Une nota sobre los primeros edificios

By J. L. Martin and S. Speight

existían ciertas obras, ciertos enfoques que podían competir con esta idea y un espíritu común: la tendencia constructiva en el arte de nuestras días, y que, al agrupar estas colaboraciones, tal vez podríamos demostrar un enfoque positivo.

La circulación de este libro a fines de los años treinta era limitada. Después de 1931, 34 años después de su publicación, el libro fue reimpreso en su formato original. En los últimos años se han montado importantes exposiciones sobre la obra de Naum Gabo en la Tate Gallery de Londres, y sobre Ben Nicholson en la Fundación Juan March de Madrid.

Una segunda publicación apareció en 1939, cuando Martin y su esposa, Sadie Speight, editaron un libro de colaboración The Flat Book. Fue una invitación para que el público tuviera acceso a las ilustraciones de productos bien diseñados que podían servir para amueblar y equipar el hogar. La gama de muebles incluía sillones, mesas, canapés y almohadas, calzado y exteriores de la ropa y de la ropa de cama.

Leslie Martin empezó a ejercer de arquitecto en 1933 y, durante los años treinta, compaginó la práctica con la enseñanza. Las obras de su primera época incluyen varias casas unifamiliares. Todas estas edificios seguidas un diseño libre sujeto a las distintas necesidades y a la variación de las ubicaciones en las que se encuentran emplazadas. Están construidos con materiales locales. En 1937 se levantó un parque pionero. En este edificio, cuatro árboles podían convertirse en zonas más amplias, y esta primera etapa de la edificación, con sus garajes y zona de servicios, podía extenderse a través de una serie de reflejos de la forma planimétrica final.

Durante esta época, Martin también estaba involucrado en la edición de dos importantes publicaciones. La primera, Circle, se publicó en 1937. Los editores eran Leslie Martin (arquitecto), Ben Nicholson (poeta) y Naum Gabo (escultor). Esta publicación tenía un aire internacional, al ilustrar la obra de 22 pintores, 10 escultores y 27 arquitectos. El libro contenía por añadidura ensayos de Mondrian, Gabo, Nohoy Nagy y del científico Tamm, sumados a otras colaboraciones de los artistas Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer y Richard Neutra. También incluía un artículo sobre el trabajo pionero en horticultura armónica de los puentes y estructuras diseñados por el ingeniero suizo Maillart, una nota del arquitecto Horner sobre Biomimética y un ensayo del escritor norteamericano Lewis Mumford.

Los artistas y escritores cuyas obras se reunieron en este libro trabajaban en distintos medios y provenían de formaciones considerativamente diferentes. Los editores no tenían la intención de colocar todos bajo ningún tipo de manifiesto. Creían sinceramente que, al presentar estas colaboraciones conjuntamente, podrían demostrar una actitud determinada de mente y pensamiento. Sentían que, dentro de la contusión personalizada de formas y teorías artísticas que imprimieron en la época,

El mundo para que las cuestiones arquitectónicas pudieran discutirse y, para muchos de ellos, constituye el punto más atrás de su trabajo posterior.

Tal vez puedan resumirse algunas de las ideas del Movimiento Moderno. Enfoque podría entonces trazar un horizonte de arquitectos de más pueblos que, trabajando a partir de esas primeras ideas, marcaron sus propias líneas de pensamiento creativo y sobre la edificación, elaboradas en el contexto de los problemas y de las posibilidades técnicas de sus propios países. Tal vez veamos entonces, en todas sus variaciones y con toda su riqueza, la contribución total proclamada de los arquitectos de más pueblos, hasta los más infamios en Finlandia. Incluida a la vez la altísima tecnología y la artesanal y la impresionante gama de discursos de mobiliario e industrial.

Y cuando se analice de este modo la historia del trabajo creativo, al Movimiento Moderno serán dados también las edificaciones de pisos en altura y de las obras urbanas que tanto efecto tan triste en el entorno de nuestras ciudades y con los que tan menudo se ha asociado las palabras "modernidad".

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Book with over 400 illustrations

In England, ideas about the modern city which developed during the 20th and 30s are being taken seriously after the war does not seem to have the same impact on other countries in Europe. For instance, the grand plans for Amsterdam or Berlin. Can you explain this?

Yes, I think that the starting point for any ideas about urban planning in Great Britain is not the 20s and 30s. It must begin earlier with the conditions within so many of the industrial towns developed in the 19th century. Even at the beginning of the 20th century the legacy of that vast industrial development was still there. In many cities in the north of England the extensive areas of small, compact housing, the factories, which are the buildings of today, are still to be found.

These were the conditions of the 19th century industrial towns that stimulated ideas about the new forms of town and environment that people might have and enjoy. Ebenezer Howard’s proposals were published in 1898 in his book Tomorrow; a peaceful path to real reform. It is a book about how new towns could be planned, how these might be distributed and linked by transport to form new groupings. Everything we measured we knew the type of house, the scale of plot, the schools and places of work that are necessary, and the desired size of the town itself.

At the beginning of the 20th century some enlightened industrialists had given a lead: the Garden City idea had been established at Port Sunlight and Bournville. A few years later Parker and Unwin demonstrated the new pattern of living at Letchworth and by the 1920s Welwyn Garden City was considerable and national grid of electricity to establish the idea of new towns complete with their balanced industrial development and provision of parks and other local services.

British ideas of urban planning after the war still have their roots in these earlier movements.

Could you say something more about this? Unwin’s towns or suburbs were all garden cities. Was there any lasting influence from this idea after the war?

Unwin’s housing certainly consisted of houses with gardens. This in turn controlled densities and set limits on the number of houses to the acre. That set the standard for an environment that he considered desirable and that was followed extensively in suburban developments. But Unwin left a lasting contribution to theory by his study of densities and by his use of simple methods of measurement and comparison. In his essay Nothing gained by overcrowding he compares the parallel rows of housing of the 19th century town with houses placed around the perimeter of a site with open space in the middle. He relates these areas of ease of access and of the perimeter development around existing towns he uses an important geometrical principle which relates expansion to travel time. Studies of this kind have had a considerable influence on our own work on land use and built form at Cambridgeshire. That is to say Unwin left behind a method of study; not just ‘images’ of what a town might be.

His associate, Parker, made an architectural contribution in his designs for individual houses: one or two ideas illustrate his approach. For instance, the living room is the most important room in the house: this could have double height with a staircase leading to gallery serving the bedrooms. Within this space are special areas around the fire, or for dining or writing, and with windows facing the view. Here

CIRCLE
What do you consider the most significant developments in town planning at the end of the 20th century?

I think without question it is the continuation of the belief that the problem of urban development could be analyzed and studied and that from this base, systematic proposals could be developed. Towards the end of the war for instance Abercrombie and Forshaw had produced their 'London Plan'. This established limits on growth and a relationship between population and places of work. The plan described the balance that would be required between housing densities and the schools, social services and the open spaces that might produce a better environment within the local communities from which London has grown and which constitute London as a whole.

The limits to the growth of London itself into which the plan proposed, was counterbalanced by Abercrombie's plan for 'Greater London' which in turn led to a series of towns following very clearly the precedent proposed by Howard.

By 1951 every country in England was expected to produce its own survey of existing conditions and its clear assessment of future needs.

Abercrombie's work consists of plans. What has been the lasting influence of these plans on the development of buildings which since have taken place? What happened for example in the area of London where higher densities of housing were essential?

Well, first of all I think that the plans reinforced the idea of London as a grouping of communities: the London Boroughs. One of these, Stepney, was in fact used for a demonstration area of housing, schools, etc., during the National Exhibition of 1951 and it followed very closely the Abercrombie patterns.

But the Abercrombie conception of density was limited. It was clear that for Abercrombie housing at low density was desirable where it could be achieved, that is at the perimeter. But in the inner areas the density would have to be high. For Abercrombie there was only one answer, the block of flats. This was certainly limited in height and was related to a reasonable provision of surrounding space.

Several housing developments built in London after the war followed this pattern. When the design of housing was taken over by the LCC Architects Office in the late '40s the development of a parkland site at Roehampton was one of the first projects. What was proposed there was something different: it was the simple idea of mixed development. There were slab blocks but also point blocks again of limited height. But in addition the scheme included four storey maisonettes and two storey dwellings. The density remained high, the open spaces was still very apparent but the choice of type of dwelling had been widened.

What was the motivation behind your own studies of density and housing?

The studies arose from an obvious question. If housing slabs and the kind of housing in mixed development can produce the same high densities what is the range of possible forms that might be developed? We began to study this question by placing different types of housing on an identical site area. We found that a high density of 136 people to the acre could be provided on many ways. Indeed the identical density could be accommodated in 3½ storey housing in which many types of dwelling were combined when this was arranged around courtyards which contained the open space. That is to say that tall buildings were not essential to procure snug density widening.

The theoretical aspect of this was not studied until later when the mathematical principles of placing floor space on a given site area were taken further as a direct outcome of work on the Whitehall plan.

I am stressing again the difference between the systematic study of a problem and the 'images' that we are so ready to adopt. One of these 'images' was contained in the idea that high density housing must be associated with tall buildings and as the point blocks in London became successively higher (16 storeys, 21 storeys, 24 storeys) the housing choice diminished.

I think it fair to Le Corbusier to add that although these tall developments have been associated with his City of Towers, his towers were offices, not housing. The nearest approach to high rise and high density housing is found in his 10 storey maisonettes (which have double height living rooms with open courts). These are built around public open spaces and accommodate 30% to 35% of the population. The remaining 70% to 80% of the inhabitants are to live in garden cities probably on the lines of Pessac.

There were of course many types of building in addition to housing which were built in England as a direct result of the plans produced after the war. There was for instance a national programme of building the new schools that were required and of course the new universities. What is your own conclusion about the success of these programmes and how did they affect your own work?

I would like to say first of all that I consider it to be quite remarkable that these programmes of building were carried out so completely over a period of years and on the whole successfully. I designed a small school before the war (in 1937) in which I tried to include some new principles; for example that classrooms needed good daylighting, that they could be flexible in use and that there could be provision for expansion and growth. The post war school building programmes developed all these principles together with new constructional systems to produce a remarkable number of new buildings in the time available. I think that potentially in the nearer future these basic ideas can provide a continuity of thought which can be elaborated and developed to meet each new requirement and situation.

Apart from these individual building types you have also worked on major urban problems such as the Whitehall project and a major new development for Coventry and associated developments in Glasgow. At the very end of the scale you have produced small buildings. What aspects of urban development have these studies suggested?

Let me start with Whitehall. The first point that I want to make is that the plan was not just a proposal for some new Government buildings. The plan was a framework which relates a set of ideas within the most significant area of London: the Centre of Government including the

CIRCLE

Ben Nicholson (painter) and Naum Gabo (sculptor). This publication had an international range. It illustrated the work of 22 painters, 16 sculptors and 27 architects. In addition the book contained essays by A. Mondrian, Gabo, Moholy Nagy the scientist and other contributions came from Lucien Carlu. Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and Richard Neutra. There was an article on the pioneering re-inforced concrete bridges and structures designed by the Swiss engineer Mallart: a note on Bio-technics by the architect Honig and an essay by the American writer Lewin E. Mumford.

The artists and writers whose work was brought together in this volume worked in different fields and there were considerable differences of background. The editors did not attempt to link all this together with any kind of manifesto. They believed quite simply that by placing these contributions side by side a particular attitude of mind and thought might be demonstrated. They felt that, within all the confusion of art forms and theory at that time, there were certain works, certain approaches that appeared to have a common idea and a common spirit: the constructive trend in the art of our day, and that by placing these contributions side by side a positive approach could perhaps be demonstrated.

The circulation of this book in the late '30s was limited but by 1971, 34 years after its publication, the book was republished in its original format. In recent months there have been major exhibitions of the work of Naum Gabo at the Tate Gallery in London and Ben Nicholson at the Juan March Foundation in Madrid.

A second publication appeared in 1939 when Martin and his wife Sadie Spight collaborated to produce the Flat Book. It was an attempt to make available to the public illustrations of the well designed products that could be used for the furnishing and equipment of a home. The range of furniture included chairs by Thonet, Aalto, and Breuer. Tables, desks, settees, etc. were illustrated together with fabrics and rugs, pottery and glass, lighting and equipment for heating.

Ideas y edificios