

Rectilinear reasoning

Most research proceeds incrementally, and the majority of papers received by arq fall happily into our brick-on-brick expectations: of broad interest, we trust, but clearly adding to one of the various thematic walls that constitute the edifice of the discipline of architecture. Occasionally, however, something comes along that asks a question with such wide ramifications that it is not so easily categorised: Philip Steadman's paper (pp119–130) is one such.

'Why are most buildings rectangular?', Steadman asks. The core of his answer, not surprisingly given that he has what the British police call 'previous' in this area, is gently and persuasively mathematical. But its logic will do little, one suspects, to trouble those – from advocates of the slackly biomorphic to every-angle-skewed derivatives of De-Con – to whom the right-angle is an anathema. And in a sense they are right: what Steadman addresses is the spatial logic of buildings, not the expressive means of architecture. The two, however, are intimately connected.

What is so often troubling about many contemporary departures from the orthogonal is not the choice of formal language *per se*, but the feeble arguments mounted in its defence. All too often these appear to rest on nothing more rigorous than the assertion that 'there is nothing special about the right-angle', or, by devotees of the putatively organic, that it is 'unnatural'.

Such sentiments have deep roots, as a reaction against the 'mechanical' logic of industrialisation and, within the culture of Modernism, as a riposte to those for whom right-angles were either a necessary condition of a 'rational' architecture – hence Pevsner's assertion that Gaudí's structurally unimpeachable leaning columns were 'irrational' – or an essential expression of our situation in the world. The latter view, stemming from Mme. Blavatsky and her theosophical ramblings, asserted the transcendent power of the horizontal (feminine) and vertical (masculine), and infused the ideas of De Stijl, the Le Corbusier of the *Poème à l'Angle Droit*, and much besides.

It was one of the considerable, and all too easily taken for granted, achievements of some of the finest modern architects, of Mies van der Rohe above all perhaps, to render the right-angle deeply expressive – as, in their different ways, do Terragni's Casa del Fascio (pp157–170) and Russell Jones's brick house in Bayswater (pp100–117) discussed in this issue. Faced with the contemporary demand to turn every other building into a 'landmark', it should come as no surprise – as Steadman hints at the end of his paper – to see architects routinely departing from the orthogonal in search of something more declamatory. To believe that the results are innately expressive is, however, naïve. As E H Gombrich was always at pains to emphasise, artistic forms are rendered meaningful only in the context of a system of aesthetic norms. And in architecture those norms have traditionally been grounded in the logic of building and geometry of space.

THE EDITORS

architectural research quarterly

Subscribe now for 2007

arq

Innovative in conception, unique in breadth and generously illustrated, this pace-setting quarterly publication from Cambridge University Press links, on a global scale, the worlds of architectural practice and research. **arq** regularly includes extensive peer-reviewed sections on design, history, theory, construction, environmental design, information technology and practice - as well as structures, urbanism and documents. These are supplemented by letters, reports, reviews, a directory of specialist research centers and consultancies and an annual index. Each issue opens with a leader and closes with insight, a personal end-piece. In its three year history, **arq** has published work from all over the world: from Chile to Sweden and from Japan to the Netherlands - with a strong representation from the United Kingdom and United States. **arq**, like architecture itself, is all-embracing and written by and for both practitioners and academics. It provides an outlet for all those who wish to disseminate their work to an international audience.

Please enter my subscription to
arq: architectural research quarterly, volume 11, 2007

- £156/\$252 institutions print and electronic
 £30/\$50 students print only
 £42/\$64 individuals print only

EU residents only. VAT may be payable at your local rate if not registered.

Our VAT registration number: GB 214 1416 14

If registered, your VAT registration no:

Total subscription payment £/\$ _____

EU residents only, if not registered
add VAT at appropriate rate £ _____

Canadian residents, add 7% GST \$ _____

Total £/\$

Name _____

Address _____

Payment enclosed

- Cheque in sterling or US dollars
(payable to Cambridge University Press)
- Credit Card – VISA | MasterCard | American Express
(delete where applicable)

Card no _____

Expiry date _____

Signature _____

Photocopy this page and send your order to:

Journals Customer Services, Cambridge University Press, The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 8RU, UK

T +44 (0)1223 326070

F +44 (0)1223 315052

E journals@cambridge.org

or in USA, Canada and Mexico send to:

Cambridge University Press, 32 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10013-2473, USA

T (914) 937 9600

F (914) 937 4712

E journals_subscriptions@cup.org

arq10/2