



Lloyd's (left): Dazzling technical skill, but to what purpose? White Hart Lane estate, Tottenham (centre): Inter-war 'cottage estate', garden city style. Alton East estate, Roehampton (right): One of the first 1950s 'point blocks', designed by left-wing architects

In his recent pronouncements about architecture the Prince of Wales offers himself as a representative of the people, of commonsense, against planners and architecture. Why do you think he got involved in condemning modern architecture and what is he saying about it?

**Martin** Seen from the outside Prince Charles talking about architecture in this country is a bit like Brigitte Bardot talking about animal rights in France. It's really because he's a celebrity that it has the purchase it does, not because he's an expert on the subject. It's part of a concern that such a person - who never has any money in his pocket and doesn't attempt to live in the real world - might express about the changing face of Britain. It's motivated by a simple human anxiety.

**Jules** I think that the issue found him rather than Prince Charles finding the issue. He was asked to make a speech and in this he expressed views, widely-held for at least 20 years, about modern architecture. Suddenly, 'the people' who loathe modern architecture - and that includes the press - found that they had a celebrity to front this issue.

**The high-rise housing debacle**

## Building Blocks

Prince Charles' views on architecture have brought the debate about the nature of postwar building into the headlines.

**Jos Boys talks to Martin Pawley and Jules Lubbock about the future of our urban landscape**

**finished in the mid 60s. So why is it that this debate has come up again in this form?**

**Martin** You can find royal interventions in architecture long before Charles - used very effectively by, for example, Prince Albert. But now it's basic conservatism, it's simply reactionary thought. In his present role he seems to be a front man for conservationists, and environmental reactionaries of different kinds. However, if you try to look beyond the surface - beyond the discussion of pillars, courtyards and pavements - you are left with the real issue: the continuing story of the housing problem.

**Jules** But there's a very simple and important issue here. Ever since modern architects began to get their hands on large public commissions - from about the

mid-1950s - there has been strong resistance to what they have been doing. This has been expressed in books, radio, tv, even in legislation. But, still, it appears that there is nothing that 'people' have been able to do, however strong their support, to stop the architectural profession running wild in its own particular way. Prince Charles' intervention is targeted at a profession which is out of control.

**Martin, would you not agree that there is something wrong with some aspects of modern architecture and do you not feel that there is a popular feeling against it?**

**Martin** The only thing that's wrong with modern architecture is that it ceased to have enough money to do its own PR.

**Jules** I don't believe that any amount of PR can do

any good for the faceless and reductive styles of architecture which constitute gross acts of disrespect to those people intended to live in the houses provided.

**It still has a popularity for non-housing uses such as office developments.**

**Jules** Yes. Of course, that's where modern architecture started.

**In the 1980s what do you see as the differences between the widely-held, ordinary common-sense opinion, that Prince Charles says he's supporting, and the free-market values of Thatcherism?**

**Jules** Charles is clearly an old-fashioned Tory, a paternalist. This is totally consistent with his background, Thatcher is exactly the opposite. She's a laissez-faire whig.

**But how do these differences come out in relation to architecture?**

**Jules** Take the Duchy of Cornwall's estates in London: they are well-designed streets and tenements which might meet with Charles' approval. By contrast, Thatcher has taken advantage of the way that the high-rise disaster destroyed the faith in public housing to promote a totally free market centred on home own-

ership. This brings us back to the tragedy of the undermining of the case for public housing. The Left was utterly silent in defending itself against the accusation that it was responsible for modernist public architecture - it wasn't. It was introduced by a Conservative government. **But under Richard Crossman wasn't the trend perpetuated?** **Jules** No, that's not true. Within 18 months of Labour being elected in 1964, legislation to remove the high-rise subsidy had already been prepared. This is fairly clear even from *The Crossman Diaries*. He had a pretty rapid change of heart about the virtues of the housing programme and Labour's approach to housing.

**Do you think the Left is coming round to agree with the Right in believing that modern architecture has not given people what they want?**

**Martin** I don't think design is that central. The Left is trying to solve the *real* housing problem, which is one of production. The whole question of taste and aesthetics in modern architecture is a blind alley - these issues are solved by success. Look at the car industry which has successfully modernised. A car is no longer a scarcity. Housing in Thatcher's Britain is founded on scarcity and this was exactly the opposite of the aims of architecture in regard to housing.

**Jules** Style is very important. I think that Bevan's policy when he was in charge of the housing programme was the correct one: to maintain minimal space standards you couldn't push the housing programme too far. It was in fact on this basis that Labour did badly in the elections of 1950 and 1951. The Tories promised 300,000 houses a year and they achieved this by reducing space standards by 10%. It was after 1956 that quality, which Bevan had upheld, went out of the window.

**Martin** But we need to be able to produce large numbers of houses. Then questions of taste will fall into their correct perspective.

**Jules** Unfortunately we

never will see it because that historical moment is over.

**Style has been an incredibly powerful weapon against the Left's housing and architectural legacy so, don't you think, at that level, you have to have some response?**

**Martin** It's a question of how you see the problem. I think it's a technical problem and not an aesthetic one to produce low-cost housing units.

**Jules** Let's talk about 'homes', not units, because people are expected to live in them.

**Martin** You always play into the hands of the Right, let's not talk in sentimentalities. The Left needs an objective language.

**Jules** A home isn't a romantic term. Is a 'moulding' romantic?

**Martin** It hasn't got much to do with the housing problem.

**Jules** I don't think that even the people living in the most desperate housing conditions would agree with you. People have always attempted to decorate their homes. That's why the problem is not simply one of production - it's about the quality of life. It's not a luxury. The problem with public sector housing was that it gave people very little opportunity to decorate. Indeed, councils often stopped people embellishing their houses by refusing to allow gnomes in gardens or dogs.

**The whole shift to post-modernism is about viewing architecture not as production but as consumption. Do you think that's a bad thing?**

**Martin** Yes. We need to understand that architecture has a checkered history. It came late to social concerns, its contribution was not totally successful, and now it's being booted out of them again.

The consumerisation of architecture means really the dissolving of the professional services of the architect. This is already happening. Architects no longer have a crucial role to play in the construction of the new world. Now they're really just playing with mouldings...



Spa Green estate, Finsbury: Late 1940s design from a collective of architectural radicals led by Berthold Lubetkin

**Jules** Architecture was the agent as well as the instrument in the postwar period. Architects got rid of by-law planning in 1947 and replaced it with laws that left all the initiative with the architects. The architects' charter was written. But there was nothing left wing about this architecture. Modern architecture was the architecture of Spencerean capitalism, it was the architecture of the modern, commercial man who no longer went around with aristocratic gold-braid.

**Architects do now give far greater weight to consumer taste as a clear priority. Why don't you like post-modernism?**

**Jules** Because it's architecture run even wilder, I would like to see the architect brought back under control of the by-law regulations. Architects should have to build within the parameters of a certain style.

**Martin** I don't like post-modernism because it's the architecture of investment in the private housing market, and the rising value of houses. Our houses are becoming distorted 'palaces' of equity. The decorative rules of post-modernism are the same as those that apply to

the design of bank notes and exactly the opposite to functional design. Post-modernism only has meaning in the superficiality of decoration and only values the increase in wealth.

**How do you see architecture developing?**

**Martin** I see it developing in two ways. The architecture that has kept pace with evolving technical demand, say in the financial services sector, will continue to develop in the modernist sense. But at the community architecture level, I see it ceasing to function as a profession. It will evolve into a low-level, undeveloped, technically obsolete branch of the building bureaucracy.

**Jules** I recently condemned the architectural profession in a talk I gave and afterwards several architects came up to me and said: 'All we want is to be creative'. I see no reason why architects alone in the construction industry should have the freedom to be creative. The battle to get this profession back on the rails is only just beginning. It's an enormous battle, it's a matter of reconstructing an architectural curriculum that will provide a common language building designers will be able to use. •