of his life, there's no doubt that it has been extremely influential in the architecture of the last forty years. The main features of the consumer goods industries that Banham drew attention to were, first of all obsolescence – Banham argued that architects who designed their buildings to last for ever were behaving unrealistically and tended to produce an inappropriate monumentality. In the consumer goods industries, on the other hand, where limited life expectancy was taken for granted, there was far greater freedom to experiment; in particular, consumer goods industries seemed to be

much better at making things that people wanted and that corresponded to popular desires than architecture, which generally seemed to be rather remote from everyday tastes and desires. Now there is a further aspect of consumer goods where there is an analogous relation to architecture that I would like to talk about – and this isn't something that Banham was especially concerned with – and this is 'perfection'. 'Perfection' is an extremely familiar, well-known feature of commodity aesthetics. Goods are sold to us as 'perfect' – if the plate has a chip in it, you reject it; if your new car has a squeak or a rattle, you take it back to the dealer. Quality in consumer goods is largely synonymous with this kind of technical seamlessness. Take a recent Mercedes advertisement – 'the perfect vehicle for life without compromises'. Commodity aesthetics are to a large extent dependent upon making something that is necessarily imperfect appear perfect. It is only very occasionally that someone comes along and does something that doesn't conform to this – such as Ron Arad's 'Concrete Sound' stereo – and tampers with the rules about perfection. Now this kind of expectation of the perfect object that we have of consumer goods transfers very easily to architecture, and this has happened to a considerable extent in the last fifty years. Our experience of the standards of finish, and of smooth operation that we have become familiar with from often quite inexpensive pieces of electrical and mechanical equipment, have become the norm for what we expect of buildings. At the same time some architects have approached the design of buildings as if they were consumer goods, whose manifest appeal is on the basis of their technical perfection. This isn't always such a good thing, it has to be said, for when something goes wrong, as it has at the Waterloo Eurostar terminal, it goes doubly wrong: when the glass in the roof started cracking it wasn't just a matter of repairing it, the whole aesthetic needed fixing too.

When the analogy of the perfection of consumer goods was introduced into architecture, it of course merged with an already existing, much older notion of perfection that was well embedded in architecture. This is an idea that goes back a very long way, indeed to Aristotle and to the theories of art that come out of classical philosophy. Aristotle, to distinguish between art and nature, had written that 'art generally completes what nature cannot bring to a finish'; in the 17th century, this idea became a major article of faith amongst baroque architects. The most obvious results were to be seen in landscape gardening – at Versailles, all the straight lines and clipped hedges of the central

part contrast with the chaos of the outlying parts where nature has been left to her own devices. 'Nature intends that everything should be perfect but is frustrated by accidents,' wrote the ideologue of late 17th-century French art, André Félibien. The artist's task was to come and finish off what nature on its own could not achieve. One way or another, the belief that it is one of the purposes of art to create order out of the inherent disorder of the world has been fairly fundamental to Western notions of art in the last five hundred years, and has certainly been productive of some of the more remarkable results achieved by architecture. It has been an extremely important article in the belief system of architects, and continues to be so, but not, it has to be said, always to architects' advantage. Colin Davies gave a nice example of this in his inaugural lecture last month – during the Second World War, the German architect Konrad Wachsmann collaborated with Walter Gropius on the development of a prefabricated house for mass production, called 'the packaged house'. Despite several years of development, the investment of over $6 million, a factory set up in California, and a planned production of 10,000 houses a year, only a few dozen were ever actually made. Why? Because Wachsmann, true to type, kept on refining and improving the design, trying to get it perfect, and by the time he was satisfied with it, the market opportunity was over. This might be said to have been a case of too much perfection for its own good.

Given that perfection has been such a strong fixture in the architectural belief system for so long, it is hardly to be expected that it should have got away without being challenged. And of course it has been. The best-known critic of perfection, and exponent of imperfection, was the 19th-century English writer John Ruskin. Looking at medieval buildings, Ruskin was struck by their frequent imperfections, and in these imperfections Ruskin saw the signs of intense impatience, of a struggle to attain something that it was beyond the mason's means to attain. One of Ruskin's examples was this pair of openings on the tower of Abbeville cathedral: the mason couldn't work out how to reconcile the double-time of the rhythm of the arches with the triple-time of the rhythm of the billets, and so to get round the problem he simply bent the ogee arches inwards so that their tips joined up with the inner billets. Ruskin was impressed by the way medieval craftsmen could show contempt for exact symmetry and measurement, and could be careless with the details, because they were so determined to pull off the whole thing. To Ruskin's

eyes, incompleteness was a means of expression, it revealed life, the energy of someone so preoccupied with the achievement of the end result, that they were prepared to bend the dimensions here, and miss out a bit there.

As Mark Swenarton has pointed out, Ruskin's ideas didn't finish with the Arts & Crafts and Jugendstil movements, but continued to be an important, if unacknowledged, component of early modernism. Le Corbusier, one of whose earliest formative experiences was his reading of Ruskin, never forgot what he had learnt from him, and indeed later in his life reverted to a position which was a good deal closer to Ruskin than has generally been recognised. Imperfection is a particularly interesting case here, because the finishes of Le Corbusier's 1950s buildings were notoriously awful. Le Corbusier didn't want the workmanship on these buildings to be bad – at the Unité in Marseilles he had no choice because there was no skilled labour. At La Tourette, the client didn't have much money. The roughness of these buildings was subsequently interpreted as an artistic gesture, a demonstration of the *facture*, but I don't think this was what Le Corbusier intended – he would have had better finishes if he had the means to do so – as he did on the later Unité at Firminy, where the construction is of much higher quality. Rather, it seems that he just accepted that if the work was not to be left incomplete, the construction would have to be poor quality. That he was able to accept this, and to be indifferent to the finish, would seem to be due in part to his knowledge of Ruskin. What, of course, excused the imperfection of the Unité and of La Tourette was that the works themselves were so strong, and that if the execution was crude, it didn't matter, because of the force of the whole building.

In these examples, it's not the work itself that is imperfect, it is only the means. Now it is one thing to allow imperfection in the way the work is made, which is really what Ruskin sanctioned, but it is quite another thing to conceive of the entire work itself as imperfect. This really does go against the grain of the whole Western tradition of architecture, from Alberti's *concinnitas* to the flawlessness of the digital architecture of the moment. But there are examples where people have tried to produce something that was inherently imperfect – candidates for this might include Gehry's work from the late 1970s, such as his own house in Santa Monica. A better example, to my mind, would be Cedric Price's InterAction Centre, where Price succeeded in making questions of 'perfection' or 'imperfection' largely irrelevant. Now what these various

experiments in imperfect architecture, or architecture that is indifferent to perfection, all have in common, it will be noticed, is that they are all made out of either steel or timber. It is as if these materials, somehow more provisional, more open-ended, lent themselves better to the achievement of imperfection.

If, on the other hand, we turn to another material, to concrete, then it suddenly seems to become a lot more difficult to achieve the kind of imperfection that we have seen in these works. Notwithstanding what I have said about La Tourette – where you'll recall that it was the execution, not the work that was imperfect – concrete seems to be a material that simply won't allow of imperfection. Or if we take another scheme with an air of imperfection, Rem Koolhaas's Grand Palais at Lille, although the general effect is of something that has been fabricated with a can-opener, in fact the imperfections – irregularly leaning columns, odd transitions from one cladding material to another – are largely to be found in the steel or polycarbonate bits of the building; the concrete parts are reasonably normal, and provide an armature for all the liberties that are taken with the other materials. Now it is a curious feature of concrete that it manages to throw into confusion almost all the conventional assumptions about architectural aesthetics – and the case of imperfection is no exception. All the great works that make a virtue of being made out of concrete, works that would be inconceivable in another material – the Whitney Museum, the South Bank – are definitively complete and conform to all the accepted norms of perfection. Now why should this be, why should concrete tend so strongly to the perfect, and be so exclusive of imperfection? I am not sure that I can give a wholly satisfactory answer to this, but I'll have a go.

The core of the argument is that no-one wants to create imperfection out of concrete because it is already an imperfect material. So much effort has gone into trying to cure concrete of its imperfections, that to use it to produce imperfection would be to threaten the whole belief system to which millions of pounds of investment and fifty years of architectural effort have been dedicated. The person who really started on the pursuit of perfection in concrete was Auguste Perret, who developed techniques intended to make concrete seem superior to stone. At Perret's Musée des Travaux Publics of 1937, the aggregates of the structural elements are a carefully chosen mix of small and large particles, with some coloured elements in them all coming from one region of France; Perret developed a technique in which the surface

of the concrete was carefully chiselled away by hand, except at the arrises, where smooth cement from the mould is left to form a raised fillet. This is done with extraordinary precision – one slip with the chisel, and the whole thing would be spoiled. The same happens on the columns. The amount of labour that went into producing this is unbelievable – not only did the formwork for the concrete have to be built with enormous accuracy, but then the entire surface of the building had to be worked over by hand. And the same effects are continued on the interior, where Perret boasted that no plaster was used at all. Since Perret's day, the efforts to perfect concrete have continued in all sorts of directions: finer aggregates, techniques of obtaining smoother and smoother finishes, the addition of resins to harden the surface so it can be ground and polished, and so on. Producing the perfect concrete has become a kind of philosopher's stone of the late 20th century. In more recent times, a major motive for all this has come from the bad reputation that concrete acquired in the late 1960s, and a desire to reverse this; in my view a lot of this effort has been misguided, because what it has been doing is to make concrete look less like concrete, and more like something else, usually stone. But to try to improve the public image of concrete by making it less like concrete seems rather absurd. Yet nonetheless, despite all these attempts to make concrete more perfect, there is the unavoidable fact that concrete is not a perfect material. In spite of the fantastic labour involved in Perret's building, the surface still turned out blotchy. The strategies adopted to disguise the imperfections of concrete are ingenious – but they are still disguises: take for example the stainless steel socks that cover the bottoms of the concrete columns of Canary Wharf station, which protect the columns from the scrapes, chips and grease marks that they would quickly accumulate otherwise. They're an elegant device, but their purpose is to allow us to see concrete as something other, something more perfect than it is.

Now I should at this point say that concrete is one of the most myth-attracting substances around: myths just stick to it like flies to fly-paper. One of these myths is that concrete is a mute, non-signifying material – and this I think has been part of its appeal to the so-called minimalist school of architects. Needless to say, I'm not convinced by this, and part of the point of the work I am engaged in at the moment is to take myths like these and 'to brush them against the grain', and find beneath the commonsensical smoothness of their surface whatever flaws and contradictions there may be. Another of these

myths, and one directly related to the question we are looking at here, is that concrete is an artificial material. Now of course it is artificial, in the sense that it is a compound. But all those very considerable efforts to naturalise it – usually by rendering it as stone or wood – seem by their over-insistence contrived to convince us of its artificiality. And if it is an artificial substance, it has of course to be perfect, because synthetic substances – polyester, silicon chips – always are; if they weren't there would be no point in having them. But as well as being artificial, concrete is also a natural material – it's a gloopy substance that conforms to the natural laws of fluid mechanics, so that if you don't do something to contain it, it will spread out into a shapeless mess; in other words, it behaves just like those 17th-century artists thought nature behaved – it can never get it right on its own, it has to be controlled, coaxed, vibrated and so on for it to be brought to perfection. Now to think of concrete as both natural *and* artificial demands a greater degree of mental agility than most of us can manage. So much is invested in the absoluteness of this distinction between natural and artificial, so necessary is it to our whole cosmology, that to admit that something can be both of these would be just too anxiety-inducing. To avoid this, we habitually operate on the assumption that concrete is just artificial, or alternatively, just natural, but never both. Whichever myth we subscribe to, whether we say that it is artificial, and therefore in common with all synthetic things, perfect, or whether we say it is natural, it would risk upsetting the whole precariously balanced superstructure for it to be allowed to be used for results that could be characterised as 'imperfect'. For these reasons, I would suggest, experiments with 'imperfect' architecture have largely avoided using concrete.

Nevertheless, experiments there have been, and I want to look at one of them. On the outskirts of Paris, at Créteil, at the end of one of the métro lines, there is a housing estate called 'Les Bleuets'. The landscape of Créteil, like that of most of the suburbs of Paris, is characterised by a superabundance of cement, and this estate looks much like many other housing estates in the periphery – except for the thing you have probably immediately noticed about it, the enormous slabs of stone set randomly into the concrete, making it look as if Asterix had had a hand in the construction. The name 'Les Bleuets' means blue-flowering cornflowers, and the inappropriateness of this charmingly romantic name alerts one to some of the ironies to come. Les Bleuets was built between 1959 and 1962, designed by a then very young architect called Paul Bossard.

Les Bleuets housing estate in Créteil, Paris (1959), designed by Paul Bossard and featured by Adrian Forty in *Concrete and Culture* (2012).