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**Twentieth-Century Architects**

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One of the (many) disturbing aspects of getting older is the realisation that a generation of architects that were once professional household names, in some cases even heroes, has virtually disappeared from current discourse and may never even have entered the frame of reference of a younger cohort of architects or students. This condition of amnesia is not helped by the widespread neglect of modern history in Britain’s architectural schools and the media’s relentless search for new ‘stars’. The indifference towards retired or departed practitioners of the recent past is paralleled by an equivalent neglect of its physical residues—a phenomenon all too familiar to practitioners such as myself who are challenged with the task of rescuing and restoring some of the more significant but frequently forgotten works of the period that have ceased to be ‘current’ but are yet not old enough to have become ‘historic’—even if a few may have been listed. To be clear, I am not talking about figures with an international profile—Lubetkin, Goldfinger, Lasdun, Stirling, the Smithsons (arguably) and our more recent lords and knights of the realm—whose seats in the pantheon have already been secured. No, I am referring to distinguished members of the second eleven (or better) who deserve a place but as yet have no reservation.

How very welcome therefore is this new series of monographs devoted exclusively to twentieth-century British architects whose work may have been well represented in the contemporaneous press of their day but who have subsequently been consigned to various states of oblivion. Four titles (as noted above) have so far appeared in this joint project by the Twentieth Century Society, English Heritage and RIBA Publishing, and each subject has been well served by its author. More are to follow: John Madin by Alan Clawley; Leonard Manasseh by Timothy Brittain-Catlin; Robert Maguire and Keith Murray by Gerald Adler; Stephen Dykes-Bower by Anthony Symondson;
Chamberlin, Powell & Bon by Elain Harwood and
Ahrends Burton Koralek by Ken Powell. Extended
further, the series could become an indispensable
survey of twentieth-century British architecture.
The template has now been set—well-referenced
accessible texts, mercifully devoid of twaddle,
revealing not only the range of work but also the
creative chemistry of the partnerships involved, gen-
erous illustration in black and white and colour
(though not consistently enough plans and sections
for the professional reader), definitive lists of works
and short bibliographies—plus the bonus, as judged
appropriate, of some valedictory aperc¸u, poem or
obituary tribute. The test of future success will be
in the selection of subjects and authors to maintain
the interest of those covered to date.

Already however, the range of titles both
produced and proposed is indicative of the Society’s
determinedly catholic view of ‘its’ century. All creeds
are tolerated: if they are evidential. This may
occasion a certain wistfulness among old Modern-
nists. In years to come it will probably be possible
to look back at the twentieth century without any
predisposition to privilege their ‘Movement’ as ‘the
genuine and legitimate style of our century’: as
Pevsner once had it.¹ What was once a cause is
now regarded as merely a choice, and the struggles
of one era serve the sampling of another as the
twentieth century is reprimed in all its Darwinian
diversity. This should not be cause for surprise. Mod-
ernism’s alleged singularity was an historical conven-
ience from the start and in intelligent differentiation
lies the beginning of understanding. After all, we
have only to count the 64 hectic and heterogeneous
years from 1837 to 1901 and measure the breadth
of cultural production that we conveniently general-
ise as ‘Victorian’. In claiming 86 years from 1914 to
2000 the Society has over twenty more with which
to work!

With this inclusivity in mind, the first four titles
certainly establish some extended coordinates for
the larger survey that is promised. At one extreme
Ryder and Yates, the only true heirs of Berthold
Lubetkin, child of heroic Constructivism and the
‘artistic terrorism’ of revolutionary Russia; at the
other McMorran & Whitby: epitome of that endan-
gered species of gentlemen practitioners with a
provenance that included Edwin Lutyens. In
between: the benign pragmatism of Powell and
Moya and the wholesome vernacular of Aldington
and Craig. But so much for stereotypes—the value
of these books is to get beyond the familiar outlines
and reveal more of the reality.

Of the four practices featured to date, Ryder and
Yates provides the most rarefied and poetic vision of
modern architecture in the post-war period, the
study spanning the three key decades of their
work from 1951 to 83. Epitomising their unique
gift for abstraction was the Engineering Research
Station at Killingworth (1967), an image of pristine
perfection—redolent of Concorde before its
demise—and similarly portraying a forward-facing
Britain in its post-war prime (Fig. 1). (Unaccountably,
this dazzling building is illustrated only as a frontis-
piece rather than on the cover where it would have
conveyed the ethos of the firm’s entire œuvre in a
single image.) The volume is, however, wonderfully
enriched by some of Peter Yates’ exquisite paintings:
works of penetrating insight that leave deep traces in
the eye’s mind and cry out for a larger audience.
The impact of their brief collaboration with Lubetkin (1948–50), in the latter's doomed commission for Peterlee New Town on the Durham coalfield, is shown to stretch far into their subsequent practice, not just geographically in their almost single-handed cultivation of a modern tradition in the north-east, but in the creative development of Lubetkin's unique architectural vision: a potent fusion of the rational and the poetic. Future historians given to speculate on 'what might have been' had the Russian grandmaster not withdrawn from practice prematurely, need only look at the Ryder and Yates canon, which to borrow an aphorism of the late Denys Lasdun, neither repeats nor merely extends the Tecton tradition, but rather 'metabolizes' it.

Of central interest in each of the titles published to date is the way the two characters in each eponymous partnership came together and collaborated so fruitfully. In this instance Gordon Ryder (1919–2000), son of a bookie, a Geordie born and bred who began his professional training in articled apprenticeship, then studying and later teaching at Newcastle University, would remain in the North East. Peter Yates (1920–1982), transcending his Essex origins to become a London commercial artist covering international exhibitions, studied architecture at the Regent Street Polytechnic under Peter Moro (Lubetkin's erstwhile assistant), using his spare time as a serviceman in the liberation army to befriend Le Corbusier, Georges Braque, Gertrude Stein and other intellectual luminaries in wartime Paris and experiencing an exotic formative journey that would continue to be reflected in the far-flung subject matter of his prolific artistic activity. But Carroll quickly disposes of the misconception that Ryder was the gregarious businessman and Yates the introspective designer: their collaboration involving an altogether more complex chemistry.

From this seemingly unlikely association (the pair deciding to form a practice after being re-united...
accidentally in 1953) came a succession of outstanding works, here structured by building type: residential buildings, including single houses and flats projects, eye-catching exhibition installations, some little-known but transformational refurbishment schemes, the series of groundbreaking industrial commissions for the gas industry and finally a range of community welfare buildings. The early houses, so often a practice launch pad, immediately reveal the designers’ ability to fuse simplicity with intensity: a gift surely nurtured by Lubetkin. Thus concrete and glass are combined with stone and timber in a series of wonderfully inventive plans conjured from imaginative readings of site and client circumstances—the house of Gordon Ryder himself epitomising this vision of contemporary domestic living. Yet the story tells us that these early essays were still unwelcome to the cautious and conventional local planning committees of the North East and often rejected, apparently leading to Yates’ proposal that radical aspirations be postponed and that survival depended on compromise, a strategy reportedly rejected by Ryder: who would be proved right.

The Daily Mail’s quoted description of Ryder’s own house—‘difficult to imagine anything less like a house and more like a factory’—might be regarded as prophetic considering the architectural genre for which the partnership would become best known. The location for this flowering of progressive industrial design was the new township of Killingworth: a desolate tract of former mining land redolent of the closing scenes of Get Carter, but bravely chosen for its headquarters by the Northern Gas Board after delays in obtaining a central city site in Newcastle. This profoundly unpromising setting the young partnership proceeded to transform into an abstract landscape of quite breathtaking beauty. The account of their appointment itself provides another insight into the client’s gritty independence at a time when such mainstream figures as Basil Spence, Robert Mathew and Arne Jacobsen were all producing large schemes in Newcastle under the auspices of its egregious leader T. Dan Smith. Eschewing a design competition, which it was suspected might subject it to the rulings of the RIBA, the Gas Board determined to employ a local architect from a short-list prepared by Professor Jack Napper and selected Ryder and Yates after seeing examples of their work. ‘I’m glad we did’, wrote the Secretary of the Board subsequently, ‘This policy of flying to Basil Spence cuts no ice with us’. (Spence, it may be noted, having won the competition for Coventry Cathedral in 1951, had become the establishment’s favourite ‘modern’ architect, showered with commissions from all sides.)

Norgas House, the first in the series and completed in 1965, was quickly followed by the Gas Council’s Engineering Research Station, the office building Stephenson House, Norgas Training College, a separate computer building also for Norgas, a School of Engineering, the Lion Brushworks Factory, the so-called Citadel for Northumberland County Council and even the practice’s own offices: the eventual ensemble representing possibly the most sustained architectural endeavour in a complementary range of modern buildings by a single firm anywhere in the country. Partly anticipating, partly sponsored by the discovery and rapid development of the North Sea gas industry this...
extraordinary suite of buildings, despite all the intelligent flexibility of their design, would almost equally quickly be susceptible to its fluctuating circumstances. Had several of the works not been inexcusably damaged or demolished, the case for designating the whole of Ryder and Yates’ Killingworth township a Conservation Area (if perhaps not a World Heritage Site) would surely have been unanswerable. As it is, despite heroic efforts by the author Rutter Carroll to promote the work, only the Research Station is listed and others in the series remain vulnerable to abuse and ignorance on the part of their changing owners.

Although nothing would equal the extraordinary coherence and conviction of this particular group of works, the practice continued to undertake significant commissions such as the MEA building in Newcastle and the gigantic Vickers tank factory. Other projects included studios for Tyne Tees Television 1981—contemporaneous with Terry Farrell’s TV-am building in London and epitomising their steadfast modern convictions in contrast to the latter’s PoMo frivolity—also a series of community buildings, most notably a Men’s Social Services Centre that could be seen as a personal homage to Le Corbusier’s Cité de Refuge. Despite this range of creative application all the works are disciplined by the same sense of form and refinement. Rather as Robert Furneaux Jordan once risked describing Lubetkin as ‘Le Corbusier in England’, one is tempted to see Ryder and Yates as ‘Lubetkin in Tyneside’: and then immediately (just like Furneaux Jordan) apologise for the comparison. Yet there is surely something in the purity of their work with its undertow of poetic yearning, a poignancy intensified by the searing deprivation of its locale, that binds these outstanding designers with their Russian mentor.

While Ryder and Yates chose to plough their lonely furrow in the north east, Powell and Moya had already burst onto the post-war stage with seemingly effortless ease. Launched in 1946 on the competition win of Churchill Gardens, the largest housing project in the country, the partnership would become ensconced in the three key areas of Welfare State investment—housing, education and healthcare—for nearly half a century. Their story is authoritatively told by Kenneth Powell, doyen of architectural commentators, who characterises and commends the work as exemplifying the increasingly rare ideals of social architecture that, after the more recent diversions of post-modernism and ‘starchitecture’, should again underpin the ambitions of practitioners today. As if exemplifying the maxim that ‘nothing succeeds like success’, the partnership proceeded on its golden journey, the vast Pimlico commission being followed by an almost unbelievable succession of high-profile projects: the Skylon 1951, Chichester Festival Theatre 1962, the UK Expo Pavilion of 1970, prestigious commissions from Oxford and Cambridge colleges through the 1960s and 1970s, numerous major hospitals, the Museum of London 1976, the QEII Conference Centre opposite Westminster Abbey 1986.

The author attributes this extraordinary achievement to the complementary gifts of Philip Powell (1921–2003), ‘methodical, painstaking with clients and a witty public speaker’ and Hidalgo ‘Jacko’ Moya (1920–1994), ‘intuitive and bohemian’—and substantively to a creative skill that ‘subtly subverted
the rationalist prescriptions of Modernism in order to produce romantic and picturesque effects’. Unlike some of their peers, Powell & Moya, in the words of Reyner Banham, were ‘nice, modern and British’: but crucially, nice, winning their audience precisely because it did not feel it was being patronised or was expected to applaud.3 The Oxbridge college buildings, for example, displayed an acute sensitivity to context in the close company of venerated heritage, employing an unpretentious vocabulary that was manifestly Modern but yet a world away from the high jinks of James Stirling or the pontificating Smithsons. With equal assurance they would inaugurate the great new tradition of post-war hospital building with major projects including Swindon, Wexham Park (Fig. 2), High Wycombe and Great Ormond Street, continuing these associations with loyal clients over years through successive phases of building.

The hallmark of the firm’s work, captured in a critique by Ian Nairn of their first school commission (Mayfield School, Putney, 1956) would be its ‘burning humanity, its devotion to the job it has to do and the avoidance of any kind of self-conscious architectural effect’.4 It is this lack of guile, the distrust of ‘theory’, that makes the Powell & Moya canon so quintessentially British mainstream. Indeed, perhaps more than any other single practice of its day, Powell and Moya epitomised the Welfare State in architectural terms, their record of dedicated public service being recognised in the award to the practice of the Royal Gold Medal, Powell himself being knighted in 1975 and becoming a Companion of Honour a few years later. Thus the firm’s demise in the face of PFI (the Private Finance Initiative) and the depredations of Thatcherism signalled the end of a uniquely enlightened era in British social culture, effectively confirming that the conditions needed for it to flourish had ceased to exist.

Modesty, however, is a protean virtue, and Alan Powers’ story of Aldington and Craig provides a quite different account of creative reciprocity. After a somewhat unlikely start in the LCC Architects Department Peter Aldington began to hit his stride in the early 1960s in the celebrated series of hands-on house projects, extending the tradition of English domestic design from its inter-war white (or occasionally pink) period into a robust brick
and timber vernacular for various sites in the Home Counties: most notably the idyllic enclave of Turn End, Buckinghamshire (1963–68). Powers relates the curious story of how the partnership was formed in 1970 with John Craig, a former advertising executive, after the latter had acted as client representative in Aldington’s project of redesigning his agency’s offices. Thus developed what Powers conjectures was a ‘probably unique’ arrangement whereby Craig (not an architect, though a talented artist and craftsman in his own right) would anchor the client briefing process, thereby furnishing Aldington with the programmatic information and psychological insights needed to formulate the design response.

This *modus operandi* is deemed critical to their ingenious resolution of ostensibly incompatible client requirements and was ideally suited to the firm’s design of GP surgeries and health centres that spanned from the late 1960s through to the mid-1980s, where the appropriate interrelationship of spaces, routes, ambience, privacy and legibility was paramount (Fig. 3). Running through all the work—indeed its defining quality—was the concern to integrate the consideration of buildings and their setting, embracing what Aldington was later to define as ‘the landscape obligation’.5 This is abundantly evident not only in the book’s luscious images of *mises en scène* but also in their style of plan drawing that would depict everything from bedroom furniture to garden shrubbery in the effort to imagine the entire human experience of continuous space.

Yet their intense engagement with material and detail is also shown to have brought its own difficulties in the context of commissions for larger-scale developments or more indirect modes of procurement where the opportunity for complete immersion in a project’s understanding, formulation, detailing and realisation is diminished. ‘You would not see Aldington and Craig building at Milton Keynes but some pale shadow of them’ declared Aldington in 1978 in response to an invitation to work to an impossible programme with a builder-developer on a housing scheme at the New Town. Nevertheless, several larger commissions were successfully achieved including a scheme of residential accommodation for nurses and doctors at Colchester District General Hospital and the well-known postal sorting office at Hemel Hempstead 1985, both of which revealed a readiness to explore a new building vocabulary beyond the mature house style, which has in turn been extended further by the third and younger partner Paul Collinge, whose own contemporary contributions conclude the study.

In McMorran and Whitby one feels the Twentieth Century Society returning to its comfort zone. Resolutely rowing against the high tide of Modernism, this practice bridged the war years and continued to produce important works for institutional clients that maintained but gently adapted the compositional traditions and architectural manners of a previous age. Unlike the other partnerships in the series to date this creative association evolved from an altogether longer tradition: the practice of one Horace Farquharson, a former assistant to Edwin Lutyens, and similarly weaned on the patronage of Edwardian country house clients. Farquharson, described as ‘a Victorian figure and
Figure 3. Chinnor Surgery, Oxfordshire, 1968, by Aldington & Craig (annotated by John Craig, p.43; from Aldington, Craig and Collinge archive).
truest of gentlemen’ set up in 1907, Donald McMorran becoming a partner in 1935 with George Whitby joining in 1958, engendering a professional continuity deeply inlaid in the work itself. Other figures noted in the practice genealogy include such long-forgotten names as Vincent Harris and Morley Horder. The book also contains much evidence of McMorran’s consummate draughtsmanship in an age when architects actually drew their buildings, rather than relying on Bill Gates to do it for them.

Their staid but subtly inventive style proved ideal for the stream of important public-sector and institutional commissions that sustained the practice over thirty years from 1935 to the mid-1960s: municipal headquarters and public buildings at Exeter and Bury St Edmunds, residential and teaching buildings for Nottingham University, various projects for the judiciary and the police, including of course the Central Criminal Court extension at the Old Bailey and police stations at Hammersmith, Marylebone and Wood Street for the City of London Corporation (for whom substantial housing schemes were also undertaken) (Fig. 4). The sober durability of this work is promoted as the more prudent and humane pathway that twentieth-century architecture might have taken, had the Moderns not captured the post-war limelight: the latters’ subsequent travails—in terms of both technical failure and popular disillusionment—providing the leitmotif of McMorran and Whitby’s vindication from years of critical disparagement that runs through the whole book. Their legacy ‘is more pertinent today than ever’, asserts Edward Denison in the concluding chapter, ‘since their work is of the rare type that improves with age.’ The irony is that whilst in terms of the stylistic provenance that guided their conscious endeavours this statement would take some justification, the environmental advantages of thick construction and low window to wall ratios through which they were achieved are only now being properly understood.

An intriguing aspect of the four titles to date is the way they demonstrate how each of the practices studied somehow became associated with the type of work to which they were best suited, whether by genre, sector or scale. Practices make projects and thereafter the projects make the practice. Future titles will perhaps reveal whether this pattern is mysteriously serendipitous or merely
self-fulfilling. However that may be, it is as difficult
to imagine any other of the partnerships surpassing
Ryder and Yates’ work in the genre of modern
industrial architecture as it is to picture the Central
Criminal Court by any other hand than that of
McMorran and Whitby.

Another informative feature of the series is the
inclusion of un-built as well as built projects and
the narration of some of the difficulties routinely
endured by architects in pursuing their commissions.
The innumerable unsuccessful competition entries
featuring in the respective lists of works makes
poignant reading for any practitioner familiar with
that particular selection method’s combination of
elation and disappointment. The architectural
achievements of any age are only those works that
survive the vicissitudes and inertia that prevent so
many projects born in optimism from eventual
realisation. A related theme is the relentless
myopia of planning officials that architects and
their clients must overcome in order to build at all.
Whether the ratio of fulfilment to frustration jus-
tifies the profession’s vast expenditure of creative
energy is a question that can perhaps only be
answered at an individual level. Yet there is surely
something ineffably British about a system of
environmental governance that segregates all the
control from all of the creativity.

Notwithstanding these occasional agonies, how-
ever, the growing availability of all this recent
history can only be welcomed. One has but to
follow the slapstick coverage of high-profile devel-
lopment projects in the popular press to be made
aware of still how limited is the public discourse
of post-war architecture in Britain. The architectural
investment of half a century is reduced to a few
stars, villains and isms, (vide: the Daily Telegraph
letters column.) The conscientious narration of con-
temporary building practice as an unfolding story
conditioned by a myriad social, economic, technical
and legislative circumstances is rarely attempted
outside the confines of academic scholarship;
where the products generally remain. Perhaps the
challenge is too daunting, or the task not regarded
as a necessary one. It seems there is no architec-
tural equivalent to the tradition of accessible yet
informed literary criticism, which comfortably
occupies whole sections of the British media. The
critical toolbox deployed in judging the Man
Booker prize is universally understood, however
controversial the outcome. By comparison the
deliberations of Stirling Prize juries still sound like
critical baby talk.

The controversy that continues to surround the
listing of post-war buildings provides more of the
same kind of evidence. ‘Ugly brutes or cherished
heritage?’ ran the title of a recent public debate
on this topic, sponsored by the Twentieth Century
Society itself—apparently summarising the current
state of play. The words ‘modern’, ‘concrete’,
‘tower’, ‘estate’, et al. remain potent media catcalls
with a toxic connotation that will take decades to
erase. Anyone who routinely attends meetings of
their local planning committee will be familiar
with this parody of environmental democracy that
can make the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party appear more
like the court of King Solomon. Meanwhile the
interventions of our own prospective king, exploit-
ing an easy means of recruiting popular support,
have served only to polarise a situation in which
ignorance of the circumstances in which buildings are commissioned, designed and built is compounded and empowered by a sense of critical entitlement. As one despondent observer recently suggested, the relationship of modern architects with the British general public currently resembles that of an out-of-tune orchestra with a tone-deaf audience.

Yet to underestimate the popular interest in local history and the built environment is to commit an equal caricature and risk further alienating the very support that is needed in healing old wounds. Contrary evidence can be summoned. One need only witness the avid participation in Open House weekends to sense the public appetite for real architectural experience. The National Trust’s acquisition of the modern houses of Erno Goldfinger and Patrick Gwynne has created a trail of enthralled visitors. High-profile restorations of Modern Movement buildings extend this nascent interest still further. The Guardian recently devoted a whole page to the salvation of Finsbury Health Centre: Britain’s pre-eminent 1930s’ modern building. London now has its own Architectural Biennale. English Heritage has embraced the need to address ‘historic’ modern architecture. Another publicly funded agency, CABE (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment), will defend modern design if it accords with its perception of quality. And alongside all this is the work of such bodies as ICOMOS, DoCoMoMo and the Twentieth Century Society itself: which surely promise increasing popular traction with the modern story.

With the twentieth century receding behind us it is perhaps possible to hope that the overdue task of cultivating a less partisan more accessible understanding of its architecture may become more feasible. And with understanding may eventually come appreciation. This new series of studies is another important step on this long and arduous road.

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Notes and references
6. Open House London, is now renamed Open-City: see openhouselondon.org.uk and open-city.org.uk/survey and related websites.
9. ‘Battle to save radical building that gave free health service 10 years before NHS’, Rachel Williams, The Guardian (13th April, 2010).