

C·F·A·VOYSEY

an architect of individuality



Duncan Simpson

C·F·A·VOYSEY

an architect of individuality





Duncan Simpson

C·F·A·VOYSEY

an architect of individuality

with a preface by Sir James Richards

Lund Humphries • London

Copyright © 1979 Duncan Simpson

First edition 1979

Published by

Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd
26 Litchfield Street London WC2

SBN 85331 426 8

Designed by Herbert Spencer

Filmset by Keyspools Ltd, Golborne, Lancs

Printed and bound by Lund Humphries, Bradford, Yorks

Frontispiece: A contemporary photograph, c. 1900, showing
Voysey in his work-room or study at his house,
The Orchard, at Chorleywood.

Cover illustrations: Walnut Tree Farm (9b) and The Homestead (61)

Photographic acknowledgements

Copyright The Royal Institute of British Architects, London: frontispiece, 1, 5, 9c, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20a, 22, 28, 29c, 29d, 30a, 30b, 31, 32, 33a, 33b, 34, 37, 40, 41, 45a, 45b, 47b, 56b, 62, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69

Copyright Royal Pavilion, Art Gallery and Museums: 2, 7a, 7b, 8b, 9a, 9b, 10, 14b, 14c, 20b, 20c, 20d, 20f, 21a, 21b, 21c, 26, 29b, 29e, 29f, 29g, 29i, 30d, 30e, 30f, 30g, 30h, 35a, 38a, 38b, 38c, 38d, 39, 43, 46a, 46b, 47a, 48, 50, 53, 70, 73

Copyright *Country Life*: 44, 61

Copyright Portsmouth City Art Gallery: 51

Copyright Victoria and Albert Museum: 30c

Copyright Whitworth Art Gallery: 71

All other photographs remain the copyright of the author.

Contents

	Preface by Sir James Richards	Page 7
	Acknowledgements	8
	Introduction	9
	Biographical details	12
Chapter 1	C.F.A. Voysey : An Architect of Individuality	13
Chapter 2	Establishing a Practice – The Years up to 1895	19
	Early Furniture Designs and other work	
	Perrycroft and Lowicks	
Chapter 3	Some Important Experiments, 1895–7	43
	Norney	
	New Place	
	Experiments in Furniture, 1895–7	
Chapter 4	The Years of Mature Practice, 1898–1910	63
	Broadleys	
	Moor Crag	
	Spade House	
	Voysey's relationship with his clients	81
	From 1900 to 1905 :	87
	The Orchard	
	The Pastures, Sandersons and Vodin	
	Higham and the Whitwood Institute	
	The Close of the Decade, 1905–9	
Chapter 5	Furniture Designs, 1898–1910 and the Voysey Interior	109
	The Voysey Interior	116
Chapter 6	The Practice in Decline, 1910–41	129
	Furniture Designs, 1910–41	
Chapter 7	The Voysey Inheritance	143
	Individuality	
	Gothic and Grotesque	
	The Inheritance	
	List of extant works	149
	Bibliography	153
	Notes	156
	Index of buildings and designs	159

Preface

by Sir James Richards

I met C.F.A. Voysey only once and then I said the wrong thing. The year was 1938; so Voysey must have been eighty-one. I called on him at his flat in St James's and found him a slight, sharp-featured figure dressed wholly in blue, courteous but not very forthcoming. My mistake was to acknowledge that I was specially interested in talking to him at that moment because of a Penguin book I was writing on modern architecture in which he appeared among those who had pioneered the break-away from nineteenth-century academic conventions. He objected indignantly however to being included among the originators of an architecture he heartily disliked.

He was unable to understand, as he made very clear, how it could be said that buildings so foreign to his in their technique and appearance, and which had discarded the traditional – the individual – craftsmanship on which he placed such value, could be linked with his buildings in any way. I suspect that those of his colleagues whom we also class among the pioneers and who were still alive in 1938 – Ashbee, Mackmurdo and Baillie Scott for example – would have said the same. And yet there *was* a link. There was a revolutionary element in their work that changed the course of English domestic architecture and afterwards, through the agency of Hermann Muthesius, of much of Europe as well.

For this reason alone an analysis of the houses Voysey designed (in chronological order so as to illustrate their evolution) such as Dr Simpson has undertaken, is invaluable; also of his furniture which, being based on structure, can be regarded as an extension of the architecture. His patterns are different. They have splendid qualities of invention and control, but I am sure Dr Simpson is right in according them a secondary place. He defines clearly the essential qualities of Voysey's architecture – more revolutionary in its time than the suburban acres of imitations make it easy for us to recognize today – and here I will only emphasize two of them: simplicity of geometrical form and insistence on reasonableness and utility. These are among the key constituents of his break-away from the conventions of his time, and these alone assure him his place in history. Besides rejecting architectural judgements based on stylistic and scholarly criteria Voysey, like Philip Webb and the early Norman Shaw, no longer looked towards monumental and aristocratic precedents (nor, more significant, to the plan-forms that went with them) but to the unselfconscious vernacular buildings of the countryside.

Dr Simpson's emphasis on Voysey's eye for geometrical form, his craftsmanlike understanding of local materials and his insistence on the unity to be gained from care for every smallest detail are an admirable basis for the appreciation of his significance for us today.

Acknowledgements

It is not possible to produce a volume of this kind without a great deal of help. I would like to thank the many owners of Voysey houses and other items for the enormous consideration they have shown at all times. The knowledge which is readily available concerning Voysey has been opened up over many years by the work of Mr John Brandon-Jones and the task of preparing this book has been made much easier by the availability of the catalogue of the collection of Voysey drawings held at the British Architectural Library, which have been comprehensively catalogued by Joanna Symonds. I am immensely grateful to both of these people. The recent exhibition of Voysey's work which was held at the Royal Pavilion, Art Gallery and Museums, Brighton and then shown at Darmstadt, Wolverhampton and Glasgow gave me the chance to carry out, in the course of organizing it, much of the background work for this book. I am grateful in particular to the Director of the Royal Pavilion, Mr John Morley, for this opportunity and for the use of many photographs which were taken for this exhibition. A book of this kind rests very heavily on the quality of illustration; the modern photographs contained in it are mostly the work of Mr Duncan MacNeill and are, as is all his work, of a high standard. I am grateful also to Mr John Barrow for supplying prints of many of the photographs used. Mr John Harris and the staff of the British Architectural Library have been, as they always are, consistently kind and helpful in responding to the many demands made upon them. To these people and so many others who have helped in various ways I offer my thanks. I also thank Sir James Richards for contributing a preface – it is an honour to have his comments included in the book.

Notes to the illustrations

Photographs reproduced are modern unless otherwise stated.

Dates given are the date of design, not of completion, unless otherwise stated.

Most drawings reproduced are in pencil on paper though occasionally ink on linen or other variants are used. Most also have a watercolour wash. The architectural drawings are referred to as 'watercolour' where there is full colouring of the elevations or perspectives. They are not necessarily in Voysey's own hand.

No attempt has been made to give full scholarly details for designs and drawings reproduced here. These are available if required in two recent publications, the RIBA Catalogue and the catalogue of the Voysey exhibition at Brighton (see Bibliography).

Introduction

Reputation is a very elusive commodity; in the contemporary architectural press and world Charles Francis Annesley Voysey was treated with massive respect which lasted for a large part of his life, culminating in the award of the Gold Medal of the RIBA in 1940, when he was an old man. He never produced a building which was not modest in size and in his career only produced about fifty in all – no great achievement for a man who, when he died in 1941, was 83. It is true that he never sought wealth and reputation; perhaps true also that he fully understood that by the attitude he took towards his work and his clients he was destroying his chances of worldly success. Yet his name is known by many who know very little about architecture and among a distinguished group of contemporary architects including Lutyens, Baillie Scott, Lethaby, Newton and others, only Lutyens is better known. Even Lutyens with his enormous reputation, competence and output lacks the cachet which Voysey's austere single-mindedness, purism and talent have given him and which have made him a keystone in the happenings in the world of architecture and design for the two decades surrounding the turn of the century. Students increasingly regard Voysey as a man whose work contains the key to what was happening in that world in the crucial years when the Victorian age was dying along with its Queen and the Edwardian taking over from it. Voysey linked himself, in his ideas and his aims, with Pugin; his critics have subsequently linked his work with the first stirrings of the Modern Movement. His two-dimensional designs are ranked along with those of William Morris. It is the basis of this reputation that this book aims to examine.

First an apology; there is very little in the following pages about Voysey's pattern design and this scant treatment might be thought strange with a man so well known for this work. There is an excuse for this and a reason. The excuse is that space is limited and only allows of an adequate dealing with three-dimensional design – architecture, furniture and allied things. The reason is that there is a wide and understandable gulf between Voysey's work in two and three dimensions; it is symptomatic that he never upholstered a furniture design with one of his own, or anyone else's, patterned fabrics. Nor did he, except very rarely, use in one of his houses a patterned covering or patterned hanging. He states that he regards patterning in this context largely as a means of hiding design defects and it was not in his nature to allow that a piece of his own design work would ever need such plastic surgery. It is therefore quite possible to consider Voysey the architect and designer and only take a sidelong look at Voysey the pattern maker.

His contribution to pattern design is considerable but needs examination elsewhere. The architectural and other work that is considered is dealt with chronologically, this despite its defects being the most comprehensible approach to use.

Fortunately the bulk of Voysey's drawings, for buildings, furniture and pattern, survive; moreover most survive in one location, the British Architectural Library to which they were recently donated by Voysey's son. Here they have been excellently catalogued and their care is now assured. There is a substantial holding also in the Print Room of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Only a few drawings are known to be still in private hands. The buildings themselves are also now sufficiently known and respected to be, in most cases, safe from threat of demolition or excessive alteration. Only one Voysey house, Gordondene at Wandsworth, is known to have been demolished and that some years ago. Only one, also, seems to have remained in the hands of the family for which it was first constructed – the other house at Wandsworth, White Cottage in Lyford Road. For this reason and because the changing taste of the 1930s found Voysey's furniture unappealing and uncomfortable, no furnished interior remains though most of the extant houses still have their original fittings in situ. Panelling, staircases, woodwork, doors and all metal fittings seem to have survived remarkably intact in almost all cases. It is refreshing, on entering many of the houses, to find the original locks and distinctive keys designed by Voysey still in use; one visitor commented that this was in itself a tribute to the feeling of integrity, completeness and comfort which is one of the strongest qualities of Voysey's domestic design and which had encouraged successive owners to keep their homes intact. Strange things have of course happened; one house is known to have had its main rooms remodelled in the style of Adam which makes a wry comment on the progress of architectural history and popular taste. To balance that it is heartening to know that one of Voysey's finest houses, Moor Crag on the shores of Windermere, has been bought by an architect whose aim is not simply to retain the fine original condition of the house but to restore the landscaping of the extensive garden, laid out by Mawson, to its original form. Another fine house on Windermere, Broadleys, is now the home of the Racing and Motor Boat Club and houses relics of the record-breaking attempts on the lake of the Campbells, father and son. Whether the strange house which Voysey designed and which was built at Aswan in Egypt still stands is not known; perhaps some traveller, better funded than the author, might care to investigate.

Voysey's furniture has had less luck. One family, the Ward Higgs, still retains a substantial number of the pieces originally commissioned for them, including some of the finest examples of his work. The Victoria and Albert Museum, the Geffrye Museum in East London, the Art Gallery and Museum in Brighton, the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester and the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery in Bedford all have a number of pieces which give a clear idea of the range of the furniture. Other pieces survive in private ownership but a great number which were known to have been made are now lost. It is one of the premises of this book that more attention needs to be paid to Voysey's furniture than has been in the past. Not only is the use he made of his furniture designs in composite interiors

worth studying; the individual pieces are also fascinating. Considerable space will therefore be given to this aspect in the following chapters.

The title of this book stresses the point that Voysey was a man of definite, often idiosyncratic ideas to which he held strongly and consistently; his most substantial piece of writing, published in 1915, had the simple title, *Individuality*. The idea of individuality in thought and action ran perpetually through his mind just as it must force itself on those who study his work. Even so one must keep in mind a clear distinction between the idea of individuality and that of isolation. So far as one can judge at several removes, based on the accounts of remaining members of his family and of friends and acquaintances, he was a man capable of great warmth and with a high regard for the importance of friendship. Evidence – unfortunately scant concerning his private life – does bear out this fact and of course this characteristic had its impact on his professional life. Though he never worked with others, though he seems to have shunned the busy social life which his skills and reputation could have gained him, it would be wrong to think of Voysey as a man unaware of things happening around him in the fields of architecture and design. The signed menu card of a dinner held in Voysey's honour in 1927 demonstrates, by its inclusion of most of the significant names of the period in his profession, that his circle of acquaintances and friends was distinguished. This is an important distinction to make before going further; he may have kept his head often in the clouds but never in the sand.