

Broadcasting Buildings: Architecture on the Wireless, 1927-1945

Review Number: 1765

Publish date: Thursday, 7 May, 2015

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ISBN: 9780262026741

Date of Publication: 2014

Price: £20.95

Pages: 352pp.

Publisher: MIT Press

Publisher url: <http://mitpress.mit.edu/books/broadcasting-buildings>

Place of Publication: Cambridge, MA

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The dissemination of cultural improvement was written into the ethos of the BBC under John Reith, the first director-general from 1927. Until 1945 the BBC broadcast a single national service and therefore constructed programming that attempted to offer a culturally unified ‘voice of the nation’. In the post-1945 period, however, historians have argued that the BBC replicated and thus reinforced triadic class divisions by splitting its radio programming into the Light Programme, the Home Service, and the Third Programme. The historiography of BBC broadcasting has often turned on this question of unification. Two recent studies published in 2012, Simon J. Potter’s *Broadcasting Empire* and Maggie Andrews’s *Domesticating the Airwaves*, have moved beyond the class dynamic to demonstrate how imperial and gender identities could be refracted through the process of broadcasting.⁽¹⁾ Asa Briggs’s monumental five-volume history of British broadcasting (published at intervals between 1961 and 1995) set the tone for these types of studies and for media history more generally.⁽²⁾ Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff’s 1991 *Social History of British Broadcasting* further showcased the BBC as an attractive sounding board for examining the cultural nation.⁽³⁾ An indication of the continuing popularity of this subject is the fact that researchers are advised to email the BBC Written Archives Centre several months in advance to secure a spot in the little reading room housed on the estate at Caversham Park.

Shundana Yusaf's *Broadcasting Buildings* is a refreshing, innovative, and superbly composed addition to this historiographical landscape. Architectural broadcasting seems at first to be a particularly niche topic, admittedly, but go with Yusaf. She artfully demonstrates how the 'space' of early British radio became a playground for intellectuals looking to connect their listeners with the world around them. Thus, *Broadcasting Buildings* contributes to our understanding of two important themes of the mid-20th century: the character of progressive liberalism and popular heritage and the preservationist movement. There is also much to be learned methodologically from Yusaf's careful unpicking of patterns of speech and listening, and the impact that these non-visual processes have on a highly visual discipline such as architecture (e.g. pp. 71–2). The MIT Press has produced a rather beautiful object in this book, which adds further to its sensory pleasures. It is generously illustrated (there are 77 illustrations in total), including both photographs of the built environment and pages from BBC publications. Some of the pamphlets reproduced, particularly those accompanying 'Broadcasts to Schools', do not appear immediately relevant to the text and could have benefited from more explanation (e.g. p. 5, p. 152, p. 155, p. 176).

In the introduction Yusaf familiarizes the reader with the premise at the heart of her study: that architecture was, perhaps surprisingly, a highly-discussed topic on BBC radio in the period 1927–45 and that it occupied a unique place in the Corporation's cultural pantheon (p. 100, p. 7). She also provides a thorough and eloquent discussion of the network of 'public-minded' individuals positioned around John Reith, teasing out their ties to 19th-century liberalism (pp. 9–14). This immediately situates her study alongside other intellectual histories, classically articulated in LeMahieu's 1988 work, which have explored the cultural ambitions of early 20th-century liberalism in Britain.⁽⁴⁾ Yusaf is skilled at easing the conventional historian, perhaps unacquainted with architectural criticism and theory, into her subtle argument about what the aural qualities of radio can do to built structures. Thus, a discussion of the 'design challenges' surrounding both the interior and exterior of Broadcasting House in 1932 provides an inspired introduction to the BBC's 'Janus-faced' relationship with architecture in mid-20th-century Britain (p. 29). Hereafter, most of Yusaf's architectural criticism is consigned to the footnotes.

The first and second chapters of *Broadcasting Buildings* are symbiotic. Put simply, they answer the questions what did the BBC do to architecture and what did architecture do to the BBC? Yusaf is clear that she does not follow a hierarchal line of architectural theory that subordinates all other cultural representations of architecture to the aura of the built form itself (p. 37). On the contrary, language (and especially for Yusaf, speech) is considered to be more powerful in a technologically connected society for the communication of the built environment. Within architectural historiography since the 1960s, this path has been led by those emphasising the importance of Derridean signs and signifiers to architectural expression, recently re-articulated in Andrew Higgott's *Mediating Modernism* (2007).⁽⁵⁾ But Yusaf is also highly concerned with the concrete, social constitution of architectural discourse, and this grounding ensures the reader not does get bogged down in theory (p. 80). Her theoretical assumptions frame Yusaf's argument that when made available via the medium of the BBC, architecture's role in modern British society was ultimately redefined: 'Speech was publication. It transformed work from a private object into a public one' (p. 40). Talking about architecture became as much an architectural act as designing and constructing buildings. This new act, nurtured by a receptive institution with a public monopoly, breathed life into a proud profession struggling to recapture its social status in lieu of its traditional aristocratic patrons.

Was this positive narrative for architecture mutually beneficial to the BBC in the 1930s and 1940s? Within the context of cultural programming, Yusaf asserts that it was, because architecture had some special qualities in the realm of 'culture'. Reith's workforce puzzled over how to communicate highly individualized notions of aesthetic perfection via the radio, how to diffuse 'culture' to a faceless mass audience ('listening in' by their millions by the 1930s) and ensure it really stuck. The answer was to relate 'culture' to their everyday lives. 'The physical environment ... made far more robust topics of conversation than fine arts, and resolved the problem of broadcast culture' (p. 91). The latter part of chapter two showcases the range of architectural opinion that the BBC aired, from hardline traditionalists to avant-garde modernists. These broadcasters were not exclusively practicing architects: they included a range of

professionals (critics, journalists, town planners) who found themselves concerned with architecture's social implications (p. 101). Such a variety of opinion, often contesting the hottest topics of the day, was sustained by the notion that any form of architectural discussion could finally wed 'culture' to ordinary, social experience. By virtue of being an *applied* art, architecture was more democratic. And 'democratic' was the buzzword of Reithian idealism. Yusaf concludes that the modernists fulfilled this criterion far more successfully than their academic interlocutors, who struggled to accommodate popular tastes unless administering them from the top down (pp. 106–7). Reading the modernist debates of the 1930s from the perspective of architectural broadcasting is ingenious. Yusaf weaves questions of aesthetics, which are too often consigned to specialist art and architectural histories, into the 'mainstream' of social and cultural history. We are reminded of how much was up for grabs in this crucial decade, before modern architecture made its *physical* stamp on the face of post-war Britain.

The third chapter zooms out and considers the thorny question of the BBC's political positioning between the wars. The consensus remains that at key moments when national unity appeared under strain, such as the General Strike of 1926 and appeasement at Munich in 1938, the Corporation simply toed the government's line.⁽⁶⁾ Drawing on Scannell and Cardiff's analysis, Yusaf accepts this picture of the BBC's conformist attitude in current affairs and news programming (p. 159). Her interjection is illustrated in a series of case studies of the BBC's cultural programming: art appreciation for schools, housekeeping advice, the preservation of the English countryside, and a debate over the urgent and contentious housing question framed as 'Flats vs. Cottages'. These cultural productions were an outlet for the politics of liberal progressivism whose ideological agenda hinged on forging a cultural identity for Britain. 'The BBC's cultural programming sought to impose a cultural system that put the aesthetic and moral values of the educated classes above all others, within a political system where all citizens were equal before the law' (p. 161). The unity of this project and its homogeneity at the BBC in this period is 'beyond doubt' for Yusaf (p. 164).

This chapter is also the closest we come to peering in at the listeners themselves. Yusaf provides a clear and helpful overview of the BBC's organisation (schools and adult education programming, written publications) and comments upon the ways in which class and gender structured cultures of listening (pp. 149–50, p. 153). Whilst her attention to the latter is fleeting, she devotes space to describing the routine of a 'listening-in' miner named Joe Brown who is 'a composite character based on historical information on one segment of the audience that listened to architectural programs' (p. 139). The device of reconstructing particular moments with some descriptive embellishment is a stylistic choice deployed elsewhere in the book (e.g. p. 167, p. 243). A footnote to one particularly vivid reconstruction of Stanley Casson in his Oxford study explains that the scene is 'a source-based simulated ethnographic construction' inspired by Pierre Bourdieu (pp. 91–2, fn 29 p. 286). Whilst it has the potential to jar with some readers, this technique does help to personify broadcasters and especially listeners, who may otherwise be rendered anonymous in a study based mainly on BBC documentary material. The question of how the architectural broadcasts were received and subsequently shaped the mental worlds of listeners is ultimately beyond the scope of this thesis and would require an entirely different set of sources (cf. p. 149).

Chapter four tackles a major theme of interwar cultural politics head on: preservationism. Building on the discussion of C. R. Ashbee's Morrisian inheritance in chapter three (pp. 130–8), we are introduced to three seminal architectural broadcasters of the 1930s and 1940s who were all sympathetic to the modern movement yet chose to dedicate their time on the airwaves to igniting the 'British historical imagination' (p. 167). Geoffrey Boumphrey, John Betjeman, and John Summerson used travelogues on the radio as 'a type of backdoor activism for architectural preservation' (p. 177). Boumphrey, a now obscure figure, did much to accommodate modern, 20th-century developments into his conciliatory picture of rural Britain readily consumable for suburbanite adventurers (p. 193). Betjeman, probably the most famous of the three and celebrated by the postwar generation as the prince of preservationists, first announced himself to the BBC as a broadcaster willing to speak on historical *and* modern styles.⁽⁷⁾ Summerson too endured a messy and public break-up with modernism in the 1950s, but only after many years of seeking to popularize a quiet and progressive British modernist style.⁽⁸⁾ Focusing on these individuals has the salutary effect of affirming how

incestuous the relationship between traditional preservationist ideals and the pursuit of the modern was in the mid-20th-century (cf. p. 220). Yusaf's readings (and they *are* readings, as she explains, hardly any actual pre-1945 recordings survive and she is mostly working from transcripts, p. 18) of the three sets of broadcasts are sensitive and acute in this chapter. She is clearly 'listening' as close as possible to the words on the page. The book also reproduces sizable chunks of the scripts in question. This allows the reader to follow Yusaf, if we venture to read them aloud. The particular poetry of these radiophonic transmissions recast a politically blunt and unpopular preservationist cause into something cautiously 'populist', when allied (rather than set in opposition) to modern countryside tourism (p. 213).

In the final chapter Yusaf's very generous definition of 'architecture' comes into its own. We move away from discrete buildings to consider how different units of design - the street, the city, and the home - figured in BBC programming. This chapter is again a triumph for the modernists. The radio, itself a machine and symbol of interwar modernity, was particularly suited as a medium for making the case for modern, functionalist design. Mass communication had destabilized a system of cultural production that could codify Englishness in one eternal image: 'That radio consolidated and expressed mass culture forced the definition of culture to be channeled not through iconic works but through the entire built fabric' (p. 248). This amounted to nothing less than the re-definition of art itself. Hopefully, a new and democratized notion of art as expressed via everyday things could neutralize the potency of class struggle (p. 259). The champion of this ideal was Frank Pick, CEO of the London Passenger Transport Board and founder of the Design and Industries Association. Pick's broadcasting endeavors are explored accordingly, connecting up our picture of the activities of Pick and his peers who were spreading their message with missionary zeal through the major organs of British public life in this period.⁽⁹⁾ The chapter concludes with a lucid restatement of John Reith's mission for the BBC: 'To keep democracy from becoming a mob rule, to make it a civilizing and enlightening force, the forces of virtue must colonize public decision making and everyday life' (p. 261). Reith the man is arguably a shadowy figure in Yusaf's study, but the force of his post-Victorian idealism permeates every one of her arguments.

If we accept Yusaf's assertion that the symbolic systems produced by speech-based architectural construction are as culturally legitimate as the built forms themselves, then the period 1927–45 was a period of ascension for British architecture. 'The radiophonic call for architecture as a mass-produced, mass-consumed, all-encompassing, everyday, and authorless commodity was a precursor of the experimental efforts of English architects of the cold war era' (p. 264). In her conclusion, Yusaf grapples with her theoretical commitments and thankfully resists the invitation to collapse what is a very historically situated study into an overly abstract endpoint: '... to conclude that we have reached the end of meaning and the end of human intervention leads us to a kind of nihilism all too familiar in the "radical chic" schools of architecture today ...' (p. 266). This book is playful in the best, scholarly sense. It is also forensically researched and readable for architectural novices. Overall, it probably adds more to our understanding of architecture's public face in the mid-20th-century, than to the historiography of the BBC. The latter is already well-tilled ground, whereas the former is understudied in comparison to how other forms of 'elite' culture were diffused into the 'popular' sphere. Given the impossibly large definition of 'architectural' broadcasting that Yusaf presents, her achievement in marshaling the material into such a focused and convincing argument is masterful. She sets an eminent example for future studies of broadcasting taking a subject-based approach. Indeed, it would be illuminating to see how far her larger claims for the singularity of architecture to broadcast culture in this period stand up against detailed studies of other strands within the 'arts'.

Notes

1. S. J. Potter, *Broadcasting Empire: the BBC and the British World, 1922–1970* (Oxford, 2012); M. Andrews, *Domesticating the Airwaves: Broadcasting, Domesticity and Femininity* (London, 2012). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. A. Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* (volumes 1–5, Oxford, 1961–95). [Back to \(2\)](#)

3. P. Scannell and D. Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting. vol 1, 1922–1939* (Oxford, 1991). [Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford, 1988). [Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. A. Higgott, *Mediating Modernism: Architectural Cultures in Britain* (London, 2007). [Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), p. 461. [Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. *John Betjeman: Letters Volume One: 1926 to 1951*, ed. C. Lycett Green (London, 2006), p. 50. [Back to \(7\)](#)
 8. P. Mandler, 'John Summerson 1904–1992: The architectural critic and the quest for the modern', in *After the Victorians: Private Conscience and Public Duty in Modern Britain*, ed. P. Mandler and S. Pedersen (London, 1994), pp. 229–42. [Back to \(8\)](#)
 9. Cf. M. Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England: Medieval Modernism and the London Underground* (New York, Oxford, 1999). [Back to \(9\)](#)
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