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COMMON OR GARDEN

Joshua Mardell

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Ruskin once reflected, with characteristic melancholy, that he felt he achieved almost nothing in his lifetime other than through his encouragement of Venetian Gothic mannerisms, and thus, he thought, was responsible for some of England's ugliest edifices.[1] The Venetian Gothic idiom was ingeniously turned on its head at the turn of this century by Rex Hawkesworth (born 1939). This architect, whose path we will begin to follow, worked within the seemingly nefarious but undoubtedly lucrative trade of speculative house building in England from the 1970s onwards. Still, nearing the end of his career in the 2000s, Hawkesworth maintained an interest in introducing modern forms of construction to the predominantly traditionalistic suburban developments – that is, industrialised components assigned with historical signifiers as diverse as Venetian Gothic and Neo-Grecian (fig. a and b). Alas, the endeavour failed, possibly due to the pre-cast concrete surfaces, but his career path does prompt an assessment of the tensions between speculative economic motives and the aesthetic consciousness of the designer.

Like Dickens' Martin Chuzzlewit, Hawkesworth's training mirrored the familiar nineteenth century method into the profession by articled pupillage and evening lectures. Critically, though, in determining our protagonist's fate, this path was viewed with disdain by the architectural establishment at the time. Though part-time study would entitle Hawkesworth to RIBA membership, he would not be able to obtain the honours degree, a ticket for leaving the province and joining the company of the ‹big boys› in London, which included his hero, James Stirling.[2] As it went, Hawkesworth studied part-time at the Portsmouth School of Architecture from 1956 onwards with his finals testimonials rooted in the Contemporary Style of the fifties. Finally qualifying in 1966, Hawkesworth spent a brief spell in the public sector leading corporation housing projects in an austere modernist idiom. He worked henceforth solo, founding his own office in 1972, only four years after the collapse of the Ronan Point tower block had signified the end of modernism.[3]

As we can see it was speculative house-building, perhaps the dominant form of domestic architectural production, that offered Hawkesworth a lucrative opening in the field. Retaining much resonance today, Ian Nairn wrote grimly in 1961 that «the basic fact about speculative building is depressingly simple.

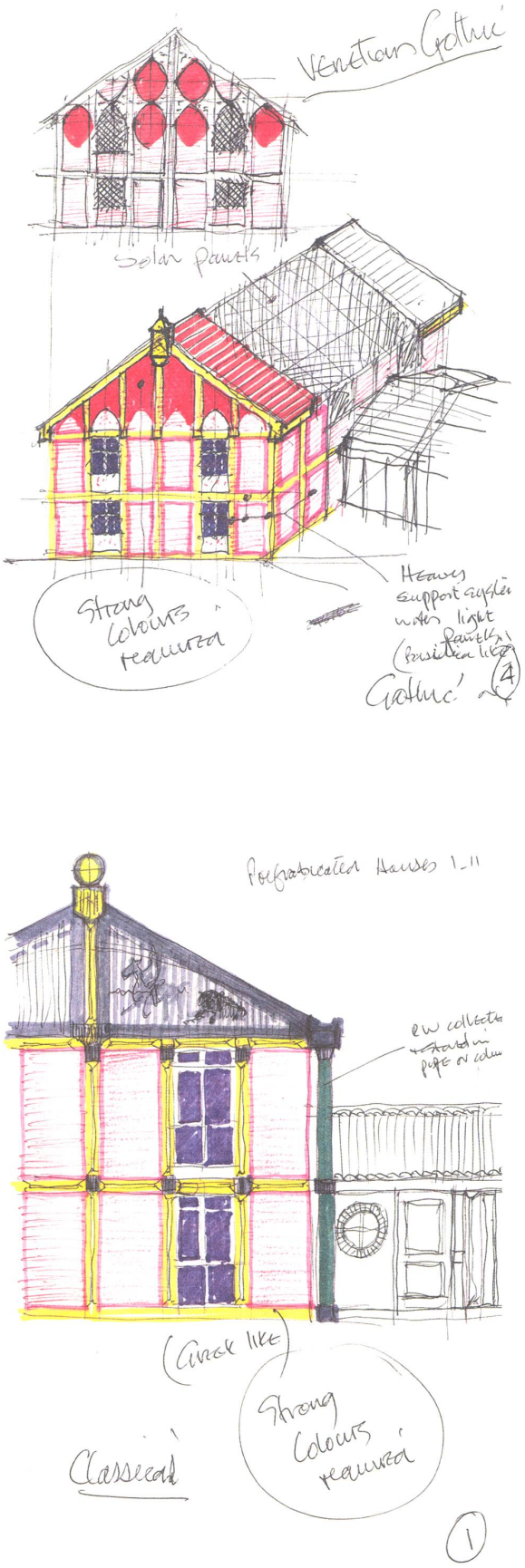

fig. a
Studies for prefabricated houses in the Venetian Gothic and Neo-Grecian style, Rex Hawkesworh, 2008. Image: Joshua Mardell for the RIBA Drawing Collection.

It is English compromise at its worst, a huge industry geared to mass-produce the answer to a million individual dreams of a-house-with-a-garden».[4] Nairn's polemic aside, as a ‹spec› architect, Hawkesworth enjoys an esteemed parentage. His ancestors include the Tudor mason-quarrier William Orchard who ran vast building operations and a remunerative business in construction materials; the Brothers Adam, Thomas Cubitt and the other Georgian and Regency speculators that moulded the form and fabric of London; and the revered Eric Lyons of the Span Development partnership who brought a strong design core to industrialised development in the 1960s.

Something of a prisoner to convention, our hero was essentially patronised by a philistine middle-class consumer, and had to adopt in his housing the traditional appearance demanded by this market. The image is a familiar one: brick facings, pitched and overhung roofs, bow and bay windows, dormers (these invariably hipped), and vernacular treatment on the gables or at first-storey level: tile-hanging, weather-boarding, bargeboards, half-timbering. The result is somewhat hackneyed and clichéd, or, to return to Nairn, «the artificially tickled-up stimulants to people's dreams».[5] For convenience, this style might best be called ‹Neo-Vernacular› although Hawkesworth was held aloof from the rhetorical Neo-Vernacular ‹movement› whose seminal proponents included Jeremy Dixon and Charles Jencks in the United Kingdom, whilst later in Germany the traditional formalism of Hans Kollhoff offers a case of parallelism. The epithet offered for the movement by Jencks, «the sign of an instant community», however, perfectly encapsulates Hawkesworth's endeavour.[6]

It is significant that Hawkesworth's mastering of the Neo-Vernacular product, a tested formula proven to sell, earnt him, by his own account, some five times the average architect's salary of £9,000 in his first year, and eight times the average at his peak in 1983. The ‹individualist› rhetoric of the Thatcher years (and the weakening of the welfare state) supported a housing boom that sustained the affluence of Hawkesworth's practice throughout the 1980s; correspondingly, the boom ceased in 1992 with the end of the Thatcher government, giving Hawkesworth his first slump.

'There was certainly no development precedent of any sort and it was decided that the individual site would allow for a one-off house to be developed.

fig. b

THE SPATIAL QUALITY OF THE BUNGALOW WITH ITS FAMILIAR COURTYARD GARAGE DRIVE AND STRONG DESIGN LINKS WITH THE ORIGINAL DEVELOPMENT, WAS THE KEY ELEMENT HERE IN ALLOWING CLUSTERS OF BUNGALOWS AND HOUSES TO HAVE THEIR OWN IDENTITIES.

fig. c

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To attempt an analysis of Hawkesworth's path, you will forgive this author's own speculative move in referring to two essays published contemporaneously with the founding of Hawkesworth's practice. The first is Denise Scott Brown's ‹Learning from Pop› (1971) for ‹Casabella› in which she posed an attack on architectural elitism and its distance from the needs and desires of the lay public, much like J.M. Richards had argued in the immediate post-war period.[7] The second is Bourdieu's aptly named ‹The Market of Symbolic Goods› of the same year.[8] Bourdieu offers two concepts that mirror two apparent tensions. Firstly the dualism of ‹art-for-art's-sake› which might be conceived as a retention of artistic autonomy (‹resistance›), on the one hand and ‹middle-brow art›, that which is «dominated by the quest for investment profitability», or subordination of artistic autonomy (‹submission›), on the other. In summary, Bourdieu's second dualistic concept concerns ‹the field of restricted production› (FRP) in which «properly economic profit is secondary to enhancement of the product's symbolic [cultural] value» and ‹the field of large-scale cultural production› (FLP) in which its products are managed «like ordinary economic goods… destined for consumers».

As a speculative architect, Hawkesworth found his sustenance within FLP, evidently concerned with economic rather than cultural capital. Thus if we consider the speculative neo-traditional model house as ‹middle-brow-art›, we see how Hawkesworth was instrumentalised by an affluent market, succombing artistic autonomy to common desire. Thus he appears to be both an opportunist in one respect but also, recalling his fate, something of a tragic hero for the middle classes.

Let us draw to a close, however, with reference back to Hawkesworth's prefab system with which we opened, as demonstrative of his clinging-on to a degree of artistic self-consciousness. Many further examples demonstrate ‹resistance›, such as his Stirling-esque competition designs for a new Parliament building at Westminster (1972) or his Cedric Price-inspired House for the Future (1991).[9] Also note that Hawkesworth's detached house at Horndean with no development precedent operated within Bourdieu's FRP, as early as 1976 (fig. b). All three affirm creative, and not incidentally modernist, yearnings. Most of all though, his value is in having offered an opening for good design work for the ‹spec› builder, ‹within› the staid and accepted typology. As we can discern in his extensive oeuvre, his concerns went beyond superficial historicism, extending to an interest in spatial setting and social propriety (fig. c). Further still, as an architect trained in an artistic milieu, his life-long ambition was to bring the Neo-Vernacular typology to a creative conclusion. Though Rudofsky would have it otherwise, tradition ‹can› modify.

With the private sector remaining the dominant supplier of housing and owner-occupation the dominant socio-economic model, can architects afford to hold aloof from the speculative market? Is it only the architect, rather than the in-house draughtsman, that can bridge the gap between the economics of mass production, common desire and creative invention?

1 Peter Quennell, ‹Ruskin: Portrait of a Prophet›, London: Collins 1949.
2 Indeed the fate for part-timers worsened following Sir Leslie Martin's reforms at the 1958 Oxford Conference, with courses cut still further and student grants making the system all but redundant.
3 See for instance Nicholas Bullock, ‹Building the Socialist Dream or Housing the Socialist State? Design versus the Production of Housing in the 1960s›, in: Mark Crinson and Claire Zimmerman (Eds.) ‹Neo-avant-garde and Postmodern: Post-war Architecture in Britain and Beyond›, New Haven: Yale 2010.
4 Ian Nairn ‹Spec-built› in: ‹Architectural Review› 129, March 1961, p. 164. The house-and-garden archetype was the basic building block of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City paradigm, the ideal model for the ‹Homes for Heroes› mentality post-WWII and the societal ‹beau ideal› accompanying Thatcher's individualism.
5 Ibid.
6 Charles Jencks, ‹Architecture Today›, London: Academy Editions 1988, Ch. 7.
7 Denise Scott Brown, ‹Learning from Pop› in: ‹Casabella›, December 1971, pp. 359–360; on Richards and the vernacular see: Erdem Erten ‹The Hollow Victory of Modern Architecture and the Quest for the Vernacular: J. M. Richards and the Functional Tradition› in: Peter Guillery (Ed.), ‹Built from Below: British Architecture and the Vernacular›, London and New York: Routledge Press 2011, pp. 145–168.
8 Pierre Bourdieu, ‹The Market of Symbolic Goods› in ‹The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature›, New York: Columbia University Press 1993, pp. 112–141. Though first published in 1971, a temporal connection is not claimed; the essay was not disseminated in English until 1984.
9 In the ‹Daily Mail Book of Home Plans›, London: 1991.

Images in fig. b and fig. c: courtesy of Rex Hawkesworth.

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