Space Traveller

Hana Loftus on an idiosyncractic exploration of the architect's task

'Buildings: Between Living Time and Rocky Place'
Paul Shepheard
Circa Press, 180pp, £18

Who reads books about architecture? And what books do architects read? These two questions pursued me as I read Paul Shepheard's 'Buildings', a book about architecture, written by an architect for architects. After all, only a book written for architects – or students of architecture – would require a prologue to explain why describing buildings "as they are" is a radical thing to do. Non-architects would be baffled that a book about architecture would do anything else.

They would agree with Shepheard that buildings should be described as they are encountered "in actual time and space, face to face and one by one"; as objects that "survive despite the demise of the ideas that formed them". It is paradoxical that this book does so within a structure that, in the author's view, requires a prologue to explain it. This is unnecessary, however – the book does speak for itself. Chapters of a globetrotting narrative journey alternate with miniature essays on particular places or object-buildings – an alternative grand tour journal for an audience who will appreciate learning about totem poles or the Large Hadron Collider alongside gothic cathedrals and Japanese temples, with an abundance of anecdotes along the way.

But the slide from travelogue into fiction is where the book loses its charm. A series of stereotyped characters – a private pilot named Jesus, a geek named Geek – take over from Shepheard in bouncing us from Monaco to Texas to London to California, via Stonehenge and the Escorial. They conduct stagey 'dialogues' in a series of locations that gradually embody greater extremes between Shepheard's 'particular' – rooted, complex, mostly old – and the 'generic' of City office towers, apartment complexes, airports, which Shepheard increasingly fictionalises to underscore their faceless nature.

My patience ran out when, of all places, the tour passes through Ipswich station in Suffolk. The surroundings of Shepheard's Ipswich station, concocted to make a didactic point about big retail, bear no resemblance to the real Ipswich, which I know well. In that same chapter he states that "every building, however typical, is specific to the conditions of the ground it stands on", yet he refuses to test this statement by describing a real example of a retail park. There are many of these in Ipswich, just not right next to the station, and alongside their utilitarianism they all have specific idiosyncracies that could be explored. From a writer dedicated to describing buildings "not as types but as individuals", this is disappointing.

In the epilogue Shepheard reaches some important questions about architectural practice today, but by then it is, perhaps conveniently, too late to have to answer them. As a stand-alone essay – or a lecture – it sets out a compelling argument for building "strong and certain" forms that can outlast their makers, providing wonder and shelter for the unforeseen activities of generations to come. I wanted more of this manifesto, expanded into a fuller proposition of how, in this moment, this might come to be.

As a quotable guidebook for architecture students who are not yet aware of how buildings are shaped by money, materials, people and power, and yet transcend them over time, this book is a readable introduction. I want to praise it more than that. But I could not help recalling other books – written by non-architects, for non-architects, fiction and non-fiction – which illuminate those perspectives more vividly and profoundly: Elena Ferrante's Italy, Norman Scarfe's Suffolk. If architects stopped only reading books from the architecture shelves, they would find much to learn and savour, as I think Shepheard would agree. AJ