Networking

Lutyens and the Edwardians: An English Architect and his Clients *by Jane Brown. London: Viking, 1996. 276 pp., illus., $34.95.*

Reviewed by Barrie Scardino

The clear conclusion that can be drawn from Jane Brown's account of Edwin L. Lutyens's career is that success and recognition for an architect is attained not by talent alone, but through an affable and convivial personality along with powerful connections to wealth.

Lutyens was the tenth child and ninth son of the fairly successful portrait painter Charles Lutyens and Mary Gallwey. He was named for Edwin Landseer, the greatest animal artist of his era and a sometime collaborator of Charles Lutyens. The wealthy Landseer agreed to be Ned Lutyens's godfather, and it was a legacy from the Landseer family that allowed Lutyens later to begin his architectural practice. Lutyens was a sickly child and is quoted by Brown as saying: "Any talent I have was due to a long illness as a boy, which afforded me time to think, and to subsequent ill health, because I was not allowed to play games, and had to teach myself, for my enjoyment, to use my eyes instead of my feet." When he was eight, the family moved to the isolated village of Thursley. There, in addition to "playing with" his father's paints, he haunted building sites and carpenters' yards, determined one day to become an architect. Richard Norman Shaw was his hero. At 16, Lutyens had the good fortune to meet Shaw through the Arbuthnots, whose portraits his father was painting. Shortly after the Shaw introduction, Mrs. Arbuthnot persuaded Charles and Mary Lutyens to send their talented and ambitious son to the South Kensington School of Art to study architecture; perhaps the Arbuthnots paid his bills as well. The Arbuthnot connection was the core alliance in the complicated nexus of supporters and patrons that Lutyens developed during his lifetime.

After a short time at South Kensington, Lutyens felt he had learned all that could be taught him there. Because the waiting list for apprenticeships in Shaw's office was so long, Lutyens went to work for Sir Ernest George in 1887. By 1889 Lutyens had his first commission, cashed in his legacy, and went out on his own. His professional career never floundered, thanks to a succession of women who took up his cause. The first was Barbara Webb, who "cajoled and challenged everyone she met to let Ned build for them." Then he married the daughter of the Earl and Countess of Lytton, Lady Emily. The Lytton family first opposed the marriage, but once it took place they developed a great fondness for Lutyens and gave him their patronage. The marriage, however, was not ideal. Emily's adoption of Theosophy and lack of interest in architecture, gardening, or even housekeeping, drew her far from her husband and his client-friends. Brown surmises, "But it is quite possible that if he had been happy and fulfilled in marriage, we would never have heard his name."

The eccentric and celebrated landscape gardener Gertrude Jekyll, old enough to be Lutyens's mother, also took him under her wing. Theirs was to be a lifelong friendship and collaboration. Her influence on Lutyens was not only through the commissions she obtained for him, but in her tutelage. Lutyens became known for the "outside rooms" he created for his wonderful country houses. The most important woman in Lutyens's life, beginning in the early 1920s was Lady Victoria Sackville. She adored him and his work, found commissions for him, and finally became his mistress. Brown explores this relationship to its end when, in the last decade of his life, Ned and Emily were reconciled.

Nested within this account of Lutyens's life and relationships are a myriad of fascinating details concerning the design and construction of his houses — Hazlehatch, Heathcote, Homewood, Pasturewood, Goddards, Orchards, Mells, Munstead House, Little Thackam, Great Maytham, Folly Farm, Fulbrook, Pleasaunce, Lindsfarne Castle, Castle Drogo, and more. The program for High Walls in Scotland, which Lutyens said was his favorite house, called for 15 bedrooms, a fortress construction to keep out the winds, *and* very large windows. Lutyens complied masterfully. Odd facts abound, such as that a water diviner was sent out to a property to place the well and pump house before a house site was considered; and that Lutyens himself went in search of clay to produce a particular brick color, then had a brickworks set up to craft bricks for just one house. Lutyens loved to do little things: he seemingly took on any remodeling or addition, no matter how small; he designed sets, notably for his great friend James M. Barrie, including the nursery for *Peter Pan*, which Lutyens's daughter Mary

Sir Edwin Lutyens and his client, Lady Horner, in the garden at Mells Manor, ca. 1939.

remembered as being taken straight from "our own night nursery." Interior decoration interested Lutyens as much as gardening — in his own house he lacquered the dining room ceiling black "to reflect the candlelight." Although best known for his houses, the architect used his creative talents for an amazing range of design projects from book covers to clocks to furniture to the Liverpool Cathedral.

Lutyens's personality, like his creative talent, comes through in Brown's choices of anecdotes, beginning with the hilarity of his impersonations of Queen Victoria (with an antimacassar on his head). He drew plans and elevations on linen tablecloths at fancy dinner parties, played cricket with his clients' children, and drew cartoons of and for his friends. He was constantly described in the diaries and letters of cohorts as "cheerful," "charming," "amusing," "beloved," and the like. Their loyalty and the loyalty of his staff stand as proof of his ability to inspire confidence and sustain affection. Most of the clients, Brown points out, were middle-class, "meaning that they were rich either through earned or inherited wealth, but they were not tied to the land on which they built by ancestral ties." Lucky for Lutyens, who was consistently able to interpret the social aspirations of these men and women through the great houses he designed for them. Today, though, most of their houses have been converted to hotels or schools.

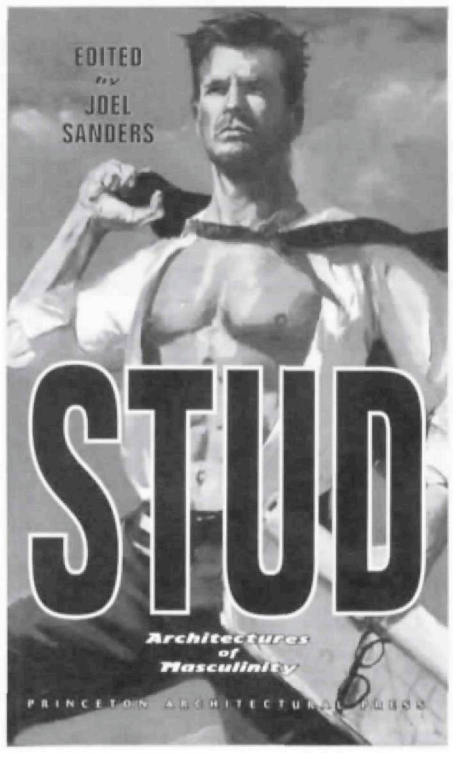
Lutyens and the Edwardians occasionally bogs down with the intricacies of familial ties and interpersonal relationships. Sentences with four or more long and difficult names are not unusual: "The Hutcheson-Poes were also close neighbors of the de Vescis at Abbeyleix, and Constance Portman of Hestercombe was the mother of Ivo Richard Vesey (the son of her first marriage to Captain Eustace Vesey, who died in 1886), the heir to Abbeyleix estate." It might have been helpful to have a glossary of people to which a reader could refer to sort out the enormous cast of characters. But these were the people of Lutyens's life, and he prospered within the social and financial web that bound them.

The great surprise at the end of *Lutyens and the Edwardians* is a guide to Lutyens buildings that can be seen by the public, either from the road or on tours. Turning the last page, unwilling to leave Lutyens, I wanted to book the first flight to London and ring up all my friends to come with me. Any takers?■

Out of Cite

Stud: Architectures of Masculinity *edited by Joel Sanders. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996. 311 pp., illus., $19.95.*

The best thing about this compilation of uneven essays is its cover. About halfway through the book, after Rem Koolhaas's poem and photo essay on his villa in Floriac (1995) for a paraplegic and the engaging essay by Diana Fuss and Joel Sanders on Freud's office, the book begins to fall apart. The men's room photographs will be mostly interesting to women, and the last sections of the book will be mostly interesting to gay men. Joel Sanders does do a good job in his introduction of letting the reader know what might or might not be of interest. There are some serious pieces that explore ideas such as the masculinity of the Modern movement, and then there are some rather bizarre photographs.■



Architectural Biography

Compiled by Karl Kilian

Boston Bohemia, 1881-1900: Ralph Adams Cram, Life and Architecture *by Douglass Shand-Tucci.* This first in a two-volume life shows Cram (1863-1942) — architect of Rice University's master plan and original buildings — as a leader, editor, art critic, poet, and designer in America's earliest avant garde, Boston's little-known *fin-de-siècle* bohemia. (Univ. of Massachusetts Press. black-and-white illus.; $19.95 paper.)

Donald Judd: Spaces *edited by Volker Rattemeyer.* Until there is a full biography of the late conceptual artist Donald Judd, this book tells the story in pictures. And while it is also not altogether a book of architecture, it does illustrate Judd's furniture designs and the beautiful spaces he created for his art work, and that of his friends, in New York's SoHo neighborhood and in his large compound in Marfa, Texas. (Cantz. color illus.; $45.)

Philip Johnson: Life and Work *by Franz Schulze.* From the biographer of Mies van der Rohe, a life of Johnson, warts and all, from his Midwest childhood, through his early years as an architectural historian and curator, to his astounding career as an architect and patron of the arts: a life that offers an insider's look at the ups and downs of architecture during the second half of this century. (Univ. of Chicago Press. black-and-white illus.; $16.95 paper.)

Josef Frank: Architect and Designer *edited by Nina Stritzler-Levine.* In his career as an architect and interior designer, Austrian Josef Frank (1885-1967) charted an original and complex version of modernism that expressed a unique view of the modern home, the single-family house, and its furnishings. This book, the first in English about Frank, was written to accompany an exhibition mounted this summer at The Bard Graduate Center in New York City. (Yale Univ. Press. illus., 150 color; $65.)

Charles Rennie Mackintosh *edited by Wendy Kaplan.* The 13 essays in this book, the catalogue of an international Mackintosh (1868-1928) retrospective organized by the Glasgow Museums, considers his work as architect, interior designer, furniture designer, painter, and graphic artist. (Abbeville. 249 illus., 134 color; $60.)

Under Boxwood

The Architect of Desire: Beauty and Danger in the Stanford White Family *by Suzannah Lessard. New York: The Dial Press, 1996. 334 pp., illus., $24.95.*

Reviewed by Barrie Scardino

Using architecture as a metaphor for the psychosocial history of her family, Stanford White's great-granddaughter has produced an engaging work that reads like a well-written novel, telling a good story with evocative language. Suzannah Lessard interweaves her awakening to the beauties and dangers of her own experiences within the White family, while, in every other chapter, exploring the circumstances of Stanford White's life and murder.

Ms. Lessard grew up at Box Hill, where five generations of her family have lived since Stanford and Bessie White acquired the 60-acre Long Island estate after their marriage in 1884. As the main house and grounds were layered with complex additions and improvements designed by White, the lives of those at Box Hill were wrapped and rewrapped, hiding both essential truths and transcendent love. "The correlation between architecture and interior life allows us to relive past visions by simply entering the architecture those visions produced. In a similar way, there was for me a correlation between the architecture of my family history and my inner life. In both, something was hidden in the beautiful environment of the family past, there was a magnificent figure who had gone out of control in ways destructive to those along his course — including his family — and ultimately to himself."

Stanford White, unquestionably an extraordinary architect, was also a philanderer and *bon vivant* who entertained young virgins in his extravagantly decorated pieds-à-terre. His lust for life and incredible energy allowed him, for a decade or two, to combine, without any apparent neglect, his profession, his family and friends, and a degenerate life that included not only women, lavish antiques, and liquor, but drugs and perhaps male lovers. But by 1906 he had become unable to balance the disparate parts of his life; no one seemed surprised when he was shot during a refrain of "I Could Love a Million Girls" in Madison Square Garden, one of his masterpieces. Insane jealousy led Harry K. Thaw to murder White. Thaw could not bear the thought that White had, years before, ravished his


Tom Frisell
The White family at Box Hill.

wife, the showgirl Evelyn Nesbit, when she was only 15 or 16 years old. White's questionable character traits and social proclivities were not unknown, even before his death, but they were never discussed at Box Hill. There was an unspoken covenant of secrecy around "The Place," as the family called Box Hill. Thaw was found to be insane after "the trial of the century" during which every school child knew something of the crime and passion surrounding White's murder, but his own family chose to shelter themselves and their children completely, living reclusively at Box Hill as if nothing had happened — not even acknowledging that the head of their family had been a famous and talented architect.

In exploring her childhood, including her own father's sexual dysfunction, Ms. Lessard writes with a more poetic voice, often using architectural language and analogy. Her parents, Mary White and Frank Rousseau, were both accomplished musicians, and the tone of the Lessard chapters is lyrical and emotional. "My father was charged and masterful and magnificent and yet he was also, in my perceptions, blanked out. . . . There was a cloistered part of our experience . . .that didn't show up on the mental blueprint of our lives. . . . There was also a part of our father that was cloistered from himself, a domain that belonged to the jewel-like amber in the bottle of Heaven Hill bourbon on the kitchen sideboard, the gallon jug of purple-black wine on the floor." Passages such as this one illustrate Ms. Lessard's talent and experience; she wrote for the *New Yorker* then the *Washington Monthly* for 26 years. Her carefully crafted phrases take us through the search for meaning in her interior world and, finally, in the architecture of her forebear, effectively carrying both the story and the emotional content of her experiences.

For those more interested in architecture than psychology, Lessard provides plenty of behind-the-scenes glimpses into the professional world of McKim, Mead & White: "In addition to housing our new Medicis, the architects of the time, and perhaps Stanford more than any other, took on the task of teaching them good taste. The mission included helping them buy suitable furnishings and adornments for their palaces. . . . He had an eye. But with this went a shamelessness about looting Europe of its treasures. . . . Once, when he saw a fountain in an Italian village square which he wanted for a client, he simply went to the police and made a deal for them to look the other way while he had the fountain wrenched out and carried off." Also satisfying are Lessard's frequent descriptions of places: "Under high ceilings, the darkness of many portraits stood out from the softness of the old plaster like burned-through places in the ordinary texture of the world."

Each chapter begins with a psychographic, often fuzzy, historic image, the purpose of which was not so much to illustrate the text but to provide an artistic clue to the content of the chapter. I found it seriously frustrating that so many places were described, so much architecture was invoked, without illustration, sending me to other Stanford White biographies and architectural histories, as to a dictionary, to look-up real photographs and be reassured that my mind's eye had understood.

In the last chapters of *The Architect of Desire*, Ms. Lessard is able to integrate the seductive nature of both Stanford White's personality and his architecture. He was not only an architect with compulsive, destructive desires, but also an architect able to translate his Gilded Age patrons' outlandish desires into great works of art. Acknowledging the "changing perspective of time" Lessard concedes that beyond the violent subtext of her family's history and beyond even his own self-destructive behavior, Stanford White's genius has left a substantive architectural legacy. Likewise, Lessard comes to see that we can all, herself included, be architects of our own desires in a constructive, life-giving way.■