

The curse of Palladio

As the Raymond Erith exhibition at the Soane Museum makes clear, the interesting question is not 'classical or modern?' but 'good or bad architecture?'

Raymond Erith – some of whose exquisite drawings are currently on display in a centenary exhibition at Sir John Soane's Museum – has long been the most celebrated of those so-called traditionalist architects who carried on building after World War II despite the active opposition of the ascendant modern movement. Many of his projects remained on the drawing board and most of his work consisted of building or altering country houses, but after he reconstructed the interiors of nos. 10, 11 and 12 Downing Street for the Macmillan government interesting jobs came his way, notably the library at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. This last, at least externally, is like a large, austere Soanian warehouse, and Soane, indeed, was a hero or mentor for the young Erith. Like others of his generation who intelligently recognised an affinity between the abstraction of Soane and the aesthetic of modernism, Erith considered him 'a very rare bird, and unique among the great architects, in being a progressive classicist'.

There seem to me to be two things that matter about Erith. One is that he saw the continuing value of traditional styles and methods of construction, so that his buildings were beautifully made. The other is that he was a good designer. This last consideration is too often forgotten in the tiresomely polarised debate about modernism and classicism which continues to rage. It is a debate in which blinkers tend to be worn on both sides – something encouraged by the Prince of Wales tendency, which naïvely regards anything with a flat roof as clearly bad and any building with columns as indisputably good. Modernists, of course, adopt precisely the reverse position. What this reveals is merely conventional opinion. It is instructive to note that, when the first modern movement houses were built by Maxwell Fry and Connell, Ward & Lucas in Hampstead in the 1930s, there was ferocious local opposition to these alien intruders spoiling the precious local character. Yet thirty years on, when Erith designed that charming essay in Georgian vernacular, Jack Straw's Castle, the denizens of Hampstead opposed it because it was traditional and not 'modern'.



Police station, Wood Street, London, designed by Donald McMorrin and George Whitby, early 1960s. Photo: Gavin Stamp

Intelligent modern architects such as Denys Lasdun and Philip



The Howard Building and Library, Downing College, Cambridge, designed by Quinlan Terry (b.1937), 1986. Photo: Mark Fiennes/arcaid.co.uk

Powell held Erith in high regard, but perhaps this was partly because he was no threat and had a rather specialised practice. Indeed, Erith has become a sort of hero or prophet for those who are committed to classical architecture. This may reflect English snobbery, that is, the undue reverence given to the architecture of country houses, for in truth, despite his early admiration for Soane and his belief in a progressive classicism, Erith's work has less to teach about the adaptability of tradition to modern conditions than that of certain other twentieth-century classicists. There was Lutyens, of course, who expanded and enriched the language of classicism with astonishing originality until his death in 1944. More to the point, there was Sir Albert Richardson who, although he parodied himself as a reactionary Georgian squire, designed Bracken House for the *Financial Times* in the 1950s – a modern commercial building (since cleverly altered by Michael Hopkins) that showed how the neo-classicism of Schinkel and Cockerell could still be appropriate and practical in the City of London.

Above all, perhaps, there was Erith's contemporary Donald McMorrin and his younger partner George Whitby, who, inspired by the legacy of Lutyens and that great town-hall builder Vincent Harris, rose to the challenge of modern administrative and technical requirements. Their classicism was truly progressive and they designed municipal buildings at Exeter, Bury St Edmunds and university colleges at Nottingham that were both traditional and modern, abstracted but civilised structures that met their users' needs and were intelligently detailed. Most impressive, perhaps, are two buildings in the City: the police station in Wood Street, which has a stone-faced residential block that is a miniature skyscraper, and the extension to the Edwardian baroque Old Bailey, where the simplicity of treatment and the abstraction of monumental forms creates a grandeur worthy of Vanbrugh. Yet McMorrin and Whitby were largely ignored by the architectural press and are little known today.

The tragedy of modern British architecture is that the sane, progressive alternative to doctrinaire modernism was undermined by the comparatively early deaths of these men: McMorrin in 1965; Whitby and Erith both in 1973. Although this was the very time when the arrogant assumptions of the modernist establishment were beginning to be questioned, these departures left the field empty, with only Erith's younger pupil and partner, Quinlan Terry, to hold aloft the torch of classicism – something he was, I fear, quite unfitted to sustain. Yet Terry went on to build up a hugely successful country-house practice, largely for the new money of the Thatcher years. There are two unfortunate things about this earnest and rigid traditionalist. The first is that he has grasped the dead hand of that perennial curse of English architecture:



Design for a factory, warehouse, offices, etc., at Ipswich, for Burton, Son and Sanders Ltd by Raymond Erith (1904-1973), 1948. Pencil, pen and ink and wash, 60.3 x 99 cm (detail). From the exhibition 'Raymond Erith: Progressive classicist 1904-1973' at Sir John Soane's Museum, London

Palladianism. Erith, at least when young, was much more broad-minded, holding to 'the tradition of all western architecture: Greek, Roman, Gothic, Renaissance, and all the rest, including the tradition of the great modern engineers. It is the tradition from which architecture ought never to have deviated'. His early designs, inspired by the Regency, were drily witty. Later, however – perhaps under Terry's influence – his work drew more on Palladio, and became more pedantic and boring.

The second unfortunate aspect to Terry's being fêted as the leader of a new generation of continuing classicists in Britain is that he is, I am sorry to say, a mediocre architect. He goes in for a sort of photocopy-Palladian, with classical details stuck on to dull boxes. Although undoubtedly well made, his architecture is stiff, pedantic and uninspiring. Particularly revealing is the Howard Building at Downing College, Cambridge, a vaguely Palladian design which turns its back on the Greek revival style of the original campus. Ineptitude is demonstrated by the complete failure to integrate – or interpenetrate – a lower Doric order with a double-height Corinthian, as Cockerell or, for that matter, Palladio knew how to do, while it is simply excruciating to see down-pipes slicing through plinths. And then there are the eight false windows, four of them in symmetrical pairs and so, as balancing elements, redundant. Far from aspiring to a progressive classicism, this is crude, drawing-board architecture that undermines efforts to take a modern classicism seriously, yet Quinlan Terry has been consistently praised by the *Country Life*/Prince of Wales Institute lobby.

Of course, the other side is equally partisan and blinkered. Poundbury, the new development outside Dorchester promoted by the Duchy of Cornwall, i.e., the Prince of Wales, is undoubtedly twee in aspects of its traditionalism. It has, however, been carefully planned by Leon Krier to realise progressive and socially humane ideas about traffic, social diversity and community, yet few critics seem to have a good word for the experiment. Similarly, the new Queen's Gallery at Buckingham Palace has largely been ignored by architectural critics, despite its clear success, simply because its designer, John Simpson, uses the language of the Greeks as refined by Schinkel. Now Simpson may not be a great architect, but in the handling of space – something that modernists constantly bang on about – he displays genius. At Buckingham Palace, he has brilliantly threaded new rooms and staircases through an existing building while the quality of his detail and his mastery of technology and construction commands respect. The Queen's Gallery deserves to be taken very seriously indeed.

Even so, the sad truth is that, despite much hype, the new classicism that has flourished to a degree since the 1980s has been rather a disappointment.

Even if Terry is taken out of the equation, no designer has emerged who has made the immensely rich language of the classical tradition glow and 'become as plastic clay', as Lutyens put it. There is Robert Adam who, with considerable intelligence, has argued that classicism must adapt and embrace new technologies, but his designs are too often clunkingly gauche and slightly vulgar. There is Demetri Porphyrios, who can be elegant and austere when he keeps to a Greek revival style, but whose attempt at Tudor gothic at Magdalen College, Oxford, is so painful as to make the whole enterprise seem contrived and posturing. More promising is the work of Craig Hamilton, who has had the benefit of an old-fashioned training in South Africa and who seeks to play with the classical orders informed by a broad-minded knowledge of history. With his work, I cannot help feeling that the further he moves from Palladio, and the simpler it becomes, the more convincing it is – but I fear that is not what his clients want.



Entrance hall, The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, London, designed by John Simpson and Partners, 2002. The Royal Collection © 2004, HM Queen Elizabeth II

The late Sir Nikolaus Pevsner has received much stick, particularly from David Watkin in *Morality and Architecture*, because of his disapproval of traditional architects who declined to follow the orthodoxy of modernism after the 1920s. Yet I am increasingly being forced to admit – especially when contemplating all this unremarkable and self-conscious new classicism – that perhaps he was right all along in that, yes, there really is a *Zeitgeist*. Of course architects should have the freedom to reject the spirit of the age and learn from the past, but I suspect that true originality and artistic success is only possible when a designer is working with that spirit. Any alternative seems to be doomed to be pedantically striving and unsophisticated. Even Erith's buildings became less interesting as the climate became more alien. Even so,



Mayshield Chapel, Scotland: Perspective from the south west by Craig Hamilton (b. 1961), 2004. Pencil and watercolour on paper, 71.1 x 50.6 cm. Craig Hamilton Architects

it would help if critics on both sides used their eyes rather than just followed party lines.

The exhibition 'Raymond Erith: Progressive classicist' is at Sir John Soane's Museum, London, until 31 December 2004: for details, see www.soane.org