

John Summerson, *The Life and Work of John Nash, Architect.* Cambridge, (Mass.), The MIT Press, 1980. 217 pp., 48 illus., 35,00 \$

Ann Davis

Volume 9, Number 1-2, 1982

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074995ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074995ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Davis, A. (1982). Review of [John Summerson, *The Life and Work of John Nash, Architect.* Cambridge, (Mass.), The MIT Press, 1980. 217 pp., 48 illus., 35,00 \$]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 9(1-2), 130-131. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074995ar>

languages.) Surely, references to books such as Peter Burke's *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy* (London, 1972), Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience* (cited above), or Martin Wackernagel's *Der Lebensraum des Künstlers in der florentinischen Renaissance* (Leipzig, 1938, now available in a new English translation by Alison Luchs as *The World of the Florentine Renaissance Artist*, Princeton, 1981) are fundamental to a collection of sources and documents of Renaissance art. The need for such secondary material in the case of individual texts has already been commented upon, and I will only add two more cases. Is it really enough to refer the reader of Alberti's *On Painting* to the works of Masaccio and other Renaissance artists and to Kenneth Clark's 1944 edition, for further information? Or to mention Cecil Gray's highly regarded, annotated translation of *De Pictura* only as the place of publication of the Latin text? How much more meaning do all the individual references to the Medici have when viewed within the context of the studies by Wackernagel, Chastel (*Art et humanisme à Florence au temps de Laurent le Magnifique*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1961), and Gombrich ('The Early Medici as Patrons of Art: A Survey of Primary Sources,' reprinted in *Norm and Form*, London, 1966, 35-57)? Given the wealth of material in Gilbert's selected texts, it is indeed unfortunate not to have proper support for the interpretation of that information.

BARBARA DODGE
York University

JOHN SUMMERSON *The Life and Work of John Nash, Architect*. Cambridge, (Mass.), The MIT Press, 1980. 217 pp., 48 illus., 35.00 \$.

In 1806 John Nash, then 54 years old, was appointed Architect to the Department of Woods and Forests of Great Britain. At an age when many men are considering the conclusion of their careers, Nash embarked on the most brilliant and most controversial portion of his. In fact it could be said that this was

Nash's third architectural practice, for he had already been through two distinct periods. These earlier experiences prepared the eclectic, spirited man for his important Regency work.

John Nash was born in 1752 to Welsh parents. His father, 'an engineer and millwright in Lambeth' (p. 1) died when John was six or seven. A few years later the young boy was indentured in London to Sir Robert Taylor, a sculptor turned architect, who achieved considerable fame and became architect to the Bank of England. Nash's activities upon leaving Taylor – probably after the customary seven-year indenture period – are not known in any detail. It appears that he was briefly married and, more importantly, undertook the building of eight houses in Bloomsbury, a precocious move. Presaging his mature style, the houses fronting on Bloomsbury Square parade eight Corinthian pilasters above an arched and rusticated ground floor. While an architectural success, this venture was a financial failure for Nash was unable to sell these houses for some number of years. In 1783 he was declared bankrupt, an event which closed the London development world to him, effectively ending his first career.

This unusual man, who described his own appearance as a 'thick, squat, dwarf figure, with round head, snub nose and little eyes' (Ann Saunders, *Regent's Park*, 1969, p. 79), was far from beaten. Beyond his physiognomy, he could be characterized as one who delighted in large-scale, complex projects that called upon his considerable capabilities for persuasion, intrigue and financial manoeuvring. He had a genius for the broad effect and little patience for rules and regulations. These traits were now required as Nash, penniless, went to Wales to re-establish himself in business. By 1789 he was employed as architect for the Carmarthen gaol. Other commissions soon followed for he made himself agreeable to the local Welsh squires; an elegant woman, much later, was to call him 'a very clever, odd, amusing man' (p. 13). For Nash, 1796 brought an important break-through: that year he was hired to enlarge the house of Paul Cobb Methuen of Corsham

Court in Wiltshire. At the same time Methuen engaged the leading practitioner of landscape art, Humphry Repton. From this exercise there emerged a partnership lasting for four or five years, from which Nash emerged with decisive gains. Central to this union was a belief in the Picturesque, as defined by Uvedale Price and Payne Knight. While Repton's example of Picturesque methods was important to Nash, so was his clientele; as the colleague of Repton, Nash was hired by many well placed patrons to which he would not, otherwise, have had entrée. In this category is Nash's work for H.R.H. the Prince of Wales at his seaside resort at Brighton. According to contemporary tales Nash's ties with the Prince were furthered by the architect's marriage, in 1798, to a woman 21 years his junior, Mary Anne Bradley, who was reputed to be the Prince Regent's mistress. In 1811 the Regent was particularly stirred by Nash's Picturesque plan for Marylebone Park, subsequently renamed Regent's Park. With this commission begins Nash's third and most noteworthy career.

The development of the Park entailed the creation of a new thoroughfare, for royal processions from the Park at the southern end to Carleton House in Pall Mall, to the north of the capital. This became Regent Street. Arcaded like the Rue de Rivoli in Paris, this 'bending street,' along with the Park, was to occupy Nash for the next twelve years. He was 'architect, surveyor, valuer, estate agent, engineer and financial advisor' (p. 88), although he himself did not undertake all the new building required. Both Samuel Baxter, who created Oxford Circus, and James Burton, who build one quarter of the houses in the street, all behind facades designed or approved by Nash, made important contributions.

While engaged in work on the Park and the Street, Nash was also active in a myriad of other important projects, including improvements at Windsor to Cumberland Lodge and Royal Lodge, at Carleton House, and at the Royal Pavilion, Brighton, all for the Regent. He was also remodelling his own

country estate of the Isle of Wight, East Cowes Castle, as well as designing or redesigning and building other structures on the island. It was in works such as these that Nash exhibited his genius: his use of Picturesque principles to keep the Royal Lodge looking like a cottage; the arresting Gothic dining room in Carleton House which was made possible by his innovative use of iron supports; and the stylistic novelties of the Indianized, domed extravaganza at Brighton. Though consistently exceeding his estimates, and careless about details, Nash was a prodigious and inspired worker.

Nash's last great project was the rebuilding of the royal residence, Buckingham House. In 1825, setting aside his own doubts about the location and suitability of the existing structure, Nash presented hastily prepared drawings for 'repair and improvement' and threw himself into the work. A sense of urgency prevailed: neither the sovereign, at 63, nor his architect, ten years his senior, wanted this project, initiated in 1821, to be interminable. Nash added to the old house – a main block with forward-projecting wings – a new range of buildings across the garden side and, eventually, tidied up the projecting wings. For the space between the wings Nash commissioned a Roman triumphal arch, the Marble Arch, which, of course, was never installed there. Nash was also responsible for the Palace's interior design, an aspect for which he had exhibited only moderate skill. More to his taste were the renovations to St. James' Park, including the addition of terraces, and the building of the United Service Club on the corner of Pall Mall, made possible by the demolition of Carleton House.

By 1828, when these works moved towards conclusion, Nash was assailed by criticism, partly on grounds of taste, but more particularly and damagingly because of expense, which, unquestionably he had allowed to 'become utterly out of hand' (p. 175), a fairly typical trait. And, when George IV died in 1830, Nash was now vulnerable, as never before, to censure by the Commons and the Treasury. By the Fall all work on the palace had been stopped and Nash had been dismissed from the Board of Works.

Within five years he was dead, having proved himself one of the outstanding architects of his period.

As one might expect, such a colourful and influential Regency character has long been a favorite among writers of biography and monographs. Now that the study of architectural history has become a recognized academic discipline, several serious writings have come to round out this abundant literature. Worth reading are Colvin's summary in his *Dictionary* (1978), *The History of the King's Works*, Volume Six (1973), Hermione Hobhouse's *Regent Street* (1975), and Ann Saunders' *Regent's Park* (1969). More specifically Nash's life has been documented by Terence Davis in two useful books: *The Architecture of John Nash* (1960) and *John Nash, The Prince Regent's Architect* (1966) as well as John Summerson's 1935 biography, *John Nash: Architect to King George IV*. All three, regrettably, are out of print.

The book under review is a rewrite of the 1935 biography. The new version profits from the author's prodigious research during the intervening years, the documentation and theories provided by others, and recent interest in the intellectual context of Regency architecture, particularly the theory of Neo-classicism and the philosophy of the Picturesque. Many new photographs illustrate the text. Summerson, nonetheless, retained his original format. 'The approach,' he explains, 'hardly differs from that of the first book. My aim has been simply to reconstruct the life of John Nash and to combine narrative and architectural description in an intelligible account of the man's life and what he achieved in it' (Preface).

To what extent does Summerson achieve these aims? On the positive side, he has constructed an informative and well-paced narrative, a credible and interesting reconstruction of Nash's tumultuous life. With regard to the other stated objective, including architectural description, the author does not fare nearly as well. In his choice of format lies the problem, for he gives us neither theoretical framework nor full visual documentation. Thus, Nash's contributions are not analysed in terms of the Neo-classical and Picturesque theories of

the day, nor are his accomplishments adequately illustrated. And when they are, the reader must search them out, painstakingly, at the back of the volume. The impression of Nash's artistic life remains cloudy. By describing everything and stressing nothing, Summerson has provided a resource volume suitable for scholars in the field, but inadequate and confusing for the general reader.

ANN DAVIS
Bishop's University

GILLIAN NAYLOR *The Arts and Crafts Movement: A Study of its Sources, Ideals and Influence on Design Theory*. Cambridge (Mass.), the MIT Press, 1980. 260 p., 106 illus., 10,95\$.

La révolution industrielle du XIX^e siècle a certainement agi comme un puissant révélateur des fondements de notre culture. La rapidité du phénomène s'est heurtée à l'inertie relative des mœurs, des coutumes et des usages provoquant des réactions d'autant plus violentes que les distorsions sociales, économiques et politiques étaient grandes. L'imprévisibilité et l'ampleur de son développement faisaient craindre le pire à une part importante de la population. La machine ne devait pas tarder à passer pour responsable de tous les maux: le monde du travail, notamment, y voyait une menace pour l'emploi, les compétences traditionnelles et le «beau métier».

L'avènement du machinisme eut donc pour effet de susciter nombre de malentendus, qui permirent paradoxalement d'en lever d'autres. L'attitude souvent hostile des artisans devant la transformation brutale de la pratique professionnelle permit de considérer avec quelque recul des procédés de fabrication dont la routine avait fini par masquer la raison profonde et la vertu. Il en résulta un regain d'intérêt pour les tourne-mains habituels, le savoir-faire séculaire, et la reconnaissance explicite d'une créativité propre trop longtemps méconnue parce que tenue pour intrinsèque aux métiers. Du même coup, cette