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On being Reyner Banham's Grandson

Ser el nieto de Reyner Banham

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Resumen

En este ensayo exploro la experiencia que significa ser nieto de Reyner Banham y relaciono mi conocimiento personal con su trabajo como profesor de historia de la arquitectura. Sugiero que su pedagogía estaba en consonancia con su carácter en el ámbito social y describo el impacto que tuvo en mí pasar tiempo con él, tanto en términos de mi experiencia en el arte y la arquitectura, como en términos más generales. Reflexiono sobre el privilegio de poder continuar mi relación con un miembro de la familia mucho después de su muerte, y sobre las notables ideas sobre facetas particulares del arte y la arquitectura que me confirió mi relación con Banham. Observo la importancia de lo visual para la enseñanza y la escritura de Banham, y concluyo sugiriendo que, si bien la experiencia de su enseñanza sólo puede abordarse a través de los recuerdos de sus estudiantes, las impactantes imágenes que dejó atrás pueden ayudarnos a imaginarlo.

Abstract

In this essay I explore the experience of being Reyner Banham's grandson, and relate my personal acquaintance of him to his work as a teacher of architectural history. I suggest that his pedagogy was of a piece with his social character, and describe the impact that spending time with him had on me, both in terms of my experience of art and architecture, and more broadly. I reflect on the great privilege of being able to continue my relationship with a family member long after their death, and of the remarkable insights into particular facets of art and architecture that my relationship to Banham conferred on me. I note the importance of the visual to Banham's teaching and writing, and conclude by suggesting that while the experience of his teaching can only be approached through the recollections of his students, the striking images he left behind may help us to imagine it.

Palabras clave: Reyner Banham - enseñanza de la historia de la arquitectura - arquitectura posmoderna - arquitectura high-tech - pop art

Key words: Reyner Banham - teaching architectural history - Post-Modern architecture - High-Tech architecture - Pop-Art

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It's 1983 or 1984, in London during the summer. My grandparents are visiting from the United States, as they do every year, staying with friends of my mother's who live in Great Russell Street, right next door to the British Museum. I'm twelve or thirteen years old, also staying there, and my grandfather, who I call Pete –as my mother has decreed that first names must be used at all times– takes me out for a walk to a delicatessen near Seven Dials. Construction is continuous in this part of the city, as it is to this day –buildings are being continually refurbished, demolished or built. On this walk I discover what the inside of a traditional Italian deli smells like, what Parma ham is (and for related reasons, why I will never be a vegetarian– to my mother's regret), and what a central London building site looks like.

We are passing a site in which my grandfather is interested, as he knew the building which was there before. There is a pedestrian walkway beside the hoardings along the street, and at one end of it a large plastic sheet hangs over the entrance to the site. Pete simply pushes it aside and walks in, reassuring me that it's fine to do so. He makes some observations about the construction techniques and materials, and when someone approaches him to ask us to leave, he asks them such informed questions that they stand and chat to him about the building for a good ten minutes.

Apparently he made a habit of this, although this was the only occasion on which I experienced it; he used to take a clipboard with him sometimes, so that the site workers would assume he was some kind of official inspector. Although I never invaded another construction site with him, going anywhere with Pete was likely to result in some kind of impromptu investigation or explanation. One of my earliest memories with him is of driving through Drury Lane to see where the Muffin Man of the nursery rhyme made his home, and wherever we went there was always some interesting detail to be discovered or disclosed. The loving grandfather was never far removed from the researcher or the teacher –but then who does completely separate their public and private selves?

My grandparents, Peter and Mary Banham's wedding. From left to right: Peter's mother Pat Banham (née Reyner), Peter's father Pip Banham, Peter's brother Paul Banham, Mary Banham (née Mullett), Mary's father John Mullett, Mary's sister Anne, Mary's mother Kathleen Mullett (née Garrett –known to me as Great Granny, the only member of that generation not to die before I was born).

My great-grandmother's surname (Reyner) was taken up as a middle name in the Banham Family. Her sons were Peter Reyner Banham (better known as Reyner Banham the architectural critic) and Paul Reyner Banham; Peter's children were my mother, Deborah Anne Reyner Banham, and Ben Banham (who didn't get called Reyner for some reason); Paul's children were Patricia Reyner Banham, Clare Reyner Banham and Anthony Reyner Banham –better known as Tony Banham, a leading historian of World War II Hong Kong. Reyner Banham is sometimes referred to as PRB, but it can be observed that there were two other members of the family with those initials!

Early in the morning of March 19, 1988, I let go of Pete's hand, for the last time. A nurse had just entered his room in the Royal Free Hospital, and closed his eyes. I wept then, and my grandmother Mary held me in her arms –if she shed tears for him, she did it in some other place and time, not in that moment for which she had been preparing for months. At that moment she continued to do what she always had, to be his other half. She comforted me for him, she represented him, as she would for the remainder of her long life, as one half of their inseparable partnership, the moral structure

upon which his intellectual garments were hung. Peter Banham died that morning: he ceased to experience the flow of moments, or to suffer the pain of his cancer and its treatment, and my acquaintance with him became retrospective. My acquaintance with Reyner Banham was just beginning, however.

My memories of the time he spent in hospital during my eighteenth year are hazy. I saw many of his friends there, although the only precise occasion I can specify was later that morning, when I was leaving the hospital with my mother, and we met one of his dearest friends. 'It's all over, Ced,' my mother told him sadly. This was Cedric Price, the architect, teacher, theorist, co-creator of Plug-In and spiritual parent of High-Tech. I had also run into 'Big Jim' Stirling, after whom Britain's most prestigious architecture prize is now named. The chances are good that I also saw the pop artist Richard Hamilton, the New Brutalist architects Alison and Peter Smithson, and any of a long list of more or less well-known artists and architects. Other such figures predeceased my grandfather, but I can recall meeting them, or have been told that I met them.

I was seventeen years old when Pete died, and I had little understanding of the remarkable privilege that this was, little understanding, in fact of who these people were or why they were important. Buckminster Fuller was simply 'Bucky', my grandparents' American friend. I knew that their friend Eduardo was responsible for the mosaic murals in the Tottenham Court Road London Underground station near where my grandmother would later live, but I didn't have any clear appreciation that this was *the* Eduardo Paolozzi, whose late 1940s collages had inaugurated Pop-Art. These were just my grandparents' friends, and I knew that they did interesting things, but my understanding was that 'interesting things' were simply something that came with adulthood.

A greater privilege was that when I lost my grandfather, as many people before and since have lost grandparents, the deceased private individual was survived by the public figure, the writer, the scholar, the iconic iconoclast, who with his Castro beard, his small-wheeled bicycle, his cigars, his cowboy hats and his minor celebrity, remains a symbol of the hip and subversive in his field of architectural history. I have had the priceless opportunity to come to know this other man through his writings, and through the impression he left on the world – it's not unusual for me to meet architects or scholars considerably younger than myself who regard my grandfather as some kind of a rock star. I still miss the man, but the writer has been with me ever since his death, keeping my memories of him burnished and bright, and unfolding aspects of himself in the way that might have occurred through a more extended in-person acquaintance.

Michael and Sheila Gooch's wedding. Left to right: Peter Reyner Banham, Michael Gooch, Sheila Gooch, and and Shiela's maid-of-honour (probably her sister who we think was called Freda). Michael Gooch was Peter's first cousin, who grew up with Peter and Paul, and was treated by them as a brother. Michael was an architect, who lived out his life in the rural East of England working mainly on historical buildings, far from the high-flown theoretical debates and rigorous modernism of his cousin. His father was Edwin Gooch (Reyner Banham's uncle) who was a Member of Parliament and a campaigner for agricultural workers' rights. Peter and Michael remained close until Peter's death.

This began with *Scenes in America Deserta*, his least scholarly, least architectural, and most personal published text. In this book, reflecting on his peregrinations through the deserts of the southwestern United States, he explores the limit conditions of his intellect, grappling with a place and an experience which by his own admission he does not fully understand, and to which his response was more visceral than it was analytical. Although his writing here is informed, it is not scholarly, and the text does not set out to make critical arguments –instead it represents his experience. This is the closest that *Peter* Banham got to publication, although the voice is clearly that of the scholar and the professional writer, whose academic work had often been shot through with a vein of wit and informality in any case. It was an ideal place for me to get to know my grandfather, with whom I had discussed the American deserts little, if at all. This was an enthusiasm he would doubtless have shared with me at some point if he had survived into my adulthood, and this atypical monograph offered me a chance to have that conversation. Though I had no idea of it at the time, it also offered him the chance to teach me what good non-fiction writing looks like.

I lost my father in 1980, at the age of nine, and for the next eight years, although he lived several thousand miles away from me, Peter Reyner Banham was the closest thing I had to a father figure. Since his death, as writing has become an increasingly important part of my own life, he has remained one –a friend, a critical voice, a safe haven, and a teacher. When I read his writing, I hear his spoken voice very clearly, but the curious thing is that when I read my own non-fiction writing, I also hear it in his voice.

I am not an architect, an architectural critic, an art historian, or the practitioner of any profession which would make Reyner Banham's writings particularly relevant to my own work. But I have always maintained an interest in architecture, in the same way that I am interested in music, cinema, art, comics, literature or videogames. It is always surprising and disappointing to me to be reminded how few people without a professional interest consider the ethics and aesthetics of buildings to be a suitable repository for their enthusiasm, let alone their fandom. For me, a building is exciting, potentially beautiful, technically intriguing, an instance of creative practice, and a text, which however opaque it may initially appear, I am always confident will eventually disclose its meanings. I'm a big fan of David Bowie, a big fan of Al Pacino, and a big fan of Zaha Hadid. Buildings are accessible to me as cultural objects, in a way that they rarely are for those with no relevant education or professional interest, for the simple reason that I have had a teacher.

Banham with his parents, Pip and Pat Banham, probably in 1923. He is presumably displeased by the poor quality of the vernacular architecture.

When Pete was alive, I spent a fairly small proportion of each year in my grandparents' company, but in my memory those periods loom large. The impossible glamour, to an ordinary boy living in an ordinary English village, of grandparents who lived in the fabled U.S.A., who sometimes appeared on TV, and who had famous friends, made a few weeks spent with them in the summer easily outweigh the drab remainder of the year. And during those few

weeks, while we did whatever we did together, they would both talk to me about art and architecture, not because they felt it was their duty to educate me, but because, well –what else is there to talk about? The buildings we would see, modern or historical, while we spent time together, were not just worth talking about, not just interesting, but important –as important as anything could be. So without realising that I was learning, without understanding for a moment that I was absorbing both a vocabulary and an ideology, I learned to look at buildings and to read them– to intuit something of their historical context, and to situate them within the debates and discourses that were my grandparents' native soil, and in which I would only realise that I was a tourist (to my surprise and chagrin) some years later.

Inevitably I absorbed their tastes, and because my grandfather was a scholar and a critic, I absorbed their tastes as aesthetic and ethical positions, not simply as preferences. Thus I came to adulthood knowing that what was 'wrong' with 1980s Post-Modern architecture was that it consisted of uninventive rectangular blocks covered incoherently with ornamental features plundered from the Classical tradition. I understood, in the same way that I understood any other important fact of life, that what was 'right' with British Georgian and Regency architecture was that it applied those same features according to the harmonious Palladian proportionality from which they had originally emerged.

I had learned, in other words, that there are examinable reasons for the ways that we experience things like buildings and paintings, and something of a basic, amateur method for getting at those reasons. And I had learned this not through some kind of heavy-handed effort to 'improve' me, but by walking and talking, by being asked questions, by being flattered by the solicitation of my own opinion. My grandparents, always considered a creative and intellectual team by my grandfather's colleagues, shared their enthusiasms with me as they would with any of their friends.

Banham in 1932, demonstrating a conventional manner of dress which was rarely to be seen in his later years.

On these sturdy foundations I have built an ongoing appreciation of architecture from the materials I have subsequently gathered, some of my grandfather's writings among them. The foundations themselves are so solid because despite the nominally strict demarcation between the private Peter Banham and the public Reyner Banham, he was a man who lived his work: he was a good teacher to his grandson simply because he was a good teacher –not just when he went to work, but when he woke up in the morning. I'm lucky enough to have known a good number of his ex-students, and it's clear that his generous discursivity and his enthusiasm were equally present when he taught in a formal setting. I never saw him teach in person, but I've seen video of him

lecturing, and he's very much himself –simply a more continuous and performative version of the person he always was.

There are details that belong to those who knew him as a family member, details to which the historical record is unlikely to attest. The corrugation of his thumbnail due to an accident with an industrial press; his preference for liver sausage on toast at breakfast time; his tendency to snort rather than laugh; the deep pain he carried with him after losing many colleagues at the Bristol Aeroplane Company to aerial bombardment during World War II; his allergy to shellfish. These are of little interest to those who will likely still be interested in him after I have died of old age, but they are of a piece with the details of his teaching, writing self. In an essay he wrote on his deathbed architecture is listed alongside the names of his family, and that is where it belongs. In my view he achieved the creative, intellectual success that he did because there was no rigid barrier between his work and his life. For this reason, I have had the incalculable privilege of continuing my relationship with my grandfather after his death.

It's 1971 or 1972, in London during the summer. My grandparents' friend is visiting from the United States, and I am entertaining him in the shaded, leafy garden of their ground-floor flat in West Hampstead.

I don't recall how I entertained him, but we played together. In fact, full disclosure requires that I admit I have no recollection of this incident whatsoever, but it is a matter of family tradition that, as a small boy, I played with Buckminster Fuller in the garden when he visited. And more than an amusing family story, it is a matter of enormous pride to me, as I have since come to understand how important a figure Fuller was. This is the great legacy I received from my grandfather: I have been privy to many situations that people with an interest in architecture would have given their eye-teeth to observe.

I have shared a cooling glass of still lemonade in the deep, viridian garden of Esther McCoy's house in Los Angeles, with the two most prominent boosters of that much-reviled metropolis's cityscape. I don't recollect if the conversation strayed to architecture, and what I do recall of it is unedifying, but I was there, with the two writers whose monographs on Los Angeles bookended the 1960s and announced it to the world as a place where architecture could be found.

Banham in 1940, aged 17 or 18. His trademark intellectual frown is already well-developed. He wears the insignia of an ARP air-raid warden, a duty he performed while working in Bristol for the Bristol Aeroplane Company. He would have been responsible for ensuring buildings were properly blacked-out at night, for guiding members of the public into air-raid shelters, for sounding the sirens, issuing gas-masks and so forth. During the air-raid of 25 September 1940, presumably because he was fulfilling these duties, he was absent from the company air-raid shelter when it suffered a direct hit from a Luftwaffe bomb, killing virtually all of his colleagues.

When I was between the ages of 3 and 6 I lived with my mother in an area of London that had been occupied by squatters protesting its proposed redevelopment, in a movement led by several students at the Bartlett School of Environmental Studies (as it was then called) at which my grandfather was then teaching. Recently, some forty-five years later, I met one of those students at a party. He recounted some amusing recollections of my antics as a small child, but also told me about a long letter my grandfather had written to him, warning him that he was not sufficiently engaged with his studies to make the most of them. The student in question went on to abandon his course, but he told me that he had kept the letter, and still had it all those years later. He seemed regretful that he had disappointed Banham, which would be consistent with the very positive relationships I observed between him and his students over the years, many of whom still remember him with great fondness.

I witnessed a reunion between my grandfather and another of his students, one which was perhaps less fond. It may in fact have been some kind of Freudian psychodrama, in which the Oedipal antagonism between intellectual father and son was played out behind a facade of polite, architecturally focussed observations –or it may not have been. The principals are both dead, and I was in my early teens at the oldest, so it's hard for me to judge in retrospect. But I was present when Charles Jencks, leading advocate of postmodern architecture showed his PhD supervisor and public theoretical antagonist Reyner Banham around his 'Thematic House', a building which seemed to embody Banham's central criticism of postmodernism –that it consisted of perfectly ordinary buildings with various decorative bits stuck on to them. Whether I was there to defuse any tension between the two, or simply because Pete thought I might find it interesting, it is no longer possible to discover, but this was just one of the many situations I experienced in which writers on architectural history might like to have been flies on the wall.

The Banham family at play. From left to right: Peter, Ben, Debby (my mother), and Mary. This photo was taken by James Stirling in the empty reading room of his recently completed History Faculty Library at Cambridge University. Apparently, empty libraries make good places for picnics –as a librarian I should take note.

As what I am writing today is a contribution to a broader discussion of the pedagogy of architectural history, I'm conscious of the limitations of my experience. I know that Banham, as a teacher, was revered by some, and was held in great affection by many that he taught. I know that he was considered to be a very engaging lecturer, and this accords with my own experience of his informal conversation. But to really get at the meat of his work as a teacher, the interested researcher will have to speak to those whose research he supervised, those to whom he lectured, those who accompanied him on walks around the industrial sites of Buffalo, New York, as in one photograph that I've seen online.

There is little or no documentary trace of Banham's teaching or lecturing –the Getty Centre holds some thirty-odd boxes of his papers, but they relate to his research and writing rather than his pedagogy, and he was notorious for the ruthlessness with which he destroyed his working archive, rolling up the carpet behind him as he walked through his career. When we discovered recently (to our delight) that an architecture student at South Dakota State University had published his 4th year project of a design for a Reyner Banham Archive in Los Angeles, my uncle joked that there would be nothing to put in it.

What residue he did leave of his work as a lecturer was his extensive collection of slides, mostly taken by himself. I guess that an entire generation of university lecturers are now deep into careers in which they have never had to learn how to unjam a slide carousel, or how to exploit the emphatic percussion of its advance to dramatic effect, but in Banham's day the slide projector was to the lecturer as the amplifier is to the electric guitarist. For a number of years after his death the Design History Society organised an annual 'Banham Lecture' at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and I recall clearly that Mary Banham's assessment of the quality of each year's speaker would be made with reference to the number, quality and mode of use of the slides projected during their talk.

What I think my grandfather understood is that *anyone* just standing up and talking on a technical subject for an hour will put their audience to sleep, irrespective of how engaging a speaker they are, or whether their subject is a significantly visual one as his was. He was not a professional photographer, but he knew how to use a manual SLR to good effect, and his slides are always striking. He left an archive of several thousand of them, which were donated to the Architectural Association in London –I assisted my grandmother in cataloguing them in preparation for this, which was my first archival work (I trained as a librarian many years later– another example of the guiding hand my grandfather continues to exert on my life).

To celebrate the accession of this collection, the AA held a small exhibition, including large prints of some of the transparencies. I recall that my uncle on my father's side of the family attended the opening: he *was* a professional photographer, and was largely unimpressed. But while they may have left something to be desired as photographs –if they were nicely framed they might have been slightly out of focus, if they were perfectly sharp the layout may have been off, if the depth of field was just right the film was probably too fast and the contrast too soft– these were instrumental images, frequently showing objects which Banham would have been quick to inform you should not be apprehended as primarily visual, but as habitable spaces, as technologically contrived environments. The slides were not representations, but a significant and indispensable part of Banham's speech.

As someone who devoted his scholarly life to an area in which visual praxis is so important –an architect may be many things, but they are always someone who draws– it would perhaps have been surprising if Banham had not engaged in some form of image production himself. In his book on Los Angeles he wrote that 'the Santa Monica/San Diego [freeway] intersection is a work of art, both as a pattern on the map, as a monument against the sky, and

as a kinetic experience as one sweeps through it'. It's clear from this that he did not see the visual in opposition to the environmental, in an either/or distinction, but as complementary to it. The 'kinetic experience' of Banham's teaching is clearly lost to us, but perhaps the images he left, in his slides, in his iconic person, and in the memories of his students, may enable us to imagine it more clearly.

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