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Title: Making it New: the discourses of architecture and modernism in Britain

Year of publication: 2007

Citation: Higgot, A. (2007) 'Making it New: the discourses of architecture and modernism in Britain', in Higgot, A. *Mediating Modernism: Architectural Cultures in Britain*. London: Routledge, pp.3-32.

Link to published version:

<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415401777/>

Mediating Modernism: Architectural Cultures in Britain

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Routledge 2007

Chapter One

Making it New: the discourses of architecture and modernism in Britain

...'Modernism or *Modernismus* as it should be called on the German precedent, has invaded this country like an epidemic, and though there are signs of reaction, its attack is insidious and far-reaching, with the wholly fallacious prospect of a new heaven and a new earth which it dangles before the younger generation.'¹

Reginald Blomfield *Modernismus* 1934

The younger generation of Blomfield's² time, and the generations which came later, have largely not followed his advice. Instead, the thought of 'a new heaven and new earth' has generated the process of making and re-making the practice of modern architecture over the seven decades since then. A series of critical shifts within overlapping and discontinuous discourses aimed to address

¹ R Blomfield *Modernismus* London Macmillan 1934 p.v

² Reginald Blomfield (1856-1942) was a leading member of the architectural profession in Britain, awarded the RIBA Gold Medal in 1913: among his last works was the reconstruction of the Regent Street Quadrant (1923-28).

the question of what, after all, modern architecture should be: the primary purpose of this book is to recount these narratives which were so compelling in their time. Blomfield's book³ spoke for his own generation of established architects, and was published at exactly the time when modern architecture first emerged to be a convincing force in Britain. He is aware that he is entering into contention with those holding opposite beliefs: in the years after him, a series of influential journals and books continued this dialectic. Modernism, given that it is by definition a culture of resistance, has been manifestly the propagator of polemic which defines the territory it demands to occupy.

Much of the most innovative architecture of the second half of the twentieth century came from Great Britain: the Smithsons, Archigram, Rogers, Foster, Koolhaas and Hadid are among many others whose work gained international significance. Having played no part in the early formulation of Modernism, Britain found itself, to much surprise, to be the home of the most significant architectural work. It has been central in the formulation of new polemic and practice more than any other single country, whether in the post-war field of city rebuilding and later the expressions of Brutalism, the technological imperative of Archigram, or the new modernities generated at the Architectural Association School. But behind the achievements of specific architects and their built and unbuilt work lies a rich architectural culture which can be seen most acutely through key books and journals in their formulation of ideas, and these are examined in the chapters which follow.

It would be possible to write a history of modern architecture in Britain through a series of critical buildings which seem to represent the spirit of their particular time: buildings which have become famous, and form a narrative of the changes and development in the way architecture has been practiced. Or it would be possible to take another line, which would connect those buildings to a series of individuals who seem to have shifted the ground on which architecture stands. But the approach of this book takes a different course, and instead looks at what underlies these phenomena; the debates, issues, questions and assumptions which have been behind these individual projects and individual actions. The idea is, then, of developing a history of British architectural culture, a narrative of the main shifts in architectural thinking: of articulating the different ideas of how architecture should be practiced, of what it should be for. And if one does that, it appears that each period had its common ground, a set of assumptions, or perhaps more accurately contained a dialectic of opposing forces. What most forward-thinking people believed to be true in the period of the fifties was different from what were the background assumptions in the sixties, and far more dissimilar 'truths' existed in more distant periods. The unspoken assumptions of such positions contrast with each other over time, that for example architecture was obliged to be a social

³ Blomfield argued that architecture in such countries as Britain did not need a 'new architecture', as that it gathers 'all that may be learnt from the changing conditions of modern life, yet not losing touch with the splendid heritage of the past' (*Modernismus* p61)

practice, to make the world a better place; or that architecture was above all compelled to relate to new technologies and build new forms emerging from them; or that architecture was essentially a cultural practice which emerged from the specifics of a place and its qualities.

After all, architecture is never in reality about the functional, never simply the fulfilment of a brief: and functional justification is a pretext for the architect's more complex intentions which relate to the cultural context in which he or she participates. Architectural discussion generally focuses on buildings: but many if not most buildings are not *architecture* in the sense of truly forming part of its discourse. The speculatively built estate, the industrial installation, or the developers' office block have at best liminal references to the 'art' of architecture. The world is full of such *facsimiles* of architecture in this exacting sense: thus the discourse of architecture as a specific practice and as an art which expresses and interrogates cultural values misses its target if it concentrates on buildings and projects which lack any original aspiration.

The position of this book locates architecture firmly in the wider realm of culture, beyond that of the accustomed dialectic of architecture alternatively being a science or an art. Architectural ideas contain traces of ideologies derived from a far wider range of reference than generally acknowledged: and the making of architecture has been seen on the one hand as the realisation of a political aim, on the other as an expression of the subversion of established structures. In its articulation both of the fundamental values of a culture and the attributes of inhabited space, it relates both at the largest and smallest scale to basic human questions. In the period of modernism, architecture has been seen as the expression of new forms in art based on abstraction and anti-historical expression, and even more that it emerges from the new technologies which were available increasingly through the nineteenth and twentieth century and, it has been said, determined that it would happen. But a cultural reading asserts that beyond this, architecture is always the fulfilment of particular ideologies, the making of building projects taking place very much in the context of what is assumed to be appropriate. A cultural interpretation makes little distinction between what is built and what is not: after all, what comes to be built is largely a matter of good fortune, and the availability of finance. Equally, those architects who build extensively are not always those with the most critical ideas, and for the most part are not those who debated and generated those ideas, the inventive thinking which informs their work.

The particular importance of publications must be emphasised. While discourse- a synonym of discourse is *dialogue*- exists perhaps most of all in conversations, by their nature inevitably unrecorded, those ideas also appear in the form of journal articles, in the editorship of journals, in books which may develop a standing and influence. Texts may define discourses at the same time as not being their sole component. Government reports and the making of strategies by various

authorities also express highly specific points of view: the individuals who shape and control institutions are aware of the publication as an embodied expression of their values. Thus the methodology of this book is to analyse specific publications- books, journals and articles- which have been instrumental in transforming the culture of architecture in Britain.

A second fundamental issue is the great significance in these publications of how they are designed, how their illustrations are used and what graphic layout employed. Layout and graphics give weight and meaning to their subject and effectively manufacture its importance. The language which is used embodies a particular meaning rather than the simple communication of fact and certain words are made to focus that interpretation. The published photograph has been one of the most important communicators of architectural ideas, even if, for the most part, it bears little relation to the experience one might have of the built reality it represents. Pictures have a visceral immediacy as the assumed embodiment of truth, despite their many limitations in the representation of architecture, in particular that they can scarcely illustrate space. The reality of architecture portrayed in professional journals and books does not come unfiltered, but is edited, framed and presented in such a way that it is transformed. It *becomes* the architecture: the book or journal constructs a reality rather than representing it. Thus books create architecture; rather simply talking about it, or simply representing it, they reify an individual and specific set of assumptions and from that point of view make clear what architecture is, and should be. The media provide an alibi, presenting arbitrary architectural intentions as naturally occurring fact. The role of the architectural publication is to provide a correlative to the fortuitous wishes and desires of those designing architecture as well as those interpreting it. Publications furnish the conditions for the transformation and establishment of the values of architectural culture.

Books can thus be powerful things, and in the history of modern architecture in particular, have become highly polemical texts. Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture*, mistranslated into English by Frederick Etchells as *Towards a New Architecture*⁴, without doubt had the greatest single influence, in its field as revolutionary as Karl Marx's political treatises of the previous century. As a publication it leaves much to be desired, with frequent repetition and lack of structure, in fact disclosing its origin as a series of articles. It declaims rather than argues its position, and this perversely is its strength: there is an effectiveness in hearing and rehearing such phrases as 'a great epoch has begun, there exists a new spirit.' Its reiteration of such axioms, which become calls to battle, cuts through contemporary, more genteel debates. But even more effective are its visual attributes, which set up a new mode of presenting ideas that took account, for the first time in an architectural publication, of the possibilities of layout and photography in the printed media. While none of these qualities is

⁴ Le Corbusier *Vers Une Architecture* Paris Cres et Cie 1923, *Towards a New Architecture* trans Etchells, London Rodker 1927.

quite so strongly represented in a British publication, it underlines how a publication might work, and each of the publications chosen for discussion here use the possibilities of layout and image in distinct ways.

II

The approach of this book, as a cultural history of British architecture which has chosen to concentrate on what underlies the production of architecture, is shaped by a reading of theories which interpret the conditions of modern life. Modernism claimed to be objective, the 'making it new' which would deliver the world from the deleterious effects of centuries of stifling tradition that had long ago lost any connection with the actual circumstances of life. Instead of the narratives of myth, religion and history itself, the modern world would face *reality*: as Le Corbusier and Ozenfant wrote in the first edition of *L'Esprit Nouveau*: 'Nothing is worthwhile which is not general, nothing is worthwhile which is not transmittable. We have attempted to establish an aesthetic which is rational, and therefore human'⁵ Existing frameworks of meaning were then to be overturned, in favour of the visceral immediacy of authentic life. Thus the long-standing fixed picture of the world was turned around: but the new science of psychoanalysis made the experiencing subject itself a changing and complex entity. The world of the subject and object was a condition of instability.

The Structuralist view, initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure⁶, is that nothing can exist by itself, only by its relationship to other things within a structure. For him, language consists of arbitrarily determined signs, and a word may only be understood in its relation to the structure of language as a whole: thus individual speech is not 'original' but exists on a plane beyond the individual's will and creation as part of an abstracted system. The extension of this into any field of human activity is to undermine the traditional view of the autonomy of the individual act: the individual always operates in relation to a pre-existing system. As the modernist poet T.S. Eliot wrote in relationship to poetry: 'the existing order is complete before the new work arrives, (but) the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered...the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.'⁷ In relationship to history, this certainly put in doubt the idea of the 'genius' who as an individual changes the world, an autonomous actor in charge of their medium, and instead sees the individual forming a part of a defined practice. Roland Barthes developed a very particular and ahistorical practice of criticism, which saw all the products of a culture as equivalent. In his

⁵ Le Corbusier and Amedee Ozenfant *Sur la Plastique* in *L'Esprit Nouveau* I, 15 October 1920, quoted in T.Benton, C.Benton and D.Sharp *Form and Function* London Granada 1975 p89

⁶ Ferdinand de Saussure : Linguist and author of *Course in General Linguistics*(1916). On De Saussure see F Gadet *Saussure and Contemporary Culture* London Hutchinson 1989

⁷ T.S.Eliot *Tradition and the Individual Talent* in *Selected Essays* London Faber 1951 p15

*Mythologies*⁸ he talked about the Eiffel Tower, but also gladiator films and steak and chips. Apart from being the unwitting generator of countless later articles which take the products of popular culture very seriously, his work is important in making clear how meaning is created; the Eiffel Tower 'attracts meaning the way a lightning rod attracts thunderbolts'⁹: whatever the intention of its 'author', the engineer Gustave Eiffel, its shifting significance is something for which he is not responsible. As he argued elsewhere¹⁰, the intentions of the author are meaningless in the development of an interpretation. Any text consists not of one authorial voice but is a montage of unconscious influences and existing texts, as well as the interpretation which the reader brings to it. In relation to architecture, Barthes' position opens up the possibility of a radical clarification of the architect's role in relation to their production: far from being able to control the meaning of a building and the reaction of its users, any work stands as a part of a far wider culture, open to interpretation and misinterpretation.

But it is Michel Foucault, with his term the *discourse*, who in 'The Archaeology of Knowledge'¹¹ really set up the framework for new kind of history and a new basis for criticism. His rendering of de Saussure's Structuralism is that everything exists within a discourse: it is contingent on it and part of it. What he terms 'statements' within a discourse could be a book, an article, an utterance, a client, or a building: a *discursive formation* brings these together in their diversity, but can never be definitive, is always provisional, and should not be seen as equivalent to the kind of history which unifies diversity into a singular narrative. As he wrote: '...discourse (is) a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation; it does not form a rhetorical or formal unity, endlessly repeatable, whose appearance or use in history might be indicated (and, if necessary, explained); it is made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined'.¹² Thus it is in Foucault's *archaeology*, a term that does not imply the search for a beginning, that the evaluation of the products of culture can take place, conditioned by an enquiry of rediscovery and free from absolute judgment.

Royston Landau in his essay 'Notes on the concept of an architectural position'¹³ is among those who have applied Foucault's thought to architecture, and it is his key idea that the *production* of an architect includes their writing, discussion and set of beliefs, quite separate from what his or her buildings might look like, which underlies his study. But he also speaks of significant individuals' work outside those key architects who build what are seen as the most important buildings. This

⁸ *Mythologies* was published in French (1957) in English London Cape 1972: see also *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies* New York Hill and Wang 1979.

⁹ See Susan Sontag (ed.) *A Roland Barthes Reader* London Vnintage 1993 p238

¹⁰ Death of the author in Roland Barthes *Image Music Text* London Fontana 1977

¹¹ Michel Foucault *Archaeology of Knowledge* London Tavistock 1972

¹² op cit 116-17

¹³ Royston Landau Notes on the concept of an architectural position *AA Files* 1 Winter 1981-2 pp111-114

includes authors, the editors of journals, those who put on exhibitions, those who run schools of architecture and professional bodies. Landau's position does not privilege the architect who builds over the architect who does not build: but equally would see government policy, the individual significant client and their decisions as equally important, as well as positions taken by those who edit magazines and lead schools and institutions. As Foucault pointed out, the sum knowledge of any subject is a construction that is far more inclusive than a conventional structure of analysis.

Foucault's own position has been a contributing influence on a number of recent books of architectural theory and history. Particularly groundbreaking is Beatriz Colomina's 'Privacy and Publicity: modern architecture as mass media'¹⁴: for Colomina, maybe the true site of 'modern architecture' as it has been developed is not the suburban location of a series of inconveniently located villas, but the pages of the far more accessible publications which document and present this work. Le Corbusier, for her, is the first architect, and certainly not the last, to understand this and develop his work with reference to its relationship to the media. His 'Complete works'¹⁵(which are nothing of the kind) carefully present- and illustrate- his work as a continuum. Presentation is far from straightforward; pictures are manipulated, and unbuilt projects given an equal significance to those which are built. The 'new photography' and the architecture of what came to be called the International Style were both products of a modernism created in response to the machine. While her concern is rather wider in scope, for Colomina modernism's transformation of the house created a public role for private space. But her emphasis on the role of the media in creating rather than simply representing architectural ideologies is the substantial innovation of her book.

Adrian Forty also presents in 'Words and Buildings'¹⁶ an important and radical new idea, and sets up a new subject for architectural study- the language which is used by modern architects and by those interpreting it. Words create meaning- and are influential in doing so. 'Structure', the 'user', even 'form', are among the specific terms seen by Forty as decisive in relation to modern architecture: at the outset, he quotes Barthes in his essay 'The Fashion System' who in relationship to the social practice of fashion writes: '...Why does it interpose, between the object and the user, such a luxury of words (not to mention images), such a network of meaning(?)'¹⁷ The same could be said, Forty argues, for the system of language which runs parallel to the system of the making of buildings: the new words which modernism required were effective in bringing it into being. Each of the eighteen 'key words' whose etymology he analyses as crucial to the making of modernism, have become invisible as their meaning is so widely assumed: 'space', many readers would be surprised to hear,

¹⁴ B.Colomina *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* Cambridge, Mass MIT Press 1994. Her contrasting counterpart to Le Corbusier is the work of Loos who refused engagement with the media and destroyed records of his work.

¹⁵ Le Corbusier *Oeuvre Complete* (Complete Works) London Thames and Hudson 1964-70

¹⁶ Adrian Forty *Words and Buildings: a vocabulary of modern architecture* London Thames and Hudson 2000

¹⁷ Forty (2000) p13

only came into importance in architecture relatively recently with the writing of Semper, while 'flexibility', which might be assumed to be a good thing, had a very specific time span from the 1950s to the 1970s. More fundamentally, Forty, like Colomina, discovered and investigated a new theme within architectural historical analysis which served to deconstruct its meaning and assumptions.

The question of architecture's representation in the published media is one which has far more importance than it has yet been given. Kester Rattenbury's edited collection of critical essays and influential images, 'This is not Architecture' is one of a small number of publications that have recently appeared¹⁸. The writing of books which become influential, and even more the editing of magazines; what they choose to include, and very importantly how this material is framed, can be seen to create architectural discourse as much as anything does. The resulting emphasis on the visual as the means to comprehend modern architecture has meant that the architectural photograph can be interpreted as a misrepresentation of a more purposive modernism. The history of modernism has been shaped by the development of the visual media in parallel with the practice of modern architecture: the new architecture, new media and new photography worked together to mutual advantage. Had they not done so, the *forms* of modernism rather than any deeper level of its meaning or realization, might not have become so pervasive.

The media have a history as a subject, and the work of 'media studies' originated with Marshall McLuhan. A Canadian professor of English, McLuhan published three books in the 1960s which were highly influential on a new understanding of the media. They developed his radical position, exposing how the printed or electronic medium had a transformative role on all social interaction, even at that time with computers scarcely invented. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) examined the historical importance of the shift to printing and beyond: *Understanding Media* (1964)¹⁹ introduced the memorable phrase 'the medium *is* the message' and described how man was becoming the extension of the various transformed modern media, rather than the media being dependent on man. The 1967 book *The Medium is the Massage*²⁰ with its punning title, however, took on a new synthesis of form and content: pages without text, huge sometimes shocking images, text which was repeated, text printed backwards. Its form underlined what the sixties had already begun to demonstrate, that knowledge, art, and what is described as culture, had been irrevocably changed. And, more than that, any carefully- constructed argument was no match for the powerful impact of the modern media. Showing both extraordinary foresight and imagination to create a book which could participate in the condition it interrogated, McLuhan made it clear that the world had been

¹⁸ Kester Rattenbury(ed) *This is not architecture; media constructions* London Routledge 2002

¹⁹ Marshall McLuhan *The Gutenberg Galaxy* London Routledge 1962: *Understanding Media*; London Routledge 1964

²⁰ Marshall McLuhan, Quentin Fiore *The Medium is the Massage* Harmondsworth Penguin 1967

transformed, even if to a great extent this transformation had not been noticed. This lack of awareness was equally true of architects, with notable exceptions. The architects who formed Archigram in 1961 became world famous through exactly that device, of creating a medium of their own, *Archigram* magazine (see pXX) which communicated their work, even without the physical existence of a single building. It could be said that they, almost alone, invented a new way of becoming an architect, solely validated by the media which they themselves had generated.

III

The narrative of architecture in the twentieth century was, for the most part, located between several polarities: social engagement, cultural representation, technological incorporation and formal innovation. There was rarely a balance within this dialectic, and, rather, the emphasis on one to the exclusion of others has been the primary cause of modern architecture's numerous failures. Architecture cannot solely be determined by its technological means, but neither can it solely be expressed by innovation in its form. This book is selective of what seem to be the most significant dominant themes in the history of British modernism: there are at any time overlapping discourses, and in fact it can be seen that each period, which in Britain approximates to the sequence of decades, contains a dialectic of opposing positions. The 1930s saw the fundamental battle of establishing modernism: initially this contrasted with the position of questioning and denial of its necessity, and later with the development of a local identity. The period of wartime and after was really expressed by contrasting positions on just how modern cities should be rebuilt. The 1950s differentiated the large scale fulfilment of the modernism defined in earlier decades with what is called here the shift to the specific in terms of materiality and site, while the sixties saw the development of a massive modernist building programme now inflected by a Brutalist aesthetic with its opposite, an architecture which was provisional and expendable. The seventies and eighties, seen here in the explosion of new ideas at the Architectural Association, developed its complexity against a redundant modernism, and later stood against the simplicities of the post modern position. In the nineties, the dominance of so-called High-Tech architecture elicited several responses that questioned but also reiterated more fundamental architectural values.

A word means something different after a decade has passed: meaning is a shifting rather than a fixed thing. 'Architecture' is no exception, its properties and values moving almost imperceptibly until they may mean the opposite of what was formerly the case. A retrospective view is no doubt misleading: the discourses celebrated here as the key ideas of a period did not, in large part, seem to be that at the time. Its authors were perhaps ignored, sometimes ridiculed: they certainly, and by definition, stood outside what were the commonly accepted ideas of the day. They were not taken

seriously; they were seen as irrelevant to the real business of architecture; or they were even seen as dangerous. Just as the ideas of Modernism were dismissed by Blomfield in 1934 as an 'extreme of crude and unabashed brutality'²¹ so Archigram in the 1960s or NATO in the 1980s were seen as self indulgent irrelevancies. Both, as well as many other positions, were to be important as new realisations of architectural possibilities, which in their turn would become established and perhaps later repudiated.

Despite popular belief, history does not speak for itself. It is, rather, a series of accepted judgments which shift sometimes almost imperceptibly, sometimes swiftly. In Britain in the 1960s, it was generally believed that the nineteenth century produced bad art and bad architecture. As a result, most of Victorian Whitehall as well as St Pancras Station were seriously threatened with demolition. It was believed that, in terms of absolute quality, these buildings were bad. In the end, with British hesitancy, most survived: Euston Station Arch (which was defended by the young progressive architects Alison and Peter Smithson) was one of a few major casualties. This situation is not exceptional; similarly, once-disdained modern buildings such as the housing tower blocks by Goldfinger²² are now valued, not as curiosities, but as *good* architecture. The reverse is true of Cumbernauld Town centre designed by Geoffrey Copcutt and completed in 1966, widely praised by Banham²³ and many other critics on its completion. A 2005 television programme 'Demolition'²⁴ saw it awarded the highest number of votes, in favour of its destruction, of any British building.

Perhaps the most successful British buildings emerging from the material discourse of the 1950s, while not strictly Brutalist, were not completed until the mid 1970s, when there was remarkably little notice taken of one, the Barbican development and general hostility to the other, the National Theatre. Lasdun's National Theatre was completed in 1977, located on the London South Bank designated in Abercrombie's 1943 plan for London as a culture zone, but could be seen as embodying a reading of Le Corbusier's pre-war work, as well as reflecting the new materiality of the early 1950s. Lasdun thus produced a building which participated in several discourses in British architecture, but the timing was inauspicious. The year of its completion was close to the lowest ebb of appreciation of the architectural qualities it had. If (hypothetically) the Barbican and National Theatre been completed a decade earlier, not only their immediate, but also their lasting reputation would surely have been higher. The Millennium Dome, a lightweight tent structure provided as an enclosure for the built exhibition installations within, was designed by Mike Davies of Richard Rogers and Partners at the end of the 1990s but represents a long-nurtured idea with clear roots in

²¹ R Blomfield *Modernismus* 1934 p64

²² Ernö Goldfinger's Balfron Tower in the Brownfield Estate, Poplar, London designed in 1963 and Trellick Tower, Cheltenham Estate North Kensington, London designed in 1967.

²³ See R Banham *Megastructure* London Thames and Hudson 1976 p168ff for a discussion of its qualities.

²⁴ 'Demolition' Channel 4 20 December 2005, presented by Kevin McCloud, with George Ferguson RIBA President and Janet Street-Porter.

the designs of Archigram in the 1960s. It is almost inevitable that architectural theory, which takes a while to become acceptable, and another long period to become realised, means that built buildings are frequently an expression of a past discourse and judgements on their worth have already moved on. Chronology is in any case a tricky thing, and one of the problems involved in conventional historical narrative: Adolf Loos, one of the first architects to develop a cultural reading of architecture, pointed out in *Ornament and Crime* (1908), that while he might be 'up to date' his neighbour was living in the 1880s, and his enemies in an earlier century.

This is not to say that buildings are simply the embodiment of prevailing ideas. But, rather, that the context of ideology provides the field from which the building emerges, and publications may determine just how architecture is understood and also shape architects' actions as designers. Far from belittling the achievement of building, this assumption leaves ample space for the uncovering of the qualities of the physical, of the here-and-now, which every building has. Theory, as active, applied theory is a way of understanding what gets built- and not just the 'famous buildings' by celebrated architects, but the diffusion of ideas affecting the whole urban fabric. The results of an architectural discourse, the common assumptions of a given period, create the context for practice by those who have no ambition to create originality: thus the spread of architectural ideas creates a shift into a kind of vernacular of practice, as can be seen in any city and town. However there is an unfortunate corollary, illustrated by the example of the discourse of the 1950s: the Smithsons' polemic assures them of a significant role, and like Le Corbusier they were highly conscious of the role of the media. The irony may be that an undoubtedly original architect such as James Stirling definitively eschewed the architectural manifesto- and for that reason does not appear the significant figure he was in the discourse of the period.

The discourses the book primarily deals with are seven, placed in sequence: first, the stage of the discovery and proselytising of Modernism as established in continental Europe, seen more as an appropriate new style rather than a movement, and exemplified by the editorial work of James Richards at the *Architectural Review* from the mid 1930s. Second, the discourse of reconstruction which examines texts published during World War II, with its programme of comprehensive city rebuilding, a utopian mission to create model communities and focusing on Patrick Abercrombie's officially commissioned 1943 County of London Plan. The third theme is the new interpretation of materiality seen both in the writing of Alison and Peter Smithson and the campaigns of the *Architectural Review*, primarily in the early 1950s: effectively a shift from the universal to the specific solution, and encompassing what came to be called Brutalism. The work of *Archigram* magazine, an approach later taken up by a revived *Architectural Design*, provides the fourth chronological discourse, a technological imperative transposing the practice of architecture from the making of an object to servicing the human subject: with this challenge to convention, British architectural culture

earned wide acclaim. The field of architecture within the highly international Architectural Association School under the Chairmanship of Alvin Boyarsky sought and created radical alternatives to the hegemony of modernism, which provides the theme of the chapter concentrating on the 1970s and 1980s. The final subject is recent rethinking of the basis of architectural practice in the 1990s, manifested by the great increase in the volume of publication of architectural books and journals and which has served to reinforce a split between the pragmatics of practice and rigour of theory.

These themes, it can be argued, provide not only the most resonant ideas in the history of British architecture since the 1930s, but also that they form a thread of action and reaction, of development and repudiation, if read as a sequence. It would be reasonable however to read each chapter as a self-contained subject, rather than the dialectic of the succession of discourses, and the book would make no claim to be a complete historical overview. A number of significant discourses have not been included: the immediate post war years, for example, saw the surprising adoption of Rudolf Wittkower's book *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*²⁵: first published as an academic paper in 1949, it became influential on a generation of architects, not least the young Smithsons. Renaissance systems of proportion would seem an unlikely subject for their generation, although a connection can be made with certain of Le Corbusier's preoccupations²⁶. Opposite, but occurring at the same time, was a resurgence of Swedish influence as a model of socially committed and humanist architectural practice, influencing the design of housing developments and new towns. This link with Sweden and a softer version of 'modern' began in the mid- 1920s as described below (see pxx) and, arguably, has never gone away: Colin St John Wilson's 'Other' tradition²⁷ is the most consummate extension and realisation of this discourse.

Among others which had influence in Britain was the representation the position of science as the basis for thought and design in architecture. This can be seen in particular in the work of Richard Llewelyn Davies²⁸ both in his practice and his leadership of the Bartlett School through the 1960s, which he transformed from a Beaux-Arts school to one based on environmental research. One outcome was the development of design for the mass production of industrialised building, and the account of the widespread adoption of commercial building systems, Camus and Larsen Nielsen being the first for housing, alongside local authorities' own CLASP system, is a significant and perhaps entirely negative history²⁹. Also in the same period the massive programme of social housing was planned according to the principles of the 1961 Parker Morris Report *Homes for Today*

²⁵ R Wittkower *Architectural Principles in the age of Humanism* London Warburg Institute 1949

²⁶ See Le Corbusier *Le Modulor* refXX

²⁷ See Colin St John Wilson *The Other tradition of Modern Architecture: the uncompleted project* London Academy 1995

²⁸ Richard Llewelyn Davies had trained in the immediately pre-war AA, and later set up a practice with John Weeks, responsible for the London Stock Exchange and the plan for Milton Keynes.

²⁹ See Barry Russell *Building Systems, Industrialisation and Architecture* London John Wiley 1981.

*and Tomorrow*³⁰ The history of the British social housing programme is comprehensively researched, documented and discussed in Glendinning and Muthesius's 1994 book *Tower Block*³¹, while the postwar building of schools is covered in Andrew Saint's excellent 1987 study *Towards a Social Architecture*³².

The anti-modernist movement, beginning with Blomfield and his contemporaries, merits a book by itself and can scarcely be included in the current study. The writing of the Cambridge historian David Watkin, particularly in *Architecture and Morality* (1977)³³ is one recent manifestation: the survival and revival of historical forms in the later twentieth century gained much from the growth of the conservation movement which becomes a discourse in itself³⁴. Developing over perhaps a ten year period before then, 1975 saw the foundation of SAVE Britain's heritage and the publication of *The Rape of Britain*³⁵ which catalogued current and prospective urban destruction by what seemed to be the alliance of architects, planners and ignorant local authorities. A wider view would indicate that the practice of modern architecture itself was in crisis: the drive to redevelop British cities ground to a halt, not only for economic reasons; those economic reasons also led to the collapse of the public commission, non-existent after the accession of the Conservative government four years later. 1975 also saw the first publication of the term 'Post modernism' in the writing of Charles Jencks, and much of his essay was also a plea for conservation, as well as presenting the argument that the visual language of modern architecture was one that simply didn't communicate and had negative social consequences³⁶. The term was a major influence for over a decade, and developed into the practice of applying historical references to otherwise 'modern' buildings, prefigured in Jencks' 1977 book *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*³⁷.

Andreas Papadakis's editorship of *Architectural Design*³⁸ through the 1980s began, as far as Britain is concerned, the making of a wide and inclusive forum for architectural publication. Rather than reflecting a highly specific agenda, the contributions and guest-editorships of a wide variety of architects, writers and academics provided opportunities for the airing of a bewildering variety of themes; most of these (outside, and to some extent opposed to, the A.A.'s contemporary culture) would effectively have had no outlet through existing publications. The process was to enliven

³⁰ Central Housing Advisory Committee's Sub Committee on housing standards, chaired by Sir Parker Morris *Homes for Today and Tomorrow* London H.M.S.O. 1961.

³¹ M Glendinning and S Muthesius *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England Scotland Wales and Northern Ireland* New Haven Yale University Press 1994.

³² Andrew Saint *Towards a Social Architecture: the role of School building in post-war England* New Haven Yale University Press 1987

³³ David Watkin *Architecture and Morality* Oxford Clarendon 1977

³⁴ See Elaine Harwood and Alan Powers (eds.) *The Heroic Period of Conservation Twentieth Century Architecture 7* London The Twentieth Century Society 2004

³⁵ Colin Amery and Dan Cruickshank *The Rape of Britain* London Paul Elek 1975

³⁶ Charles Jencks *The Rise of Post Modern Architecture* AA Quarterly October/December 1975, pp3-14

³⁷ Charles Jencks *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* London Academy 1977

³⁸ Papadakis took over the magazine, then in financial trouble, in late 1976, and became editor in 1979.

British architectural discourse, even if the publications, more books than periodicals, sometimes had shortcomings as either magazines or books. The other publication which typifies the 1980s is *Blueprint*³⁹, founded by Peter Murray and edited by Deyan Suidic. While very much reflecting practice rather than more discursive issues, the journal took a highly specific and in effect prophetic position, and one which was specifically modern rather than post-modern. It relocated architecture into the wider sphere of design and reiterated the autonomy of the designer, no longer cowed as in the seventies by the widespread rejection of the public, and turned their work into something to celebrate. Its covers emphasised the architect or designer as a 'personality', but overall its popularising tendency led gradually to a wider acceptance of modern design as something accessible and eventually popular, prefiguring the role in the mass media that architecture developed in the 1990s, and which had not ever been the case before in Britain.

IV

The relation of Britain to the development of modernism is a complex one as the then leading industrial nation, and advances in technology (exemplified by the building of the great railway structures and the Crystal Palace), did not generate a culture that, some historians retrospectively felt, should have spontaneously created a new architecture. But the development in Britain of the anti-industrial arts and craft movement, which Nikolaus Pevsner saw as the harbinger of modernism, made an entirely different synthesis of what the modern world needed as a representative architecture⁴⁰. Writers other than Pevsner did not follow the same line, and a more commonly held view is that of the pre-history of modernism through French rationality and through neoclassical austerity: the early twentieth century in Britain saw very little new thinking, and even the years after World War I were dominated by varying versions of historicism. Developments were taking place elsewhere in Europe that were leading to the revolutionising of architecture as a practice, from which Britain was excluded.

A precursor to the main themes of enquiry of this book is the work of Howard Robertson and Frank Yerbury⁴¹. In some two hundred articles, the vast majority published in the *Architect and Building News* from 1925-1931⁴², Robertson and Yerbury introduced Le Corbusier, Perret, Asplund and Oud

³⁹ *Blueprint* was first published in October 1983 by Peter Murray with Suidic as Editor and Simon Esterson as art editor.

⁴⁰ As in Pevsner's text *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* London Faber 1936

⁴¹ Robertson and Yerbury's publication of articles on modern architecture is the subject of Andrew Higgott (ed.) *Travels in Modern Architecture* London Architectural Association 1989, which as well as an extended version of this essay has extracts from twenty of the *Architect and Building News* articles. Yerbury's architectural photography is illustrated and commented on by Andrew Higgott and Ian Jeffrey in *F R Yerbury: Itinerant Cameraman* London: Architectural Association 1987.

⁴² See *Travels in Modern Architecture* pp122-8 for a full bibliography of these articles.

to British architectural culture. Ahead of other traveller-critics of the English-speaking world, Robertson and Yerbury visited, photographed and criticised whatever buildings were new in Europe, certainly not limited to those that came to be defined as modernist. They provided the first, often highly naïve accounts of the most significant modern buildings before there was any understanding, let alone polemic, about a 'modern movement.' Their work thus forms a pre-canonical sense of modern architecture, before what was established by consensus as 'important'. In terms of the historiography of modernism their work is valuable, preceding Hitchcock and Johnson's travels which led to the Museum of Modern Art 'International Style' exhibition of 1934.⁴³ Yerbury's role was initially that of photographer, although at a later stage he developed into the co-writer and later sole author of certain of these articles. Robertson on the other hand was Principal of the Architectural Association School and the author of two books in the period, *The Principles of Architectural Composition* (1924) and *Modern Architectural Design* (1931)⁴⁴ While the former reflects, even in its title, the influence of the Beaux-Arts, that influence is modified in the second book with much new material introduced emerging from his European travels, and was also briefly the only British delegate to C.I.A.M. (the Congrès Internationaux d' Architecture Moderne). Reyner Banham, in a rare recognition of the importance and impact of their work, described in 1953 how 'these two, journeying around the world, found architecture in a ferment of which England knew nothing, and combated this ignorance in a famous series of weekly articles, spread over the late 1920s and early 1930s in *The Architect and Building News*, with occasional deviations into the *Architectural Review*.⁴⁵

The most notable British buildings of the 1920s included Reginald Blomfield's rebuilt Regent Street, and banks, offices, town halls and other public buildings continued to be built almost exclusively in some interpretation of Michelangelo, Mansart or Wren. Robertson, despite the influence of his own architectural education at the Paris Beaux-Arts School, had doubts about this historicism. In response to Blomfield's contention that 'the deliberate search for originality is futile'⁴⁶, he asserted: Is not an original thought in a mechanical age like ours more valuable, even if it is imperfect, than the same old repetition? What is the meaning, in the facades of the great departmental stores, of friezes or sacrificial ox-skulls or garlands? And what defence can there be, in these or any other days, for building huge fake Orders supported on steel points?⁴⁷

⁴³ The International Style exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1932, curated by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, may be seen as responsible for establishing modernist architecture as an international practice. Hitchcock commented positively on the modern coverage of *The Architect and Building News* in an article in *Architectural Record*, February 1929.

⁴⁴ Howard Robertson *The Principles of Architectural Composition* London Architectural Press 1924, *Modern Architectural Design* London Architectural Press 1932. Robertson's career as an architect included the building of the British Pavilion for several international exhibitions, including Paris(1925), Brussels(1935) and New York (1939). His role as representing British architect can also be seen in his membership of the U.N. building committee in New York, and he was awarded the RIBA Gold Medal in 1949.

⁴⁵ *Architectural Review*, September 1953, pp161-8

⁴⁶ Quoted by Howard Robertson in 'Post-war Glimpses of Architectural Vitality' *Architect and Building News* 19 March 1926, p223.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Frank Yerbury, the Secretary of the Architectural Association, first travelled in Europe in 1922 when he led an A.A. excursion to Holland. There the party visited buildings that were representative of modern Dutch work, such as the Amsterdam Bourse by Berlage and housing by De Klerk. These became the subject of the first article on contemporary architecture written by Robertson and illustrated by Yerbury's photographs.⁴⁸ The following year Robertson and Yerbury visited the Jubilee Exhibition in Gothenburg in Sweden. The centrepiece was Arvid Bjerke's Congress Hall, a design of timber arches supporting a row of clerestories. Robertson's own design for the London Royal Horticultural Hall, the subject of a successful competition entry soon afterwards, reproduced similar forms in concrete. At least as influential was the other high point of this Swedish excursion, the new Stockholm Town Hall. Ragnar Ostberg's building, beautifully sited on the waterfront and inspired by National Romantic forms, which made an immediate and lasting impression- Yerbury called it 'the finest modern building in the world.'⁴⁹ He decided to make this work better known and on his return arranged an exhibition of drawings and models which opened in London in May 1924. This Exhibition originated the influence of Sweden on British architecture, developing particularly in the 1930s and re-emerging in the post-war years: Swedish architecture was seen as a humane and evolutionary version of the modern, rooted in tradition but not traditional. To British architects it seemed highly appropriate, and, at least for a while, the answer to the quest for a new and appropriate style. For Yerbury himself, the acknowledgement which came with the exhibition and publication served to establish him as an influence within a sphere far larger than the A.A. He was awarded an honorary ARIBA, and the book on Sweden⁵⁰ became the first in a long series, largely published by Ernest Benn and including volumes on Dutch, Danish and French architecture, which brought a collection of unfamiliar modern architecture to Britain.⁵¹ Thus by 1925 the insularity of British architectural culture had been challenged.

Buildings such as Le Corbusier's villas at Garches and Passy, Mendelsohn's Einstein Tower and Schocken shops, schools by Dudok, Oud's housing in Rotterdam and May's in Frankfurt, Asplund's Stockholm Library and Woodland Chapel, churches by Perret and Art Deco shopfronts in Paris all had their first exposure in Britain in the *Architect & Building News*. But this was not an exclusive history: along with the now celebrated names and buildings were such forgotten examples as the YWCA building in Amsterdam and the First Church of Christ Scientist in Berne, as well as such apparent anachronisms as the Sacré Coeur in Paris. In early 1927 there appeared the first article on houses by Le Corbusier, 'Architecture of the Modernist School'. Fairmindedly, it starts by reminding us of the controversial nature of the work: 'There are many people who refuse to regard as

⁴⁸ 'Modern Dutch Architecture' *Architectural Review*, August 1922 pp46-50

⁴⁹ *Swedish Architecture of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Hakon Ahlberg London, Ernest Benn 1924 p3

⁵⁰ Hakon Ahlberg (ed.) *op.cit*

⁵¹ *Dutch Architecture of the Twentieth Century* London Ernest Benn 1926; *Modern Danish Architecture* London Ernest Benn 1927; *Examples of Modern French Architecture* London Ernest Benn 1928; *Modern European Buildings* London Gollancz 1928; *Modern Dutch Buildings* London Ernest Benn 1931.

architecture the buildings which are being put up in France by a group of men who are attempting to express design in the very difficult terms of modern life.' But Robertson, with his eminently rational nature, considers the various innovations of the Modernist vocabulary, and sees a logic at work, not least in the apparent reduction of costs. He concludes: 'These houses show whatever virtue lies in a clean simplicity, the shapes being entirely reasonable. Details such as the doorhoods, window boxes, balcony rails, etc., could obviously be enriched were the means forthcoming.'⁵² Later in that year an article on the Weissenhof Siedlung in Stuttgart gave a somewhat harsher judgment, while at the same time reminding the reader that other European countries were without the highly developed English tradition of small and comfortable houses and cottages. Talking of verandahs, white walls and flat roofs, Robertson and Yerbury comment with a degree of accuracy, if not approval: 'These characteristics are the most obviously salient ones, but behind them lies something very much more fundamental which is responsible for the effect of strangeness which is produced by buildings of Mallet-Stevens, or Van der Rohe, or Le Corbusier. It is a something which derives from the idea behind these conceptions, an idea which presupposes not only a change in architectural standards, but a change in the human personality of the sort of tenant for whom these houses are destined.'⁵³ Thus the idea was identified that this architecture was not simply intending to be a new style, but brought with it the new idea of the transformation of domestic life.

The architecture of Germany, whether by Höger, Poelzig or Mendelsohn, was, however, perceived as being more likely to form the basis of a new tradition than modern French work by Le Corbusier or Mallet-Stevens. They wrote in 1928: 'In a survey of the executed work of the modern school, it is to Germany that falls the premier position . . . Always those architects who were part of the modern movement have attempted to express the idea and function behind the building: an interest in the expression of construction has taken only a very secondary place.'⁵⁴ While this argument could be used to justify a very different kind of architecture, in which expression is subordinate to the resolution of structure, the authors were here defending the streamlined forms of a building by Mendelsohn or Poelzig as having a representative quality, or, as they would have put it, 'character', a distinctly unmodernist term used by Robertson in his 'Principles of Architectural Composition'⁵⁵.

In terms of housing, Robertson and Yerbury often reiterate their satisfaction with traditional English house forms and assert that the new architecture of Europe would not appeal to the English, since there already existed a perfectly good tradition of building small, comfortable houses and cottages: 'In all its major essentials, the English traditional type of small house can remain unchanged without the reproach of unsuitability to modern needs.'⁵⁶ New materials and techniques should be used with caution: for example, they admired the work of Perret in evolving new forms for the architecture of

⁵² 'Architecture of the Modernist School', *Architect and Building News*, 29 April 1927, pp745-8

⁵³ 'The Housing Exhibition in Stuttgart', *Architect and Building News*, 11 November 1927, pp763-6

⁵⁴ 'Some Modern German Buildings', *Architect and Building News*, 9 March 1928, pp354-8

⁵⁵ Robertson (1924) pp65-76

⁵⁶ As footnote 14

concrete, although traditional craftsmanship and the judicious use of crafts in decoration still seemed preferable. Principally, they wanted a sensible building, rationally planned and conceived; for architecture, after all, was a practical art.

While mild in tone and hesitant in the face of theory, Robertson and Yerbury's views, when placed in relation to those of other key contemporary figures in the British architectural world, were radical and revolutionary. Blomfield accused them of misleading the young; William Davidson wrote, in the correspondence columns of the *Architect & Building News*, that their praise for foreign work was misplaced.⁵⁷ Strong disapproval of the new was also expressed by AA President Gilbert Jenkins, who, after a visit led by Yerbury to the Weissenhof Siedlung in 1927, accused its architects of deliberate sensationalism: 'A French exponent of modernism has built a concrete and plate glass box to form one of these new abodes: one could not conceive it as a home for anyone save a vegetarian biologist.'⁵⁸ British disapproval of Le Corbusier's work extended also to his writings: 'The Dead City' was Trystan Edwards's title for his review in *Architectural Review* of Le Corbusier's *The City of Tomorrow*.⁵⁹

Yerbury and Robertson presented their work as reportage rather than polemic, as in the introduction to *Examples of Modern French Architecture*, where they describe themselves as the 'compilers' rather than the 'authors' of a 'modest collection of plates'.⁶⁰ However, in certain quarters, any receptivity to new ideas from abroad was enough to make them appear extreme, and the loneliness of their roles as radicals in the British architectural scene is demonstrated by a survey of the rest of the architectural press at this period. With the exception of the *Architect & Building News*, to which they were major contributors, British periodicals dealt with very little contemporary architecture, and that which they did cover was mostly British. The buildings documented in *The Builder* of 11 January 1929 for example, are Sir Edwin Cooper's National Provincial Bank in the City, Elcock and Sutcliffe's Daily Telegraph building, a house in Sevenoaks by Baillie Scott and Giles Gilbert Scott's Salvation Army College in south London. Buildings such as these, with the exception of the Daily Telegraph which showed the influence of the 1925 Paris Exhibition, were all developments of long-standing British traditions.

A new and less cautious attitude to the modern idiom begins to appear in Robertson and Yerbury's writings during this period. The Van Nelle Factory in Rotterdam by Brinkmann and Van der Vlugt is described by them as a fulfilment of the possibilities of the new aesthetic: 'the sense of light and space, of organised grouping, of colour beautifully disposed, . . . are all things which are as good to

⁵⁷ Correspondence, *Architect and Building News*, 25 April 1930, p.546

⁵⁸ President's Address, given by Gilbert Jenkins at the Architectural Association, 24 October 1927, reported in *Architectural Association Journal*, November 1927, p 155

⁵⁹ *Architectural Review*, September 1929, pp 35-38

⁶⁰ *Examples of Modern French Architecture* (London 1928)

live with in a house as in a factory.'⁶¹ In May 1929 they published an article on Le Corbusier's villa at Garches, incorporating an examination of his work, material which would have been far from familiar to their readers. Comparing the house with nearby work that is based on English Arts and Crafts models, they are startled by the contrast; it seems almost as if a conversion has occurred: 'One suddenly realises that the 'English' houses are wrong, and that Le Corbusier's house is right. A motor-car stands before its door. One sees that the motor-car and the house are in tune, that the design of house and car are in the natural harmony which has always obtained between man-made objects of any period which is truly an epoch. The coach has gone, the garb of its occupants, the house which filled them. Today, another vehicle, another dress, another architecture.'⁶²

The following decade saw the building of houses by Connell, Ward and Lucas completed in 1930 and Emberton's Royal Corinthian Yacht Club in 1931, among the first in Britain in the new aesthetic. But the decade also saw the survival of Blomfield and Cooper, and thriving practices with a traditional view of architecture continued beyond it. However, the 1930s saw the realization of ideas introduced in the mid-1920s, the most significant examples being Swedish-influenced buildings such as the competition successes of Grey Wornum⁶³ with the RIBA headquarters in London and James and Pierce with Norwich City Hall. According to one assessor the latter was a competition for which 'every damned Swedish architect has gone in'; he was referring to the obvious influences at work in the British architects' submissions.⁶⁴ Work by Holden for London Transport such as Arnos Grove underground station had a clear Swedish source; in 1930 he and Frank Pick had toured northern Europe, specifically in the footsteps of Robertson and Yerbury. There was also work influenced by Dudok, such as Hornsey and Greenwich town halls and numerous pithead baths; at a slightly later date there were many versions of Mendelsohn's Schocken shop and Universum cinema, notably the Peter Jones store in Sloane Square, London, by Crabtree.

These are some of the direct progeny of Robertson and Yerbury through their communication of the ideas of European architecture to Britain. Reyner Banham may be right in his judgement that the variety of their examples confused the issue, 'sending the younger generation dashing off madly in several directions at once'.⁶⁵ But the generation who passed through the AA in Robertson's time included those who would later be the most committed to the ideal of the functional, to the use of new technology, and to the adoption of a socially committed role for architecture. Evidence of their influence can be found in the years immediately following the second world war, when a softer version of the modern was embraced: an architecture of social concern, lacking in modernist rigour what it made up for in humanity. They opened the possibility of a specific form of modern architecture to be realized by a later generation.

⁶¹ 'A Poem in Glass and Steel', *Architect and Building News*, 30 May 1930, pp687-90

⁶² 'The Quest of the Ideal', *Architect and Building News*, 10 May 1929, pp621-5

⁶³ Wornum, late president of the AA, had accompanied Yerbury on a trip to Sweden in 1930

⁶⁴ James Bone in the foreword to Yerbury's *One Hundred Photographs* London, Jordan Gaskell 1935

⁶⁵ *Architectural Review*, September 1953, pp161-8

It would be a mistake, however, to view Robertson and Yerbury as being implacably opposed to the traditional work being produced in England, or as wholehearted supporters of the more radical architecture they introduced to their readers. They were far too cautious for that. As late as 1931, towards the end of their prodigious joint effort, their ambivalence towards the architecture of their time was still apparent, and they are referring to the exact period when for most later historians, the significant work of the modern movement was achieved: the Bauhaus building, housing at Stuttgart and Frankfurt, the Purist villas of Le Corbusier and Mies' Barcelona Pavilion among much else. 'When the history of the present phase of architectural development is written, it may be that the achievement of the years in which we are living will be summed up as mediocre. Emphasis will be laid on the lack of uniform tendencies, on the amount of individual experiment which has no sequence . . . Astonishment, perhaps contempt, may be levelled at this seeming chaos, at these twentieth-century decades in which crystallised no style, in which all architects seemed agreed only to differ.'⁶⁶ It was in the following eight years that, in particular through the very different attitude of the *Architectural Review*, that modernism would become the dominant discourse in British architecture.

⁶⁶ 'Poverty and Promise: Examples of Dutch Detail', *Architect and Building News*, 23 October 1931, pp92-95