

Building
Zaha Hadid Architects'
Antwerp Port House

Forum
Timothy Brittain-Catlin,
Helen Thomas, Elly Ward,
Pedro Gadanho interview

Works
Rogers Stirk Harbour & Partners'
Guy's Cancer Centre, Wilkinson
Eyre extends the Dyson Campus,
Housing for Old Age: DRDH,
Bell Phillips Architects, PRP,
John Nordon and Irene Craik

Focus
Interiors: Wright & Wright
at Magdalen College, Oxford



Grimly Amusing

Criticat's collection of essays on French architecture is both delightful and dispiriting, finds Timothy Brittain-Catlin

'Yours Critically', a very funny and incisive book, full of memorable sardonic aphorisms, is a selection of translated essays that had previously appeared in French in Criticat, a biannual journal of architectural criticism founded in 2007 and financed solely by subscription sales. Its theme is that architects are generally much less significant than they think they are during the design processes of a public building, and that criticism that concentrates on form and style — which, in mainstream press descriptions is nearly all of it — is not only overblown but also conceals what actually goes on. But because the articles are mostly written by architects and teachers in architecture schools, the mood is regretful and sympathetic rather than judgmental.

At the same time we are provided with a most interesting introduction to building in France in areas that up to now have been hard for non-French-speakers to access. Thus some of the most revealing sections are those that deal with the procurement processes for architects. One does not have to be French to see projects going repeatedly to the same practices who have adapted themselves to the procedures: in the UK we had the Building Schools for the Future programme for that.

And as far as choosing architects on the basis of renders and souped-up elevations is concerned, we can, in the immortal words of the other Peter Cook, get all that at home. But what makes some of these essays so memorable, and so grimly amusing, is the analytical way in which these disasters are clearly and drily laid out. Françoise Fromonot's chapters on high-rise building on the edges of Paris, on the 2010 Shanghai Expo and, especially, on Shigeru Ban and Jean de Gastine's Centre Pompidou at Metz (a "festival of blunders" illustrated for her in cleverly miserable photographs by Jacqueline Trichard), do the job very nicely.

On Metz, Fromonot concludes that "the Pompidou brand has franchised Archigram's best images". I laughed out loud throughout. Fromonot's stated purpose in establishing the magazine in the first place was to provide a riposte to the subservience of the French architectural press to the most self-important members of the profession. So here comes retribution in delicious spoonfuls. An example: in a very interesting contribution on the design and subsequent conversion of Frank Gehry's American Center in Paris, Valéry Didelon writes about "the Californian architect whose genius seems indexed on the magnificence of his customers".

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Centre Pompidou Metz, photographed
by Jacqueline Trichard.

Below

Spread from 'Yours Critically'.

*'Yours Critically: Writings on Architecture
from Issues 1-10 of Criticat'*

Edited by Françoise Fromonot,
Valéry Didelon and Pierre Chabard
Criticat, 332pp, £23



Bernard Marrey's suggestion that 'canopy' is "a word only used by starchitects to refer to treetops", is another acute observation, and comes in the course of a chapter on the slow mauling of the heroic Jussieu campus in the Paris' 5th arrondissement: the original grand plan never really came off; its artistic ambitions were seriously scaled down; and finally it has slowly been comprised by low-level fiddling about in and around its public spaces, rather as if rats were gnawing at the carcass of a legendary racehorse, accompanied all the while by decades-long, low-level, grandiose but useless chatter from politicians.

Most of the chapters are concerned with specific building projects that went wrong or ended in results which were, if not actually a disaster, pregnant with unfulfilled possibilities. In Pierre Chabard's chapter on Jürgen Mayer's Metropol Parasol in Seville, the dreamy vision promised by the renders gives way bit by bit to the clunky reality of handrails, steps, clips and braces. New York's High Line, too, gets a well-deserved battering. But some writers provide insights into unusual territories, including one on the American teacher Victor Papanek and another on a previously undiscovered portrait of Rudolph Schindler. This is an excellent compilation from start to finish. **A**

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