

CULTURE

Myth and imagination

Swiss architect Valerio Olgiati's RIBA show is short on labels but strong on enigma, monumentality and paradox, discovers **David Kohn**

EXHIBITION

VALERIO OLGATI
RIBA, 66 Portland Place,
London W1 www.architecture.com/whatson
Until August 26
★★★★☆

Valerio Olgiati's exhibition is the Swiss architect's first in the UK. Part of a larger show originally at ETH Zurich in 2008, the present version comprises seven exquisite white models accompanied by a low table displaying reference images on two digital screens and a new monograph.

For those familiar with Olgiati's work, the delivery is reassuringly in character — almost the only exhibition interpretation is a sign informing you of the scale of the exhibits, "Models 1:33, Drawings 1:66". (An earlier Olgiati monograph was entitled "Plan 1:100".) The models are presented much like a sculpture installation: abstract figures on slender steel legs, carefully arranged and scaled to the room, a perceptible serial development from one piece to the next, a relative lack of interpretative distraction. In fact, the RIBA Gallery rarely looks this refined.

At a sculptural level each model suggests an exploration of the nature of dense bodies, their formal compactness, gravity and sense of centrifugal rotation. The smaller pieces are comprised of geometric frames floating above inflected structural armatures; in the larger pieces the outer forms themselves are rotating or staggered as though turned on a lathe. Beyond these consistencies, each model shows the principal idea governing the conception of a building project.

As the exhibition notes insist, Olgiati intends his models to be interpreted in the context of his "Iconographic Autobiography", a collection of images displayed on screens in the centre of the room. Ranging from Fathepur Sikri to Borthwick Castle, from Shinohara to Rossi, the architectural wonders on display represent Olgiati's memory bank of ur-forms. The dialogue between the models and the images constitutes Olgiati's claim for a complete architecture of mythic provenance, removed from the specific contingencies of time and place.

Although the models in the show make no distinction between built and unbuilt projects, the majority are in fact complete. At the level of archi-

Olgiati: delightful, disquieting.



Olgiati's exquisite models display precision and invention.

tectural parti, each building harbours an enigma: the labyrinthine central stairs of the Zernezh Visitors' Centre (2008); the crank in the central column under the roof of the Gelbe Haus (1999). In terms of their architectural order, the projects are uncannily pitched somewhere between laconic post-war modernism (with traces of early OMA) and Mayan archaeology. You get the impression of having seen them before without quite being able to remember when, which results in a mixture of delight and disquiet.

In the smaller projects (Yellow House, Paspels, Bardill House, Olgiati studio), these discordant touches are beguiling, providing a welcome antidote to iconic architectures that present a single incontestable image. The buildings' quite staggering constructional precision only serves to heighten one's appreciation. At the larger scale, however, the same strangeness seems more problematic, as

the enigma previously hidden from view comes to dominate the primary architectural order. In the competition-winning scheme for the Perm Museum XXI (2008), for example, the size of the building, the scalelessness of the curtain-like order, and the symmetry and singularity of the form suggest a greater struggle to relate the architecture to its possible inhabitation and consequently its wider significance. This raises the question of whether the singular approach Olgiati promotes across the projects is appropriate to larger or urban propositions.

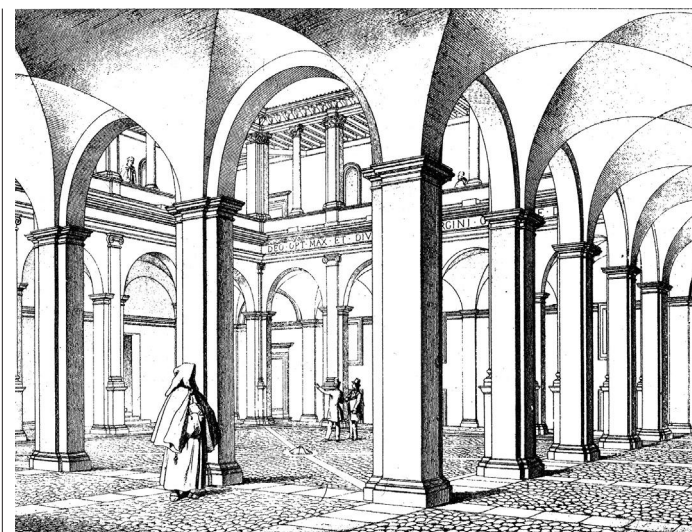
The extraordinary influence of Swiss architecture over the past 15 years has helped reintroduce into Britain concerns for the relationship of academia to practice, con-

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struction to expression, and invention to tradition. Nonetheless, the work of Swiss practices has been diverse and inevitably not as singular as the brand suggests — think of Herzog & de Meuron, Peter Zumthor and Peter Märkli for example.

In this context, Olgiati's work reasserts certain tenets and rejects others. Arguably, it shares the motivation present at the outset of each of these practices to produce architecture resistant to market commodification. Where Olgiati's work diverges is in turning to a mythic, rather than an artistic or vernacular, basis to this resistance. On the one hand this approach affirms imagination as a stronghold against the instrumental logic of late capitalism. On the other, it raises the question of the possible disconnection with the everyday world that such a stronghold might create. Either way, the precision and invention on display is able to bring such contradictions clearly to one's attention and will undoubtedly inspire debate and fresh initiatives.

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Letarouilly's engraving of the cloister of Santa Maria della Pace.

Travels in space & time

Robert Harbison's elegant erudition beguiles **Christopher Woodward**

BOOK

TRAVELS IN THE HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE
By Robert Harbison
Reaktion Books, 288pp, £19.95
★★★★☆

In Wagner's Parsifal of 1882, an old, wise knight surprisingly explains to the holy fool Parsifal: "You see, my son, time here becomes space." There was a lot of this sort of thing about at the time as the eastern philosophies on which Wagner drew became attractive in progressive circles.

Towards the end of the 19th century, notions of time as a "fourth dimension" and of its entanglement with the mundane three were enthusiastically taken up by, among others, the theosophists, many of whose dotier enthusiasms underlay the architectural polemics of the early 20th century. The 1905 publication of Einstein's theory of special relativity seemed only to add further allure to a skein of ideas that persisted at least until 1941 when, 60 years after Parsifal, Giedion published *Space, Time & Architecture*.

So, what might be the topography of architectural historical time? "History" here is both the actual archaeological or physical evidence and the record and methods of its study. The answer from the contents page of Robert Harbison's latest book suggests that his framing device is as actually familiar as that of my childhood's Observer's Book of Architecture: an "archipelago" perhaps of periods — Egyptian, Greek, Roman ... modernism I, modernism II — connected by narrow causeways, continuity links. On each island of the archipelago are a very few interesting architectural objects, some canonical, others which I have never heard of let alone seen. The quirky selection, the inclination towards the local rather than global, allows him the freedom to excel in the Venturian analysis of buildings' particularities that results from the architectural equivalent of close-reading a text.

Harbison observes and describes things in a way now all

too rare in architectural criticism. It's clear that he has visited everything he so elegantly discusses, if only because most of the photographs are his own.

In one of the longer chapters, a rush through the Italian Renaissance, he alights on Bramante's first Roman work, the cloister of Santa Maria della Pace, and naturally mentions its uncomfortably spindly corners, the consequence of an application of geometry more Miesian than Mies.

But in a more detailed analysis he has noticed that at the base of the ground floor's ionic pilasters "the floor of the cloister finds itself co-opted as the last protruding moulding before a plain wafer of plinth sitting on the ground." The "plain wafer of plinth" was so intriguing that I had to check Letarouilly's engravings, and indeed there it is. (This is the sort of enquiry for which at present the web, that Harbison regards in his preface as "the great rubbish heap of history", would have been of no help whatever.)

Ring of pilasters

He is just as good on Bramante's Tempietto at San Pietro in Montorio where, for example, he draws attention to the way the mouldings of the door opening, but not the door itself, interfere with the otherwise uniform ring of pilasters that decorate the colonnade's inner face.

A generic criticism of this sort of connoisseurship is that it pays no attention to the socio-economic conditions under which the works he describes were produced — that it is innocent of ideology. The author might well reply that it is possible, indeed usual, to discuss in comparably narrow terms a Beethoven sonata without mentioning the niceties and iniquities of the Holy Roman Empire.

Harbison's beautifully-written book would provide sixth-formers and students with a useful introduction to a cultural landscape which is scandalously absent from their current curriculums. If BD were to provide suggestions for summer reading, this should certainly be among them.