

# A “New Picturesque”? The Aesthetics of British Reconstruction after World War Two

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*In Britain during and after World War Two, public authorities were the most significant commissioners of new buildings and landscapes. As such, their impact on the ‘look’ of Britain was to be profound. This paper argues that British post-war planning was characterised by the search for a ‘new picturesque’ aesthetic: an attempt to bring natural characteristics into the city. This, its proponents believed, would enable reconstruction both to be ‘appropriately’ British and suited to the conditions of a social democracy.*

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*This paper argues that the government-sponsored celebration of Britain, the 1951 Festival of Britain, became a ‘new picturesque’ pattern-book. Festival exhibitions held across the four nations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were a culmination of discussions about reconciling the country with the city through planning that had started in Britain as early as the 1920s. Taking ‘the land and the people of Britain’ as their main themes, Festival exhibitions were the first public events where such a major attempt had been made to reconcile nostalgia for a pre-industrial landscape with the present through the landscaping of exhibition sites, pavilions and in guides and written commentaries.*

*Taking examples from 1951 Festival of Britain exhibitions, this paper will show how this ‘new picturesque’ was conceived and realised. At London’s South Bank Festival Exhibition, landscaping techniques were used which owed a debt to eighteenth-century garden layouts and stood as an example to architects working on ‘New Towns’ and new estates. At the Live Architecture Festival Exhibition in London’s East End, a new model estate was built. Low-rise housing was built of indigenous materials, clustered round churches and common land that tried to transpose country villages, renamed ‘neighbourhood units’, into the city. The design of Festival of Britain exhibitions answered the demand for a new aesthetic, which reflected the social democratic ideals of the post-war government. It imported elements from the countryside into the city in order to transform the ‘ugly’, blitzed and ‘scarred’ ‘face’ of Britain.*

In Britain during and just after World War Two, public authorities were the most significant commissioners of new buildings and landscapes. As such, their impact on the ‘look’ of Britain was to be profound. British post-war planning was characterised by the search for a revived Picturesque: an attempt to bring characteristics developed in the English landscape into the city. This, its proponents believed, would enable reconstruction both to be ‘appropriately’ British and suited to the conditions of a social democracy. The concern of originators of the English eighteenth-century ‘Picturesque’ precepts had been with enhancing the visual qualities of wild, natural places. These mainly constituted areas of private country estates. By asserting control over these places, they sought to enhance already inherent natural qualities. By contrast, the twentieth-century revived or ‘new’ picturesque impulse concerned the development of a practical aesthetic for reconstructing places predominately in

public ownership across Britain. It tried to reconcile, in visual form, the self-image of Britain as a rural nation, with a landscape that had dramatically been transformed by modern roads, buildings, industry and war. This paper will show how the government-sponsored celebration of Britain after World War Two, the 1951 Festival of Britain, used this ‘new picturesque’ in its presentation<sup>1</sup>.

In order to make sense of debates about reviving the Picturesque for use in the twentieth century, it is important to explore briefly first how these ideas originated. The Picturesque way of seeing has, on numerous occasions, been claimed by commentators on English art as the nation’s greatest contribution to European visual culture. Writing on the ‘Genesis of the Picturesque’ in 1944, for example, architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner (1902-83) asserted the attitude to landscaping identified as Picturesque

FIGURE 1: A 'Typical eighteenth-century "landscape" setting' as identified by post war landscape architect Brenda Colvin, *Land and Landscape*, London: John Murray, 1947.



as 'The greatest English contribution to European architecture. It is one of the greatest aesthetic achievements of England'<sup>2</sup>. More recently, art historian Christopher Woodward has echoed this claim in his writings, arguing that manifestations of a Picturesque imagination can be detected in English poetry, painting and thought from as early as the 1660s, when antiquaries and poets were beginning to show an appreciation of the impact of ancient ruins in the landscape. Woodward comments 'No one "invented" the Picturesque. In retrospect, it can be understood as a confluence of philosophers, poets and painters whose ideas flowed in the same direction'<sup>3</sup>.

The multiple forms taken by this 'confluence' of Picturesque, in both written and applied forms, from diaries and novels, paintings, architectural and gardening schemes, and dispersed across more than a century make writing a history of Picturesque difficult. Despite the scattered formulation of these ideas through poetry, painting and philosophy, however, their original formalization into a written programme is most usually attributed to debates between two men: art collector and writer Richard Payne Knight (1751-1824) and the writer and rural improver Uvedale Price (1747-1829)<sup>4</sup>. Both were landowners of neighbouring Herefordshire estates, and both had been deeply influenced by their Grand Tour travels to France, Rome, Florence, and beyond. In 1794, Knight published *The Landscape: a Didactic Poem* in which he extolled the virtues of rough and 'picturesque beauty' of natural landscapes that he had seen in paintings by Dutch and Flemish artists and by Claude Lorraine. In his poem, Knight set the English landscape in a wide political and national context, making an implicit comment on the impact of the Industrial Revolution, French Revolution and Whig politics, and using the landscape as a metaphor through which he sought to define English democracy.

Published in the same year, Uvedale Price's *Essay on the Picturesque* celebrated both the local and the diverse within the landscape. His essay put up a defense against what he saw as the uniform planning practices of gardeners such as Capability Brown. The *Essay* set out to present ideas that could be adopted by others in their treatment of land in their control.

As cultural historian Peter Mandler argues, both Knight and Price's interest in the look of the landscape around them derived from their position as landowners<sup>5</sup>. The eighteenth-century Picturesque in what we might describe as its formalized manifestations was an aesthetic developed and controlled by those who owned the land, rather than by those who lived on it, worked on it, or visited it. Their focus was on asserting control over, and on enhancing the inherent qualities of places that appeared uncultivated that predominately formed areas of private country estates. By contrast with these manifestations of private Picturesque, the twentieth-century or new picturesque concerned the development of a practical aesthetic for reconstructing areas in public ownership across Britain. Its proponents tried to reconcile, in visual form, their image of Britain as a rural nation, with a landscape that had dramatically been transformed by modern roads, buildings, industry and war.

As in its eighteenth-century form, the twentieth-century new picturesque operated both in the realm of rhetoric and as an applied aesthetic. As rhetoric, it was linked by its twentieth-century proponents with claims to an indigenous national visual culture, with the existence of a 'genius loci' or character of place, and a tradition of linking democratic politics with the land. This situated it as both appropriately British and suited to the current conditions of a post war social democracy. In its aesthetic application, it

was promoted for its potential to create eye-pleasing arrangements of buildings in green space, its potential for visual variety and for creating scenic ensembles, in this sense mapping onto the word it derived from, *pittoresco*, or painterly.

To summarise the changed environment in which the Picturesque was adopted in twentieth century Britain, I use the phrase 'new picturesque' as shorthand. My term owes a debt to architectural critic Reyner Banham who argued that his phrase 'The New Brutalism' denoted an 'ethical' agenda, akin to a manifesto<sup>6</sup>. This 'New Brutalism', he said, was different from the existing phrase 'Neo Brutalism', which had served as a stylistic assessment, largely pejorative. Similarly, 'new picturesque' differs from the phrase 'neo picturesque', which has been used to denote a stylistic revival of Picturesque in the twentieth century for example by art historian Frances Spalding when describing painter John Piper's work. 'New picturesque', meanwhile, denotes that the reuse of Picturesque principles was in a deeper sense ideological: specifically, eighteenth century principles were being mobilised for use in the reconstruction of the British public realm after World War Two<sup>7</sup>. They were considered appropriate not only visually, but also because they correlated with political rhetoric and configurations of national identity.

So, how then did the 'Picturesque' come to be mobilised for re-use in the twentieth century? The revival of interest in the picturesque in the twentieth-century is linked with the publication of author and gardener Christopher Hussey's book *The Picturesque* in 1927. Hussey would describe the book as 'a pioneering venture in the field of visual romanticism'<sup>8</sup>, seeing in the principles 'a practical aesthetic for gardeners, tourists and sketchers'<sup>9</sup>. Hussey's interest in promoting and reviving the Picturesque was in line with his other beliefs in the need for a revived squirearchy as a way of safeguarding the future preservation of the countryside<sup>10</sup>. His interest in Picturesque revival was in line with its original use, and controlled by descendants of its originators.

A change in the way that the possibilities of the Picturesque were conceived from the early 1940s can be linked primarily with two key factors: first, growing dissatisfaction with the long-term impact of the Industrial Revolution on the topography of Britain and, second, the immediate impact of the Second World War on the landscape<sup>11</sup>. The war had taken its toll both

through the destruction of the blitz and also through the need to install new technologies and industries, to build new roads and to cut down trees in places that had previously been rural. The proponents of a revived Picturesque saw that it could be employed to enable a physical restructuring or in their words, 'healing', which would return beauty to 'ugly' and 'scarred' places. Improving the look of Britain would, its proponents believed, have a knock-on effect by improving national morale. New picturesque ideals were adopted during the second half of the 1940s in a number of official contexts. They were mobilised in government reports, in local schemes and by government agencies in their work, all of them united in their role in reconstruction work.



FIGURE 2: *Instructive contrasts made by Brenda Colvin in order to show the potential for what she termed 'new beauty': above, an 'unplanned nineteenth-century development. Industry and dwelling-houses together, with no open spaces' and below 'A modern group of workers' houses' where the architect AW Kenyon 'has made full use of existing trees', photographs from Land and Landscape, figs 90-91.*

Key to providing a regional planning context in which new picturesque ideas could thrive was architect and town-planner Patrick Abercrombie. His interventions in planning debates from the inter-war period were highly influential and his 1943 and '44 London Plans had set out blueprints for the re-planning of London after the war. Abercrombie was closely involved too with the policy of creating a green belt to limit development round London, with putting forward the idea of post-war new towns, and with the requirement that towns drew up a blueprint for future development. The idea of constructing communities on a small-scale that combined aspects of town and country was not by any means, a new idea. In Britain, the tradition could be traced back to the ideas of Ruskin, Morris and the Arts & Crafts movement, which sought to reform architecture using traditional building crafts and local materials. These in turn had spawned the garden suburbs and cities of the turn of 20th century. Influenced by these earlier developments both in his architectural work and subsequent policy thinking, Abercrombie would propose the village as the most productive community configuration. In 1926 he even went so far as to claim that England had invented the village<sup>12</sup>. His ideas provided a fertile context in which revived Picturesque ideals were coherent.

In guidelines setting out policy on new public housing, it is striking that a new picturesque was also strongly advocated as providing an appropriate look. For example, we can find it in HMSO Government Housing Manuals produced in 1949 and 1953, where the housing schemes cited as models took on picturesque elements such as an emphasis on dominant green space, preference for low-rise buildings often with pitched roofs and the role of vistas into and out of the building groups. Advice in the 1949 Manual, which covered both urban and rural schemes stated, for example, 'Where estates border open country or a park, the lay-out should allow the country or park to be viewed from within the housing area'<sup>13</sup>.

Beyond the design of new housing, this preference for pictorial values in public reconstruction work was also being debated in the emerging profession of landscape architecture. A key exponent of this debate was landscape designer Brenda Colvin, who worked on many industrial landscaping schemes and explored the idea of 'locating' beauty in order to 'use' it in her 1947 book *Land & Landscape*<sup>14</sup>. Claiming to be 'an examination of the latent causes of beauty', she called

for a strongly attuned philosophical aesthetic based on the sense of sight and not reliant on a sense of tradition<sup>15</sup>. This instinct to create 'new beauty' and to challenge 'ugliness' was not simply a wish to reverse modernisation<sup>16</sup>. Instead, Colvin suggested that people should learn a new 'discipline'<sup>17</sup> of looking that would allow them to see modern public utilities as beautiful, stating: 'Viewing objectively, judged by the eye alone, certain windmills and certain transmission towers in certain positions are beautiful: but the eye is influenced by mental associations and memories'<sup>18</sup>. This appreciation of new technology within the texture of the landscape was key to the new picturesque, which was mobilised in order to reconcile people and new structures in the landscape supplying national power, water or other collective needs.

Before gaining power in 1945, the Labour Attlee administration had set out a nationalisation programme, pledging to nationalise coal, gas, electricity, inland transport, iron and steel, and to 'work towards' land nationalisation<sup>19</sup>. Fierce Parliamentary clashes over nationalisation were a feature of the Attlee government until 1951, the year of the Festival of Britain, when they lost the election. In the context of these debates, Colvin's words of 1947 can be read as marking a significant shift towards the acceptance of a permanently changed landscape, following the restructuring of national industries. In *Land and Landscape* Colvin had also stated that: 'our power-stations, oil refineries, factories and water-works must take their place, in time with the pyramids, castles and temples of the past'<sup>20</sup>. For Colvin, where 'beauty' had previously been associated with the countryside and to have connotations of private ownership, to use her phrase: the 'pyramids, castles and temples of the past' that had been situated on private country estates, in the twentieth century people must be able to learn to find 'beauty' wherever they could in a land dominated by new public housing estates, power-stations, pylons and roads.

The most vociferous advocates of the adoption of a twentieth century Picturesque were the editors of influential architecture magazine, *Architectural Review*. The debate was introduced in the magazine most explicitly with a 1944 article<sup>21</sup>. This suggested that the Picturesque was a national visual form – a 'philosophy' - which the English could claim sole credit for. After all, the article stated, 'a national picture-making aptitude exists among us'<sup>22</sup>. George Orwell



FIGURE 3: Map of 1951 Festival of Britain Exhibitions and Arts Festivals, showing nationwide dispersal of events from Festival of Britain advance information leaflet, London: HMSO, 1950.

had strongly contradicted this highly contentious idea just three years earlier. In his influential essay 'The Lion and the Unicorn', he stated that 'The English are not gifted artistically'. But *Architectural Review* magazine continued to pursue their agenda with dogmatism, and by 1949 they had become strongly convinced of the need for a Picturesque revival publishing an article entitled: 'Townscape: A Plea for an English Visual Philosophy Founded on the True Rock of Sir Uvedale Price'. The subject was a recurrent theme in the magazine for the subsequent decade<sup>23</sup>. Although holding up Picturesque as part of a national democratic tradition, *Architectural Review's* contribution to the debate was not ideologically bounded in the way that Brenda Colvin and fellow landscape designers had been in favour of accepting nationalised utilities as a fact of modern life. It was, instead, principally about working towards a new visual economy to improve the 'look' of Britain, thereby enabling people to accept the changed world around them.

It was national post war reconstruction that provided a context for the revival of this so-called 'national visual philosophy'. However it is clear that what was claimed as a national look owed an enormous debt to the much-admired Swedish model for people's housing built within the conditions of the welfare state. The twentieth-century reuse of the Picturesque in Britain – the 'new picturesque' – was controlled by governments and public authorities and mobilised for application across the four nations of the United Kingdom governed from London. Its proponents considered the ideas to provide a look that also linked with a distinctive British brand of politics, suitable for reuse in a social democracy. The Picturesque, then, was produced by a controlling individual (in its eighteenth-century manifestation) or authority (in its twentieth-century one), rather than by consumers.

It was on this basis, then - the Picturesque an instrument for reconciling people with the world around them - that it was also taken up for use by the organisers of the Festival of Britain. It mapped closely

onto the Festival's organising concept of putting the achievements of the four nations of the United Kingdom on show, and nothing beyond national boundaries. The Festival of Britain – with its eight government sponsored exhibitions and 2000 or so other events and happenings, put the whole of the land of Britain (and Northern Ireland) itself on show and visitors were invited to make themselves at home, to: 'Climb our heathered hills; scan our landscape; visit our towns and villages; mingle with us at our work and play'<sup>24</sup>, making the country into a vast, extended exhibition site. Each Festival exhibition was stated as being about the Land and the People, linking topography of Britain with British national character, whether the exhibitions' focus was on industry or farming or anything else.

So how was the new picturesque mobilised within individual Festival exhibitions? I will look first at the impact on the Festival's London centrepiece at the South Bank. In a special Festival of Britain edition of August 1951, *Architectural Review* magazine made a triumphant announcement. That the Festival of Britain's South Bank Exhibition layout: 'represents that realization in urban terms of the principles of the Picturesque in which the future of town planning as a visual art assuredly lies'<sup>25</sup>. Claiming that the look of the South Bank Exhibition site was a very successful exposition of ideas developed in the magazine, it went on to detail the ways in which the exhibition site successfully used a Picturesque idiom. The South Bank site achieved its picturesque effect by departing from Beaux-Arts symmetry, which had been favoured in the lay-out of so-called 'great exhibitions' such as the 1867 and 1889 Paris Expositions – with their straight axes marked in this slide - which the Festival's designers themselves drew contrasts with<sup>26</sup>. Instead the Festival's designers chose an optic based more on informal, meandering circulation route around the site, marked on this slide by a red-dotted line. This aspect of the Festival of Britain owed a debt to Gunnar Asplund's highly admired treatment of the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition site, where pavilions had been set in a designed landscape beside a stretch of water. Gordon Bowyer, designer of the South Bank Sports Pavilion, confirmed that the picturesque impact was indeed in the forefront of its designers' minds. He recalls Director of Architecture Hugh Casson walking around the South Bank site with landscape designer Peter Shephard. Casson expressed delight when some of the planning alignments had been lost, producing a pleasing irregularity<sup>27</sup>. If the impact



FIGURE 4: *Geological samples, trees and plants brought to the South Bank site and assembled to recreate a river-bed and stone walls around the 'Origins of the Land' Pavilion, from Surveys, Vol. 1, No. 6, September 1951.*

of irregular pathways was claimed as a key design achievement of the South Bank site, it was made necessary by the site's relatively small area. It was 29 acres, by comparison with previous 'great' exhibition sites such as the 1939-40 New York World's Fair, which had covered 1,216 acres.

As the central Festival exhibition, the South Bank put the achievements of all of Britain on display through exhibitions of objects, text, photographs and artworks that told a British 'story'. But significantly the site itself, which had been specially converted to use for the purposes of the exhibition, also became a microcosm of the physical structure of Britain. The South Bank used trees, plants and rocks from various parts of Britain in its construction. Round the Origin of the Land Pavilion, for example, a dry stonewall was erected of rough stones, into which a 'bold natural outcrop' was built of Cumbrian stone, which we saw visitors sitting around in the film extract. South Bank landscape designer Peter Youngman recalled that by using these stones there was an attempt to recreate the geological features of Britain on the site, to put the physical features of the land on show<sup>28</sup>. Elsewhere, Derbyshire fossil marble, granite and many other types of British stone were used. The structure of the outside of the Land of Britain pavilion, where visitors entered

between rough stone-walls acted as a sign of the subject within, which was the geological evolution of the British Isles.

Some of these geological features were also used to achieve a straightforward visual effect. For example, at the South Bank, the Moat Garden was designed to look like a riverbed with large stones, smaller shale and water, surrounded by bushes and plants. Snaking around one of the café areas, it drew the eye into the immediate environment and away from the buildings closely neighbouring the Exhibition site just outside its barriers. While British stone was transported to the Festival's South Bank site for use in buildings, alongside the concrete and new materials that were favoured in the majority of building structures, special attention was also paid to planting. Semi-mature trees were transplanted to the South Bank in the autumn of 1950<sup>29</sup>. Trees had become more highly valued during World War Two as a result of the loss or removal of large numbers, making their replacement a perceived act of reconstruction in itself, as contemporary gardening manuals stated<sup>30</sup>. A paper instructing the South Bank's landscape designers on appropriate planting stated that this would be 'to attract the eye and stimulate the senses'. Showing that its designers were consciously

considering the site's debt to the eighteenth century landscape gardening tradition, designers were also told: 'The use of colour and plant forms should be in the spirit, though not necessarily in the manner of the 18th century landscape garden, which was designed to evoke emotion, and awaken dreams'<sup>31</sup>.

Beyond the landscape architecture of the South Bank, the Festival designers can also be seen employing a new picturesque in the model housing that formed part of these celebrations. The Lansbury Estate, the Festival's Live Architecture Exhibition, was co-ordinated by the London County Council (LCC) and built in a blitzed area of East London as one of eleven 'neighbourhood units'. The idea of 'neighbourhood units' had been put forward by planner Patrick Abercrombie in his London Plan as a model for structuring tight communities within larger planning masses. This was an idea he had adopted from US planner Clarence Arthur Perry<sup>32</sup>. 'Neighbourhood units' were essentially akin to linked village communities, a popular model for conceptualising London's future development as seen, for example, in Copenhagen town-planner, architect and sociologist Steen Eiler Rasmussen's influential 1934 study: *London: The Unique City*, when he presented London as 'a group of townships'<sup>33</sup>.



FIGURE 5: *The market place and shopping centre at Lansbury, seen from Chrisp Street, designed by Frederick Gibberd, with the clock tower providing a vantage point over the low-rise buildings surrounding it, model, photograph from 1951 Exhibition of Architecture guide, London: HMSO, 1951, p.14.*

The Festival of Britain's Director of Architecture, Hugh Casson, was to show a similar conception of London as a city of villages, in the narrative for the Brief City film he made as a valediction on the Festival of Britain, where he described London as 'a city of secret places, of unexpected country lanes and hidden gardens'<sup>34</sup>.

It was the village that was constantly cited in discussions of this period as a model of virtuous community and many planners such as, for example, Thomas Sharp in his 1946 *Anatomy of the Village* had shown their belief in the pre-eminence of the village as a community structure in the years immediately leading up to the Festival of Britain. Such planners sought to encapsulate the spirit of the village and to transfer it to new, urban developments. The attempts to imbue in schemes at Lansbury and beyond a local focus relates to wider attempts to create a sense of particularity of place even within entirely new, urban developments. Rather than focusing solely on well-designed architectural or landscape model spaces, the emphasis was rather on presenting a way of locating community 'feeling' within large, urban communities. In order to do this, proponents pursued the idea of locating 'character' or the *genius loci* imbedded in place, as had their eighteenth-century forebears. To create the particularity of place, a specific characteristic needed to be located, even in newly built or reconstructed places previously ravaged by war or industry. At Lansbury this was key to the LCC's instruction to architects to use in their contributions the slate, brick and stone that were native to that part of Poplar.

The way that new housing was laid out at Lansbury also reflects this imagination. For example, the houses at Pekin Close designed by Bridgwater and Shephard – who had been key to the landscaping of the South Bank Festival site - were a series of terraces of two-storey houses with tiled, pitched roofs each with gardens, set in a pedestrianised cul-de-sac (traffic was cut off from entering by bollards). These houses sat in the shadow of the newly built Roman Catholic Church of St Mary & St Joseph. The social housing at Lansbury achieved its aim of being an intimate village by setting housing in leafy areas, much with their own gardens or else immediate access to green space, predominately low rise and small scale. Access between different groups of houses was through a succession of green, landscaped spaces, which were closely integrated and acted like village greens.

The emphasis on creating environments for fully functioning communities in newly rebuilt areas was also manifest in the idea of 'mixed development'. This meant new estates could be 'mixed': peopled with a cross-section of age groups and a variety of groupings including families, couples and individuals. Festival architect Frederick Gibberd was a strong exponent, believing both in the need for a social cross-section and that mixed buildings produced an appropriate visual impact. He stated that 'buildings with quite different formal qualities such as blocks of flats, maisonettes and bungalows are needed to provide contrast' and 'variety' in the 'composition' of an area<sup>35</sup>. The impact of this idea can be seen in Gibberd's work at Somerford Estate in Hackney, 1947, at Harlow from 1951 and in the Festival's 'Live Architecture Exhibition' at the Lansbury Estate. The idea of 'mixed development' was used most notably – and to greatest picturesque effect - at the LCC's first development on the Roehampton Estate at Alton East, built between 1952 and 1955. Designed by the LCC's architecture department, Alton East set a mix of 11-storey point blocks, five-storey maisonettes and two-storey terraced houses among mature trees in a large stretch of parkland.

This preference for low-rise buildings on public housing estates was also seen at Harlow New Town. At Harlow, Gibberd's only high-rise building was the nine-storey point-block, The Lawn, of 1951. Standing, as it did, in isolation The Lawn was more akin to a viewing-tower that allowed a view down onto the Harlow Estate for those inside it, and a visual feature – like the 'eye-stoppers' used as landscaping devices - for those below. In the same spirit, Gibberd had inserted a clock and viewing-tower into his Festival designs for Lansbury's Market Place. As Gibberd explained, the clock-tower, which rises above the otherwise low-rise buildings of the market square: 'closes the long vista down the road leading to the square, and provides a contrast to the comparatively low shop buildings' and simultaneously closed the view to the desolate stretch beyond<sup>36</sup>.

The aversion to flats and approval of maisonettes and houses was related to deeper beliefs in what were seen as appropriate forms of British home. Flats, it was argued by several writers of key importance to British architectural and planning criticism, were a continental import that were at risk of being repeated without sufficient regard to the specific condition or character of the environment<sup>37</sup>. For example in

1941 influential town-planners Gilbert and Elizabeth McAllister launched an anti-flat diatribe, seeing flats as expensive 'folly', and representing: 'a deterioration of the standards of working-class housing only attained by a century of struggle'<sup>38</sup>. The endorsement of low-rise building by influential figures in the Festival of Britain can also be seen when we examine the schemes singled out as having special merit in the Festival's architecture awards. This scheme set out to stimulate the 'creation of beauty', which they claimed was 'an appropriate form of celebrating the Festival throughout Great Britain'<sup>39</sup>. Award-winning housing schemes included: Jury's Old People's Housing in Glasgow where single-storey dwellings were set among mature trees with steeply pitched tiled roofs. Recipients of Festival awards shared a common regard for the merits of small-scale building and domination by outside space.

So, was this 'new' picturesque, this British visual alternative, a retreat from aesthetic domination by international modernism or was it in fact indicative of wider cultural formations in post war thinking? In order to consider this question, we must think about the relationship between the Festival's designers and international modern architecture at the same time. Key to this, were two groups: the first, the British Modern Architecture Research Group or MARS and the second, the international modern architectural group CIAM, which had been formed in 1928. Several Festival designers such as Wells Coates, Jim Cadbury-Brown and Frederick Gibberd, were also prominent members of the MARS group. From 1947 the group was led by editor of AR magazine, JM Richards, who was at the same time at the forefront of the magazine's debate about promoting a revived picturesque. In his leadership of MARS, Richards shifted the group's direction away from its pre-war functionalist concerns towards his own interests in the aesthetic appeal of modern architecture to what he called the 'Common Man'. But the British contingent of CIAM were not isolated in showing such concerns.

As Eric Mumford shows in his history of the international architects' consortium CIAM, the group assumed a very different character after World War Two. War had limited opportunities for travel to meetings, meaning that groupings had splintered along national lines. At the same time, war had refocused CIAM's members on a more dominant social agenda. From its first post war meeting in 1947, discussions of CIAM moved away

from the 'functional city' model favoured in the 1930s until by 1951 – Festival year – the group were having discussions about creating the 'core' or 'heart of the city'. At CIAM's 1951 meeting in Britain, presentations from prominent British, Swiss, Spanish and Scandinavian members, show a developing concern with integrating landscape at the centre of urban space. But although the CIAM members often shared a common social agenda, there was not always a consensus about how to expedite this. This is particularly clear when we compare Le Corbusier's solution to collective living with his British contemporaries'. The form that his 'Unite d'habitation du grandeur conforme' or in translation: 'neighbourhood unit of the proper size' took was in stark contrast to the neighbourhood units we have discussed, designed by his contemporaries in Britain. In Corbusier's scheme the rough concrete slab block with its 337 duplex units sits alone in its 35,000 square meter site, intending to maintain family privacy while also containing collective services, such as day care centres. In the mixed developments of his British contemporaries we have already discussed, low and higher rise buildings were dotted over the contours of the site. Both share a common concern with building successful communities and providing collective services on site, but the way in which landscape was integrated into the schemes was very different. Across the many members of CIAM many other models for integrating buildings and landscape were also on offer.

The development of British housing schemes such as Lansbury, where low-rise housing dominated, was linked to a growing awareness of the need to make 'compromises' within post war schemes, in order to give residents what they wanted. This enhanced awareness had resulted from the impact of participative planning techniques<sup>40</sup>, the influence of voluntary workers who became involved in housing committees during the inter-war period<sup>41</sup> and the development of market surveys. And, as already discussed, from debates taking place within the international architects' group CIAM, all of which had shown that new developments would need to be a process of negotiation between those responsible for building schemes and those who would be inhabiting them. Whether this awareness of need for a compromise solution resulted in areas such as Lansbury being better suited to the needs of residents is hard to assess. Young and Wilmott's research from the 1950s, published as *Family and Kinship in East London*, focused on the social impact

of moving east London families from slum-dwellings to new housing in the early 1950s. Their over-riding conclusion was that old, dense communities were more effective than the new ones residents had been moved to<sup>42</sup>. As early as 1953, architectural critic JM Richards would castigate new towns as being places of community dysfunction, producing 'lop-sided and amputated suburban communities' in his article 'The Failure of the New Towns'<sup>43</sup>. Geographer Jessica Allen's recent PhD study of the impact of Lansbury on its new residents, concludes that they felt forced to accept new housing that was seductively modern and often at the same time isolated from friends, family and work.<sup>44</sup>

How long did this new picturesque episode continue? In 1951, a month after the Festival of Britain ended, the Clement Attlee's administration lost the election and a Conservative administration under Winston Churchill entered government. The new administration reversed many of Labour's nationalisation policies, including those affecting building controls. This led to an exodus into private architectural practices, where there was more design autonomy. But for several years after the Festival was over, architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner continued to defend a picturesque revival as a necessary element of British reconstruction. He countered the attacks of those such as art historian Basil Taylor, who had made three broadcasts in 1953 entitled 'English Art and the Picturesque'. In these BBC talks Taylor had mocked his contemporaries who were in positions of authority in the Arts Council and Council of Industrial Design for their picturesque tendencies, saying that Payne Knight and Uvedale Price would have been at home on the committees of such post war agencies<sup>45</sup>. Pevsner made the picturesque revival the subject of his 1955 Reith lectures in which a key strand of his argument – using developments such as Stevenage New Town as illustration - was that Picturesque ideas could still be used by contemporary architects, planners and landscape architects to reconstruct Britain.<sup>46</sup>

Looking back, design historian Reyner Banham would detect in the design of the Festival moment an unpalatable xenophobia. He described it as: 'an overwhelming demonstration of the superiority of the English Picturesque tradition over all other planning dogmas'<sup>47</sup>. More immediately, he would criticise the revived Picturesque as being utterly irrelevant to his contemporaries, relating more to the aesthetics of an

older generation<sup>48</sup>. The younger generation, whom Banham had seen as let down and ostracized by the dogma of the Picturesque revival was, in fact, his own generation – and those such as his friends the architects Peter and Alison Smithson who were also members of the Independent Group. But this post war rift between one generation of architects and the next was not only a British phenomenon. There was a broader feeling of unease about the direction that international modern architecture was taking and this would lead in 1954 to the creation of the new group 'Team 10', of which the Smithsons and Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck were key members. The group attempted to renew the connections between collective social transformation and an avant-garde architecture, while retaining the goal of urbanism, which had been absent in architectural discussions since World War Two<sup>49</sup>.

The contrast between the dominating new picturesque imagination at the time of the Festival of Britain is summarised neatly if we compare two building designs. First, architect Basil Spence's winning design for Coventry Cathedral and, second, young architects Alison and Peter Smithson's entry for the competition, both in 1951. Spence, then reaching the height of his career, designed a building that rose out of the Cathedral's ruins, set picturesquely in the landscape. It formed a vista from afar, being perfectly framed from the city's centre. By contrast, the Smithsons, then in their 20s, set all the functions of their Cathedral on a platform above the sloping site, in an anticlastic concrete shell. By doing so they created a building that sat above the landscape, rather than giving any illusion of becoming part of it.

To conclude: a 'new' picturesque aesthetic was mobilised after the Second World War in Britain and formed a particular focus for the design of the environment of the Festival of Britain. This had been made possible by the context of public reconstruction. Its impact was short-lived, for a number of reasons, firstly, due to the 1951 change of government and the subsequent reversal of many of Labour's nationalisation policies, including those affecting building controls. Secondly, due to the disillusionment that quickly set in with the key vehicle of new picturesque experiments, the 'new towns' building programme. And lastly, due to a new generation of architects that rejected, indeed ridiculed, the picturesque ideals of their forebears.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This discussion paper was drawn from the PhD 'Imaginative Reconstruction: Designing Place at the Festival of Britain, 1951', examined at the Royal College of Art/ Victoria & Albert Museum's History of Design department in 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, 'The Genesis of the Picturesque', *Architectural Review*, December 1944, p.139; repeated in *The Englishness of English Art*, London: Architectural Press, 1956, p.162.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2001, pp.119-121.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Ian Horton in his recent essay, 'Perversion of the Picturesque: English Architectural Aesthetics and Legislation, 1945-1965', in Hughes (et al), *Non-Plan: Essays on Freedom, Participation and Change in Modern Architecture and Urbanism*, Oxford: Architectural Press, 2000, draws parallels between the written formulation of picturesque by Price and Knight in the eighteenth-century and its translation into twentieth-century debates.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997, p.12.

<sup>6</sup> Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism*, London: Architectural Press, 1966, an expansion of his article of the same name in *Architectural Review*, December 1955, p.355.

<sup>7</sup> In his essay, 'One Continuous Interwoven Story (The Festival of Britain)', *Block Issue 11*, 1985-6, pp.209-220, Barry Curtis uses the phrase 'utility-picturesque' to describe the aesthetic of the South Bank Festival.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View*, London: Frank Cass & Co, 1927, foreword to 1967 reprint.

<sup>9</sup> Hussey, *The Picturesque*, p.66.

<sup>10</sup> This is something that he would make clear in his editorials for *Country Life* magazine.

<sup>11</sup> For discussions around the time of the Festival of Britain about the impact of industry see Humphrey Jennings' anthology *Pandaemonium* (compiled before his death in 1950 and published later by Andre Deutsch, in 1985); *FD Klingender's Art and the Industrial Revolution*, London: Paladin, 1972; (first published 1947). Films including those by Humphrey Jennings and others such as the 1951 Festival commission *Forward a Century* directed by JB Napier-Bell discussed the long-term impact of heavy industry on the land and social make-up of Britain.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Abercrombie, *The Preservation of Rural England*, 1926. This article would become the catalyst for the formation of the Commission for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) in 1926, which he was closely involved with, as chairman of its executive committee.

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Health, *Ministry of Health Housing Manual*, London: HMSO, 1949, with supplements *Housing for Special Purposes*, London: HMSO, 1949, p.35.

<sup>14</sup> Brenda Colvin was in private practice, working as landscape consultant for several power station schemes including Stourport (from 1952), Eggborough (from 1961), Drakelow (from 1963) and Rugeley (from 1963), as well as landscaping the new reservoir at Trimpley in Worcestershire and as consultant for the rebuilding of Aldershot military town from 1962. As cited in Hal Moggridge, 'Colvin, Brenda (1897-1981)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Colvin, Brenda. *Land and Landscape: Evolution, Design and Control*, London: John Murray, 1947, Foreword p.x.

<sup>16</sup> Colvin, *Land and Landscape*, p.145.

<sup>17</sup> Colvin, *Land and Landscape*, p.99.

<sup>18</sup> Colvin, *Land and Landscape*, p.99.

<sup>19</sup> As discussed by Robert Pearce in *Attlee's labour governments 1945-51*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp.53-60.

<sup>20</sup> Colvin, *Land and Landscape*, p.344.

<sup>21</sup> Hubert de Cronin Hastings, 'Exterior Furnishing or Sharawaggi: The Art of Making Urban Landscape', *Architectural Review*, January 1944, p.2.

<sup>22</sup> *Architect*, January 1944, p.3.

<sup>23</sup> *Architectural Review*, December 1949, p.354. The magazine later claimed to have coined the term 'townscape'.

<sup>24</sup> *Ulster Farm and Factory Exhibition Guide*, London: HMSO, 1951, p.29.

<sup>25</sup> *Architectural Review*, August 1951, p.71.

<sup>26</sup> Files give evidence of the statistical comparisons senior Festival officials were making with other major historic international exhibitions on everything from size of sites, to visitor numbers, to refreshments available. See, in particular, Peter Kneebone's collection at the Museum of London and Misha Black's files at the V&A Art and Design Archive. Festival presentation panel members also carried out site visits to other European exhibitions in the years directly preceding these events.

<sup>27</sup> Gordon Bowyer, in an interview with the author at Blackheath, October 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Professor Peter Youngman, in an interview with the author at King's Langley, May 2004.

<sup>29</sup> National Archives, Kew, File INF 12/ 255 (originating from the Central Office of Information).

<sup>30</sup> In his 1953 book *Modern Gardens*, Festival landscape architect Peter Shephard would also describe his conviction that trees could be used in a process of reconstruction, writing: 'there is hardly a town anywhere which has not some scar of industry or railway yard, gasworks or speculative building, which could be healed by the careful planting of the right trees in the right places'.

<sup>31</sup> File in the National Archives at Kew, INF 12/ 255.

<sup>32</sup> Term coined by planner Clarence Arthur Perry for the seventh volume of the *Regional Survey of New York and its Environs*, New York: Regional Plan Association, 1929.

<sup>33</sup> Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *London: The Unique City*, London: Pelican, 1934, p.29.

<sup>34</sup> *Brief City* produced by Richard Massingham, commentators Patrick O'Donovan and Hugh Casson, *Observer*, 1951.

<sup>35</sup> Frederick Gibberd, 'The design of residential areas' in *Design in Town and Village*, London: HMSO, 1953, Part II, p.24.

<sup>36</sup> Frederick Gibberd, *Town Design*, London: HMSO, 1953, p.170.

<sup>37</sup> Cecil Hunt in *Homes and Gardens* magazine, January 1951, p.9 stated, for example, that the 'quality of home' is found 'more often in houses than in flats'.

<sup>38</sup> Gilbert and Elizabeth McAllister, *Town and Country Planning*, London: Faber & Faber, 1941. This romanticised view of the development of social housing in Britain has been disproved by Alison Ravetz's recent studies of the 'enlightened elites' who were key to their inception, although

always achieved with working class support. See, for example, *Council Housing and Culture*, London: Routledge, 2001, p.6.

<sup>39</sup> File at the National Archives, Kew: WORK 25/ 44/ A5/ A4 4th Dec 1948, paper by Gerald Barry.

<sup>40</sup> For example, the influence of planners such as Max Lock who developed their plans for the County Borough of Middlesbrough, 1945, and for The Hartlepoons, 1948, with the participation of potential residents.

<sup>41</sup> As discussed, for example, by Elizabeth Darling in studies of the career of planning consultant Elizabeth Denby and by Alison Ravetz who has traced the history of social history in Britain in studies such as *Council Housing and Culture*, London: Routledge, 2001.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Young and Peter Willmott *Family and Kinship in East London*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, first published in 1954.

<sup>43</sup> JM Richards 'The Failure of the New Towns' *Architectural Review*, July 1953, p.28.

<sup>44</sup> Jessica Allen, *Contested Understandings: the Lansbury Estate in the Post-war Period*, PhD Thesis, Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London, 1994.

<sup>45</sup> Basil Taylor, three programmes for BBC's Third Programme on 'English Art and the Picturesque', November 1953, programme one, transcript p.7, held at the BBC Archives, Caversham. 'They would not' – Basil Taylor surmised – 'find much that would be strange, for the preferences of his generation have a surprising similarity to ours'.

<sup>46</sup> Pevsner's Reith Lectures were published in 1956 as *The Englishness of English Art*. Stevenage became the first designated New Town in 1946, opening in 1959.

<sup>47</sup> 'Effeminate and Flimsy', an essay he contributed to the book accompanying the 25 year anniversary of the Festival, Mary Banham and Bevis Hillier (eds), *A Tonic to the Nation: The Festival of Britain 1951*, London: V&A, 1976, p.193.

<sup>48</sup> In 'Revenge of the Picturesque: English Architectural Polemics 1945-1965' he discussed the irrelevance of Picturesque, an essay he contributed to *Concerning Architecture*, a compilation of essays dedicated to Pevsner and edited by John Summerson in 1968.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted by Eric Mumford in *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism*, 1928-1960, Cambridge: MIT, 2002, p.7.