

# letters

## **Cornford House: West Coast ...**

Sir: Robin Webster (*arq* vol. 2: no. 2) is right to observe the absence of Louis Kahn in Michael Spens' welcome review of the landmark Cornford House by Colin St. John Wilson (*arq* vol. 2: no. 1). His remarks bring back memories of a tour I made with Sandy Wilson in the early '60s about a year before the Cornford House first appeared on the drawing board.

I had just spent three months in Arizona, three as guest of Paolo Soleri in Scottsdale, and three living with the Hopi Indians high on a mesa top in their pueblo at Hoteville. Sandy flew in from Mexico. I seem to recall him crossing the airstrip surrounded by a group of drunken Texan businessmen. We drove off in my postbox red Chevrolet Belair, crossed the Mojave Desert and arrived in La Jolla where the Salk Institute was under construction. There we were met by Jack McAlister, the supervising architect for the project. We stayed with Jack and his wife for three days. Louis Kahn was the other house guest. Sandy and I looked at some works by Irving Gill, and both of us were particularly impressed by the small Bailey vacation house in La Jolla, with its double-height living room overlooked by an internal window from a bedroom set in an horizontally planked wall: a feature to be echoed later in the Cornford House. We also visited Schindler's Pueblo Ribera complex with its balconies and rooftops occupied by bronzed, blonde surfers modelled after Adonis and Aphrodite. Later, guided by Kahn, we clambered through the deep service floors of the Salk Institute just then being completed. One evening, Sandy presented the first sketch designs for the British Library at a dinner hosted

by Jacob Bronowski, the Vice-President of the Salk Institute. On another evening we enjoyed a barbecue at Jack's house, to the most mellifluous and romantic piano improvisations at the grand by Kahn, interrupted occasionally by Jack's athletic take off of a Mexican bullfighter. Kahn was magical. It was impossible not to be touched by the poetry of his speech and the landscape of his vision.

Sandy and I then travelled north to Los Angeles. I was with Sandy when we were turned away from Wright's Millard House in Pasadena, but not before we had glimpsed, between the owner and the door opening, the balcony in the living room. I am sure we saw some Greene and Greene houses with their sensuous exposure of timber structure. We certainly viewed the Hollyhock House together, and the Hollywood Bowl. I know that I saw the multi-storey atrium of the 1893 Bradbury Building downtown with its open-caged elevators, and that I visited Schindler's How House in Silver Lake. Sandy may have been with me, I believe he was. My student, Jin-Ho Park recently described (*arq* vol. 2: no. 2) Schindler's uses of diagonal symmetry in the How House, which is very marked, of course, in the Cornford House. Only a year or so ago, Sandy returned to the How House with a group of friends, unfortunately during one of my absences, and before its restoration.

After Los Angeles we travelled north up the Pacific Coast Highway through Big Sur, stopping to look at Wright's Walker Residence on its rocky promontory into the ocean at Carmel, and then onto San Francisco to meet with Charles Moore at his 'barn'. Despite Chuck's protests, I insisted on

going to the recently completed Marin County Civic Center as part of my researches on Wright's Broadacre City. Personally, I very much enjoyed its Dan Dare, Captain Marvel, imagery: as did the citizenry who, in a grass roots movement, had overcome resistance from the city supervisors to the scheme. Its rounded, bright blue roof, the golden baubles punctuating the gutters, and the flesh pink concrete challenged my Cambridge sensitivities. Its mannerist inversion of structure in the suspended arches of its envelope played to my perverse delight. Wright, it seemed to me, was the first Pop architect: the Imperial Hotel, that samurai of all buildings; those concrete block houses in L. A. echoing to the epics of Cecil B. De Mille and D. W. Griffith. I stomached Wright's audacious taste to be tasteless. Some years later Charles Moore cast aesthetically-correct Sea Ranch aside to indulge in similar Pop Art enthusiasms. In the Bay Area, Sandy and I looked at some buildings by that 'barbarous', architectural maverick, Bernard Maybeck.

Looking back on the tour, certain influences can be traced on projects emanating from Cambridge in the mid '60s. Wright's and Maybeck's wayward exuberances loosened the strangling noose of international orthodoxy for me, and possibly Sandy. I am sure that Gill's Bailey vacation home and Schindler's How House had some influence on the Cornford project. As for myself, working in Leslie Martin's office, the 10-storey galleria in the Whitehall scheme, exceeding the length of the Crystal Palace, was partly influenced by my own experience in seeing the Bradbury Building atrium, but even more so by the long galleria of the Civic Center for Marin County

with its single-loaded access galleries opening onto atria. The overall form of the government complex also had something to do with Soleri's enthusiasm for natural forms. I likened the ministry buildings proposed for Whitehall to roches moutonnées, with the gentle slope inclined to catch the north light, even some sunlight, and the south face minimised and overhung for protection. The narrow courts aligned north and south were intended to cast shadows like the self-shading ribs of saguaro cactus. A similar use of a three-storey galleria occurs in the preliminary design for the residential building for St. Anne's and Balliol, Oxford, with which I was involved. The triple-height entrance hall had branching timber posts supporting the roof not unlike those in the Cornford living room. The floors in both were stepped. I am certain that the influences are common ones; possibly Californian, but definitely Aalto. And surely, some of Sandy's proposals for Liverpool City Hall project owe a debt to the Bradbury Building here in L. A.

Finally, answering Robin Webster's remark, I don't see any direct influence of Kahn's own residential work in the Cornford project, but the house unquestionably captures the spirit of what Kahn meant by 'architecture'. Its documentation by Michael Spens has received a warm welcome here.

Lionel March

How House

Silver Lake, California

*Lionel March is a Professor in the School of Arts and Architecture at UCLA.*

#### ... or East Coast influences?

Sir: I respect Robin Webster's contention (*arq* vol. 2. no. 2) that Louis Kahn has had an influence on the

architecture of Colin St. John Wilson. This is particularly relevant in the case of the British Library, now nearing completion. However it would seem that Aldo Van Eyck was more influential in the case of Spring House (*arq* vol. 2, no. 1); what is particularly relevant is the 'inside/outside' concept of Van Eyck, and the role of the six circular columns in mediating this relationship at Spring House is dramatically successful.

Webster is 'surprised' at some of my sources: the primary sources being Wilson, Van Eyck, and latterly Rowe, this seems strange. My verification of further documentation in the form of secondary sourcing relates to these primary sources, to which can be added comment from those involved in the Wilson office at the time, backed up by Cornford papers. The research into the U. S. background of the period requires further filling out, currently in process, but there seems as yet no reason to query the main conclusion that Spring House in the late 1960s had an interested following on both sides of the Atlantic, as representative of revisionist theory concerning modernism already being developed by Wilson. Nor is it possible to ignore the extent to which such views were to be reciprocated, in the intellectual and critical climate of the period.

Given the prominence of the New York Five in this climate of re-assessment, as propagated by Colin Rowe and Kenneth Frampton, my choice of the Gwathmey house as a comparison stands, I submit, on the basis that, albeit to a lesser degree than Spring House and distinctly apart from the other members of the 'Five', it exhibits a tectonic achievement which succeeds independently of the actual materials used. As Frampton argued at

the time, 'this house could very easily be a load-bearing masonry structure'; which cues in my play that Spring House could 'work' sheathed in timber at Amagansett. The corollary for the sake of argument, surely, is not to construct it in timber in Cambridge, but hypothetically to build Gwathmey in brick in Cambridge.

The point, which Robin Webster seems to miss too, is that Spring House is tectonic to an extent that allows the dramatic tension to succeed (the six columns, the inside-outside effect) regardless of the material cladding. The dramatic tension to which he alludes is not a function primarily of the contrast of brick walling and timber roof structure and supporting columns, although that may have its value. Such preoccupations led Wilson further forward, of course, than Gwathmey, and the comparison is telling. I submit that in neither building could any part be removed without causing irreparable loss. However 'batty' things do happen in Cambridge England, to use Webster's terminology, and I am glad there seems to be a growing consensus to get Spring House listed.

Michael Spens

St. Andrews

Scotland

*Michael Spens is an author and architect.*

#### Conclusions please

Sir: The Errant's Lodge (*arq* vol. 2 no. 2) is just the sort of project that ought to be published – built as a research idea on a rich theoretical background, tested empirically in prototype, planned for unconventional use, constructed in a pedagogical context. But I want a lot more information about this one. How is the thesis affected by the demonstration? How

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letters

does the air flow (and the lighting and the planning) work in the real complex building, compared with the early modelling? What, of all that is gained by the students, comes from the programme itself rather than exposure to an inspired teacher?

So I'm grumbling. I want more from *arq* than a description of work in progress, no matter what the work is. I want criticism and conclusions, because unless those are developed it is not research.

**Peter Tregenza**  
Sheffield

*Peter Tregenza, an architect and building scientist, teaches at the University of Sheffield*

*Both our referees thought that this particular project was worth publishing not only because of its unusual origins but also to raise the very questions now asked by Peter Tregenza. The Editor.*

**Old editors should use their eyes**

Sir: I know it is a minor point in a fascinating and fine (and now established) journal, but I must protest. In vol. 2, no. 2., James Marston Fitch writes: 'Why not urge young engineers to study the Crystal Palace [Fig. 13]'. But Fig. 13 (captioned 'The Crystal Palace by Paxton, 1851') is a completely different building – both in form and shape and in structure, and in location, from the 1851 Crystal Palace. Not just young engineers need to be urged to use their eyes!

Nor was it, as any 'young engineer' will have found out, by Paxton. You are not alone – the vast two volume *International Directory of Architects and Architecture* (St. James Press) carries a long article by me on

the Crystal Palace – illustrated by the same building as in the Dell and Wainwright photo you used.

To see what is in front of the eyes, as Goethe said, is surely the most difficult of tasks.

**John McKean**  
Brighton

*John McKean is a Professor at the University of Brighton.*

*The Editor and Publisher retreat suitably chastened. Fortunately, the sharp-eyed McKean did not notice that the illustration on the Letters page purporting to be of the 'Royal Crescent, Bath' is in fact Lansdown Crescent.*

**Call for papers**

Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (CEMERS)  
Binghamton University  
*The 31st annual conference*  
31 October and 1 November 1997  
(Note: revised date)

*Comparative colonialisms:*

*Pre-industrial Colonial Intersections in Global Perspective*

Recent American attitudes and even US policy toward Bosnia have been driven in part by a seductive image, that of Sarajevo as a model of a tolerant and sophisticated multicultural society, disrupted and perhaps destroyed by nationalism and fanaticism. The resonances of this image in a society concerned with the fact of multi-culturalism – David Dinkins's 'gorgeous mosaic' – and its various implications are inescapable. Closer to home, the values associated with Sarajevo have been sustained in the recent celebration, notably in a well-attended exhibition in New York, of the *convivencia* of diverse

populations in the Arab states of medieval Spain. Such historical accounts resonate with frankly fictive representations, from the Cartagena of Garcia Marquez to the Bombay of Rushdie, the Cairo of Mahfouz, or even Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria.

The coexistence associated with places like Sarajevo and Granada was of course enabled, safeguarded, and exploited by colonial power. We are confronted, therefore, by a paradox: positive conceptions of at least distant colonial cultures are emerging in our own culture against the background of postcolonial discourse, which is often still rooted in – though often also critical of – forms of nationalism developed in the anti-colonial struggles of the present century. This conference is designed to explore the diversity and complexities of demographic and cultural intersections (and resistance to intersection) in a range of colonial settings and historical periods. The conference will coincide with the 1997 New York State Conference on Asian Studies.

We invite submissions on colonial formations from the eleventh to the eighteenth century. We envisage sessions on medieval Eurasia; on the early modern Americas and the Atlantic world, perhaps reviewing the outcomes of the debates of 'Columbus year'; on the Ottoman Empire, both in and beyond Europe; and on regions relatively remote from European influence. We encourage comparative discussions and presentations directed to the role of representations – of 'image' – both in the constitution of colonial cultural formations and in modern descriptions of them.

Deadline for submission of abstracts:

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July 1, 1997

*Plenary Speakers*

John Van A. Fine (University of Michigan): Balkans, Ottoman Rule in Europe

Gwendolyn Midlo Hall (Rutgers): Louisiana and W. Indies, Africans in New World

Walter Mignolo (Duke University): Colonial and Pre-Colonial S. American Cultures

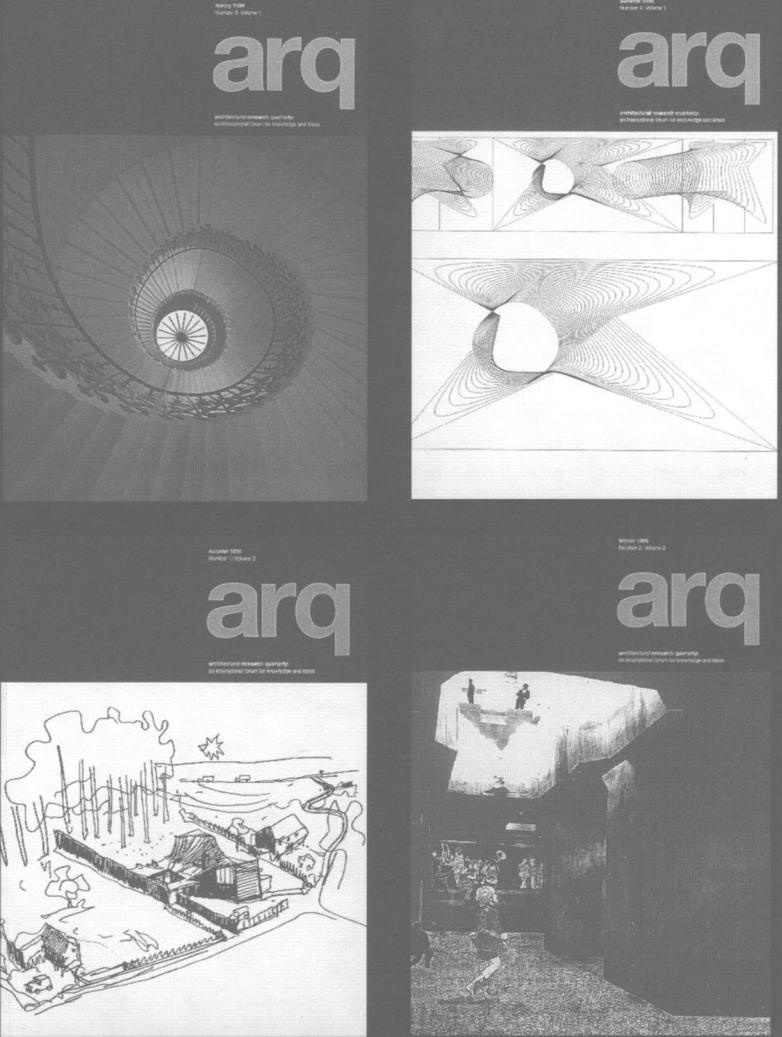
Anthony J. S. Reid (Australian National University, Canberra): South East Asia

Patricia Seed (Rice University): Colonial Regimes in the Americas

For information please contact  
Charles Burroughs, Director,  
Center for Mediaeval and  
Renaissance Studies (CEMERS),  
Binghamton University, Binghamton,  
New York 13902-6000  
E-mail [cemers@binghamton.edu](mailto:cemers@binghamton.edu)  
telephone 607.777-2730

**Letters, should be typed double-spaced and sent to Peter Carolin, Architectural Research Quarterly, c/o University of Cambridge Department of Architecture, 1 Scroope Terrace, Cambridge, CB2 1PX, faxed to +44 (0)1223 332960, or e-mailed to [pc207@hermes.cam.ac.uk](mailto:pc207@hermes.cam.ac.uk)**  
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