

SOANE AND MODERNISM

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Was Soane a modernist? Matthew Lloyd Roberts reviews 'Soane and Modernism: Make It New'

What makes an architect 'a modernist'? Is it sufficient to design buildings which share formal qualities with the architecture of the "Modern Movement"? (itself a category subject to significant querying, stretch and strain in recent decades). Do the materials, technologies, visual qualities and urban thinking of the twentieth century, if recognised in the work of earlier historical moments, suffice to declare something 'Modernist'? These are the questions inevitably begged by the new exhibition at Sir John Soane's Museum, which in its opening panel proclaims that Soane has been 'heralded as one of the first modernist architects due to his sophisticated emphasis on light, open space and abstract forms.'

The exhibition explores the resonances between Soane and architects from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries largely through side-by-side comparison of drawings, the modern counterparts being drawn almost exclusively from Drawing Matter, the remarkable collection of architectural drawings founded by Niall Hobhouse and recently relocated from Shatwell Farm, Somerset to 8 Smart's Place, just over Kingsway from the Soane.

Of course, in the twentieth century, retrospectively claiming preferred architects as precocious harbingers of the true creed of modernism was the name of the game. Soane was undoubtedly an architect possessed of tremendous originality – able to design and control space and light in idiosyncratic

manner with little precedent in architectural history. To describe him as a modernist *per se* seems to stretch the meaning of the word toward breaking point, but this largely seems an exercise in branding for the exhibition – much as with Brady Corbet's garlanded *The Brutalist* – the empty signification of the mid-century architectural zeitgeist is good for the attention economy.

The exhibition itself doesn't offer a strict definition of modernism and includes work by decidedly post-modern architect Aldo Rossi alongside Tony Fretton, an English architect whose taste-making work of the last 35 years combines the formal qualities of actual modernism with the contextual sensitivities of architecture after the end of history. Compulsorily included is Giles Gilbert Scott's red telephone box, made during his time as a trustee of the Soane Museum and most likely inspired by the pendentive dome of Soane's mausoleum for his wife Eliza. The telephone box is certainly of modernity, but is it modernist? Maybe these questions do not matter. There are important senses in which the vehemence of the Style Wars have faded from contemporary architectural culture, and the stakes of claiming Soane as a proto-modernist feel much lower than they might have been forty or fifty years ago.

Sweeping aside the terminological bluster, are the comparisons fruitful? In places magnificently so, elsewhere, the justifications begin to creak under tremendous pressure. Most frustrating are the senses of missed opportunities for incisive comparison. In the first room, work from Richard Neutra, Le Corbusier, Ernő Goldfinger, Frank Lloyd Wright, Otto Wagner and Adolf Loos is put up against Soane for direct comparison. Neutra's Corona Avenue School is compared to Dulwich Picture Gallery,



Joseph Michael Gandy for John Soane, Pitzhanger Manor, design for the lawn front and conservatory, August 1810. (© Sir John Soane's Museum, London)



Robert Dennis Chantrell for John Soane, Dulwich Picture Gallery, bird's-eye view of the west side from the south, 13 August 1812. (© Sir John Soane's Museum, London)



Opposite:
Frank Lloyd
Wright, Arch
Oboler House
'Eaglefeather',
rendered
perspective, 1940.
(Drawing Matter)



Opposite: Aldo
Rossi, Urban
Scene: Scena Per
il Teatrino, 1978.
(Drawing Matter
© The Aldo Rossi
Estate, 2024)

because both are concerned with controlling and directing natural light (albeit in different ways to different ends). Soane's proto-modernism feels incontestable when confronted with the proposed two-storey, fully-glazed and modular extension to his house at Pitzhanger, pure Bauhaus fever dream some three decades before the Crystal Palace. And yet the comparison to Goldfinger's muscularly articulated Alexander Fleming House (rather than a Miesian curtain wall) seems if anything to re-emphasise Soane's un-modern-ness.

The most Soanean modern drawing in the show is surely José Oubrerie's section of the Government Museum at Chandigarh, where the complicated detailing of skylights echoes the even more complex roofscape of the Soane Museum itself, which might have been more clearly captured by comparison to a similar section drawing, rather than a watercolour sketch of Dulwich under construction. Charming, Soane's ersatz rustication by reconstituted stone is compared to Frank Lloyd Wright's 'desert masonry', both radical material novelties made kitsch with time by imitation in pebbledash, crazy paving and Californian suburbia. Elsewhere materials and choices of ornamentation also play an important role in Soane's instincts to abstract, imply form by absence, and make austere his perfectly proportioned

walls – unquestionably in the spirit of later architects modernist or otherwise seeking the same effect.

The exhibition is at its most intriguing when posing questions about planning. In his domestic plans, Soane contends with his love of romantic and dramatic sightlines, a proto-functionalist enthusiasm for utile segregation of purpose, and reconciling these instincts to the regularity of the façade. This is made more legible by proximity to plans by Adolf Loos or the Dutch Structuralists Aldo van Eyck and Hannie van Rooijen. In his largest projects, particularly the Bank of England or Westminster courts, piecemeal site assembly and pre-existing irregularities forced tremendous inventiveness – Otto Wagner suffered similarly in his proposed Imperial Crypt. Where Soane gave himself a *tabula rasa*, unlimited budget and free rein, as in his unbuildable proposals for Westminster, the work suffered from turgidity. In each of these cases we are reminded that regardless of -ism, architects perhaps produce their best work when constrained.

Many of the pieces from Drawing Matter are exceptional. Sketches and drawings by Álvaro Siza and Tony Fretton are beautiful and well deserve the wider audience they will enjoy at the Soane. Alison and Peter Smithson's proposal for the Golden Lane Estate, feverishly montaged onto aerial photography

of a blitz-stricken Coventry still feels a radical act of image-making all these years later – as strange in effect as Gandy's ability to transpose Soane's unbuilt proposals into the scenes of contemporary landscape painting. The post-war interest in ruination, exemplified in Robert Smithson's *My House is a Decayed House* certainly resonates with Soane's fixation on the inevitable decay of his own work. However, by restricting the exhibition to the Drawing Matter collection, the exhibition limits its ability to argue the strongest cases for Soane's resonance in modernity. Louis Kahn is conspicuous by his absence. The virtually unparalleled documentation of Soane's construction sites in watercolours by his office would have made rich comparison to a wealth of twentieth-century building site photography.

By restricting the exhibition to drawings, it becomes impossible to explore perhaps the most modern element of Soane's career – his relationship to the public. Like many modernist architects, Soane suffered great opprobrium in the press and was out of fashion almost before his career was over. He forged an architecture for newly conceived state institutions, whilst bureaucratic governance was being invented on the fly. In turn he was hauled into select committees to explain irregularities, the proceedings of which were published in newspapers. He was the subject of great opprobrium by critics in the public sphere, including by his own son (whose indiscretion and disinheritance we have to thank for the Soane Museum's existence). He threatened critics and officials with legal action over permissions and libels. In all these senses he was more alike twentieth-century architects than anybody that had come before him.

Tony Fretton's sketchbooks reveal telling moments from his architectural practice. In a rapid hand he pithily asserts his desire not to repeat himself in his design for the Lisson Gallery, rather to 'Make it New', a line which he must have conceived might come to light later on and indeed lends itself to the title of this exhibition. What architects claim to be doing, what they are actually doing, and what they think they are doing are rarely the same thing. The performativity of Fretton's scribbling is, in many ways, a perfect mirror of Soane's obsession with reflexive self-presentation, perhaps the thing that makes him most modern of all.



Soane and Modernism: Make it New ran from 12 February to 18 May 2025 at Sir John Soane's Museum, in collaboration with Drawing Matter Trust

A series of texts published by Drawing Matter describe all of the Modernist drawings on loan to the exhibition, which was curated by Erin McKellar. Visit drawingmatter.org