

The English Crucible

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figure 1
Model of the
Festival of Britain,
1951



UPSTREAM CIRCUITS

- 1 The natural Scene
- 2 The land of Britain
- 3 The country
- 4 Minerals of the Island
- 5 Power and Production
- 6 Sea and Ships
- 7 Transport
- 8 Dome of Discovery

DOWNSTREAM CIRCUIT

- 9 The People of Britain
 - 10 The Lion and the Unicorn
 - 11 Homes and Bardens
 - 12 The New School
 - 13 Health
 - 14 Sport
 - 15 Seaside
- OTHER DISPLAYS
- 16 Television
 - 17 Telecinima
 - 18 1851 Centenary pavilion
 - 19 Shot Tower
 - 20 Design Review
 - 21 Skylon
 - 22 Royal Festival Hall

figure 2
The Royal Festival
Hall, developed by
the LCC (specificly
R. Matthew, J.
Martin, E. Williams
and P. Morrow)



figure 3
The Stockholm
Exhibition 1930, The
Paradise restaurant
by Gunnar Asplund
and Nils Einar
Eriksson

Being asked to reflect on the English situation during the '50s and '60s when the so-called New Brutalist movement entered the architectural stage has had the effect of compelling me to reflect on my own origins. I started to study architecture during the years that the Festival of Britain was being conceived and realised, first in the Guildford School of Art and then at the AA School in London. I am old enough to have been exposed to the cult of rubbed ink renderings on stretched paper and the meticulous drawing of the classical orders during the first year of my education before I went to the AA school. At the AA during my initial year 1950-51 I was taught by the young Turks of the Festival of Britain by Paul Boissevain, and above all Leonard Manasseh, who were among the propagators of the so-called Contemporary Style, which was vaguely Swedish in its affinities, as was the Festival itself in its overall tone, even though three structures on the Festival site clearly had other origins: the Royal Festival Hall, the Skylon and the Dome of Discovery. Only one of these buildings is still standing, the Royal Festival Hall, which in my view remains the best civic monument realised by the British in the second half of the twentieth century. The other two were interesting, however, in as much as they owed a great deal to the legacy of Russian Constructivism. This was the same modernising paradigm that had informed the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930, even though Gregor Paulson's celebration of the Swedish Welfare State was as much affected by a lighter populism in terms of mass culture, as its successor the Festival of Britain would be twenty years later; tulips and flags in the case of Stockholm, 'Black eyes and Lemonade', to coin a popular nineteenth century jingle, in the case of London, although considerable play was also made on the South Bank with flowers, bunting and brightly coloured furniture by Ernest Race.

To the extent that it favoured load-bearing brickwork, low-pitched roofs, white, wood-framed picture windows fitted with plate glass, small-bore central heating and exotic indoor plants, the so-called Contemporary Style or that which was variously called People's Detailing, the New Humanism or the New Empiricism was also mainly Swedish in its affinities, the neutral, northern socialist welfare state of World War II, which had been much favoured by the British architects even before the war. The Alton East section of the famous Roehampton Estate of the LCC, in the design of which Oliver Cox played a key role, was also overtly Swedish in its syntactical and ideological implications. It was known that New Brutalism arose very much as a reaction to this normative syndrome, giving rise to James Stirling's apocryphal remark, 'let's face it, William Morris was a Swede'. It is clear that *The Architectural Review* played a key role throughout the late '40s and early '50s in furthering this so-called Swedish style, along with its championing a remedial, partially nostalgic picturesque methodology known as Townscape that was pursued as a Neo-Sittesque principle by Gordon Cullen, the exceptionally gifted graphic artist on the staff of the *Review*.

The left-wing students at the AA in the '50s – above all, John Voelcker, Andrew Derbyshire and Stephen Rosenberg – much subject to the influence of the unreconstructed communist idealism of Arthur Korn – were also categorically against this liberal, petit bourgeois stylistic compromise. They were close to Le Corbusier's post-1945 *béton brut* manner and the heroic concrete engineering approach of Owen Williams, as they found this, say, in Williams's Boots Factory (1932) and in his Peckham Health Centre (1935).

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figure 4
Alton East,
Roehampton,
developed by the
London County
Council, 1952-1955



figure 5
A journey through a
hypothetical city,
Drawn by Gordon
Cullen, 1961



figure 6
Housing in Norfolk,
designed by Tayler
and Green, 1948



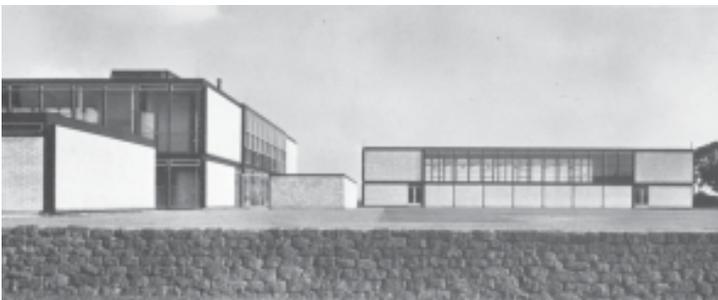
figure 7
Boots Factory,
Owen Williams,
1930-1932

The Smithsons cut across both of these tendencies with their Neo-Miesian Hunstanton School, influenced by Philip Johnson's monograph on Mies of 1947 and under construction during the best part of my years at the AA, having been won in competition in 1950. In retrospect one may surely look back at Hunstanton as the self-conscious antithesis to the astonishing achievements of the Hertfordshire County Council school building program under the leadership of C.H. Aslin, which had served as a model for us as students. In retrospect, I hardly know which to admire most, the actual *realisation* of these prefabricated, light-weight schools – 29 were built between 1946 and 1948 – or the detailed micro space that they provided and the constructional standards to which they were worked out to accommodate the needs of children in the most sensitive way imaginable.

figure 8
Hunstanton
Secondary Modern
School, Norfolk,
1949-1954



figure 9
Hunstanton
Secondary Modern
School



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The other key paradigm on the English scene prior to the full emergence of New Brutalism between 1952 and 1956 was surely the methodology and the Neo-Baroque, Neo-Corbusian language and evolved by Berthold Lubetkin and his Tecton team before World War II, most particularly in Highpoint 2 Apartment Block, with its caryatid portico, and in the Finsbury Heath Centre, both completed in 1938. This language is all too evident at an urban design level in both Clive Entwistle's Crystal Palace Competition of 1946 (shades of Le Corbusier's Cité Mondial of 1928) and in Lubetkin's rejected plan for the new town of Peter Lee of 1950, not to mention Lubetkin and Tecton's Spa Green Estate (1947), the Royal Festival Hall (1949-51) and the TUC Headquarters Building, designed by David du R. Aberdeen, all completed at around the same time. However, in the internal furnishing and

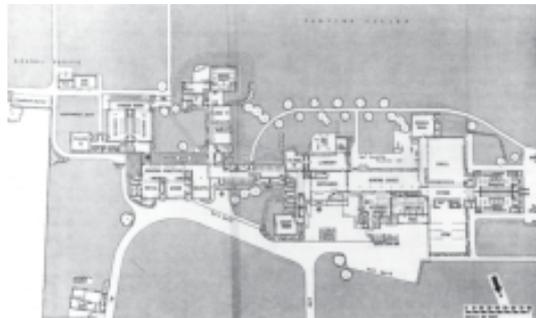


figure 10
St. Crispins
Secondary Modern
School, Development
Group with the
Berkshire County
Council, 1951-1953



figure 11
St. Crispins
Secondary Modern
School

figure 12
Highpoint two,
Lubetkin and Tecton,
1936



figure 13
T.U.C. Memorial
Building, David Du
R. Aberdeen, 1957



figure 14
Factory at
Brynmawr, South
Wales, developed by
the Architect's Co-
partnership, 1952



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detailing of both the RFH and the TUC one can also detect the influence of the Scandinavian popular, 'softer' contemporary manner to which I have already referred. One might also argue that the Brynmawr Rubber Factory completed in 1952 to the designs of the Architects Co. Partnership, who were my teachers in my second year at the AA, was also indirectly connected to the syntax and the planning method of Tecton, even if it was Tecton of Highpoint 1, rather than Tecton of Highpoint 2, and one might also note here in passing a wide span aircraft hangar and laboratories designed by du R Aberdeen in 1950, which share certain tectonic tropes with the Brynmar Factory, above all the prominent use of shell vaults. It is significant, for me at least, since he taught us concrete, that the concrete structure of the rubber factory was by Ove Arup and Partners, just as Ron Jenkins of the same firm would be the engineer on Hunstanton.

The completion of Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseille in 1952, having been underway since 1948, broke upon the English scene like a thunderbolt and encouraged the Smithsons to move away from Mies in their Golden Lane competition entry of the same year. The Unité is also the inspiration behind the Alton West section of the LCC Roehampton estate of 1954 designed by Howell, Killick and Partridge however much this patently departed from the Fourieriste paradigm of Le Corbusier's Unité. Le Corbusier's *Modulor* proportional system was also a major factor in the detailed resolution of this work, as this system had been publicised and validated by *The Architectural Review*.

Before going on to treat, however briefly, the Golden Lane proposal of Alison and Peter Smithson, I would like to focus on a conjunction dating from the late '40s, namely, the publication of Rudolf Wittkower's *Architectural Principles in an Age of Humanism* in 1949, and in the same year Le Corbusier's first essay in low-rise, high-density housing, his Roq et Rob project for Cap Martin, made in that year. Although there is no direct relationship between the two, they were both to exercise an influence on the main protagonists of the New Brutalist movement, Alison and Peter Smithson on the one hand and James Stirling & James Gowan on the other. We may say that the popularisation of Le Corbusier's *Modulor* and Wittkower's rediscovery of Humanism fed into the latent Neo-Palladian tendency that floats just beneath the surface of certain projects by the Smithsons and Stirling & Gowan at this time; Hunstanton in the first instance and Ham Common housing of 1958 in the second. However, a more delicate and so far perhaps insufficiently acknowledged excursion on the part of both the Smithsons and James Stirling was their separate projects for village infill housing of the mid '50s, above all the Smithsons *fold* and *close* houses

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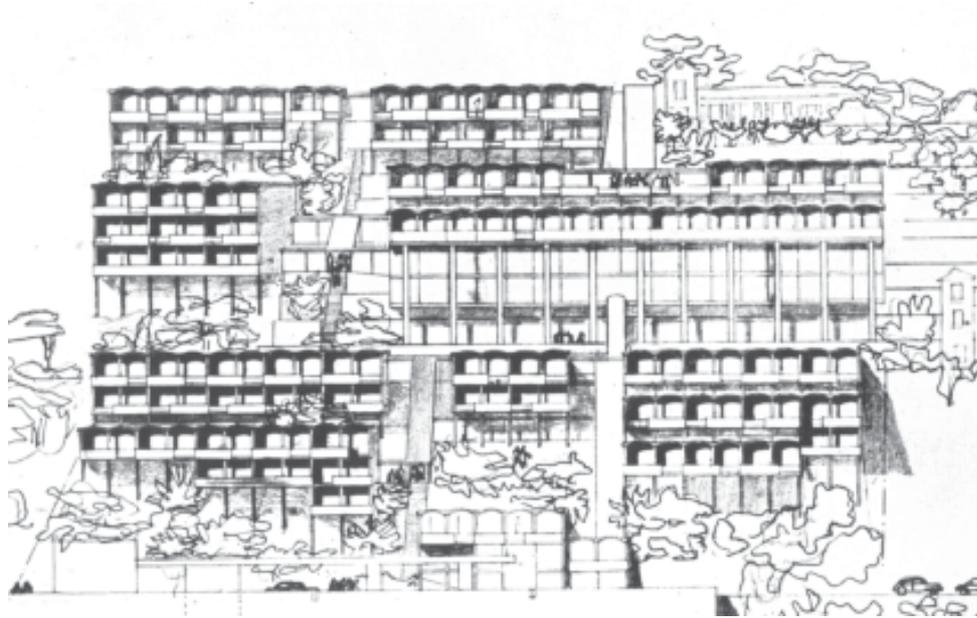


figure 15
Elevation of Roq et
Rob, Cap Martin, Le
Corbusier, 1948-
1950

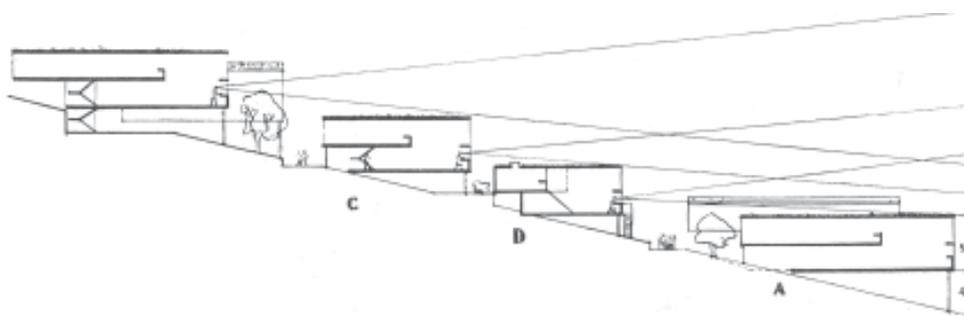


figure 16
Roq et Rob, Section

figure 17
Maison Jaoul, Le
Corbusier, 1956



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figure 18
Ham Common, James
Stirling and James
Gowan, 1958

of 1953. An unacknowledged influence in all this was surely Thomas Sharp's study of *The English Village* dating from 1949. These extremely poetic unbuilt proposals conceived for another time and another kind of society were already oddly removed from the incipient consumerism of the British Welfare State as this would be partially evoked in James Stirling's Ham Common Houses built at Richmond in 1958, where one might note that *béton brut* & brick fireplaces came to be plastered over. The detailing of Ham Common obviously owed something to Le Corbusier's Marison Jaoul completed at Neuilly 1956, even though Stirling had initially criticised this work in the pages of *The Architectural Review*. 'Mies is great but Corb communicates' was the Smithson's slogan around the time that they designed Golden Lane which like Alton West but much more generously was conceived as a street-in-the-air housing scheme, owing as much to Le Corbusier's Unité but also influenced Brinkman's Spangen Housing in Rotterdam (1920). In terms of its layout, particularly as it would be hypothetically applied to bombed-out Coventry in a photo-montage, it was also indebted to Le Corbusier's *Ilôt Insalubre* slum clearance project of 1937.

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figure 19
Diagram of Village
infill housing, A. and
P. Smithson

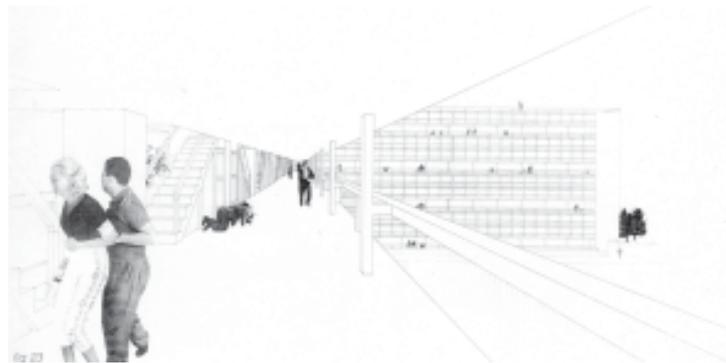


figure 20
Golden Lane
Housing Competition,
A. and P. Smithson,
1952



figure 21
Housing in Spangen,
Rotterdam, Michiel
Brinckman, 1920

figure 22
Patio and Pavilion at
the Exhibition This is
Tomorrow, by A. and
P. Smithson, N.
Henderson and E.
Paolozzi, 1956



figure 23
Pavilion at the
Exhibition House of
the Future, A. and P.
Smithson, 1956



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Apart from their consistently heroic and imaginative attempts to come to terms with the fragmented urbanised regions of the post post-war world (for example their London Roads study of 1953) the Smithsons pursued an ideological diverse architecture that went in more than one direction at once as we may judge from their House of the Future built for the Daily Mail Ideal Home exhibition of 1956, and the garden shed and temenos that they constructed with Eduardo Paolozzi & Nigel Henderson for the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition mounted in the Whitechapel Gallery in the same year. Together with *Parallel of Life & Art* exhibition staged at the ICA in 1953, the Smithsons contribution to *This Is Tomorrow* pointed to a certain existentialist sensibility that was totally at variance with their Americanised ideal exhibited in the Daily Mail show, with its debt to Richard Hamilton and to the American car-cum-furniture designer Harvey Earl.



figure 24
The Super 88,
General Motors,
designed by Harvey
Earl, 1958