ARCHITECTURE VIEW: SIR EDWIN LANDSEER LUTYENS AND THE CULT OF THE RECENT PAST

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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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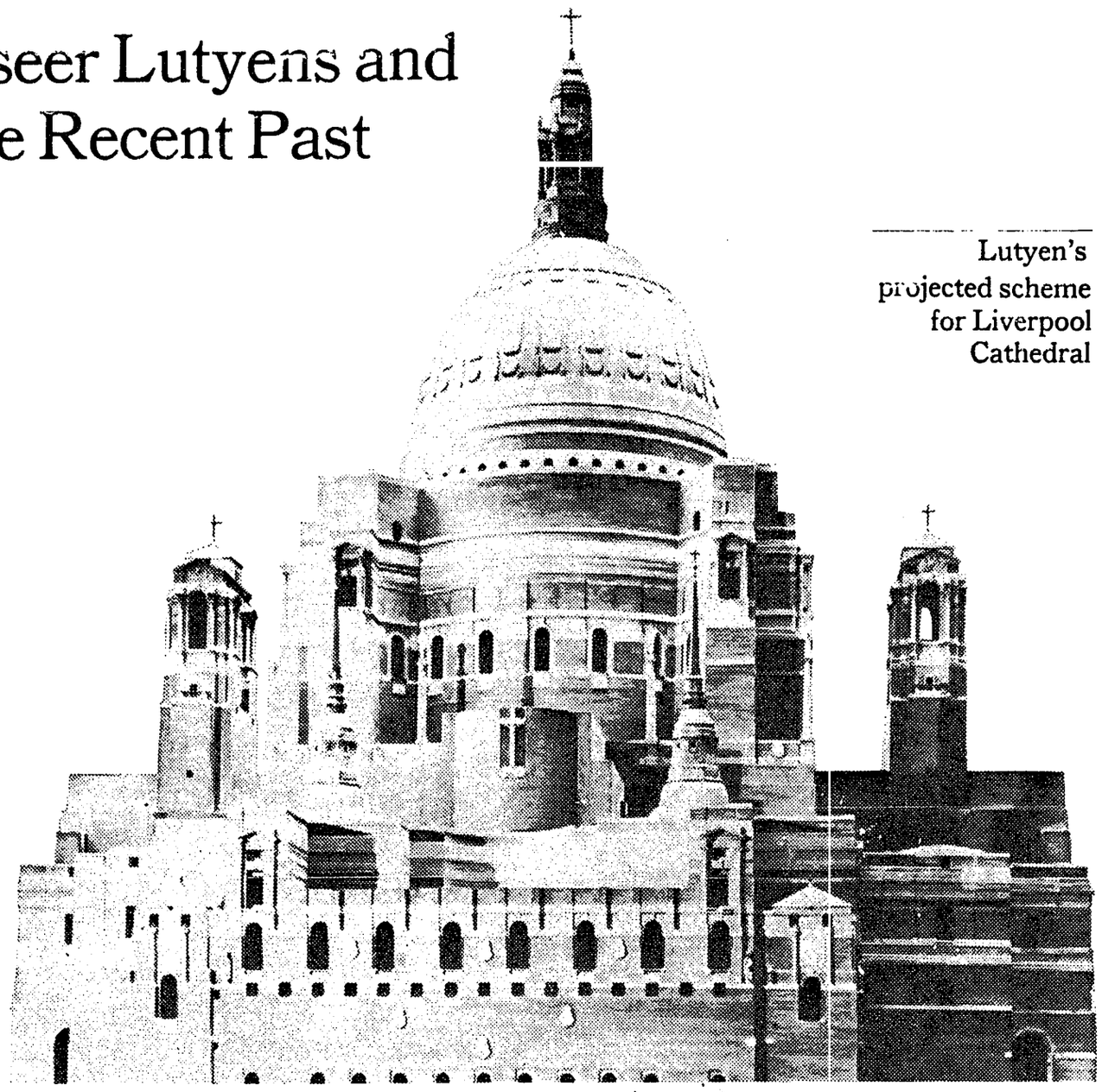
Sir Edwin Landseer Lutyens and The Cult of the Recent Past



Lutyen's projected scheme for Liverpool Cathedral

The architectural revolution is galloping rapidly backwards. The latest titillating peek at the forbidden past that the modernists have spurned with Calvinist fervor is "The Architecture of Sir Edwin Landseer Lutyens (1869-1944)," the exhibition that has just opened at the Museum of Modern Art as one of its major shows of the fall and winter season. Aided by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and co-sponsored by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the show will be on view in New York through Jan. 7.

Of all the forbidden past, the traditional work of the 20th century — those buildings that continued to use eclectic sources after the modernists had outlawed them for functional glass, steel and concrete — has been the most taboo. And if there is a lower circle of damnation reserved for architects, it has been for the ones who compounded the sin by clothing modern construction in classical forms.

Sir Edwin Landseer Lutyens was guilty on both counts. If that weren't enough, he was solid British establishment dealing in the kind of official and monumental commisssions for business and government that ranged from bank buildings to plans for the colonial capital of New Delhi in India. To say nothing of homes for the privileged and rich.

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Why, then, this sudden attention to his work? Actually, it is not all that unexpected. The guest director of the show, Allan Greenberg, is an architect who has been studying Lutyens for over a decade, and Lutyen's name has become one of the code words of the "postmodernists," who have been rediscovering a highly selective past.

Nor is the Museum of Modern Art displaying a perverse sense of humor in giving these traditional buildings its stamp of approval. The exhibition is in the same revisionist spirit as the big Beaux Arts drawing show of 1975, which restored the rejected Academy to respectability, and the Gunnar Asplund show, which took that controversial eclectic-modernist back into the fold of approved practitioners.

As your all-purpose, nonconformist architect, Asplund made an easy transition to something even less acceptable, your all-out establishment-eclectic architect; in this case, Lutyens. Spurred by Arthur Drexler, director of the Department of Architecture and Design, the museum is right in the mainstream of the revisionist trend.

But beyond all the turns and twists of revisionist theory and practice today — the agony and anguish of those who profess that modern architecture is dead and alternatives must be sought, and the fruitful excitement of some of the more thoughtful explorations of those alternatives — one notable fact remains. Lutyens was a superb architect. If he had clothed his buildings in banana peels, he would have done it with urbanity and style. He was a high-wire practitioner; one need only look at run-of-the-mill classicism, or what passed for classicism in the 20th century, to see the extraordinary art and skill with which he worked.

This is the kind of miraculous manipulation of proces-

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sion and space, of form and proportion, of visual and functional relationships, that goes beyond style and labels. The results were achieved through erudite and elegant devices. And this is the kind of architecture that generates tremendous excitement among professionals — particularly among the young in the process of discovering the brilliant complexity of great building. What passes for the architectural avant-garde today is all on a Lutyens high.

But if the recognition of his work among the intellectual art élite is not perverse at this time, there is a certain irony in the relative inaccessibility of its forms and meanings to all except those with a rather recondite architectural education. (On the other hand, inaccessibility is the traditional hallmark of the avant-garde.)

Most of today's architects are ignorant of all but the most elementary knowledge of classical forms and their uses. Some are busy clambering over monuments in an orgy of making measured drawings, learning the lessons of Rome and the Renaissance first hand. Others are trying valiantly, in a mood of reinvention, to produce moldings again, and one is unsure whether to laugh or cry at the innocently clumsy results. No wonder they are all so impressed by a master.

And if there is an interesting side effect of this reevaluation of Lutyens and other eclectic architects, it is that ignorance is rapidly going out of style. Architects will need a proper knowledge of their own art in its total stylistic and historical evolution — and that can't possibly be all bad.

Otherwise, how to really appreciate Lutyens's buildings? It is possible to walk through a Lutyens house and sense the compelling spatial organization, but it is less simple to "read" the sophisticated and subtle play of the spatial devices that depend on a learned vocabulary.

Because in every Lutyens work, from the Berkshire estates of the first decade of the century done in a "protomodern" or "new traditionalist" picturesque style, to the "high classical" of the Viceroy's House built in New Delhi, over the next two decades, there is grace and wit. Lutyens called classical architecture "the great game." It was a game that he played with an aerialist's skill.

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Ambiguity and paradox are present in every example; Lutyens joined the formal and the bucolic; he liked symmetry of form with asymmetry of movement. He willfully broke the restraints of order for the accommodation of function. In his own time, the taste and polish of his classical vocabulary commanded admiration. But it is this ambiguity and paradox that intrigue another generation today.

He was wonderfully witty — his "disappearing" pilasters serve both to puzzle and delight the viewer and to transform the perception of a building's bulk. He could throw the curve of an oculus better than Ron Guidry throws a ball. No current practicitoner of complexity and contradiction can improve on his treatment of the changing wall planes of the Midland Bank on Poultry Street.

Even the later, drier work of the 1930's, such as the British Embassy in Washington or the Y.W.C.A. on Great Russell Street in London, and the buildings on which he acted as consultant, retain this consummate gamesmanship. What his project for the Liverpool Cathedral would have been like if executed, is a staggering thought.

Call it classicism, or mannerism, the mastery was always there. Call it architecture, in its timeless definition. ■

Yet these many years later the game is still being played. Thomas M. Messer, the director of the Guggenheim, at least varies the scenario a bit when, in an introductory note to Mrs. Waldman's catalogue, he invokes the names of Schubert and Brahms and the whole "era of German Romanticism." But the fact is, Schubert's name — not to mention the vast roster of minds conjured up by this reference to German Romnticism — tells us exactly nothing about the experience of Rothko's painting.

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Still, the question of "meaning" in Rothko's art — for this is what all these "literary fancies" are really about — cannot be avoided, if only because Rothko himself made such a point of it. An artist who insists that "the subject is crucial" in painting, and then denies that the one most dominant visual element in his painting — in Rothko's case, color — is not the subject, is not only presenting us with a paradox, but himself as well. Rothko was clearly uneasy, indeed extremely anxious, about this paradox, and he had every reason to be. He had carried painting to a point of extreme reduction, and had made something extraordinary out of what remained, and yet he still yearned for the world of meaning that painting had jettisoned on its way to colonizing its extreme position.

What he was left with — and what we are left with in his art — is precisely this struggle between the artist and his esthetic materials. It adds to the paradox of Rothko's art that this struggle resulted in images of such apparent serenity, but the drama of the self makes itself felt all the same, and it is made all the more poignant by the fact that the only language available to the painter for its expression is the language of an extreme estheticism.

If there is a religious dimension to Rothko's art, is it not to be found precisely in this estheticism — in the religion the artist made of art itself? That, I suspect, is what accounts for the atmosphere of piety and wonder in this exhibition — the sense it gives us of art itself being made into a substitute religious faith. This, I think, helps to explain both the power of the art and its capacity to leave us with a sense of bafflement.

The retrospective at the Guggenheim, Fifth Avenue at 88th Street, remains on view through Jan. 14, and will then travel to museums in Houston, Minneapolis and Los Angeles. The show at Pace, 32 East 57th Street, closes on Nov. 25. ■