

Review of “Du Rond-Point au Giratoire” by Eric Alonzo published in 2005 by Parenthèses and CERTU.

The book is a very comprehensive review of the circular plazas and intersections, describing the historical evolution of this form of intersection all the way from the roman times to today. It is written from an architect’s point of view, discussing the architectural and urban design aspects of rotaries and roundabouts. Alonzo discusses the conflict that emerged in 1909 between Eugene Hénard and William Phelbs Eno in regards to who “invented” the circular intersection (pages 71 and 72) and he follows the evolution over the last 40 years that we have seen from the old rotary to the modern roundabout. He also presents the influences that the modern architects had on the design of our streets and intersections (page 89 has a 1929 sketch by Le Corbusier stating that we have to kill the idea of the street as a corridor and that radial plazas and roundabouts are planning illusions!).

Alonzo is a strong supporter of roundabouts, but he does not take a position on the technical aspects of roundabouts. He does not address and does not seem to worry about the differences between modern roundabouts and non-conforming circles, or the British versus the Australian or French design principles. He shows many roundabout designs that we would consider non-conforming. His interest is strictly in the aesthetic and urban design aspects of roundabouts.

He does address the arguments presented by some architectural and urban design critics claiming that roundabouts increase the separation of neighborhoods and that they are not pedestrian friendly, or that the multitude of roundabouts in a neighborhood creates a certain monotony. He has visited many locations and many roundabouts and presents arguments that are very convincing.

Alonzo does not want to see the intervention of the architect or landscape architect limited to the design of the central island, an intervention that occurs only after the engineer’s main tasks are complete. He argues for an early intervention of the architect/landscape architect and a more large-scale intervention. He encourages us to look beyond the central island and beyond the intersection itself, to take into consideration the relationship between the roundabout and its immediate environment, as well as the aspects of a multitude of roundabouts in the urban fabric.