Hot Modernism

WORDS Paul Walker

Hot Modernism is a great title. It promises a lot. So does the image on the book’s front cover: a photograph of James Birrell’s Oscar Niemeyer-esque pavilion at Brisbane’s Centenary Pool Complex of 1959. The weather’s hot, the topic’s hot, the design is so hot it’s cool. The text on the back cover, however, is a bit more circumspect. Hot Modernism, it states, “explores the foundation and growth of modern architecture in post-war Queensland. In recent years the regional flowerings of mid-twentieth century Modernism in Europe and the Americas have been meticulously dissected and widely published. Hot Modernism contributes to this emerging understanding that Modernism, despite its internationalism, was not a monolithic movement, nor one that can be understood at a national level.”

But turning from the book’s cover to what’s inside, I was left wondering if switching from nation to state in trying to apprehend the reception of modernism changes much at all. The book is organized under four themes—“Modernism and its Critique,” “Influences,” “People, Firms and Networks” and “Building Programmes”—with each theme grouping two or three chapters and a “visual essay”—images and short descriptions of key projects. The writers include practitioners but are mostly academics from the University of Queensland’s School of Architecture, one of the country’s premier architectural history and theory research centres. The issues they canvass are those that have more generally dominated the discussion of modern architecture’s reception in Australia: the role of European migrant architects, the influence of war experience on young architects returning to the profession in the postwar years, the adoption of modernism in the 1950s as the new orthodoxy in architectural education, the travels of young architects in Europe, the rise of a counterculture in architecture in the 1970s, community building and the under-representation of women in the profession. It is all meticulously researched and mostly well written and the micro histories set out are sometimes beguiling.

Rex Addison’s fascination with the work of northern Italian architect Gino Valle being a case in point. Here an individual’s particular travel and literary experiences produce an unpredictable but apparently very productive tangent. Occasionally, the connections asserted left me puzzled, such as the claim that Conrad Gargett and Partners’ banal State Government Insurance Office Building in Brisbane (1971) was modelled after the Pan Am building in New York (Huh? How?). Hot Modernism’s case for a specific Queensland architecture, however, rides on the old question of climate. Never quite argued, but always an inference readers are invited to make—in the book’s very title—is that the arrival of modernism as an aesthetic manner enables or coincides with a new sensitivity to opportunities in lifestyle and so on offered by Queensland’s climate. Or should that be “climates,” given that Brisbane is no closer to Cairns than it is to Melbourne? Whatever—it is climate that is conceived as differentiating Queensland architecture from that of the dominant centres of Melbourne and Sydney. But the essays in Hot Modernism that explicitly address this show climate was on the agenda of the state’s architects well before the advent of postwar modernism, and other essays (on architectural practice, or urbanism) proceed with little reference to the issue of climate at all. I am not suggesting that this climatic sense of “hot” is not significant in Queensland’s modern architecture, but Hot Modernism does not entirely show the complexities of how this is so. It is as if climate produces disquiet in Queensland architecture still—we should be acknowledging its significance, but are there risks in doing so, such as reducing architecture to the mere provision of comfort? We don’t believe the geographical determinism of the nineteenth century, with its dread that Europeans in tropical and subtropical Australia would drift off into ennui and the bottle. However, if this particular fear has abated, the general sense of anxiety—of needing to account for climate—remains ...

Queensland in the 1970s is several times characterized in Hot Modernism as a police state run by philistines who bulldozed the place’s heritage buildings at the whim of their business and developer pals. No doubt, politics under Joh Bjelke-Petersen were heated
and corrupt. But nowhere in Australia are politics untainted. I wonder if there is not, in the constant formulation in Hot Modernism of the 1970s—Queensland-as-police-state, a subtle rehearsal of climatic determinism: torrid Australia dreaming of itself as Nicaragua. Bring on the Sandinistas.

The preoccupation with climate has also come at the cost of neglecting other matters that are alluded to in the book but not treated as extensively as they deserve to be. Most important of these is the sheer scale of Queensland’s growth and commitment to newness in the postwar decades, which continues to this day. If Victoria is Australia’s rust bucket New Jersey, then Queensland is our California, so to speak. It would have helped the book to explicitly examine demographic and economic changes that underpinned the development of suburbs, the demand for community facilities, the expansion of government bureaucracies and the creation of tourism infrastructure on an unprecedented scale. All these have made in South East Queensland a dispersed urbanism with a city at its heart that challenges the old Australian urban binary of Sydney versus Melbourne. How much did Brisbane’s population grow between 1945 and 1975? How many more cars were there on the road? How did planning deal with such things? How did private interests try to engage with these issues in, for example, pioneering suburban shopping mall? Related to this question of scale is the influence of entities such as the Brisbane City Council and the University of Queensland. As Hot Modernism shows, both offered the young James Birrell opportunities to exercise his prodigious talent that he probably would not have had if he had stayed in Melbourne. A key difference between Brisbane and its southern rivals is the power of its city government. Mayors like Clem Jones in the 1960s and Campbell Newman more recently have had a level of profile and real political sway unrivalled elsewhere. These things are not analysed in Hot Modernism. But it might be in this issue of scale and the willingness not only of architects but also of institutions to think anew – for good or bad – that Queensland really is different.

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