

Vernacular Revival and Ideology – What’s Left?

by

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This essay derives from a lecture first given at a Vernacular Architecture Group conference on vernacular revivals in 2015, reprised to generally younger audiences at the Bartlett School of Architecture and the University of Westminster. Its retrospection about vernacular architecture, anonymity, revival and left-wing ideologies was prompted primarily by a bemused awareness of recent advances in self-building. It seemed timely to try to get at how and why certain ideas retain traction. Then, coincidentally, young and old were recombining behind Jeremy Corbyn to reinvigorate Labour, and the self-styled design ‘collective’ Assemble won the Turner Prize. John Ruskin, William Morris, the Arts and Crafts Movement and Romanticism will arise (how could they not?), but only in passing, for a revisionist view of what has come since. It is taken as read that a strong commitment to architectural design as being rooted in labour and everyday or subaltern agency tallied with the emergence of socialism and was an important part of architectural thinking and history in late-19th-century England. This is an attempt to relate that history to the present in a new overview for a new framework. It adopts an unconventional or purist definition of what vernacular means that will clash with many preconceptions.

In a century and more that has seen the rise and fall of Communism, and the rise, at least, of neoliberalism, what has happened to the 19th century’s linkage of vernacular revivals with ideologies across a diverse range that for simplicity are here labelled ‘Left’? It may be that it is no longer meaningful to speak of the ‘Left’ as a unified cultural position. No less a seer than Paddy Ashdown recently said, ‘This is the era of individual choice and socialism cannot go there.’¹ But what is left? For those who wish to perpetuate aspects at least of ‘Left’ ideologies what now is vernacular and how is it being revived? There are many possible answers. This is no more than a join-the-dots exercise to describe one history of continuity, thinking more about vernacular production than about vernacular style.

Vernacular revivalism and Leftist ideology have co-existed more in parallel than in synchrony since 1900. There have been and still are right-wing or reactionary appropriations of the vernacular. The Right’s use of the vernacular, of a know-your-place or knowingly deceptive *rus in urbe* pre-lapsarian mythology is not the subject here, at least not until the end. The preservation of privilege has many uses for the vernacular which are left aside, important though it is to document this. There are also important international contexts, but for the sake of manageability the chronology here is almost entirely insular – ignoring the Right and sticking to Britain.²

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Emphasis on ‘revival’ does tend almost by definition to be reactionary – the word implies a bringing back of what went before. Revival of what? an imagined purer past? a ‘lifestyle’? just a look? Many of those who, since Morris, have held to left-wing analyses and been interested in things vernacular, resisted the *tabula rasa* or destructive aspects of Communism and were actually more interested in vernacular survival – holding on to what is good through a kind of cultural conservatism that is radically anti-capitalist, capitalism being society’s primary engine of change. They refused to accept the alienation of labour from architectural production.

So perhaps this is not about revivals at all. Against that perception, H. S. Goodhart-Rendel, following Ruskin on the fruitlessness of resurrecting dead architecture, pointed out that ‘you may speak of “reviving” the perishing but not the perished – you can revive a lost sheep but you can’t revive mutton’.³ If this is accepted, then revival is irrevocably to do with survival.

R. W. Brunskill, who did not buy vernacular revival as vernacular, wrote ‘it is hard to visualize any circumstances, short of the nuclear holocaust, which can possibly revive vernacular architecture in the country’.⁴ For him and others who have defined vernacular architecture as necessarily pre-industrial, the sheep is dead. If the vernacular is defined as necessarily local then he is probably broadly right. But is ‘local’ all that vernacular means? For the sake of argument, at least, and in order to consider ideology as much as architecture, it might be useful to set aside industrialization as an unequivocal watershed, and to be open to the possibility that the sheep is not dead, rather just lost and cold.

To account for something that is far from lost, it also needs to be explained that this history will neglect the well-trodden path explored in Fiona MacCarthy’s National Portrait Gallery exhibition of 2014–15 titled ‘Anarchy and Beauty’ – Morris, Arts and Crafts including C. R. Ashbee and his Guild Co-partnership in Chipping Campden, Garden Cities and Ebenezer Howard, up to the Festival of Britain. The intention is to trace a different and more recent lineage or inheritance that is linked, but less well known or successful.

An important background thread is the locus of agency in architecture – to whom should buildings be assigned? Are designers or users primary? It is a basic Marxist point that buildings, like all wealth, but unlike many other cultural artefacts, are collectively produced and privately appropriated. Vernacular revivalists from the Arts and Crafts movement onwards have striven to get away from professionalization. Design was not seen as the prerogative of the formally qualified. It was inextricably interwoven with labour the alienation of which from its fruits was to be avoided. But in many ostensibly sympathetic yet professional hands these ideals descended into nostalgic muddle. C. H. James, a garden-city architect and a disciple of Parker and Unwin and of Ashbee’s Guild, argued in 1924 that the services of an architect were ‘just as essential to the proper design of a cottage as to that of a mansion or town hall’, at the same time averring that the charm of old cottages arises from a ‘lack of conscious design’.⁵

To go back to basics as articulated by Ruskin and Morris, the decline of the vernacular such that it is perceived to need revival results in part from the abandonment of local materials and forms, but only in part. Another and arguably more important shift has been the professionalization of design. For at least two centuries architectural design has

been controlled by architects and planners employed by the State or by *rentiers* (bankers and speculative developers).

Another important backdrop, one that gets horribly tangled, is the class and identity dichotomy, whereby, and crudely, 'class' long signified urban workers and the left; and 'identity' in England signified rural 'olde England' and was usually favoured by the Right. On the class and unalienated labour side – Sidney Oldall Addy's *Evolution of the English House* drew on German precedent and cited Viollet-le-Duc to focus on England without being nationalistic. In a socialist analysis Addy concluded, 'The first links of the long chain of evolution which extends between the lowest and the highest forms of human dwellings were forged by the men who tilled the land and watched the flocks. It was they who fashioned and maintained the shapes which for so many ages prevailed both in the cottage and the palace'.⁶ This affirmation of subaltern agency recalls the original Romantic, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. 'The first person who, having enclosed a plot of land, took it into his head to say this is mine and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors would the human race have been spared, had some one pulled up the stakes or filled in the ditch and cried out to his fellow men: "Do not listen to this impostor. You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to all and the earth to no one!"'⁷

On the identity side, all might agree that vernacular houses in England should be English, whatever that means. Hermann Muthesius characterized English houses as expressing refined sobriety, quiet reserve and appealing honesty – 'These qualities are the legacy of old English vernacular architecture, whose simple sentiment, once reclaimed, is wed to the spirit of modernity in order to forge the artistic character that distinguishes the English house of today'.⁸ Or, Englishness plus modernity equals something like vernacular revival, or continuity, so survival. This identity siren was seductive and Neo-vernacular or Arts and Crafts architecture came to be seen in the early-20th century as forgetting questions of class in favour of identity, of being individualist in comparison with the collectivism (often Communism) of both International Modern and Neo-Georgian styles of architecture. From a left-wing standpoint vernacularism was broadly relegated to anarchist individualism, which, to understate things, was not powerful. For much of the 20th century for much of the Left good architecture was Modernism, from early Soviet Constructivism to High Tech, and the vernacular was reactionary. But at the end of the century the collectivist Left was floored, while the identity politics that seduced the New Left in the 1960s and 70s followed a destructively individualist and divide-and-rule path.

However, there were figures on the Left who held different lines, rejecting both identity-based revivalism and collectivist Modernism, holding the vernacular as what has gone self-sufficiently before, not what might dependently be. There have been many if mostly quixotic attempts to revive building with local materials, not addressed here in any detail, though without wishing to diminish their value. The focus here is on another kind of windmill tilting – resistance to professionalization, that is the revival/survival of non-professional, amateur, common or vernacular design.

At the risk of the kind of hero worship that has helped floor the Left two individuals now take the stage – James Maude Richards and Colin Ward. Richards was a journalist who, with more clarity than wit, John Betjeman nicknamed 'Karl Marx'. In the 1930s

Richards was writing about anonymity and the 'divorce of art as an individual achievement from art as vernacular expression'. He saw that the 18th century had a 'widespread vernacular', lost in the 19th century, and, adapting Le Corbusier and others, urged 'acceptance of the new impersonal vernacular that the machine art offers us'.⁹ After the war in 1946 he published *The Castles on the Ground*, the first critical publication in which inter-war private housing was taken seriously (Fig. 1). In Britain's suburbs Richards found 'a true contemporary vernacular', 'architecture of the people by the people'.¹⁰ Inter-war Neo-Tudor, mocked in the late 1930s by writers as far apart as Osbert Lancaster and George Orwell, has since found a number of champions.¹¹ Richards got there first.

As editor of the *Architectural Review* in the 1950s, Richards published a series of special issues on 'the Functional Tradition'. This was an important part of the promotion of what was dubbed 'Townscape', but it also placed great emphasis on anonymity and developed to explore an interest in comparative cultural anthropology. This was mirrored in Bernard Rudofsky's 'Architecture without Architects' exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1964. Richards held that the early socialist promise of Modernism had been betrayed by the architectural profession. The way back was to embrace vernacular design, to let architecture be whatever people made it. For Richards vernacular architecture expressed the interests and the aspirations of 'the people'. He did not disavow Modernist ideals and held on to the idea that professional architects had a 'specialist contribution' to make. The intellectual and the vernacular could be made to combine in an approach that has recently been dubbed 'vulgar modernism'.¹²

Colin Ward was a product of London's Essex suburbs, and a conscript during the war who became a contributor to the anarchist newspaper *War Commentary*. During and after the conflict he also worked for the architect Sidney Caulfield, which gave him a direct link to W. R. Lethaby, who had a great influence, and the Central School of Arts and Crafts, as well as to Hampstead Garden Suburb.

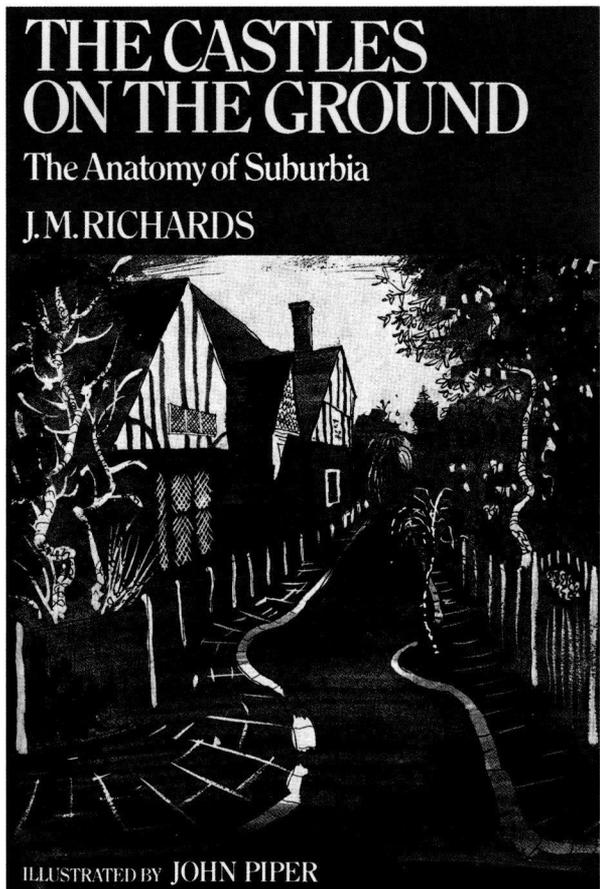


Fig. 1

J. M. Richards, *The Castles on the Ground*, 1946.

Ward then went to work with the Architects' Co-Partnership, Shephard & Epstein, and, in the early 1960s, as director of research for Chamberlin, Powell & Bon, architects of the Barbican Centre – he also had strong links to Modernism. In the 1970s, Ward was education officer for the Town and Country Planning Association, founded by Ebenezer Howard as the Garden City Association.¹³ Anarchism and planning may seem at odds. Reyner Banham, Paul Barker, Peter Hall and Cedric Price thought as much in 1969 when they published 'Non-Plan: an experiment in freedom'.¹⁴ But the best-laid non-plans go awry; their brand of anarchism was, notoriously, taken up by the libertarian Right in the 1980s.¹⁵ In a passage Ward would surely have approved, James Meek has written, 'When you strip the state of its duty to make long-term plans, or denigrate the practice, you don't liberate citizens from planning, you make them subject to the private plans of others'.¹⁶

Throughout, Ward was very much not a part of the conventional Statist Left. His anarchism developed through his role as the founder editor and main writer of the journal called simply *Anarchy* in 1961. The 97th issue in March 1969 was devoted to 'Architects and People', the cover explaining that 'ARCHITECTS are very busy, they have heavy responsibilities, they have to deal with planners and economists and geographers and surveyors and civil servants and committees and boards of directors and civil engineers, structural engineers and electrical and heating and ventilating and mechanical engineers and draughtsmen and model makers and perspective artists and material manufacturers representatives and estimators and quantity surveyors and cost accountant and filing clerks and secretaries and building contractors. They use up a lot of stationery and sometimes work with a set square and ruler. Eventually after a great amount of revision and compromise they get structures built, in which are put PEOPLE'.¹⁷

Ward wrote a great deal. There was *Housing: an Anarchist Approach* (1976), and *Arcadia for All: the Legacy of a Makeshift Landscape* (1984), a history of south-east England's plotlands – Dunton, Jaywick Sands, Dungeness (Fig. 2) and Peacehaven, the last thought by Ian Nairn and Nikolaus Pevsner to be the worst rash on England's countryside.¹⁸ Ward wrote about everything from Diggers to new towns, in *New Town, Home Town* (1993), as well as about the history of squatting with a return to plotlands in *Cotters and Squatters: Housing's Hidden History* (2004).

With enthusiasms that ranged so widely, from cottages on waste to planned new towns, Ward is hard to fit into a conception of vernacular revival that is essentially Neo-Tudor. He escaped the trap that has netted much revivalism. As Ken Worpole has written, 'He has never been seduced by the aesthetic of the picturesque, or rural arcadia, in which there are few, if any, people to be seen... Neither is he persuaded by the charm of bucolic coaching inns and red-faced men in pink hunting jackets. In his books on plotlands, on holiday camps, on the child in the country, he endorses Raymond Williams's delight in a "working landscape", where people find their own ways of settling into different kinds of landscapes and cultivating, building and earning an appropriate livelihood. Making and mending is what most people do best and what somehow always seems to cause the least long-term damage'.¹⁹

Colin Ward, who died in 2010, was an important social philosopher and ideologist about the meaning of the vernacular. His anarchism opened up many little-explored paths forward while also being forged through links back to Lethaby and the Arts & Crafts



Fig. 2

House in Dungeness, Kent.
Photograph, Sumita Guillery, 2015

movement. Lethaby aside, Ward was influenced by Kropotkin, William Morris (though not for his socialism – Morris did not countenance anarchism), Ebenezer Howard, Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford.²⁰

For Ward anarchism was not about revolution, but rather about something that was always already there, ‘like a seed beneath the snow, buried under the weight of the state and its bureaucracy, capitalism and its waste, privilege and its injustices, nationalism and its suicidal loyalties, religious differences and their superstitious separatism’, anarchism is ‘a mode of human organization, rooted in the experience of everyday life’ ... ‘the alternatives are already there. If you want to build a free society, the parts are all at hand’.²¹ This already-there-ness is nothing if not vernacular, and revivalist. Ward’s seed is like Goodhart-Rendel’s lost sheep – he likewise perceived that there can be no revival other than via survival.²²

An anarchist approach to the sustenance of the vernacular is adaptive not prescriptive, and at bottom is a matter of putting reception before intention. It thus stands in opposition to Ayn Rand’s anti-collectivist libertarian individualism as first and famously espoused in *The Fountainhead* (1943), the novel in which the architect Howard Roark refuses to compromise the purity of his intentions in the face of the perceived inadequacies of the world around him. The notion of the solitary architect genius is a powerful myth that has stuck to Modernism and its progeny, as well, through historians, to antecedents such as Inigo Jones and Edwin Lutyens.²³ Good architecture is still too widely understood as



Fig 3

Fishermen's net shelters in Hastings, Sussex.

Photograph, Eric de Maré, 1956, reproduced in the Architectural Review article on 'the Functional Tradition', September 1957. Reproduced by permission of Historic England Archive

a matter simply of realizing the intentions of a single great man, or (*pace* Zaha Hadid) woman. Not only is this not often how good architecture happens, it also suffers as an interpretational tool from what has been called the Intentional Fallacy in the context of literary criticism. A work of art exists independently of its maker's intentions and cannot be properly judged only in terms of those intentions. Of no art is this more true than it is of architecture.²⁴ From the moment they come into existence buildings are reshaped by their users, all the more so if the users do not share the designer's outlook, a situation Richards referred to as Modernism's 'hollow victory'. Following on, another related fallacy should be accounted for, the 'ethical fallacy' that Geoffrey Scott then David Watkin, from conservative, right-wing and Neo-Georgian points of view, saw as having dominated architecture from the Gothic Revival to the Modern Movement.²⁵ They pointed out in

effect that a designer’s concept of rational truth or honesty has no meaningful bearing on style or built appearance. Romantics, Gothic Revivalists, Modernists, all believed not just that there was another world to be discovered, but that they had found a way to build it. Others, like Richards and Ward, held that this other (vernacular) world is already here and capable of revival.²⁶

The study or recording of vernacular architecture is not the same as its revival, but if reception is to be put before intention it is vital. Much such study has been done from committed left-wing bases, whereby it has been implicit at least that the object of study has something to offer the future. Photographers, monarchs of reception, are natural vernacularists, often natively more interested in what is already there, what exists and how it is used than in design or intention and its sway. From Eugène Atget in France, to Walker Evans in the US, on to Bernd and Hilla Becher and their many disciples in Germany and beyond, great photographers have shown us what was always there that we failed to notice. The Bechers’ photography of industrial monuments presents ‘vernacular aesthetics’ that aspire ‘to detail a gasometer’s architecture as if it were a cathedral’.²⁷ Much of the photography in Britain that can be termed aesthetically vernacular has been gentler, for example Edwin Smith, whose work was the subject of an RIBA exhibition in 2015. He photographed Furlongs, the home of the painter Peggy Angus, a Communist Party member who had been married to Jim Richards. John Gay, a German immigrant, was similar in that his work was rarely lacking in sentimentality.²⁸ Eric De Maré, British born of Swedish parents, had links with Richards’s *Architectural Review* and its ‘Functional Tradition’ polemics, and photographed many vernacular and industrial subjects (Fig. 3).

Photography may seem something of a digression, though it does have importance in this context. To return to the post-war ideological milieu wherein Richards was such a vital voice, his perceptions were not wholly unheeded. Some architects did react against internationalism in favour of the regional in a critical climate that was a significant backdrop to the founding of the Vernacular Architecture Group in 1952.²⁹ That same year saw the launch of the journal *Past & Present*, which was to lead the way in the advancement of the study of social history. Among the founders there was a strong Marxist–Communist nexus, represented by Eric Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson and Christopher Hill, emerging from the Communist Party Historians’ Group, established in 1946. In its second year the journal published W. G. Hoskins’ ‘The Rebuilding of Rural England 1570–1640’. Left-wing history thrived and Thompson wrote a biography of William Morris, *Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955), and brought the phrase ‘history from below’ into prominence in 1966. With this bent and other works such as *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), edited by Hobsbawm with Terence Ranger, it might be thought that scholarly interest in the lives of ordinary people, in everyday or non-elite histories, would be congruent with an interest in things vernacular. But these eminent historians were not much interested in architecture, or even in buildings. In so far as they were, attention to what we now call material culture would probably have been dismissed as a Romanticised even quasi-Fascist matter of identity when their primary focus was on class. Raphael Samuel, who set up the History Workshop Movement in the 1960s and its journal in the 1970s, was the great exception to a lack of interest in vernacular architecture among left-wing historians.³⁰

These historians were influential for others who did look carefully at buildings. Eric Mercer, a Marxist contributor to *Past & Present*, and early member of the VAG, took the work of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England in a radically new direction with *English Vernacular Houses* (1975). As Sarah Pearson put it in an obituary, this book ‘pioneered the task of setting lesser secular buildings in their social and historical context’.³¹ Others in the Royal Commission continued to combine social consciousness with empirical recording of what exists out there, producing words and drawings that are analogous to the works of the above-mentioned photographers. An independent but powerful voice was that of F. W. B. (Freddie) Charles, a Communist who had worked with E. Maxwell Fry and Gropius before the war, who then, after moving to Bromsgrove in 1952, devoted his later career to expertise in timber-frame construction and that town’s open-air museum.³² Very many more VAG stalwarts since the 1950s have been more-or-less Left in outlook, an important part of a cultural difference with the discipline of architectural history that is only now breaking down. In part that has been thanks to another intellectual strand based at the Bartlett School of Architecture, where a different kind of attentiveness to the everyday passed from Reyner Banham to Adrian Forty and Mark Swenarton, whose *Artisans and Architects* (1988) deals directly with the Ruskinian tradition.³³

But these are critics, not builders. What of architects themselves? Ground that has been ably covered by other architectural historians is here trod lightly. In the 1950s and 60s early work by Jim Stirling, always a maverick, had a strong neo-vernacular streak, influenced by Richards’s ‘Functional Tradition’.³⁴ The Smithsons’ ‘as found’ aesthetic, whereby beauty already there was to give rise to ‘no style’, chimed with the ideas of both Richards and Ward. In the Neo-vernacular movement of the 1970s a number of architects reached back to the Arts and Crafts tradition via ‘Townscape’. The Essex Design Guide of 1973 influenced commercial vernacular revival in the hands of high-volume housebuilders, and from the late 1980s onwards there was Poundbury – patrician vernacular. Much of this, however socialist or patrician, however local its materials, is vernacular revival of the mutton kind, not what Richards or Ward would have regarded as any kind of survival.³⁵ This is abundantly clear in the intellectualized formulation of ‘critical regionalism’, a highly theorized endeavour to make the Neo-vernacular safe for the (Post-) Modernist Left. As Gevork Hartoonian has commented on Kenneth Frampton’s ‘Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance’, ‘the word critical in the title of Frampton’s text says something about his theoretical affiliation with Marxism. It also separates his discourse from any form of vernacular, sentimental or otherwise’.³⁶ Even neo-classicist right-wing fogeys evoked mutton-vernacular, as in Roger Scruton’s *The Classical Vernacular: Architectural Principles in an Age of Nihilism* (1995), a paean that lapsed back into ‘ethical fallacy’ from the other side. Raphael Samuel chronicled the ‘retro’ with fascination, and wrote a telling and more or less contemporary critique of the fake-ness of Neo-vernacular design in the 1970s and 80s.³⁷ This kind of design has not gone away, and now there is a new kind of fakeness, the pseudo or Neo-neo-vernacular, a kind of undead mutton. In 2015 Urban Design London boosted brick, as favoured by Boris Johnson, and ostensibly ideology-free architectural standardisation called ‘A New London Housing Vernacular’, actually more a wolf in sheep’s clothing than mutton.

The purpose of this essay is not to dwell on architects and their stylistic vagaries, but to concentrate on non-architects as agents of architectural creation. Echoing Brunskill, Colin Davies has written 'Architects, by definition, cannot do vernacular, they can only observe it, admire it and try to learn from it. It is the state of innocence from which architecture has lapsed irrevocably'.³⁸ To call the Neo-vernacular mutton is not to say that none of it is good, just that it is not reviving anything meaningfully vernacular. However, there have been some valiant attempts to contradict or at least mediate this.³⁹

Something of an exception should be made for Ralph Erskine, who pioneered the engagement of those who were to be housed as clients for council housing. Of Erskine's team working on the great housing project at Byker, Andrew Saint wrote 'Mention socialism and Erskine's lads will grow glassy-eyed and look the other way; but at Byker they have created the most practical socialism we have had in housing for many years'.⁴⁰

More important in this direction was Walter Segal, a refugee German architect who as a child during the First World War lived at Monte Verità in Switzerland, an alternative community with a strongly anarchist tinge. In the 1960s and 70s Segal devised experimental 'self-build' methods with a timber modular and dry-jointed structural system. These were intended to be flexible, cheap and simple for families to design and build their own homes, at first just one at a time. He broke through to a larger scale in Lewisham, where Colin Ward was instrumental. Ward had floated the idea of the 'Do-it-Yourself New Town' underpinned by approval from a planning authority (remember Ward was a planner). He persuaded key figures in Lewisham to take up Segal's approach on 'gap sites', provided families on the council's housing waiting list brave enough to build for themselves would be given priority. Segal Close (1977–82) and Walter's Way (1983–7) followed, just twenty houses, expressing both variety and unity (Fig. 4). Segal's system was never an answer to housing shortages and certainly not suitable for all, but it was inadequately exploited for primarily political reasons.⁴¹

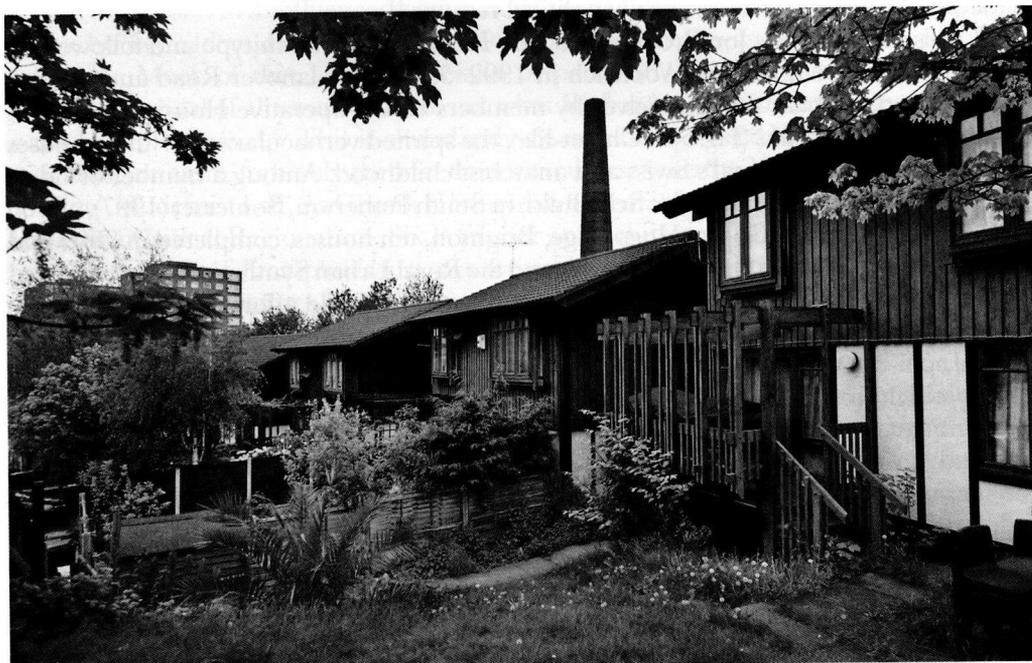
Lewisham disciples Jon Broome and Bob Hayes formed Architype and followed on with thirteen more houses in Woolwich in 1992–5, five on Llanover Road and eight at Parish Wharf, all built for themselves by members of Co-operative Housing in South-East London (CHISEL) (Fig. 5).⁴² Chalet-like, the spirited vernacularism of these houses seems to hark back to Segal's Swiss and anarchist childhood. Among a number of other Segal-based projects are Camelot Self Build, in South Petherton, Somerset (1997), eleven houses, the Hedgehog Co-op, Hogs Edge, Brighton, ten houses, completed in 2009 and featured on television on 'Grand Designs', and the Rural Urban Synthesis Society, founded by people who had grown up in the Lewisham houses to build affordable housing.

The Centre for Alternative Technology, established near Machynlleth in 1974, was a Segal spin-off, though with poorly constructed buildings influenced by the *Whole Earth Catalog* which from 1968 promoted a DIY paradigm in response to concerns about the environment that were not yet then 'Green'. Martin Pawley wrote *Garbage Housing* in 1975, advocating bricolage, or building cheaply with recycled materials. Self-building and the setting-up of intentional communities requires not just building skills, but first of all access to land, a major problem in a capitalist society. It has therefore tended to gravitate not just to rural areas but to the least inhabited margins. Wales was where sustainable architecture through the use of local materials and volunteer labour was also explored

Fig 4
 Walter Segal meeting
 a self-builder in
 Lewisham.
*Architectural Press Archive/
 RIBA Collections*



Fig 5
 Parish Wharf, Woolwich,
 built 1992–5, a
 Co-operative Housing
 in South-East London
 (CHISEL) self-build.
*Photograph, Derek Kendall,
 2010. © Historic England
 Archive*



by David Lea and Christopher Day.⁴³ A neighbour to Day in the Preseli mountains of Pembrokeshire, the architectural historian Julian Orbach, initiated a self-build low-impact project at Brithdir Mawr (big dotted place) in 1994. There Jane Faith and Tony Wrench built a roundhouse in 1997 (Fig 6), using local materials and giving it a low-pitch roof achieved through what is called reciprocal-frame construction. A planning battle and exposure in the *Daily Mail* brought the community some fame, or notoriety. It continues, though not without problems. Earth-fast poles rot quickly, they are now thinking about building with stone plinths.⁴⁴

There have been, of course, many other Green experiments in self-build sustainability in what is obviously an international movement. A shift in energy-efficient building away from such self-builds to so-called ‘passive houses’ has German origins, and the Swiss are especially strong on ‘New Vernacular’ as represented by Peter Zumthor and Gion Caminada, who have reputations for commitment to local materials and focussing on use not form.⁴⁵ There is also the Open Building movement, with Dutch origins. In England, many architects, including Sarah Wigglesworth, Jeremy Till, Peter Barber and Clare Nash, are mining a range of similar veins, sometimes pushing for revivals in vernacular technologies. Springhill Cohousing in Stroud is a self-styled ‘progressive’ intentional community of thirty-four dwellings, built in 2001–04. Deriving from a Danish model, it was planned, owned and managed by its residents, who included an architect, Harry Charrington, but was not strictly self-built, and depended on design input from Architype.⁴⁶

This rag-bag of projects fails to amount to much, either as a solution to a housing crisis or as an architectural movement. Small symbolic sallies is about all the Left can muster these days, and that has been true in politics as much as in architecture. Hipsterdom



Fig 6

The Roundhouse, Brithdir Mawr, Pembrokeshire, Wales.

Photograph, Tony Wrench, 2016

celebrates 'making', the 'artisanal', and Ruskin, and the 1970s DIY ideal has been subverted by what Murray Bookchin called 'lifestyle anarchists'.⁴⁷ It need not be accepted that this will remain forever true.

To revert to reception, mention should be made of a kind of vernacular revival of Modernism, a very English and Romantic attempt to reconcile tradition, nostalgia and historicism with progress and social advances, so, as ever, a revival that is actually about survival. There is now a widespread and growing appreciation of Modernism as a fact on the ground that has more connection to people and more democratic legitimacy than what has come since. Our own recent culture is as susceptible to ethnographic review as any other. This criticism, of which major exponents are Jonathan Meades and Owen Hatherley, avowedly of the Left, may not espouse vernacular revivalism, indeed Meades has said 'I detest folk art, folk music, folk dance – all telling the same institutionalised, self-pitying lie about oppression, all gormlessly utopian, all sentimentally humanistic',⁴⁸ but it does now heavily inflect Left perceptions of architecture. Architecture always does express class and power relations and its recent forms reflect a devil-take-the-hindmost society with a roughshod approach to planning and re-appropriation of public space that would have appalled Colin Ward.⁴⁹ Some of this late-capitalist and style-neutral architecture is Neo-vernacular, instances of reactionary subversions where 'look' stands in for substance. The neoliberal and Post-modern focus on identity as against class allows everyone to be pseudo-vernacular in different ways, and the cultural conservatism that values the vernacular, however defined, is always open to appropriation by coarse reactionary misinterpretation. Capital is the major obstacle to anything more genuine, but romantic utopianism will not die. As Vivek Chibber has rousingly shown in relation to some of the blind alleys of Postcolonial theory in academia, we need to throw the scales from our eyes to get over separateness in our identities and retrieve some of the fundamentals of Marxism to understand what is universal. The vernacular can be understood as being about a kind of identity normally overlooked by tribalists or nationalists, the simple binding identity of being human.⁵⁰

It is perhaps a measure of the weakness of the Left that six years on Occupy London seems like history. Its tents have already been historicized as vernacular architecture.⁵¹ It appears that this short-lived intentional community has not had any impact in Britain on anything that might be termed vernacular housing. In contrast, in the US, Occupy housing emerged through what was dubbed the Tiny House Movement – small developments of very small houses for the homeless. Quixote Village in Washington State was formed in 2013 to house about thirty people who had been living peripatetically in tents. Spearheaded by Jill Severn, a political activist-fund-raiser, architects were involved (Garner Miller of MSGS Architects), working collaboratively with a committee from the tent city. Similarly, Andrew Heben, a planner, rebounded from the Occupy movement to spearhead the building of Opportunity Village in Eugene, Oregon, and Occupy Madison (Wisconsin) crowd-funded a project to build similar wood cabins for homeless people.⁵²

Having introduced American experience, it is useful to refer back to Lewis Mumford, already mentioned as an inspiration to Colin Ward. In 1934 Mumford wrote, 'The creative life, in all its manifestations, is necessarily a social product. ... The essential task of all sound economic activity is to produce a state in which creation will be a common fact

in all experience’.⁵³ This recalls William Morris in *News from Nowhere* or ‘The Revival of Architecture’ – art should become so omnipresent that there would be no need to define it; beauty for all. They both argue that architecture should be a product of democratic design, not something imposed by any elite, but something of the general populace. Can that kind of vernacular architecture happen anywhere except at the opt-out margins? As Morris well understood, technology changes everything. Pre-fabrication, industrialized or system building used to seem antithetical to any understanding of the vernacular. But in a new machine age in which technology, big data, open-source hardware and 3D printing can permit anybody to design their own buildable house without reference to architects, it is possible to speak of the vernacular machine. Makers can trump designers and machine technology may after all be the route to a new and democratic world of vernacular production. This seems to turn Morris and Ruskin upside down, though building has almost never taken place without access to machines of some kind – abacuses, adzes and plumb lines are machines. Architects became necessary mediators when building technology and then regulation grew too complicated for other people to cope with. That may be changing as technology subsumes the complications.

An exhibition at the Building Centre in late 2014 investigated the impact of digital technology on the design of buildings. To quote from the content on 3D printing and customisation, ‘Digital manufacture offers an exciting prospect to increase housing provision, in which customers are able to customise and design their home using an online “kit of parts”.’⁵⁴ The WikiHouse concept offers an open source kit to allow ordinary members of the public to design, download, print and assemble a house with the aim of democratising production’.⁵⁵ Each house can be different (Fig. 7). And, as mentioned at the outset, Assemble, who aim to ‘address the typical disconnection between the public and the process by which places are made’ and to ‘champion a working practice that is interdependent and collaborative’,⁵⁶ won the Turner Prize in 2015.

So much, seemingly so positive. But it would be naïve to conclude without pointing out that self-build and related approaches are now, ominously, being facilitated by those who govern us in ways that tend to favour developers and business, putting ‘choice’, in practice narrowly constrained, before independence. A Tory council, Cherwell in Oxfordshire, has launched a 2,000 unit self-build housing project, Graven Hill, Britain’s largest, to form a new suburb to the town of Bicester.⁵⁷ And in 2014 the Tory–Lib Dem Government initiated a ‘Right to Build’ programme with £150 million to drive councils to offer as many as 10,000 plots to the ‘custom build’ market. Custom building, which has more in common with mail-order prefabs than self-build, and may even be a step towards a re-invention of leasehold speculative development, was emphasised at another recent exhibition, at the Royal Academy on the future of housing, where community self-builds by resident co-operatives were proposed, and Colin Ward’s idea of a ‘Do It Yourself New Town’ was also explicitly revived along with a plea for strong planning – recall the lesson of Non-Plan and that Ward was a planner as well as an anarchist. Richards’s ‘specialist contribution’ was implicit.⁵⁸

WikiHouse and Graven Hill may both seem dystopian, differently reminiscent perhaps, to revert once more to Goodhart-Rendel’s metaphor, not so much of dead sheep as of ‘Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?’, the novel that inspired *Blade Runner*

and its replicants. What would Ruskin and Morris think? Whatever they might have said about the architecture, they might have approved of the unalienated labour. There are obviously some major questions left hanging – access to capital? access to land? Indeed, as Fredric Jameson has said ‘in our time all politics is about real estate ... Postmodern politics is essentially a matter of land grabs, on a local as well as global scale’.⁵⁹ Perhaps libertarian and individualist opportunities, rather like free schools, are more attractive to the Right and liable to be yet further destructive of social justice and what remains of equality. To return to my title – what is Left? But these are political, not architectural, and scarcely new problems. Suffice it for now to say that a genuine revival of one kind of vernacular architecture, the achievement of which will not oblige people to flee to the rural margins, is a possibility.

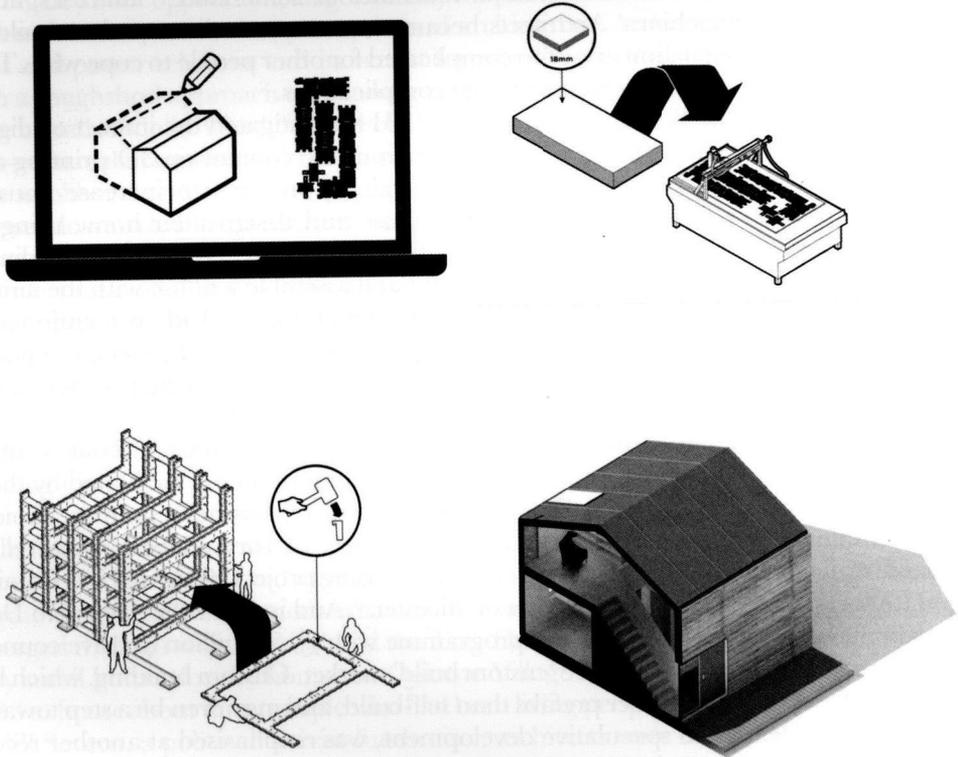


Fig. 7

WikiHouse.

Images supplied by WikiHouse Foundation

NOTES

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14. *New Society*, 20 March 1969.
15. I am grateful to Barbara Penner for this point.
16. *Financial Times*, 12 Sept. 2014.
17. *Anarchy* 97, 9/3 (March 1969), cover by R. Segar.
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