

**SHUNDANA YUSAF (2014) *BROADCASTING
BUILDINGS: ARCHITECTURE ON THE WIRELESS,
1927-1945*. CAMBRIDGE, MASS.: MIT PRESS. ISBN
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In recent years the publication world has witnessed an unprecedented growth of scholarship on sound studies. Starting with Emily Thompson's groundbreaking *Soundscapes of Modernity* and Jonathan Sterne's *The Audible Past*, to mention two milestones in the field, scholars and historians found in sound a new medium through which to interrogate knowledge production in the humanities. Evident in the proliferation of publications and conferences on the subject, with Routledge and Oxford University Press featuring new readers in their catalogues and conferences such as *The Sound of Architecture* at Yale and *Sensing, Seeing, Hearing* at MIT, the sound studies boom found architectural history and theory virtually unprepared. How was architectural scholarship and research to address the oral regime beyond the realm of architectural acoustics and concert hall design?

At the heart of this inability to reframe the discussion in more productive ways lay a question of method. A visually-biased field, architectural history has for decades relied on the visual culture produced around architecture, elevating plans, drawings, and models into primary research resources. This methodological preference has limited the questions one can ask when the discussion concerned the non-visual register at large, and the acoustic realm in particular. So far, anyone interested in architectural history from a sound studies perspective would have to choose between two options: (1) to approach the built environment from the perspective of history of technology and study the evolution of architectural acoustics; or (2) to indulge in a phenomenological discussion of experience and sound. What if, however, we start asking different questions?

Shundana Yusaf's major contribution consists in shifting the discussion away from these two limiting propositions. Her book puts

forward a new model of interrogation, where sound becomes a medium to ask larger historical questions regarding the status of architecture within a changing empire. Echoing Marshall McLuhan's position that placed the electronic age within an operative acoustic realm, she sets out to investigate the impact that the post-typographic orality of the 20th century had on the discipline, especially as related to debates on culture, aesthetics, and nationalism.

Departing from scholarship on media and architecture, Yusaf draws our attention to an often-overlooked medium and the oral universe within which it operates. Without imposing a single narrative, she examines what the function of the radio has been in the history of architecture. For her, the radio, or as she calls it the 'wireless,' held a central position in relation to the question of modernity and its coming of age. Replacing the function of the 'hearth' in modern households, for Yusaf the relatively 'old' medium of radio brought inside the domestic sphere public debates, connecting these interiors with centralized broadcasting institutions. In claiming so, she locates the radio within a longer history of networked publics that mass media such as television and the internet afforded later in the century.

Published by MIT Press, *Broadcasting Buildings: Architecture on the Wireless, 1927-1945* examines the conjunction of architectural discourse and radiophonic culture in the BBC's broadcasting services between 1927, when John Charles Walsam Reith was appointed Director-General, and 1945, when the BBC resumed television programming. Mark Mazower argues that this period saw a gradual transition from empires to an institutional organization of the world (2013). Instrumentalized for its ability to reach a wide public, the BBC exemplifies the changing role that institutions came to play within this new model of world organization. Radio reached out to audiences in their living and dining rooms, producing the public sphere as a bubble, an ever-expanding interiority that allowed for the centralization of the dissemination of information. Yusaf argues that the drive for connectivity that the BBC exemplifies ignited processes of modernization in the United Kingdom. Within these processes, not only was architecture massively consumed as culture, but also played a major role in articulating new visions of nationhood, patrimony, and modernity.

One of the major undertakings of the book is to historicize the emergence of architecture and design as a culture. Her thorough archival research brings forth new material and helps us recontextualize major debates in British architecture. Yusaf's

exploration starts with an examination of how architecture and design were introduced in radio programming. She claims that architects appropriated radio to excite the public's imagination, visually framing their broadcasts with publications such as the *Listener* and *Radio Times*. To respond to a shrinking profession, Yusaf explains, architects instrumentalized the BBC's interest in architectural culture to grow their clientele and create new publics for themselves and their projects.

At the same time, Yusaf contends that the medium's structural characteristics delineated the discourse itself, promulgating the mass consumption of architecture as a discourse and culture. She argues that in engaging with the commercial aspects of radio, these architects moved away from the 'normative space' of 'analytical, distanced, and abstract expression,' to the 'cumulative, participatory [...] idiom' of radio space, transforming the tone of architectural discourse from proclamatory to advisory (49). This shift produced a new role for architects and designers as consultants in the creation of modern households and lifestyles.

Yusaf also suggests that radio was an emerging and novel urban institution that could replace the museum in the production of culture. For her, radio organized the publics of post-typographic orality into centralized informational networks, allowing architects to access an 'expanded public' beyond the interiors of architectural schools, conference halls, museums, and auditoria. With its ubiquitous presence, radio managed to circumvent 'the decorum of traditional cultural institutions' and deliver 'culture' ready for instant consumption (84).

For Yusaf, this new institution moved the discussion away from the 'fine arts,' blurring the hard boundaries that museum and art galleries raised against the 'applied arts.' She claims that the radiophonic space, in reframing 'the built environment as an artist's gesture made not in the museum but in the street' (95), instigated new debates regarding 'aesthetic' and 'ordinary' perception (87). Yusaf notes that architecture provided an important 'gateway,' a medium through which the public could access the 'more esoteric cultural enterprises' (116), previously framed by art institutions. By examining the BBC's programming, she claims that architectural discourse contaminated, in a sense, the applied and decorative arts with abstract thinking, while promoting modernism as 'populist, democratic, and economical' (116).

The BBC's newly found focus on architectural culture partook in, what Yusaf names, the 'politics of broadcasting' and the 'broadcasting of politics.' She explains that the BBC utilized architecture to debate politics through culture. She describes the BBC's listening groups and their pedagogical prerogative as representative of the larger effort to reform the public. By articulating 'culture' as a field of interrogation standing outside the contentious space of politics, the BBC utilized its cultural programming to put forward debates that were often political in nature (165). Modeled after the discourse promulgated by the 'educated classes' (161), a certain intellectualism took over the BBC's cultural programming, with architects, broadcasters, and designers promoting through design 'the politics of a class that resisted a world divided into classes' (164). Within this context, architecture acquired a particular role, with debates such as the one touching on 'cottages and flats' framing larger questions regarding the impact that modernity was having on the built environment and the organization of life.

One of the major debates to reflect the state of the empire at the beginning of the twentieth century was the discussion on the vernacular. Yusaf interrogates the triumphant return to orality as a knowledge production modality, with the BBC's appropriation of the travelogue as a medium for debates on heritage and national identity. She explains that the travelogue drew the attention of a wide range of experts, introducing architecture and the built environment as topics relevant to parliamentary debate. Ultimately, this move introduced architectural heritage to the wider public as a matter of mass consumption. Looking closely at the broadcasts produced by Geoffrey Maxwell Boumphrey (*Along the Roman Roads*), Sir John Betjeman (*Town Tours*), and Sir John Summerson (*Famous Midland Houses* and *Ruins and the Future*), she explains how the BBC appropriated contemporary architectural debates to address major national debates on preservation and development (31). Employing broadcasting as a medium to agitate the public's imagination, the BBC managed to turn the built environment into a lens through which new ideals of citizenship, national identity, aesthetics, and modernity were constructed (215).

The author concludes her book with a closer examination of the popularization of design and the BBC's consolidation of a 'middle-of-the-road, consumer oriented modernism' (215). By discussing the role of Frank Pick, president of the Design and Industries Association, she argues that design was moved to the realm of mass production and consumption (225). For Yusaf, Pick was just a voice to soon be

joined by Holbrook Jackson, and others who saw in design culture the possibility to establish a solid bond with the Arts and Crafts tradition, reclaiming it as a vital component of British national identity. To this end, Maxwell Fry's intervention was critical. He addressed planning and the function of a city in the service of humanity, redirecting the discussion on the city beyond the blind criticism over the urban environment as 'dull' and 'mechanic' and away from the debate on garden cities. Yusaf claims that Fry's attempt concluded with Boumphrey's unsentimental approach to housing and his promotion of the modern household as the only viable solution for life in the twentieth century. According to her, these broadcasts produced a new national idea, since they aspired to create 'a community intersubjectively connected by taste, manners, and knowledge' (219).

Yusaf's enterprise to open the discussion on the role of radio as a medium that shaped architectural discourse and production is thoughtful and provocative. Her thorough archival research undermines the latent understanding of modernism as a univocal movement with common objectives, bringing forth debates on heritage, politics, and mass consumption. However, at times in the book multiple narratives collapse, leaving the reader at a loss for a coherent thread that would allow us to situate all the characters within a deeper history of architecture. Even though Yusaf masterfully manages the wealth of archival findings, the book would have benefited from a stronger disciplinary positioning. The variety of materials and stories would have better served the book if they had been assembled within a clearer structure, alluding and exploiting connections with the canon, and thus profoundly unsettling our reliance on it.

At the same time that Yusaf posits architecture and design to be the main foci of the book, she also alludes to McLuhan's argument on the environmental condition of media, ultimately suggesting that radio not only produced a new public for architecture but also transformed the discourses and practices surrounding it. She contends that the wireless opened modernity to the imaginary, since it radically disassociated images from concepts. However, after establishing the importance of the oral modality in conditioning architectural practices and discourses, she doesn't fully exploit the opportunity to tell her readers how. And maybe for good reasons, since Yusaf seems to astutely avoid establishing a master narrative of any kind.

References

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