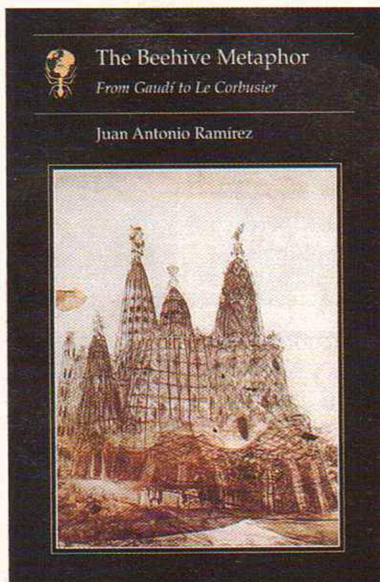
The spirit of the beehive

EDWARD WINTERS

The Beehive Metaphor: From Gaudí to Le Corbusier
by Juan Antonio Ramírez. Reaktion, 2000. 304pp. £15.95



This is a charming book by a Spanish professor of art history at the University of Madrid. Academics are often eccentric and sometimes they are enthusiastic. Ramírez is both.

The book develops three strands of argument concerning the nature of bees in connection with art and architecture. The first looks at the structure of beehives and the natural formation of honeycomb, and sees possibilities in this for the creation of art and architecture. The second examines the 'social' organisation of bees and takes this as a metaphor for human organisation. Thirdly, we are given a range of examples of how the beehive is used symbolically by artists and architects in their work. The book is very well researched and offers the reader a treasury of well-illustrated examples.

On occasion, however, Ramírez is in danger of taking his metaphor literally, thinking of bees as creators of both their 'architecture' and their 'social world'. He quotes the eighteenth-century Swiss apiarist François Huber with approval, and continues: 'Huber came to the conclusion that bees possess a certain rational intelligence...If bees are rational creatures they deserve to be treated in a "humanitarian" manner.' Unlike humans, however, bees do not live in society and they do not know what they are doing. Bees are not governed and are obedient only to natural inclination. It is therefore a mistake to regard bees as virtuous or to treat the structures they erect as works of art.

Nevertheless, looking at nature for inspiration is a familiar enough artistic enterprise. Since we think metaphorically of bees as industrious, it is understandable that they have come to symbolise our thoughts of human collective endeavour. They work hard together for the common good, and Ramírez gives a wide and scholarly range of examples of apian imagery in art and architecture symbolising this collective effort.

With the demise of communism in Europe and the advances of global capitalism, much thought has turned to political opponents of dominant Western liberalism. Communitarianism locates the identity of a person, not in their individuality, but in the communities to which they belong. Difficulties with this view arise from the danger of moving towards totalitarianism, whether communist or fascist – difficulties that those developing communitarianism try to overcome.

While Ramírez does not discuss this issue, he is certainly aware of the political dimension of the symbolism with which he is dealing. 'The idea of a people or nation that functions like a superorganism and before which personal individuality disappears was emphasised by the Nazis, but is not alien to anarchist and communist tradition (though for different reasons). The defeat of the fascist powers saw an attenuation of the "positive" connotations associated with social insects, and very few people have dared to advocate the resurrection of the beehive as a symbol of political activity.'

Ramírez does argue for its resurrection. In so doing he draws on the work of Joseph Beuys, whose own particular brand of 'social sculpture' might be seen as an artistic emblem for communitarianism. Beuys was a Roman Catholic and it makes sense to think of his work as having inherited something of the values instilled in Catholicism. Ramírez, too, is a Catholic, and one senses that this informs the book and properly locates the values he expresses. It is a timely contribution to contemporary thought concerning art and architecture. The beehive metaphor may well be due for revival.

Edward Winters teaches at the University of Westminster

the bandstand, photographs created during the design process (AJ 18.5.00).

Images of key past projects line the walls, notably the celebrated photographer's hide in Northamptonshire, for whose client McLaughlin is designing the camera obscura – an underground chamber which will double up, cheekily, as a woodshed; and a flower farm which features an automated nursery, served by seed banks moving on a solar-powered electric track, on the path of an old runway.

After eight years in practice, McLaughlin believes he now has a body of work that represents 'a coherent system of ideas ... a sense of what we are about'.

Indeed, as well as the architect's particular fondness for manipulating light, circulation and vista, which reaches something of a zenith in the Oxfordshire house – currently on site, the design occupies its woodland setting with a harmony reminiscent of Fallingwater – a more profound theme emerges. Projects such as the houseboat (right) and the flower farm highlight a doctrine based on the correlation, rather than opposition, of technology, nature and history – with thrilling results for the design.

Situated in the small lobby of the Bartlett, this exhibition suffers from bad lighting and shabby surroundings. But it also captures the attention of every student entering the building. Since McLaughlin's work bears the hallmarks of the experimental ethos of the school – and yet is being built as it is being viewed – it demonstrates the very real potential of that questioning, creative spirit.

Demetrios Matheou is a freelance journalist