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John Outram: the definition of British postmodern architecture

A rare interview with the celebrated British architect who can expect star billing at a celebration of postmodernism in London

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A classical landscape of cypresses, antique fragments and umbrella pines is raised on a concrete entablature above Egyptian-scaled columns. To the right a grand staircase descends, outpaced by cascades of water. The whole edifice is shown, in the style of the images of Sir John Soane's Bank of England building that the architect once commissioned from the artist Joseph Gandy, poised between construction and ruin. Then, going beyond Soane-Gandy, the painter - Carl Laubin - makes the columns and stairs grow out of the storm-gnawed rock of some promontory washed by an unnamed sea.

All this imagery goes to describe no more than an office block, an entry by the architect John Outram in a 1987 competition to design a replacement for the Financial Times' old headquarters, Bracken House, near St Paul's Cathedral. Laubin, playing Gandy to Outram's Soane, tries to show in a single canvas not only the form and fabric of a

building, its past and its future, but also the ideas that lie behind it. Both painting and project are ripe, dense, heroic - you might say a touch preposterous - and unconstrained and unconcerned by the calculations of letting agents or critical assessment.

The image and the building, if they are of their decade in their excess, also oppose the commercial tendencies of their time, which was to slice and dice architecture and to confine expression to the ever skinnier wrapping of the ever larger money factories built to serve the Big Bang. In this work Outram, with Laubin's help, protested against the epoch's evanescence of built substance and against modernism's reduction of the rich imagery of traditional architecture to function and abstract form. He wanted to enact his conviction that architecture should mean something, that it should recover its "universal" power to communicate myths, beliefs and ideas.



Imago Terrarum, 1987 by Carl Laubin, Photograph: carllaubin.com

If you inquire further you will find that the Bracken House project, like all his work, is based on an omnivorous, lifelong fascination with ancient mythologies - classical, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Vedic - their gravity leavened with a certain giggling mischief. It is only scratching the surface to know that Laubin's painting shows the "river of time cut through the forest of infinity". A building, for Outram, should be "metaphysical". Which, if it sounds remote from contemporary ways of discussing architecture, is unquestionably how it was considered for most of what Outram calls "the 9,000 year history of architecture".

He loves stories, but it's not all talk. Outram knows how to alchemise building materials, to play with the colours and casting of concrete, to add (for example) crushed brick and broken glass to the mix, to polish it and incise it, until it looks animate, or geological, or edible, or any combination of the three. He can assemble colours and shapes of brickwork to impart energy, mass and depths of imagined time. Given the chance, he will saturate a surface with polychromy and ornament and what he calls "scripting". "You have to keep your eye on Outram," said Michael Graves, an American architect who was also fond of decoration. "He never knows when to stop."

Outram, now a young-looking 83, is the most compelling British exponent of the style called postmodernism, for which reason he can be expected to be the star of a show on the subject that opens this month at Sir John Soane's museum in London. One of his buildings, a pumping station in the Isle of Dogs, has been listed under Historic England's programme of protecting postmodern masterpieces, and more will be announced soon.

Except that, like most architects assigned a label, he resists it. “I quote Malvolio,” he says: “Some people have postmodernism thrust upon them.” He is indeed *sui generis*.

His personal history plays a role in his cross-cultural fascinations. Although palpably British, with a courteous, quietly genial, witty manner that recalls the actor James Mason, he can also view Britishness from the outside: he was brought up in colonial India, and through family connections of his wife, Rima, knows Cyprus well. There, as in other Mediterranean cultures, he says, “the metaphysical is something ordinary. They feel at home with it. It doesn’t inspire the fear and dread that it does in northern climates.”

He was never, in his Indian childhood, taken to see Hindu temples. “The imperial government regarded metaphysics as a sort of weakness that could be exploited in the subject peoples,” he says. Then, postwar and after the independence of India, condescending government “applied the same principles to the British. The British put up with it because we thought we were the top people.” The result was an austere form of official modernism, “a ‘this hurts me more than it hurts you’ sort of thing”, that “was supposed to be good for you”.

His career as the leader of singular architectural practice was “an accident”. In 1974, after stints in the architects’ department of the London county council and in commercial practices, he was about to emigrate with his family to Cyprus “when we opened the Sunday papers and found that a war had started” - the Turkish invasion that left the island divided to this day. He stayed, started his own business, and got by on kitchens and bathrooms commissioned by supportive relatives - until, with a combination of luck and resourcefulness, he got to design some warehouses at Poyle, west of London.

These, in contrast with the prevailing fashion for hi-tech metal sheds, had brick walls and high vaulted roofs, somehow bringing the aura of the ancient Roman working buildings - the shops of Trajan’s market or the port buildings of Ostia - to a location under the descent into Heathrow airport. Poyle won him more industrial projects. It also clinched the commission to design a quite amazing house in Sussex for the Tetra Pak billionaires Hans and Märit Rausing, who saw in Poyle the quality they wanted, of something that “looked as if it had always been there”.



Duncan Hall, at Rice University's centre of computational engineering in Houston, offers a powerful expression of Outram's thinking. Photograph: John Outram Associates

With the house for the Rausings, on which he worked, one way or another, from 1978 to 2008, Outram could fully explore his love of increasingly fruity concrete, shiny black, rich blue, malachite green, white, wriggling and seething with pattern. It in turn led - after a trustee saw the house featured in a magazine - to the greatest fulfilment of Outram's ideas, the Anne and Charles Duncan Hall, a centre of computational engineering for Rice University in Houston, Texas. Here Outram could "script" every surface of the astonishingly decorated interior, walls, floor and ceiling, with the story of "the ontogenetic and phylogenetic coming-into-being of humanity". "They are hungry people, the Texans," he says. "If you offer them a meal, they will eat it all." He did and they did.

It is striking that Outram should have found fertile ground in Houston, a modern city as far as can be from his ancient Mediterranean inspirations. An attraction of opposites, perhaps. But despite Outram's immersion in antiquity he is also fascinated by the technology of the modern age. A 1958 student project for a "curvy fibreglass boilerhouse" was described by a guru of such things as the very first example of what would later be called hi-tech. An RAF pilot during his national service, he knows something about machines, and there can be something aeronautic as well as temple-like in the low-pitched pediments he gave to some of his industrial units.

There is a paradox in Outram's work. It seeks a shared ground, a way of experiencing the built universe that is both profound and accessible to all, but his burrowings into ancient mythologies make it esoteric to almost all modern viewers. "You can't expect architecture to 'think the truth of being'," he says, citing Heidegger, "unless you can halfway read the ornament." And an article like this can't begin to explain the complexity and range of his imagery.



The Judge Business School at Cambridge University was designed by John Outram. Photograph: John Outram Associates

Recently he was invited to visit an extension to the Cambridge Judge Business School, which Outram designed in the 1990s. The extension is by Stanton Williams, whose cool modernism is the opposite of Outram's style. "It put me in deep shock. I felt like a ghost," he says. "There was a refusal to do discourse with me." This tale seems to confirm Outram's position as singular and out of the mainstream.

Yet, thanks to his genius for translating stories into matter and space, his buildings have a directness that is anything but obscure. You know that something significant is going on that is at least partly familiar, even if you don't entirely know what it is, which

wouldn't happen if there weren't the stories behind what you see. Outram's buildings reach out and grab you. Once seen, they are not forgotten. They move you and engage you. Which is not something you can say of most new buildings.

The Return of the Past: Postmodernism in British Architecture is at Sir John Soane's Museum, London WC2, 16 May-27 August.

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