WHAT I ADMIRE ABOUT SOANE:

Thoughts from two of our 2009 Honorees

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I try to go to Soane’s museum in Lincoln’s Inn Fields when I’m in London. Like Coit Tower, Greenwich, St. Paul’s, and Regency Park Chiswick, “The Soane” is a “pilgrimage site,” which, like Monticello, I’ve gotten to know in stages.

The first time I saw Lincoln’s Inn Fields, I must have been 14 years old on a trip abroad with my family. It was quiet, colorful, filled with statues, models, mirrors, drawings, delightful, and it stayed with me. Years later, while studying at Oxford, I began to understand how good it was. Later still, while on a Yale Traveling Fellowship in Cambridge, Soane was being recanvassed along with Palladian; there were trips and long night discussions with the likes of Colin Rowe, Jim Stirling, Sandy Wilson, and Peter Eisenman. It was not just Soane’s architectural “extravagances, his collecting of related artifacts, but his playfulness with light, his knerled articulation of powerful small spaces, the way in which he took traditional details and simplified and recombined them, the cantilevered stairway and its elegant banister, all the way down to the crypt at Lincoln’s Inn Fields. And, of course, there was the Dulwich Gallery and those drawings of the Bank of England.

Soane was blessed to be born in the midst of an intellectual culture moving into high gear—Inigo Jones, Christopher Wren, Lord Burlington, William Kent, Nash, the Adams brothers, etc.; an extended period of historic moment, English classicism, but prophets of design deviations, Jefferson and Soane both embraced new technology, methodology, and sculptural qualities in their architecture.

Jefferson and Soane each tackled the difficult task of designing their own “essays in architecture,” or personal residences, and both became wedded to their intimate house-museums after they lost their wives. Monticello and Soane’s residence at Lincoln’s Inn Fields were both designed over the span of more than thirty years. The houses were experiments in the manipulation of light and intricacies of carved space, and served as vessels for the abundance of diverse collections. Drawings, models, mirrors, curiosities, and gadgets adorned every open fragment of wall space and spilled from marble tables and cases. Their experiments in residential architecture blurred the line of the public and private by providing dedicated spaces for solitary study and contemplation while also engaging the Enlightenment principle of dissemination through the program of a museum.

Retirement was never really actualized by either gentleman; they pursued other design projects, maintained correspondences, and reluctantly stayed within the public lens in a variety of ways. Through the later years of their lives they each exchanged letters with their mutual friend Maria Ginnaw, and read, collected, and received students. Although Jefferson and Soane never met, one can only imagine the spectacular conversations they could have shared in a coffeehouse given the similar structures of their lives and interests.

Today thousands of visitors still enjoy the pleasure of experiencing Jefferson & Monticello and Sir John Soane’s Museum: they are organic eddies that seem to have a life of their own beyond the assembly of brick and plaster. (continued)

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I was just out of college the first time I went to England. As a student of Southern American literature, I knew nothing about architecture. All I had ever seen was what I grew up around in Florida—Spanish Revival and Mid-Century Modern. But one night at my host in Bloomsbury I overheard some people talking about a most amazing place. What could it be? I asked them and was told about an extraordinary house at Lincoln’s Inn Fields, which was not far from the hotel.

I got up early the next morning, had a full English breakfast, and hit the road. Soon I was in front of numbers 12, 13, and 14. Number 13 was weird. Among other things, I wondered what those chopped-off columns were doing hanging off the front? But the more I looked at it the more I became fascinated. What I liked was that it was so eccentric. I had never seen anything like it, or anything like what I found inside. “Oh my God,” I thought, “this was the home of a certified obsessive!”

But the longer I stayed, the more it intrigued me. And because I stayed so long, a very nice lady who worked there realized I was in a bit of a daze and came over to talk to me. She told me all about John Soane, about the house, about his collecting, and cases. Design deviations, Jefferson and Soane both embraced new technology, methodology, and sculptural qualities in their architecture.

That visit had a big influence on my life. I think it was instrumental in my becoming an obsessive collector of things, and of spending most of my adult life in architecture. I fell in love with the Neoclassical on that visit, and it is still my favorite. Over the years it has prompted many pilgrimages all over Europe to see the great examples. And to Washington, too, and even Staten Island—to Sailors’ Snug Harbor—one of the undiscovered gems of New York.
OPENING UP THE SOANE: THE SECOND FLOOR

The restoration and opening to the public of the entire second floor of Sir John Soane’s Museum was met with much anticipation. The museum knows quite a lot about the exact location of the second floor rooms, their functions and how they compare with other interiors at the end of the 18th century. They were closed after his death until the 20th century when they were opened to the public. While Soane was alive he published two books on his buildings and for the first time the museum has full access to his buildings.

CLASSICAL VISIONARIES

Sir John Soane’s Museum Foundation has a mission to provide a lively forum in the fields of art, architecture, and the decorative arts within the Soane tradition and to assist financially Sir John Soane’s Museum in London. Sir John Soane’s Museum Foundation has a mission to provide a lively forum in the fields of art, architecture, and the decorative arts within the Soane tradition and to assist financially Sir John Soane’s Museum in London. For details on Sir John Soane’s Museum’s support of these endeavors, please visit our website: www.SirJohnSoane.org.

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