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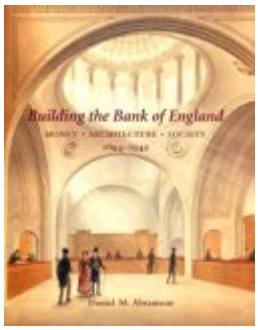
Daniel M. Abramson. *Building the Bank of England: Money, Architecture, Society, 1694-1942.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005. x + 282 pp. $95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-10924-5.



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Cathedrals aside, it remains somewhat unusual in writing the architectural history of Britain to devote an entire and substantial monograph to a single building work. Yet the analogy between the Bank of England and a cathedral of the standing of, say, Canterbury, may not be entirely irrelevant. Both are institutions as well as buildings; the name of each applies eponymously to a complex of buildings rather than to a single edifice. Both serve myriad functions, perform symbolic as well as practical roles, and perform those roles for the nation as well as the neighborhood. Both have continually had to balance the goals of closed oligarchic governance with the broader public interest. And both have had to evolve architecturally over time to reflect the changing functional and symbolic requirements of their respective value systems, whether of capitalism or Christianity.

And, like most ancient cathedrals, the Bank of England evolved from simple concerns and humble quarters to something entirely more complex and physically grand. Beginning with the vision of a handful of London merchants seeking a better means of raising funds to finance the nation's wars, and first located in rented space in a livery company hall, the Bank became by the turn of the nineteenth century a national institution spread over several acres of prime London real estate, responsible more than any other single institution for funding the fiscal-military state which Britain had become.

There are three stories here: that of the Bank as an evolving and national fiscal institution, the Bank as an architectural project, and the Bank as the major life's work of its most substantial architect, John Soane, all of them appropriately placed within the social and economic realities of their time. In the work at hand, Daniel Abramson adroitly keeps these strands as distinct as need be in order, fully and brilliantly, to articulate the unfolding relationship amongst them.

To the conventional institutional history of the Bank as described in Sir John Clapham's seminal work, *The Bank of England* (1944), Abramson adds the social and political context of its evolution, enriching his story especially with themes of national identity, public trust, and the fiscal requirements of warfare. In effect, this strand of the

whole offers something of a national history of Britain from the fiscal perspective, especially over the long eighteenth century. We learn how the Bank underwrote the costs of war abroad while maintaining national fiscal stability at home. But we also come to appreciate how the Bank's directors delicately and successfully balanced their private interest with the public good so as to make it a trusted institution at all levels of society: no small feat.

But of course this is principally an architectural history, and it is in the evolving design of the building as well as in its policies that this delicate balancing act may best be observed. The Bank evolved physically in four stages beyond its early years in rented quarters: its first dedicated home as designed by George Sampson from 1734; its expansion under the architectural direction of Robert Taylor (1764-88); what may still be seen as its apotheosis as directed by John Soane (1788-1833); and, after a period of stagnation, its re-construction to accommodate twentieth century technology by Sir Herbert Baker (1921-42).

Abramson's treatments of all four architects are thorough, finely nuanced and well informed. His more balanced view of Baker's achievement, so baldly scorned during his lifetime by Niklaus Pevsner and other critics, breaks important new ground in using archival material hitherto unavailable. But his treatment of Soane, in three substantial chapters which form something of a book within a book, is the most sustained and important discussion of all. The central place of his forty-five years with the Bank in Soane's career, and the dramatic growth of the Bank's premises under Soane's command, amply justify that attention, and Abramson's zeal for the subject comes easily to the fore in the telling.

Soane not only enjoyed a very long tenure as the Bank's architect, but he did so with the very free hand extended to him by the Bank's directors. That freedom to create was highly appropriate to a project which proceeded without any obvious architectural models. It allowed Soane all the latitude he needed to work out his own solutions to the Bank's physical and symbolic requirements. He responded with a picturesque, creative, and often controversial adaptation of classical forms to contemporary needs. That free hand also permitted him to reflect architecturally the conflicting realities of an aristocratic and private institution seeking to attract broad popular support in the public interest. Mainstream architectural opinion of the day may have considered Soane's solution as "barbarous," but the directors never wavered in their support, and the magnitude of his achievement cannot be denied.

Brilliant and exceptional as Abramson's own achievement may be in weaving this together, the varieties of current discourse in the field make it inevitable that some will see an over emphasis or neglect of particular interpretations and approaches. Those interested in building history, for example, may be disappointed that so little consideration has been given to the role of the master builders with whom Sampson, Taylor, Baker, and especially Soane worked. Recent works, e.g. by James Ayres in particular, might well have been considered here for its emphasis on the considerable influence which such men had in bringing the intended design from the architect's studio to the building site.[1] And those more theoretically inclined will perhaps see a missed opportunity for further exploring the semiotics of space, and the application of critical theory to the task. But most will appreciate that, in its holistic approach to the subject, its breadth and clarity of understanding, and its confident, authoritative handling of such a sweeping subject, Abramson has made a truly exemplary contribution to the field.

Note

[1]. James Ayres, ***Building the Georgian City*** (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

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