

Signature Effects: John Soane and The Mark of Genius

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But let the sacred Genius of the night
Such mystic visions send, as Spenser saw,
When thro' bewildering Fancy's magic maze,
To the bright regions of the fairy world
Soar'd his creative mind.

Thomas Warton, *The Pleasures of Melancholy* (1747)

We have now conducted the reader, step by step, through the apartments on these two floors, appropriated to the reception of works of art, and may safely assert that no where within a similar extent does there exist such a succession of varied and beautiful scenery, so many striking points of view, so many fascinating combinations and contrasts — so much originality, invention, contrivance, convenience, and taste.

John Britton, *The Union of Architecture, Sculpture and Painting* (1827)

Today, the question of 'genius', in architectural discourse, is, perhaps, associated more with the sciences, with what John Maeda has referred to as "creative code" (2004). However, the persistence of an interest in 'signature effects' among contemporary architects, like Frank Gehry, Peter Eisenman and Greg Lynn, suggests older notions of genius persist. Artistic genius has typically been associated with the Romantic period, when, as a means to theorize the role of the author and the process of creation, the concept became legitimate within the discourses of art and architecture. Its arrival signalled a moment in which design was no longer seen as a process of mimesis — the recombination of pre-existing material — but rather as an individual act of invention. Architecture, in the Romantic period, elaborated a complex definition of genius, tying innovation to its own version of form-finding; to aesthetic theories steeped in atmospherics, mood and effects; to politics, the politics of aesthetic and cultural discourse and the politics of the nation-state. All these concerns can be seen mobilized in the work of that quintessential romantic architect, John Soane. This essay will explore late eighteenth and early nineteenth century aspects of genius, through the motives and motifs at play in Soane's work, focusing largely on the most idiosyncratic of his projects, his own house at 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Soane's house-museum was formally bequeathed to the British nation in 1833 and preserved by an act of parliament on Soane's death in 1837. Work on the house and three adjacent lots began in 1792 and spanned the rest of his life, con-

tinuing from developments at his country house in Ealing, Pitzhanger Manor.¹ Lincoln's Inn Fields was a hybrid in many ways. Nested into the functioning domestic spaces of a cultivated urbanite was an architectural office (in latter years a studio training apprentices); a museum, a room-scaled model case; an archive of drawings and folios; an extensive professional and scholarly library; an art gallery which transformed the walls into cabinets, interleaving the paintings in layers to maximize hang space; and a sequence of themed spaces, largely "gothick" in character and loaded with moody special effects. Special effects, indeed, were mobilized throughout the house in complex spatial interpenetrations; in soaring triple height domes and fissures; in mirrored complexities and gleams; in colorized or gloomy atmospheres. These effects, picturesque and sublime in their aesthetic leanings, but also owing allegiance to popular spectacles in London at the time, were part of the panoply of techniques — and, indeed, technologies² — deployed by Soane to exhibit his 'genius' as architect and choreographer of space. These techniques can also be found in Soane's other projects, notably in the domed spaces of the Bank of England's public offices, and his mysterious Freemason's Hall. But it is in the house that they are most intensely engaged.

Showing Off:

Soane was no less aware of the economic value of signature effects than today's architects are. He was more than willing to mobilize his own houses as highly successful publicity machines, as others - like the Adams brothers and Thomas Hope - had done before him, demonstrating, to students, peers, critics and potential clients alike, his 'genius' as a tag of marketability. The many visits, tours and parties conducted at both residences were intended to reveal, to influential clients and friends, Soane's architectural skills, to demonstrate his genius, originality and taste, as well as his ability to keep up with fashions. From the *Gothic scenes and intellectual banquets* at Pitzhanger, to the major public spectacles staged at No. 13 in 1825,³ to the design of the spaces themselves, signature effects were constantly used as marketing devices.

'Effect', and its corollary, 'affect', were frequently used terms during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. 'Effect' was the mark of production, it was the mark of the 'hand', the trace of artifice, of fabrication. 'Effect' was also the ability of an artwork to produce an impression on the mind, to produce 'affect'. In Soane's house, eighteenth century aesthetic theories were combined with a baroque theatricality adapted from Piranesi. Soane stage-managed a raft of technological possibilities to produce light and shade, scenography and setting, negotiating tensions between horizontal and vertical, as well as complex spatial manipulations of formal elements, to create a whole range of expressive effects. These effects — the production of a certain image, a staging, an atmosphere, certain qualities of light and shade, and so on — culminated, in the words of his friend, well-known archaeologist, John Britton, in a space designed for "spectacle and display" (Britton, 1827: 44); a theatre of effects designed to highlight and showcase his talent.

The latter is significant here. Showcasing talent, that is, creativity, invention, style, design skill, was a controversial aim in the early nineteenth century. To privilege talent in this way was to mobilize a debate that moved the production of a work

1 For a more complete history of Soane's building and collecting activities, see Thornton & Dorey (1992); Stroud (1996); Feinberg Millenson (1984 & 1987).

2 No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields was an early house to be fully plumbed and have a central heating system.

3 The house was opened three successive Saturday evenings to some 900 invited guests to celebrate the acquisition of an Egyptian sarcophagus. This was also an opportunity to show off the house, which the deployment of theatrical lighting, to interior and exterior, aided. For more on this event, see Furján (2002).



Photographs by Michael Shepherd

4 Soane Museum Archive, 7/10/8, 2.

5 For more on the attacks on Soane's style see Schumann-Bacia (1991).

6 Such a resistance to imitation could already be seen in the French querelle over the same issue of imitation (the ancients) versus invention (the moderns). See Perrault (1993).

7 It is also worth noting that part of Soane's re-evaluation of classicism was due to the influence of the picturesque and of romanticism; both had forced a reevaluation of the accepted taste of the classical style.

of art away from a mimetic act to a highly individualized act of creation, taken to its extreme in Romantic theory under the concept of genius. Soane's house, as showcase, parallels the work of artists such as his friend, J. M. W. Turner, who overturned dominant classical notions of self-effacement, leaving the traces of his 'hand', and his brush or palette knife, clearly legible. Turner's abstractions made explicit the difference between "natural effect and the imaginative reality of art" (Gowing, 1966: 31). He was not content to have his work subsumed under the blanket of good taste, judged on how well it imitated nature or remained faithful to the existing rules of the genre. Rather, he believed in the importance of creative genius, an innate ability which he saw as unique and unfathomable. Like Soane, he also saw himself located in a genealogy of great artists whom he frequently invoked in his paintings or their captions.

The mark of the hand, the idiosyncratic detail or technique, indicated the ambitious subject behind it: creator, inventor. In Soane's house, then, the role of imagination was crucial. The theatrical nature of the rooms, as scenes and evocative settings, demonstrated the range and power of his imaginative faculties. Britton noted this, and thus confirmed Soane's stature, in a text he gave to Soane as a Christmas gift in 1824, on the completion of a suite of rooms in the basement, fictionally inhabited by Soane as the monk 'Padre Giovanni'. "The Sinners [sic] offering at the Shrine of St. John of Soania", professed his admiration for the "most potent, grave and reverend St. John" and paid homage to "the miraculous powers and potencies of that revered Saint, which I had chosen for my father and mediator".⁴

In Soane's style, as in Turner's, the emphasis on individuality worked against the grain of established tradition, by refusing a servile imitation of Classicism, and insisting on the indelible mark of his own hand, his own particular genius.⁵ Such inventiveness, a continual re-reading and re-invention of classical rules, was considered to be an example of bad taste (i.e. 'improper'), because it broke the accepted rules of classical architecture.⁶ Sir Joshua Reynolds, and other stalwarts, considered marks of authorship defects, and architectural theorists largely continued to assert that Classicism involved the emulation of Antique models and accepted conventions, not invention. In effect, architectural practice was to protect a status quo — an architect was to work within a tradition and pass on its rules to the future. In contrast, Soane's interest in an identifiable style, one that could point directly to its singular author, promoted an interpretive, inventive and highly individual approach to the traditions of architecture.⁷



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Poetic Genius:

John Summerson, noted architectural historian and theorist, and curator of the Soane Museum from 1945-1984, was most probably the first to refer to “the Soane style” which he regarded as highly distinctive and idiosyncratic:

⁸ See Teyssot (1978: 62).

In 1792, when it arrives suddenly at maturity, there was not, anywhere in Europe, an architecture as unconstrained by loyalties, as free in the handling of proportion and as adventurous in structure and lighting as that which Soane introduced at the Bank of England in that year (Summerson, 1983: 9).

Summerson notes that much of that style had been formed under the influence of George Dance, and that Soane developed his own signature version by adding, “a novel handling of proportion, a highly personal mode of decorative emphasis and a tendency to arrive at solutions by unlimited, often bizarre, distortions of old themes” (Summerson, 1983: 9). These traits included pendentive domes with lanterns, often dilating in diameter to all but swallow the springing arches, semi-circular arches screening hidden light sources, double height tribune spaces, coloured skylights, and complex sectional interpenetrations. For instance, the complexities of sculpted space for which Soane has become famous, demonstrate, not an affiliation to style as genre — the following of precedent — but to space, conceived as an abstraction of solids and voids, as a site for morphological experimentation.

Georges Teyssot argues that, for eighteenth century architects, abandoning the rules of classical architecture meant not a freedom *from* technique but a freedom *for* technique.⁸ Likewise, writing of the sectional relationship between the gothic parlour and picture room above it at No. 13, John Britton already pointed out that, “it would be utterly impossible to convey by a drawing, however well executed, any adequate idea of the singular effect thus produced” (Britton, 1827: 41). He remarks on the originality and skill evidenced:

We perceive what beautiful and novel effects may be attained by ingenious and tasteful contrivance — what rich and picturesque architectural scenery may be created within the most confined space ... After witnessing what has been accomplished here, let no architect complain that private residences afford little scope for the display of originality

9 On the topic of the abstraction of styles to effects, see Summerson (1983: 14); and Teyssot (1978: 67).

10 “Far above, and on every side, were concentrated the most precious relics of Architecture and Sculpture, disposed so happily as to offer the charm of novelty, the beauty of picturesque design, and the sublimity resulting from a sense of veneration due to the genius and the labours of the ‘mighty dead.’” Hofland, B. In Soane, (1835/36: 37).

11 For more on this topic, see Furján 1997.

and fancy, or that striking effects cannot be produced on a small scale, or that picturesque beauty cannot be obtained, except at the expense of convenience (Britton, 1827: 28-29).

“Singular effect” is critical. In defence of Soane’s originality, Britton acknowledged that some critics may have been of the opinion that, “he has occasionally allowed himself too much license”, but retorted that there was no reason “why architecture, which is purely an art of invention, should be more fettered or restricted in this respect than any other” (Britton, 1827: 9). This was a reference to a commonly held opinion that painting, since it represented, was an art of imitation; sculpture was part imitation, part invention, as it isolated bodies from settings, stripped colour and was often paired with architecture; architecture and music, being the most abstracted from nature, were non-representational, and hence inventive arts. However, Britton did caution against novelty for novelty’s sake and stressed that innovation required, “consummate judgment and the most refined taste” and could in itself be seen as “the touchstone of an architect’s ability; for it is exceedingly difficult to hit upon the due medium between servility and timidity on the one hand, or caprice and rashness on the other” (Britton, 1827: 9).

Soane was against the “monotony and tame repetition” (Soane, 1996: 605) of the prevailing neoclassical design method, as a blind copying of historical precedent, and he developed instead a method of invention that abstracted and preserved the *effects* of such styles.⁹ Singularity was the product of an experimental technique derived from Dance and the work of visionaries Soane admired - Étienne-Louis Boullée, Nicholas Ledoux, J-B Piranesi. It could also be found in the cult of novelty that took hold of theorists of the picturesque, as it appeared in the continuous references to novel effects made by Barbara Hofland in her commentaries for Soane’s privately printed descriptions of his house, or in Britton’s earlier *Union of Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting*.¹⁰ In theories of the sublime and the picturesque, architecture turned into a theatre for special effects, characterised by the play of mass and void, of form, and of light, shade and atmosphere. For Britton, Soane’s house, especially the museum with its crypt and monkish apartments, aligned architecture with poetry: “We perceive here not merely the imaginative architect, but the poet, and are at a loss which most to admire, the originality or the beauty, the mystery or the intricacy of the conception” (Britton, 1827: 6).

In his 1830 *Description*, Soane himself noted an emphasis on the conjuring of “an almost infinite succession of those *fanciful effects* which constitute the poetry of Architecture”, notably through the use of picturesque devices (Soane, 1830: 2).¹¹ Like many eighteenth century theorists of taste, aesthetics, or association, Soane, when referring to poetics, used ‘fancy’ and ‘fanciful’ interchangeably with ‘imagination’. It wasn’t until Coleridge wrote his *Biographia Literaria* in the early nineteenth century that fancy and imagination were distinguished from each other. Drawing on Aristotle, Coleridge linked “the associating power” to memory and fancy, and kept them both distinct from reason and imagination (Coleridge, 1817: Vol. I, 104-05). In his theory, fancy was characterized by finitude, remaining inseparably linked to the store of impressions, memories and ideas of the perceiving subject’s sum of experiences (Coleridge, 1817: Vol. I, 296). In contrast, imagination was limitless; imagination was novelty and invention where

fancy was mimesis, always beholden to the re-assemblage of precedent. For Coleridge, imagination, “that syncretic and magical power”, is clearly the privileged faculty in the cultivation of artistic genius: “Good sense is the body of poetic genius, fancy its drapery, motion its life, and imagination the soul that is everywhere and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole” (Coleridge, 1817: Vol II, 11-12).

12 Letter from Isaac D’Israeli to Soane, 14 August 1836, in Bolton (1927: 529).

13 Hazlitt is quoted from his essay *On Poetry in General*.

In strikingly similar terms, Soane set out the combination of faculties necessary for the production of great architecture: “rich fancy *and* bold imagination; flights of powerful mind and magical genius” (Soane, 1966: 619, *emph. added*). Soane made explicit use of poetics in his architectural work, and evoked the term ‘poetry’ for its romantic and theatrical implications and associations. “Like Poetry, [architecture] presents a succession of varied pictures” (Soane, quoted in Bolton 1927: 100). Recognizing these aims, Isaac D’Israeli was to describe the museum as a “built poem”.¹² Thus, the “poetry of architecture” is, in Soane’s understanding, a combination of novelty, the picturesque, the sublime and poetic association. However, it is also evidence of that elusive quality, genius. Soane wrote of his paper projects — his “architectural visions” — that they were the “wild effusions of a mind glowing with an ardent and enthusiastic desire to attain professional distinction” (Bolton, 1927: 18).

In 1818 William Hazlitt wrote of the representation of objects distorted by the poetic imagination, thus immediately evoking the distortions of the convex mirror; that beloved of picturesque tourists (the Claude Glass), as well as the many that line the interiors of Soane’s house (see Furján, 1997). Combining the mirror with the lamp, he further complemented the mimetic faculty with a reasoning and “emotional light”, in order to show that the artistic work is mediated, the product of the object and its contemplation, the work of the mind’s reflection (quoted in Abrams, 1971: 52-54).¹³ In this analogy, Hazlitt brought together the two modes of composition that formed the basis of a romantic neo-Classicism like Soane’s - the mirror of contemplation and mimesis, together with the emanating light of individual genius. The figure of the lamp, in Hazlitt’s evocation, originates in notions of God and the human spirit figured as a flame (typically burning in the darkness of evil and disbelief). This romantic re-figuration follows directly from the Enlightenment conception of knowledge understood literally as enlightening, as the bright light of illumination that renders things clear and visible; except that here, it is the light of imagination, of creation, not of nature and reason.

Styling a Nation, Nationalizing a Style:

John Gwynn, in *London and Westminster Improved*, described the question of “Public Magnificence” in architecture as “a national concern” for honouring the country’s distinction and its people’s genius, along with its culture’s refinement of taste and manners (Gwynn, 1766: 1-2). Soane, in one of his Royal Academy Lectures, linked magnificence to “national taste” and “national glory” through the notion of “character”, essentially a representational aspect of architecture, one he admitted is malleable:



Photograph by Helene Furján

14 The reference to character here is significant, an important element of neoclassical architectural theory, most notably theorized by Quatremère de Quincy. For more on this, see di Palma (2002).

15 See Colley (1992).

16 See Pagden (1995).

17 For more information on these projects see Richardson & Stevens (1999).

18 For detail on these conflicts, see Darley (1999).

Notwithstanding all that has been urged to the contrary, be assured my young friends, that architecture in the hands of men of genius may be made to assume whatever character is required of it. ... Without distinctness of character, buildings may be convenient and answer the purposes for which they are raised, but they will never be pointed out as examples for imitation nor add to the splendour of the possessor, improve the national taste, or increase the national glory. The want of proper character and appropriate magnificence in the buildings of this wealthy metropolis is not confined to the exterior form and interior distribution of single structures, but is almost general (Soane, 1966: 648).¹⁴

Britain, as a nation, required a self-image strong enough to bolster her status, both domestically and internationally.¹⁵ The British “Nation” had always included the diverse countries of the British Isles, and was now the seat of an expansive empire. The attempt to develop a self-image was steeped in a cultural anxiety about the implications of its poly-cultural and poly-national constitution. How was England, the origin and centre of this largely remote empire, to keep its presence readable?¹⁶ In *The True-Born Englishman*, William Defoe argued that England was a mongrel nation of mongrel origin, the barbarous offspring of all the invaders and colonizers who had besieged England in the course of history (Defoe, 1701: 28-30). In the multiple and essentially arbitrary answers to the question of, what is English, Defoe saw an indication that the nation was a self-conscious *fabrication*. The poly-stylism of Neoclassicism, meanwhile, which included Egyptian, “Hindoo,” Gothic, as well as Greek and Roman influences, reflected the intense effects of travel on British culture, as well as the diversity of the British Empire.

Soane’s own stylistic solution to the question of a national architecture, which went beyond that of most of his neoclassical colleagues, was the development of a new classical language. Moving away from the abstracted incising of the Bank of England interiors, for instance, Soane developed a fully-fledged ornamentation that combined Gothic, Roman and Greek detailing. This was intended as a truly national style, original and contemporary, and one that would be significantly unique to Britain. However, it was also highly idiosyncratic, the product of individual innovation, developed in a climate in which “genius is encouraged to create, rather than to copy and adopt” (Papworth, 1916: 312). Soane’s “national style” appeared in many of his public projects for London, both commissioned and proposed; for example the House of Lords, the Law Courts, the new Offices for the Board of Privy Trade and the Privy Council, as well as an ambitious (unrealised) scheme for a processional route through the city.¹⁷ Its novelty was timely; a *new* nation needed a *new* language.

‘Genius’ was thus employed in two different modes by Soane. Through the inventiveness of the “Soane style”, he sought to gain a market advantage; through invention, he contributed to the means by which a nation with a newly constructed identity could represent itself. In the architectural world Soane inhabited, they could be, and often were, easily blurred. The numerous controversies that Soane was involved in, and that he so bitterly complained of, pitted him in battle against other architects, as well as the “state apparatus” - in the form of his local district surveyor, the Royal Academy or parliament — in a struggle for architectural prominence.¹⁸ The ‘battle of styles’ that these conflicts represent was also a battle for political lev-

erage. ‘Genius’ was thus as much about economics — who will receive coveted and lucrative public commissions — as it was about aesthetic theory or artistic merit.

PR:

As a meticulously curated archive of Soane’s production and its genealogy, witness the purchase of the Dance and Adams archives, or the prominently displayed Piranesi etchings. Soane’s house, too, is an emblem of signature construction within the terms of a legacy. The bequest of the house and its considerable collections, including over 60,000 drawings, forms a cultural inheritance both of his own work, that of those architects to whom he felt himself indebted, and of the aesthetic theories and cultural trends materialized in it. Thus, it was also a temple to fame. One could think of the house — as library and museum — operating as a carefully constructed exposition, with meticulous evidence and detailed footnotes, buttressing a claim to his place in the panoply of great architectural geniuses. One could think for a moment of today’s architects engaged in similar moves: Michael Graves, a fan of Soane, turning his house into a museum already gifted to the public; or Frank Gehry, signing and dating everything he draws, the building archive already under contract on his death. It could be said, that they, like Peter Eisenman, Zaha Hadid, and others, are great masters of the signature effect. And perhaps more than any other contemporary architect, Graves and Gehry have literally sold their signatures with canny success.

The “Soane style” could be seen as a similarly commercial exploitation of signature. In a parallel move, Turner’s famous self-portrait at the Royal Academy annual show on Varnishing Day made great flourish out of his auratic presence, and clearly served to add massive commercial appeal to his signature - both *on* the work and clearly *in* it. Soane’s house, and the highly idiosyncratic public projects he built or designed, certainly helped cement his claim to a signature effect - invention as the mark of genius. It gave a competitive advantage to a long line of ‘great’ architects, from Michelangelo to Ledoux, from Piranesi to Boullée, and continues to do so today. It is not for nothing that Peter Eisenman is want to insert himself into a genealogy of ‘signature’ architects, just as Soane did, or that his student, Greg Lynn, will talk of ‘signature effects’ as a deliberate design goal, one that counters the general misapprehension that today’s digital architecture is ‘autogenerated’.

There is no doubt that Soane was a master of self-representation, ready to demonstrate the greatness of his achievements and certain of their worth as cultural legacy. He used his ability to create a theatre of special effects and spectacular spaces: a sublime architectural virtuosity as a deliberately emphatic way of expressing his professional skill. His house’s primary ‘effect’ was thus the demonstration of Soane’s consummate genius as the magician of space, a master showman displaying his talents and achievements in a blaze of effect. Critic John Papworth referred to Soane’s work as “the ideal imagery” of “an exuberant fancy” (Papworth, 1816: 312). *The Athenaeum*, reviewing Soane’s house-museum in 1828, echoed Papworth’s sentiments:

Here he has collected his rich stores of art and antiquity. Here he revels in architectural glory, dwelling, magician-like, among fairie chambers



Photograph by Michael Shepherd

of his own creating. Of its kind it is perfect, the ichnography of the very mind of the architect, everywhere difficulties surmounted, ingenuity triumphant ...

The importance of fiction and imagination to Soane's domestic enterprise must be emphasized; fantastic invention is the mechanism by which genius can be revealed. This 'theatrical' architectonics complimented the architectural theatre of the house (as museum), its role as memorial immortalizing his work, his collections and his creations, of which the house-museum itself was the most exemplary manifestation. It is no surprise, then, that the visitor to the house finds, in the centre of the double height tribune space that focuses the museum section, a bust of Soane himself, surveying his collections and accomplishments.

John Britton, in his theorization of architecture as an art of invention, necessitating originality, experimentation and innovation, was mindful that 'genius' was merely the flipside of a failed experiment:

In this, as in many other things, much depends on success: if the architect be fortunate in his attempts, he enriches his art and adds to his powers; if he fails, he has done worse than nothing, and exposes himself to derision. Innovators are like usurpers: they either become the founders of new dynasties, or are hurled as rebels from the eminence to which they aspired (1827: 9).

Soane may not have generated the dynasties he hoped for, but for Britton (as for the many admirers of Soane's work today) it was clear that No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields memorialised, more generally, the achievement of genius in Soane's oeuvre. Soane's risky experiments in morphology and effect had paid off.

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