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Architecture: the past fights back

Architects used to be stock figures of romantic fiction, combining the respectability of the professional man with the glamour of the art school. They were also heroes of the welfare state, devising the buildings and images appropriate to the post-war society

The public expected sex-appeal and social concern, technical competence and artistic exuberance. When it became clear that these ideals were not, and probably could not be, realised in a profession of about 26,000 moderately competent middle-class men (and about 2,000 women), the public's rejection was swift and severe. The architect today hardly exists as a separate image in people's minds. One half has shifted to that of 'the planner', the stock figure of local government bureaucracy, constantly interfering, achieving little and that generally negative. The other half has shifted to that of a developer's lap dog, a man unrolling drawings of yet more banal and ugly office buildings in front of a smug financier.

These familiar images are useful rough and ready indicators of how the relation between architectural practice and society has changed, but they still beg a lot of questions. Most importantly they accept a limited definition of architecture and so make a general understanding of its change and significance difficult. Architecture is not just what architects do. An army of other experts and professionals — engineers, surveyors, quantity surveyors — is now indispensable to the production of designs for buildings. In any case a sizable proportion of buildings is designed by builders, surveyors, draughtsmen, with no architect in sight. But more important than this is that architecture is more than just the sum of the intentions of designers and specialists expressed in the form of drawings, contracts, specifications and schedules. The only useful definition, although a very broad one, is that architecture concerns the relationship between buildings and people. Some questions, the strength of structures or the qualities of materials for instance, can be dealt with as specialisms if they are taken as isolated aspects of inanimate buildings. The use that

people make of buildings however is an architectural issue. Also, because people cannot avoid seeing even buildings which they do not use, their everyday experiences in the street are an architectural issue. Given this, architecture is surely too serious to leave to be dominated by any body of experts. It is easy to draw this conclusion, but much more difficult to set out a way of understanding and analysing architecture which can become public property. If anything, discussion about architecture among experts and professionals is becoming more, not less, obscure and in-turned. Given this obscurity about what the issues are in architectural debates, people become increasingly diffident about their own feelings towards buildings. Can it really be right that so many buildings seem to them patently ugly and inconvenient to use? Or are they themselves in the wrong because they don't understand what the designer is trying to do? The first problem that needs to be tackled therefore is to outline the scope of architecture, to suggest a basic agenda of the questions that should become public property, to boost people's confidence so that they can argue about architecture.

A daily issue

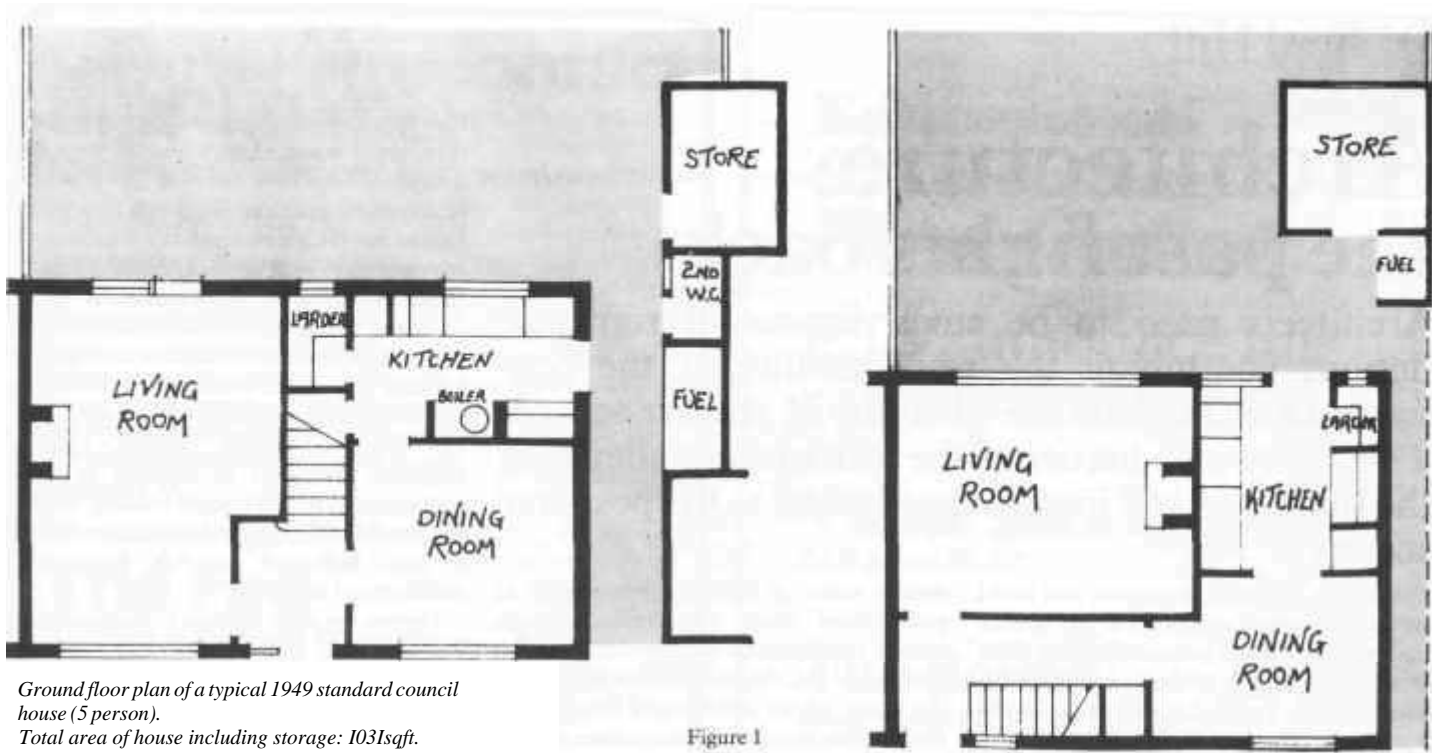
People are right to worry about architecture. It has a profound effect on everyday life. At the extreme architecture can be a matter of life and death and very commonly a matter of health and physical well-being. In the winter months cold can kill people inside their homes. This can be seen as a 'social policy' problem: old people, and numbers of young families are particular groups too poor to afford the proper amount of heating fuel. It can, and should, be seen as an architectural problem. Such people typically live in draughty uninsulated homes with ancient or inefficient or inappropriate heating systems. They would be as well advised to wrap up warm and live in a tent. Many hundreds of

thousands of families live in houses where dampness is a constant hazard to health. This can be seen as a 'social policy' problem: if they spent a lot more on fuel and less on food they could waste enough heat to keep the dampness at bay. But it is also an architectural problem. Even new housing in Britain has the lowest insulation standards of any country with a comparable climate. Whenever housing standards have been discussed and formulated in Britain, the kind of heating system and insulation standards to be used have been footnotes. Performance has always been sacrificed to economy. Even the minimal 'Parker Morris' heating standards will soon be dropped as basic requirements in new council housing, raising the possibility that some authorities will take a step backward in this most vital architectural standard.

Having the right attitude to standards will not wish away all the problems in a sphere, like heating, which is dominated by health and basic comfort considerations. Although it presents no basic scientific challenge, it does, like many cases where engineering products come into consumer use, raise issues of reliability, simplicity of operation, economy and unobtrusiveness. But in the last analysis the requirements of such a system can at least be measured in physical terms: temperature, humidity, air movement. Much more typical of architectural work are questions where important issues of comfort and convenience in daily life are involved but where there are no clearly measurable criteria. The objectives are socially defined and impossible to articulate in the abstract. How can you measure the convenience of the arrangement of rooms in a house? Presented with a number of different examples most people could say which they preferred and why. It would be virtually impossible to get the various factors weighted against each other as abstract lists: is a square living room worth five points to a narrow room's ten? Is a sink with a view on the garden worth five points or fifty points? Clearly such an approach would be meaningless since in any given house all the factors affect one another in a unique manner. The complexity of these sorts of problems has tended to produce two extreme reactions around which discussion in the architectural profession has focused.

Standardisation — and no trimmings

The first kind of reaction is to try and systematise and simplify, to create a set of measurable criteria against all the odds. Since only crude features can be systematised in this way — for instance types of house plans can be sorted into hierarchies of shapes and sizes and basic arrangements of rooms —



Ground floor plan of a typical 1949 standard council house (5 person).
Total area of house including storage: 1031sqft.

Figure 1

Ground floor plan of a typical 1952 standard council house (5 person).
Total area of house including storage: 921sqft.

The most obvious differences from the 1949 house are: no second downstairs WC, no hot water boiler, smaller larder, no pram space, smaller living room and dining room, narrower plot and hence smaller garden.

there is a great danger of exaggerating the importance of a few features to the detriment of all aspects of the design problem. This can lead, quite unexpectedly perhaps, into a buttressing of mean and backward-looking social policies. For instance it is a frequent cry that, given the seriousness of the housing problem it must be worth producing 'basic' houses with 'no trimmings' on the assumption that these will be at least better than no house at all, or a miserably cramped or badly-equipped one. So, the argument goes, it is worthwhile making the insides of houses cheaper, cramming the houses closer together, cutting out some of the heating, because what *really* matters is to provide four walls and a roof with some internal walls for reasons of modesty. The argument is pursued with predictable zeal when the strategic question of economising on state subsidies to council housing is on the agenda — as it was in the early 1950s, again in 1975, and is of course today. Perhaps the most notable example was Harold Macmillan's much publicised 'People's House' of 1952. In reality this was nothing other than the typical council house approved during Bevan's period as Minister for Housing from 1945-50, minus a good deal of storage space, with fewer fixtures and fittings and with meaner and more cramped halls and landings. The contrast is shown in Fig 1. The basic premise of this argument, that for a given problem there is a 'basic' architectural solution, is shown in practice to be catastrophically wrong. For instance it constantly surprises policy-makers and experts that there should

exist many thousands of council flats which are 'hard-to-let' and shunned by even the people most desperate for a home. They do indeed have two walls and a roof, appropriately divided up. They fulfil the basic architectural criteria for a house. So it is obvious that even the poorest people will not settle for 'basic' architecture, but demand, rightly, a great range of complex values and features in their homes.

It is without doubt one of the glories of the system of speculative house building — from the capitalist's viewpoint — that the standards of provision can be lowered at a rate unthink-

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able in the public sector. Fig 2 shows a comparison of the typical kind of house that a young family might have bought about ten years ago with the kind of house that they could just about afford today. The former is at a standard rather worse than the People's House of 1952. The latter quite simply returns to standards which were considered unsuitable in 1875. This is The Great Property Trick whereby people are forced, by the need to get into owner-occupied housing *on any terms*, to forego any choice or control of the standards of house they will occupy. There was a great revulsion against this kind of gerry-building approach to

housing towards the end of the private house-building boom of the 1930s and it helped to strengthen and inform the demand for higher and more dignified standards in post-war housing. It cannot be long before such a campaign re-emerges.

The idea of 'basic architecture without frills', whether the creation of the bureaucrat or the estate agent, is particularly an affront to women. Because it is largely they who manage buildings in practice, cleaning them, tidying them, making them furnished, looking after children in them, cutting out 'frills' like storage space and convenient circulation degrades their experience in a very sharp manner. The point holds true for other building types. An 'architecturally basic' hospital might consist of carefully designed wards and operating theatres. But if the result of cutting out 'frills' were to make it inconvenient to clear and to stock with goods and materials, the strain would tell on the female domestics and not on the consultant surgeons.

The 'mystique of flair'

The second, and opposite kind of reaction to the complexity of architectural problems is to develop a mystique of skill and 'flair' within the architectural profession, asserting that only a dedicated, experienced and gifted (by

nature) few can be expected to solve these intractable problems. A solitary and heroic figure wrestles with the intractable stuff of geometry and a list of contradictory client's requirements. The result does indeed have a gloss of newness and breaking with convention. An example would be the attempt by architects in the 1960s to try and resolve the awful problems of high density housing design by an intricate interlocking and stacking of flats off 'deck access' balconies. On paper this approach, requiring a great mental agility by the architect, seemed to resolve brilliantly the conflicting geometrical and utilitarian problems of high-density housing. Unfortunately reality was a sterner critic. The problems were not gone but turned around. For the problems of point blocks were exchanged for those of foul and windy corridors, persistent noise and damp problems from the 'decks' and views of tenement-like cramped courtyards.

Architects can be good or mediocre or incompetent. They cannot, even out of artistic struggle, design good buildings out of impossible briefs.

These kinds of issues, of health, convenience and comfort, are central to architecture. They are technical in some respects, but the technicalities are not hard to grasp. They are evidently political, although the architectural profession would like to pretend they were not. They need to become public property.

Architecture as ideology

But here utilitarian issues can only be part of the agenda. For the public's apparent rejection of much modern architecture is as much because of its appearance and associations as because of its functional problems. The relationship between buildings and people includes an ideological aspect: our reactions to buildings form part of a stock of ideas and images with which we picture a whole society and within which we place ourselves. This ideological aspect of architecture is very powerful and it can change very rapidly. A building provided for a certain purpose with a certain basic technology can be styled in a completely different manner from one decade to the next: it can present a quite different ideological aspect.

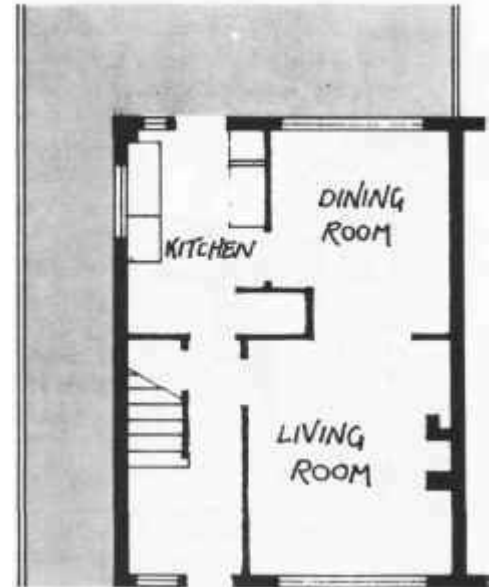
This point is thrown into relief by looking at changes in the design of schools in Britain in the post-war period. The kinds of design which were canvassed in the 1940s for instance were flooded with daylight and sunlight. The classrooms have daylight coming in from two facing walls; the plans are arranged loosely along well-lit corridors with each part or function of the building separately expressed. The schools are

transparent — literally, informal — architecturally, and flexible in appearance by virtue of their lightweight frame construction. By association these values are linked to the place of the school in the society as a whole. It was indeed part of the popular conception of post-war education that it would be transparent to view in the political and democratic sense, that it would be informal in method and flexible in its ability to respond to changing needs. It is easier to make these observations today than it would have been at the time: the ideological aspects of buildings, as of other areas of life, can be invisible when they have currency. They appear as natural.

In fact John Summerson, in an article written in about 1948, suggests precisely such naturalness and innocence of symbolic meaning. He argues that architecture no longer necessarily takes a monumental and dramatic place in the fabric of a civilisation:

'In our own age it is perfectly reasonable that it should not. Architecture is no longer required to give symbolic cohesion to society. Cohesion is now maintained by new methods of communication. The chief function of architecture now is to bring a sense of dignity, refinement, subtlety, gaiety to all the places where we live and work — to bring out 'the values which are latent everywhere in the measured enclosure of space'.'

The contrast between school buildings of this period and those of the recent past and present day, and the contrast of their ideological aspects, is interesting and depressing. A notable example would be the school buildings designed by Buckinghamshire County Council in recent years. They are solid-looking brick structures, compactly arranged with steeply-pitched roofs. Some aspects of the changing design are admittedly 'technical' in character. The reduction in the area of windows is one, since the delightfully light and airy post-war school did get fearfully overheated, as many teachers can testify. But the architectural change involved much more than just putting right some technical problems. The primary force behind the overall design of the Bucks school was not technical or functional but, in the sense we have been discussing, deeply ideological. Summerson predicted an architectural future where the style of buildings would not be ideologically significant and where the parts and sequences of spaces within buildings would be experienced individually in a manner innocent of outside meaning. Other communications media could be left to glue society together. It would have shocked him to know that, a generation later, with programmes such as the Bucks



Ground floor of a typical 1972 3-bedroom house for sale (Wimpey).

Total area of house: about 816sqft. Figure 2



Ground floor of a typical present-day 1-bedroom 'starter' house for sale (Barratt).

Total area of house: about 396sqft.

schools, the revival of past styles would once again be top of the architectural agenda.

Looking backwards — again

In this case it is the revival of a supposed rural-vernacular-building style. Summerson's confidence in the future society no longer exists. The 'monumentality and drama' of the home counties farmyard on which the aesthetics of the Bucks school is based may seem small beer compared with older and grander revivalisms, but the essential point remains that architects increasingly need to buttress the meanings which will be ascribed to buildings with references from past styles of architecture. Is it possible, from inside our own time and without the benefit of hindsight, to disentangle the ideological significance of this

'John Summerson, *Heavenly Mansions*, p.209, first published 1948. Norton Library Edition 1963.



The Ambridge style: an example from Essex County Council's design guide for new building, attempting to recreate the village.

trend? This much is clear, that it is part of that grand and endlessly running British cultural project to make the institutions of the present day seem like those of pre-industrial, agrarian, village society. To make a school look like an old farm shows a wistfulness about the past and perhaps a cynicism about the idea of a welfare state and the significance of an education system to it.

This revival of past architectural styles presently threatens to turn from a refreshing breeze to gale force. The design of shopping centres, that distinct architectural creation of the post-war period, is another example of this. Recently a large US company commissioned a group of chic architects to suggest some new designs for the facades of their superstores. The results contained every variety of revivalism and a good measure of re-working of classical clichés. Less exuberantly, British supermarket firms are now becoming adept at disguising new buildings as tithe barns, village squares and at tacking 'vernacular' brickwork details on to large steel structures. There is no doubt that in such cases the ideological work being

done is of the pill-sugaring kind. If we have to shop at supermarkets rather than the corner shop (where other pundits say that we should in order to sustain the traditional community), and if we must buy mass-produced food instead of the hand-made kind said to be good for us, then we can at least do so in a kind of architectural Ambridge.

Two qualifications must be made to these criticisms. Firstly the newly-acquired ability of architects to put new shopping centres carefully behind existing facades in old towns should be applauded, although even here it is often after the bitter and anxious struggle of civic amenity groups, those much-ridiculed arms of British political life. Even so, respecting the value of existing historic buildings is a different issue from the attempt to create a saccharine history.

Revivalism versus Functionalism

Secondly, and more importantly, the revivalist wind has by no means swept all before it. Its great antagonist, functionalism, has survived many changes of emphasis and direction to remain the alternative focus of architectural analysis and guidance for practice. Like other great movements it is notoriously divided into sects who hold to

narrow truths. In 1938 Le Corbusier, perhaps the most important architect of the twentieth century, wrote a short article for a magazine started by young, and mostly left-wing, architects and students, called */// Had To Teach You Architecture*. It expresses well the crucial points of the general attitude which here is described as functionalist:

'How do you make a door? How big? Where do you put it? How do you make a window? But, incidentally, what is a window for? Do you really know why they make windows? If so, you will be able to explain to me why a window is arched, square, or rectangular. I want reasons for that, and would add: Think hard: do we need windows at all today?

In what part of a room do you make a door? . . . Perhaps you have several solutions. You are right, there are several solutions, and each one gives a separate architectural sensation. You see — these differences of solution are the very basis of architecture. According to the way you enter a room and according to the position of the door in the wall, you get a particular impression, and the wall which you pierce takes on particular characteristics. You feel you have discovered architecture. By the way, I forbid you to draw an axis on your plans — axes are merely formulae to dazzle the unwary.'

and

'When you have achieved through plans and sections a working entity the elevations will follow, and if you have any power of design, your elevations will be beautiful. Say, by all means that houses are for living in but you will be a good architect when your elevations succeed. Proportion is enough, but you will need plenty of imagination as well, and the more modest the problem, the more imagination you need.

Architecture is organisation. YOU ARE AN ORGANISER, NOT A DRAWING-BOARD STYLIST.²

Analyse the problem, to the absurd if necessary, into its component parts; realise that the different possible solutions have

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symbolic as well as utilitarian aspects; produce a 'working entity' before thinking about the facades; follow the logic of that entity in designing the facades, but use imagination as well; but primarily, architecture is organisation, not styling. Functionalism expressed in this way is complex and ambiguous: it is full of potholes for the unwary designer and presents a shockingly uneven and seamed surface to the eye of the roving architectural critic. It does however have the enormous strength of a confidence in its own ability to produce a satisfactory architecture by a rational attention to current problems without resort to fragments of past ways of building.

Despite a virtually continuous academic attack since the early 1960s it is an extraordinary resilient and powerful movement. An example from the frontier of its achievement is the series of housing schemes designed by Ralph Erskine's office, notably that at Byker in Newcastle. The design of these houses, their detailed construction, appearance and layout, comes out of a long and exhaustive study of the siting, technical and social constraints of designing high-density housing, a study which at Byker involved the participation of the future inhabitants of the scheme. The newly-built area has precisely that dignity, refinement, subtlety, gaiety, which Summerson hoped would be characteristic of post-war architecture.

In its ideological aspect therefore, there are disputes about the appropriateness of certain styles for daily life, and about how styles are derived at all. Unbelievably, a new battle of the styles, as in the nineteenth century, between the 'vernacularists' and the 'classicists', is getting under way. In architecture the real struggle is whether we can learn to design our own future or whether the future will always have to be a re-creation

of the past. This struggle should become public property.

The conservative onslaught

A repeated theme of this article has been that certain discussions about architecture, currently the preserve of experts and professionals, should be the subject of public and political debate. In fact the terms of the debate are already being set by a strong and articulate intervention of conservatives in architecture. The regime of public spending cuts and the attack on the standards of public sector building is the sharp end of this onslaught. It is supported however by a set of more subtle offensives. Michael Heseltine, for example, has offered architects a new kind of settlement in return for their compliance in cuts in the building workload. This consists of a carefully-cultivated reputation as a man concerned about 'quality, not quantity' — implied in a number of judgements to prevent the destruction of historic buildings and in favour of slightly less than unbridled opportunities for property speculators in sites of scenic significance in central London. Beside this is a stated enthusiasm for the competition system of design for major public buildings. The practical record of such competitions in Britain in recent years is catastrophic. It says something for the architectural profession's attachment to the values of the marketplace (or the sweepstake) that they can applaud when this tattered card is brought out of the pack again. Parallel with these governmental moves is the development of an explicitly reactionary grouping of architectural critics whose aim is to attack all versions of modernism in architecture as aspects of fascist or bolshevist totalitarianism. Here the primacy of classical



architecture and the rule of taste are to be re-established. Architecture is to be seen as a distinct realm with its own laws unrelated to anything outside it. Where we would argue for the widening of the discussion of architecture in the various ways which have been sketched out, the thrust of this work is to narrow it. The art historian David Watkin has claimed that the notion of 'the spirit of the age' is at the root of the dangers of modernism and that this, 'combined with the historicist emphasis on progress and the necessary superiority of novelty, has come dangerously close to undermining on the one hand, or appreciation of the imaginative genius of the individual, and, on the other, the importance of artistic tradition.'³

The purpose and content of buildings, so the argument goes, is outside the scope of these discussions: social analysis and aesthetic theory have no business in common. 'Individual genius' and 'artistic tradition' are the key words in the aesthetic sphere, leaving the social sphere free for the play of the market. A century ago William Morris described this attitude as 'the tyranny compounded of utilitarianism and dilettantism'. It is the architecture of the workhouse: a well-proportioned facade, a classical pediment, a noble entrance. For those who pass through its door there is a life of iron discipline, of meagre subsistence, and a cold which freezes the breath. •

² Le Corbusier, *If I Had To Teach You Architecture*, first published 1938.

³ David Watkin, *Morality and Architecture*, p.115, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1977.