

review essays:

a new kind of architectural history

TWO CHICAGO ARCHITECTS AND THEIR CLIENTS: Frank Lloyd Wright and Howard Van Doren Shaw. By Leonard K. Eaton. MIT Press. 1969. \$10.00.

The visual arts frequently play a much less central role in American Studies than might be reasonably expected. No doubt this can be partially explained by the excessive reliance on written materials in American education and scholarship. We are, all too often, visually illiterate. It cannot be denied, however, that books on the arts commonly reinforce the situation by focusing on technical and highly esoteric issues while neglecting the many crucial interconnections between the arts and their cultural contexts.

Historians of architecture, for example, rarely shift their myopic attention away from individual architects and their most important structures. An architect may be studied as an engineer, as an artist, or, infrequently, as a thinker. His structures are analyzed as three-dimensional forms, as evidence of important technological advances, but even less frequently as data for cultural history. Certainly the connection between architecture and American culture implicit in the relations between architect and client gets very short shrift from most scholars in the field.

Breaking away from these methodological and conceptual patterns, Leonard Eaton has produced a provocative study of first rate importance. He begins with the safe assertion that (p. 3) "the problem of radical shifts in style is one of the knottiest in architectural history." But Professor Eaton tacitly rejects the conventional biographical or formalistic tools to untie his chosen knot, the emergence between 1890 and 1913 of the "Chicago school" or "Prairie School" led by Frank Lloyd Wright. Since (p. 5) "it appears that in order to have a revolutionary architecture you must have an unusual type of client," Eaton very sensibly proceeds to analyze the character of Wright's clients by comparing them with those of a conservative, prestigious contemporary, Howard Van Doren Shaw. Like most important innovations, this scholarly procedure seems self-evidently appropriate, though, strangely enough, no one had thought to do it before.

Eaton attempts, in his first chapter, to give "The Problem of Architectural Innovation in History" a context that goes back to Abbot Suger and the stylistic transition from Romanesque to Gothic as well as to that in fifteenth-century Florence from Gothic to Renaissance. Most

readers, however, will probably feel that this undertaking requires far more than one chapter of thirteen pages to produce anything beyond tantalizingly suggestive results.

The body of the book is made up of parallel chapters on the architectural practice of Wright and Shaw with extensive profiles of their clients (14 of Wright's, 13 of Shaw's). An Appendix by Elizabeth M. Douvan supplements the impressions gained from the profiles by statistically summarizing (pp. 252-254) the results of the questionnaire used for all of the clients in the sample (40 for Wright, 52 for Shaw). Eaton concludes that while the Shaw clients represented the economic and social elite of their time, Wright drew his support (p. 234) "from a small, highly individualized segment of the American middle class." In fact, Wright's clients (p. 235) "impress one as atomistic individuals, unconnected with the most significant institutions in American life." In sharp contrast to Shaw's clients, they "lacked almost entirely the kind of institutional organization which would have enabled them to make the Wrightean revolution a permanent part of American culture." Clearly, *Two Chicago Architects* is the most interesting and revealing book on American architecture since Norris Kelly Smith's *Frank Lloyd Wright: A Study in Architectural Content* (1966). Eaton's methodology exemplifies a new way that architectural history may significantly contribute to and draw support from the study of our civilization, and that should be warmly applauded by anyone concerned with American Studies.

It is particularly unfortunate, therefore, that Eaton did not pay more attention to the issues raised by historians dealing with this era, commonly referred to as "The Progressive Period." If, for example, the reader asks how Wright's clients fit into the "status revolution" described in Richard Hofstadter's *Age of Reform* (1955), no answer is forthcoming. The question of family structure repeatedly emerges in *Two Chicago Architects*, but there is no hint that its author has read Christopher Lasch's *The New Radicalism in America* (1965). Eaton is still too much the art historian who knows his Vasari but perhaps not his Beard, whose knowledge of art may be great and wide-ranging but whose grasp of history is weak and fragmentary.

More serious than inadequate background reading is the danger that a scholar, attempting to use techniques from other disciplines, may be victimized by pedestrian or even faulty application of those techniques by his consultant. One cannot escape the feeling that the behavioristic character of Professor Douvan's questionnaire necessarily led to Eaton's surprising and highly dubious observation that (p. 37) "the clients themselves rarely attached any ideological significance to the design of their homes." If you set up a questionnaire like that of Douvan's, which obscures or ignores ideological motivations, you will surely obscure or ignore the role of ideology in decision-making.

The case of Mr. and Mrs. Avery Coonley is particularly revealing. Not only is their house by Wright (1908) one of his masterpieces, but Coonley's brother commissioned a residence by Shaw in the same year. Thus, nearly perfect conditions for comparing clients existed here. The Avery Coonleys were devoted Christian Scientists, he serving as Illinois Board of Publication and she as a professional practitioner, while the Prentiss Coonleys apparently had no unusually strong religious interests. Mrs. Coonley told Wright, according to a frequently quoted passage in his *Autobiography* (1933, 1943), that they found "the countenance of principle" in his work. The significance of this statement, already great

for anyone who understands Christian Science terminology, is increased by the fact that Wright included it as the last part of the section entitled "Designing Unitey Temple." Though all of this amounts to strong presumptive evidence of "ideological significance," Eaton did not explore the matter. He conceded that (p. 218) "Avery's interest in religion may have been for him the slightly offbeat characteristic which he shared with so many of the other Wright clients," but Eaton's tendency to dismiss the beliefs of clients may be seen in his captious description of Mrs. Prentiss Coonley (p. 166), "her recreation was gardening, not Christian Science."

It is necessary to point out that, even when Professor Eaton is at his weakest as in his analysis of the Coonleys, he sheds far more light than most earlier works on the subject. Grant Manson's highly respected biography, *Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910* (1958), devotes 10 pages to the Avery Coonley house. Yet he claimed that the Coonleys (p. 187) "determined to find the most progressive architect in practice, and, having made their requirements plain, to interfere thenceforth in no way whatever with the creative processes which they had set in motion." *Two Chicago Architects* has serious faults and limitations, but it applies an architectural history methodology of great promise in furthering American Studies.

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history as retrospective anthropology

RED, WHITE & BLUE. By John William Ward. Oxford University Press. 1969. \$7.50.

This book is a collection of seventeen essays written during the 1960's dealing with a wide variety of topics. The sub-title, *Men, Books, and Ideas in American Culture*, indicates the content of the book. The value of the essays for students of American society varies greatly. The author decided (for valid historical reasons) not to revise any of the essays; in many cases this works out well, in some cases it does not. The essay on James Gould Cozzens, for example, is out of date. Republishing the essays in their original form also leads to annoying repetitions. For example, two chapters conclude with the same quotation from Schumpeter; this same quotation is used again in a third chapter. The essays on freedom and individualism also tend to be repetitious and are not particularly informative.

The opening essay, however, is worth the price of the book. In it Ward explains both the concepts and the methodology of what he chooses to call cultural history. In his introduction he says that his own preference is for the "descriptive and the concrete, rather than the abstract and the conceptual," and he begins his discussion with an analysis of the role of the cultural historian. He argues that an understanding of the concept of culture is fruitful for the writing of history. History, he contends, "is the study of the actions of men in the past," but "the proper subject of the historian is not the fact of an action . . . but the processes of thought which go on in the mind of the actor which are disclosed in, and establish the meaning of, that action."

Ward takes an organic position on the nature of society and argues that without society man is not a human animal, "he is simply animal."