

BLEAKHOUSES

Disappointment and Failure in Architecture

Timothy Brittain-Catlin

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For Keith Diplock

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INTRODUCTION

BEING A LOSER

When I returned to England in the middle of the year 2000, after nearly ten years abroad, I discovered that I had become a loser. The local contemporary architectural world that I had known since childhood, and had once been so passionate about, had changed so much that I soon found that I no longer had any interest in or understanding of it. When I had left my homeland at the beginning of 1991, I still had a broad understanding of and sympathy to the things that motivated most architects. Architecture then had been a consolidation of the post-Second-World-War-style consensus, mainly derived from the Scandinavian version of modernism, and it had been refined and developed by architects both consciously and unconsciously over decades. Even after the noisier episodes of postmodernism, buildings had remained by and large orthogonal, with only an occasional and regular curve to them; and those created by architects were, mostly, designed with the declared intention of enhancing the town and the landscape for those who saw them and used them. Even buildings designed by architects without pretensions, or not by architects at all, such as those originating in the back offices of speculative developers, at least had the grace to pretend that they, too, were there for human benefit (and sometimes it was true). There had been ups and downs in quality, with the ups concentrated around the ends of decades and the beginning of the next ones: the late 1950s; the late 1960s; even the late 1970s. But in terms of the big things in life, nothing really had changed since modernism had

become the mainstream in England with the development of the first New Towns around London in the late 1940s.

By 2000 this comfortable and reassuring world was fast being pushed aside by a new and aggressive form of architectural design. In September 2001 I started teaching the history and theory of architecture at the Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA) in London, where one saw perhaps too much of the avant-garde or the crest of passing fashion. There were no orthogonal buildings on the computer screens at all. To some extent this was because of the kind of conceptualization that was then dominating teaching: no one expected the youngest students to design buildable objects. That in itself was not particularly frightening. But those who were admired, whether within the school or linked to it, were now working on buildings designed using a process called parametrics. Students happily explained to me that their abstract sketches were turned into improbable, organic forms using computer algorithms that generated and managed shapemaking, so that a design took on a life of its own. The result was a structure where the walls and floors were a peculiar shape that had no historical or contextual connotations to it, and where the function of the building or the logic of the plan was unimportant to the overall design. To me it was unintelligible: not just the process, but the very fact that anybody wanted to make a building in this way.

This made me think about architects such as myself who were forced to face the fact that the rug—of critical acceptance, even of mainstream appreciation—was being pulled out from under their feet. At the time I was researching the Gothic Revival for my doctorate on Augustus Pugin's residential architecture, and I became interested in the pre-Gothic architects of the early nineteenth century. Had they felt the same as me, I wondered, when confronted with the assertive cult of the Gothic Revival? Had they despaired too? Almost certainly. There were some prominent casualties. The most striking of these was George Basevi, best known as the original designer of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge in 1836, and also of the façades of the houses around Belgrave Square in London. It is well known—it is a canonical moment in the story of the Gothic Revival—that in 1843 Pugin designed a fine set of buildings for Balliol College, Oxford, that were rejected almost certainly because he was a Roman Catholic at a time when conversions

to Catholicism posed a real threat to the credibility of Oxford High Church Anglicanism. But what is less known is that Basevi had already been commissioned to design a Gothic-style quad for Balliol, and that Pugin, having seen his proposal, shamelessly and aggressively rubbished it, in a letter to a friend who was one of the fellows.¹ Basevi's project was abandoned as a result. Basevi was a competent designer in the pre-Pugin version of Gothic—"Tudor Gothic"—and although we do not know what he thought of the new, correct, "truthful" version of the style, it is a fair bet that he could not produce it himself, because if he had been able to, he would have done. Perhaps he disliked it; perhaps he was frightened of the leaders of the new Gothic cult, with their moral hysterics and their passions. Tragically, in the true sense of the word, he fell to his death from the roof of Ely cathedral, of which he was surveyor, in 1845. Sometime later George Gilbert Scott restored Ely in the new approved, historically correct, Gothic fashion, and Basevi's modest contributions to it were forgotten. Basevi's fall came as the neo-Gothic reached the final stage of its conquest of English architecture, and marked the beginning of the period in which neoclassical architecture was all but abandoned by high-art people.

As was to be the case again in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the practice and design of architecture changed so fast and so completely that a great number of its talented practitioners were relegated to obscurity. A new category of architect emerged: the loser, the designer who was not part of the dominant clique. Basevi was just one of many. The provinces of all Western countries are full of these

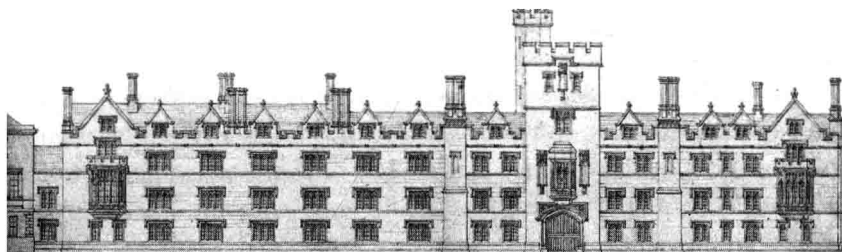


FIGURE 0.1

George Basevi's design for the Front Quadrangle at Balliol College, Oxford, circa 1841.

By kind permission of Balliol College, Oxford.

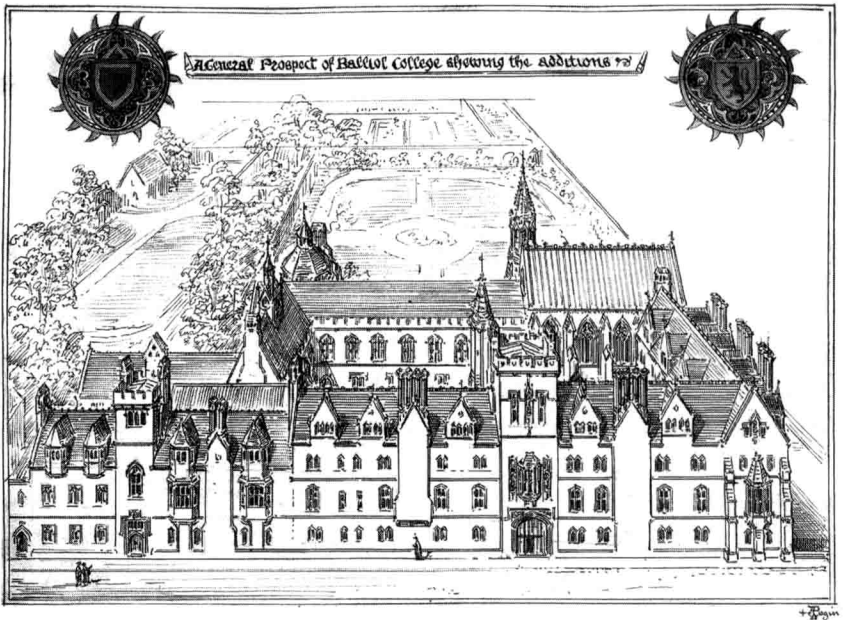


FIGURE 0.2

Augustus Pugin's bird's-eye view of his scheme of 1843 for the same site. By kind permission of Balliol College, Oxford.

people, who watched as cleverer, more talented, less principled, better-connected interlopers from capital cities took their jobs away. And subsequently, even the first rank of provincial English architects who were classicists—Harvey Elmes, say, or Cuthbert Brodrick—are pigeonholed into single-line descriptions in mainstream introductions to the period in which they worked, thanks to the one building they designed which for some reason or another is unavoidable. And as it happens, both Elmes and Brodrick ended their lives in circumstances which contribute somewhat to the “loser” character of their professional achievements.

By contrast, one of the outstanding features of the Gothic Revival is the youth and the assertiveness of its leaders, the ecclesiologists and their architects, who in a remarkably short time managed to dominate the design of churches and much else in England—and subsequently

across the Anglican Church, the British Empire, and beyond. There is no doubt as to the talent involved; in fact their arrival on the scene gave the country a truly fine body of work that is without parallel in any European country in the nineteenth century, and led directly to some of the marvels of the arts-and-crafts era which influenced architecture worldwide. One would have to take a very odd view of history to say that these wide-eyed young men were “wrong,” or for that matter that England was “wrong” to have adopted the new style. They were undoubtedly “right”: what Pugin achieved, directly or through his personal influence, was astonishing, and enriched what architects did, and the people they built for, without measure. The criticism the Goths leveled at the neoclassical men was, however vicious, nearly always justified: the work was often cheap, or incompetent technically, or simply looked unsatisfactory. Thanks to a series of persuasive writers as much as to a small number of astonishingly dedicated and productive designers, the Goths won the argument. In time these events established a key characteristic of modern architectural criticism: its bombastic, triumphalist, exclusive, moral tone, originally derived from the strident theological debates between evangelicals, Puseyites, and Roman Catholics in the 1830s and 1840s. Alongside this, the early Gothic Revivalists’ call for “true” buildings, which emerged from a puritanical English architectural preoccupation with what is sometimes called “realism” in buildings, turned into a shibboleth against which the “honesty” of every single new design was eventually to be measured.²

Being good and being right is a perfectly reasonable basis for a history of architecture; and unless young architects are excited or inspired by what they see, in books and magazines as much as in reality, there is little hope for the rest of us. But being good and being right are not the only criteria by which one can write about and explain architecture in the wider context of what the built world means for those who are sensitive to it. This book is an attempt to show how other ways of presenting architecture have been suppressed since Pugin, or have been unnoticed, and how the triumphalism of first the Gothic Revival and then modernism came to dominate architectural criticism and history across the Western world right through to the present time, with no sign of abating yet, at the expense of a quieter and more modest way of looking at and interpreting buildings. It looks into the prevailing

macho culture of architecture, and the dubious alliances that architects have made with noisy critics or other people who do not possess the accumulated visual sensibilities that architects have, and whose priorities lie beyond the attractiveness of a building in its own right. It looks at “show trials” and suggests that architectural history has more to offer than what writers have considered “good,” “successful,” or “influential” architecture. By laying these concepts aside, one can come to a more profound understanding of what it is that buildings can do for those who see them and use them. It asks whether the sadness that architects feel when confronted with their idealized memories of the past and their disappointment and impotence in the face of them has in fact created memorable, profound buildings for them and for the many who see them and use them. If it has a single message, it is that an exploration of the story of an architect’s relationship with his or her own building has more to offer than a simplistic teleological or triumphalist approach to architectural criticism, and also suggests a more effective way of talking about buildings to those who have become indifferent to them.

THE BATTLE WITH WORDS

It seems to me that one of the reasons why architects have been consigned to failure is that what they were trying to do did not suit the types of literary priorities that were prevalent at any particular time: their buildings were there to be felt, to be experienced, not to be categorized in fashionable terms. At a certain point even successful and influential architects—Pugin, for example—have been victims of a literary and intellectualizing view of culture as much as their own victims—Basevi, for example—had been before them. Furthermore, the use of words to describe their own buildings by some architects, across the twentieth century from C. F. A. Voysey to Daniel Libeskind, is, although sonorous and inspiring, quite clearly daft and meaningless if interpreted literally.³

This is not to say, however, that buildings cannot be presented effectively through words: it is the incompetent way in which some architects and critics do it that is the problem. One of the ideas I shall

explore here is that novelists, whose primary tool is language, can indeed describe the architecture of a building in more satisfactory terms than those for whom words are secondary. The use of words and terms by critics can be shallow and limited, especially as they deploy words to denote generalities or categories of things. Furthermore, architects—like, no doubt, other nonliterary people—grab at the words that are in fashion at any given time, and apply them to what they are designing in the hopes of making their designs more comprehensible or justified to the people who have to pay for them or use them. Thus they are at a disadvantage when literary fashions change. I have mentioned that early-nineteenth-century Gothic Revival architects talked about truth, honesty, morality, and so on: they did it because this was the language of their clientele, the predominantly Christian intellectual milieus around them. Early modernist artists and designers did much the same with a different set of terms, but for the same reason. But is the neo-Gothic really about truth or morality? Is early modernism about being functional? Enough people have already pointed out that they were not. They were, like all types of design, about trying to create a particular response through a provocative three-dimensional experience. It is a nonsense to say that architecture is about what architects say about it themselves at any given historical moment, and as much a nonsense to claim (as is done too often, for example by biographers or art historians) that architecture can be judged in literary terms, such as “romantic” or “postmodernist,” without the meaning being essentially different from the way such terms are applied in literary criticism or historical investigation.

So it is important to make a distinction between different types of writing. My own teacher, Andrew Saint, urges architectural historians to describe and write about buildings as if telling a story, and this is what he, Mark Girouard, Clive Aslet, Kenneth Powell, and others have done, inspired perhaps by the late John Summerson—all professionals emerging from the English tradition of the enthusiastic amateur or journalist-writer: in fact this approach defines a distinct, popular, and highly regarded school of English architectural history that is continually retrieving forgotten architects from loserdom. Adam Summerfield, a former student of mine, dedicated his undergraduate dissertation to the subject of how planners and developers misjudged

the process of public consultation for a prime waterside site in his home town, one of the most economically and socially deprived in the region; their mistake, he said, was to present to local residents drawings of exciting new buildings, which simply aroused antipathy. In fact, he concluded, telling an atmospheric, literary, *story* of what the new development could do would have conveyed the intentions much better—to my mind, a striking and valuable observation from someone who was much more of a designer than a writer.⁴ Novelists can do this very well. In particular, there is something about the domestic architecture of the beginning of the twentieth century that has attracted almost continuous attempts at placing the feelings it evokes into words. Look at novels from the early works of H. G. Wells to Alan Hollinghurst's recent *The Stranger's Child*—discussed later—to see the large suburban villa and the small country house of the Edwardian period used directly to convey what Voysey called, with characteristic unhelpfulness, “ideas in things.”⁵

Thus it has sometimes seemed that writers such as these novelists, who have few pretensions as architecture critics, have done this job much better than some professional architectural writers, because they have aimed at telling much more of a story than a simple description of a building as a packaged artifact. This story is nothing to do with the biography of the architect; it is to do with the world that architect has evoked. Critics and theorists, by contrast, too often divorce buildings from the emotions that surround them and fall back on simple teleological narratives about style, change, and influence. Popular architectural criticism will remain profoundly shallow if it never catches up with those storytellers who can effectively visualize and project what J. R. R. Tolkien called a “secondary world”—that is, a parallel existence which catches the imagination.⁶ Some of the most effective architectural writing is that which establishes a “secondary” world in the minds of those who are reading, coming closest to the visceral, emotional and, above all, associational approach of architects to their own work. Indeed, some architects have also created “secondary” worlds, in buildings and schemes rather than in words, and most likely their appeal to other architects lay in this rather than in any specific concept. So by taking a literary approach to architecture we might discover some lost joys.

Yet architects face a further challenge too, and one that is just as dangerous: a critic may judge that they have become so in thrall to a particular literary tradition that their work has lost the freshness that comes with the direct engagement a creative person has with design. Is this fair, I wonder? A common indication of this is to draw a view of a building in a way that implies that it is rooted in an attractive view of history or a literary narrative: just as Norman Foster and the illustrator Helmut Jacoby put sexy helicopters in their aerial views, so British and American architects of the neo-Regency and Edwardian “Queen Anne” put pert young milkmaids and wooing farmer lads into theirs, alongside rainwater butts and pergolas aplenty. One of the most common arguments against traditionalist and neoclassical designers of all periods is that they are shackled to a sentimental literary-cultural view of life that time and time again blights their buildings: in fact, being “sentimental” is one of the most serious charges made against architects, especially in architecture schools where teachers feel that they have to shock impressionable students away from their natural inclinations. Herbert Baker, Edwin Lutyens’s second string on the design of the new government center at New Delhi and the architect of many large institutional buildings, has long been seen as a failure for precisely that reason. His rebuilding of Robert Taylor and John Soane’s Bank of England in the heart of the City of London in the 1930s was somehow made so much worse for critics by what was widely seen as his disingenuous attempt at rewriting the building’s history from his own perspective: “a masterpiece of egregious diddling” is what Nikolaus Pevsner called it.⁷ The critics’ automatic condemnation of “sentimentality” is something I shall question, for architects themselves cannot win battles with words, and so long as words are the dominant cultural medium, they are liable to become losers.

FINDING JOY IN SADNESS

My intention is to look at several episodes in architectural history that are centered on architects who fell outside the canon—who were not particularly famous, at any rate outside their immediate circles—and to see what we can learn from them. Certainly their work suffered from