

Sir John Soane and London

Ptolemy Dean, Lund Humphries £40.00 hb 248 pp



Reviewed by Brian Waters who is presently working on the restoration in a new use of Soane's Holy Trinity, Marylebone Road (Grade 1) (and is editor of *PiL*).

An understanding of John Soane's work tends to relate to his country houses and a few public buildings – the Bank of England, which does not survive, and the Dulwich Picture Gallery and his house and museum in Lincoln's In Fields, which do.

Little known before this publication was the number – over 400 – and range of his work in London. Even less, his mode of operation, acting often as an estate agent to solicit town houses for his clients, in the hope of being commissioned to extend or adapt them. And the productivity of his six-man office with its prolific and consistent output, especially through his later years when most of the London work was carried out.

The book is organised as the same author's *SJS* and the *Country House* (Ashgate 1999): it starts with a discussion of *SJS*'s London practice and follows with eight case studies helpfully photographed by Martin Charles. Watercolour drawings of Soane's interiors in the author's lively style support the text (10 Downing Street's eating room, below). Finally and importantly there is an up to date illustrated *Gazetteer* of Soane's known London projects.

The case studies quote Soane's fees, building costs and list the craft subcontractors who did the work. One of many insights is Soane's attitude to competitive tendering which was demanded for his public works which included the Law Courts, Whitehall, extensions to 10 and 11 Downing Street and three Commissioners' churches. Soane warned on the Board of Works' tender planned for St Peter's, Walworth: "My experience and

knowledge of the risk and hazard attending this method of erecting buildings convinces me that it is a false system of economy, which although it appears to save, and does save present cost, is the certain means of entailing frequent and ineffectual reparations."

Dean observes that the key to his efficiency was "the use of skilled contractors who were familiar with Soane's way of detailing and who could proceed with the minimum amount of drawn information. Soane was passionate about the need to employ trusted tradesmen as a means of providing a consistent quality for an agreed price. The loyalty of Soane's tradesmen spanned decades." This we call 'partnering' today!

Although much influenced by his youthful 'Grand Tour', Soane had little time for contextualisation. In his scheme for Westminster Hall there was "little new facade at all, although Soane was keen to point out that this was the result of saving money rather than any sentimental

attachment to the past".

The emphasis of his work was in his interiors with recurring themes in his use of space and light and in his detailing (he would have made good use of CAD). As Dean notes: "of all Soane's London extensions, the most memorable remain those most constrained by tight financial budgets. Soane became the master of brick... his language was perfected in London". (Soane was the son of a bricklayer).

Many of the perceptions of Soane's practice as drawn out by Dean's research will resonate with today's architects. None more than with his frustrations. Summerson is quoted regarding Soane's constant remodelling of his house, office and now museum up to his death in 1837 and its bequest to the nation as: "the only possible way of salvaging his hoarded cargo from the shipwrecked dream."

Ptolemy Dean salvages a lot more of special interest to London. It is a good read and an invaluable work of reference.



Most books reviewed on these pages may be purchased online from:

**riba
book
shops.
com**