

---

BOOK REVIEW

## ***A Review of Architecture and Climate: An Environmental History of British Architecture, 1600–2000***

By Dean Hawkes, Routledge, 272 pages, 2012, ISBN: 9780415561877

Manolo Guerci\*

---

Chronologically arranged in eight essays dealing each with a topical chapter of British architectural history, ranging from the Smythson of Hardwick Hall fame to his twentieth century namesakes, Alison and Peter, the book's aim is to trace a common line of architecture's adaptation to the British climate throughout the period examined. The central argument is that factors such as location, light and orientation played a fundamental part in the planning of all the examples selected for discussion.

This may, at first sight, appear to be obvious as, regardless of specialist environmental knowledge, one expects a certain degree of interaction between architecture and climate. Nor would the adaptations dealt with by the author seem to be unique to the British climate, as solutions such as different rooms being exposed to varying degrees of sun light are exploited in diverse ways in most places and epochs. And yet, what distinguishes this book is that environmental aspects of architecture, from the most basic principles of orientation and lighting, are here treated as a key to a full understanding of architectural design. This issue is clearly raised by the book, the first merit of which is to make us question the established art historical parameters generally used to analyse a building.

A broad introduction, and first essay entitled "Climate described", set the scene for what is essentially a survey of how the relation between architecture and climate in Britain evolved. This is followed by an interesting analysis of how otherwise much studied Elizabethan country houses such as Wollaton, Hardwick and Bolsover were conceived to respond to and embrace the weather all the year round. The author then moves to the more scientific approach to the study of climate that developed in the seventeenth century, with an essay on "Christopher Wren and the origins of building science" which considers such buildings as the Sheldonian Theatre at Oxford and the Trinity College Library at Cambridge, as well as a number of London churches. This is followed by an investigation of how the Italian climatic character of Palladian architecture was adapted to the more hostile British context,

which is examined through examples such as the splendid Houghton Hall.

Up until this point of the story, the weather is something architecture interacts with. The next essay, "Building in the climate of the nineteenth century city", explains how the increasingly problematic environmental effects of rapid industrialisation on cities such as London – famous for its fog – effectively turned climate into an enemy. Architecture in urban areas became an elaborate shield against external factors, rather than interacting with them; it is this context that provides the setting for the origin of climate controlled spaces, pioneered by John Soane at the Bank of England, and applied at a number of public buildings such the infamous (given all the initial troubles caused by failing air circulation systems) Houses of Parliament. Moving away from smoky towns, the author turns to suburbia, and more broadly to the countryside as a whole, to the idyll of Arts and Crafts houses: here one feels again in England as these houses seem so perfectly embedded within the English landscape! Not for long, however, as the next essay concentrates on a selection of fascinating Modernist houses, each almost unique on account of the limited adoption of this style in Britain. The book closes with an insightful and clearly sympathetic overview (perhaps influenced by the author's intellectual connections<sup>1</sup>), of Alison and Peter Smithson's "environmental architecture", which examines in detail two highly charged houses by the duo, Sudgen House, designed for one of the architects' friends outside London, and Upper Lawn Pavillion, the Smithsons' own retreat in Wiltshire.

While the author has gone to great lengths to select his case studies, the visual support is at times uneven, especially when it comes to illustrating the plans of the Modernist houses, almost all of which are too small. An unintended result is that this obliges the reader to research the houses further, thereby encouraging an interesting dialogue between what the author states and what has been omitted. Furthermore, perhaps on account of the survey-like nature of this book, some essays are more engaging than others. Nevertheless, this broad coverage allows commonalities to emerge, so that, while at a first glance the glass box, be it Hardwick Hall or the Upper Lawn Pavillion, would seem a peculiar, if not indeed a downright foolish

---

\* University of Kent, UK  
[mg316@kent.ac.uk](mailto:mg316@kent.ac.uk)

response to the British (or, as the author specifies, *English*) climate, they are shown to be “not simply responses to, but *expressions* of the climate” (p. 240). Such an observation may appear illogical to non-natives, Mediterraneans, like myself, or even Germans such as Herman Muthesius, whose topical *Das Englische Haus* (1904/5) described the English climate as “generally inhospitable” (p.154). What would seem, however, to contradict the benefits of glass-box-architecture in the north is the fact that such types do not protect from the cold. At Hardwick, the extravagance of the glacial public rooms on the top floor is balanced by the more livable middle floor reserved for Bess’ residence, with her bedroom at the heart of the house. So too at Upper Lawn, as Simon Smithson, the architects’ son, put it, the “house was sometimes very cold in winter or very hot in summer” (p. 253); hence no real escape there, but for the fact that the pavillion “was also comfortable on

cold, sunny days” (i.e. it was presumably not otherwise!). But all this, we learn, is only one side of the story, for glass boxes, while theoretically keeping rain out, crucially let light in, an aspect which, throughout the relatively long period examined here, appears to have been considered a more precious asset than warmth. The line of enquiry which accordingly follows in this book is revealing.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Peter Smithson’s studies on the subject have played an important role in the author’s own works. The beginning of the second essay on “Robert Smythson and the environment of the Elizabethan country house” begins with a quote by Peter Smithson on Hardwick Hall, followed by: “Here began a train of thought that has led, over twenty years later, to the present essay [...]” (p. 31).

**How to cite this article:** Guerci, M 2013 A Review of *Architecture and Climate: An Environmental History of British Architecture, 1600-2000*. *Architectural Histories*, 1(1): 5, pp. 1-2, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/ah.ae>

**Published:** 30 January 2013

**Copyright:** © 2013 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License (CC-BY 3.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.

]u[ *Architectural Histories* is published by Ubiquity Press and is fully open access

OPEN ACCESS 