Architecture: Making the Scene With Sir John

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

LONDON.

So you've seen swinging London. You've been to The Drugstore with its miniature mod rotunda wrapped in shiny brass walls, its pop clutter and vertical space bathed in rock sound — the multidimensional environment, the "now" esthetic, the new, new world. And because you're a card-carrying member of the over-30 generation, you have the feeling that although it's fresh, and fun, it is scarcely revolutionary and that somewhere you've seen it all before.

Well, you have. In London. In that early 19th-century swinger's pad, Sir John Soane's Museum — the house the famous English architect built from 1812 to 1834 for his home and personal collection of art and antiquities, preserved by an endowment in his will and by an act of Parliament.

Here are the miniature rotunda with its multidimensional effects of light and surface, the dramatic tricks with scale and space, the collector's clutter that outpops camp, the "now" esthetic of circa 1825. No rock — just a cacaphony of clock chimes on the hour. There you have it, plus a few tricks the boys haven't learned yet. The point here is not to offer redundant proof of that old chestnut that there is nothing new under the sun, but that when Chelsea palls, nonswinging London still has a lot to offer, and Sir John can make the present generation look pale.

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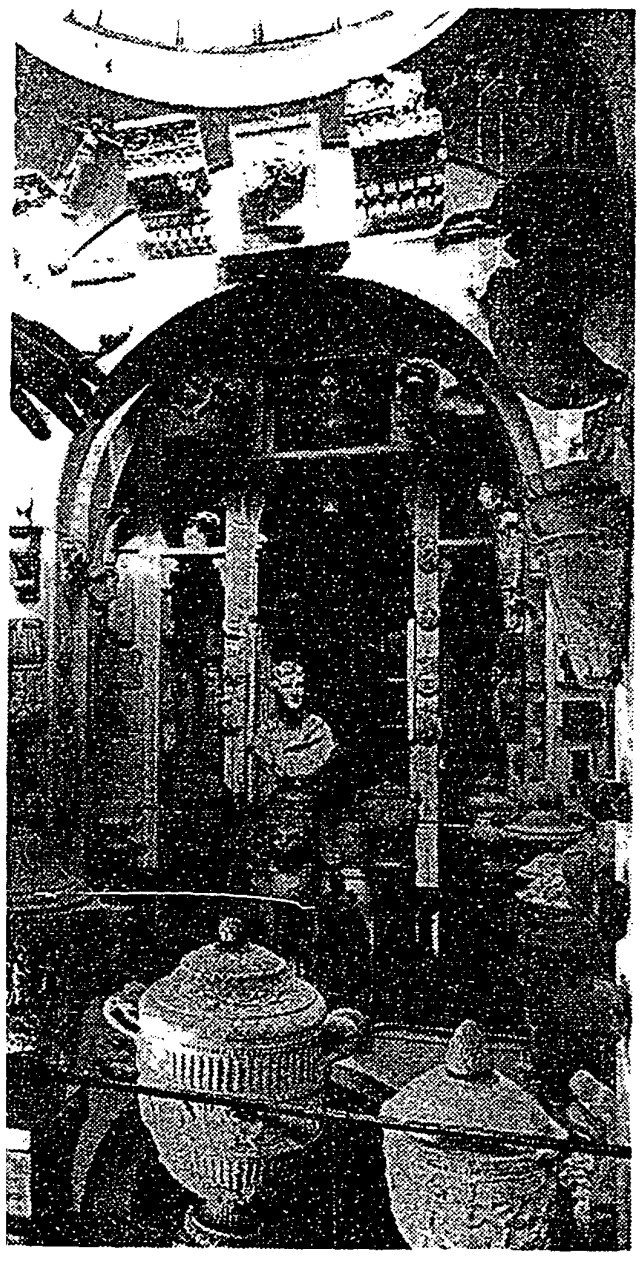
The remarkable thing about the Soane Museum is not that this beautiful oddity is so little known, but that it has become a pilgrimage point for today's architects, who find much to admire and to learn from this intensely personal memorial.

Soane is the English exemplar of the phase of late 18th and early 19th-century transitional architecture known as romantic classicism. In France, this movement produced Boullée's dreams of supercolossal funerary grandeur and Ledoux's colonnaded spheres; in England, it is embodied in Soane's domed, skylit spaces that were the fruit of his search for "the poetry of architecture." The unorthodox work of this group is considered by architectural historians to be one of the significant moments in esthetic theory and practice. Its geometric severity and austerely smooth planes, the play of light on simplified, aggrandized classical forms used with bold and striking originality, made the break with tradition that opened the door to the modern revolution.

Soane's reputation has been higher outside of England than at home, and his influence is greater now than it ever was in the past. Few of his buildings still stand; of his masterpiece, the Bank of England, only the outside walls remain unchanged. His work has been characterized by Dorothy Stroud, author of "The Architecture of Sir John Soane," as "highly idiosyncratic, sometimes hard to comprehend and always of interest."

The idiosyncrasies and interest are all present in the museum at 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, the house Soane built and occupied from 1813 to 1837. The museum's curator, a position occupied by custom by a scholar of particular architectural eminence, is Sir John Summerson, historian, philosopher and critic of notable literary grace.



The Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum

Sir John Soane's house and museum, London, the Dome and Grotto of Antiquities
Swinging nineteenth century London

The building is a curiosity of such endearing strangeness, with passages of such imaginative fancy, that one feels oddly as if one might have dreamed the whole thing. But who could dream a monk's parlor and crypt and sepulchral chamber on the basement level, a passage of classical columns on the ground floor holding aloft a wall-less mezzanine drafting room, light shafting down from lateral skylights, a miniaturized dome over an open circular well surrounded by arched passages at two levels, every surface covered with fragments of antiquities and sculptural and architectural memorabilia overflowing into a monument court and monk's yard and tomb?

Soane had the magpie acquisitiveness of the cultivated 19th-century gentleman and professional with the means and taste to collect what the current sensibility admired. Coins, casts, columns and corbels, everything, from pieces of Greek friezes to an Egyptian sarcophagus, is piled up with ordered surrealist splendor. Today's deadpan youngsters with their environmental Happenings can't beat it.

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The beauties as well as the curiosities are there, too. One notes the breakfast parlor in particular, with its delicately embellished flat-domed ceiling "like a rich canopy," in Soane's words, the room gently light-washed from a central lantern and high skylights at two sides, mirrors studding the arches and dome. This is an interior of magically controlled spatial and sensuous effect.

Nor can one fault the superb library in Pompeian colors, where segmental and circular arches with mirrors set behind them suggest rooms beyond rooms and worlds beyond a 19th-century London town house.

The house is a primer, in surprisingly small scale, of many of those creative devices that can lead to the elusive environmental "poetry" Soane sought, and that define the architect's basic techniques and objectives in the manipulation of space, light and form. This is the essence of the art of architecture of any period or style.

Not a few of today's architects have learned Soane's lessons well. Philip Johnson puts his gratitude on public record. His sheer delight in tricks to be played with shallow domes, trompe l'oeil scale and colonnades, sources of light and progressions of space make the Soanian debt quite clear.

He offers, in fact, a fascinating 20th-century parallel to Soane, the architect-collector of means and taste, with his own domestic museum. Soane's famous picture room has cleverly hinged panels that swing open to reveal layers of paintings; Johnson's underground gallery has panels that pivot to reveal his collection.

Non-swinging London has much to teach the interested observer, architect or not. There is the lesson of urban excellence, with every street offering buildings of irreplaceable magnificence or streetscapes of notable quality. Expendable cities add nothing to the dignity of man.

Much has already been destroyed here, including Soane's buildings, and Londoners are vocally concerned. This is the kind of city that puts planning news on page one, and where a press conference on the release of a new city scheme turns into a knowledgeable planning debate.

"What insurance is there of continuing architectural elegance?" asked one member of the press at a recent briefing, objecting to demolition of older buildings of character for new construction. "Will the area be swamped by architectural monstrosities?"

"We can't save every 19th-century building," replied a city official, "even if John Betjeman wants it." "I would like to correct that, sir," another press member objected. "Betjeman and the Victorian Society are quite selective about preservation." It couldn't happen in New York.