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Foreword:

From Ahistory to History: re-thinking the modern in British architecture.

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In the early 2000s, I began to write a study of architectural modernism in interwar Britain, a project intended as 'a non-modernist history of [architectural] modernism' (to slightly adjust the art historian of modern Britain Lisa Tickner's helpful phrase). It was to be a history which sought, as she continued, '[to] be adequate to, but larger than, the passionate investments of its various protagonists' and which, at the same time, also resisted the 'compulsion to sort the academic sheep from the avant-garde goats.'[1]

Tickner's book, Modern Life and Modern Subjects (2000), formed part of an ongoing reframing of the study of twentieth-century British art. Ultimately informed by the emergence of the Social History of Art in the early 1970s, and more immediately by the New Art History of the 1980s, this, as the quotations suggest, was concerned to look again at how histories of modernism in Britain

[1] Lisa Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects. British Art in the Early Twentieth Century*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000, 189.

(especially in the period from the 1900s to the 1930s) had been written, and could be re-written. Emphasis moved from primarily formal analysis against a continental European standard, in which British artists were always to be found wanting, to a concern to understand the painters' and sculptors' work in terms of the specifics of a British modernity.[2] At the beginning of my career, when I felt the same dissatisfaction at the way, in my case, histories of British architectural modernism were conceptualised, it was to these historians' work that I turned. Architectural histories of this period had not yet made the same epistemological moves that would facilitate my re-thinking of how I approached my subject. That influence, combined with the work of feminist art and architectural historians, was what I drew on for what became the book called *Re-forming Britain: Narratives of Modernity before Reconstruction*: an opening gambit in my goal to complicate the established canon of what (and who) mattered in twentieth-century British architectural history.[3] In so doing, the concern was to establish a 'larger' way of

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[2] See, for example, A.L.Rees and Frances Borzello (eds), *The New Art History*. London: Camden Press, 1986; Jane Beckett and Deborah Cherry (eds), *The Edwardian Era.* Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1987; David Peters Corbett, *The Modernity of English Art 1914-1930*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997,

[3] The transformative effect of feminist art and architectural histories remains under-acknowledged in the emergence of new approaches. Germinal texts include Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay 'Why have there been no great women artists?' reproduced in her *Women, Art, and Power*. New York: Harper and Row, 1988, 136-44; Gwendolyn Wright, 'On the Fringe of the Profession: Women in American Architecture' in Spiro Kostoff (ed), *The Architect: Chapters in the History of a Profession*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 280-308; Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*. London: Pandora,1981; Matrix. *Making Space. Women and the Manmade Environment*. London: Pluto, 1984; Alice Friedman. *Women and the Making of the Modern House*. New York: Harry Abrams, 1997. My research was published as *Re-*

writing about architectural history, one which could convey the multiple processes and people which, the historical evidence showed me, went into the making (and the re-making) of the built environment.[4]

At that time, I was content to focus on modernism because so much of the writing on its interwar manifestations seemed unable to go beyond its practitioners' concerns and prejudices and was tied, knowingly or not, to the advocacy of a particular position within a wider architectural culture. There were few deviations from an historiography that was established almost as soon as a modernist architecture began to be practised, and which seemed to eschew rigorous historical analysis rooted in the archive.

In that historiography, a recognizable origin 'story' of British modernism had been constructed. In this, the idea of importation and redemption was dominant. Typically, it contrasted the vibrant development of modernism in continental Europe in the late 1910s and 1920s with a Britain that remained content with the historicism into which the pre-war Arts and Crafts movement was presented as having evolved. It argued that since none of the preconditions which had generated modernism elsewhere existed – Cubism, progressive clients, pure talent, for example – modernism could not be generated from within and

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forming Britain: Narratives of Modernity before Reconstruction. Abingdon: Routledge, 2007.

[4] By modernism I mean, for the purposes of this discussion, a determinedly new language of architecture formed as a response to new subjectivities, new materials, technologies and media.

therefore had to be imported.[5] This importation took various forms. The reporting of European work in the pages of the architectural press, and the translation into English in 1927 of Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture* were often cited as important turning points in awakening those receptive enough to realize its potential. Modernism's arrival was, however, most often attributed, 'to the work of outsiders'.[6] First came the colonial sons, uninhibited by native prejudices, such as Amyas Connell and Basil Ward (both New Zealanders), Raymond McGrath (an Australian), or Wells Coates (a Canadian born in Japan). This group 'started' (although it is rarely specified how) a movement in the late 1920s, which was then shown how to do modernism properly by the émigré architects who arrived from Nazi Germany from around 1933. This narrative gave the sense that modernism, like a cold virus, was something 'out there', waiting to be caught, and stemmed in part from a desire to construct it as the international and inevitable style of the age.

To conceptualise modernism in this way, however, had two significant historiographical implications. In focusing on modernism's supposed internationalism it led to an impulse to generalise and to overlook work that apparently disrupted a common story and definition of that modernism (an approach ratified, of course, by Hitchcock and Johnson's exhibition and book of

[5] W.Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*. London: Phaidon, 1990, 221.
[6] K.Frampton, *Modern Architecture, a Critical History*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1987, 252.

1932).[7] So rather than understanding modernism as a transnational impulse shaped by place, it uncoupled a profound cultural shift from its context and established a persistently ahistorical way of accounting for the forms that architectural culture took.

Such an interpretation can be traced to Nikolaus Pevsner's assertion in 1936 that 'England's activity in the preparation of the Modern Movement came to an end during less than ten years after Morris's death'.[8] Deploying the trope of importation for the first time, he argued that it was only in the late 1920s that the 'forms of the Modern Movement began to penetrate into England, the forms which, between 1910 and 1925, had been developed by German, French and American architects'[9] A similar narrative can be found in John Summerson's writing. As far as he was concerned, everything important in the generation of a modernist architectural culture (indeed architectural culture as a whole) in Britain happened because of the translation of *Vers une Architecture*, and consequent to that. It took, however, several years of 'talk and travel' before anything 'substantial in the new spirit' could be built; a moment he dates to 1933.[10]

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[7] H-R. Hitchcock & P. Johnson, *The International Style, Architecture since 1922*, New York: W.W.Norton & Co., 1995 [1932],
[8] N.Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement, from William Morris to Walter Gropius*, London: Faber and Faber, 1936, 29.
[9] Ibid, 69.
[10] John Summerson, 'Introduction' in Trevor Dannatt (ed), *Modern Architecture in Britain*. London: Batsford, 1959, 12.

As Summerson's characterisation signals, in most accounts, the history of British architectural modernism was therefore primarily a phenomenon of the 1930s, a chronology which could be conveniently bookended by the house 'High and Over', designed by Connell for Professor Bernard Ashmole and built at Amersham in 1929-30 (the 'first' modernist building in Britain) and finishing, a decade later, with the Finsbury Health Centre by Tecton (1938), and Ernö Goldfinger's terrace of three houses at Willow Road, Hampstead (1939). This story was then interspersed with other 'pioneer' moments such as the founding of the Modern Architectural Research (MARS) Group in 1933, as the British chapter of CIAM, publications such as FRS Yorke's *The Modern House* (1934) and other buildings such as Tecton's Penguin Pool (1934), Coates' Lawn Road Flats (1934) or Elizabeth Denby and Maxwell Fry's Kensal House (1937). Stylistic analysis usually centred on observations about the clear European influence on the forms of British modernism.[11]

[11] For this story see, *inter alia*, Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*; D.Watkin, *A History of Western Architecture*, London: Laurence King, 1992, 559; J.Lubbock, *The Tyranny of Taste, The Politics of Architecture and Design in Britain, 1550-1900*, London & New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, Part VI 'Good Modern Design'; C.Benton, *A Different World, Emigré Architects in Britain, 1928-58*, London: RIBA Heinz Gallery, 1995. Notwithstanding my comment above, honourable exceptions include Summerson's essay in *'45-55, Ten Years of British Architecture* and his subsequent essay in T.Dannatt, *Modern Architecture in Britain*, London: Batsford, 1959; and A.Jackson, *The Politics of Architecture*, London: Architectural Press, 1970, both of which look back to the 1920s with a serious appraising eye, although both are reluctant to accord 'talk, travel and illustration' the same value as buildings, as this author does. For a more holistic view of the 1930s, see David Dean, *Architecture of the 1930s, Recalling the Architectural Scene*, New York: Rizzoli, 1983.

It is a narrative that has proved surprisingly tenacious. Indeed, it has recently undergone something of a resurgence in the wake of the frenzy around the 2019 centenary of the Bauhaus and the fact that Walter Gropius and several other of its leading members settled, albeit briefly, in London.[12] And while the narrative, as I wrote in *Re-forming Britain*, was 'not entirely without foundation', it contained and contains slippages and elisions that leave some rather important questions unanswered.[13] Why, for example, did John Rodker think it was worthwhile publishing a translation of Le Corbusier's writing in 1927? What audience was in place that would have assured him of a market for that book? Why did Berthold Lubetkin come to London when he could have stayed in Paris, and after him, all those other émigrés? While on the matter of the bigger, and one might say, key problematic of quite how pre-war pioneering gave way to post-war hegemony, there was a strange and lingering silence.

It was such sticky and unasked questions that I sought to address in *Re-forming Britain*. In order to do so the first step was to move beyond the methods and assumptions that underpinned modernist histories of modernism and which only produced ahistories. These assumptions were (and are) several and pertain not

[12] For a rather tiresome reprise of the refrain, see Oliver Wainwright, 'Auf Wiedersehn Walter, Why Britain booted out the Bauhaus': 'https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/oct/01/beyond-bauhaus-britain-riba-walter-gropius#comments (accessed 7 June 2021). This was a review of the 2019 exhibition, 'Beyond Bauhaus: modernism in Britain 1933-1966', held at the RIBA Architecture Gallery. For a critique and review of the exhibition, see Elizabeth Darling, Alistair Fair, Jessica Kelly in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, forthcoming).
[13] Darling, *Re-forming Britain*, 2.

simply to histories of modernism but to architectural history more broadly. They rely on a mode of architectural history which sees it as comprised solely as a series of ‘actual monuments’, and hence to analyse monuments primarily with reference to others, rather than relating them to the broader contexts within which architecture is embedded.[14] This is paralleled by the tendency to therefore see architecture as something produced solely by architects and to focus on them as protagonists of change. Likewise, a preoccupation with architecture as a primarily formal discipline has closed off a wealth of rich avenues which might have a great deal to tell us about its evolution. The significance of the building types in which British modernism was expressed, for example, reveals its interweaving with wider debates about community and the social reordering of British society after 1918 and hence to architecture’s role, spatially, formally, materially and socially, with the modernisation of the nation as whole.

The non-modernist history of modernism that I wrote was one which still considered canonical buildings, such as the Finsbury Health Centre, but it did so deliberately in order to present and understand such actual monuments (and indeed projects that went unbuilt) as a part of a wider process: as a set of practices. Only in this way could the emergence of something we call modernism be understood and located historically. Decentring the architect and the building and placing them within a nexus of activities that included the client, the builder, the reformers whose campaigning created new ideas about housing (for

[14] Hitchcock & Johnson, *The International Style,* 37.

example), proposals and prototypes, the users of buildings, the reporting and dissemination of projects and ideas, was a way to show how my subjects were embedded in a specific space and time. To call this a 'historical turn', one which formed part of a small wave of scholarship from the later 1990s to the mid-2000s, might seem odd.[15] In contrast to the methodologies that underpinned the writing of architectural history of previous centuries, however, which have very happily been written in terms of building type or patronage and are embedded in archival research, this is really what it was.

The implications of the historical turn for the discipline of twentieth-century British architectural history were various and relate directly to the concerns of the present volume. An expanded view of who and what constitutes architecture has meant that those who had been hitherto been 'othered' by modernist (and indeed other periods of) histories can take their place in our understanding of how architectural culture shifts and changes. It is now clear how significant women were in shaping modernism in Britain, as thinkers, writers, reformers, campaigners, clients and designers (if not as professionally trained ones). The case of the housing consultant Elizabeth Denby (1894-1965) was key here. The

[15] See John Gold, *The Experience of Modernism, Modern Architects and the Future City, 1928-1953*, London: E & F Spon, 1997; Nicholas Bullock, *Building the Post-war World, Modern Architecture and Reconstruction*. London: Routledge, 2002; Cheryl Buckley, *Designing Modern Britain*. London: Reaktion, 2007; Alan Powers, *Britain. Modern Architectures in History*. London: Reaktion, 2007. On a more general methodological note the work of Sarah Williams Goldhagen "Something to Talk about: Modernism, Discourse, Style," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 64, no.2, (June 2005), 144=167 and Hilde

origin point for my work on British modernism because of her association with one of its most canonical buildings, Kensal House (almost ur-canonical because it was both modernist *and* social housing), tracing her career as a polymathic expert who worked in health, housing, design (to name just a few of her areas of concern), her background in the voluntary sector and collaboration with assorted pressure groups, showed how what became a British modernism was embedded within wider processes of modernisation in this country and deeply informed by wider discourses of reform.[16] Moreover, her decision not to leave a personal archive forced me to the archives of, for example, the organisations for and with whom she worked; her imbrication in their papers simulated the way her voice, and more importantly, other voices too, were woven into the making of a particular project. To chart this fabric of voices and other factors, legislation, finance, changing religious and community principles, was to read the changing context of British modernity through changing architecture and vice versa.

Denby, in her collaborations with the more familiar figures of British modernism, such as the architect Edwin Maxwell (Max) Fry, with whom she co-designed both R.E.Sassoon House (south London, 1934) and Kensal House (west London, 1936) highlighted the deeply gendered nature of modernist histories and showed

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Heynen was also significant ((Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity, a Critique,* Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1999.

[16] See my Elizabeth Denby, Housing Consultant, Social Reform and Cultural Politics in the inter-war Period, unpublished PhD thesis, University College London, 2000; Elizabeth Darling, 'A Star in the profession she created for herself': a Brief Biography of Elizabeth Denby', *Planning Perspectives* 20: 3 (July

how it refused to see anyone but a white, male, heterosexual as protagonist. Although credited at the time (with some notable exceptions) for these schemes, it was noticeable how Denby's name gradually disappeared from credit lines as histories were written.[17] An ostensible reason for this would be that she was not professionally trained yet Serge Chermayeff, one of the most feted of interwar modernists, had no formal training as an architect either, but his 'qualifications' (which included a stint as a professional ballroom dancer) have never been challenged.

Seeing Denby more clearly, however, as an example of a woman thoroughly shaped by the century: highly educated, independent, sexually liberated, an agent of her own destiny, and typical of the many women who shaped the built forms of the twentieth century, opened the way to understanding how much the forms – spatial and material – of modernist architecture owed to new ideas about subjectivity and identity more broadly. Denby sought to enable working-class women to develop the modernity she had already achieved and this shaped how she co-designed the schemes in south and west London. Her vision of a re-formed domestic sphere was one that enabled women in particular to be free to be agents of their own leisure and to focus on becoming modern citizens. At the same time, the revised way of seeing allows us to see that such intentions were

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2005), 271-300 and idem, 'Introduction' to Elizabeth Denby, *Europe Rehoused*, London: Routledge International Planning History series, 2015 [1938].

[17] E.Darling 'Elizabeth Denby or Maxwell Fry? A Matter of Attribution' in Brenda Martin and Penny Sparke (eds), *Women's Places: Architecture and Design 1860-*

not unproblematic, as many of the essays in this volume show. Beneath such emancipatory visions often lay an uneasy tension between an envisaging of a certain type of working-class modernity and citizenship that overrode the economic realities of class differences and which was profoundly heteronormative.

The hetereonormativity of modernist histories of modernism is also challenged by the non-modernist stance. Ideas of the modernist architect as hero become quaint (and also tainted with the clichés of imperial ‘adventuring’). Instead, he (pronoun used deliberately) is displaced – decentred – into a narrative in which clients who were often gay or bisexual or otherwise resistant to the norms of heterosexual relationships demanded new forms of space to enable them to perform the lives they wished to live in modernity. The decidedly queer coupling of the actors Elsa Lanchester and Charles Laughton, for example, who were important early clients of Wells Coates, enabled the re-thinking of space that was key to the development of his particular type of modernism. Similarly the Cambridge don, Mansfield Forbes’s homosexuality led him to create, with his protégé Raymond McGrath, the very particular environment of his home-cum-salon Finella (1928-29), in which other ‘outsiders’ could gather to discuss new forms of cultural expression.

1960. London: Routledge,2003,149-170 and for further developments on this theme, idem, ‘The Significance of Errors’, *The Modernist*, 32,2019, 62-67.

The expanded and inclusive historiography of modernism which brings in figures like Denby, Lanchester or Forbes, simulates the way that the built environment is created out of conversations, campaigns, friendship networks, political connections, the practicalities of the building site and the availability of materials, *inter alia* and pushes the researcher to reconstruct the moments from which that environment emerges. It also widens the possible sources on which to draw: not just the architectural archive (centred, inevitably, around the architect's personality and, often, the drawing) but also the papers of clients, institutions, the architectural and other media. Thus modernism can be seen not as something 'out there' but something that emerged from a specific set of circumstances and demand and was contiguous with broader experiences of modernity. It was an integral part of an existing and ongoing conversation about how Britain might be after 1918 and its postwar ascendancy was founded on its rootedness in these conversations about the place and role of architecture in a country experiencing profound change. *Re-forming Britain* was, therefore, devoted to an analysis of how modernist architects worked to dominate those conversations and push them in a particular direction.

Despite the acknowledgement of those wider conversations, the book remained, as noted above, a study of modernist architecture. It may have seen and understood that modernist architecture in a different and larger way, but it very much conformed to modernist tropes in its focus on projects whose makers sought (formally and spatially at least) to 'make it new.' I did not quite succeed in

resisting the compulsion to cast out the academic (or, in architectural terms, historicist) sheep. Yet it was clear, not least because of the energy that modernists like Coates and Chermayeff spent delineating themselves from such contemporaries, that the other conversations about what architecture might be in the 1920s and 1930s had an equal potential to influence its direction. In the early 2000s, however, the modernist hold was as yet so strong that the literature on the milieux, architectural and otherwise, where those discussions were taking place was relatively limited. That which existed tended to emerge from a rightist anti-modernist perspective, and to focus primarily on stylistic discussion.[18] It was certainly not sufficient to enable a comparative account to be made.

Gradually, however, the modernist stronghold has weakened, and historians have started to see and write historically about those 'academic sheep' who articulated alternative visions of the modern in inter-war Britain: that audience which Rodker envisaged would buy *Vers une Architecture* in English, for example. A further process of decentring is, then, underway in which modernism is realigned into a spectrum of modern architectures. The scholars whose work is included in *Reconstruction* have formed part of this evolving way of seeing and collectively the essays in this volume make some very significant contributions to the historiography of inter-war architecture.

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[18] See David Watkin, *The Rise of Architectural History*. London: Architectural Press, 1980; several of the essays in the *Architectural Design* profile, no. 24, Britain in the Thirties (1979); Lubbock, *The Tyranny of Taste*. *The Politics of Architecture and Design in Britain 1550-1960.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995.

Methodologically, as readers will soon see, each chapter take as a given that architecture is a complex process formed out of a messy intersection of competing demands and interests, not just the work of the architect alone. Equally importantly, and this is perhaps the most significant development in non-modernist histories of the interwar, alongside considerations of gender, sexuality and class, an understanding that empire and colonialism have to be considered as integral to architectural (in this context) thinking in this period is core to much of the writing in *Reconstruction*. In the early 2000s, such concerns were not absent from historical analysis but they had not yet become a core mode of enquiry into understandings of the form that architecture and space could take. Many of the chapters in this book show how architecture was shaped by the evolving relationships between Britain and the recently established White Dominions and with colonies that were ever more resistant to the imperial yoke.

Concomitant with this is a challenge to periodization. This begins with the book's title. In their framing of the volume, Jessica Kelly and Neal Shasore argued that this was chosen because it challenged received notions of what this term usually connoted in the historiography of British twentieth-century architecture. Reconstruction with its correlates of action, energy, progression, has habitually been applied to the period after the Second World War, not before. By implication, therefore, the period before this lacked all these qualities and was

profoundly moribund. This is a familiar narrative, and was why my book sought to document and account for the vibrancy of modernist architectural culture before 1945 and to locate this much further back than usual into the 1920s. Nevertheless, my research was not yet at a stage to make the conceptual leap taken in this volume which is to overturn that cliché and link reconstruction to the period after 1918 and present a resounding counterpoint to such characterizations. Thus, with their contributors, Kelly and Shasore work towards a vivid recasting of our understanding of architectural debates and practices in the 1920s and 1930s and, indeed, the twentieth century as a whole. It is a shift which feels particularly timely given our current historical present, which is negotiating a similar terrain of resurgent nationalism and global tensions rooted in the imperial legacy and it promises an epistemological shift that will create a discipline fit to record a diverse future.

Reconstruction therefore presents the reader with an account of a British architecture which was actively engaging with the modern throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and which posits, in particular, the years around 1918 and the later 1920s as crucial moments of architecture's re-thinking. Manifested in new forms of office building, land speculation, rural reform, practice organisation, reformed public houses, temples to peace and new forms of architectural writing, to name but a few, a vibrant architectural culture sought to work out the form a modern and modernising nation should take.