SOANE FOUNDATION HONORS

Phyllis Lambert, Emancipate, Empower, Create: Modernism, Talks about the Source

The Sir John Soane's Museum Foundation recently celebrated the singular contributions of the architect David Adjaye and the author, educator, and architect Phyllis Lambert in the newly refurbished Rainbow Room atop Rockefeller Center. Both received Soane Foundation Honors during a sparkling international gathering of nearly 200 friends of architecture in general and the Soane Museum in particular.

During the summer the Foundation had the pleasure of an email chat with Mr. Lambert. It was an honor to speak to someone who had played such a central role in the rise of Modernism in America. Thanks to her, New York has Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building, and Montreal, the Canadian Centre for Architecture. A 2007 documentary about her purposeful life plainly dubbed her 'Jean of Architecture' for her gallant efforts in the cause of preservation.

Here are extracts from the conversation:

Can you share some details of your first visit to Sir John Soane's Museum?

I was working on the Seagram Building and somewhat bemused by what was, so a Modernist, cluttered Romanticism.

And what is your assessment now?

I have found many affinities between the Soane, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and the Canadian Centre for Architecture. An underlying similarity is that each of these museums personally established the idea of collections, each was in some way the architect of the building that houses the collections, and each was intimately involved in the way the collections and the architecture of their purpose-built structures relate.

If you were trying to persuade someone to visit the Soane, what would you tell them?

I'd emphasize drama and experimentation in light, richness and differentiation of rooms that include the integration of object and architecture. This especially so in the double-height plaster Room.

What do you think Soane would have to say about the Seagram Building?

He'd appreciate fine materials, articulation of surface, the noble space it carves out on Park Avenue, the program of sculpture on the plaza, and the choreography of public space.

What sort of group would you gather if you were hosting a dinner party with Sir John Soane?

I can imagine Soane and Philip Johnson discussing the architectural traditions of all periods in the Grand Tour and whether or not the elder peer as he turned from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, or modernism. But a conversation between Soane and Frank Gehry would be infinitely richer. I'd ask them about finding inspiration in the works of art of their contemporaries, about their break from the past, their friendships with artists, the role of decoration, form, culture, This would be delicious.

THOROUGHLY MODERN, REALLY?

He may not have been the first Modern architect, but that hasn't stopped some Soane devotees from saying he did.

Starting about 106 years ago, on the cusp of the Modern movement, turn-of-the-century architect Sir John Soane's brand of staid, formal design, asserting that the early 19th-century architect was the first Modernist. The Soane's Deputy Director and Inspector, Helen Day, comments that "some scholars would argue that his uniquely modern style was actually the result of financial constraints and had nothing to do with breaking barriers," she says, adding "I think the key thing to ask is not so much whether Soane was the first Modernist but why he is perceived as such." Here are her eight reasons:

continued inside...
SOANE'S SUPER MODELS
The Soane has an impressive stable of beauties, with some needing a lift or two

The Soane Museum holds the largest collection of architectural models in the United Kingdom and one of the most representative in the world. Come spring, 11 models – out of 120 or so – will be on view in the Soane's Model Room where it reopens to the public for the first time since 1904, just as Soane always intended. Outside the Model Room, another 62 of the models will grace other spaces around the museum. We spoke to the Soane's director, Abigail Thorne, about the models and the Adopt-A-Model initiative now underway to keep them in model shape.

What did Soane have in mind by collecting these models?

The models bring to this architecture museum in miniature, allowing today’s visitors, and students in Soane’s time, to explore on their own Grand Tour without leaving the building.

Besides an educational purpose, do the models serve other roles?

Lots. With some models in our collection that have even been used as legal evidence in court hearings! In the 21st century, models are still important and widely used by engineers, architects, planners, and others – anyone who wants to visualize and/YEP

Why was the Adopt-A-Model program implemented?

Just like anything that has lasted nearly two centuries, the Soane’s historic models, particularly those made of cork, have suffered from the depredations of time and deviances in environments. They need some

MODERN (continued from first page)

1. His elevations of elements usually found in classical buildings, such as columns and entablatures, to recover all projections from interior walls.
2. His asylars or scribbled-down classicism.
3. His linear detailing, often using incised lines or grooves that have been praised by modern connoisseurs for their simplicity and refinement. In Soane’s day, though, the lines were criticized for looking like “scooched up penmanship.”

1. His innovative handling of light to create what Henry Russell Hitchcock described as “effects of clair-obscur.”
2. His overall handling of space — and particularly, small spaces where he created spatial fragmentation and ambiguity.
3. His breaking apart of motifs and reducing them to create new effects, such as segmental and semicircular arches, the circular dome and the “starred” ceiling.
4. His innovative use of fire-resistant materials and introduction of central heating, and the precision with which he used materials.
5. His quest for originality and invention. Soane once said that “Architecture is art in complete possession of itself.”

The Soane Foundation is proud to invite guests to the Soane G. Miller Memorial Lecture Series as a tribute to Soane and his indelible contribution to the Foundation and to the museum world. This year’s lecture will take place at the Century Association in New York City on Wednesday, November 3, 2014. Charles E. Pierce, Jr., former Director of the Morgan Library and a close friend of Soane, will address those attending about what made the Soane a work of art in its own right and will introduce Philippe de Montebello, Director Emeritus of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and now an educator at NYU’s Institute of Fine Arts. In his lecture, entitled “The Museum as Medium,” de Montebello plans to use Sir John Soane’s Museum as an archetype to illustrate how museums are anything but inert environments for the display of works of art. The lecture will also illuminate how various museum installation styles create narratives that alter context, meaning, and effect. To make a reservation, contact the Soane Foundation office or go online to purchase tickets.

BOOK YOUR TOUR TODAY

Over the next year, the Soane Museum plans to offer new focused tours exploring subjects like architectural models, portraiture, antiquities, and the work of Soane’s architectural office. The museum may even offer a behind-the-scenes experience for those interested in painting art and history. For further information, please contact Diana West at dwest@soane.org.uk.

BESPOKE OFFERINGS: Special private tours with curators may be arranged with a special donation.

PRE-BOOKED TOURS: Once a day, Tuesdays through Fridays, an hour-long tour at £10 per person. Book online: www.soane.org.uk/your_visit/tours/

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MR. DE MONTEBELLO KICKS OFF NEW LECTURE SERIES

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ABOUT US

Mission Statement of the Foundation

Sir John Soane’s Museum Foundation exists to support and encourage research and educational initiatives for Sir John Soane’s Museum in London. For more details, please visit our website: www.soane.org.uk.

The Foundation is a registered 501(c)(3) organization.

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