Secret architecture

Description

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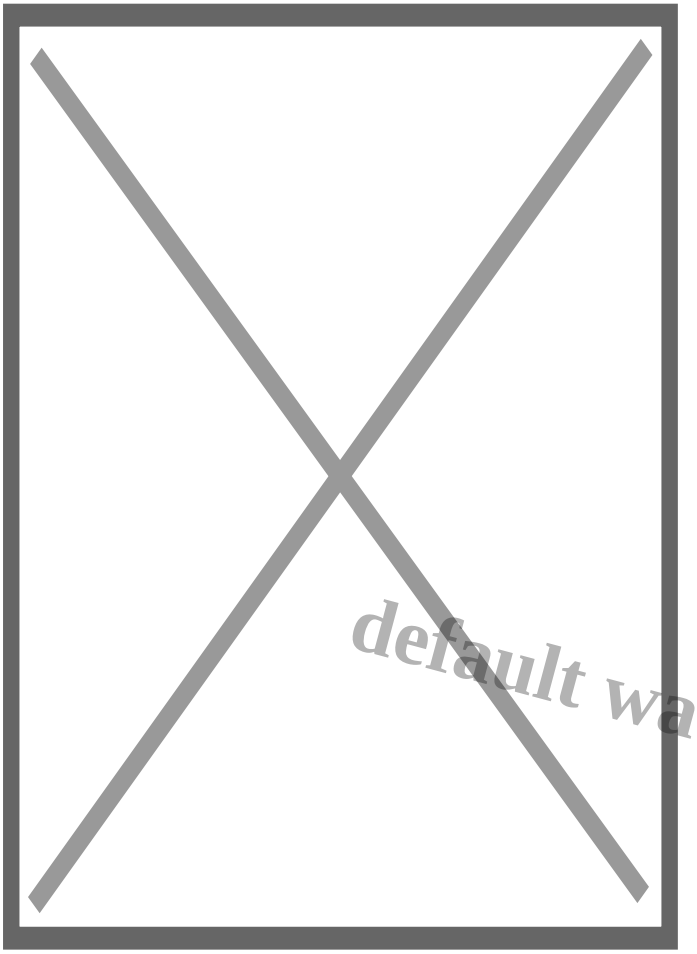
The prominent Regency architect John Soane (1753-1837) was a member of a secret society. In an account provided by architectural historian David Watkin, Soane â??took Freemasonry very seriouslyâ?• (402). Though he wasnâ??t initiated as a member until the age of 60 his work adopted the mood of Freemasonry.

> â??He reflected its deistic philosophy in his own references to God as â??the Architect of the Universe,â?? and in his numerous designs for funerary monuments, tombs, sepulchral chapels, and mausoleums, from which he always scrupulously excluded all Christian referencesâ?• (402).

As evidence of his commitment to Freemasonry, Soane designed the Masonic Hall in London which was completed in 1830. Professionals might join clubs and societies for business contacts without incorporating the organisationâ??s rites and symbols into their professional practice. A societyâ??s moral codes, communality and work of improvement or redemption are sufficient to exert influence on professional life. I would like to investigate though if Soaneâ??s commitment to the ideals of Freemasonry are evident in his architecture, even domestic architecture.

Soane purchased a terrace house at 13 Lincolnâ??s Inn Fields in central London in 1795. He lived there with his family, and extended and renovated it over a number of years so that it combined the functions of home, studio, library and museum. It was Soaneâ??s life-work and a passion documented notably in a book by Helene Furjan, *Glorious Visions: John Soaneâ??s Spectacular Theatre.*



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Having visited the house on two occasions, I observed it to be austere, melancholic, funereal, formal, ceremonial, and symmetrical, as might befit a homage to stonemasonry. It crams enough artefacts, adornments and architectural features to fill a building 10 times its volume. This oddly scaled building is fascinating and invites curiosity. I would also like to visit and take photographs of the interior some day without the crowds of people processing through what has become a major London attraction (www.soane.org).

Furjanâ??s scholarly assessment of the building outlines Soaneâ??s debt to the aesthetic tastes of 18th-19th century London for sentimental fiction, collections of antiquities, theatres and spectacles (e.g., dioramas), including theories of the sublime, shadows and mysterious light â?? motifs adopted by many architects at the time, though amplified in Soaneâ??s work.

> â??In all these referents, Soane found an interest in atmosphere, spectacular effect, drama and mysteryâ?• (172).

Mystery features prominently in Furjanâ??s account of Soaneâ??s house-museum. She refers to the basement of the building, which you can look down into from various points in the plan, as an evocation of mystery. Itâ??s configured as a romanticised funerary crypt. But she says the same spatial devices apply to the rooms above: dome, colonnade, picture gallery and even the breakfast room and other domestic quarters.

She notes that Soane extended quasi Gothic, neo-classical conventions, transforming Gothic literature â??into a three-dimensional, inhabitable spectacleâ?• (172).

Three-dimensional and theatrical

I like to see the building in terms of secrets, as befitting the product of a devotee of a secret society. After all, theatricality is a controlled art of revealing and concealing.

Furjan relates the house-museum to â??representations and constructions of landscapesâ?• (7), particularly in the houseâ??s association with tropes of the garden picturesque. The building employs â??a series of carefully framed scenes and prospectsâ?• (61). Entrances to rooms frequently align to produce a viewing sequence (an *enfilade*). Sometimes there are glimpses encountered through â??apertureâ?• that â??suddenly come into lineâ?• as you move across a room (112).

Hidden within this account of *prospect* is its landscape converse of *refuge*, though thatâ??s certainly evident in the house-museum. It has nooks and hiding places. The visitor to the building frequently looks down, up or through from a position of safety: a place from which you can see without being seen, or where you can retreat from view if you want seclusion.

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In any case, the requirements of private house and semi-public museum demand that the architect give attention to a play between prospect and refuge. Other aspects of the building make even more overt reference to secrecy: cupboards, cabinets and the famous gallery of panelled walls that hinge open to reveal a series of paintings by J.M.W. Turner among others.

The house-museum by Soane is not only a place of secrets, but an eloquent lesson in the architecture of secrets. Itâ??s fair to say Soane demonstrated affinity between his membership of a secret society and his house as an instruction manual in the spatial art of secrets.

References

- Appleton, Jay. 1975. *The Experience of Landscape*. London: John Wiley
- Furjan, Helene. 2011. *Glorious Visions: John Soaneâ??s Spectacular Theatre*. London: Routledge
- Vidler, Anthony. 2012. Glorious Visions: John Soaneâ??s Spectacular Theater by Helene FurjÃ¡n, Routledge 2011 Book Review. *Journal of Architectural Education*, (66) 1, 35-37.

Notes

- From my reading of the architecture of Freemasonry, human representations appear in abstract monumental form, though are mostly absent. The architecture lacks the exuberant tiled geometries of Islamic patterning for example.

- Masonic Hall designs reference Solomonâ??s temple described in the book of Kings (1 Kings: 6).
- I took the facade image above in August 2017. The strip image is from a Google image search on â??john soaneâ??s museum interiors.â?•

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. Freemasonry
2. secrets
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