



A LANDSCAPE OF ARCHITECTURE, HISTORY AND FICTION

JONATHAN HILL

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Jonathan Hill

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introduction

The catalyst for this book was a fascination for a place: a four-mile long sandy beach flanked by dunes and adjacent to one of the grandest early eighteenth-century English estates, created while the turbulent and threatening sea was moving inland. The estate's dual orientation established a dialogue between culture and nature – London and Rome to the south and the sea to the north – and also between differing conceptions of nature, which was celebrated to a more profound degree than in earlier centuries and associated with journeys in self-understanding.

The initial aim of this book is to identify the simultaneous and interdependent emergence of new art forms, each of them a creative and questioning response to empiricism's detailed investigation of subjective experience and the natural world: the picturesque landscape, the analytical history and the English novel, which its early advocates conceived as a fictional autobiography and characterised as a history not a story. The conjunction of art forms instigated a new design practice in which architecture is analogous to a landscape, a history, and a fiction, stimulating a lyrical environmentalism that profoundly influenced subsequent centuries.

Associating the changing natural world with subjective and social experience, and the design process with a visual and spatial autobiography, this book describes journeys between London and the North Sea in successive centuries. Its focus is an enduring and evolving tradition from the picturesque and romanticism to modernism, which has the 'living' ruin as its emblem and model. A hybrid of nature and culture, architecture and landscape, and a recurring temporal metaphor in gardens, histories and novels, the ruin represents growth as well as decay, potential as well as loss, and the future as well as the past.

Integrating the analysis of architecture, art, literature, agriculture, landscape, industry, politics and social life, the detailed, holistic and evocative comparison of specific times and places is my research method. The first chapter begins with John Evelyn's seventeenth-century account of London's polluted atmosphere, which initiated centuries of poetic and practical responses to anthropogenic climate change. While in London, the chapter sets the scene for the artistic, literary and philosophical transformations in early eighteenth-century Britain, before following Evelyn's advice to discover the clear air of a country estate, journeying north to analyse William Kent's Arcadian designs for two neighbouring Norfolk estates: Houghton, the home of Sir Robert Walpole, the first British Prime Minister, and Holkham, the coastal estate that initiated this book.

The second chapter begins with J.M.W. Turner's painting of the paddle steamer *Ariel* in a turbulent night-time snow storm off the East Anglian coast, which depicts the complex interweaving of intense natural and man-made energies as the era's most formidable machine, the steam engine, is vulnerable to the power of the

sea. The chapter then returns to London, focusing on the contrasting responses to the city's polluted atmosphere of Turner and his close friend John Soane, who conceived 12–14 Lincoln's Inn Fields as a fictional autobiography and picturesque garden, portraying it as a romantic ruin in a novelistic history of his home.

The third chapter begins in mid twentieth-century London, when a threatened national identity reaffirmed the association of a people with a place, and British modernism was identified with the picturesque and romanticism, encouraging architects to counter an earlier, didactic and universal modernism by embracing history, landscape and environmentalism. Leaving London, the chapter travels north to a late eighteenth-century Norfolk estate where the architect Denys Lasdun and landscape architect Brenda Colvin designed the new University of East Anglia in the 1960s. In the symbiosis of geography and history in an island nation, Lasdun and Colvin acknowledged that British architecture is both interdependent with landscape and a form of landscape architecture. Associating designs with stories and histories, Lasdun remarked that each architect must devise his or her 'own creative myth', a set of ideas, values and inspirations that inform design, concluding: 'My own myth . . . engages with history'.¹ The most creative architects have often looked to the past to imagine a future, studying an earlier architecture not to replicate it but to understand and transform it, revealing its relevance to the present.

¹ Denys Lasdun, 'The Architecture of Urban Landscape', pp. 137, 139.

The conclusion considers the contemporary relevance of this evolving tradition with particular regard to the influence of digital media and anthropogenic climate change on architectural design in Britain and the many other nations where 'romantic modernism' remains of abiding importance. Acknowledging that people are natural as well as cultural beings, and that each urban or rural landscape is teeming with life forms that are not simply subject to humanity, the conclusion considers an expanded conception of architectural authorship that includes natural as well as cultural influences. In conceiving a design as both a history and a novel, this book places architecture and landscape at the centre of cultural and social production, and emphasises their ability to engage and stimulate ideas, values and emotions that influence and inform individuals and societies.

**a hellish cloud
and a sublime sea**

1 Evelyn, *Fumifugium*, p. 18.

2 Brimblecombe, 'Interest in Air Pollution', p. 123.

3 Evelyn, *Fumifugium*, pp. 1–2.

4 It is uncertain whether the influential treatises attributed to him were actually written by Hippocrates, who was born in the fifth century BC. Evelyn, *Fumifugium*, pp. 18, 11–13.

5 Evelyn mentions *A Discourse on Sympathetic Powder*, 1658, in which Kenelm Digby was probably the first person to attempt to explain the detrimental effect of atmospheric pollution on health, noting that the airways to the lungs are narrowed in pulmonary diseases. Evelyn, *Fumifugium*, pp. 3, 28, 34–37.

6 Evelyn, *Fumifugium*, pp. 42–43.

7 Evelyn, *Fumifugium*, pp. 47, 49.

A 'Hellish and dismal Cloud of SEA-COALE' blankets London, complained John Evelyn in 1661.¹ Coals then had sulphur levels twice that of ones used centuries later. On combustion, sulphur oxidised to introduce sulphur dioxide into the air and a secondary oxidation created sulphuric acid.² Fog, coal smoke and industrial fumes turned the sky into a darkly odorous smog, blackening buildings, corroding metals, killing plants, lodging in lungs, and making streets and squares unbearable. A new building had a shadow of soot even before the end of its construction.

Evelyn's *Fumifugium: Or, The Inconveniencie of the Aer and Smoak of London Dissipated*, 1661, was the first book to consider the city's polluted atmosphere as a whole, as well as the first to recognise mitigation and adaptation as responses to human-induced – anthropogenic – climate change, three centuries before these principles were widely accepted. Opening with a dedication to King Charles II, Evelyn conceived *Fumifugium* in response to a 'pernicious Accident' in the royal palace of Whitehall. A 'presumptuous Smoake . . . did so invade the Court' that 'Men could hardly discern one another' in the same room.³

Evelyn distinguishes between London's agreeable setting and the ruinous effects of its polluted atmosphere. A keen admirer of Francis Bacon – the father figure of empiricism – Evelyn advocates modern science but also acknowledges the medical tradition of ancient Greece, which considers health and disease holistically and the interdependence of the body, soul and environment. Recalling the principle that the air – the breath – is 'the *Vehicle of the Soul*, as well as that of the Earth', he recounts Hippocratic opinion that the character of a people depends upon the air they inhale.⁴ Convinced that London's atmosphere is unhealthy, he notes the comparative clarity of the sky on Sunday when industries are idle, and mistakenly assumes that domestic fires contribute little pollution. Offering a 'Remedy' for the '*Nuisance*', he proposes a number of practical and poetic measures, including the relocation of coal-burning trades, butchers and burials to the east of the city so that the prevailing westerly winds would carry the smoke away from London and the rivers and ground-water would be unsullied.⁵ Prisons are also to be removed, indicating that his purpose is moral as well as medical.⁶

Emphasising the allegorical and poetic as well as practical significance of his treatise, Evelyn proposes that the edges of London are to be forested with trees and planted with fragrant shrubs so that wood could replace coal as the principal fuel and the whole city would be sweetly perfumed.⁷ Noting Evelyn's detailed attention to aesthetics, climate, natural history, horticulture and human experience, Mark Laird writes that 'he reflected on how gardens gratify all five senses through tinctures, redolent scents, delight of touch, fruit gusto, and warbling birds and