Murray Fraser and Joe Kerr's
Architecture and the 'Special Relationship'
The American Influence on Post-War British Architecture

Reviewed By
Kerstin Sailer
Bartlett School of Graduate Studies, UCL
London, UK

Pages: 359-360
Murray Fraser and Joe Kerr's
Architecture and the 'Special Relationship'
The American Influence on Post-War British Architecture
Reviewed By
Kerstin Sailer

'Architecture and the Special Relationship' by Murray Fraser and Joe Kerr explores the influence of American culture on British Architecture, mainly focusing on the period after World War Two. Covering a wide range of cultural and historical aspects of urbanism and architecture, the book fits into the context of previous publications by the authors. Drawing on post-colonial theory, the authors propose analysing waves of economic and cultural influence from a new perspective: whereas traditionally it was assumed that European metropolitan centres were only originators of colonisation, Fraser and Kerr turn the argument around by looking at ways in which Britain's urban landscape and architecture was subject to influences stemming from the USA as its ex-colony that has risen to world power.

The phrase 'Special Relationship' originates from a speech by Winston Churchill in 1946 and describes the intensive political and economic alliance between Britain and the USA in the post-war period. However, the argument is more complex than to assume a flow of money in exchange of political and cultural allegiance. Criticising the term 'Americanisation' themselves, the authors take a balanced and reflective view arguing for the continuity of a longstanding tradition of shared origin, language, and culture, for multiple forms of influence, and thus in essence for the emergence of hybrid forms of culture in times of globalisation. Therefore an 'Americanised inflection of modernisation' is argued to have shaped British architecture.

The extensive argument unfolds based on a rich variety of material including architectural writings, pieces of art, the biographies of individual architects, as well as concrete examples of urban developments and architectural projects in Britain that are compared to its American archetypes.

The book is structured into seven thematic chapters covering distinct aspects of the 'Special Relationship': idealistic and materialistic influences up to the Second World War (1), town planning and house design before and after the Second World War (2), the emergence of corporate architecture
in post-war Britain (3), the impact of technology and conceptual ideas (4), the importance of American High Tech architecture (5), aspects of monumentality (6), and last but not least the impact of economic and cultural values after 1980 (7).

Providing a 'synoptic overview' the book appears a bit lengthy and repetitive; moreover, the authors construct such a complex argument of hybridisation that it is at times hard to follow - for example when they argue for the Americanisation of British architects, who studied with and were inspired by Mies van der Rohe in their own built projects. John Winter’s House in Highgate/London (1969) for instance clearly treads in the footsteps of Mies and his Farnsworth House in Illinois (1950-51). However, Mies himself can only be seen as a cultural hybrid, because even though he was honorary American, his truly European origin cannot be overlooked.

Nevertheless, the book is a treasure chest full of fascinating stories that reveal the history and origin of architectural and urban form in Britain: how Mayfair became an Americanised quarter in London, how Liverpool and Blackpool were shaped by transatlantic trade, how Ebenezer Howards’ garden cities were inspired by American suburbia, how the London landmark 'Centre Point' was modelled after American ideals, how out-of-town supermarkets and shopping malls emerged following American consumerism and convenience, how Norman Foster, Richard Rogers and Nicholas Grimshaw were fascinated by American building technology, how Canary Wharf was developed as ensemble of high-rise buildings “like a castle - a protected fort of global capitalism” (p. 466), and so on.

Readers with a background in Space Syntax may find that this book provides complementary insights to their own research interests. Instead of focusing on configuration and layout in its relation to society and culture, Fraser and Kerr offer a different perspective by exploring how the form of the built environment in Britain emerged as result of an intensive mutual relationship with the USA. Having an interest in historic and cultural theory and seeing phenomena through a global lens, the authors provide qualitative evidence how those who create form, i.e. architects and planners were shaped themselves by hybrid cultures.

Potentially, it could be fruitful to combine the ideas presented by Fraser and Kerr with a syntactical approach - this could mean to explore built form as a product of cultural hybridisation yet acknowledge the configurational aspects of form and its relation to the social life it affords.