

Crinson, Mark. *Empire Building: Orientalism and Victorian Architecture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. Pp. xvi, 288 pages. 95 black and white illustrations, index. \$104.95 (cloth); \$34.95 (paper)

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Volume 27, Number 1, October 1998

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016628ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016628ar>

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Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McMordie, M. (1998). Review of [Crinson, Mark. *Empire Building: Orientalism and Victorian Architecture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. Pp. xvi, 288 pages. 95 black and white illustrations, index. \$104.95 (cloth); \$34.95 (paper)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 27(1), 74–75.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1016628ar>

This is a very good book which pulls together well all of the American planning traditions and relates them to trends in business.

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Crinson's study of nineteenth-century British building in three Near Eastern cities resonates with current geopolitical issues (the cities are Alexandria, Istanbul, and Jerusalem). Arab-Israeli struggles over Jerusalem and a Palestinian homeland, the role of a westernizing Egypt (and its internal problems with a militant Islamic fundamentalism), Turkey poised between east and west and now rebuffed by the European Union; all this and more makes *Empire Building* immediately relevant, even though engagement with these current issues is not on Crinson's agenda. That they lurk nearby is evident only from the continuing dialogue with Edward Said that informs the argument. Said's thesis about the hegemonic nature of Orientalism and its essentially imperialistic goals provides a running counterpoint to the urban and architectural investigation, and evidence from specific projects corrects some of Said's more sweeping conclusions.

Although complex themes overlap and interact, a clear, straightforward structure helps us find our way. The "Introduction" introduces key themes, especially questions raised by Said's thesis which can be tested against the specific examples of British building in the Near East. Crinson notes the difference between the "informal" empire developing in the Near East and true imperial rule in India and suggests the even greater complexity of interests and audiences to be addressed where British power was not consolidated and official. Said drew on Foucault's analysis of power and knowledge, the two inseparable and working through discursive structures. Architecture for the Victorians was just such a discourse. Writing on eastern buildings and culture by Ruskin, Fergusson, and Owen Jones provide discursive themes for analysis in Crinson's critical account

Part I, "Orientalism and Architecture", sets the scene with a review of the travel accounts, espionage reports and other documents that included Islamic buildings as notable only among other exotic sights. Through the eighteenth century increasingly accurate knowledge of the cities and buildings of Islamic regions issued from various expeditions. The forms their reports revealed to the European public provided examples for the rationalist analysis of architectural form by theorists such as Laugier. Chief among the British architects who studied and wrote sympathetically on the subject was Owen Jones. Jones used his knowledge of eastern building to confront the prevailing revivalism of

the west and the dilemma of a style for the modern (mid-nineteenth century) age.

Jones, Ruskin, the historian Edward Freeman, and James Fergusson were key figures in the attempt to place Islamic building in an historical context, to give what we would consider a social-scientific account. Freeman, writing in the 1840s, was dismissive. The east was static, the fruit of a "lifeless seed" compared to the architecture of the west. To the contrary the architectural theorist and historian James Fergusson, in views informed by theories of race and development drawn from geology and ethnology, found the work fertile and inventive, but lacking in the discipline achieved in the west. Ruskin also drew on his knowledge of geology to argue the need for an art informed by nature. The conventionalism and abstraction he found in Islamic design pointed both to moral and intellectual failure. While Ruskin used examples from Islam to support his rejection of industrial society, Owen Jones found them to suggest ways forward, constructive examples of how design might meet the needs of industry. These he promoted both at the 1851 Hyde Park exhibition, and in various publications, notably the monumental *Grammar of Ornament* of 1856. Underlying all these positions, whatever their differences, were the common themes of western conquest and control.

Western expansion brought to the front the question of style; British building in the east raised the question of how best to address domestic and expatriate audiences, as well as the local, native, population and local urban contexts. Where some of the key building projects were for churches, Byzantine architecture might have been considered a useful bridge to the east. While the French made notable contributions to the study of Byzantine architecture the British hung back, and it was not until Lethaby and Swainson's 1894 study of Hagia Sophia that a close, first-hand British study of a Byzantine work appeared. Complex liturgical issues, as well as the religious politics of the Holy land and the Crimean war contributed to this ambivalence, while confirming colonialist views of the Near East.

The buildings studied in the second part of *Empire Building* give architectural instances of the diverse attitudes set out in Crinson's analysis of texts. The principal subjects are James Wild's church of St. Mark's, Alexandria, 1845–54; G. E. Street's Crimean Memorial Church, Istanbul, 1864–68; designs by a number of architects for an unbuilt British consulate in Alexandria; and Christ Church, Jerusalem by J. W. Johns and Matthew Habershon, 1839–49. A number of other related buildings, and the work of other architects are also illustrated and discussed, to reveal conflicting views of appropriate design, and the other issues, including budget and site, that shaped the progress of each project. As well the buildings are located in their urban contexts, illustrated by contemporary city plans.

The buildings discussed illustrate a range of responses. At one end was the British embassy in Istanbul (1842–54, W. J. Smith), a Renaissance palazzo with an enclosed central court following Charles Barry's London Reform Club (1837–41). Conventional

and wholly European it spoke to the expectations of a conservative British audience as well as to the modernizing and European aspirations of the Ottomans, for whom Smith also designed a number of structures. The much more adventurous work of James Wild engaged with local style in a number of projects. Wild travelled and studied the architecture of the Near East, and worked in the 1840s in Egypt. His Christ Church, Streatham (1839–41) incorporated Islamic, along with Romanesque and Early Christian themes in a London church. His unbuilt design for a consulate in Alexandria (1869) worked freely between European and Islamic sources to respond creatively to the local climate, and urban context. Crinson describes the effect of the building's plan:

The visitor would pass through carefully staged areas from public to notionally private domains; from the exterior Levantine space of the square (which, as has been shown, itself signified ethnic and cultural distinction from the "native" town) to the interior English space of the square within, the enclosed courtyard with its octagonal pool. The required sense of social or national distancing would thus be achieved by an ordered spatial sequence ... that marshalled and edited sequence of urban spaces that we saw manifested in contemporary maps of the city. (p. 193)

The last project discussed, opened in Jerusalem in 1897 but not fully finished until 1900, is the "English mission hospital for Jews" designed by Arthur Beresford Pite for the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews. Pite belonged to the forward-looking circle that included W. R. Lethaby, and sought to move beyond the prevailing architectural fashions. He looked to Early Christian and Byzantine precedents, as well as the cross-ventilated Nightingale ward plan, to shape a compound of free-standing verandahed blocks linked by a semicircular covered walk. The compound included administration and outpatients' blocks and a doctor's house, crowned with domed cupolas. The conception was remarkably inventive, and largely free of traditional stylistic detail.

Crinson's study also provokes some reflection on Canadian architecture and urbanism. Conditions in North America contrasted greatly with those described for the Near East. There the British dealt with ancient urban cultures with sophisticated traditions which also drew, often more directly than did the British, on

the legacies of Greece and Rome. In North America, however, colonial and imperial economic and political goals ruled. The architecture also pursued European ideals while constrained by the conditions of building in a remote and alien land. Canadian architecture has been through most of its history a colonial architecture. It shared the experience of Victorian economic growth, expansion, and urbanization and, with differences, its architects struggled with the appropriateness of European models to an alien setting. The twentieth century has seen dominance pass from Britain to the United States, but it is not clear that the colonial experience has changed, particularly since economic domination has remained much the most important means of control.

At several points further extensions of Crinson's argument appear desirable if not necessary, at others openings for further exploration appear. When he discusses in Part I theories of the origin of styles, Joseph Rykwert's *On Adam's House in Paradise*, and French and Italian views might have received some attention (Laugier and Lodoli are briefly mentioned). Local views of the British intrusions receives little attention, as Crinson acknowledges: "Even if it were in my competence to do so, it is notoriously difficult to reconstruct the 'responses' of native informants." (p.8)

Victorian science supported a good deal of the colonialist attitude, as Crinson makes clear. The same arguments from evolution to race and thence to culture led through the same period to the eugenics movement, whose consequences still reverberate in Alberta. A related issue, Ruskin's view of barbaric ornament expressed in *The Stones of Venice* (1851–3), anticipated Adolf Loos's "Ornament and crime" and the ornament-free International Style. That Crinson stimulates these and many other branching trains of thought is no criticism of a work that reasonably concentrates on British architectural sources.

In his conclusion he notes that his investigation has revealed the complexity of the interests and responses as the British sought to establish themselves in the Near East. The Orientalist thesis, while a stimulating point of departure, he has shown to be inadequate to deal with what was actually achieved.

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