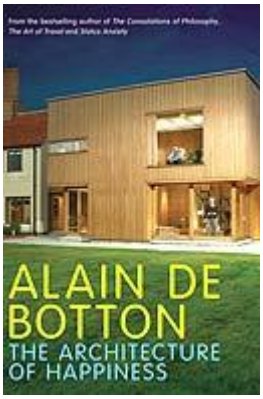
Home truths

Alain de Botton explores the emotional impact of the way we build in The Architecture of Happiness. Architecture is too important to be left to the architects, says Charles Saumarez Smith



The Architecture of Happiness
by Alain de Botton
Hamish Hamilton £17.99 , pp280

Alain de Botton is a brave and highly intelligent writer who likes to take big, complex subjects and write about them with thoughtful and deceptive innocence, elucidating the arcane for the layman. He has already done this with Proust, with the idea of travel and with status symbols. Now he has turned to the subject of architecture.

De Botton starts with a dithyramb to the pleasures of a west London suburban house, his own, one suspects. It is all about the accidental pleasures of sunlight and silence, the associations of family life and the recollections of those who might have lived in the house before; not about the experience of architecture, one might think, since a terraced house in Acton might not necessarily be thought to qualify, but, instead, about the pleasures of sympathetic domestic building and of the objects arranged around it.

It is an odd place to start, but as good as any for a walking tour through the history of architecture, beginning with Epictetus and Bernard of Clairvaux and passing rapidly to the essential theme of the book: how architecture influences mood and behaviour, a topic that has preoccupied architectural theorists from Pugin to le Corbusier.

His second chapter is about the meaning of style and is likewise brisk, moving rapidly from the whole history of classicism to Horace Walpole, who, de Botton implies, was the first to use gothic for domestic architecture. Like much of what he writes, this is an over-simplification - what about all those Oxbridge colleges or Vanbrugh's admiration for Woodstock Manor or William Kent? No matter. We zip through the 19th century to the time that really engages his emotional interest and sympathies, namely the period of early modernism and, in particular, Corbusier's Villa Savoye, which he writes about with poetic eloquence.

Unfortunately, to an extent I had not realised, the Savoyes detested their villa because it was so badly built and were on the verge of prosecuting Corbusier when he was saved by the outbreak of the Second World War.

I particularly like de Botton's third chapter, which is a meditation on the meaning of abstract shape, beginning with Adrian Stokes's (Freudian) views of the sculpture of Barbara Hepworth, then looking at the language of typefaces and at Lavater's Essays on Physiognomy. He goes on to a contrast between the work of Albert Speer and the architecture of postwar German democracy, although this distinction is slightly complicated by a drawing by Mies van der Rohe in the V&A's current exhibition on Modernism, which shows a building uncannily like the Barcelona pavilion flying swastikas.

De Botton was clearly outraged to be invited to drinks at the official residence of the German ambassador in Washington and to find that the garden fa&ccric;ade, designed in 1995, clearly echoes the work of Speer. This is, once again, not really an issue of architecture or design, but what Geoffrey Scott in his book, The Architecture of Humanism, published in 1914, called the associational fallacy.

By now, I think I am getting the point of the book. It is not about the specifically architectural characteristics of space, plan, volume and design, but much more about the emotions that architecture inspires in the user of buildings. Many people, my wife included, devote huge amounts of time trying to ensure that the interior of their houses is a bulwark against the disorder of the outside world: places of contrived harmony. There is an obvious difference, as de Botton describes, between the harsh strip lighting and angst-ridden atmosphere of a McDonald's on London's Victoria Street, which he describes with eloquent disgust, and the wonderfully empty, dark, numinous spaces of Westminster cathedral on the other side of the road. Yet architects do not normally talk nowadays very much about idealisation, about emotion and beauty. They talk about design and function and technology and shape. They are preoccupied by gesture and material. They have lost an ability to think about more traditional ideas of order, simplicity, balance and harmony.

De Botton's message, then, is fairly simple but valuable precisely because it is simple, readable and cogent. He wants to encourage his readers, and society more generally, to pay more attention to the psychological consequences of design in architecture: that architecture should not be treated as an arcane and specialist discipline to be left to professionals, but as something that affects all our lives, our happiness and well-being. He wants us to look more carefully at our architectural surroundings, pay attention to them and develop a language with which to judge them.

De Botton is quite prepared to state why exactly he admires, for example, buildings such as Louis Kahn's Yale Centre for British Art or Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron's Stone House in Liguria. He likes the modest aesthetic pleasures of Gustavian manor houses in rural Sweden. He is keen on works of engineering. He doesn't like Quinlan Terry or Poundbury. He is, in fact, a modernist and approvingly quotes Adolf Loos, who wrote: 'Let one building be like another. We won't be published in Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration and we won't be made professors of applied art, but we will have served ourselves, our times, our nation and mankind to the best of our ability.'

Just as de Botton has taken philosophy out of the academy and back into the realm of common sense and reflection, where it originally belonged, so he has taken discussion about the characteristics of architecture out of the professional journals, where issues of aesthetics are treated in a language that is wilfully abstruse, away from the offices of the developers and town planners, and back into the drawing room. There it behoves us all to think carefully, as de Botton has done with perceptive clarity, as to what exactly are the qualities that make a good building.

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