

THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE:
RE-EVALUATING FORM AND MEANING IN EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURE C. 1400-1950

Impolite Architecture: The ‘Message’ of the Nineteenth-century Speculative House

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[1] The Call for Papers for this conference stated that, ‘All buildings – whether polite, vernacular or somewhere in between – were initially informed by some kind of presiding idea or set of ideas.’ The buildings about which I want to talk today are neither polite nor vernacular, but fall into that area of the ‘somewhere in between’. In my title I refer to them as *Impolite Architecture*, for they are the speculative houses of nineteenth-century London, [2] the sort of houses in which, I imagine, many of this audience have lived, as did Mr Pooter, the eponymous hero of *The Diary of a Nobody*. This was the Laurels, 12 Brickfield Terrace, Holloway — ‘a nice six-roomed residence, not counting basement with a front breakfast parlour ... a flight of steps up to the front door ... [and] ... a nice little back garden which runs down to the railway’.¹ As such, did these speculative houses have a message? Quite clearly they did, for they had an audience, the house-buying public, but did they have a ‘meaning’. That is a question which I shall address later.

[3] The rapid expansion of the cities in the nineteenth century left many critics aghast at what they saw. George Cruickshank’s satirical cartoon of 1829, *London Going Out of Town or The March of Bricks and Mortar*, showed brick kilns spewing bricks onto retreating haystacks and livestock: one floored tree cries out, ‘I’m mortally wounded’. Meanwhile, on to the open ground, in advance of the uniform ranks of speculative houses, comes an army of hods, its leader brandishing a sign advertising ‘Mr Goth, Brickmaker, Bricklayers Arms, Brick Lane, Brixton.’ It is a scene, surely, redolent of Hades through the smoke of which St Paul’s Cathedral and the Monument are dimly discernable.

[4] The regularity if not monotony of Cruickshank’s houses was something which Benjamin Disraeli, writing in *Tancred; or; the New Crusade* in 1847, was also to notice:

Although London is vast, it is very monotonous. ... Pancras is like Mary-le-bone, Mary-le-bone is like Paddington; all the streets resemble each other, you must read the names of the squares before you venture to knock at a door.²

What the critic William Henry Leeds had called 'the wearisome succession of brick boxes' was echoed [5] by Alfred Tennyson, in his poem In *Memoriam AHH*, written in 1850. Here Wimpole Street is referred to as both 'the long unlovely street' and 'the bald street'. His friend Arthur Henry Hallam, AHH, had lived at number 67. [6] Three years later, in the third volume of *The Stones of Venice*, John Ruskin cited the reduction of (what he called) 'men's inventive and constructive facilities from the Grand Canal to Gower Street; from the marble shaft, and the lancet arch ... to the square cavity in the brick wall.'³ Gower Street was, for Ruskin, 'the nec plus ultra of ugliness in street architecture.'⁴

[7] It is perhaps not surprising that Disraeli, as a politician, laid much of the blame on the vastly influential 1774 Building Act which, by its categorization of houses into four rates, based upon ground floor area, had the effect of standardizing street elevations. The most prolific, the Third Rate, is shown here. As Disraeli said:

Mary-le-bone ought to have produced a revolution in our domestic architecture. It did nothing. It was built by Act of Parliament. Parliament prescribed even a façade. It is Parliament to whom we are indebted for your Gloucester Places, and Baker Streets, and Harley Streets, and Wimpole Streets, and all those flat, dull, spiritless streets, all resembling each other, like a large family of plain children, with Portland Place and Portman Square for their respectable parents.⁵

[8] The uninspiring appearance of London's streets, in this case villas, had already been noticed in the architectural press. *The Builder* was first published in 1843 and by 1846, *Punch* was able to quote from it:

A SAGACIOUS correspondent, of our edifying contemporary, *The Builder*, complains of being put sadly out of spirits by the depressing influence of our Street Architecture. Dull uniformity sends him into a fit of melancholy for a whole morning's walk, and an unsightly chimney casts him down into the lowest depths of utter despondency.⁶

[9] *Punch's* solution was simple:

The mode of producing cheerfulness might be varied in different neighbourhoods; but a few streets of Harlequins, Pantaloons and Clowns might be tried by way of an experiment for enlivening our Street Architecture.⁷

[10] If there was a Message in all this, it was that speculative domestic architecture, as exemplified by the eighteenth-century developments of the Portland and Bedford Estates, had, by the mid-nineteenth century, become boring. But why was this? If the speculative builder had a product to sell, one would expect it to be wrapped up in attractive packaging. But the packaging, it seems, had grown tired. What had happened was, quite simply, that the 'polite' Palladian architecture that was the basis of this 'impolite' street architecture had long since fallen out of fashion but its residual influence was continuing. [11] These bald elevations on Sussex Way in Holloway were built as late as the 1870s. [12] This is what Ruskin meant by 'the square cavity in a brick wall'.

Yet not all was like this. As the nineteenth century developed, the speculative builder adopted other building styles with which to sell his product. The metamorphosis of architectural style from polite to impolite architecture followed the same pattern of devolution, no matter what the style, although some took longer than others to die out. [13] Take, for instance, the Gothic, with or without a K. From its inception at Strawberry Hill in the 1750s, it was promulgated through pattern books such as John Buonarotti Papworth's *Designs for Rural Residences* of 1818, before appearing in a variety of interpretations. [14] These examples of ornamental gables from Lorn Road in Stockwell, of the 1840s and Scarborough Road in Finsbury Park, as late as the 1890s, show the longevity of such interpretations. The final stage of this devolution can be recognized in a design [15] published in *The Illustrated Carpenter and Builder* in 1890. Submitted by H W A H (initials only) in response to a request by a reader from Bradford for a house design, this elevation seems ignorant of the whole Gothic Revival of the previous fifty years. Yet the author has the strength of his convictions for, as he says, he 'if necessary, would alter plans to suit same elevation.'⁸

The hiatus of the Napoleonic War, while serving to popularize the *cottage ornée*, as at John Nash's Blaise Hamlet of 1811, reduced the opportunity for architects to travel the Continent in search of new ideas and styles. The Greek style, first promoted by Nicholas Stuart and James Revett in the mid-eighteenth century, experienced a further revival in the early nineteenth-century when the eastern Mediterranean was accessible to architectural tourists while France and Italy were not. [16] Pattern books, such as Papworth's *Rural Residences* offered Greek Revival designs similar to those which James Collis, in his *Builders' Portfolio of Street Architecture*, was to aim directly at the speculative builder nineteen years later. Shallow Doric pilasters, porches with laurel wreaths and party walls crowned with acroteria, as here at Hartington Road in Stockwell, soon became part of the speculative builder's vocabulary and remained so well into the mid-century. But not all speculative housing was designed by builders. [17] These Greek Picturesque villas in Tollington Park were designed by the architect Alexander Dick Gough (a pupil of Benjamin Wyatt and partner of another of Wyatt's pupils, Robert Louis Roumieu), following his marriage to the daughter of one of the local landowners.

In his 'Essay on Modern English Architecture' published in 1839, William Henry Leeds called the Palladian of Sir Robert Taylor and James Wyatt 'feeble', 'insipid' and 'spiritless'⁹ and promoted instead [18] the Italian *palazzo* style of Charles Barry's Travellers' Club. Completed in 1832, the Travellers' Club offered a new approach to street architecture and one which, Leeds said, allowed for 'many diversities'. Unlike the Palladian, it was astylar and presented a flat, more evenly balanced elevation contained within rusticated quoins and beneath a horizontal *cornicione* — or cornice. It was not only eminently more suited to the urban context than had been the Palladian façades, derived from rural villas, but also represented a mercantile architecture more representative of the Whig position than the Tory association of the Palladian country house. [19] This is, perhaps, no more apparent than in Barry's next Pall Mall clubhouse, the Reform Club, built, as its name would suggest, for the Whigs or Liberals and completed in 1841.

[20] It was this style, perhaps more than others, which the speculative builder first took up to replace the Palladian, some of the earliest examples being in smaller villas such as 57 and 59

Wellington Road, St John's Wood. Dating from November 1838, these elevations were drawn on leases issued by the Eyre Estates to William Sexton, a bricklayer of Great Pulteney Street in Soho. Very similar in appearance although smaller in scale, were these cottages across the river in Turret Grove, Clapham, of 1844-45.

[21] Of all the styles which were taken up by speculative builders during the third quarter of the nineteenth century, it was that of the Italian Villa which was probably the most endemic. In John Claudius Loudon's *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture* of 1833 and in his next book, *The Suburban Gardner and Villa Companion* of 1838, Loudon published many designs in this style by both Edward Buckton Lamb and Marriott Field. 'Characterised,' as he said, 'by irregularity, by strong contrasts, and by other painter-like effects',¹⁰ the Italian Villa style offered the speculative builder a great variety of interpretation. 'A building,' wrote Loudon, 'in all other respects plain, with rusticated quoins, and a blocking cornice ... with similar cornices under the window sills, will produce a striking effect, without any other exterior decoration.'¹¹ But perhaps more important than that, was Loudon's final observation: 'One great recommendation of the Italian manner in our eyes is, that, from the cheap nature of its finishing and decorations, it is suited to a people in moderate circumstances — to a democracy.'¹² **[22]** So democratic was 'The Modern Italian Style of Architecture', as Loudon called it, that it seemed to consume much of west London where, on the Ladbroke estates in the early 1850s, Thomas Allom introduced loggias and belvederes, quoins and corbels brackets in heady profusion. At the same time, paired villas were being built along King Henry's Road in St John's Wood with porches and round-headed windows that might have come straight out of Loudon's pages.

Despite its popular usage across the great west-London terraces, the Italian Villa style came to an abrupt end in the mid-1870s. **[23]** Between 1876 and 1880 the builder William Douglas erected a large, white stucco terrace at 186-195 Queen's Gate, Kensington, to the designs of R W Lewcock. It probably looked a bit like this nearby building, Queens Gate Terrace. But it did not sell. **[24]** A new house, just completed on the adjacent plot at 196 Queens Gate, was the cause of the problem. You can just see Douglas's terrace rising on the right hand side of this

photograph of 1877. Designed by Richard Norman Shaw for the painter and art collector John Postle Heseltine, it was of red brick and had a prominent Dutch gable. All of a sudden stucco was out and brick was in. **[25]** Douglas was forced to reface his block in brick and terra-cotta, and even divide three of the houses into flats, before they would sell. Consequently, in 1888 he went bankrupt with debts of over £659,000.

Just as Norman Shaw's new house was taking shape on Queens Gate a letter appeared in *The Building News*. It read:

[26] There is a species of clap-trap design just now finding its way into what we may term the second-hand architecture of the day that, from its want of taste and frequent extravagance, forces itself upon attention. Such architecture will be found most rampant in Suburban districts of the metropolis, where it may be seen flourishing along main thoroughfares, in business premises and in tenements. It is what we designate the serio-comic burlesque of the architectural drama. Its prevailing characters are ridiculous travesties of church doorways and windows, mimic Gothic pillars and arches, caricatured translations of Venetian facades, and a variety of decorative paraphernalia of every Classic and Gothic school.¹³

Behind these elevations, whether monotonous or serio-comic, was essentially the same product as there had been a generation or a century before. **[27]** Consider the plan which, amongst the Third Rate houses, had been in common use since Nicholas Barbon, London's first great spec builder, laid out Bedford Row and Red Lion Square following the Great Fire of 1666. Barbon's standard terraced house plan, as shown here by John Summerson, comprising a front and back room, linked by a side passage, with stairs, leading to a rear extension. It differed very little from the plan of 27 Frederick Street, Clerkenwell, built in 1840, **[28]** or from that for the previously seen pair of Gothic houses which H W A H submitted to *The Illustrated Carpenter and Builder* fifty years later. What was different, of course, was the packaging. **[29]** Whatever the styling was on the exterior, amongst this Rate of house in particular, the plan was invariably the same. On the left is 27 Frederick Street in Clerkenwell, which we have just seen, built in the Greek style by Lewis Cubit in 1839. And on the right is 11 Bonner Road, Bethnal Green, built in the Italian manner by Joseph Lucas in 1866. Apart from

the appearance of the bay window, about which I shall talk in a moment, the plans are the same: all that really differs between these buildings is the appearance.

Here I would like to return to the beginning of this presentation where I referred to the Call for Papers which our hosts issued three months ago. There it was suggested that all buildings were initially informed by some kind of presiding idea or set of ideas. Over the last day and a half we have heard many reflections on this. I would now like to offer one more. That is, that the presiding idea which informed the design of the nineteenth-century speculative was that it was a product. If it had a meaning, it was just that. It was meant to sell. If it did not sell, the speculating builder, like William Douglas, would get his fingers burnt.

This can best be understood not through the kaleidoscope of styles through which I have just guided you, for ultimately their appreciation is subjective, but rather through some hard, economic facts implicit in the business of house building. The first is to do with the ground floor area or footprint of these houses and the second is to do with their fenestration. And both are to do with taxation.

[30] By far the greatest number of spec houses built in the nineteenth century were of the Third Rate or class of building, as defined in the 1774 Building Act. My illustration is from Peter Nicholson's *The Practical Builder and Workman's Companion* of 1823. These were houses, as Loudon explained in his *Suburban Gardener and Villa Companion*, which had a frontage of 17 to 18 feet and a depth of 28 to 29 feet.¹⁴ The Act defined the Third Rate house in terms of both its value —between £150 and £300 — and, as suggested, its area which was calculated in 'squares' or units of 100 square feet:

... every dwelling house, which does or shall exceed three squares and a half of building on the ground plan, and shall not amount to more than five squares of building on the ground plan, shall be deemed the third rate or class of building.¹⁵

So the Third Rate house had to have a footprint of between 350 and 500 square feet and, if built to Loudon's dimensions, would be no smaller than 476 square feet and could not be larger than 500 square feet. The amount of tolerance, therefore, between a house that was too small

to be economic and too large for the tax band, was 24 square feet — the difference between 476 and 500. That is about the size of a small double bed.

Thus the standard plan was set and did not evolve beyond its original, seventeenth-century arrangement until, within a six-year period in the 1840s and early 1850s, three long-standing taxes were repealed which allowed the spec builder to invest more money in his building without risk to either himself or to the prospective buyer. The first of these to go was the Glass Tax, repealed in 1845;¹⁶ next was the Brick Tax, repealed in 1850;¹⁷ and finally the Window Tax, repealed in 1851.¹⁸ It was the last of these, the repeal of the Window Tax, which allowed the change of plan form to happen and the result was the almost ubiquitous introduction of the bay window. The reason was simple. A house was taxed annually on the number of windows it had and this charge was borne by the owner. Each window had glass and, although only taxed at source, the extra cost of the glass was passed on by the spec builder to the purchaser. The same indirect taxation existed for bricks so, the fewer bricks that were used, the less cost there was to pass on to be purchaser. And the spec builder, always wary of his profit margin, did not want to risk a sale by out-pricing his product.

Let us consider for a moment how this worked. The Window Tax¹⁹ had been introduced in 1808, the year the Peninsular War started, and was levied, as I have said, annually. If the ordinary Third Rate house had seventeen windows — eight on the front, five on the rear, three on the stairs, and one in the extension — the house owner would have been liable for an annual duty of £8-14-0,²⁰ some six per cent of the minimum value of his house, defined in the 1774 Building Act as £150. This much, it would seem, could not be avoided unless the windows were bricked up. Add to this the indirect costs resulting from the taxation of glass and bricks — the former taxed at £3-13-6 per hundredweight²¹ and the latter at 5/10d per thousand²² — then a relatively large sum would be passed on by the spec builder in the purchase price of the house.²³ Had the spec builder added, unwittingly, a canted bay window to the basement and ground floor of his house before selling it, then there would have been more tax to pay on both the extra glass and extra bricks and the house owner, now with four more windows, would have seen his annual Window Tax rise by almost 40 per cent to £12-1-0.

Would the average clerk or shopkeeper have bought a house with such a tax liability?

Probably not, and the spec builder would not have been able to sell it.

[31] The removal of these three taxes allowed the spec builder to improve his product by the adoption of the bay window but, **[32]** as shown in these flat-fronted houses of 1852 in Clapham Manor Street, Clapham, its adoption was relatively slow. **[33]** By the mid-1850 the bay window is starting to appear, **[34]** but initially in detached and semi detached villas, as in King Henry's Road, rather than in the smaller terraces. **[35]** It was not until the mid-1860s, **[36]** as you can see in these houses on Bonner Road that the bay window was taken as the norm. The best evidence for this is provided by the Middlesex Land Register now held at the London Metropolitan Archives. These large, red volumes list every land purchase made in Middlesex — that is London north of the Thames — from the early eighteenth century and are often accompanied by an outline plan which, in the case of houses, shows their footprint. Here, as one works through the volumes, the appearance of the bay window becomes increasingly frequent until, by the end of the 1860s, it was, as H J Dyos commented in *Victorian Suburb*, his memorable study of the growth of Camberwell, 'fast becoming *de rigour* in all grades of suburban homes.'²⁴

And so, in conclusion, back to *meaning*. **[37]** The speculative house, as I have said, was a product, a commodity which was *meant to sell*. A letter published in *The Builder* in 1871 made this point:

It is hardly necessary, however, to point out that the speculating builder, like any other tradesman who hopes to live and gain by his trade, will rarely produce what he cannot hope to sell ...²⁵

That was the presiding idea behind this impolite architecture. These houses were built to sell **[38]** — and they still sell today

¹ 'Diary of a Nobody', *Punch*, 26 May 1888, p. 241.

² Benjamin Disraeli, *Tancred; or, the New Crusade* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1847), vol 1, pp. 128

³ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol 3 (3rd edition, Orpington: George Allen, 1886) chap. 1, p. 2.

⁴ Bridget Cherry and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: London 4, North* (London: Penguin Books, 1998) p. 325

⁵ Benjamin Disraeli, *Tancred; or, the New Crusade*, (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1847), vol 1, pp. 128

⁶ 'Street Architecture', *Punch*, 31 October 1846, p. 178

⁷ 'Street Architecture', *Punch*, 31 October 1846, p. 178

⁸ *The Illustrated Carpenter and Builder*, 4 July 1890, p. 40

⁹ William Henry Leeds, 'An Essay on Modern English Architecture' in *Studies and Examples of the Modern School of English Architecture* (London: John Weale, 1839) p. 2

¹⁰ John Claudius Loudon, *An Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture ...* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1842), pp. 963

¹¹ John Claudius Loudon, *An Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture ...* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1842), 959

¹² John Claudius Loudon, *An Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture ...* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1842), p. 963

¹³ 'Speculative Builders Architecture', *The Building News*, 20 August 1875, p. 190

¹⁴ John Claudius Loudon, *Suburban Gardener and Villa Companion*, London, 1838, p. 35

¹⁵ 14 Geo III cap. 78, S 8

¹⁶ 8 and 9 Vict cap. 6

¹⁷ 12 and 13 Vict cap. 9

¹⁸ 14 and 15 Vict cap. 36

¹⁹ 48 Geo cap. 55

²⁰ 48 Geo cap. 55, Schedule A

²¹ 3 and 4 Vict cap. 22

²² 2 and 3 Vict cap. 24, Schedule 2

²³ For readers unfamiliar with pounds, shillings and pence: £8-14-0 is eight pounds and fourteen shillings or £8.70p; £3-13-6 is three pounds, thirteen shillings and sixpence or £3.67.5p; 5/10d is five shillings and ten pence or 29p.

²⁴ H J Dyos, *Victorian Suburb: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell*, (Leicester, 1973) p. 178

²⁵ 'Speculating Builders', *The Builder*, 4 November 1871, p. 870