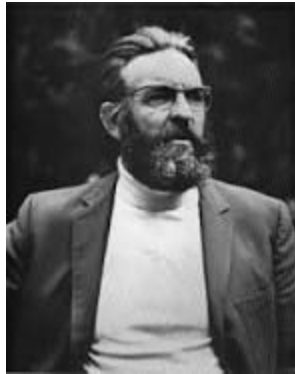


University of California: In Memoriam, 1988

Peter Reyner Banham, Santa Cruz: Art History



1922-1988

Professor

On March 19, 1988 Reyner Banham died of cancer in London, England, having retired as Professor of Art History at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1987. He was 66. From his first book to his last, he achieved a remarkable reputation for writing about architecture, the built environment, and the landscape. He stretched and even redefined the bounds of what constituted architectural history, both in his scholarly books and in the numerous journalistic pieces he constantly produced, gaining worldwide acclaim among a variety of audiences--academic, professional, and popular. At last count his publications numbered well over 700, and he had been honored in recent years with an award for architectural writing by the American Institute of Architects. Most recently he had served on the architect selection advisory panel for the new Getty Museum and Center for History of Art and the Humanities in Los Angeles and the architectural advisory committee for the Brooklyn Museum.

His brilliance on the architectural horizon was noteworthy from the beginning with the publication in 1960 of *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, in which he not only examined architecture with visual acuity but related this discussion to the interpretation of architectural theories and their reception in various media, as well as underlined the significance of relevant technologies within their cultural setting--all this analyzed with wit, intelligence, and a conscious use of verbiage, illuminated by occasional pyrotechnic



highlights. The basic theme was again taken up in what became his last book, *A Concrete Atlantis* (1986), where he showed the importance that American industrial structures such as grain elevators and factories had for the foundations of modern architecture. It was an influence that did not come through the architects' direct acquaintance of these structures, but through manipulated reproductions in European architectural journals, another case of misreceived messages which have pushed innovation.

In between these two books, Reyner Banham wrote a number of volumes that enlarged the traditional perspective of the fields of both architecture and architectural history, books such as *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment* (1969), which he complained was often catalogued under the history of technology rather than architecture, where it was meant to go, and *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971), in which he connected the layout of the city and its architecture with its transportation history and technologies and with the environment. The introductory sentence of the latter is typical of how much--and what epigrammatic sophistication--he could pack into the simplest-looking declaration: "A city seventy miles square but rarely seventy years deep, apart from a small downtown not yet two centuries old and a few other pockets of ancients, Los Angeles is instant architecture in an instant townscape." Alongside the grand masters of Los Angeles architecture, he writes of "pop" architecture of the strip, the beach, and the id--of neon restaurant signs, wharves, surf-board art, and off-shore oil rigs, icons that deserved attention as much as the famous work of a Wright or Schindler in understanding the phenomenon of Los Angeles. Much of his writing was published in numerous journals, such as *Architectural Review*, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*; but he published also outside the academic press, in such publications as *New Society*, *The New Statesman*, *Times Literary Supplement*, and *The Listener* so that his reputation far exceeded that of most academicians. Many of these journalistic ephemera were collected in *Design by Choice* (1981). In all his activities he was generously and intelligently abetted by his wife Mary, a graphic artist and wise woman, who did many of the graphic illustrations for his publications and sharpened them in many other ways.

After an initial operation for cancer, he seemed to bounce back with typical buoyancy and was soon again writing solidly on his next book--this one on high-tech architecture--as he prepared to move to the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University to be the first occupant of the Seldon H. Solow chair in architectural history, a prestigious post which all expected to be a significant capstone to his vigorous career. But suddenly an inoperable tumor appeared. In response to the emotional difficulty of the moment, he deflatingly replied to one caller with typically robust repartee, "Yes, I admit the news is not good... but the *details* are fascinating!" Then he turned

conversation to “gizmology” and wizardry--the technology of modern medicine, tubes and pipes and their analogy to the conduits of power plants, the Beaubourg, or other examples of high-tech structures. His range of interests, exemplified in an article on sheriff's badges “O, Bright Star”), illustrates his fascination with things, systems, parts, process, and their imagery, suggesting why he found life in the United States attractive and could write on such diverse subjects as Los Angeles and the American desert (*Scenes in America Deserta*, 1982) with equal fascination.

Born in Norwich, England in 1922, he was from the start interested in engineering. He worked in an aircraft company on an apprentice scholarship during World War II, but changed to the history of art and architecture in 1949. He received his doctorate in 1958 from the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, where he studied under the great pioneer of modern architectural history, Sir Nikolaus Pevsner. Meanwhile, he had joined the editorial staff of *Architectural Review* in 1952, and worked there until 1964. Before coming to Santa Cruz in 1980, he was Professor of the History of Architecture at University College, London, and Chairman of the Department of Design Studies at SUNY Buffalo.

At Santa Cruz he made his mark quickly with students, who appreciated the punchy intelligence of his lecturing, peppered with pointed insights which made his listeners understand the material more fully. His colleagues remember his willingness to shoulder his share and more of departmental chores and campus service. His clear perspective and wise counsel made him much in demand, yet he always found time to respond with sound advice to colleagues and students. When you needed him, he was there. Although his published work reveals his lively genius, trenchant intelligence, sharp verbal gifts, and warm humanity, these qualities were heightened in person. We remember in particular the vivid image of his tall, imposing figure on his bicycle with tiny wheels, the latest high-tech foldup model from Moulton, riding firmly erect with bushy gray beard partly covering the ever-present bolo tie, all under the cowboy hat of the day, a picture of independence and legend to students, colleagues, and townspeople alike--and stunning to those on campus who knew that at age 65 he has just arrived after pedaling uphill for four miles.

He is survived by his wife Mary, a son Ben, a daughter Debby, and a grandson Oliver.

Fondly submitted,

David Cope Virginia Jansen Douglas McClellan Keith Muscutt