

Klaus Herdeg, *The Decorated Diagram: Harvard Architecture and the Failure of the Bauhaus Legacy*. Cambridge (Mass.) and London, the MIT Press, 1983. viii + 125 pp., 120 illus., \$31.50 (cloth)

Catherine Mackenzie

Volume 13, Number 1, 1986

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073568ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073568ar>

[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

Mackenzie, C. (1986). Review of [Klaus Herdeg, *The Decorated Diagram: Harvard Architecture and the Failure of the Bauhaus Legacy*. Cambridge (Mass.) and London, the MIT Press, 1983. viii + 125 pp., 120 illus., \$31.50 (cloth)]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 13(1), 81–83.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1073568ar>



FIGURE 5. Eric Kennington, *Mustard Gas*, pastel (Photo: Canadian War Museum).

troops were engaged in a peripheral campaign against Bolshevism, were cancelled. Preliminary sketches for major works were not acquired, then or in the 1940s when many were offered once more. A gallery to house the collection got no further than a roughly sketched proposal; by contrast, Australia was reasonably prompt in finding a suitable home for its more modest assemblage of art and military trophies.

Maria Tippet's book is sprinkled with anecdotes relating to specific works. Byam Shaw used two of his sons as models for his large, symbolic canvas, *The Flag*; both were killed during the Second World War. Derwent Wood's bronze, *Canada's Golgotha*,

drew protests from German spokesmen who described it as vicious propaganda – which it was.

The book has few faults. There is little about the conditions under which artists worked in the field, or incidents to show how they were received by the soldiers themselves. The decision to use black-and-white illustrations was undoubtedly made to reduce publishing costs, but it was still unfortunate. The index is not complete. Nevertheless, these are petty given the final result – a comprehensive, pioneering study that recounts an important piece of history never told in depth.

HUGH A. HALLIDAY
Canadian War Museum, Ottawa

KLAUS HERDEG *The Decorated Diagram: Harvard Architecture and the Failure of the Bauhaus Legacy*. Cambridge (Mass.) and London, the MIT Press, 1983. viii + 125 pp., 120 illus., \$31.50 (cloth).

Consigned to eternal passage within a revolving glass door, the heroes we create are either on their way in or on their way out, but never at rest. No one needs ask in which direction Walter Gropius, once fondly regarded as the individual who rescued American architecture from its moribund reliance upon the Beaux-Arts mentality, is travelling these days. In fact he is moving out so fast it is conceivable his path will be linear rather than circular. Already convicted for most of the crimes of International Style architecture, he is also being held responsible, in no small measure, for the weaknesses of the architecture and architects seeking to displace modernism.

Klaus Herdeg's thesis will do little to decrease the velocity of Gropius' recent passage. The book associates many of the 'ugly new buildings around' with the teaching ethos engendered by the architect's 1937-1953 tenure at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. In doing so, it questions what has been until now a relatively safe facet of Gropius' career.

From at least 1973, with the publication of Charles Jencks' *Modern Movements in Architecture*, the works of such Harvard graduates as Philip Johnson, Paul Rudolph, I.M. Pei, Ulrich Franzen and Victor Lundy have been recognized by some as constituting a problematic, formalist approach to architecture. Through careful analyses of a number of 'Harvard' buildings, Herdeg seeks to articulate more clearly the nature of this American formalism. It exhibits certain positive values – functional zoning, expert attention to detail and craftsmanship – but, according to the author, these are merely isolated reminders of what might have been. They appear in passionless structures which fail to address, let alone display 'the struggle involved in attempting to reconcile opposing functional and formal conditions, or a struggle with a difficult site.' In the end, the buildings subsist largely through the plays of textures, patterns and materials that are almost casually superimposed upon diagrammatic responses to functional demands.

For this demotion of architecture to an art of retinal stimulation, Gropius the educator is held culpable. On the surface, the evidence Herdeg presents is compelling; a design problem given to Harvard Master's classes, intended to have elicited schemes for suburbia that reconciled standardization with individuality, reads like a catalogue of visual tricks: 'c) Alternate the materials, their textures and colors, and alternate the bright and dark effect. d) Confine the adjacent outdoor living space around the house by varying combinations of pergolas, ... screens ... and groups of trees' (Appendix A). Contextual aspects of buildings were characterized as those 'less definable psychological requirements which, when met, provide a stimulating environment' (Appendix A). The published curriculum framing such projects was devoid of any substantial commitment to the rich potential for meaning in architecture: knowledge of historical paradigms was but an elective, as was any study of societal forces. Instead the guiding 'principle' is found to have been pragmatism, with the architect's office serving as the model for classroom activities.

Little wonder then, that Victor Lundy's 1973 Intermediate School 53 in New York 'grinds form, function and appearance against each other' (p. 60). Untutored in the reflective processes requisite to a comprehension of the complex nature of architecture, Lundy was launched unto his profession with particular talents and no potential for synthetic vision.

Or was he? A one-page assignment sheet listing the material arsenal to be deployed in a design problem is not necessarily proof of the educator's failure to provide guidance in the *principles* of design decision-making. Nor does the operating of a design studio as if it were an architect's office preclude the understanding and creation of resonant architecture. The voices that speak to one another in the classroom determine what is there to be learned. No matter how difficult they are to reconstruct, unless they are 'heard' again one cannot proceed very far in evaluating the direction or the quality of the educational experience. Interviews with students, subjective and contradictory though they might be, would have to form a part of such a reclamation of the past, yet *The Decorated Diagram* explicitly eschews such a task. Instead, it relies heavily upon the texts of only three design assignments and the official calendar. Few, if any

educators would wish to have their contributions judged on such documentation.

Even were Herdeg to have provided a more expansive account of what actually transpired in the Harvard studios, his case against Gropius would still have required further strengthening. He would need to have asked what, if any, specifically American factors might have helped shape the pedagogical orientation of the 'transplanted Bauhaus'. We can excuse Tom Wolfe for his colourful MOMA/*The International Style* conspiracy theory – he does, after all, have to sell books – but it is disturbing to find a Columbia Professor of Architecture wearing the same Captain America apparel. MOMA may well have been the 'most emphatic and best organized among the propoganda instruments' (p. 5) which prepared the United States for the Bauhaus invasion. Nevertheless, any balanced hypothesis owes both Gropius and the so-called 'Bauhaus Legacy', if no one else, passing reference to such general factors as the effects of the Depression and the second World War, as well as to such specificities as the educational preferences of Joseph Hudnut, appointed Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design in 1935. Prior to taking up residence in Cambridge, Hudnut had been Dean of the Columbia School of Architecture. During his tenure there, design studios emphasized actual projects, these subject to specific financial constraints deemed appropriate to the post-Depression marketplace. This parallel between the Columbia and Harvard systems is but one indication that Gropius may have attempted, indeed may have been enjoined, to design a programme responsive to the milieu he entered.

The author concedes the paucity of his testimony and consciously avoids making of Gropius an intentional culprit: 'My principal argument is that architectural training at Harvard under Gropius and Breuer strongly promoted – unconsciously, perhaps – the kinds of design decisions that shaped the buildings discussed' (p. 79). However, in sporadically turning to the *Scope of Total Architecture* for confirmation of evidence produced by either the Harvard documents or the buildings of ex-students, Herdeg calls into question his own hesitancy. So too does the book's promotional commentary: 'formal analysis of the

work of the school's most illustrious graduates ... shows that they have all failed to move beyond Gropius's *indoctrination* and the Bauhaus legacy.' Notwithstanding suggestions that American formalism may have developed accidentally out of the structural features of education at Harvard, Herdeg clearly believes in the essential infirmity of Gropius' approach to architectural education. Once the tentative shifts to the certain, the thesis of *The Decorated Diagram* moves from the stimulating, if weakly argued, to the irritating.

Never intended simply as an indictment of Gropius, *The Decorated Diagram* is at its best when it addresses the second of its concerns: the definition of what architecture must encompass if it is to survive as a 'major resource for the intellectual and emotional enrichment' of life. Put simply, the building is obliged to articulate through controlled formal, associative and symbolic design, the nature of its being, even should that nature be composed of polyvalent or contradictory impulses.

While some might wish to argue with Herdeg's vision of architecture, few should contemplate criticizing the means used to illustrate it. These generally consist of comparisons of buildings by the Harvard graduates with favoured designs from the likes of Thomas Jefferson, Schinkel, Le Corbusier and Aalto: each and every one might serve as a model of what attentive visual analysis can accomplish. The 1930 Errazuzo house of Le Corbusier, probably never constructed, is brought to life in Herdeg's text through an exceptionally observant account of relationships between its constituent elements, whether they be material, environmental or cultural. The V-shaped roof of the Errazuzo project, a simple component in a complex design, emerges as the key to deciphering the major theme of the house – 'a veranda sympathetic to a difficult but dramatic site.' Read against its intended mountainous backdrop, the roof announces the possibility of an intimate union between man-made object and nature. When looked at in conjunction with the <-shaped internal mezzanine ramp, the same roof confirms both the material stability of the house and the capacity of artifice to structure a realm as cohesive as that of the physical environment. Artifice further proves itself equal to more than the simple replica-

tion of fixed vistas. The spatial confinement created by the meeting of the low point of the roof with the high point of the internal ramp is relieved by its juxtaposition with the most expansive window in the house: sensations encountered in walking through mountain passes are thereby evoked.

'Brilliant' though the analysis of the Errazius project and its comparison to the 1949 MOMA exhibition house of Marcel Breuer may be (as argued Colin Rowe on the dust-jacket), more interesting are the confrontations of institutional designs. A quick look at one of these, involving Lundy's Intermediate School and the 1962-64 London Secondary School of Alan Colquhoun and John Miller, reveals an author who must have felt betrayed by what he perceives to have been the shallowness of the Harvard commitment to humanizing architecture.

Discovered in the English example is a successful recognition of the many functions performed by a school. In contrast to the fortress-like exterior appearance of Lundy's building, the London School offers a formal statement of the accepted connection between educational institution and community. Equally important, it provides an interior articulation that conjures up both the large home and the small city, acknowledging the need of a young student to feel the security of belonging somewhere before s/he can be urged to participate in a larger forum. Interior articulation further addresses itself to the imaginative nature of the child's mind: receding galleries surrounding the assembly hall, taken in conjunction with changing natural light streaming through a coffered ceiling, establish the potential for diverse associational or experimental enrichments of the structure.

Proposing that the emotional needs and imaginative potential of the individual can be reconciled with the demands of society, the Colquhoun/Miller school is an entity responsive to the stated values of democracy. The author of *The Decorated Diagram* tends to favour such propositions. Thus we can well understand his decision to question Walter Gropius, long deemed the major advocate of democratic architecture. Nevertheless, the decision is to be regretted and not just – not even principally – because the case against Gropius is sketchy. The pages devoted to Harvard education might better have been used to develop more systematically Herdeg's notion of an architecture conceived in genuine

relation to the experiences, lived and about to be lived, of those who enter the building's domain. Left unstated, for example, are the means through which the designer selects an appropriate historical or associational paradigm for a given work. Gropius' emphasis on the 'pleasure principle' indeed may have reduced the scope of architectural discourse, but Herdeg's commitment to the possibilities of symbolic and associative design might result too easily in an even more authoritarian discourse, one which forces the individual into an artificial relationship with a bankrupt past or with faulty assumptions about human experience and imagination. To call, as Herdeg does, for a more 'self-conscious' attitude, for an analysis of the nature and rôle of 'creative instinct,' is simply not enough. He must be more specific before the evocative glimpses he permits us of an engaging humane architecture can be translated into a programme – educational or otherwise – which will replace the Gropian way. This reviewer does not doubt Herdeg's abilities to move a long way in such a direction, although she does regret that his abilities were not deployed in greater measure in *The Decorated Diagram*.

CATHERINE MACKENZIE
Concordia University

ERIC SHANES *Turner's Rivers, Harbours and Coasts*. London. Chatto & Windus, 1981. 160 pp., 116 illus., \$44.95 (cloth).

Since A.J. Finberg's important *Life of J.M.W. Turner* appeared in 1961, a number of research monographs have been published to fulfil what appears to be an endless demand for well-crafted recapitulations of the artist's life and work. These publications are always properly seasoned with morsels of new information and liberally garnished with high quality illustrations. Encouraged by these popular monographs, and spurred by the 1975 Turner bicentennial, there have been flurries of scholarly research on various neglected aspects of Turner's work: one of these important but relatively unexplored areas has been Turner's watercolours.

Since Martin Butlin's *Turner Watercolours* (1962), some valuable general studies of this subject have been writ-

ten by Graham Reynolds, Gerald Wilkinson, and more recently, Andrew Wilton. There have been also more specialized works by Adele Holcomb and Gerald Findley on Turner's watercolours for engravings. And now, Eric Shanes has added his contribution with his ambitious and original publications: *Turner's Picturesque Views of England and Wales* and *Turner's Rivers, Harbours and Coasts*. Until now, Turner's watercolours for the series of engravings of England's ports, rivers and coastline have not received the attention they deserve.

In museums, galleries, private collections and auction records, Eric Shanes has located a large number of watercolours used or conceived for engravings in a series of marine and river subjects titled *The Ports of England*, *The Rivers of England*, and *Picturesque Views of the Southern Coast*, which mark an important phase of Turner's development as a watercolourist.

Discussed in the initial part of the text are Turner's first commission from Jack Fuller for watercolours to be used for the engravings *Views of Sussex* and, even more important, his work for William and George Cooke.

In the second part of Shanes' text, titled 'Mr. Turner,' there is a general discussion of the development of Turner's art between 1810 and 1827, and, more specifically, the watercolours associated with the engravings for the *Southern Coast*, *Ports of England*, *Marine Views* and *East Coasts*. This is followed by a catalogue with separate commentaries of each of the watercolours for these various projects, including stylistic characteristics, medium and technique. The subject entries have relevant historical and biographical information which contribute to a clearer understanding of the work. After the 'commentaries' there is a full set of helpful photographs, mostly in colour, of all the watercolours catalogued.

In the third and final portion of the text, titled 'Concordance of Watercolours to their Original Sketches,' Shanes presents a chronological list of the sketchbooks in the Turner bequest pertaining to the watercolours already discussed. The watercolours that can be related to a particular sketchbook are listed under the title (and Finberg number) of the appropriate book. The sketchbooks are listed chronologically with the page number of the related sketch placed next to the title of each