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**British architectural criticism of the 1930s: Reactions to
modernism**

Croft, Catherine F. A., M.A.

University of Delaware, 1991

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**BRITISH ARCHITECTURAL CRITICISM OF THE 1930S
REACTIONS TO MODERNISM**

by

Catherine F. A. Croft

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University
of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in Early American Culture

August 1991

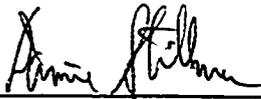
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BRITISH ARCHITECTURAL CRITICISM OF THE 1930S

REACTIONS TO MODERNISM

by

Catherine F. A. Croft

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PREFACE

During 1988 I was involved in the preparation of two exhibitions to be held in London at the Royal Institute of British Architects' Heinz Gallery. One of these planned to examine a single building form, the airport terminal, as it evolved during one decade--the 1930s. The other offered a retrospective of the work of the prolific ecclesiastical architect Sir Ninian Comper (1864-1960). Perhaps inevitably, I was prompted to attempt to compare Comper's work of the 1930s with the airport buildings and also with the contemporary designs for London Transport underground stations, as Charles Holden's drawings for these were being prepared concurrently for a subsequent exhibition.

Thus, for example, Comper's St. Philip's, Cosham, Portsmouth, 1935-39,² and Ramsgate Municipal Airport,

²This building was selected by both Lord Berners and Sir John Betjeman as one of the best recent British buildings in an opinion poll organized in 1939 by Architects' Journal. See p. 51. Another example of Comper's work, St. Mary's, Wellingborough (1904-1931), was included in the R. I. B. A.'s Centennial Exhibition, 1934. It was seen as encouraging evidence of plurality of approach; the catalogue included the following comment:

1936,² by David Pleydell-Bouverie were both public buildings in southern coastal towns less than one-hundred-and-fifty miles apart going up at the same time. Both made use of modern building methods and materials,³ yet the fusion of English Gothic and Mediterranean forms of the former seemed to have nothing in common with the latter's sleek lines and wrap-around glazing. Whilst St. Peter's is remarkable for its revival of the central plan of the Renaissance church, Ramsgate airport epitomized the machine aesthetic, with its swept-back plan deliberately airplane-shaped (a conceit that could only fully be appreciated from the air).

At the Winterthur Museum, my growing interest in material culture methodology prompted me to re-examine British architecture of the 1930s. If, as Jules David Prown concluded, artifacts are "excellent and special indexes of culture, concretations of the realities of belief of other

It is to be hoped that such beautiful work on such sound traditional lines will be studied and admired alongside the more daring adventures in what we know as modern art (p. 147).

²Now demolished.

³The columns and vaults of St. Peter's are of fibrous plaster on steel and concrete; the windows are cast in artificial stone. Anthony Symondson, The Life and Work of Sir Ninian Comper (London: Royal Institute of British Architects, 1988), p. 25.

people in other times and places,"⁴ what were the important beliefs in Britain in this period and why could I identify no coherent "cultural stylistic fingerprint"⁵. If the diversity that puzzled me was symptomatic of a diversity of ideals, I wanted to discover a method of understanding the relationship between these conflicting value systems. This led me to carry out a study of the architectural literature of the period, both in specialist and more general newspapers and magazines. I wanted to discover not only what opinions were held by contemporary critics, but what audience they appeared to believe themselves to be addressing and whether, in fact, they were successful in communicating with that audience.

I should like to thank the many members of staff and fellow students at the Winterthur Museum and the University of Delaware who offered me advice and encouragement in connection with my thesis. I am particularly grateful to my adviser, Dr. Damie Stillman, to Amy Weisser, John Bacon and, in England, to Mark Turner of the Silver Studio and to my father, Roy Croft.

⁴"Mind in Matter," Winterthur Portfolio 17 (1982): 16.

⁵Jules David Prown, "Style as Evidence," Winterthur Portfolio 15 (1980): 200.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses British architectural criticism of the 1930s in both specialist and general-interest books and periodicals. It concentrates on the reactions to European modernism, noting that the evident split between modernists and traditionalists is symptomatic of a universal polarity of opinion during this decade.

Both modernist and traditionalist critics reinforced their arguments through the deliberate exploitation of linguistic style, paralleling the stylistic diversity of built form. The humor of architectural criticism and its intended audience are also examined. It is concluded that both traditionalists and, more surprisingly, modernists were writing for a middle-class intellectual elite.

It is proposed that the discontinuity of architectural discourse caused by World War II allowed for a subsequent de-contextualized reading of 1930s criticism.

Two myths were thus established--that modernism was understood and admired by the whole population during the 1930s and that modernism was perceived as suitable for domestic buildings. Evidence indicates that neither was true.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The architectural literature of the 1930s is remarkable for a diversity similar to that exhibited by actual buildings erected during the period. There is a parallel split in both linguistic style and subject matter between those works that sought to promote International Style architecture and those that gave voice to more conservative opinions. This thesis concentrates on contemporary reactions, both positive and negative, to the influx of new ideas from the Continent; direct reactions to the work of such architects as Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier and, more importantly, to British interpretations of European modernism. The range of publications produced and the sympathies and affiliations of their authors were analyzed. Alternatives to written communication and the nature of the intended audience for each form of information were also investigated. Thus, the diffusion and the spread of knowledge throughout the whole population, rather than the architectural profession alone, is a central issue. Two

particular aspects of this process were investigated: first, what group of people constituted the modernist and traditionalist conceptions of "the general public"; and second, how each group exploited prose style to reinforce their arguments and values. The concluding chapter surveys the 1930s architectural scene in the light of this investigation and seeks explanation for the post-War enthusiasm for, and subsequent rapid disillusionment with, Modern Movement architecture.

It is important to note at this point that in Great Britain in the 1930s, architecture (and the other arts) became very closely involved with politics. Supporters of the Modern Movement in architecture identified themselves closely with progressive, mainly left-wing political ideals and aspirations. On the other hand, opponents of the Modern Movement, who saw themselves as defenders of traditional architectural values, tended also to support traditional, hierarchical social values. In recent years some contemporary writers have argued that one consequence of this politicization of the architectural debate has been that the influence of the modern movement in the 1930s has become over-emphasized. They have sought to redress the balance by drawing attention to good work by architects who avoided identifying themselves too closely with either the

Modern Movement or opposition to it.⁶ Nevertheless, even in 1979 a study of the art and literature of the 1930s displayed a deliberate bias inherent in many post-War works. Concentrating on explicitly left-wing works with a political agenda, it stated that:

The culture of the thirties gained in strength and vitality by confronting instead of attempting to evade the profound economic and political crisis of those years. . . . [T]he commitment generated in the crisis was fundamental to the very real cultural achievement of the thirties.⁷

Such commitment is obviously not essential to the production of interesting architectural design. Examining the architecture of the 1930s with the benefit of hindsight, it is obvious that "Fascist" design was by no means the sole alternative, and many who did attempt to "evade" the sense of crisis produced exemplary work. By concentrating only on the work of one largely self-identifying section of society, this particular collection of essays fails to give an accurate assessment of the relative significance of left-wing artists and writers.

⁶David Watkin, "Architectural Writing of the Thirties," in Britain in the Thirties, ed. Gavin Stamp (London: Architectural Design, 1980), pp. 84-89; Alan Powers, Oliver Hill (London: Royal Institute of British Architects, 1989).

⁷Jon Clark, Margot Heinemann, David Margolies and Carole Snee, eds., "Forward," Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), p. 7.

This thesis attempts to avoid similar pitfalls by examining the architectural criticism of the 1930s within its contemporary social and political framework by drawing on the works of both right and left. It is of fundamental importance to realize that many critics writing during the 1930s equated the modernist/traditionalist architectural divide directly with the political sympathies of its propagators. C. H. Reilly used explicitly political terminology, referring to left-wing and right-wing designs, in many of his end-of-year summaries for the Architects' Journal, but he was not alone. The journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, for example, made the following comments when discussing the broad range of society:

Two factions have tended to range themselves behind two existing regimes, the U. S. S. R. and the Third Reich, and have therefore felt bound to justify the acts of the one, whatever they may be, and abhor those of the other, whatever they may be.*

George Orwell's largely autobiographical The Road to Wigan Pier, published in 1937, is perhaps the most forthright exposé of the deep-seated class snobbery prevalent throughout the decade:

*The Thirties: 1930-1940 in Great Britain (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1940), p. 23.

A European of bourgeois upbringing, even when he calls himself a Communist, cannot without a hard effort think of a working man as his equal.⁹

Any study of this period must remain aware of the complex interaction of the political, economic and class divisions that governed British society. As Orwell explained,

The essential point about the English class-system is that it is not entirely explicable in terms of money. Roughly speaking it is a money stratification, but it is also interpenetrated by a sort of shadowy caste-system; rather like a jerry-built modern bungalow haunted by medieval ghosts.¹⁰

Although modernism was energetically promoted by an articulate and committed minority, it received only partial acceptance during the pre-War period. The political and social ambitions of the modernists had always formed a large part of the rationale for the development of the International Style. However, these were realized to a far greater extent during the 1950s and 1960s than during the 1930s. Whereas the majority of built examples of the new style during the first period were private houses for the wealthy, the post-war "triumph of modernism" led to the investment of large sums of public money in major building projects, both housing and public buildings. Subsequent

⁹(London: Seckler and Warburg, 1986), p. 119.

¹⁰Road to Wigan Pier, p. 114.

revulsion against schemes specifically designed to improve drastically the lifestyle of the mass of the population has led to the belated discovery that modern architecture lacks broad popular appeal and with few exceptions has never found favor with the general public. Can this lack of understanding and failure to communicate, particularly with the working-class population of Britain, be traced back to the evangelizing architectural criticism of the 1930s?

CHAPTER 2

THE 1930S--A DECADE OF CHANGE AND DIVISION

The 1930s was a period of rapid change, of political upheaval and of technological innovation. A feeling of general unrest and instability, from which architecture was not immune, seems to have permeated all levels of society and all creative fields. This mood of uncertainty and its effects, its pertinence to their work, was frequently described by architects themselves in dramatic, even apocalyptic terms:

Amid a chorus of confused ideas we are always being told that our own age is different from the immediate past, that it is an age of youth, an age of hurry, an age of machinery, and that what has been can never be again.¹¹

A younger generation, its vision unclouded by nostalgic yearnings for an Edwardian golden age, was enthusiastic to experiment, to form a new type of building for a new way of life, fuller, healthier, more egalitarian.

¹¹"Ourselves and Europe," editorial, Architectural Review 61 (June 1927): 1.

Although not always blithely disregarding all limitations, this generation was more optimistic:

Our time is a period of crisis, a borderline between two ages. It is not surprising, therefore, that modern architecture is still rather harsh and unformed, representing as it does the unsettled world in which it arises.¹²

Modern architecture represented the way forward, a brave experiment that would inevitably mature as the new golden age arose from the chaos.

Writing at the end of the decade, Mugeridge expressed the cynical view that every age feels exactly the same sense of crisis and struggle for direction:

Each generation of men are convinced that their difficulties and achievements are unparalleled. One of the few constants in life for the individual and for the community is a sense of crisis.¹³

However, the 1930s had certainly set new challenges and offered new opportunities in many fields, frequently impacting specifically on domestic building design. In addition to developments in steel and concrete fabrication methods and the increasing manufacture of mass-produced components, other technological advances could be exploited

¹²Hugh Casson, "The Spirit of Modern Building," Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects 67 (7 March 1938): 449.

¹³The Thirties, p. 1.

by architects. In 1933 the National Grid was completed; for the first time electric power (as opposed to electricity for lighting purposes) was widely available in the home.

A. J. P. Taylor has noted how the introduction of the portable electric fire made it simple to move from one room to another with unprecedented flexibility.¹⁴ During the decade car ownership rose from less than two-hundred-thousand to more than one million,¹⁵ making the week-end house more viable and leading to the development of new areas of the country. Smaller families were the fashion, mainly because of economic uncertainty, with readier availability of contraception assisting the trend. This, combined with the sharp decline in the number of servants, meant that fewer people were inhabiting each individual dwelling. With the introduction of "talkies," the cinema became increasingly popular and, together with a flourishing photo-journalism industry, broadened the public's visual awareness.

¹⁴"The Thirties," in Thirties: British Art and Design before the War, ed. Jennifer Hawkins and Marianne Hollis (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979), p. 6.

¹⁵Concern over safety standards led to the introduction, in 1935, of the driving test. Between March and May, 33,824 people took the test and 3,045 failed, an astonishingly high proportion of those presumably already on the roads. Marjorie and C. H. B. Quennell, The Good New Days (London: B. T. Batsford, 1935), p. 41.

Some innovations in transport technology seemed purely positive--indeed little short of miraculous. The public imagination was captivated by repeated capping of land, water and airspeed records. However the spectacular crash of the airship R101 in 1930 cast doubt over man's mastery of new territory.

At the same time a series of largely political events undermined many of the bastions of traditional society, for so long regarded as unimpregnable. The abandonment of the Gold Standard in 1931 had a symbolic significance far more fundamental than its immediate economic effect. In 1931 a section of the British Navy at Invergordon mutinied in protest at cuts in wages, and in 1936 Edward VIII was forced to abdicate. British pride in the Empire was challenged by Gandhi's programme of civil disobedience in India. Church attendance was in decline and atheism gained intellectual and moral credibility. Julian Huxley used an interesting analogy. In his view humanism was a more logical and sophisticated explanation for the existence of man and would inevitably supersede religion in a society that prioritized scientific rationalism:

God was for some millennia a very useful hypothesis about the universe and human destiny, just as Newtonian mechanics was for some centuries a very useful hypothesis about the physical world.

. . . But now Newtonian mechanics have had to be discarded in favour of Einsteinian. The God-hypothesis too is meeting with inherent contradictions and unexplained facts, . . . and we are gradually finding that the naturalistic-humanistic hypothesis is a better one.¹⁶

Even on the cricket field, seemingly unassailable values of fair play were under attack. The "bodyline" bowling techniques deployed against the Australians by the upper-class captain Jardin, through the agency of the working-class bowlers Larwood and Voce in 1933, caused moral indignation and booing at test matches.

For all sections of society two issues caused the most fundamental concern. Unprecedentedly high levels of unemployment, although having greatest impact in major industrial regions, could not be ignored by the more affluent southeast. In 1936 MP Ellen Wilkinson and eight-hundred laid-off shipbuilders marched to London, this Jarrow Crusade dramatically demonstrating the poverty and unrest in regions such as Tyneside. Although the activities of Sir Oswald Mosley in Britain and the rise of the Nazi party in Germany were initially tolerated, fascism was seen as increasingly sinister and even more of a threat to political and social stability than revolution sparked by

¹⁶If I were Dictator (London: Harper Brothers, 1934), pp. 10-11.

unemployment. By 1933 Hitler was in power, and an Air Raid Precaution (ARP) department was set up by the Home Office as early as 1935. Perhaps the changing climate of opinion and increasing disregard for old standards was best exemplified by the "notorious refusal of the Oxford Union to fight for King and Country."¹⁷ At least one section of the new generation was anxious to demonstrate that it sought a new order.

Call for radical change was, however, far from universal in 1930s society. In a decade remarkable for a polarization of views, there was a definitive split between the progressive and the reactionary opinion on almost every subject. Many people saw this as an inevitable response to the contemporary climate:

In this age of Transition it will be found that architectural design (as indeed all artistic effort) leans either towards the traditional or the new age.¹⁸

Orwell saw it as an increasing tendency throughout the decade:

The times are growing harsher, the issues are clearer. . . . The fence on which the literary gent sits, once as comfortable as the plush

¹⁷The Oxford University Debating Society. Taylor, "Thirties," p. 8.

¹⁸Patrick Abercrombie, ed., The Book of the Modern House: A Panoramic Survey of Contemporary Domestic Design (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1939), pp. vii-viii.

cushion of a cathedral stall, is now pinching his bottom intolerably; more and more he shows a disposition to drop off on one side or the other.¹⁹

The phenomenon was certainly not confined to the arts. Malcolm Muggeridge discussed the growth of "two rival heavens-on-earth,"²⁰ be they conceived as "nationalism and internationalism; Christianity and atheism, dictatorship and democracy, capitalism and communism, tyranny and freedom, bourgeoisie and proletariat."²¹ To this list could be added "Cornice and non-cornice men--traditionalists and modernists."²²

¹⁹The Road to Wigan Pier, p. 196.

²⁰The Thirties, p. 23.

²¹Muggeridge, The Thirties, p. 23.

²²Opinion of Maurice Webb; quoted in Architectural Review 70 (July 1931), caption to Pl. VII. The term traditionalist gained rapid and universal acceptance; it was conveniently broad and vague and thus more generally acceptable than other suggestions, such as "Classic":

Perusal of the year's work suggests that we have reached in this country a stage when architectural design is definitely dividing itself into two schools--the modernists and the classicists; the latter including, of course, those who work in any of the past styles, Gothic equally with Classic.

C. H. Reilly, "Landmarks of the Year: A Retrospective of 1928," Architects' Journal 65 (9 January, 1929): 44-55.

This denial of the possibility of a middle ground, of a gradual spectrum of opinion, was entrenched in children from an early age:

The whole point of education is to be able to judge between Good and Evil; Beauty and Ugliness; Truth and Deceit. . . . The Devil is never so black as when he clothes himself in grey.²³

However, maintaining two options between which to choose was seen as positive, as a way of avoiding a totalitarianism similar to the regimes currently being established in Germany and the U. S. S. R. As the British House of Commons physically reinforced the concept of a two-party system, this bi-partite divisionism may have been seen as a specifically British perception of the ideal state of the world. Julian Huxley described how, in his ideal state, public art would be commissioned:

I shall arrange for a system . . . two organizations, Right and Left, each with their own council and staff and personnel . . . one can imagine the excitement when a school board or town council had to vote for Right or Left over the decorations for a new school, pride of the district, or a town council make up its mind as to the general style for a new council chamber.²⁴

Already, by 1930, when it was necessary to draw up a jury to adjudicate the competition for the new

²³Quennell, The Good New Days, pp. 2-3.

²⁴Huxley, If I Were Dictator, p. 150.

R. I. B. A. Headquarters building, two definitive camps of architectural opinion were recognized. In the Architect's Journal of 14 May 1930, A. Trystan Edwards was asked to argue "Why I think the Jury should respect the English tradition," whilst, in a parallel column on the same page, Frederick Towndrow expressed the opposing view: "Why I think the Jury should be essentially modern."²⁵

Early in the decade the influence of Swedish design, as seen at the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition, had been widely admired:

The Swedes are definitely adapting themselves to modern ideas, and have created not only dwellings but their equipment such as furniture, glass, etc., all . . . pleasing to look at and delightful to live with.²⁶

²⁵"Style v. Style: From which side should the R. I. B. A. Jury be Picked?" Architects' Journal 67 (May 14, 1930): 745. However, the R. I. B. A. Building, Portland Place, London, erected by Grey Wornum in 1934, became the pre-eminent example of an attempt to please all extremes. Similarly, in 1935 the R. I. B. A. awarded their Gold Medal to W. M. Dudok:

The older generation hailed him as their only anchor against the modernists, whilst the younger men gave thanks that the Royal Gold Medal hangs at last around a really contemporary neck.

Architects' Journal 77 (April 25, 1935): 618.

²⁶Sir Harold Wernher, "Progress. The Swedish Contribution." Architectural Review 68 (August 1930): 52.

However, the flourishing middle ground this interest seemed likely to promote failed to materialize. Muggeridge concluded that, despite confusion over nomenclature and apparent shifting loyalties, all the dialectical conflicts of the 1930s were essentially manifestations of the same ideological rift:

A deep cleavage of opinion, a deep discord between two expressions of the same spirit of romantic materialism--a Brave New World and a Brave Old World facing one another and menacingly flourishing the same weapons. More and more this conflict came to provide the underlying pattern of thought, whether in politics, literature or religion. It became an obsession from which no one was wholly immune.²⁷

Both sides were anxious to stress that their creed was not narrowly interested in improving or preserving physical conditions. Julian Huxley epitomized the "Brave New World":²⁸

My philosophy, then, is scientific humanism. It is rational, but not jejune rationalist; that is to say, it does not seek to minimize the emotions, nor to belittle the mysteries, the horrors, or the glories of existence.²⁹

²⁷Muggeridge, The Thirties, p. 24.

²⁸The expression "Brave New World" caught the public imagination and gained ironic weight in 1932, when Julian Huxley's brother Aldous used it as the title for one of the first futuristic novels to express disenchantment with technology and point to the dehumanizing effect of machinery.

²⁹If I Were Dictator, p. 8.

However, the essentially materialist motivations of both sides, albeit ideologically driven, should not be underestimated, especially in relation to architecture. These concerns are probably responsible for the imagery of much contemporary comment.

A review of Frederick Etchell's 1927 translation of Le Corbusier's Vers une Architecture made explicit use of a military metaphor that had been suggested by other writers. This review reiterated the model of polarized opinion but also introduced a third vital factor--as yet unformed public opinion. It described the traditionalists' faction "secure behind the sandbags of its close organization and in the bulk of its own inertia." It predicted that what had already been witnessed was only a few minor skirmishes in comparison with the "fight for supremacy" to come. This battle would be fought out in no-man's land; victory would go not to whichever side convinced the ranks of the opposition, but to that which won favor with the general public.³⁰ It is precisely because this was so strongly believed by all architectural writers in the 1930s that the ways in which the general public was

³⁰Gordon H. G. Holt, "The Merit of Le Corbusier," review of Towards a New Architecture by Le Corbusier, trans. Frederick Etchells, in Architectural Review 64 (1928): n.p.

didactically addressed, and exactly what kind of person was perceived as comprising this category, are fundamentally important issues.

CHAPTER 3

THE 1930S--A DECADE OF ARCHITECTURAL REJUVENATION

One of the most interesting aspects of British architectural history during the decade of the 1930s is that whilst the country faced growing economic and political problems, its international reputation for innovation in the arts generally and architecture in particular rose enormously. It is important to note that this was not due to an increased respect for traditional architectural values in a period of growing worldwide instability, but stemmed directly from Britain's growing acceptance of modern architecture as well as the increasing concentration of critical attention on a small fraction of the new buildings erected.

What made Britain receptive to new ideas? Fundamentally, foreign ideas appealed to those who perceived a profound lack of inspiration, a void in home-bred theoretical debate. At the turn of the century the legacy of the Arts and Crafts movement and Garden City reforms had

focused world attention inwards, on Britain itself. The work of Parker and Unwin, C. R. Ashbee, C. F. A. Voysey, M. H. Baillie Scott and Charles Rennie Mackintosh was widely published and admired on the Continent. This interest was epitomized by the publication of Hermann Muthesius' Das Englische Haus--a project financed by German governmental funds. Despite this earlier pre-eminence, by the early Thirties progress had stagnated and Britain had lost its cultural lead:

The generally conservative character of the arts in Great Britain during the last generation is so well known as to be exaggerated.³¹

This was seen as part of a widespread malaise that had a particularly detrimental effect upon architectural innovation:

In England there is scarcely any intellectual or literary support for those who are groping towards a modern idea in architecture.³²

Indeed, so pervasive was their lack of confidence in British architecture that many authors discounted everything built since the Regency, believing that up until this point there had been steady evolution and increasing refinement of

³¹Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Jr., and Catherine K. Bauer, Modern Architecture in Britain (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1937), p. 9.

³²H. Robertson, "Some Recent French Developments in Domestic Architecture," Architectural Review 61 (June 1927): 2.

design but that this line of progress had been completely undermined by the "Battle of the Styles" of Victorian eclecticism.

It is therefore surprising that by 1937 a foreign author who had previously expressed highly dismissive opinions began to notice a radical change. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, who, with Philip Johnson and Alfred Barr, had coined the term "International Style" in 1932 with an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, decided that English architecture now merited an exhibition:

Today, it is not altogether an exaggeration to say that England leads the world in modern architectural activity.²³

The examples Hitchcock chose to illustrate did not attempt to survey the broad architectural scene; they were all Modern Movement buildings. Many of the works selected were the work of Continental architects who had emigrated to Britain as a result of the increasingly threatening political climate in their native countries. Erich Mendelsohn had arrived in London in 1933; Marcel Breuer and Walter Gropius followed in 1934. These architects, who had all established prestigious reputations abroad, worked in collaboration with British architects. Hitchcock's

²³Hitchcock and Bauer, Modern Architecture in Britain, p. 25.

catalogue included two buildings in Bristol by Breuer and F. R. S. Yorke and two adjacent houses in Church Street, Chelsea, one by Mendelsohn and Serge Chermayeff, the other by Gropius³⁴ and his partner E. Maxwell Fry.

Undoubtedly part of the reason for Hitchcock's focus on Britain was the presence of these leading Modern Movement protagonists in Britain, combined with economic conditions on the Continent that had substantially limited the amount of any type of building in the countries that had previously been most innovative. However, he was not just praising foreign buildings erected by force of circumstance on British soil. Hitchcock aimed to demonstrate that there was a new British architecture, albeit part of a wider international movement. This concurred with the British modernists' own perceptions of themselves. In contrast to the traditionalists, they were eager to organize themselves into groups to facilitate discussion and to promote their views--to attract both public notice and the attention of such influential taste-makers as Hitchcock.

³⁴Gropius was to have an especially important impact in Britain. Fry recalls him reading, in translation, a lecture to accompany an exhibition of his work at the R. I. B. A.: He "filled us with a fervour as moral as it was aesthetic." Autobiographical Sketches (London: Elek, 1975), p. 147.

Two early attempts proved short-lived. In 1930 the Twentieth Century Group's founder members were predominantly young architects, including Wells Coates and Roger McGrath.³⁵ Born in Japan of Canadian parents, Wells Coates had studied engineering in Vancouver and London before turning his attention to journalism,³⁶ interior design and architecture. McGrath was born in Australia and studied architecture in Sydney before receiving a research fellowship at Cambridge. The Twentieth Century Group was encouraged by Cambridge don Mansfield Forbes, who had employed McGrath to work on his house "Finella." Herbert Read fulfilled a similar inspirational role for the members of Unit One. This organization consisted largely of painters and sculptors, including Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, but architects Wells Coates and Colin Lucas participated and were thus identified with a broader conception of the modern movement in the visual arts.

In 1933 M. A. R. S., the Modern Architecture Research Group, was formed as the English branch of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne, C. I. A. M.

³⁵The others were Serge Chermayeff, Frederick Etchells, Jack Pritchard and Howard Robertson.

³⁶Not initially architectural journalism. Coates was Paris correspondent for the Daily Express and also wrote a popular science column.

The founding officers were again Wells Coates, assisted by E. Maxwell Fry and F. R. S. Yorke. Two of the partners of the firm Tecton,³⁷ David Pleydell-Bouverie (Wells Coates's partner from 1933 until 1935), together with Amayas Connell and Basil Ward (both New Zealanders) and their English partner from 1933, Colin Lucas, were also members from the very beginning. M. A. R. S. also had four non-architect members, all established writers for the Architectural Review, Hubert de Cronin Hastings, P. Morton Shand, John Gloag and John Betjeman.

As is frequently the case, the conservative traditionalists were less well organized than the progressive modernists. Whilst the latter were anxious to speak as spokesmen for a unified creed, reactionary criticism was perceived as a series of more idiosyncratic individual opinions. The leading protagonists did not organize themselves into any coherent organizational group nor, as might have been expected, were they all established members of an old-guard faction of the R. I. B. A. or of the Art Workers Guild. Thus, the organizational framework existed to ensure that motivated observers would find modernist views more easily accessible. Hitchcock must have

³⁷Godfrey Samuel and R. T. F. Skinner.

been made aware of many of the works of native British architects and their colleagues from the dominions, for which he expressed unqualified admiration, through the activities of these groups and particularly through the writings of members of this tight-knit coterie.

CHAPTER 4
ARCHITECTURAL CRITICS OF THE 1930S

It was the enthusiastic supporters of modernism who produced the greatest quantity of architectural criticism in the 1930s. They saw themselves as seeking the public acceptance of a radically different form of architecture, the result of a fundamentally new approach to planning, individual building use and construction. In seeking to correct commonly-held misconceptions, the critics emphasized the subservient role of aesthetic concerns:

By "modern" I mean a building where every part has been thought out from the point of view of its service and not from the point of view of its visible effect: a building where consciousness of beauty has been used only as a means to an end, and not the end itself; where the aesthetic apprehension of the designer has been used only to detect and draw out the underlying efficiency, and not to superimpose artistic predilections upon the organic nature of his subject.³⁸

The modernists found "style" a problematic term. Despite recognizing an aesthetic coherence to the body of new work,

³⁸F. E. Towndrow, Architecture in the Balance: An Approach to the Art of Scientific Humanism (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1933), p. 7.

they resisted any sort of stylistic categorization, arguing that it was not in any style at all:

Wherever you find identical forms in different places, you can be sure it was due to the adoption of a similar solution for a similar problem [rather than following a formularistic style] . . . We reject the traditional concept of "style" first, because it gainsays sincere and appropriate design; and secondly, because the link between quite justifiable differences in appearance produces the sort of contrast we consider is characteristic of modern life.³⁹

By redefining the valid territory for criticism, modernists enhanced their deliberately revolutionary stance and further prioritized their social and political ambitions. They aimed to publish not merely the next chapter in Britain's architectural history, but new concepts that would have universal impact.

David Watkin notes with regret that whilst the 1920s had been remarkable for the quantity of excellent books of architectural history and theory, during the 1930s the majority of intellectual energy was diverted into journalism.⁴⁰ Journalism probably gained in importance for a number of reasons; the feeling of rapid change and development in all branches of the profession, and in

³⁹Marcel Breuer, "Where Do We Stand?" Architectural Review 77 (April 1935): 136.

⁴⁰The Rise of Architectural History (London: Architectural Press, 1983), p. 132.

preservation issues in particular, meant that writers were anxious to get in print fast. Although some writers used journalism as a necessary supplement to their earnings whilst struggling to establish a practice, it is remarkable how many, even amongst the modernist group, came from wealthy backgrounds and were presumably as financially able to spend time writing longer works as their predecessors had been.

The majority of architectural periodicals rapidly became enthusiastic promoters of modernism. It has already been noted that in 1933 four members of the staff of the Architectural Review were founder members of M. A. R. S. From 1928, when Hastings had become editor, this journal had become increasingly sympathetic to the Modern Movement, from 1932 he was also editor of the Architects' Journal. His, colleague P. Morton Shand, was described by Maxwell Fry with a mixture of condescension and awe as:

A supercilious Etonian with a private income, an international gourmet (since they are seldom homebred), an enthusiast heavily disguised as a diplomat, trilingual and exceedingly cultivated."

John Gloag, in contrast to the great majority of his contemporaries at the Architectural Review, described

"Fry, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 138.

himself as "largely self-educated."¹² He was not a product of the public school-Oxbridge system, but attended Battersea Grammar School and then studied architecture briefly at the Regent Street Polytechnic before World War I. He was a prolific broadcaster as well as the author of numerous novels and architecture and design books which displayed his strong interest in social history. The fourth M. A. R. S. member was John Betjeman, who later became poet laureate. He was, at this period, both an ardent advocate of modernism and a man of strong antiquarian interests.

Betjeman had great respect for one colleague in particular:

There was on the other paper, a man called John Summerson--still to me the best writer living on architecture--in those days . . . diffident cool and rather detached. The other paper was the Architect and Building News, but he used to write reviews for the Architectural Review under the name of Coolmore . . . Ever since then I have called that great man Coolmore, because it does rather describe him. He stops over-enthusiasm.¹³

Architect and Building News, the main rival to Architectural Review, shared many of its ideals and even some of its contributors. John Betjeman recalled that pragmatic

¹²Who's Who: An Annual Biographical Dictionary, 1973-4 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974), p. 1231.

¹³John Betjeman, "A Preservationist's Progress," in The Future of the Past, ed. Jane Fawcett (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 57.

financial considerations were responsible for maintaining some breadth of coverage:

Sometimes I used to have to go to architects of the neo-Renaissance school who in those days were disapproved of by advanced people. But as their buildings brought in advertisements for ironwork, Portland stone and electric light fittings, they were tolerated.⁴⁴

However, Sir Reginald Blomfield's experience in the hands of the architectural press is indicative of a widespread pro-modern bias. Only two professional journals were sympathetic to his book, Modernismus--the Builder and the Carpenter and Builder.⁴⁵

Country Life, owned and edited by its founder Edward Hussey (1854-1936) until his death, offered more balanced coverage. Christopher Hussey (1899-1970), who contributed a weekly article on architecture, was primarily an expert on Georgian and Edwardian architecture, but reviewed some Modern Movement houses with qualified admiration. For example, he included a very enthusiastic quotation from the owner of a house by Howe and Lescaze to conclude his article on one of their buildings: "Serenity, clarity, and a kind

⁴⁴John Betjeman, "Frederick Etchells," Architectural Review 154 (October 1973): 273.

⁴⁵"For and Against Modern Architecture," The Listener 12 (November 28, 1934): 885.

of openness are its distinguishing features."⁴⁶ In addition, Country Life also approached more ardent modernists; in 1928 Randel Phillips wrote an influential piece on the early modernist housing at Silver End.⁴⁷ Many non-specialist periodicals also carried articles on architecture and in particular the effect of new developments on interior and product design. G. M. Bounphrey contributed a column entitled "The Modern Home" to The Spectator. This, like its rival political weekly The Nation and Athenaeum,⁴⁸ was largely sympathetic to modernism. Both also carried prolific book reviews which reached a far wider audience than the books themselves.

The most persistent and prominent opponent of modernism was Sir Reginald Blomfield (1856-1942), an architect with a flourishing country-house practice. Described as "the doyen of his profession and the greatest

⁴⁶"High Cross Hill, Dartington Hill, Devon: The Residence of Mr. W. B. Curry," Country Life 73 (February 11, 1933): 149.

⁴⁷"Some Houses at Silver End Garden Village, Essex, designed by Mr. Thomas S. Tait," Country Life 64 (October 27, 1928): 601-602.

⁴⁸This was absorbed by The New Statesman by the middle of the decade.

writer on architecture of his generation,"⁴⁹ Blomfield was educated at Haileybury and Oxford, entered his father's firm and was for a while a member of the Art Workers Guild and a strong advocate of Arts and Crafts principles. Blomfield's mature style, however, was a heavy, French-inspired classicism for which there was still plenty of demand in the 1930s. He published extensively during the early decades of the twentieth-century, and, despite the more eclectic sources of his design work, his opinions came to epitomize the intensely insular and patriotic Edwardian worship of England and all things English. Watkin notes how he "interprets everything he admires about English architecture as the expression of permanent racial characteristics."⁵⁰

Blomfield was also a frequent radio commentator on architecture. His written and spoken style varied little (perhaps because the BBC required participants to submit a text of their talks for approval before broadcasting live). Invited to put the traditionalist viewpoint, he could be relied upon to state his position unequivocally. His tone was occasionally that of "the indignant schoolmaster

⁴⁹Martin S. Briggs, Building Today (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 34.

⁵⁰The Rise of Architectural History, p. 97.

reprimanding a class of naughty boys that have played truant";⁵¹ he had a cajoling but rather pompous manner, and his appeals to everyday common sense were frequently patronizing. Often he expressed a deliberate refusal to follow modernist trains of thought, completely denying the logic of any argument.

Blomfield forfeited public sympathy and his unchallenged position as the leading proponent and supporter of classicism through his involvement in a scheme to redevelop Carlton House Terrace. Although Nash's stucco façades, for many years little regarded, were currently being reevaluated, one part of this plan went ahead. No. 4 Carlton Gardens was demolished and rebuilt to Blomfield's designs before a public outcry halted further work. This meant that when Blomfield's most scathing attack on the modern movement, Modernismus, was published, he was no longer the respectable establishment figure he had been, which lessened the book's impact. Blomfield thus became a slightly ridiculous figure. However, if baiting the traditionalists was proof of one's modernist allegiance, provoking an outburst from him definitely confirmed one's credentials. As John Summerson recalls,

⁵¹"A National Style," Country Life 75 (10 March, 1934): 236.

Another Frogmal house, the one designed by Connell, Ward and Lucas in 1938, always seems to me over-conscious of its modernity ('I'll show Sir Reginald!')⁵²

It is ironic that the most ubiquitous example of Blomfield's design remains the electricity-grid pylon.

Another well-established architect who chose to express his strong dislike of modernist design in print was M. Hugh Baillie Scott (1865-1945). Scott, unlike Blomfield, had remained true to an early Arts and Crafts career. His education was less conventional, and he had not had the opportunity to learn directly from leading members of the first generation of Arts and Crafts architects. Baillie Scott studied at Cirencester Agricultural College before being articled to the Bath City Architect, C. E. Davis. He then worked in the Isle of Man for many years before arriving in London in 1901 and establishing himself as an outstanding proponent of Arts and Crafts architecture. In 1933, together with a fellow architect, A. Edgar Beresford, he published Houses and Gardens. This is outspoken in a manner which reveals their own particular values:

⁵²John Summerson, Introduction to Trevor Dannatt, Modern Architecture in Britain (London: Batsford, 1959), p. 17. Incidentally, Blomfield had built a house for himself in Frogmal.

The mechanical productions of the designer, with their repellent and startling incongruities, are not only practically absurd but destructive of all that natural beauty of the world of Nature which the old builders knew so well how to emphasise and adorn.⁵³

The traditionalist camp lacked unity. The preservation societies which might have seemed likely fora for reactionary solidarity were in fact supported by both modernist and traditionalist architects. Robert Byron (1905-1941), who was instrumental in the founding of the Georgian Group, wrote for the Architectural Review and was both a strong supporter of Sir Edwin Luytens and an acknowledged expert on Byzantine architecture. He described European modernism as a "fatal infection of architectural thought,"⁵⁴ but was particularly vehement in his attacks against Blomfield over the Carlton House Terrace issue. Therefore, to a certain extent the growth of preservation societies split the traditionalist camp and focused the energy of such figures as Clough Williams-Ellis on the less controversial issue of protecting the countryside from suburban sprawl by tightening planning control.

⁵³(London: Architecture Illustrated, 1933), p. 4.

⁵⁴"Technique and Tradition in British Architecture as Illustrated in the Royal Academy Exhibition," Country Life 81 (16 January, 1937): 72.

CHAPTER 5

LEARNING ABOUT ARCHITECTURE-- ALTERNATIVES TO WRITTEN CRITICISM

Although the written criticism that appeared in periodicals and books was undoubtedly the most important way in which a knowledge of International Style architecture was disseminated in Britain, the various alternative ways in which knowledge of the works and ideas of European modernism reached the country should be considered in comparison. Perhaps the most obvious way to learn about foreign architectural developments is to arrange a visit to the country concerned, to see the buildings and meet their architects. An early commentator was unduly optimistic about the problems of learning about Continental developments of the 1920s and 1930s first-hand:

Easy facilities of travel and the abounding illustrations of the Press make everyone almost immediately familiar with what is being done abroad.**

**Randal Phillips, "Some Houses at Silver End Garden Village, Essex," p. 601.

However, during the 1930s, it was not that easy to visit many important modernist buildings. Many of the key examples of European modernism were private houses and therefore generally inaccessible; also works were spread out geographically over a wide area and were often hard to locate. It was actually only a few of the most enthusiastic and persistent supporters of modernism who visited European buildings and fewer still who were acquainted with their creators. This select minority brought back news of their encounters to friends and colleagues eager to learn more:

When Wells Coates returned from Paris it was as though Moses had descended with the tablets of the law. He had made contact with a source of inspiration, had spoken with Le Corbusier, and was deputed even to bring us into the body of European architectural thought organized as C. I. A. M.⁵⁶

Wells Coates was the most cosmopolitan of the modernists working in Britain. An experienced traveller, he had worked as a journalist in Paris and would have had no language problems travelling in France. Most English architects had not met any of their foreign colleagues until the latter arrived as refugees in Britain and were forced to learn to speak English.

⁵⁶Fry, Autobiographical Sketches, p. 138.

Photography was regarded with deep suspicion; as early as 1928 it was reported that "the mendacity of the camera has become proverbial."⁵⁷ G. M. Boumphrey reported a conversation with someone sympathetic to modern architecture who had recently made a trip to Austria to "inspect some of the modern houses which appear so intriguing in what few photographs reach us":

In almost every case, the photographer seemed to have chosen his position with rare skill: from most other points the appearance of the majority was disappointing.⁵⁸

The Architects' Journal columnist, Astragal, appeared to have ambiguous feelings as to how useful photographs could be. In the same paragraph lamenting the dearth of translations of European texts, he both stated that the "photograph serves us nearly as well as words" and regretted that "photographs are only two-thirds of the story, I feel sure."⁵⁹

⁵⁷Review of Modern European Buildings by F. R. Yerbury, in The Nation and Athenaeum 44 (15 December, 1928): 424.

⁵⁸"The Modern Home. Tendencies and Progress," The Spectator 156 (May 16, 1931): 796.

⁵⁹"News & Topics: The Translation of Foreign Architectural Books," Architects' Journal 72 (July 2, 1930): 5.

Although television has subsequently been used to extend knowledge of buildings to a broad public and proved especially helpful in conveying a spatial awareness, in the 1930s the industry was still in its infancy. Filming on location was difficult and expensive. Very few people owned a television set, which was an essentially experimental toy for the rich.⁶⁰ However, an experimental program was made in which Berthold Lubetkin talked about the building that his firm, Tecton, had designed for London Zoo. He was joined by their client, Professor Julian Huxley, secretary to the Zoo, and filmed poring over a model for the elephant and rhinoceros house.⁶¹

Perhaps ironically, non-visual media were far more influential in disseminating architectural knowledge. BBC Radio programs reached a much wider audience than television:

⁶⁰"Television, though provided by the BBC from 1936 until the outbreak of war, was little regarded until its post war revival." A. J. P. Taylor, English History, 1914-1945 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 307.

⁶¹"Television of Architecture," Architectural Review 83 (January 1938): 54.

The one universal feature [of the 1930s home] was the wireless set, symbol of the interwar period, especially towards the end when nine million sets were licensed; in other words, in nine homes out of ten.⁶²

This was a medium by which the public was used to being instructed and informed. The period was dominated by the avowedly didactic ambitions of the first Director-General, Sir John Reith. In January 1933 The Listener reported that the previous autumn 563 study groups had been formed to discuss a variety of series broadcasts and individual talks. Frequently these were topics that were at the center of current intellectual debate. The programming aimed to be up-to-date and progressive; in this season the most popular series had proved to be one on psychology. The study groups appear to have drawn members from a range of social backgrounds; in 1932 82 of the 563 groups reported were specifically for unemployed, 40 in the Northwest and 33 in Yorkshire (i.e., areas of high working-class unemployment).

Although there were no series dealing explicitly with architecture, several "symposia" were broadcast and transcribed in The Listener. In 1933 a group of experts were asked to give answer to the question "Is modern

⁶²Taylor, English History 1914-1945, p. 307.

architecture on the right track?"⁶³ In particular their views were sought on six specific issues:

- (1) Is the engineer making the architect unnecessary today?
- (2) Has functionalism in building gone too far?
- (3) Can the English town and city ever properly assimilate the new architecture?
- (4) Is the new architecture ugly?
- (5) What will the new generation think of the ultra-modern style of present-day buildings, including the ultra-modern home?
- (6) Are we likely to evolve in the near future a new style of architectural ornament?⁶⁴

Revealing a very conservative bias, this list reflects Blomfield's conclusion that modern architecture had "gone off the deep end" and that although modernists were "making a laudable effort to bring architecture back to its essentials . . . they appeared to have an inadequate perception of what those essentials are."⁶⁵ The questions are phrased in a cautious manner that suggests their compiler may well have believed that indeed functionalism had gone too far and that the results were best described as ugly. Wells Coates voiced his objections to the structure of the program:

⁶³These were Sir Reginald Blomfield, Charles Holden, A. E. Richardson, W. Curtis Green, E. Maxwell Fry, Frederick Towndrow, M. H. Baillie Scott, Joseph Emberton, Christian Barman and Wells Coates. "Is Modern Architecture on the Right Track?" The Listener 10 (July 26, 1933): 123-132.

⁶⁴"Is Modern Architecture on the Right Track?" p. 23.

⁶⁵Ibid.

You ask questions based on stylistic premises, framed with circumlocutions such as "ultra-modern", "functionalism", etc., which are barren and meaningless, trackless, to the contemporary architect.⁶⁶

The following year a discussion entitled "For and Against Modern Architecture" was broadcast.⁶⁷ This was not, however, a spontaneous encounter, as all scripts had to be pre-approved, and it appears to have been delivered in a very gentlemanly manner.⁶⁸ Once again Blomfield was the spokesman for the traditionalist cause. He was invited to speak both before and after Amyas Connell, indicative of both his personal prestige and further evidence of the BBC's bias towards traditional establishment opinion.

In 1934 the R. I. B. A. International Architecture

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 132.

⁶⁷The Listener 12 (November 28, 1934): 885-888.

⁶⁸According to the Architectural Review, it was:

marred for those who prefer their vendettas to be carried on with the sawn-off shot gun by an unrehearsed finale which ran somewhat as follows:

Sir Reginald Blomfield: Am I on time?

Mr. Amyas Connell: On the tick.

Sir R. B.: Was it all right?

Mr. A. C.: Very good.

"The English Tradition," 77 (March 1935): 86.

In 1934 the R. I. B. A. International Architecture exhibition was organized, and it was announced that "the avowed object of the exhibition is the education of public taste"⁶⁹ It toured the provinces and was seen by nearly eight-thousand people. Nevertheless, it is doubtful whether many of these were ordinary members of the public; after all, it was said of another exhibition of the period, "so the magnets of curiosity, snobbery and fashion have drawn the public to see the great Italian Exhibition."⁷⁰

By far the most important source of information available to the layman was through published written material, articles in the press and specialist and non-specialist periodicals, as well as more substantial books. A. J .P. Taylor confirmed that "the printed word remained the serious means of communication";⁷¹ textual information was still regarded as supremely reliable.

⁶⁹"Architecture and the Layman," Country Life 78 (21 December 1935): 646.

⁷⁰Paul Nash, "The Public and Art, or A Brand from the Burning," Architectural Review 67 (March 1930): 167.

⁷¹British History, 1914-1945, p. 308.

CHAPTER 6

THE AUDIENCE FOR ARCHITECTURAL CRITICISM

At whom were the architectural critics of the 1930s aiming their work? Whilst a few were writing exclusively for an informed professional audience, there was a great emphasis on diffusing architectural knowledge to a broad audience, paralleling similar educational aims in many other fields. However, writers were very imprecise about exactly whom they wanted to reach. Both modernist and traditionalist critics used a variety of vague terms such as "the general public," "the man in the street," and "the common man."

Many modernists were eager to draw attention to a widespread ignorance of design issues, noting that "to-day architecture is an activity about which the average man cares little and knows less."⁷² This was the case despite

⁷²Osbert Lancaster, Pillar to Post, The Pocket Lamp of Architecture (London: J. Murray, 1938), p. xii.

the fact that, as it was noted, architecture was inevitably the most public of art forms and therefore the one which members of the public should be best qualified to assess and the one that had the most immediate and inescapable impact on their lives:

Young ladies whose acquaintance with art is confined to an unbridled enthusiasm for the works of Mr. Russell Flint and a talent for depicting old-world gardens on lampshades are accustomed to give forcible expression to their views on modern painting; but persons of far greater knowledge and taste who have been living in houses, walking down streets and working in offices all their lives, are seldom so bold as to express any opinion on architecture.⁷³

Traditionalists reiterated these same views but sought to make people care about the architecture of the present by increasing their knowledge of past architectural styles. This was the rationale behind Robert Byron's polemical The Appreciation of Architecture, which provided a judgmental overview of architectural history:

This essay has been written with the purpose, solely, of stimulating public interest in that one of the arts which deserves, above all others, to be the chosen province of the public.⁷⁴

Traditionalists argued that whilst their work was part of a continuously evolving British heritage, modernism had

⁷³Lancaster, Pillar to Post, p. xi.

⁷⁴(London: Wishart and Co., 1932), p. 30.

deliberately isolated, and thereby impoverished, itself.

Modernists themselves reacted by attempting to establish a British-based historical pedigree for their work, albeit over a shorter time-span than the traditionalists (generally only to the nineteenth century). They lamented that previously intellectual interest in architecture had been seen very much as something isolated from the current situation. It was speculated that this was a legacy of Victorian antiquarianism:

It is largely due to Ruskin's influence that for very many schoolmasters "architecture" is almost synonymous with "medieval church architecture."⁷⁵

Although Continental modernists had stressed the revolutionary impact of their architecture, and denied any continuity with past styles, several British authors drew up "genealogies." John Betjeman's "The Growth of Good Taste" charted "the thin stream of life and vigorous influence for the good in the last fifty years."⁷⁶ This culminated with a selection of modernist buildings, including Crawford's offices, London (Frederick Etchells, 1930) and the Royal Corinthian Yacht Club, Burnham-on-Crouch

⁷⁵"Architecture in the Public Schools," Architects' Journal 72 (2 July 1930): 5. This article refers to state schools.

⁷⁶Ghastly Good Taste (London: Chapman and Hall, 1933), pp. 138-139.

(Joseph Emberton, 1931). John Summerson and Clough Williams-Ellis' diagram of "The Story of English House Design"⁷⁷ summarized many of their arguments and incorporated illustrations to assist the layman unfamiliar with the buildings discussed.

Although traditionalist critics undoubtedly did seek a wider audience for their work, precisely what segment of the population they aimed to reach is harder to establish. Baillie Scott and Beresford state that:

This book [Houses and Gardens] is primarily intended to interest the general public, but we should be very glad and proud if it might also be in anyway helpful to our professional brethren or to builders interested in the planning of houses.⁷⁸

Their concept of "the general public" is therefore loosely defined as anyone not directly involved in construction. Baillie-Scott and Beresford's text suggests that they envisaged their large and lavishly-produced book lying on the coffee tables of the sort of people who commissioned houses from the partnership: wealthy, upper-middle-class, Home-Counties couples. The reader is invited to consider for inspiration the content and arrangement of what the

⁷⁷Architecture Here and Now (London: Architectural Press, 1934), n. p.

⁷⁸p. 1.

authors consider to be an unpretentious, homely living room: "with Touchstone we may say of it, 'a poor thing maybe but yet mine own.'"⁷⁹ However, this "poor thing" is extremely spacious, and the contents include "two old Persian Rugs." Though somewhat shabby, the ensemble seems rather to suggest how the nouveau riche might affect a style of faded gentility, rather than offering practical advice on effective home furnishing on a limited income.

Several books which countenance modernism as one of a range of stylistic options were again aimed at that section of the public wealthy enough to commission a private house, at the layman faced with "the treacherous Question of Style":

Surely, he may maintain, there is some absolute standard of values--surely there must be one building form which is more essentially right for our houses today than any of the others?⁸⁰

More modest examples, for instance many of those included in Ella Carter's Seaside Houses and Bungalows,⁸¹ are intended as second homes. It therefore seems unlikely that most traditionalist critics saw their work as being read outside

⁷⁹Baillie Scott and Beresford, Houses and Gardens, p. 26.

⁸⁰Roger Smithells, The Country Life Book of Small Houses (London: Country Life, 1939), p. 17.

⁸¹(London: Country Life, 1939).

a very narrow economically-defined sector of society.

Perhaps more surprising is the modernists' lack of communication with ordinary people. Popularization was a common aim of modernism in all fields, seen as necessary to its vitality. Statements such as the following were common:

There is an important movement about now to bring the work of contemporary painters and sculptors, musicians and architects, designers and decorators into closer touch with the general public.⁸²

For architecture, in particular, widespread commitment was regarded as a prerequisite to enable the whole of the population to benefit:

If our immense technical achievements are ever to be applied to the advancement of the happiness of the whole of mankind, and not to the private gain of a small section of it, then the nature and possibilities of modern architecture must be widely understood.⁸³

However, comparison with other contemporary texts suggests that rather than encouraging the whole population to learn about modernism, Penn and Yorke sought to convert an articulate and influential group in a position to encourage financial investment in modern architecture. Orwell sought to lend power and credibility to the socialist cause by recruiting a similar set of people whom he termed the

⁸²Paul Nash, "The Public and Art," p. 167.

⁸³F. R. S. Yorke and Colin Penn, A Key to Modern Architecture. (London: Blackie and Son, 1939), p. 1.

members of the "sinking middle classes":⁸⁴

The private schoolmaster, the half-starved freelance journalist, the colonel's spinster daughter with £75 a year, the jobless Cambridge graduate, the ship's officer without a ship, the clerks, the civil servants, the commercial travellers and the twice bankrupt drapers in county towns.⁸⁵

For example, Anthony Bertram's book, called simply Design,⁸⁶ was distilled from a series of radio broadcasts intended to demonstrate that good design was obtainable on an income of eight pounds per week (equivalent to 416 pounds per annum). He was anxious to show that he had a sensitive and well-informed approach to the problems of working-class people; he described how it was important for those with threadbare underwear to have somewhere private to hang it out to dry.⁸⁷ That he felt it necessary to explain such issues to his readers meant, however, that he did not expect them to have had first-hand experience of such poverty. That he is writing for the middle classes is confirmed by consultation of earnings statistics for the 1930s. Throughout the decade, the average industrial wage remained below three pounds per week, less than half Bertram's proposed budget,

⁸⁴The Road to Wigan Pier, p. 215.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶(Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin Books, 1938).

⁸⁷Design, p. 36.

and in 1938-9 72.8 percent of households had an income of less than 250 pounds per annum and only 7.4 percent received more than 500 pounds per annum.⁸⁸

This type of subconscious self-deceit has been seen as a characteristic of the 1930s:

Facade became a reality for a generation trained in cinema palaces. Men believed the phrases which they heard and themselves used.⁸⁹

It is also clearly manifest in a series of articles published by the Architects' Journal in 1939. In order to compile a ranked chart of the most popular recently-erected buildings, it was announced that "well known representative members of the general public" would be consulted and asked to suggest their favorites.⁹⁰ However, far from being representative of all classes and income levels, the invited

⁸⁸Alan F. Sillitoe, Britain in Figures. A Handbook of Social Statistics (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 140-141.

⁸⁹Taylor, British History, 1914-1945, p. 319.

⁹⁰The search for suitable members of a "Laymen's Vigilance Committee" was officially launched in the Architects' Journal 85 (9 February 1939): 234. Subsequent reports appeared (23 February 1939): 313; (30 March 1939): 518-519; (6 April 1939): 558-559; (13 April 1939): 598; (20 April 1939): 638-639; (27 April 1939): 678; (4 May 1939): 719, (11 May 1939): 759; (18 May 1939): 803; (25 May 1939): 846, with full report of poll results 851-862; (8 June 1939): 954.

respondents were all highly literate and respected characters, prominent in public life. The list included industrialists, journalists, members of the House of Lords and even a member of the Royal Family.

It should also be remembered that the architectural periodicals, and even such weeklies as The Spectator and The Listener, would only reach a relatively small and well-educated readership. Despite their good intentions the modernists had little direct knowledge of working-class life and little idea as to how to address effectively that portion of the population that they felt modernism had the most to offer. This is not surprising, for many other well-meaning groups were similarly handicapped and therefore continued the essentially paternalistic approach of a previous generation. This confirms the conclusions reached by recent studies of other 1930s art forms:

The living standards and way of life of ordinary middle-class people--even in the humbler sectors like teaching--were much more sharply cut off from those of workers than they are today, in terms of security and leisure as well as housing and food. They had little contact with the culture or entertainment shared by working people . . . There was of course scarcely any television, and in films and novels of the early thirties little of the reflection of working-class tastes and lifestyles that is common place in the modern media."¹

¹Clark, et al., Culture and Crisis, p. 8.

Architects, like writers, still came predominantly from well-educated backgrounds and, despite their good intentions, inevitably lacked sensitivity.

CHAPTER 7

THE IMPORTANCE OF LINGUISTIC STYLE

One of the major reasons why written architectural criticism was seen as being of particular importance was that it was believed that the style in which it was composed could be a direct parallel to the style of the buildings it described. Although this is an idea that has now gained general acceptance, in the 1930s it was still a novel proposition.

This interest in the components and structure of language can be attributed to parallel developments in linguistic analysis within other academic fields. The period is one during which a new school of literary criticism was forming. The "New Criticism"²² demanded the close reading of an individual text; detailed analysis of its language, its use of metaphor, symbol and image and an interest in

²²Exemplified by I. A. Richards, The Principles of Literary Criticism, 1924; William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity, 1930, and John Crowe Ransom, The New Criticism, 1941.

style rather than in the biographical or historical significance of a text. I. A. Richards' The Principles of Literary Criticism was highly praised by Wells Coates, who referred extensively to this "brilliant and original book"⁹³ in an article which attempted to evaluate the purpose and scope of architectural criticism. Coates noted how Richards himself had suggested that literary criticism might be applicable to architecture:

The differences between the separate arts are sometimes no greater than the differences to be found in each of them; and close analogies can be discovered by careful analysis between all of them.⁹⁴

Richards, who had trained as a psychologist, observed a widespread tendency to impose spurious meaning on buildings:

It is often easy enough to find something which we can suppose to be what we know. Belief feelings . . . are parasitic, and will attach themselves to all kinds of hosts. In literature it is especially easy to find hosts. But in the non-representative arts . . . in architecture for example, the task of finding something to believe, or to believe in, is not so easy. Yet the "feeling of significance" is as common in these arts as in literature.⁹⁵

⁹³"Response to Tradition," Architectural Review 72 (November 1932): 166.

⁹⁴Richards p. 147; see Coates "Response to Tradition," p. 166.

⁹⁵Richards, n. p.; see Coates, "Response to Tradition," p. 166.

psychology; Freud's early works were newly available in translation. Coates called for a criticism which was neither purely aesthetic nor based on inappropriate psychological interpretation:

The fallacies of contemporary criticism are contained in the processes by which mental effects are projected and made to appear as qualities of the objects "seen."⁹⁶

Whilst trying to make a definitive break from the theoretical models of the previous generation,⁹⁷ Coates was also dissatisfied with recent attempts to write informative architectural criticism. He found that the ideals of

⁹⁶Coates, "Response to Tradition," p. 167.

⁹⁷Especially from Geoffrey Scott's Architecture of Humanism, originally published in 1914, but more widely read when re-issued after the war in 1924. Scott (who was Bernard Berenson's secretary), was an essentially formalist critic. As such, his work was antithetical to the early modernists' emphasis on the functional requirements of any building. In addition Scott's emphasis on the human experience of spaciality had been interpreted by several traditionalists as support for a more "humane" architecture. Scott had described Classical architecture in the following terms:

The centre of that architecture was the human body; its method, to transcribe in stone the body's favourable states; and the moods of the spirit took visible shape along its borders, power and laughter, strength and terror and calm.

Although "empathy" was developed further by Herbert Read, it remained more applicable to modern art than architecture.

objectivity and factual accuracy were undermined by contorted and mannered prose style. He identified two strategies most commonly used to describe modernist buildings and ideas, neither of which he admired--"Verbal Identity" and "Verbal Invention."⁹⁸ The first reduced argument to a series of tautological arguments whilst the second also failed to contribute any useful understanding:

To dispose of your difficulty you invent a new word; or you seize upon a word which can be used exactly only in a specific context, and you make it include a lot of other things; you make it a "portmanteau" word.⁹⁹

Coates was not alone in calling for a new critical language and approach as a necessary adjunct to successful contemporary architecture. As well as providing a logical parallel to stylistic developments, clear language, for both modernists and traditionalists, was seen as a prerequisite

⁹⁸"Response to Tradition," p. 165, and Unit 1. The Modern Movement in English Painting and Sculpture (London: Cassell, 1934), p. 107.

⁹⁹p. 165, In Lewis Carroll's Alice Through the Looking Glass Humpty Dumpty gives an example of a "portmanteau word:"

"Slithy" means "lithe and slimy." "Lithe" is the same as "active." You see it's like a portmanteau--there are two meanings packed up into one word.

Martin Gardin, ed. The Annotated Alice (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 271.

modernists and traditionalists, was seen as a prerequisite to gaining increased public understanding and involvement with the built environment. Book reviews consistently stress the importance of clarity over stylistic novelty and analyse style in terms of its ability to aid communication, again with particular emphasis on a broad audience. A review which stated that the M. A. R. S. 1938 exhibition catalogue used "words and phrases which are largely, if not wholly, unintelligible to the ordinary man"¹⁰⁰ was highly damning.

The quality of translations from European languages was a matter of great concern. Etchells' translations of Le Corbusier's works received widespread praise; he conveyed both the meaning and spirit of highly idiosyncratic prose. In contrast other efforts were severely criticized:

Mrs. Prudence Maufe was so imprudent as to belie her name by translating this Viennese iconoclast's [Adolf Loos'] Ornament=Crime from the usual French translation.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects 67 (January 24, 1938): 290.

¹⁰¹P. Morton Shand, review of Men and Buildings, by John Gloag, in Architectural Review 70 (October 1931): 75.

However, British modernists, aware of unfavourable responses to the "irascible Continental polemic,"¹⁰² did not replicate the extremes of Continental prose style but substituted a mixture of light-hearted didacticism and concise description that aimed to be strictly objective. This was warmly welcomed:

Modern architecture has now passed out of its aggressive adolescent stage (at which statement those who care about the style of their reading --with memories of earlier strident and hysterical publications--will breathe deeply and thankfully.)¹⁰³

The most blatant example of the modernists' concern over linguistic style was the discussion concerning the use of "Basic English." British, American, Scientific, International, Commercial English was designed to aid international communication. Invented by C. K. Ogden, it was a product of the Cambridge school of philosophy, a logically simplified version of the English language. Ogden's description of the system was first published in 1930 and was widely discussed. It was even predicted that

¹⁰²Baird Dennison, "Basic is as Basic Does," Architectural Review (January 1935): 30.

¹⁰³G. M. Boumphrey, review of Twentieth Century Houses, by Raymond McGrath, in The Spectator, 15 February, 1935): 254.

it would be adopted as a universal world language in 2010.¹⁰⁴ Basic reduced the English language to a vocabulary of eight hundred and fifty words, plus fifty internationally recognized words and the names of numbers. One could also elect to use one hundred general science words and up to fifty specialist words for a particular field.

In 1934 Raymond McGrath published a survey of Twentieth-Century Houses and elected to use Basic. To late twentieth-century critics his decision seems pertinent, but unremarkable: "It is written in Basic English as a Literary counterpart to the sparseness of modern architecture."¹⁰⁵ However, contemporary critics felt it necessary to explain his logic more carefully:

Those who are conscious of the special part played by language as the frame of our experience will not be surprised by the discovery that developments in language have their parallel in other directions. And though, on the face of it, there may seem to be little connection between language and building, these widely different fields have certain points in common which make such a parallel probable.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴Serge Chermayeff and J. M. Richards, "A Hundred Years Ahead: Forecasting the Coming Century." Architects' Journal 81 (10 January, 1935): 86.

¹⁰⁵David Dean, Architecture of the 1930s: Recalling the English Scene (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), p. 89.

¹⁰⁶C. K. Ogden. "A Note on Basic English," in Raymond McGrath, Twentieth Century Houses (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), p. 221.

McGrath's decision was widely applauded, and many were impressed by the fluidity and elegance of his prose; "I had imagined it (entirely without warrant) to be a sort of pidgin English--and clipped and pidgin at that."¹⁰⁷

However, above all it was the logic that informed his choice which won their approval:

Mr McGrath is an architect with language-sense. . . . He saw in Basic a language with the same qualities as the buildings he was writing about, and which had, for this reason, a special value for his purpose.¹⁰⁸

Twentieth Century Houses included a description of Basic by Ogden which explains that less than one hundred words can be used with endings such as -ly or -ed and that sentence structure must follow a logical order. He emphasized that because verbs are notoriously difficult for non-native speakers to master, Basic uses only eighteen simple verbs which are combined with the name of an operation to describe further actions: "to remove" substituted by "to take off"; "to disembark" by "to get off a ship." A single fold-out page listed all the words used.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷G.M. Boumphrey, review of Twentieth Century Houses, p. 254.

¹⁰⁸C.K. Ogden. "A Note on Basic English," p. 221.

¹⁰⁹McGrath felt it necessary to use thirteen specialist words: architect, balcony, beam, ceiling, chair, concrete, furniture, hall, mosaic, mould, plaster, slate, terrace. He regretted the fact that "century," not a word included

For some, prose structure was seen as having the ability to convey a visceral appreciation of subject matter. The Nation and Athenaeum in publishing a review of R. M. Fox's The Triumphant Machine made the following comment:

It has, in itself, a certain indeterminateness, and some repetition. This may be due (but probably not) to an over-subtle attempt on the part of Mr. Fox to reproduce the "machine" atmosphere. Repetition and indeterminateness--a failure to connect satisfactorily processes with ends--are among the characteristics of factory technique which force themselves upon the attention.¹¹⁰

Others noted that specific words had gathered connotations above and beyond their accepted meanings. Frequently these were extremely negative, as G. M. Boumphrey noted in discussing the word "concrete":

Many people appear to find the word definitely unpleasant, and even menacing. Their reasoning so far as I am able to fathom it, runs something like this: Concrete-abstract; material-spiritual. Therefore concrete is synonymous with Mammon.¹¹¹

In a later article in the same series, he suggested that, regardless of any specific associations, some words are just off-putting:

in Basic, was used in publicity before his decision to write in Basic had been taken and was thus "like a fly in amber." Twentieth Century Houses, p. 225.

¹¹⁰43 (26 May 1928): 254.

¹¹¹"The Modern Home: 'This Foreign Stuff,'" The Spectator 159 (9 December 1932): 833.

One hundred and ten years ago, according to the Oxford Dictionary, some misguided person first used the word "flat"¹¹² . . . --and thereby did his fellow countrymen a disservice whose effects continue to this day. . . . For there is something utterly drab and uninspiring about the word.¹¹³

Traditionalist critics were also interested in language structure. M. H. Baillie Scott and A. Edgar Beresford noticed an appreciable stylistic difference in the language of modernist criticism from that of previous generations of architectural criticism. However, they were far from welcoming, calling instead for a very different style of commentary:

Nothing fills us with greater despair than the cold and calculating intellectualism of much architectural criticism of to-day: The art of building, if it is to be revived, needs warm-hearted human enthusiasm far more than the detached and inhuman methods of the scientist.¹¹⁴

No doubt their "enthusiasm" was an example of "the sort of woolly-headed, tweed-knickerbockery theorizing" reviled by

¹¹²"Flat," however, obviously does have another meaning, one definition of "to flatten" is "to make dull uninspired or spiritless."

¹¹³"The Modern Home: Flats versus Houses," The Spectator 162 (20 April 1934): 636.

¹¹⁴Houses and Gardens, p. 7.

Hugh Casson.¹¹⁵ They stressed their well-intentioned amateurism as a positive and honest counter to the presumed "professionalism" of the modernists:

In the business of writing we claim no expert knowledge, but if our only reading had been the Holy Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, we should be able quite easily and unconsciously to express ourselves in the best kind of English.¹¹⁶

A preponderance of Biblical and Shakespearian references characterizes much traditionalist criticism, as, for example, the following:

There is an enduring rightness . . . [about the traditional English house] which age cannot wither or custom stale.¹¹⁷

These are rarely attributed; rather, they are reassuring landmarks for the well-educated reader, indications of the respectability of the authors. Recognition confirms that reader and author share wider social and cultural suppositions. Houses and Gardens also included quotations from several other authors appreciated by an upper middle-class audience, including Tennyson, Meredith and Kipling (whom Orwell had described as the poet laureate of the

¹¹⁵Review of Modern Building: Its Nature Problems and Forms, by Walter Curt Behrent, in Royal Institute of British Architects Journal 67 (7 March 1938): 449.

¹¹⁶Scott, Houses and Gardens, p. 7.

¹¹⁷See Anthony and Cleopatra, II, ii, 243; Houses and Gardens, p. 12

upper-middle class¹¹⁸).

Attacks on the language of the opposing "camp" quickly became an additional facet of the modernist versus traditionalist debate. As these usually took the form of elaborate parodies they will be discussed in the following chapter.

¹¹⁸Road to Wigan Pier, p. 113.

CHAPTER 8

HUMOR IN ARCHITECTURAL CRITICISM

Humor was an important element in 1930s architectural criticism. Although the thrust of humorous writings tends also to further underline the decade's obsession with the audience for architectural criticism and an awareness of linguistic style, modernist and traditionalist critics were inclined to use rather different strategies which reflect their differing aims. In a decade dominated by passionate political fervor, a degree of detachment and an ability to inject a note of frivolity into one's writing were seen as evidence of a healthy awareness of the other side's opinions, even if it was used only to ridicule them. As a reaction to traditionalist attacks which criticised modernist writing for being too dryly intellectual, both traditionalists and modernists were eager to demonstrate that they could write with a down-to-earth directness.

Peter Fleetwood-Hesketh described how he and Osbert Lancaster were amongst a group who "were all concerned, in a serious way, to make architecture more amusing."¹¹⁹ Thus McGrath was praised for "reasonableness, common sense and a dryly informing irony";¹²⁰ and a more recent commentator, noticing the preponderance of modernist architecture in Cambridge over Oxford, noted:

Its dry and narrow intellectualism was bound to be taken in by the pretensions of the New Architecture, as it was by the ideals of Burgess and Maclean.¹²¹

A deliberately light-hearted approach was perceived by a contemporary audience to be a persuasive force, not solely as an amusing diversion. John Gloag commented that:

We'll find the public turning its back on modernism altogether, unless the Puritan elements in design are uprooted and a little fun, excitement and humanity introduced.¹²²

Humor was seen as an excellent way in which to popularize the subject. However, as with the broader body of

¹¹⁹Alan Powers, "Recollections of the 20s and 30s: An Interview with Peter Fleetwood-Hesketh," The Thirties Society Journal 1 (1980): 16.

¹²⁰Dennison, "Basic is as Basic Does," p. 30.

¹²¹Stephen Bayley, "Patrons of the Modern Movement," in Britain in the Thirties (London: Architectural Design, 1980), p. 92.

¹²²John Gloag, "Mr Waugh and the Orders," Country Life 83 (26 March, 1936): 316.

criticism, intentionally humorous articles were, in practice, generally written for a very restricted audience. In particular, those that parodied the linguistic style of both modernists and traditionalists required a sophisticated knowledge of the contemporary discourse. As early as 1931 the Architectural Review offered for comparison "Three forms of contemporary art criticism," a set of pastiches of various journals. "In the manner of Punch" is chatty, flirtatious and frivolous; "Any Royal Academician" is sure to name-drop and expound at length in a verbose and rhetorical style, whilst the example of the dense, assertive prose typical of Close Up is short enough to be quoted in full:

Functionalism is scenic force. Force premises emotion. The aesthetic subjective experience is translated by force premised by emotion into objective terms.¹²³

The modernist critic thus makes use of both of Wells Coates' strategies: "Functionalism" was the most notorious "made-up" word, and it was combined with a narrow "stepping-stone" logic. A correspondence carried on in the pages of the Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1938 demonstrated that prose style remained a central issue and a worthy source of humor. Entitled "High Falutin," this

¹²³"Marginalia," 69 (May 1931): 185.

was initiated as a challenge to the bombastic rhetoric of modernism and aimed to make the latter appear absurdly pompous. Although essentially good humored, it illustrates a very real gulf between the proponents of modernism and the frequently self-styled traditionalists. The first letter opens with a very obvious parody:

Dear Sir, --It may amuse you to know that a remark at luncheon the other day set me thinking, and I have been cogitating a philippic on the involved long-wordiness of the exponents of the "new" in architecture, which may (but most likely not) be polite enough for the JOURNAL.¹²⁴

The author then professes to be puzzled and confused by what he has read. Taking the part of the "plain man," his critique verges upon scatological humor, "Such expressions as fundamental organic functionalism can surely only mean and refer to bodily and very human processes." He also quotes stoic cockney one-liners, gleaned not from any stand-up comedians routine, but from his own experience with the newly-wed inhabitants of "love hutches" with inadequate and chilly bathrooms where "'the 'eat of the body warms the water.'" He makes scathing reference to the "jabberwocky journalese of the new-thoughters" and provides a set of spoof footnotes to suitably diverse, but thoroughly British,

¹²⁴L. Sylvester Sullivan, Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects 67 (7 February 1938): 341.

"highbrow" sources.¹²⁵ The response was short and to the point:

Bloomsbury (of course)
8.2.38

Dear Sir, --May I beg Mr L. Sylvester Sullivan to take the straw out of his hair, mop his desperately low brow, adjust his tie, sit down quietly, and re-read the introduction to the MARS Catalogue? It is quite intelligible- really it is. I ought to know, because I am,

Yours Faithfully,

THE AUTHOR OF THE INTRODUCTION TO
THE MARS CATALOGUE [A.]

P.S.--Basic English next time--or
Runyonese.¹²⁶

However amusing this may have been to an informed audience, the general public were likely to find such humor unintelligible. A survey published in the Architects' Journal revealed that only two per-cent of those asked to read a passage from Osbert Lancaster's heavily ironic Progress at Pelvis Bay realized that it was not meant to be taken at face value. Thus, although the Architectural Review began to "cultivate a wicked alliance of voguishness and erudition, and, in a manner of speaking, to play the

¹²⁵These included Willaim Shakespeare, Lewis Carroll, Beowulf and the Proceedings of the Water Engineer. Ibid.

¹²⁶John Summerson, "High Falutin," Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects 67 (21 February 1938): 408.

Diaghilev of the English architectural stage,"¹²⁷ it played only to a limited audience.

In addition, many of those articles that intended to be humorous attempted to do so at the expense of "the common-man." An article entitled "Modernism and the Man in the Street" published in the spring of 1930 in the Architects' Journal caused some controversy. It suggested various "cockney" responses to the Underground offices at St. James's Park by Charles Holden and Joseph Emberton's new Olympia. Not surprisingly, its tone was seen as highly patronizing: "Silly, building it of that strange stuff--won't look so posh in a year or two!" Its conclusion was "What the public wants is what it's used to: Corinthian columns and the Crystal Palace, and 'a little bit of Toodor for the 'ome.'"¹²⁸ "Quite the Ordinary Man in the Street," or perhaps a sympathetic Architects' Journal reader, out to defend the former's reputation, replied. He felt that "your contributor should know that the layman is far more enlightened and quick to understand than he imagines" and continued:

¹²⁷Summerson, Introduction to Dannatt, Modern Architecture in Britain, p. 14.

¹²⁸71 (30 April, 1930): 672.

I should say that the ordinarily enlightened person is greatly impressed by this new modern architecture. Its simplicity, its expression in its construction of utility and purpose, its recognition of the needs of daylight in all rooms, and the charm of well proportioned wall spacing have made the ordinary man see more than anything, I imagine, what architecture means and what it can do for the community.¹²⁹

Rather than working as a strategy for attracting a broader audience to architectural criticism, the humor of 1930s criticism was so self-referential that it led to increasing elitism.

¹²⁹Architects' Journal 71 (7 May, 1930): 723.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

By 1938 the threat of war had brought building to a virtual standstill. In Britain, as well as Continental Europe, architectural and engineering expertise was channelled into defensive structures. Despite the fact that periodicals and architectural books were dominated by photographs and descriptions of International Style buildings--largely the examples erected in Britain which had re-established her as an architecturally innovative nation--resistance at home had only been partially overcome.

The form of Modern Movement buildings erected changed over time and can, as suggested by Jeremy Gould,¹³⁰ usefully be divided into three periods: 1919-1933, during which isolated, experimental buildings were commissioned, mainly by innovative industrialists; 1933-37 when "pure" (i.e., of Continental form) International Style buildings were designed by emigré architects and the members of

¹³⁰Modern Housing in Britain, 1919-1939, (London: Society of Architectural Historians, 1977).

M. A. R. S. and finally a group of buildings dating 1935-39 when there was an increasing interest in producing a more contextual architecture, a "rational approach to English architectural tradition and conditions."¹³¹ However, the negative opinions expressed about the Modern Movement remain remarkably consistent throughout the decade and unresponsive to attempts to meet some of its requirements.

Much of the criticism concentrates on a perceived inherent unsuitability of the style for domestic buildings. Although International Style houses were disparaged as fit only for machines to inhabit, or for looking like laboratories or operating theatres, few factory or hospital buildings were constructed. However it was for certain types of public buildings, generally those without a well-established precedent, that the Modern Movement proved least controversial and was most widely accepted.

So far as acceptance by the general public was concerned, one significant factor was that the Modern Movement buildings which had been built were far from evenly distributed throughout the country. There was a marked concentration in the south of England, an area generally perceived as more cosmopolitan and certainly more affluent,

¹³¹Ibid., p. 22.

an important factor in a decade in which the industrial areas of the country were especially affected by economic recession and little was built in any style. Few of the industrial workers living in the big towns of the north of England, who were later to be housed in the modern movement blocks of the 1950s and 1960s, can have seen even one modern movement building before 1939. Many of the most important works were commissioned by academics, artists or those with a particular connection to the architectural or building professions. This, again, was particularly the case with domestic work and suggests that despite the attempts to introduce the style to a broad audience, International Style architecture remained a fairly esoteric taste.

Those International Style buildings which did receive some popular acclaim were very largely confined to a limited range of building types. Most were entertainment buildings, not housing, and thus could be regarded at the time as essentially frivolous and possibly ephemeral. Three of the four most popular buildings on the Architects' Journal "Scoreboard" list¹³² came in this category--the Penguin Pool, Bexhill Pavilion and Peter Jones (a store to entice suburban shoppers on a day out in town). Cinema design, in particular, had been largely monopolized by the

¹³²Discussed above on p. 51.

universally-castigated "modernistic" designers. Almost any approach would have been welcomed as an improvement upon this degraded English version of Art Deco, even by the most ardent traditionalists. The Modern Movement's associations with health and outdoor exercise made it especially appropriate to those buildings that combined entertainment with such activities, as Bexhill and also the Penguin Pool, where the ramps were specifically designed to encourage the penguins to exercise more often.

Some specific situations were deemed more suitable than others, again contradicting the myth that modernism was universally applicable. Concrete was more acceptable by the sea where weathering would help to keep it clean. Features such as curved balconies, porthole windows and chrome metal railings derived from yachts and liners were regarded as being "in keeping" at the seaside, and the practicality of geared metal windows in highly exposed and windy locations was hard to deny.¹³³ To some, flat roofs were more acceptable in open locations. Whether castles on the brows of hills offered an acceptable precedent for locating International Style houses in such prominent locations was debated. Whilst suburbia was so universally condemned by all critics that few stopped to comment on the

¹³³Carter, Seaside Houses and Bungalows, p. 18.

differential environmental impact of specific building styles, the idea of introducing a modern movement building into a traditional English village was most strongly deplored; its scale, materials and associations would be completely out of place.

Nevertheless, despite the limited progress made by the Modern Movement before 1939, the strong current of socialism which prevailed in the immediate post-war period, in intellectual as well as political life, meant that great influence was accorded to those in the architectural profession who, in the 1930s, had sought to associate their interpretation of modernism with explicitly left-wing causes and aspirations. These claims had been further reinforced by traditionalist critics. The more complex issues which had broadened earlier debate were subsumed by increased political polarization. Traditionalist criticism, as much as modernist idealism, had laid the foundations for this development by deliberately echoing the solutions of a previous generation. The values of those critics who most vehemently opposed International Style architecture on account of its "foreignness" and incompatibility with the English landscape were firmly embedded in a perception of England as a primarily rural nation, and the inevitability of urban living in the twentieth-century was ignored.

Baillie Scott's condemnation of housing developments as class-divisive and his praise of the village as an excellent balanced and integrated community recalls William Morris' feudal idealism and allows political affiliation, rather than aesthetic considerations, to remain the primary issue.

To a fast-changing culture, traditionalists had nothing to offer and could easily be dismissed as out of touch with the new Britain. However, for modernism to go forward as the style of a new socialist Britain, for schools, hospitals and public housing, all products of a revitalized Welfare State, those wielding power in the New post-War society needed to see their architects as popular heroes. The existence of a considerable body of purportedly "populist" criticism from the 1930s was thus an important factor. Because it was precisely that educated middle-class elite which had been mistakenly addressed as "the common man" in the 1930s which was now responsible for commissioning new buildings and thus forging public taste, modernism briefly triumphed. But because this triumph was based on the false premise of universal acceptance, the "Brave New World" was short lived.

As the practical shortcomings and widespread public antipathy to Modern Movement buildings became increasingly hard to ignore during the subsequent decades, the

architectural profession came to be held in very low esteem in Britain. The most important lesson to be learnt from the experience of the 1930s would therefore seem to be the necessity of good communications and a willingness to listen as well as to preach. A greater degree of humility on the part of architects, a genuine desire to educate all levels of society and to encourage an informed public response, should lead to greater understanding on the part of a profession previously too concerned with the wit and erudition of an elitist rhetoric and an all-too-ready desire to believe that still-forming ideas have been tested by experience. The growth of the media, in particular the possibilities of television, should facilitate this and enable a revitalized leadership of public taste from within both public and private sectors to draw on a better understanding of what "the common man" wants.

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