

# 16 Postscript: Looking back

There was more than a half century between the dark night of Nazism and the bright dewy English mornings of the '80s and '90s when Arts and Crafts architecture was born. The whole world had changed. Ideas of freedom had either atrophied or been transmuted into the aids to oppression—by the state or by machinery. Arts and Crafts architectural achievements had either been forgotten or commercialized and bastardized in the suburbs.

Was Arts and Crafts architecture any more than a fashion of the rich: rich architects and designers toying with idealism and rich clients in search of a grand, yet undemonstrative, setting for their lives? Even Morris's own idealism verged at times on the absurd. Ford Madox Brown's grandson, Ford Madox Hueffer, recalled a meeting at Kelmscott House "brought to an end by someone—I presume an Anarchist—putting red pepper in the stove. Poor William Morris, with his enormous mop of white hair, luxuriant white beard and nautical pea-jacket used to preside . . . He disliked the violence that was creeping into his beloved meetings. He had founded them solely with the idea of promoting human kindness and peopling the earth with large bosomed women dressed in Walter Crane gowns and bearing great sheaves of full eared corn. On this occasion his air was most extraordinary as he fled uttering passionate sneezes that jerked his white hairs backwards and forwards like the waves of the sea."<sup>1</sup>

There were no Walter Crane gowns and precious few ears of corn for ordinary building workers. Ruskin and Morris's ideals of free craftsmanship had little effect on workers' lives. Owen, the hero of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, Robert Tressell's semi-autobiographical novel of life in the building trade, explained the realities of life to his workmate Easton: "when there's no work, you will either starve or get into debt. When—as at present—there is little

work, you will live in a state of semi-starvation. When times are what you call 'good', you will work for twelve or fourteen hours a day and—if you're *very* lucky—occasionally all night. The extra money you then earn will go to pay your debts so that you may be able to get credit again when there's no work . . .

"In consequence of living in this manner, you will die at least twenty years sooner than is natural, or, should you have an unusually strong constitution and live after you cease to be able to work, you will be put in a kind of jail and treated like a criminal for the remainder of your life."<sup>2</sup>

Owen was working for a jobbing decorator who never got contracts from anyone like an Arts and Crafts architect. But the life of building labourers who did work on Arts and Crafts houses does not seem to have been very different. H. G. Wells was horrified by the work he saw on his Voysey-designed Spade House: "It is a house built by hands—and some I saw were bleeding hands—just as in the days of the pyramids."<sup>3</sup>

Of all the Arts and Crafts architects, only Ashbee made serious and consistent attempts to improve the lot of workmen. His effort failed because, to keep the work (so he believed) as interesting and creative as possible, he held machinery to a minimum and put a premium on handwork. Therefore the products and buildings of the Guild of Handicraft were expensive and could only be bought by the rich. And then the rich turned away from modern work to buying antiques or to commercially made imitations. As critic and designer D. S. MacColl wrote in 1903, "It is not the inventor who usually gets the benefit of his idea. It is the shops, which straightway set their own designers or facile students from South Kensington to parody anything in which there seems to be a chance of money."<sup>4</sup>

Ashbee was in a trap: he could sell less and less to

the rich, whose taste was changing, yet he could not fully embrace machine production and compete commercially—that would have been a betrayal of everything he believed in.

The conundrum was just as incapable of solution in architecture as it was in artefact production. Arts and Crafts architects usually charged extra for their special features like individually made ironwork, decorative schemes and their furniture.\* This meant that clients were paying a double premium—for having items made by hand which could, without sacrificing convenience, have been more cheaply bought from a mass produced range, and for the architect's special designs (usually charged as a percentage of the cost of production). Or the architect could reduce the client's bill by waiving charges for special designs—but if he did so, he could not make ends meet, as Goodhart-Rendel pointed out (p. 118).

It was the individualness, the specialness, which stemmed from Ruskin's precepts of savageness and changefulness that priced Arts and Crafts architecture out. The wealth of the upper middle class was being gradually eroded and the systematic approach of the classicists became cheaper (for one thing, its standardized details were capable of being produced by machines). The really international style of the '20s and '30s was not the Modern Movement, as some historians have made out, but classicism in different guises, derived from the people's palaces of Russia and Germany to the quiet neo-colonial and neo-Georgian of Anglo-Saxon suburbs. It was not until after the second world war that the Modern Movement was victorious, when its apparent economies, achieved by elimination of hand labour whenever possible, were desperately needed in the labour-hungry former combatant nations.

Wells foresaw the change after his experiences at Spade House. In 1903, he called for a revolution in building with prefabrication, synthetic materials, electric central heating and self-making beds.<sup>6</sup> His vision was an early example of the building science fiction that dominated much Modern Movement thinking.

Yet as we now see, and as Morris and many of his followers saw perfectly well at the time, substitution of crude machine production for hand work could improve life for workers little, if at all. Certainly it did away with the awfulness of the Rodmarton saw-pit (p.

152). But, as building was increasingly made to approximate to machine production, workers fared little better than Tressell's contemporaries. Semi-starvation was obviated by increasingly humane legislation, but workers were still subject to the demands of a notoriously erratic industry. And increasing systemization and mechanization ensured that they lost any opportunity for personal creativity—even Tressell's Owen was allowed to work up and carry out occasional decorative schemes himself, one of the few things that made his life not absolutely bleak.

The only way in which Owen could have had a fundamentally better life and in which Ashbee could have escaped from his trap, the only hope of long term survival of Arts and Crafts building, was the revolution preached by William Morris. Arts and Crafts architecture flourished, briefly, in a time when labour was cheap. Only if labour could have been made free, as it was in *News from Nowhere*, could it have achieved full bloom. But none of Morris's immediate disciples backed his revolutionary socialism to the hilt—even Ashbee held back. And most Arts and Crafts folk must, like Voysey, have shared with their clients a horror of radical social change.

If the Arts and Crafts movement had any coherence at all, it was concerned with the quality of life. The movement had no manifesto. It was far too varied in expression to have a coherent style, for it encompassed Lethaby's Brockhampton church, Prior's Home Place, Mackintosh's art school, Voysey's Sanderson factory and Townsend's Horniman Museum. Yet virtually every Arts and Crafts architect would have agreed with Lethaby when he said that "what I mean by art . . . is not the affair of a few but of everybody."<sup>7</sup>

The Arts and Crafts people knew that quality of life depends on all five senses, and that it is to do with the experience of making and using artefacts. To improve quality, work and leisure, instead of being separated into different compartments as they were by the Industrial Revolution, should be more related to each other. Thinking and making should be brought closer together.

Everyone's ideal of the quality of life must be different. From that understanding sprang the great Arts and Crafts emphasis on individualness. The triumph, first of classical architecture, then of the Modern Movement with its emphasis on standardization and norms, ensured that individualness became less and less important, even ridiculous in an age of mass produced objects. The same emphasis on stan-

\* For instance, on the Waldbühl house, Baillie Scott charged no less than £560 worth of expenses and fees for special designs on top of the basic fee for the design of the house.<sup>5</sup>

dardization and universality meant that the Arts and Crafts respect for locality and its humility towards old buildings became regarded as sentimental whimsicality.

Now some of the basic premises of the Modern Movement are being questioned. The vandalism and decay associated with many post-war housing estates throughout the western world are one indication of the falseness of the Movement's belief that satisfaction of people's material needs would in some way automatically ennoble humanity. The realization that supplies of materials are not infinite seriously calls into question the Movement's implicit belief that the whole world would be rebuilt in its image. The end of cheap energy must cast doubt on some of the Movement's theories of building production—for instance, centralized manufacture of bulky and heavy building components must become increasingly uneconomic as transport costs rise.

While resources dwindle, machine production is entering a new phase. At last the subjugation of man to machine, which formed the Arts and Crafts movement's objection to machinery, may be nearly over. There is hope that people need no longer be at all involved in producing chains or planks or refrigerators or television sets. William Morris would surely have welcomed the microchip.\* But while the new technology offers freedom from drudgery, it threatens to force millions into the dole queues. At the moment, western societies have simply no answer to the threat of vast unemployment—except the hope that output will increase so greatly that somehow there will be enough machines for everyone to supervise. The prospect seems increasingly unlikely in an age of diminishing resources.

Against such a future, the Arts and Crafts belief in quality and individualness again seems relevant. The

Arts and Crafts integration of work and leisure could be a basis for a humane future. In a small way the new life is already growing with the increased middle class interest in craftwork, cooking and gardening. The do-it-yourself explosion (though largely consisting of the assembly of crass commercial decorative products) is another and much more widespread example of a new attitude to work and leisure.

The roles of architect and designer in this kind of future would be much more advisory than directive. The need for very large new buildings will probably be much reduced in an age of advanced telecommunications (which are quite inexpensive in energy terms). So will the need to organize large teams. Sometimes by their own artistic example, more often by smoothing the path, architects and designers would help others to realize their own potential for creativity. To conserve resources, materials would be drawn from more local sources and old buildings be gently adapted, extended and cherished.

1984 is the centenary of the Art Workers' Guild. And it is the year in which Orwell set his nightmare novel. We must, it seems, move towards one or other of these visions. Can anyone doubt which will be better in the end?

1 Ford, Ford Madox "The Spirit of an Age: the Nineties" originally published in *Return to Yesterday*, 1932. Republished in the Bodley Head *Ford Madox Ford*, London 1971, p. 147

2 Tressell Robert *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, Lawrence & Wishart, London 1955, p. 139. Tressell died in 1911 of the deprivations he described so graphically.

3 Quoted in Mackenzie, Norman and Jean, *The Time Traveller*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London 1973, p. 149

4 MacColl, D. S. "The Arts and Crafts exhibition" *Architectural Review*, Vol. XIII, 1903, p. 189

5 See the back end papers of Medici-Mall, Katherina *Das Landhaus Waldbühl*, Gesellschaft für Schweizerische Kunstgeschichte, Bern 1979

6 Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 149

7 Lethaby, W. R. "Town Tidying", paper delivered to the Arts and Crafts Society, 1916, reprinted in *Form and Civilization*, *op. cit.*, p. 15

8 Morris, William "Art, Wealth and Riches", lecture 1883 to the Manchester Royal Institution, *Works*, *op. cit.*, Vol. XXIII, p. 160

\* In 1883, he wrote: "I want modern science, which I believe to be capable of overcoming all material difficulties, to turn from such preposterous follies as the invention of anthracine colours and monster canon to the invention of machines for performing such labour as is revolting and destructive of self-respect to the men who now have to do it by hand."<sup>18</sup>