

Between History, Criticism, and Wit: Texts and Images of English Modern Architecture (1933-36).

Original

Between History, Criticism, and Wit: Texts and Images of English Modern Architecture (1933-36) / Rosso, Michela. - In: JOURNAL OF ART HISTORIOGRAPHY. - ISSN 2042-4752. - ELETTRONICO. - 14:(2016), pp. 1-22.

Availability:

This version is available at: 11583/2657976 since: 2021-02-22T09:13:41Z

Publisher:

Department of History of Art The Barber Institute of Fine Arts The University of Birmingham Edgbaston

Published

DOI:

Terms of use:

openAccess

This article is made available under terms and conditions as specified in the corresponding bibliographic description in the repository

Publisher copyright

(Article begins on next page)

Between history, criticism, and wit: texts and images of English modern architecture (1933-36)*

Michela Rosso

Introduction

In the years between the two wars, Britain occupied a peculiar position in the history of architectural modernism, often remaining on its margins.¹ In parallel, until the first three decades of the twentieth century, architectural history in Britain had been a discourse almost exclusively populated by amateurs and historically-minded architects, while its emergence as a discipline of trained and professional scholars only started to occur in the 1930s.²

This essay will examine and compare a small group of articles, books and pamphlets on English modern architecture produced by English architects, journalists, historians and critics, published in the mid-1930s. Their authors (John Betjeman, Peter Fleetwood-Hesketh, John N. Summerson, Clough Williams-Ellis, J. M Richards, P. Morton Shand, Serge Chermayeff, and Osbert Lancaster), were (with the exceptions of Williams-Ellis and Morton Shand) born in the first decade of the twentieth century and are all well-known figures of the interwar London architectural scene whose intellectual and professional itineraries often converged or crossed paths. Whereas not all of them were trained as architects (for instance Betjeman, Morton Shand and Lancaster), most of them shared links of friendship and collaboration, and their backgrounds and careers gravitated around a small number of architecture schools (the Bartlett and the Architectural Association), associations and pressure groups (the MARS and the Georgian Group), and

* I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Adrian Forty for generously advising on my work and patiently reading and reviewing it.

¹ British architecture in the 1930s has been the subject of numerous studies, amongst which Gavin Stamp, ed. 'Britain in the Thirties', *Architectural Design*, vol. 49: 10-11, 1979; Hélène Lipstadt, 'Polemics and Parody in the Battle for British Modernism', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 5: 2, 22-30; Alan Powers, *Britain: Modern Architecture in History*, London: Reaktion, 2007, esp. 13-51; Andrew Higgott, *Mediating Modernism. Architectural Cultures in Britain*, London, New York: Routledge, 2007, esp. 4-55; William Whyte, 'The Englishness of English Architecture: Modernism and the making of a national international style, 1927-1957', *Journal of British Studies*, 48, April 2009, 441-65.

² Adrian Forty, 'Architectural History Research and the Universities in the UK', *Rassegna di Architettura e Urbanistica*, 139, 2013, 7-20; David Watkin, *The Rise of Architectural History*, London – Chicago: Architectural Press – Chicago University Press, 1980, esp. 145-64.

architectural magazines (*The Architects' Journal* and *The Architectural Review*, mainly).

A common feature of the publications examined in this essay is that they do not fit into the category of architectural history intended as a rigorous scholarly practice; published between 1933 and 1936, they are closer to the genre of architectural criticism and writing that the British architectural historian David Watkin has gathered under the definition of 'history of the English tradition'.³

This essay will elucidate the contexts in which these writings were produced and published, and their relations to the broader architectural discourse on modern architecture in Britain. Special attention will be paid to the narratives, the textual and visual languages and the rhetorical strategies deployed by these texts.

Stories of modern English architecture 1933-36

In 1933 John Betjeman⁴, an Oxford-educated poet and architectural critic, full time assistant editor of *The Architectural Review*, published a little book with a pink cover entitled *Ghastly good taste. Or a depressing story of the rise and fall of English architecture*.⁵ (Fig. 1)[#]

The work, a light-hearted overview of the English architecture of the previous fifty years told from an autobiographical vantage point, had been – writes Betjeman – 'written for two reasons. Primarily, to dissuade the average man from the belief that he knows nothing about architecture; and secondly to dissuade the average architect from continuing in his profession'.⁶ As it seems clear from the very first lines, Betjeman, a self-taught architectural critic with no architectural training, hates almost all living architects, despises and ridicules their works and jeers at their private lives. Here are some of his remarks: 'The average man is a fool and the average architect is a snob. (...) Although intensely proud of being in a "profession" architects are intensely jealous of one another. Their camaraderie is limited to the golf club'.⁷ The book's main focus is architectural taste, or more precisely the author's personal taste. On this matter Betjeman leaves no doubt: his enthusiasms are for the late Georgian and the right-up-to-date-modern; he is cautious in his

[#] [Figures are attached in a separate PDF.](#)

³ Watkin, *The Rise of Architectural History*, 94-144.

⁴ The intellectual and professional path of John Betjeman (1906-84) has been the subject of an exhibition and an accompanying collection of essays: *First and Last Loves: John Betjeman and Architecture*, London: Sir John Soane's Museum, 2006.

⁵ John Betjeman, *Ghastly good taste. Or a depressing story of the rise and fall of English architecture*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1933. See also the autobiographical memoir published as a foreword to the second edition, 'Introduction. An aesthete's apologia', in John Betjeman, *Ghastly good taste. Or a depressing story of the rise and fall of English architecture*. London: Blond, 1970, XIII-XXVIII.

⁶ Betjeman, *Ghastly good taste*, 15.

⁷ Betjeman, *Ghastly good taste*, 16-8.

admiration of Gothic; he detests personal antiquarianism; he makes gentle fun of the Victorians and sneers at the Edwardians, except Voysey, Mackintosh and Lutyens. A genealogical tree at the end of the book illustrates what stands in between 'The growth of "good taste"' and 'The deep pit of speculative building', with architects and buildings in bold type representing 'the thin stream of life and vigorous influence for the good in English architecture for the last fifty years', and those in italic epitomizing 'stagnant architecture which is a dead-end in itself, being lost in self-conscious efforts either to parade 'scholarship' or 'value for money' or else to make an ineffectual tasteful compromise between the new and the old'. (Fig. 2) All this is made even more visible by the book's only illustration (and true *pièce de résistance*): a forty-inches long folding picture entitled 'The street of taste. Or the march of English art down the ages'⁸ drawn by Betjeman's long-time friend Peter Fleetwood-Hesketh.⁹ (Figs. 3-4)

Hesketh, a graduate in architecture who had studied under Albert Richardson¹⁰ at the Bartlett and at the Architectural Association, a fellow student and travelling companion of John Summerson, was also the owner and editor - with his brother Roger - of the architectural journal *The Master Builder* published between 1931 and 1935. Hesketh's 'Street of taste' is a witty parade of English building facades from 1490 to 1933 complete with lamp posts, vehicles, people and advertisements. This unique drawing displays a variegated gallery of architectural idioms whose styles are not only perceptively depicted by Hesketh's caricatures, but also re-christened, classified and grouped in a number of evocative ways. Beginning from 'Christendom' in the late fifteenth century, 'The march of English art down the ages' follows the emergence (and consequent disappearance) of an 'Educated Class' in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This phase reaches its climax in the 1830s, with 'the full flower of the late Georgian street frontages', and ends in 1860, with 'A Gothic Revival church in the "Early English" style influenced by Ruskin'. From this point onwards, while a new 'Middle Class', that has progressively grown 'Self-Conscious', has replaced the previous 'Educated Class', a multitude of revivals and interchangeable period styles definitely takes the lead. Thus, 'under the influence of commercial success' Palladio is again resuscitated in Pimlico and South Kensington, a reinvented 'Mansard style' marks 'a reaction in favour of the French', and Queen

⁸ Peter Fleetwood-Hesketh, 'The street of taste. Or the march of English art down the ages', in Betjeman, *Ghastly good taste*. The folding picture was updated to the period 1933 -70 in the second edition of Betjeman's book (London: Blond, 1970).

⁹ Portraits of Fleetwood-Hesketh (1905-85) are in 'Peter Fleetwood-Hesketh' *The Times*, 12 February 1985, 16; Gavin Stamp, 'Peter Fleetwood-Hesketh', *The Spectator*, 23 February 1985, 5; Alan Powers, 'Recollections of the '20s and '30s. An interview with Peter Fleetwood Hesketh', *Thirties Society Journal*, vol. 1: 1, January 1980, 13-6.

¹⁰ Albert E. Richardson (1880-1964), architect, scholar and teacher of history of architecture, was to chair the Bartlett School of Architecture in the years when Peter Fleetwood-Hesketh and John Summerson studied there. Alan Powers, ed., *Sir Albert Richardson 1880-1964*, London: RIBA Heinz Gallery, 1999.

Victoria's own version of classicism 'suitable for station hotels' spreads all over the City, followed by 'Fire station Holbein-esque Style in terracotta and red brick'. The folding picture's remaining fifteen inches are dedicated to the most recent and most controversial phase, the one stretching from 1900 to today. Here, 'Neo Gothic suitable for high churches in the suburbs' is complemented by the 'Monumental Queen Anne for high-class offices in rich towns' and 'The Norman-Shaw- Dutch-Renaissance for the houses of the cultured rich'. Finally, the last eight years of 'Big Business and Chaos' are exemplified by an 'Egypto-Commercial Renaissance going up everywhere for shops and offices', and culminate with today's 'Jazz Modern, a misinterpretation of simplicity suitable for super cinemas'. At the end of the picture, a 'general note' directs the reader's attention to the 'comparative study of lamp posts, traffic and advertisements'.

1934 - the year of Gropius' arrival in England, of William Morris's centenary, of Reginald Blomfield's fierce attack on modernism (*Modernismus*), and the opening of the RIBA's first public *ouverture* to British and Continental modernism with its exhibition 'Architecture 1924-1934' - was a year of stocktaking for English architects. The centenary of the Royal Institute of British Architects and the completion of its new headquarters at 66, Portland Place designed by Grey Wornum, are at the centre of a special issue of *The Architects' Journal*, where a six-page chronological 'table of influential occurrences' compiled by the editor J. M. Richards¹¹ 'attempts to set out in a concise form those events of every year since 1834 that have had most effect on the subsequent development of architecture in England'.¹² (Figs. 5-6) A cursory overview of the interminable list of notable technological and scientific discoveries, fundamental parliamentary acts, socio-political-diplomatic events, deaths and births of outstanding architects and completions of architectural landmarks, shows an overall balance between England and the rest of the Western world, with a particular emphasis on the US, Germany and France. Starting with the foundation of the RIBA, the fire of the Palace of Westminster and the death of Thomas Telford, the catalogue includes the invention of the telegraph (1835), the publication of Pugin's *Contrasts* (1836), the first volume of Marx's *Kapital* (1867), the fall of Bismarck (1890), the realization of Boston Public Library by Mc Kim, Mead and White (1898), Paris 1900 exhibition, Auguste Perret's apartment house in rue Franklin (1903), the March on Rome (1922), Stockholm Town Hall (1923), Stuttgart Housing exhibition (1927), the foundation of the Mars Group (1933), the completion of Palace of Soviets (1933), Magonigle report on malnutrition (1933) and the to-be iconic London zoo buildings by the Russian *émigré* Bernard Lubetkin (1934). A visual counterpoint to this dense and

¹¹ A portrait of J. M. Richards (1907-92) is in Mark Girouard, 'J.M. Richards (1907-1992)', *AA Files*, 25, 1993 Summer, 30-2.

¹² J. M. Richards, 'History Condensed: the origins of architectural change over 100 years. A table of influential occurrences compiled by J. M. Richards', *The Architects' Journal*, vol. 80, n0. 2077, 8 November 1934, 700.

indiscriminate inventory of technological, political, and social events - and parallel architectural achievements - in which no special prominence is attached to any of the listed facts and people that have marked the course of the previous hundred years of English architecture, is provided by a comparative table of sixty-three black and white photographs accompanied by critical commentaries and grouped into five building typologies showing works realized between 1831 and 1934. Amongst the milestones there are less well-known specimens, so the range includes Hyde Park Terrace and the Albert Memorial by Giles Gilbert Scott; the Law Courts by George E. Street and New Scotland Yard by Norman Shaw; the Firth of Forth Bridge and Adelaide House.¹³ (Figs. 7-8)

The attempt at tracing an accessible history of English modern architecture by establishing its possible roots and coherent lines of evolution across the ages up to the present, is provided by another publication that came out that year: a co-authored work signed by the architect and English architectural historian John Summerson¹⁴ and his friend, the architect Clough Williams-Ellis,¹⁵ entitled *Architecture Here and Now*¹⁶. In the second chapter, significantly called 'Order lost and regained', Summerson and Williams-Ellis call for a return to order and simplicity in architecture for which, they argue, the Queen Anne and Georgian period provide the best models in the design of residential buildings as well as in large-scale city planning¹⁷. At the core of this argument stands a genealogical diagram illustrating the development of an English detached house from 1830 to 1930.¹⁸ (Fig. 9) This particular genealogy presents the continuous interaction of two main cultural strands: the classical tradition and the romantic movement, both finding their lineage in the eighteenth century. From this point of origin, the story of the English house design follows those 'main currents of intelligent architecture' that include the Gothic Revival's legacy – exemplified by Philip Webb's Red House and the work of Richard Norman Shaw – and the tradition of the Arts and Crafts, the

¹³ J. M. Richards, 'One Hundred Years of English Architecture: A Pictorial Summary', *The Architects' Journal*, vol. 80: 2077, 8 November 1934, 706-9.

¹⁴ On the work of John Summerson (1904-92) see Michela Rosso, *La storia utile*, Torino: Edizioni di Comunità, 2001; on the early stages of his career after graduation see Gillian Darley, 'Summerson in the crow's nest', *AA Files*, 69, 2014, 84-95.

¹⁵ As an architect educated at the Architectural Association, Williams-Ellis (1883-1978) was one of the founders of the Council for Preservation of Rural England (1926), active in numerous bodies such as the Design and Industries Association (DIA), the National Trust, and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. Arnold Rattenbury, 'Come and stay', *London Review of Books*, vol. 19, n0. 23, November 1997, 13-6.

¹⁶ John Summerson and Clough Williams-Ellis, *Architecture Here and Now*, London: Thomas Nelson, 1934.

¹⁷ 'Order lost and regained', in Summerson and Williams-Ellis, *Architecture Here and Now*, 4-10.

¹⁸ 'The story of English house design 1830-1930', in Summerson and Williams-Ellis, *Architecture Here and Now*, 8.

works of Voysey and Mackintosh, and the 'return to symmetry combined with the romantic use of materials' epitomized by some of Edwin Lutyens's buildings. Starting from the assumption that 'architecture is everybody's business',¹⁹ employing a subtle combination of text and images, many of which were provided by Albert E. Richardson, Peter Fleetwood-Hesketh and P. Morton Shand,²⁰ *Architecture Here and Now* attempts to trace a concise pedigree of English modern architecture stemming from a selective relation with the past, which excludes the Victorian and – with only some exceptions – the Edwardian period and embraces the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, alongside a reconstituted classical tradition. (Figs. 10, 11 & 12)

More than four decades later, in 1987, Summerson reminded the architectural journalist and critic Martin Pawley of this period with the following words: 'We had the impression that history stopped in 1830, then there was chaos. It is difficult to convey the nausea we felt against the recent past'.²¹ In one of his lectures at the Open University in 1974, Summerson, with his typical deliberate understatement, would downplay English architectural modernism to a mere matter of life-style, aesthetic predilections, and a few fundamental readings.

In the early twenties any design with a square, frowning look would be said to have a 'modern' character. Exaggerated horizontals and exaggerated verticals were 'modern'. We looked mostly to the Germans for these notions until we caught sight of Le Corbusier. (...) by 1927 quite a lot of people had read his book *Vers une architecture* or at least read about it, and Le Corbusier was on the lips of the sort of young men who wore black hats with rather wide brims, young men who had picked up a bit of Marx and a bit of Freud, had perhaps been to Russia, and thought of themselves as 'the intelligentsia' (...). Our 'Modern Movement' began to grow out of experiences of our contemporaries, chiefly on the continent.²²

¹⁹ 'Discovering Architecture', in Summerson and Williams-Ellis, *Architecture Here and Now*, 1-3.

²⁰ While, according to Summerson's unpublished auto-biographical manuscript (London: 1990), Williams -Ellis 'contributed only the title and some illustrations of his own work' (29), the provenance of the book's illustrations is clarified in the short preface. Summerson and Williams-Ellis, *Architecture Here and Now*, v.

²¹ Martin Pawley, 'The Sense of the Modern', *The Architects' Journal*, vol. 186, 16-23 December 1987, 28.

²² John Summerson, 'English Architecture: The MARS Group and the Thirties', text of a broadcast talk for Open University Art Faculty, 6 May 1974, 3. RIBA Manuscripts and Archives: Summerson papers, 10/15/4.

And when talking about the MARS group, the English delegation of CIAM founded in 1933, Summerson definitively assessed English modern architecture as phenomenon largely dependent on the work of *émigrés*.²³

Only Maxwell Fry, was English by birth and training, Wells Coates born in Hong Kong arrived from Canada. Chermayeff, though educated in England was born in Caucasus, McGrath was from Australia, Connell and Ward both from New Zealand. We didn't think this important at the time, but one can see now that it was. These people had a detachment, sharper ambition, a fresher outlook than the average English architect. Also, of course, they hadn't got the Englishman's acute and sterilising sense of class.²⁴

While Summerson – himself a member of the MARS and the Georgian groups – was not alone in recognising the imported nature of British architectural modernism, more recently an alternative strand of historiography has directed attention to Britain's own distinctive and original version of modern architecture in the 1930s. Thus, by drawing from several national traditions – most notably late Georgian building and picturesque planning – a generation of English architects working in the 1930s would arrive at results that were seen as characteristically different from those of their continental European colleagues.²⁵ It has already been noted how the admiration for and re-elaboration of Georgian architecture had had its roots in the Edwardian classical educational movement, thanks to figures like C. H. Reilly and Albert Richardson who were still teaching and propagandising during the 1920s and 1930s. 'With them was popularized the idea that English architecture had stopped at the time of Soane and Nash, from whom the thread of continuity should be picked up'.²⁶ The interest in everything Georgian had received further impulse from the campaign to resist the rebuilding of John Nash's Carlton House Terrace by the classicist architect Reginald Blomfield, and the ensuing foundation of the Georgian group in 1937.

The following analyses aims to show that the emergence of a distinctive English version of architectural modernism, rooted in an indigenous long time practice of building and planning, went hand in hand with the development of an equally distinctive brand of architectural criticism and historiography. A recurrent feature of this historiography and criticism is

²³ See Tim Benton and Charlotte Benton, *A Different World. Émigré Architecture in Britain 1928-1958*, London: RIBA, 1995.

²⁴ Summerson, 'English Architecture: The MARS Group and the Thirties', 4.

²⁵ This line of interpretation was first developed by Alan Powers, "Look, stranger, at this island now": *English Architectural Drawings of the 1930s*, catalogue of the exhibition held at the Architectural Association, 14 January – 12 February 1983, London: The Architectural Association, 1983.

²⁶ Powers, "Look stranger", 3-4. See also Watkin, *The Rise of Architectural History*, 120-2.

the particular emphasis put on a specific 'English tradition' considered unique to Britain and seen as a crucial phase in the process of formation and evolution of English architecture in the first decades of the twentieth century.

A preoccupation with the 'English tradition' was a recurring theme of one of the main agents of architectural modernism in Britain, *The Architectural Review*, particularly under the editorship of J. M. Richards. It is around that period, between July 1934 and March 1935, that the *A.R.* hosted 'Scenario of a Human Drama', a series of seven articles written by the architectural journalist Philip Morton Shand.²⁷ (Figs. 13-14) The articles were to provide a slightly different (and chronologically reversed) preview of the arguments contained in the far more famous *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius* by Nikolaus Pevsner published the following year.²⁸ Although Morton Shand's initial goal had been to trace a backward history of modern architecture that started from Gropius and went back to John Soane, his account eventually stopped and ended with William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement.²⁹ The pretext for a history of this kind – wrote Shand – had been offered by the recent publication of two books, Nathaniel Lloyd's *A History of the English House* (1931), spanning from primitive times up to the 1830s, and F.R.S. Yorke's *The Modern House* (1934), dealing entirely with the most recent achievements in domestic architecture.

'Mr Lloyd' – wrote Shand – 'left the English house where its formal evolution abruptly ceased. That elegant young aristocrat, the Regency style, had barely time to make his bow before he was rushed off the scene in the tumbrels of the Industrial Revolution. (...) between the points at which Mr Lloyd laid down his pen and Mr Yorke took up his lines a gap, barely a century in point of time, but growing daily more incomprehensible to us. ... A gap which it is the purpose of the present series of articles to bridge'.³⁰

²⁷ On Philip Morton Shand (1888-1960) see John Betjeman, 'P. Morton Shand, Architectural Writer and Critic', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 128, November 1960, 325-8.

²⁸ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius*, London: Faber and Faber, 1936. The bibliography on Pevsner is immense. Amongst others see his recent biography, Susie Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2011 and the collection of essays accompanying Pevsner's centenary conference, Peter Draper, ed., *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004. On *Pioneers* Michela Rosso, 'Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius', in Marco Biraghi and Antonio Ferlenga, eds., *Architettura del Novecento*, vol. 1. Torino: Einaudi, 688-92.

²⁹ The reasons for what was meant to be only a temporary interruption were given by P. M. Shand, 'Scenario of a Human Drama. Explanation', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 77, March 1935, 99.

³⁰ Philip Morton Shand, 'Scenario for a Human Drama. I. Foreword', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 76, July 1934, 9.

Right from the 'Foreword', it is clear that Morton Shand's main purpose is to present England as the cradle of architectural modernity, the origins of which are, again, to be found in the English Georgian terrace house:

There is no sort of doubt that the English urban house of 1800 was the direct prototype of the functional house of today; (...) Open planning, the solitary tangible contribution of the nineteenth century, was once again an English achievement (...) with relatively minor modifications, the norm that was originally a local English product has become as international a standard as the meridian of Greenwich.³¹

Closing Morton Shand's series is a two-page visual chronological summary of house elevations ('Houses 1825-1930') and type-plans ('House plans 1830-1930') in which a number of steps forward and backwards, gains and losses, follow one another and ultimately culminate in the triumph of the modern architectural space epitomized by Le Corbusier's prototypical Villa Savoye.³² Starting from an anonymous late Georgian villa built in 1825 on Richmond Green and marking the 'complete rationalization of form', Morton Shand's annotated photographic synopsis is a collection of English and international buildings each one accompanied by a few lines of sharp critical comments interspersed with words of praise. Alongside Philip Webb's house in Palace Green, Voysey's 'The Orchard', and Mackintosh's Hill House, the retrospective includes continental-European and American better-known examples like Behrens's Obernauer House in Saarbrücken, Wright's Robie House, and Loos's Scheu House in Vienna. The visual itinerary ends with Le Corbusier's celebrated villa at Poissy, in which, writes Shand, 'The wall (is) relegated to a pliable screen and moved here and there like a chair'. (Figs 15 & 16)

Between Morton Shand's first and last article, in January 1935, two committed modernists and members of the MARS group, J.M. Richards and Serge Chermayeff,³³ envisaged in their article 'A hundred years ahead: forecasting the coming century' the world of the future and the political, technological and social forces that would shape it.³⁴ (Fig.17) A four-page

³¹ Morton Shand, 'I Foreword': 9. See also: Philip M. Shand, 'II Immediate Background', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 76, August 1934: 39-43; 'III. Peter Behrens', *The Architectural Review*, vol. vol. 76, September 1934, 83-6; 'IV. Van de Velde to Wagner', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 76, October 1934, 131-4; 'V Glasgow Interlude', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 77, January 1935, 23-6; 'VI La machine – à – habiter to the house of Character', *The Architectural Review* vol. 77, February 1935, 61-4; 'VII. Looping the loop', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 77, March 1935, 99-104.

³² Morton Shand, 'VII Looping the Loop': 103-4.

³³ On the architect and Russian *émigré* Serge Chermayeff (1900-96) see Alan Powers, *Serge Chermayeff, designer, architects, teacher*, London: RIBA, 2001.

³⁴ J. M. Richards, and Serge Chermayeff, 'One Hundred Years Ahead: Forecasting the Coming Century. Building Between 1935 and 2035', *The Architects' Journal*, vol. 81, 10

article, written in 'Basic English', attributed to an architectural student writing in the year 2035, speculating on one hundred years of building history and fiction, and illustrated by a solitary elevation picture of the RIBA headquarters in 1835, was set in a fictional 'post-industrial age' that owed its existence to the works of twentieth-century pioneers, such as Albert Einstein, H. G. Wells, Bernard Shaw, and Walt Disney, early builders in steel and concrete as Paxton, Perret, Behrens, Gropius and Mendelsohn, as well as to a smaller group of invented heroes, whose names - Forety, Meatbaum, and Hurch - remain unheard of to this day. Accompanied by a four-page chronological table, this piece of writing is introduced as a forecast of the next hundred years of architectural development from the point where Richards' 'Condensed history' of November 1934 had left off.

Richards and Chermayeff's original and suggestive text deserves a detailed reading. According to their prognostication, by 2035 a new 'Stage of Air transport' had eradicated any fear of distance or high buildings, and rational principles of order and zoning had replaced the chaotic and filthy slums of the previous decades: in their place stood an 'Amusement Centre', an 'all metal high-walled Residential Zone', a 'Central London Transatlantic and European Services Aerodrome'. On closer inspection, 'One Hundred Years Ahead' is not as optimistic as at first appears: faith in the future was tempered by a great deal of self-critique and preoccupations of imminent failure loomed large. The student's retrospective overview of the 1930s could not avoid admitting the conflicting positions, polemics, and divisions that had hindered the affirmation of modernism in England. These, we are told, had resulted in the opposition of two main groups, the 'Traditionalists', those 'servants of the money interests' who incarnated 'the school of art', and the 'Modernists', those 'persons in art circles out of touch with normal society, dependent on the uncertain support of the well-off'.³⁵ This seeming *cul-de-sac* – the student explained – had come to an end with England's second Socialist Government in 1936 whose programme was largely inspired by the Russian socialist example. Richards and Chermayeff's intriguing 'Chronological table 1935-2035' was an abridged inventory of imaginary buildings, events and techniques intermingling actual facts with more unlikely hopes and aspirations. For example, included in the year 1935 was the publication of Summerson's monograph on John Nash, which actually came out that year. By 1937, lands and banks were nationalized, the first working class housing schemes were put into effect, and the use of plastic prefabricated units had become the norm. In 1939 capital punishment was abolished, and the following year a fascist dictatorship was established in France: as a consequence, André Lurçat had settled in England. 1941 was the year of the first Royal Television broadcast while horse traffic was made illegal in urban areas, and India was declared independent. In 1943 the Church of England

January 1935: 79-80; J. M. Richards, and Serge Chermayeff, '1935-2025. Influences on a Century's Architecture', *The Architects' Journal*, vol. 81, 10 January 1935, 83-6.

³⁵ Richards and Chermayeff, 'One Hundred Years Ahead', 80.

was dismantled and in 1945 Adolf Hitler was assassinated. By 1947 all central Europe was under fascist governments. In 1948 the first English skyscraper, 24 storeys high, was completed and in 1949 pioneering experiments in stratosphere air transportation had revolutionized travel. In 1951 a Central European War had begun which involved France and Germany to further extend to the entire of Europe. In 1956 a European peace treaty was signed, brought about by exhaustion of economic resources. In the same year, zoning was applied to all large towns while private car circulation was prohibited in central London. In 1957 the great period of urban reconstruction had begun. All obsolete buildings were demolished to provide open spaces: a new tower town architecture was inaugurated and flat roofs were made compulsory for play and landing grounds on all buildings over 200,000 cubic metres. In 1958 a first tower village in rural England 'Corb-on -the -Ouse' was completed alongside a first tube-aerial station in central London zone to connect the aerodrome with the city centre. 1960 saw the first use in England of high explosives for slum demolition while fascist dictatorships dominated the whole continental Europe, and in 1965 a first Fascist government was established also in England. While at the end of the seventies back-to-nature movements and historic revivals gained public favour, England, allied with the other European fascist states, declared war on the Far East. 1981 was the first year of European revolution leading to the first English Social Republican government and to the formation, in 1985, of the European Union of Socialist Republics. In 1988 the word 'decoration' was omitted from current vocabulary, while the term 'modern' had started to denote the style current in 1930s. In 1990 an early Lutyens' house was bought for the Nation and declared worth of preservation. 1992 marked the beginning of the dirigible period. In 1997 Glasgow celebrated Mackintosh's centenary while 2003 saw the establishment of the chair of stratospheric study in the International Faculty for Structural Art and the following year the first experiments in weather conditioning took place. In 2009 the study of period styles was made compulsory in secondary schools and in 2010 basic English was adopted as a universal language. In 2015 the first dirigible international university was established and in 2016 dirigible cities were completed in the Sahara and Thibet. Finally, in 2034 a classical revival began within private building research into the architecture of the 1930s, sanctioned by the construction of a new Charing Cross bridge in 'neo-modern' style.

Recalling much of the then recently released *The Shape of Things to Come* by H. G. Wells (1933), 'One Hundred Years Ahead' is emblematic of the kind of modernist uncompromised confidence in the inevitable triumph of urban planning, new materials and technology. The encounter between science fiction and architecture, though, was to produce further results in 1935 when Wells' future history would inspire a six-hour sketch student

competition at the Liverpool School of Architecture whose outcomes were to be promptly reported by *The Architectural Review* that year.³⁶

As has already been highlighted, Richards and Chermayeff's prognostication combined a good deal of humour with faith in the future prospects of science and technology, with socialist hopes and science fiction, and a general pessimism about the fate of British modernism, even on the part of those who were known to be some of its most convinced advocates.³⁷ This article better helps to situate the peculiarity of British modernism in the 1930s and the legitimacy of Morton Shand's and Nikolaus Pevsner's attempts to acclimatize the 'new architecture' and make it acceptable to an English audience by presenting it as the natural outcome of a long-standing national architectural lineage. With his *Pioneers*, the then recently *émigré* German art historian was to become the spokesman of the new modernist gospel in a country still largely foreign to him. As is well known, the faces of Walter Gropius and William Morris appear on *Pioneers'* cover side by side, as the start and end of the story. (Fig. 18) In this way, British modernism had traced an unusual ancestry for itself. As Michael Rustin has noted: 'Where elsewhere in Europe, the Modern Movement identified itself with the power for good science and the machine, in Britain it claimed its origins in the Arts and Crafts movement, in the organicist and romantic legacies of Ruskin and Morris'.³⁸ That 'world of science and technique, of speed and danger, of hard struggles and no personal security' epitomized by the closing passage of Pevsner's *Pioneers* needed, in order to be sanctioned in Britain, to find its first forefathers on British soil.³⁹

In reviewing Pevsner's book, Morton Shand was not slow to remark on some of its major *lacunae*, warning how an English ancestry to the Modern Movement probably had to be searched for further back in a past more remote than the Arts and Crafts movement. To Morris, Loos and Gropius, argued Shand, at least a fourth group of precursors had to be added to the ones identified by Pevsner; those 'English speculative builders' of the 1780s who had constructed Bloomsbury and Marylebone terrace houses and, without whose 'rationalization', Loos himself in 1904 could never have built his Villa Karma in Montreux, 'the first full-fledged prototype of the modern dwelling'.⁴⁰

Indeed, as had been anticipated by Chermayeff and Richards' attempt at forecasting the future, humour played a crucial role in 1930s English

³⁶ 'The Shape of Things to Come. A Liverpool fantasy', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 77, May 1935, 185.

³⁷ Lipstadt, 'Polemics and Parody', 23.

³⁸ Michael Rustin, 'Postmodernism and Antimodernism in Contemporary British Architecture', *Assemblage*, 8, February 1989, 93.

³⁹ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius*. London: Faber and Faber, 1936, 207.

⁴⁰ Philip Morton Shand, 'The Pre-History of the New Architecture', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 80, November 1936, 221.

architectural criticism, serving the arguments of both detractors of and apologists for architectural modernism. As *Pioneers* was sent to press, a series of publications were to deflate architectural modernism by way of parody: the long list includes, amongst others, William Heath Robinson's *How to live in a flat* (1936) in which cartoons suggested alternative and surprising uses of flat roofs, balconies and chromium steel furniture as possible survival strategies to the impracticalities of the modern life style.⁴¹

Alongside Robinson's book, a catalogue of English architectural humour would not be complete without mentioning Osbert Lancaster's enduringly popular and entertaining surveys of English architecture and interior design, *Progress at Pelvis Bay* (1936), *Homes sweet homes* (1936), and *Pillar to Post: The pocket lamp of architecture* (1938).⁴² A non-architect, educated at Byam Shaw School of Art and Oxford, Lancaster had started working on *The Architectural Review* in the early 1930s, when Betjeman was assistant editor. It is in the context of the magazine's pages that his first architectural books emerged. The first of them, *Progress at Pelvis Bay*, told the 'splendid metamorphosis' of an imaginary English seaside resort, 'from the original poverty-stricken fishing village to the present magnificent marine metropolis covering many acres of what had heretofore been virgin downland'.⁴³ Through a sequence of ten chapters illustrated by satirical vignettes, the reader was able to follow the rise and subsequent degradation of Pelvis Bay across the previous two hundred years, 'and to realize with what diligence the authorities had always striven to avail themselves of all that was Best in contemporary Art'.⁴⁴ In the eight central chapters, dedicated to single building types (manors, hotels, shopping centres, places of worship, monuments, housing, public buildings and methods of transport), Lancaster developed many of the themes that had already been crucial to *England and the Octopus*, the outspoken manifesto against market-force building and ribbon development published in 1928 by Clough Williams-Ellis.⁴⁵ However, the similarity between the two books is not simply a matter of content and polemical arguments. *England and the Octopus* had opened with two images set side by side and taken from an old issue of *Punch*. In the first one, Mr William Smith leaves his native town in the country with the promise to preserve it

⁴¹ W. H. Robinson, *How to live in a flat*, London: Hutchinson, 1936.

⁴² Osbert Lancaster, *Progress at Pelvis Bay*, London: Murray 1936. See also Lancaster, *Homes sweet homes*, London: Murray, 1936; Lancaster, *Pillar to Post: The pocket lamp of architecture*, London: Murray, 1938. On Lancaster (1908-1986) see Gavin Stamp, 'Cartoon history', *Apollo*, vol. 168: 558, October 2008, 106-7; 'Cartoons and Coronets. The genius of Osbert Lancaster', *The Architects' Journal*, vol. 228: 12, 2 October 2008, 45. Both are reviews of the exhibition of Lancaster's work at the Wallace Collection in January 2009; Rosemary Hill, 'Bypass variegated', *London Review of Books*, vol. 38: 2, 21 January 2016, 31-2.

⁴³ Lancaster, *Progress at Pelvis Bay*, v.

⁴⁴ Lancaster, *Progress at Pelvis Bay*, v.

⁴⁵ Clough Williams-Ellis, *England and the Octopus*, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1928.

inviolable; in the second he returns some years later to discover that it has turned into a busy industrial city filled with smokestacks and gasometers. One of the interests of *England and the Octopus* lies in the iconography supplied by its author; at the end of the text, pairs of black and white photographs show the striking contrasts between the harmony of the old and the vulgarity of the new English urban and rural landscapes. Similarly, but in a more high-spirited way, Lancaster uses Pugin's device of pitiless confrontation between past and present buildings and artifacts. Accompanying the first three chapters of *Progress at Pelvis Bay* is a sequence of sketches picturing subsequent phases of architectural development (as in Hesketh's 'Street of taste') arranged in pairs (as in Pugin's *Contrasts*)⁴⁶. The idea of following the changing fortunes of an imaginary English town was further developed in *Progress at Pelvis Bay's* sequel, *Drayneflete Revealed* (1949).⁴⁷ Published amidst post-WWII reconstruction and the emergence of town planning, Lancaster's book followed the decline of a fictional English hamlet. He depicts its changes over time through a series of comparative views drawn from the same vantage points.

Like Hesketh's 1933 folding illustration, Lancaster's cartoons not only caricatured and made familiar architectural styles and building types, but also placed them in context. In *Progress at Pelvis Bay*, as well as in Lancaster's subsequent books, architecture is made human and lived in. Not only is the architectural style conveyed, but the buildings are populated with contemporary characters dressed in the fashion of the time. Like Hesketh, in his 'Street of taste', Lancaster not only illustrated architectural styles but he also perceptively labelled and classified them with typical idiomatic expressions that were to capture their essence in a more vivid and palpable way than any scholarly handbook of architectural styles could do. (Figs. 19, 20 & 21)

English architectural humour as criticism: an antecedent

A common target of some of the writings analysed here, is the attempt to stimulate the reader's sensitivity to matters of architecture and landscape by anticipating and translating into an entertaining - and often humorous - language of images and texts the likely impressions and reactions of the layman in front of what their authors view as the increasing decay in the aesthetic quality of buildings and environments. But Lancaster, Robertson, Fleetwood-Hesketh and, to a lesser extent, Richards and Chermayeff were not the first ones in early twentieth-century England to poke fun at the architectural profession - and to use the language of images creatively to this end. Around twenty years earlier the architect and writer Harry Stuart

⁴⁶ Lancaster, *Progress at Pelvis Bay*, 2 and 3, 4 and 5, 12 and 13, 16 and 17, 18 and 19.

⁴⁷ Osbert Lancaster, *Drayneflete Revealed*, London: Murray, 1949.

Goodhart-Rendel⁴⁸ had already succeeded in combining architectural criticism with witty entertainment. His outline visual survey of the English architectural styles across one hundred years sprang from the imaginary encounter between the author and an elderly, mysterious man who had come from a faraway past and had offered himself as a *Cicerone* in what would turn out to be an instructive expedition back in time.⁴⁹ (Fig. 22) In Goodhart-Rendel's account, the author is brought back to 1813 and from this point onwards begins a walk that will lead him through the nineteenth century across the changes of architectural taste and fashion. For several hours he has been going up and down the streets of the newest garden suburb 'trying to sort his impression of the place'. The streets' names annoy him until his attention is captured by 'a square of pseudo-Georgian cottages (...) little houses all sash-bars and "texture" (...). "You do not like it?", questions a voice beside him'. Decade by decade, the author is conducted throughout the evolution of the English architectural language, an itinerary rendered into a pictorial sequence of eleven elevations to serve as a visual commentary to the text: Georgian, Neo-Greek, Castellated, Ruskinian Gothic, Italianate, Victorian, Tudoresque half-timbered, pseudo neo-Georgian. Little is said in favour of any of them and the most damning criticism is reserved for the last example, the most recent one, showing a house not dissimilar to those the author himself was designing at the time. The walk will soon reveal how rapidly, unexpectedly and, in some way, opportunistically ideas on taste change: architectural design and proportion, structure and ornament, texture and colour, sincerity and imitation become the focus of a lively piece of conversation in which the author, escorted by his older advisor, is joined from time to time by the architects, their masters, mentors and clients. This bi-dimensional survey of architectural language, entitled 'Our fathers before us' and published in *The Architects' and Builders' Journal* in 1914 is probably Goodhart-Rendel's first contribution to architectural journalism and surely provides an interesting sample of a long established tradition of English visual architectural humour (and self-humour) that can be traced back at least to Pugin's *Contrasts* and to his use of caricatures of notable buildings as a means of condemning foibles of nineteenth-century architectural practice and taste.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ On the work of Harry Stuart Goodhart-Rendel (1887-1959), see Alan Powers, ed., *H.S. Goodhart-Rendel 1887-1959*, London: Architectural Association, 1987.

⁴⁹ Harry-Stuart Goodhart-Rendel, 'Our fathers before us: a conversation on house design', *The Architects' and Builders' Journal*, vol. 38, 8 October 1913: 348-50; Harry-Stuart Goodhart-Rendel, 'Our fathers before us: a conversation on house design', *The Architects' and Builders' Journal*, vol. 38, 15 October 1913, 368-9. Two sets of preparatory drawings for these two articles are in RIBA Manuscripts and Archives: Harry-Stuart Goodhart-Rendel's papers, PB192/1(1-14). The first one was a preliminary sketch, while only the second was published in *The Architects' and Builders' Journal*.

⁵⁰ According to Alan Powers, 'this was (...) Goodhart-Rendel's first contribution to architectural journalism, (...) the first instance of a series of joke historical designs or caricatures of past styles of the Peter Fleetwood-Hesketh and Osbert Lancaster kind'.

Backward and forward: genealogies and prophecies of English modern architecture

What do all these writings on English architecture have in common? What do they reveal of early twentieth-century English architectural criticism? Recurrent in all of them is the idea of setting the architecture of their time within a historical process. Shand and, to a lesser extent, Summerson and Clough Williams Ellis, view architecture in terms of a story of technological and aesthetic progress whose ultimate destination is the affirmation of modernism. A common element in all of these episodes of operative criticism,⁵¹ is the ambition to review and assess the present condition of the architectural profession, a target that they achieve by looking backwards.⁵² Quite obviously, the recourse to the past in order to explain or criticize the present (and anticipate the future) is never neutral but neatly distinguishes between the 'right', and the 'wrong' directions taken by history's course. As in earlier general English histories of architecture,⁵³ the construction of a historical narrative plays a strong prescriptive function for the present and the future. While it highlights the correct historical path and indicates the models to be emulated, it is equally clear about the errors to be avoided.

This way of legitimising (or assessing) the modern, by reference to a carefully-selected past, was not unique to Britain. In fact, the prediction of the future and the need for a retrospective account that makes that future inevitable is a feature recurrent in most modernist historiography. For instance, it can be found expressed in most emblematic ways in Emil Kaufmann's 1933 *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier*⁵⁴ as well as in the highly

Letter of Alan Powers to James Bettley, British Architectural Library, 20 July 1987, Riba Manuscripts and Archives, PB192/1(1-14).

⁵¹ I use this expression in the way the Italian architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri did, that of a history that forces links between past and future to support particular design strategies. Manfredo Tafuri, *Teorie e storia dell'architettura*, Bari: Laterza, 1980, esp. 165-98; English translation: *Theories and History of Architecture*, New York: Harper and Row, 1980, 141-70.

⁵² The same attitude was also shared by three articles appeared in *The Architects' Journal* in 1932: Christian Barman, 'Looking Backward', *The Architects' Journal*, 13 January 1932, 45-6; Christian Barman, 'Looking Backward', *The Architects' Journal*, 20 January 1932, 114; Harold Tomlinson, 'Looking Forward', *The Architects' Journal*, 20 January 1932, 44.

⁵³ The main reference here is to James Fergusson's *History of Modern Styles* (1862). See for instance Robert Elwall, 'James Fergusson (1808-1886): a pioneering architectural historian', *RSA Journal*, vol. 139: 5418, May 1991, 393-404.

⁵⁴ Emil Kaufmann, *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier: Ursprung und Entwicklung der Autonomen Architektur*, Wien - Leipzig: Passer, 1933; The argument will be later developed in Emil Kaufmann, *Three Revolutionary Architects: Boullée, Ledoux, and Lequeu*, Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1952 and Emil Kaufmann,

influential Giedion's *Space Time and Architecture* (1941). Here, the Swiss historian identifies the origins of architectural modernity in those 'constituent facts' whose first germs he retraces in Baroque building and in the nineteenth-century pioneering iron and glass structures.⁵⁵

What distinguishes the English writings examined from those other early reference-texts of modernist historiography is their insistence on the national character of the particular past chosen to epitomize the beginnings of architectural modernity. The emphasis on the British antecedents of modernism, that was to be the central argument of Pevsner's *Pioneers*, was shared with different nuances by Morton Shand's pre-history of modernism, as well as by Summerson and Williams-Ellis' genealogical trees. In all of these writings the past furnishes a historical precedent that legitimizes present programmes and future aspirations.

While for those espousing the cause of modernism, the construction of a continuous historical thread that links the present to the past could have acted as a mediating device for the popularization of a new architecture not yet accepted by the public. For the more conservative Goodhart-Rendel, Betjeman, or Lancaster, the reference to a national past was treated within a more critical framework, as a locus of nostalgia, pessimism, or self-irony – or, like Pugin, as a means to ridicule the present.

A pictorial history of architecture

A further interest of these various texts lies in their particular association of words and images. Most of the arguments of the architectural criticism analysed in this article are visually presented. The graphic repertoire they deploy is varied; it includes pictorial summaries and photographic charts of buildings (J. M Richards; Richards and Chermayeff; Morton Shand), sets of contrasted pictures (Williams Ellis, Lancaster), synoptic evolutionary diagrams (Summerson and William –Ellis), genealogical tables (Betjeman), architectural sketches and satirical vignettes (Fleetwood-Hesketh, Lancaster, Goodhart-Rendel).

The tendency to render the historical argument graphically is not entirely new in British architectural literature. On a closer inspection, the texts examined in this article all draw upon, and adapt, existing English traditions of representing architecture. Besides Pugin's well-known polemical use of caricatures of buildings and contrasted images, further precedents include nineteenth-century references to architectural histories. For instance, antecedents for the genealogical tree of architectural development, as well as the synoptic diagrams of the historical evolution of certain architectural

Architecture in the Age of Reason: baroque and post-baroque in England, Italy and France, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955.

⁵⁵ Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time, and Architecture. The Growth of a New Tradition*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941, esp. 'Our architectural inheritance', 29-95; 'The evolution of the new potentialities', 97-211.

elements and buildings types, are to be found in the *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* by Banister F. Fletcher. (Fig. 23) In the same way, the satirical comparative galleries of buildings' façades in Hesketh's 'Street of taste', as well in some of his illustrations to *Architecture Here and Now*,⁵⁶ and – to a lesser extent – in Lancaster's vignettes and Goodhart-Rendel's sequence of facades, have precedents in nineteenth-century popular architectural panoramas such as Tallis's *London Street Views* (1838-40), or Sandeman's *Grand Architectural Panorama of London: Regent Street to Westminster Abbey* (1849).⁵⁷ (Fig. 24) In different ways, these authors all used a number of well-established conventions of architectural representation but manipulated and subverted them by replacing the straightforward topographical or architectural description of their models, with a satirical or humorous version of it. Moreover, the use of a language that frequently and effectively associates texts and images seems to emerge from the need for a communicational register that can be easily approached by a public not yet prepared to accept the novelty of modern architecture. In this same perspective - of familiarizing and mediating the knowledge of architectural modernism with respect to its possible public - can be viewed the use and re-working, often in a caricature mode, of materials that were part of a long established and widely recognized English tradition of architectural writing and representation.

English architectural criticism in the 1930s: some typifying elements for a re-assessment

What is unique about the writings analysed in this essay? What distinguishes them from contemporary architectural writings published in other countries? The emphasis on the English modern genealogy and the supposed native origins of architectural modernism is certainly a constituent aspect of the English early historiography and criticism of modern architecture.

The tendency to construct and foster a national tradition of

⁵⁶ I refer to figures 10, 11 and 12. Peter Fleetwood Hesketh, 'Piccadilly Circus shows just how far the orderly arrangement of buildings otherwise undistinguished can redeem a street scene. Compare the go-as-you please muddle on the right with the more orderly group on the left', in Summerson and Williams – Ellis, *Architecture*, 6; 'A bad dream – and a fact. A London example of sheer growth without intelligent development', in Summerson and Williams – Ellis, *Architecture*, 48; Fleetwood Hesketh, 'The English Inn', in Summerson and Williams – Ellis, *Architecture*, 72.

⁵⁷ John Tallis, *Tallis's London street views: exhibiting upwards of one hundred buildings in each number, elegantly engraved on steel; with a commercial directory corrected every month, the whole forming a complete stranger's guide through London. To which is added an index map of the streets*, London: John Tallis, 1838 -40; R. Sandeman, *Grand Architectural Panorama of London: Regent Street to Westminster Abbey*. From original drawings made expressly for the work by R. Sandeman, architect, and executed on wood by George C. Leighton. London: I. Whitelaw, 1849. See also the interesting assessment of Sandeman's work by Peter Fleetwood-Hesketh, 'The Grand Architectural Panorama of London -1849', *London Topographical Record*, vol. 23, 111-8.

architectural modernism was certainly not unique to Britain in the 1930s and can be found in other national contexts, particularly fascist Italy, where the dialectic between tradition and modernity, national ideals and internationalism, the search for Italian-ness and the identification of the classical or vernacular roots of architectural modernism was at the heart of the interwar architectural discourse. Although the modes in which this dialectic was articulated were obviously different in the two countries, the impulses that had motivated it can be traced back to the common perception of crisis that dominated the years between the two world wars.

While recent English historiography has identified a brand of modern architecture that is distinctive to England and was founded on the re-elaboration of a well-established national building and planning tradition, it is difficult to escape the fact that in this country modern architecture had been substantially an *émigré* phenomenon.⁵⁸ When modernism arrived, it was argued that its roots had already been there, either in the Arts and Crafts movement or in the Georgian legacy, or in both of them. However, when one looks at it more carefully, this search for the British origins of architectural modernism was to carry with it a series of paradoxes that can be interesting to examine. The first one relates to the striking similarity between Morton Shand's and Pevsner's arguments on the British descent of modernism. This proximity hardly seems coincidental and finds more than a simple resonance in Hermann Muthesius's *Stilarchitektur und Baukunst*. In his book published in 1902, the German architect and diplomat had first presented the idea that William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement were essential in the development of a modern European style.⁵⁹ Echoes of Muthesius's interpretation can be found in a series of writings published in subsequent years by German authors, such as Walter C. Behrendt's *Der Kampf um den Stil im Kunstgewerbe und in der Architektur*, (1920), his *Modern Building: Its Nature, Problems and Forms* (1937),⁶⁰ and Bruno Taut's *Modern Architecture* (1929).⁶¹ The

⁵⁸ Although the book comes to apparently different conclusions, this same line of interpretation is reiterated by Alan Powers in his *Britain: Modern Architecture in History*, 49: 'It has often been remarked that British Modernism depended largely on people who had come from elsewhere. While it might have been possible to have a completely home-grown Modernism in Britain (...) the *émigré* phenomenon is an inescapable part of the story and influenced the host architects, including those who went in partnership with the *émigrés*'.

⁵⁹ Hermann Muthesius, *Stilarchitektur und Baukunst: Wandlungen der Architektur im XIX. Jahrhundert und ihr heutiger Standpunkt*, Mülheim-Ruhr: K. Schimmelpfeng, 1902. English translation: *Style-architecture and building-art: transformations of architecture in the nineteenth century and its present condition*, Los Angeles: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994.

⁶⁰ Walter C. Behrendt, *Der Kampf um den Stil im Kunstgewerbe und in der Architektur*, Stuttgart-Berlin: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1920, esp. 'Das Beispiel Englands', 33-45; Walter C. Behrendt, *Modern Building: Its Nature, Problems and Forms*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1937, esp. 'A moral revolution', 50-75.

⁶¹ Bruno Taut, *Modern Architecture*, London: The Studio, 1929, esp. 'The early developments of modern architecture', 35-88.

interesting aspect in this comparison lies in the fact that while a number of English writings on architecture were trying to prove that modernism had its precursors in Britain, the identification of the British origins for modern architecture came from interpretations that had already been elaborated some years earlier by German authors. Another distinctive character of the English architectural criticism in the 1930s regarded the revaluation of the Georgian legacy. Ironically this aspect was to unite two otherwise opposed groups, Albert Richardson on the one hand (hardly a friend of modernism), and the apologists of modern architecture, who saw in the Georgian terrace house the precedent for the modern house, on the other. At the same time, Shand's and Pevsner's enthusiasm for the Arts and Crafts, Voysey in particular, must have appeared odd at that time in Britain, where Voysey and the 'free architecture' movement had been ridiculed by the intervening generation, most notably Goodhart-Rendel and Richardson, who both thought of them as contemptible.⁶²

The centrality of humour, at once verbal and graphic, constitutes an element of originality of the writings examined. While graphic parodies of steel, glass and concrete architecture and modernist metal tubular furniture abounded also in German and Italian satirical magazines and newspapers, it is unusual to find them featured by the architectural press or side by side with the modernist propaganda, as happens for instance in the pages of *The Architectural Review*.

Seen in an international context, the really unique character of these writings is their light-hearted and apparently 'amateur' mode. Architectural historiography has generally directed attention to two co-existing schools of thought within 1930s English architectural criticism, an encounter that was to find its most complete expression in the *AR*. In his study on Englishness and landscape, David Matless has traced the emergence in the interwar years of a movement for the planning and preservation of landscape, which sought to ally the English tradition with progress and modernity in order to define Englishness as orderly and modern.⁶³ In this perspective, the coexistence in the *AR* of a plurality of genres and tones of architectural criticism, including and alongside the modernist-internationalist strand that gravitated around J. M. Richards and Nikolaus Pevsner, an indigenous, more conservative tendency is identifiable with the lively contributions of Betjeman and Lancaster, both of whom were also active preservationists. A major difference between these two strands was the unambiguous, rigorously professional approach of the first, and the cheerfully amateurish one of the second. An explanation of this peculiar trait, common to several of the leading figures of English architectural criticism in this decade, can be given by reference to a long-standing English upper-class tradition to which they either belonged or identified with. This tradition considered it 'ungentlemanly' to be anything

⁶² Mentions of this can be found in Reyner Banham's *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1980, 48.

⁶³ David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, London: Reaktion, 1998.

other than an 'amateur'. To be 'professional' was regarded as 'tradesmanlike' and socially unacceptable; the expectation was to succeed without being seen to be doing any work. That these writings show a certain amount of cultivated 'amateurism', even when their authors were quite 'professional' about what they were doing, is not altogether surprising. While in fact there is nothing 'amateur' about the way in which Summerson or Betjeman went about their studies of architecture, these authors were careful not to reveal their dedication and industriousness.⁶⁴ So although at first sight this might appear as 'amateur', it was partly a device in order to protect a class position, or an aspirant class position, or to appeal to a readership. At the same time, the self-conscious amateurism adopted by these critics could be seen as a way of giving British approbation to the new architecture: in a society where authority of class still mattered (or might be thought to matter), this coded upper-class way of presenting modern architecture gave it a sort of respectability.

Summerson, Clough Williams-Ellis, Lancaster, Betjeman and Fleetwood-Hesketh, all seemed to share a similar upper-class disdain for experts' or specialist knowledge and terminology. Common to them was the idea that architecture is everywhere and everyone's business, and that anyone is entitled to have an opinion about it. Whether as a polemical tool or a personal *jeu d'esprit*, satirical cartoons and jokes, explanatory diagrams and sets of contrasting pictures, had the merit of making the specialized knowledge of architecture accessible to a wider public while sanctioning it from the position of a recognisable English upper-class tradition.

Michela Rosso obtained her Ph.D. in architectural and urban history at the Politecnico di Torino where, since 2001, she has taught the course of History of Contemporary Architecture. Her main fields of research include the history of contemporary architecture (19th - 20th centuries) and the architectural historiography. On these topics she has published the volume *La Storia utile. Modernismo e memoria nazionale. Londra 1928 -1951* (Edizioni di Comunità, Torino 2001) and edited the Italian translation of Lewis Mumford's book *The Culture of Cities*, (Edizioni di Comunità, Torino 1999). In 2014 she was General Chair of the EAHN (European Architectural History Network) Third International Conference held at the Politecnico di Torino.

Among her current interests is the relationship between architecture and humour, a research project that she is currently working on as a 2016 residential fellow at the Yale Center for the British Art in New Haven. Since 2001 she has been book reviews editor of *Il Giornale dell'Architettura*.

e. michela.rosso@polito.it

⁶⁴ While in the subsequent years both Betjeman and Lancaster never abandoned their light-hearted approach to architectural writing, which remained an important part of their persona, in the early 1940s Summerson had already dropped his 'amateur' mask and turned to a more professional mode. This transition will be finally accomplished with the publication of *Georgian London* (London: Pleiades Books, 1945), the work that was to definitely establish him as the British leading architectural historian.

Michela Rosso Between history, criticism, and wit: texts and images of English
modern architecture (1933-36)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).