

John Allan

Materials and Myths - Conservation of Modern Movement Architecture in England

Abstract of paper to International Symposium, Brno 26-29 April 2006

In this paper I should like to explore the way in which the circumstances surrounding the origination and reception of modern architecture in England have continued to influence the context in which its conservation takes place and consider the impact of this on the question of materiality.

A notable milestone in the history of British architecture is the visit to London by Hermann Muthesius in 1896 when under the auspices of the Prussian Ministry of Finance he served as cultural attaché to study the development of English domestic architecture. His monumental work *Das Englische Haus*, published in 1904/5, is often taken by English historians to signify the moment at which the initiative in developing a non-stylar architecture more suited to the new realities of 20<sup>th</sup> living passed from England to Germany. The Arts and Crafts movement, the Free Style school, the work and polemic of William Morris, Ruskin, WR Lethaby and others are interpreted as the seeds that germinated in the *Deutscher Werkbund* and the *Fagus Factory*.

As the early modern movement gathered pace in Europe generally, England in its final phase of Edwardian Imperial power, slipped into a phase of artistic stagnation, and returned to traditional architectural styles with the result that when modernism finally arrived some thirty years later in the early 1930s it was perceived as an alien import not as the late flowering of a native plant.

The manner of its arrival tended to reinforce this perception, for many of the leading figures in England's modern movement actually were foreigners who had come as refugees from the political or economic circumstances in their own countries. Gropius, Breuer, Moholy Nagy, Mendelsohn, Lubetkin, Goldfinger, Peter Moro are but a few of the many émigrés who arrived in England in the 30s - some of whom stayed, others passing through – but who gave modernism the distinctively continental connotation in British culture which has stayed with it ever since.

In addition to this influx of key personnel modernism's arrival in England was facilitated by the influence of photography in transmitting images of the iconic buildings that were being built in Europe. Invariably printed in black and white, and in fine weather, these presented the vision of an immaculate new architecture of pure prismatic forms and flawless surfaces, and played a powerful part in creating the mythology of modernism to a new English audience of observers and practitioners.

Now what has this to do with the practice of modern conservation in England today, and specifically the issue of materiality ?

Firstly the so-called heroic period of modern architecture in the 1930s established a sort myth of the white cube, in which the actuality of fabrication was largely suppressed by an idealised image of visual purity, and secondly – on account of this myth – in the repair works undertaken by subsequent owners of many of these properties the assumption has almost invariably been that the buildings should be recoated in white. Moreover, the technically exploratory nature of

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much of the original construction has meant that repairs have been needed to be carried out quite frequently in the succeeding years, such that the original surface has often been re-rendered and overcoated many times.

In the many conservation projects I have undertaken I can hardly quote a single instance where we 'started' with a building that was still in its original – even dilapidated - condition. Indeed there have even been cases where a modern building originally built in brick has subsequently been overcoated in white in the belief that it would look more authentically modern.

The other aspect arising from the particular circumstances of modernism's arrival in England has been that the residue of hostility which persists towards what is still regarded as an alien style has in many cases stimulated the desire deliberately to change or disguise the image of modernism when a refurbishment project presents the opportunity to do so. This is particularly evident in the area of post-war housing, where legitimate demands for improved performance have led to the use of over-cladding, the addition of pitched roofs and replacement in upvc windows in the effort to dissociate buildings from their unpopular past.

There is a nice irony in the fact that traditional conservation practice in Britain continues to be based on the charter of an organisation founded in 1877 by William Morris, the Society for Protection of Ancient Buildings or SPAB, which specifically promoted the ethic of remaining true to the original materials and fabric of a building as against the practice of 'improvement' that was common in the restoration of English churches at the time.

The above synopsis is necessarily a simplified account of a complex picture, and it is also possible to detect the development of wider interest in modernism as a 'historic movement' at both a popular and institutional level. There is an avid audience for modern style in publications and TV makeover shows, and bodies like English Heritage and the Twentieth Century Society have promoted the cause through listing and campaigns. Nonetheless, that a supportive context for modern architecture's preservation can still not be taken for granted is illustrated by the recent high profile case of illegal demolition of an important listed 1930s house by its unappreciative owner.

My paper will cover a number of projects carried out by my practice, Avanti Architects, where buildings we have worked on have already been in an altered state but where we have sought to use the opportunities within the project to reinstate a more authentic appearance through materials, components and colour. However it will also suggest that there are many cases where the 'gold standard' of conservation as enshrined in the charter of SPAB, and similar, does not necessarily have a privileged role in the project agenda but where the issue of authentic materiality must take its place alongside other factors if a sustainable outcome is to be achieved.

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Figures for Abstract



Fig.1 Miramonte, Surrey, 1935-37 - as built



Fig. 2 Miramonte, - As altered, c. 2000

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Fig. 3 Miramonte – As restored, 2003