

LITERALLY AN INSTITUTION

by Johnny Rodger

The brief is to design a Literary Institute. But what should such an institute be? Are there any extant examples of such a building?

Since time immemorial the book has occupied a central place in our culture. It is not, however, simply the book as an object that is enshrined there, not the actual printed or otherwise written words in it, not solely its interpreted meaning, nor even just the reading or performance of the text, that have that special place, but rather all those things together as a special social relation and an understanding of how the word is approached and received. This approach and reception of the word is a spatial notion in itself, and historically it has been worked out in the religious sphere. To Islamic believers the followers of that faith, and of the other Abrahamic religions, Christianity and Judaism, are known collectively as 'People of the Book'. In mosques, churches and synagogues, we see an architectonic codification of approach to the uttering and interpretation of the 'word of god' in terms of minarets, bell-towers, iwā, open halls, aisles, naves, altars, sanctuary, mihrab, minbar, ark, bimah and so on, and of reception of that word in terms of ceiling-heights, seating arrangements, lighting, fonts, rostra, pulpits etc.

There is thus a fundamental relationship to one book, or set of books, and its word, in religion. In modern secular society, however, while literature and books (and electronic versions thereof) are still held to be the repository of all knowledge, wisdom and learning, no one particular text or its word is universally privileged across society. Indeed the modern age seems to have difficulty conceiving of a defined boundary to its notion of literature and a valid word, and of how to approach and receive it. Unlike the canonical texts and their relationship to God, which we find in the world of religion, there is no real convention in modern secular society which allows for stable and permanent agreement on the question of what sort of writings can be called authentic 'literature'. This dilemma, if it be that, was perhaps best summed up by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who sees literature as that institution where everything can be said, and which thus questions the very possibility of institution. And this indefiniteness of the category literature even permeates, as Derrida discusses in his essay on Kafka's 'Before the Law', the individual work in terms of its external boundaries, its uniqueness, its authorship. To bring this precariousness of literary definition into view, we need not even invoke here difficult analytical concepts like Barthes' 'death of the author' and the idea that each reader remakes the work themselves, for the contemplation of a simple question -whether the title of a literary work is itself an integral part of that work?- will suffice.

The above may or may not constitute a modern literary dilemma, but for the architect of a prospective institute to house the events and activities of this human endeavour which questions the very possibility of institution, then the design difficulties are manifest. How can you build an institute for an activity which is continuously dismantling and remaking its own constitution, and terminally uncertain about its own forms, boundaries and content? The modern architect would generally approach the design of a building by formulating an architectural programme, which would outline user requirement, social settings, and facilitation of its functions. But for the case of literature this seems nigh impossible. Neither would there be much possibility of approaching selected users and seeking to find consensus on their needs. Imagine, if you would, that we were somehow able to ask a random selection of writers from the past: would



Café Sperl, Vienna.

we find that, say, Antonin Artaud, Enid Blyton, Jack Kerouack, Virginia Woolf, Berthold Brecht, James Joyce, Alice Walker and James Kelman could all agree on the purpose, extent and requirements for a housing of literary activity? And would any set of readers even agree that all of these individuals were 'real' writers, or that their work truly belonged to the category 'literature'?

It is evident that to proceed by attempting a straightforward projection of possible uses of the building would undoubtedly lead to a confusing impasse. For sure, there are a host of ancillary activities which could oil the wheels (-to employ a hackneyed old metaphor and one we ought to never hear in the institute itself!-) of literary activity. Spaces could thus be conceived to cater for quiet study; a place for arguing and promoting campaigns and manifestoes; a place where legal, contractual, and copyright information and advice can be obtained; a place to meet with a few colleagues and friends for discussion or for help; a café or a bar to relieve the feeling of isolation; a place to isolate oneself from distractions; a library; a computer room; access to stationary, photocopying, and so on. None of these activities are, however, strictly related to the core activity of writing and of delivering the final literary work to the readership. Is it simply the case for the latter of providing an auditorium or public lecture

hall? –Again not all writers would agree. The great Italian poet Leopardi, for example, famously wrote of the public reading as a ‘scourge, a public calamity, and one more affliction for mankind in general’. Architects might well have more experience of ‘public calamity’ than writers, but their real stock in trade should lie precisely in managing the move from private to public and back again without afflicting anybody. That’s why they should be aware that the types of space we can discover in literature itself as used for literary composition go far beyond the desk and chair, and have varied enormously through history, across cultures, and depending on personal inclination, from the Stoa of Ancient Greece –a type of covered market walkway, where philosophers and writers held forth and argued in public–, to the habits of the Gaelic poets of Scotland, who were supposed to compose poetry while lying alone on a beach with a flat stone on their chest under an upturned rowing boat, to the rhythmic walking of Wordsworth, and the static full height stance of Ernest Hemingway at his library.

It seems then, that the only way forward would be to examine the myriad forms and spaces which have in history provided congenial and or necessary environments for the furtherance of literature. That’s not to say that we are going to define a typology, or carry out a full-blown precedent study, for none of these places examined below were purpose designed for literary activity, but rather the activity evolved and adapted, and grew in given places and contexts: social, political, artistic and architectural. And the type of places examined here below –the Literary Salon, the Coffeehouse, the Viennese Café, the Poets’ Pub, the Writer’s Retreat/Creative Writing Centre, the Society of Authors, the Poetry Library and so on, have each catered for only some of the historical literary possibilities and actualities.

The literary salon first appeared in Italy in the 16th century but is especially known to have flourished in France from the 17th to the 19th century. Salon basically means a large lounge or comfortable room where people could relax have conversations, readings could be held, and debates and discussions would take place. The most famous salons were held in the residences of well-to-do people in the centre of Paris like that of the Marquise de Rambouillet, but they also existed across the provinces. Balzac describes these in his novels set in 19th century France, especially in *Illusions Perdues*. Some writers like Alexander Broadie see this type of gathering as important in developing the Enlightenment through concept of the Republic of Letters, which is a loose community of scholars and writers stretching through different cultures and nations communicating through idea and literary argument. The German philosopher Jurgen Habermas has also written of the historical importance of the salon and other places of literary gathering in developing civil society, or a ‘public sphere’ which widened political debate and participation from the centralised power structures of European monarchies. The prominent role of some women in literary salons is notable where they were otherwise not involved in public life. This limited social liberation of women is seen again in the tearooms of the very paternalistic 19th century industrial Glasgow.

From the late seventeenth century the Coffeehouse took off as a place for meeting and discussion in London. It became notorious in the late 18th century as a meeting place for poets, writers, and dramatists. The famous debates and bon mots of the playwright Garrick and lexicographer Dr Johnson in London coffeehouses were recorded by their friend Boswell in his biography *Life of Johnson*.

The Viennese Café developed at around the same time as the London coffeehouse. It is said that the fashion for drinking coffee had arrived with the Turkish invasion in the late 17th century. The Viennese Café is however

associated with a much more epicurean range of coffees, specialised cakes and other small food dishes than the more basic London coffeehouse. In Vienna various different cafes have also been associated with styles of interior design of differing eras (e.g. Michael Thonet chairs and Secessionist style furniture) and with political movements. Cafés are also associated very much with the late 19th and early 20th century Viennese Enlightenment, when writers and artists such as Freud, Musil, Klimt, Hoffman, Kokoschka lived there, and Karl Kraus’s journal *Die Fackel* was said to have been composed and drawn up in cafes.

In the twentieth century a phenomenon latterly known as the Poet’s Pub developed in urban Scotland. Poets and writers began to form loose societies, alliances, manifestoes around public houses where they gather discuss, read and promote their works. In Edinburgh from the 1940s-70s such groupings were found in the pubs of Rose Street in Edinburgh, where the poet Hugh MacDiarmid held court. In Glasgow in the 80s and 90s, writers such as James Kelman, Alasdair Gray, and Tom Leonard gathered in pubs around the Briggait, e.g. the Scotia Bar. Such Glasgow writers held readings, discussed tactics, organised political demonstrations, and so on, from these pubs. It was important for them that the pub was an open, public, egalitarian and working class space, from which they could organise political campaigns, start open discussions of policies and actions by the city authorities, and publicise alternative and popular viewpoints on civic issues. Such groups as the Workers City, and the Free University - campaigning groups on political questions, and on issues regarding right to the city (e.g. campaigning against the privatisation of Glasgow Green) –were founded in these pubs.

One other type of place which has been associated with the furthering of literary endeavour is concerned with those ancillary activities mentioned above. This type of place, such as the Society of Authors, the Poetry Library, and the Creative Writing Centre, provides specific services for writers, be it legal and copyright advice, bibliographic and lending services, classes in writing, or just a quiet space to get on with work. The architect of a prospective Literary Institution should study all the spaces and places described here above, how they operate, how they have been exploited and what have been their effects. Of course it must be remembered that the ways of achieving, approaching, receiving and deploying literature are infinite and unpredictable. Something can be learned from the past about leaving the institute open to a multitude of different hostings, performances, effects and engagements. But in the meantime, there are some obvious aspects –in terms of gender, social, demographic and ethnic qualities– of those historical spaces to which attention must be given immediately. One can’t help but notice that, with only a few exceptions, the users of these historical spaces, the ‘people of the secular book’, were white, middle-aged, and male; perhaps that is the real public calamity, the real historical affliction of mankind in general: and that’s where the designer should start to question the possibilities for this forward-looking institution.

1. Jacques Derrida (1992), *Acts of Literature*, (ed. D. Attridge) Routledge, N.Y., p.58. Ibid. pp181-220.
2. Roland Barthes (1978), *Image Music Text*, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, (trans. S Heath).
3. Giacomo Leopardi (2002), *Thoughts*, Hesperus Press, London, (trans. JG Nichols), p17.
4. Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair (1996), *Selected Poems* (ed. Derick. S Thomson), Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, p.16.
5. Alexander Broadie, (2001), *The Scottish Enlightenment*, Birlinn, Edinburgh, pp14-20, 24.
6. Jurgen Habermas (1989), *The Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. (trans. Thomas Burger).
7. Farquhar McLay (1991) *Workers City*, Clydeside Press 1987; Farquhar McLay (ed.), *The Reckoning*, Clydeside Press.