

“FACADISM”

by Matthew Saunders

Every movement picks its own *bêtes noires*. For the Conservation Movement there are obvious enemies: the demolition and mutilation of historic buildings, the sacrifice of individual character to the cheap, the nasty and the standard. However a real sign of disfavour is the invention of a new-ism. Just such is “facadism”, as a word a ghastly hybrid but evocative of that which it denounces. Taken at its broadest sweep this is the external disguising of a new building as if it were old. It appears in three principal forms. Firstly, the clothing of a reinforced concrete or steel frame by a front elevation designed in an historic idiom intended to harmonize with an existing street scene. Secondly, the rebuilding of the facade alone as a “replica” or “facsimile” (normally this refers to one facade alone although there are rare examples when the complete shell of a freestanding structure has been rebuilt, as most recently at 2 Queen Anne’s Gate, Westminster where three internal rooms and a staircase were resited from the predecessor). And finally there is the retention of an original facade but the demolition of the interior and/or roof. The rebuilding of the Nash Terraces at Regents Park after the War epitomized this approach. At Savoy Chambers at Andover in Hampshire, a property of the mid-18th century (Plates 1 and 2), the Secretary of State upheld the view of the County Council at a Public Inquiry in the early 1980’s that the remains of the original facade as shown on the second photograph had to be incorporated within the new offices planned for the site rather than rebuilt in facsimile. All three manifestations are regarded, by purists within the Conservation Movement, as perversions. And yet all three are exactly the sort of architectural compromise forced generally on unwilling owners that results directly from the strength of the Conservation Movement and the legislation which it has pioneered since 1947.

Any blanket condemnation of the practice in absolute or philosophical terms would be on dubious grounds historically. Architectural history is a succession of pioneering leaps forward followed by backward looking rebirths or renaissances. The spirit if not the letter of the architectural Past is always being copied. The two great architectural languages, the Classical and the Gothic, enjoyed revivals in the 18th and 19th centuries respectively that conquered all of civilized Europe. Sub-currents produced less orthodox variants such as Neo-Norman and Neo-Egyptian.

The exact copying of artefacts has been greatly prized particularly from the religious point of view. Think of the many facsimiles of the statue of St. Peter in Rome, his foot advanced for kissing by the faithful, that were reproduced in the 19th century



(Plates 1 and 2)
Savoy Chambers, Andover before and after part demolition.

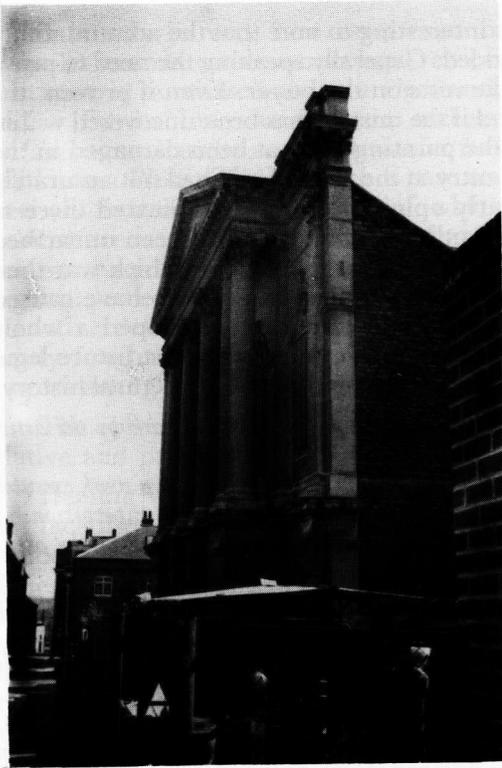
for distribution to Roman Catholic churches throughout Britain and elsewhere. Less wellknown but identical in purpose were the many reproductions of Bunyan's Chair turned out by Wells and Company in the 1870's for Methodist congregations. In architecture, there was demonstrable poetic symbolism in the "copying" of the Holy Sepulchre Church in Jerusalem around Europe in the form of the circular Templar churches. Many even now share Pugin's passionately held view that the only truly Christian Style is Gothic. Napoleon's proposed version of Trajan's Column for erection in Paris was to be a conscious evocation of Roman Imperial glories. The Arc de Triomphe that was eventually constructed after his death in 1840 in celebration of his victories established the same link in unequivocal terms.

It is hard to think of a single great Classical design—the Parthenon, the Erechtheum, the Tower of Winds, the Maison Carrée at Nimes or Palladio's Villa Rotunda that has not itself been aped, copied exactly or taken as general inspiration for many lesser offspring. The curators of 19th century museums, particularly that of the recently closed Museum of Classical Archaeology in Cambridge where every single exhibit was a plaster cast, clearly felt that copies were worthy exhibits in their own right even if only by default. The recent re-opening of the Cast Courts at the V & A demonstrates a revival in this belief. The present day campaign to rebuild Shakespeare's "Globe" also derives from the explicit belief that great literature, to be genuinely understood requires an authentic architectural context and backcloth. A rather more bizarre variant of this thinking persuaded the owners of the Forest Lawn Cemetery in California known as "Whispering Glades" to build an exact copy of the church at Rottingdean in Sussex, at which Rudyard Kipling was a regular parishioner, to serve as their chapel.

If facadism is taken in its more narrow sense of a concentration of architectural effort on the front elevation alone, this too is nothing new. The exteriors of the great country houses were about display, the announcement to the world of social status, assumed or accepted. "Queen Anne at the front, Mary Anne behind" is the rule rather than the exception. At Grimethorpe Hall, South Yorkshire (Plates 3 and 4), an otherwise unexceptional house of the late 17th century the unknown designer not only concentrated on the facades but chose to be "vernacular" on the one and "polite" and Baroque on the other. These exactly contemporary elevations could belong to different houses. The Victorian Non-conformist chapel at Northampton (Plate 5), like so many in its building type, was triumphant in its facade and meagre on the two sides and rear elevations. Many a timber-framed building was updated in the 18th century by an unashamed "facadism" that involved the tacking



(Plates 3 and 4)
Grimethorpe Hall, Yorkshire.



(Plate 5)
Chapel at Northampton.

on of a new and fashionably correct facade in brick or mathematical tile.

There are of course powerful and legitimate objections to facadism. Before examining these it may be useful to pass at a slight tangent to consider the world of paintings. In architecture copying may have been denounced at the worst as immoral and at the least uninspired and lily livered by critics such as Sir Nikolaus Pevsner and Ian Nairn but the copier does not face prison as his artist counterpart might do. To copy an easel painting with the intention to deceive for financial gain is a crime and the copyist becomes a plagiarist or forger. Strictly speaking a "replica" is a duplicate by the original artist of an original work of art painted by him and acknowledged as such. This is not illegal although Picasso enjoyed setting a riddle for lawyers by agreeing to sign with his own name a drop curtain painted for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes by Prince Schervachidze because he admired it so much. A copy by another artist, regardless of motive, is accurately termed a "facsimile". The brand of facsimile which is beyond the law is the "deliberate

forgery". Even here it is interesting to note that the accountability of the seller is not open-ended. Generally speaking the need to prove that a work of art is a fake rests on the buyer. Even if proven, the auctioneer will only refund if the mistake has been uncovered within five years of the sale, if the painting has not been damaged in the interim, if the catalogue entry at the time of sale had not accurately reflected accepted scholarly opinion or "fairly indicated there to be a conflict of such opinion" or the forgery had been unearthed using a scientific process unknown at the time or which was then "unreasonably expensive or impractical or likely to have caused damage to the Lot". The auctioneers have developed a whole language of qualification to cover themselves against future legal suits that has been only partly translated into architectural history:

"Attributed to . . ." *in our opinion probably a work by the artist in whole or in part.*

"Studio of . . ." "Workshop of . . ." *in our opinion a work executed in the studio or workshop of the artist, possibly under his supervision.*

"Circle of . . ." *in our opinion a work of the period of the artist and showing his influence.*

"Follower of . . ." *in our opinion a work executed in the artist's style but not necessarily by a pupil.*

"Manner of . . ." *in our opinion a work executed in the artist's style but of a later date.*

"After . . ." *in our opinion a copy (of any date) of a work of the artist.*

"Signed . . ." "Dated . . ." "Inscribed . . ." *in our opinion the work has been signed/dated/inscribed by the artist. The addition of a question mark indicates an element of doubt.*

"With signature . . ." "with date . . ." "With inscription" *in our opinion the signature/date/inscription is by a hand other than that of the artist.*

Such hedging of bets is necessary for forgers have now developed prodigious skills. The famous Hans Van Meegernen forged Vermeers before the War by baking and painting for several hours at 105° centigrade, cracking the surface by rolling it up and adding Indian ink and dust to the cracks. He was only found out when he confessed on being threatened with jail as a collaborator for selling a "fake" Vermeer to Goehring. The authorities still won and he was sentenced to a year's imprisonment for forgery (and died before his release). Tom Keating, tried and acquitted for forging Samuel Palmers, enjoyed a post-trial fame that led to his forgeries acquiring considerable prices at auction. The techniques of laser holography are now so developed that almost perfect copies are technically feasible. For some £250 original paintings can be photographed onto canvas and framed so expertly that everyone except the connoisseur is fooled.

It is only in very rare cases that mistaken attributions or facsimiles in architecture attract legal retribution. In 1977 the owner of a property purchased on the understanding that it was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens did sue successfully for damages on confirmation that the architect was in fact the gifted but far less well known Philip Tilden. Such a case stands out as exceptional precisely because the question of whether or not a piece of architecture is genuine or a fabrication rarely involves financial loss to any party. But for this fortuitous circumstance architecture might have been bedevilled and confused as is the world of art by Byzantine definition and verbal gymnastics. The arguments are mostly fought out at Public Inquiries, and in writing, without lawyers acting as seconds.

The objections to facadism are absolute and philosophical and relative and pragmatic.

Dealing with the first group, there are frequent complaints that facadism reduces architecture to "stage scenery" like those cardboard street scenes created for Western film sets. The facades of the Bank of Scotland in Princes Street, Edinburgh (Plate 6), and the tower of an otherwise demolished Victorian church at Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire (Plate 7) look uncomfortable in their new contexts. The stranded blocks of sandstone from the demolished Exchange at Chester (Plate 8) appear a mere architectural souvenir rather than an intelligible building.

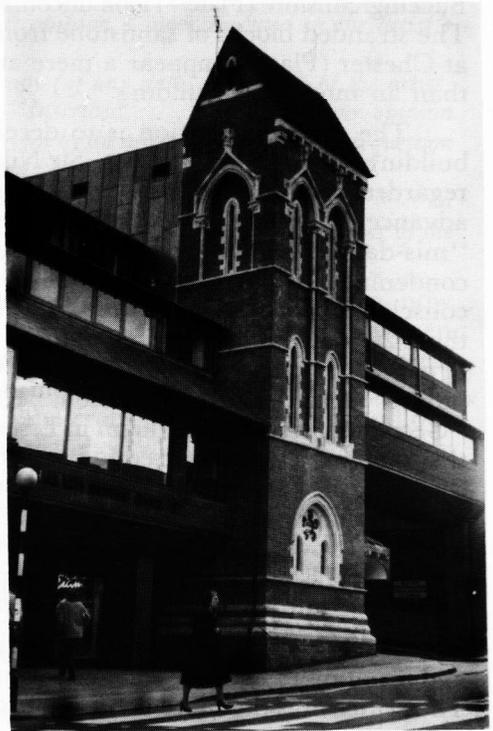
The second objection is to deceive, the attempt to make a building appear what it is not. Sir Nikolaus Pevsner in particular regarded it as praiseworthy where a building was clearly "in advance of its time". In that sense he welcomed what he termed "mis-dating". However by the obverse of that argument he condemned in absolute terms the copying of past styles, being consciously "behind one's time". He had little sympathy too with those 20th century architects building in a Classical idiom not out of perversity but because they felt the Classical language to be the purest architectural expression. Raymond Erith's beautiful "Georgian" house at Dedham in Essex (Plate 9) looks so authentic that many are still surprised to learn that it dates from 1936. Such "keeping in keeping", such neighbourly good manners in such a beautiful historic town as Dedham needs far fewer defenders than more controversial reconstructions in otherwise largely modern contexts. The Welsh House in Northampton (Plate 10) is a complete reconstruction as part of a larger commercial redevelopment.

The third lament denounces facadism as confusing to historians and insulting to modern architects whom it implicitly undervalues. The criticism is the more damning because it accords exactly with



(Plate 6)
Former Bank of Scotland, Princes Street, Edinburgh.

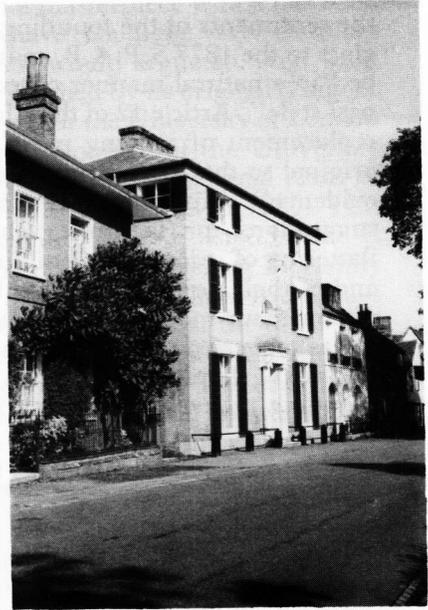
(Plate 7)
Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire.





(Plate 8)

Residual remains of the Exchange at Chester.



(Plate 9)

Raymond Erith's Georgian house of 1936
at Dedham, Essex.



(Plate 10)

The Welsh House in Northampton.

the sentiments of the founding fathers of conservation. The 1924 gloss to the 1877 S.P.A.B. manifesto urged that new work should be "in a natural manner of today . . . not a reproduction of any past style". Article 12 of the Charter of Venice lays down that "the replacement of missing parts must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence". And there certainly have been occasions where suggestions for facsimile rebuilding have been unnecessarily flattering of second-rate buildings which if they have come to the end of their useful life should be replaced in a confident but not discourteous modern idiom. It did seem unacceptably safe when it was suggested that properties in East Street, Taunton, Somerset (Plate 11) should be rebuilt in exact facsimile as part of a larger shopping redevelopment, in 1983.



(Plate 11)
East Street, Taunton.

But what do you do when it is a masterpiece which has been lost? Was it wrong, nay immoral, to have rebuilt the Wren churches in facsimile after the War? Very few would argue so. And what do you do where a building was not finished by its original designer for whatever reason? It is surely correct for the University of London to have completed the Gower Street frontage of the University College in 1985 in full correspondence with the original plans of the 1820's and '30s. A more difficult case arose in 1980. This concerned Denman House in Piccadilly of 1903, listed Grade II (Plates 12 and 13). It abuts Norman Shaw's towering Piccadilly Hotel, one of the great buildings of the West End. Shaw had always intended to construct a second gabled crosswing at the other end of the huge screen but delay had led to the disposal of the site and the construction in its stead of Denman House. The suggestion in 1980 was that the latter should be demolished and Shaw's unbuilt gable constructed in its stead. The planners took the view that the existing building was a structure of value in its own right and listed building consent was refused. When it was decided to redevelop Coutts Bank in the Strand in the 1970's the decision was taken to reverse the considerable rebuilding of the 1860's when the principal centrepieces had been rebuilt in a stone-faced Italianate style. The central space facing Charing Cross Station was left as a recessed sheer glazed wall whilst those on the return elevations were rebuilt in the original 1830's idiom. (Plates 14 and 15).

Philosophical objections are redoubled when the replica is loyal to form but not materials. Was the rebuilding of the mid-19th century public house in Ludgate Hill, City of London (Plate 16) completed in early 1985 vitiated by the fact that the new render was applied not as originally to a brick skin but to a reinforced concrete frame? Were the owners of the Grade A listed Grosvenor Hotel in Glasgow of 1855 correct in rebuilding the very impressive Classical frontage in 1979, after destruction by fire, using glass reinforced concrete (grc) because of the inordinate cost of repeating the stucco? After all history again shows that "honesty to materials" has not been steadfastly adhered to. Stucco itself is a simulator (normally of stone). Greek Doric forms, particularly the mutules and triglyphs of the entablature are facsimiles in stone of originals in wood.

Perhaps the most convincing arguments against facadism are relative and pragmatic: that it is rarely done well. It would be hard to tell that the whole of the terrace at Angel Place, Edmonton in the London Borough of Enfield (Plate 17) was rebuilt in the early 1980's particularly as the bricks have been "sootwashed". So often rebuilding loses all the subtlety or refined detailing of the original and the junction with the return elevation is unresolved. In the

words of Morris and Ruskin the results qualify only as ‘lifeless forgeries’. The retention of facades whilst the remainder of the shell is rebuilt has led to collapse on a number of occasions. Moreover it is clear, particularly from the case of the Queen’s Hotel, Micklegate in York, that once a facade has been demolished planning authorities find it immensely difficult to insist on rebuilding even where this has been an explicit condition of the grant of consent. The site of the Queen’s has now been empty for ten years despite a condition attached by the Secretary of State that rebuilding should be begun within six months of demolition.



(Plate 12 and 13)

Denman House, Piccadilly juxtaposed with Norman Shaw's Piccadilly Hotel.



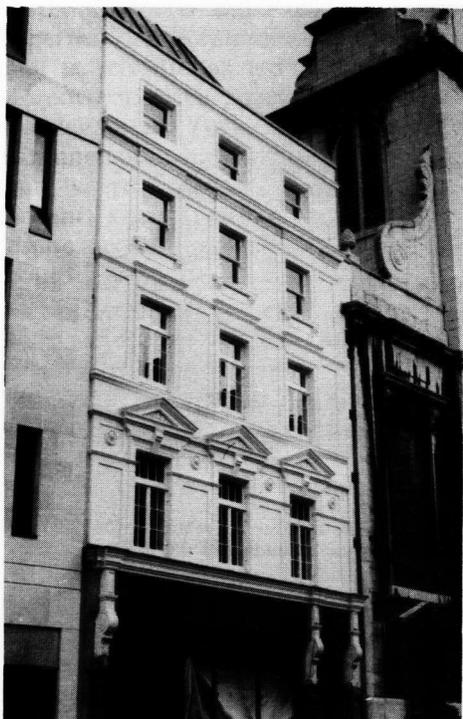
(Plate 14)

Coutts Bank, The Strand: The central section of the 1830 terrace rebuilt in 1865 and itself replaced by a recessed glazed well in the rebuilding of the 1970's.



(Plate 15)

A return elevation of Coutts Bank, The Strand where the 1865 rebuilding was replaced by a reconstruction of the 1830s original.



(Plate 16)
19th century public house in
Ludgate Hill rebuilt entirely
in 1985.



(Plate 17)
Angel Place, Edmonton in the London Borough of Enfield which has been entirely rebuilt.