

HOUSING AND THE DILEMMA OF STYLE by Richard McCormac

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The ideological void in which architects find themselves in the aftermath of the Modern Movement continues to provoke speculation, in these pages and elsewhere, about the meaning that architecture should now have. Underlying such discussion, there is usually an assumption, or at least a hope, that the subject is coherent and that the question of meaning is common to the range of building types. Consequently there is a tendency for the discussion to be somewhat abstract and illusive. The purpose of this essay is to consider housing as a particular building type with attributes which give the modern/vernacular dilemma a special significance and intensity. Behind the aesthetic and technical characteristics of style lies a contentious but highly relevant sphere of social attitudes of which, on the whole, we remain unconscious and which the Modern Movement ignored. Reviewing this background does not reveal panaceas but may disturb some prevailing assumptions, particularly the rather stale acceptance of 'vernacular'.

There are two respects in which housing is peculiar as a building type; of the whole range of buildings, only houses are essentially private and this distinguishes how they are perceived, both by the public and by the resident, whether owner or tenant; the other less definite and related characteristic is technical. In spite of the assertion of the Modern Movement that housing should be part of a homogeneous building technology, it is evident that the building industry itself has evolved house building techniques which are quite specific; pitched tiled roof, gang-nail truss and brick clad walls.

The characteristics of English housing in relation to other building types are most clearly revealed in the new towns and in particular Milton Keynes. The techniques assumed by the Modern Movement, steel or concrete frame, flat roof and infill cladding either transparent or opaque, prevails in the design of buildings for commerce or industry. The offices and shops of the city centre of Milton Keynes are a scintillating development of American Mies and the Corporation's speculative buildings for industry, whether flat roofed or portal frame, are knowing celebrations of the qualities of the big industrial box, astringent and evidently economic.

Housing, in Milton Keynes, on the other hand generally eschews both the techniques and the materials of industry, though there are important exceptions which enable this argument to be elaborated. The preferred materials of the house building industry (in which I include funding institutions, public and private) now lend themselves to a self-conscious revival of traditional house forms, small windows, steep pitched roofs and lean-to's which in some instances are almost indistinguishable from eighteenth century buildings.

So the cityscape of Milton Keynes, in which industry and housing are more generally mixed and more closely associated than in the earlier new towns, Offers a remarkable alternating display of the two cultures of home and work. Nearly half the working population of the city live within a grid square distance of their employment and so experience an almost instantaneous shift of environment each day.

One way of interpreting this dichotomy is see it as a continuation of the nineteenth century reaction to the industrial city, 'the early romantic suburb was a middle-class effort to find a private solution for the deprivation and disorder of the befouled metropolis: an effusion of romantic taste but an evasion of civic responsibility and municipal foresight. Life was actually in danger in this new urban milieu of industrialism

and commercialism and the merest counsel of prudence was to flee'. Housing remains deeply affected by that reaction. It continues to reflect the separation of work and home life, the former impersonal, disciplined and insensate, the latter for most people an outlet for personal fulfilment and aesthetic experience. These assumptions underlie a continuing vision of the garden city in which industry is segregated and utilitarian, and the matrix of landscape contains housing and keeps up the traditions of the romantic park, an unproductive amenity rather than cropable pasture or forest land. Attempts to homogenise the urban milieu are fraught with difficulties because of this and other deep-seated attitudes. Let us consider, in particular, Bean Hill, the Milton Keynes housing scheme by Foster Associates. Here, in planning terms, is a thoughtful interpretation of 12-to-the-acre suburban housing. The single-storey solution offers the traditional advantages of the bungalow, adaptability with minimum physical alteration and ease of management with a young family. The road layout is economic, residual space is avoided and the gardens are large.

Technically and aesthetically the scheme extends the firm's approach to larger industrial buildings. The same concern for manufacturing economy involved initial consideration of portal frame construction clad completely, walls and roof, in corrugated sheet. Eventually, a timber frame system was designed and clad in black finished corrugated aluminium so that the whole scheme consisted of man-handable lightweight elements, rapidly assembled.

These were the technical intentions, innocent of extraneous and unintended meanings. The problem with schemes such as these (I include work that I have been involved with myself in the public sector such as Pollards Hill) is that they provoke a certain hostility to the materials and style which was not envisaged at the time of design. An explanation for such reactions is developed in the account of social behaviour by the Chicago economist Thorstein Veblen in his attack on nineteenth century American society, *The Theory of the Leisure-Class*. His argument is that aesthetic attitudes to domestic surroundings and furniture are deeply meshed with value judgments of other kinds, principally economic and social. He sees the goods and environment with which people surround themselves as signals of social status. From this point of view, machine-made goods are particularly problematic, their very ubiquitousness denying the possibility of expressing social distinction and their evident economy implying low financial status. The terms used by the middle-class to describe such goods, 'cheap' and 'common', do not discriminate between social, aesthetic and economic values, though usually the person making the judgment assumes that it is an aesthetic one.

Conversely, handmade goods are especially valued for their characteristics of imperfection and rarity. Veblen develops a nicely ironical attack on William Morris and his propaganda for a return to handicraft and household industry. For, within the context of mass-production, Morris's goods, because of their relative crudity, rarity and labour-intensiveness, will demonstrate the special ability of the purchaser to consume conspicuously, conforming to a social structure in opposition to Morris's intentions.

Veblen's thesis allows us to understand the very limited middle-class patronage of the Modern Movement in both architecture and product design in England and other advanced industrial societies. (The same problem may not have existed in recently industrialised societies which did not have a nineteenth century middle-class, namely Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland, where modernist architecture continues to unselfconscious.) The essential economy of/means as exemplified by, say; the Pavilion de l'Esprit Nouveau, the plain walls, bare light fittings, skeletal steel stair and mass-produced furniture was, in Veblen's sense, disreputable. This disreputability was confirmed by public sector commissions. In this sense the Peckham Health Centre, rather than disseminating a taste for the new architecture and furniture ~s it was expected to do, probably had the opposite influence and with pristine works canteens and pithead facilities equipped with tubular furniture. identified the new architecture with the working man's

environment. One concludes that the possibility of a universal democratic style hoped for by the critics at the time could only be conceivable in either an idea classless society or one which does not employ goods and the physical environment to signify its social structure.

This problem is particularly acute in public sector housing, ironically because of the success of public architects in imposing the style which never prevailed in the private sector. As a consequence, rented housing and modern architecture are almost synonymous in the public mind and the aesthetic of economy, whether expressed through the white architecture, the concrete of the New Brutalism, or overt prefabrication signifies public tenancy with all its associations.

The architecture of housing is like clothing, an outer layer which communicates identity. The form of expression is highly sensitive and to be deprived of choice is to be partly depersonalised into submission or truculence. The haircut and issue of a uniform which initiates military service illustrates the principle. Philippe Boudon in his study of Pessac describes the feeling voiced by inhabitants of being prisoners in a baffling environment which came to be known locally as the 'Sultan's District' or the 'Moroccan Settlement'. Nazi propaganda again - the international style played on similar public reactions in the faked postcards depicting the Weissenhof exhibition as an Arab town complete with palm trees and camels.

The alterations to the Pessac houses made by the residents can be considered either as a search for individual expression or for alternative social identity. Many commentators tend to emphasise the need for freedom of expression, underestimating the extent to which conformity to a chosen image is voluntary. In suburbia, or the Nash terraces around Regent's Park, uniformity, even monotony, confirms a satisfactory achievement of social equilibrium. So the need for individual expression in housing may be inverse to the acceptability of the overall image. Looked at in this light, Habraken's concept of supports, which is the most developed approach to housing flexibility, becomes ironical; for arguably, it is only his massive undifferentiated collective image of housing which requires a high degree of choice and flexibility to alleviate it.

The now general rejection of the Modern Movement in housing and the supposed revival of vernacular would seem to resolve these difficulties, for pitched roofs and 'natural' materials sustain the old suburban illusions and the vestiges of a craft aesthetic as a kind of social camouflage. Ralph Erskine's partly public tenanted and partly private housing at Eaglestone, Milton Keynes, proves such housing to be both marketable in the private sector and economic in the public. But the whole phenomenon has a slightly depressing sense of *déjà vu*. We seem to be experiencing the early 1950s in reverse; the 'people's detailing', of the first phase of the Roehampton estate, which was supplanted by the 'heroic' second phase, has emerged again and we have the same alternatives of, on the one hand, acceptable images without syntax and, on the other, syntax without acceptable images. Our present situation is distinct if we reject the idea of one architecture simply substituting for another in this way. The alternative evolutionary model is represented by Wright's early Chicago period. Here emerged a new sense of architecture within the recognisable 'dress' of American suburbia. For all the elements of Wright's houses, the free plan, strip windows and extended parapets and roofs already existed, as Vincent Scully has documented in *The Shingle Style*: In the language of Wright's Prairie period, there was sufficient conventional usage to make his new syntax accessible.

This model suggests a less passive notion of vernacular than that -currently fashionable, assuming that architecture is to be innovating rather than simply conservative. The degree of conventional use need only include those meanings which make the work recognisable. In the housing of Span, for example, the terrace layouts and the use of brick and tile and painted windows allude to eighteenth century terrace

housing being re-colonised by the middle class at this time. The gardens suggest the spaciousness of Victorian and Edwardian suburbia, but the whole conception is a new chemistry of these ingredients, catalysed by the Modern Movement.

In the realm of interior design, Conran's Habitat has succeeded where Isokon failed to disseminate modern design in the 1930s. Photographs of the first Habitat shop in the Fulham Road in 1964 showed designs by Breuer and Eames set within the context of Thonet chairs, Chesterfield sofas, quarry tiles and country cooking utensils. This sudden enthusiasm for basic but not necessarily inexpensive design and environment (once termed 'conspicuous thrift'), finally established a milieu within which the values of modern design were absorbed and given social significance.

Although the current return to vernacular in housing reflects a concern for context and conservation, it should also be seen as a movement which could re-establish the public convention of architecture. In terms of information theory, this familiarity of convention raises the probability of communication, while a full break with style (Pessac) so diminishes it that there may be almost complete misunderstanding. 'If only the most probable combinations appear, the work lacks originality and corresponds to the norm we usually call the "style" Less probable combinations define the originality of the work relative to the style.' In housing and domestic design, these conventions express highly sensitive social information with which architects have lost contact through lack of patronage and the interlude of the Modern Movement. We have to embrace these conventions partly as a subterfuge to engage society, like Wright in Oak Park. Vernacular should be a Trojan horse whose acceptable exterior hides other less expected meanings.

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