Architecture & National Identities Special Issue

Architecture, Nation, Difference

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This special issue of *National Identities* was conceived to explore the hermeneutic potential of architecture's relationship with national identity. It advocates neither for 'nation' or 'identity', conceding that both are reductive concepts which are founded (in their normative forms) upon exclusion. By extension, architecture which seeks to advance or represent ideas of national identity will inevitably be considered complicit to exclusionary practices. The articles contained here acknowledge this complicity, and seek to complexify, resist, resituate or transgress the oppressive bond between architecture and national identity. They are combined in this issue to demonstrate the range of scales at which questions of architectural nationalism may be addressed: the inter-subjective, the body, the building, the city, the region, the nation, the globe, the interstitial. The articles are wide-ranging and thematically divergent, but share two key interrelated concerns. Firstly, is an interest in how 'difference' disrupts narratives of nationhood in architectural and urban contexts.   A key aim in this respect is the identification of counter-hegemonic (yet often intersectional) practices used to articulate voices, experiences, ideas and values which are excluded by dominant power structures and cultural representations of nationhood. Secondly, is the deprivileging of the building as the primary source for advancing our understanding of architectural nationalism. The de-privileging of form here is not to suggest its lack of relevance or agency. Rather, it is to mark an extended moment within which to annunciate the need for a more rigorous and conceptually ambitious grasp of relations between form, context and exteriority vis á vis collective, large-scale and long-range forms of identity.

The first of my own two contributions is a review article reflecting on a representative sample of past architecture submissions to the journal. The articles reviewed are drawn from those published since the inaugural issue through to date,

spanning a period of twenty-one years and organised into three categories: Typology, Remembrance and Geopolitics. Categorisation is used here to tentatively map the intellectual territory, fully conceding the possibility of alternative ways to frame and interrelate knowledge towards other productive understandings. Beyond articulating distinctions and overlaps between articles, subsequent critical reflection identifies the problem of form and context as central to any research interest in architectural nationalism. Sarah Milne's article tells the story of Colonial House, London, acquired in 1942 by the Colonial Office and converted into a seamen's hostel for black men from British colonies in the Caribbean and West Africa. Milne discusses the conceptual position of the hostel as an 'in-between space', and one that can be used to examine wider race and identity politics in post-war urban space in Britain. Her account exposes the troubled reality of the 'colour bar' and rights to citizenship for the seamen, and highlights how the actions of authorities ran counter to official anti-segregationist rhetoric in a post-imperial built environment. The narrative of Colonial House, its operational reality and its place in a wider pattern of welfare provision for 'migrant' communities, indicates Britain's attitude to its overseas territories at the time, revealing clear internal contradictions regarding its own national identity. Milne calls for a more rigorous pursuit of representative architectural histories, one which includes questions of power and the unbuilt. Clare Melhuish's article examines the phenomena of universities as major landowners and urban developers. She critiques new forms of university spatial and architectural development which are described as inclusive, diverse, and aim to accommodate a transient cosmopolitan community. Drawing upon the concept of cosmopolitan urbanism, Melhuish examines the relatively recent strategic engagement with global and urban identities, running counter to the historical alignment between universities and the nation-state. The extent to which these new alignments

can be legitimately claimed are interrogated, and the transgressive potential of cosmopolitan urbanism is explored towards 'more fluid and 'ethnographic' urban heritage narratives'. My second paper speculates on the potential relationship between built form and the experience of difference. Drawing upon the well-established work on nation by Homi K. Bhabha, the article examines how Bhabha's work has been used to frame specific works of architecture. This analysis is used as the foundation for two building reviews. The first is the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, which leads to a consideration of 'affect' as a possible means to reflect the lived plurality of national identity. This consideration is extended and applied to the second building study: the Institute du Monde Arabe, Paris, and is used to advance ideas on the relationship between form (representation) and affect (non-representation) and the relative merits these may bring to a re-thinking of design approaches in contexts of complex national identities.

The articles are followed by two 'think-pieces'. These assert specific and unashamedly subjective critical positions on the question of national identity within particular contexts. The first, by Shahed Saleem, reflects on the role of the mosque in Britain, its place in a new post-war multi-racial Britain, and how these in-turn intersect critically with evolving concepts of nationhood. Saleem's piece revolves around the question of belonging and highlights discourse surrounding the mosque as a new type tasked implicitly with overcoming a climate of fear and racism (whether towards members of the Black and Brown Commonwealth, or more specifically towards Muslim communities). Finally, Victoria Watson's piece opens with reference to a letter from architectural historian Gavin Stamp to former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, dated April 1985. It expressed Stamp's concern over the German-American Architect Mies van der Rohe's proposal for an office block in the city of London. From here, the

piece weaves its way through a series of interrelated architectural, political and cultural

provocations encompassing – among other things – nationalism, the question of Europe,

'architectural diversity' and the legacy of Mies's Barcelona Pavilion. In her concluding

comments, Watson refers to Mies's proposal for London being designed in the spirit of

taking away 'old cultures' and instead focusing on science and technology. The

provocation in this reference is writ large. However, it is leveraged by Watson to warn

against the dangers of the reductive tendencies of 'forced diversity and phony

traditionalism'. She hints at what could lie beyond, and what could have been had

Mies's vision been realised. It is perhaps the space that Watson describes, one which

accentuates 'luminosity, reflectiveness and the absorption of light, as a means of

producing lightly coloured perceptions for contemporary citizens and visitors in real

time and space', which could be seen as the poetic terminal point for all creative and

intellectual endeavour towards the anti-essentialist experience of Others in space. This

space represents a radically immersive alternative world, in which one may *feel* an

atmosphere of difference rather than work to arrive at materialist or rationalist

confinements of the same.