Architects and masons

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Two recent works, Andrew Saint's *The Image of the Architect* (Yale University Press, 1983) and John James's *Chartres: The Masons who Built a Legend* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982) make important contributions to the architectural literature, and have much to offer to Morrisians. Saint sets out the purpose of his book in his introduction: 'We are at present in the midst of a widespread transformation of "architectural history", with its emphasis on aesthetics, design and authorship, into "building history", which has broader social and economic preoccupations. This book attempts to contribute to the debate on this transition'. The method he employs is to examine the history of the architectural profession, choosing 'special periods of time, episodes, careers or books which I felt contained within them the seeds of the problems which architects had faced or continue to face'. He acknowledges a debt to Marx's famous dictum that social being determines consciousness, and his book gains throughout from its awareness of social, economic and political factors. His scholarship is formidable, but is combined with a very readable presentation, and an apt choice of mostly unfamiliar illustrations.

After bringing his studies up-to-date with a lively chapter on 'The Architect as Entrepreneur', in which he examines some of the pressures to which the profession is currently exposed, he concludes with a brief but stimulating chapter on 'The Influence of Imagination in Architecture', a title taken from a lecture given by Ruskin, 'the subtlest English-speaking critic ever to weigh the claims of architecture', to the infant Architectural Association in 1857. He points out the weakness of the purely imaginative standard which Ruskin advocated there for architecture: sound building must not be neglected, and may be as much as an unlucky age can produce, but it should not be confused with architecture, which relies on imagination to stir hearts and minds. Why has such an attitude dominated for so long? 'The explanation lies' Saint believes 'in the mystique' attached in our time to art . . . . Analogy with
the pure arts has perverted the proper meaning of imagination in architecture’, elevating ‘art-architecture’ to the detriment of all the other aspects essential to a successful building, and he suggests we might return to the objective of ‘sound building’, which Ruskin, and Morris in his turn, ultimately concluded was as much as could be achieved in their own day. ‘Modernism in architecture grew chiefly out of this idea, of course, but, partly through the power of art, perverted it by glorifying novelty and technology, and by interpreting what was supposed to be method as style.’

There follows a persuasive discussion of what a reinterpretation of ‘sound building’ for our own day might require. ‘It never excluded art in the ordinary sense of that word, since all architects who subscribed to it understood that it was right to bring genuine, easily accessible aesthetic pleasure to the senses. But its more thoughtful exponents also believed that within the domain of art lay also all that was best in architectural professionalism: simplicity and economy, respect for client and user, knowledge of techniques and materials, and so forth.’ It would also include the doctrine essential to the ideal of ‘sound building’: collaboration and partnership between the different specialists involved; and unlike conservative elements in the Arts and Crafts Movement, it would welcome and appropriate all genuine developments in technology. But ‘of course, a renewed ideology alone cannot avail the modern architect. Of all activities, building is the most vulnerable to economic pressures, the least susceptible to isolated reform. Without an improved social system there can be no permanently better architecture or permanently better architects’. Nevertheless, Saint concludes hopefully that it may be possible to achieve a position ‘in which imagination and artistic ability are more evenly balanced with technical and managerial experience, in which collaboration with other specialists takes on a more realistic, less high-handed meaning, and in which “sound building” is valued above “high art”. This balance has excellent historical precedent. It was from just such a state of affairs that the architectural individualism so much admired today evolved in the eighteenth century: and it was to just such a state of affairs that Philip Webb and his disciples in the Arts and Crafts Movement, reacting to Ruskin’s despair of achieving anything worth having in architecture, yearned to revert.’

It is most encouraging to encounter such a sensitive understanding of the relevance of the thought and practice of Ruskin, Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement for architects today. But the value of Saint’s book for Morrisians is not confined to its deeply thought conclusion. In his chapter ‘Myth and the Medieval Architect’ he presents the best recent
survey of the long debate on the rôle of the medieval architect. Saint distinguishes three successive ‘myths’ which have dominated the discussion. The first—that the great cathedrals and abbeys were designed and built by monkish craftsmen—was demolished by the growth of research. His next ‘myth’—that of the architect as handworker—he sees as having its origin in Ruskin’s ‘stumble into a first crude political awareness’ as a result of his response to the social stirrings of 1848. By the time of the appearance of Ruskin’s The Stones of Venice, of which the chapter ‘On the Nature of Gothic’, influenced Morris so deeply, his thinking had matured to a realisation that social discontent originated in the relations of opposing classes, and he hoped that such relations might be cemented by handwork. But his élitism precluded a belief in deliberate Gothic anonymity: élites had always existed, but art fails when the élite develops into a class set apart.

By the time Morris came to political maturity, a great deal more was known about medieval masons and their organisation. ‘Wishing to reconcile his new-found commitment to socialism for Britain’s future with his long-time love for its Gothic past, he set himself a crash course in modern medieval history of the “evolutionary” school: Stubbs, Freeman, Green, the radical Thorold Rogers, and above all, the available portions of Marx’s Capital.’ It was in fact in the 1870s, when he was working out his own path to a socialist position, that Morris got down to a serious study of the ‘evolutionary’ historians—some of whom he knew personally—convinced as always that historical understanding was essential to an understanding of his own times. He was thus fully prepared for his encounter with the historical chapters of Capital. One result of his studies was that Morris came to the conclusion, as Saint points out, that ‘the craft guild was the crucial source of virtue in medieval art because it fostered combination, looked after its members, and forbade accumulation of capital. Since there was no division of labour its members were equal and free collaborators skilled in every aspect of their trade; after his exhaustive training, every apprentice became a master. The only restraint was the hand of tradition.’

Saint emphasises that Morris did not deny that the design of particular buildings might have originated with one man, but considered this irrelevant to the spirit in which they were erected: ‘Take now some one great work of collective or popular art, and in some such way as follows I think it will have been done: the hope and desire for it stir up some mastermind to plan it; but he is not puffed up with individual pride by finding himself ready for this creation; for he knows well that he could not even have thought of it without the help of those who have gone
before him, and that it must remain a mere unsubstantial dream without
the help of his fellows alive now and to live hereafter: it is the thoughts
and hopes of men passed away from the world which, alive within his
brain, make his plan take form; and all the details of that plan are guided,
will he or will he not, by what we call tradition, which is the hoarded skill
of man handed down from generation to generation.' This great tradition
was undermined as the craft guilds became oligarchic, leading to the
division of labour on which capitalism was to be based, though in the
building industry the change from craftmanship to divided labour was
not fully accomplished until the eighteenth century, which is why
buildings up to that time (such as his beloved Kelmscott) could still have
value.

Saint acutely points out that although Morris's general beliefs about
Gothic architects and craftsmen were accepted by his followers in the
Arts and Crafts Movement, the economic framework underpinning
them, based on Marxist criteria, was soon forgotten, with disastrous
results ultimately for the coherence of the theory. E.S. Prior, a leading
Arts and Crafts architect-scholar, could claim in his *The Cathedral
Builders in England* (1905): 'In the middle ages artists, architects,
sculptors, painters, were just folk generally, and the credit of their art
must not be attributed to extraordinary personalities, but to the life
history of the race.' W. R. Lethaby shared the conviction of Ruskin and
Morris that collective endeavour was the mainspring of Gothic society
and architecture, but on the basis of his careful research recognised the
rôle of the individual within the collective, and quoted Mâle approv-
ingly: 'The art of the Middle Ages was collective, but it was more
intensely incarnated in some men; crowds do not create but individuals',
whilst insisting that since architecture and building are inseparable, the
concept of 'design' as a separate process is mistaken. Incidentally, it is
difficult to see why Saint thinks Lethaby should have altered his position
after the publication in 1909 of extracts from fourteenth- and fifteenth-
century sermons complaining that 'Master masons, with a rod and gloves
in their hands, say to others "cut it for me in this way" and labour not
themselves, yet take higher pay'; nor why such texts should be seen as
'helping to shatter what was left of solidity among the old Ruskinian
interpreters'. Surely they merely condemn developments which are felt to
be undesirable divergences from the norm.

Lethaby, as Saint points out, was never reconciled to the idea of the
medieval 'architect', who usually appears in quotation marks in his
writings. No such inhibition has restrained John Harvey, the leading
exponent of Saint's third 'myth': that where documents survive, careful
research will reveal a medieval architect not very far different from his
counterpart. Saint pays tribute to Harvey's great contribution
to our knowledge of the Gothic, but is not persuaded, and also points
out that 'in championing individualism against the bogey of collectiv-
ism, he falls within a current of contemporary political concern which
has much affected scholarship'.

Three 'myths', then, have been investigated and found wanting. What
explanatory theory can Saint advance to take their place? It must be said
that after such a penetrating exposition, the tentative explanation he
offers is not at all convincing. We can agree that 'The organisation of
medieval building depended upon separate, skilled specialisms, of whose
intricate collaboration the medieval cathedrals are the consummate
representation', but we would not agree that the parallel he draws with
the organisation of different specialisms in our great industries today
takes us very far, nor with his conclusion that 'We have been searching
incessantly for the creative and spiritual figure, whether individual or
collective, when it might have been shrewder to know how building
committees functioned, how finance was arranged, how labour was
kept at least reasonably content, how priest, mason, carpenter and the
rest reconciled their respective interests'. We want to know as much as
we can glean from the sparse documentation about these important
matters, but surely we must return to the nature of the labour that was
organised, and the ways in which the skills were exercised if we are to
understand the basic determinants of medieval creativity.

By a happy coincidence, John James's book, which must have appeared
too late for Saint, provides vital evidence for this discussion in one of the
most original contributions for many decades to our understanding of
the medieval mason and his methods of work when the great cathedrals
were being built. The book is essential reading for everyone interested in
the Gothic, and the following bare summary of the conclusions which
affect our discussion cannot do justice to the wealth of new material it
contains. James's interest was aroused by the paradox that although the
overall impression of Chartres conveys a strong feeling of unity, 'when
you examine the cathedral closely, you discover that the design is not a
well controlled and harmonious entity but a mess'. For example: 'In the
nave, structure is an aspect of and inherent in the wall; in the sanctuary
it has been condensed into the buttresses, whilst in the chapels it has
been denied altogether. Three such arrangements in one building can
only be called a mess'. Elsewhere, the building is an endless profusion of
differences, and as with other large structures of the period, 'uniformity
is the exception rather than the rule, inside as well as out'.

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How are we to explain this? Chartres is substantially the work of one generation, not of centuries. It has often been assumed that the cathedrals were built bay by bay, in sections from the piers to the vaults. James’s revolutionary discovery has been to show that in fact at Chartres the entire building went up in layers over the whole area without any vertical breaks, though some sections might be in advance of others. This he has achieved by a painstaking examination of the structure stone by stone and detail by detail, which took him years to accomplish. By studying masons’ marks, characteristic treatments (e.g. of corbels), and the distinctive use of differing foot lengths at a time when measures were not standardised, he convincingly identifies the teams which worked on the building, and where one team left off, to be succeeded by another.

From this discovery and other evidence, a striking new picture emerges, some of it conjectural, but most of it established beyond a doubt. We are to imagine large teams of peripatetic masons, each under the control of a master mason. Such a master mason of established reputation is brought in when a new building is needed, and the Chapter proceeds to detail its requirements, liturgical and otherwise. The master mason sets out his proposals, builds a wooden model, which is approved, and then gets to work on the footings. After a few years, money runs out, and work comes to a standstill. Whilst the Chapter sends its relics into the countryside to raise more funds, the masons move on to take up work elsewhere: ‘Experts at their trade, they had to be where the work was, not where their hearts lay’. When the funds permit a resumption of work, a new master with a different team may take over. What has already gone up is sacrosanct, and the Chapter ensures that interior arrangements are not altered, but everything else can have a quite fresh treatment, in line with the preferences of the new master, and even of the individual mason. At Chartres ‘we can divide the major part of the work up to the completion of the vaults into over thirty campaigns, carried out by only nine contractors [teams]. They each appeared for a short time, laying on average a mere three courses of masonry in each program. Some returned to the works many times, and when not there, would have found work on other great cathedrals and abbeys around Paris.’

What scope does such a method of construction leave for a permanent ‘architect’, perhaps retained by the Chapter? In a closely argued chapter, James gives a convincing answer from the evidence: none at all. The rôle of the Chapter was confined to seeing that the needs of its religious programme were met, and to such matters as financial control. It did not interfere with building decisions. The master for the moment was the
‘architect’, taking all decisions for the progress of the work, and ‘between the master mason who led the crews and the Chapter there was no one . . . . These new facts show that Chartres was the ad hoc accumulation of the work of many men. Once our initial dismay is over, and we become familiar with the creative possibilities of their ways, we can obtain an altogether new appreciation of medieval buildings in their living, growing and organic reality.’

Morris would have felt no ‘initial dismay’ at such a conclusion. On the contrary, he would have welcomed it as a confirmation of his conviction, based on his wide historical understanding and his life-long study of the medieval crafts, that the great cathedrals were the product of no individual genius, but of the collective efforts of men trained in a great tradition in the fellowship of their guild (or ‘team’, as we should perhaps call it at this date, though we can be sure that in all essentials it was the counterpart of the later guild). From the master down, they had learned in long years of training and practice and from the experience handed down within the guild, exactly what stone could and could not do, whilst their wanderings and contacts with other masons would keep them informed on all aspects of ‘the state of the art’. This ensured their sympathetic understanding of any work in progress they might take over, and that whatever changes they might introduce, their contribution would harmonise with what had gone before. Within the team a wide variety of skills would be found, and James argues that the bulk of the wonderful statuary at Chartres was produced not by specialist sculptors, but by masons who when not cutting figures, would work alongside their fellows on other carving, and even plain walling. ‘They could not have had our genius-complex, for they worked at what had to be done each day, without conceit’.

We can only welcome this confirmation of Morris’s deep understanding of the collective basis of Gothic architecture, whose essence he saw as the craftsman’s ‘freedom of hand and mind subordinated to the co-operative harmony’\(^1\): a freedom permitted by a particular conjecture of his society and his craft organisation. Morris’s analysis is no ‘myth’, but on the contrary it has stood the test of time, and fully accords with this outstanding achievement of modern research.

NOTES

\(^1\) Morris’s endorsement of ‘sound building’ is to be found in his lecture ‘Gothic Revival II’, *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, ed. E.D. LeMire, Detroit 1969, p. 85.