

Hidden Modernism in the World of Audit

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[auf Deutsch](#)

Ideas and opinions from some of our supporters

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Welcome to the World of Audit. In this world, every judgement that affects anyone - and what judgements don't - must be backed up with expert advice: the audit. This is a world where fairness, equality and discrimination are defined by experts, sometimes singly but more usually - for greater safety - in groups. Nothing is sacred. Quality, beauty and excellence must be pinned down with measurement and survey. In the World of Audit, no one dare make a judgement based on taste, preference or ideology.

Or do they?

The World of Audit has taken over our industry. It has, for example, led to the creation and proliferation of safety engineers. Life is intrinsically dangerous and there is no end to how it can be made safer. So building inspectors, health and safety inspectors, highway engineers and others have an unlimited future in ever finer reductions of risk. Once an audit says that something might be safer, there is no escape. No one dare overrule such a statement, however puerile, lest the one case in five million happens in this building, on that site or on this road. To the safety engineer, enormous odds do not mean that something is very unlikely to happen but that it will happen - albeit not very frequently.

The idea that the judgements of audit are not based on opinion and ideology is ridiculous. Levels of acceptable risk are an ideology. Every safety audit is only an opinion on the assessment of risk (more or less based on evidence). Claims of objectivity in audit are a smoke screen to avoid criticism, the lawyer at the enquiry or, worst of all, the judge in court.

So what hope have we for aesthetic judgement in the World of Audit?



Let there be no mistake, aesthetic judgement is already in the World of Audit. For my sins, I am perhaps uniquely qualified to speak on this subject.

I confess to the secret life of an aesthetic auditor. I began in the innocent playground of local architects' panels; this drove me for 12 years to more serious activities on the RIBA Awards

Committee; not satisfied with this, for 10 years I sat on, chaired and re-created the Faculty of Fine Arts of the British School at Rome (where I moved beyond architecture to the much more dangerous world of fine art); then I found myself on the London Advisory Committee of English Heritage (where I served a double term of six years); and now I am on the CABE [government Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment] Design Review Panel. But I have an additional qualification, which makes my experience unique. The vast majority of buildings (or paintings) that I have assessed positively are not to my taste, in my opinion are misguided and run wholly contrary to my architectural ideology. Just how sad is this?

It's pretty odd, but how did it happen?

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For those that don't know, I practice a once common but now rare form of architecture - traditional and classical design. There are very few of us, no more than 6 principal practices in the UK, about double that in the USA and as few as one or two in most European countries. We were always around but it was not until the 70s and 80s that we were given any house room and this was in the name of the morally righteous principle of pluralism - the architectural version of inclusivity. As I was one of the few of my fellow traditionalists who would have anything to do with the establishment that had for so long insulted them, I became the sort of Uncle Tom of the traditional movement, the seal of inclusivity on basically Modernist audits.

Sadder still.

As a result of this, I have become unusually sensitive to critical language. I was once described by a female fellow committee member as like a woman or a member of a racial minority: women can detect sexism when sexists don't know they're doing it, racial minorities can detect racism when people think they're behaving normally, I can detect Modernism when modernists just think they're talking about architecture. And from years of experience, I can tell you that architecture is institutionally Modernist.

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We all know that Modernism took over from Classicism as the establishment some 50 years ago. Much the same happened in all the arts. Nothing strange there. We all know that establishments protect themselves: they control institutions, they control the best jobs and they control education; it was ever thus. Modernism had to overcome this in the 30s and 50s; New Traditionalism has so far failed to do so. Differences of taste, preference and ideology are part of life in a free society and we should all accept it.

But then we have the planning system. The planning law is a specific limit on personal freedom, on behalf of the community - "the freedom to the enjoyment of possessions" (to quote the European Convention on Human Rights). Our planning system explicitly states that "Local planning authorities should reject poor designs" (PPG1, 17). So restrictions on property rights extend to an assessment of the quality of the design of new development. So now we enter the World of Audit.

Differences in taste, preference and ideology in architecture take on a new and sinister role when combined with the planning system. Suddenly it's more than debate and differing

views; it's a chance to impose taste, preference and ideology by the force of law. That's another matter altogether.

But, I hear you say, we're in the post 70s world of pluralism. Planning audit is not about style it is about quality.

Is it, hell!

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In the World of Audit, experts tell you the way it is. Of course, they're experts and they know better. Experts in the World of Audit are always the establishment. The establishment in architecture is, almost to a man Modernist. In fact, architects, almost to a man or woman are Modernist.

So established is this ideology that most who espouse it don't know they're doing it. Modernism can be defined as the ideology based on the principle that modern design, to be of its time, must differ obviously and deliberately from its predecessors and, in pursuit of this goal, novelty and innovation are stand-alone virtues. In this system, Modernism is beyond style; it is the inevitable way forward - like it or not. The idea that the promotion of these principles is stylistic is to deny the principles themselves. So, to support them is not a matter of supporting one style in favour of another, it is supporting an historical truth and truth in design is the first test of quality in design.

A whole vocabulary has arisen to support this viewpoint. Most important of the special words is the adjective "modern". This is shorthand for "Modernist". In fact, modern is an unavoidable state of being and, to the ordinary person, "modern" just means something quite recent, whatever it is. A similar adjective is "contemporary" and the issues are much the same.

My objection to this is often hailed as a case of advanced paranoia. (Persecutors always accuse the protester of paranoia). Why does it matter? It matters because, first, it deprives me of the opportunity to describe my work as modern (which it must be), second, it is so engrained in the profession that many have come to believe that it means the same to everyone and, third, it is a code which deceives the unwitting member of the public or committee member into believing that they are hearing fact rather than doctrine. When "high quality contemporary design" (Places for Living, Birmingham City Council Planning Department, p37) is called for, what the professional auditor means is "high quality Modernist design". It doesn't make sense any other way. If "contemporary" means literally just "existing at the same time as now" the phrase is meaningless: "high quality design that is being designed now".

There are a whole string of these words: "for today", "for the 21st century", "up-to-the-minute", "for modern living", "making the future", "for tomorrow" and, most seductively of all, "optimistic". Each word carries with it an implied and critical negative. Let's try it: "not for today", "for some period before our own", "old fashioned", "not for the way we live now", "not right for the future", "out of date before it starts" and, of course, "pessimistic".

Then there are the words that are baldly partisan: "innovative", "cutting edge", "honest", "honestly modern", "authentic" and so on. It is surprising, given the clear ideological basis of these words, how often they occur. Birmingham City Council calls for "high quality

innovative proposals", the Architecture Foundation supports revisions to the government's Planning Policy Guideline 15 (the Historic Environment) that discourage "new buildings that imitate earlier styles ... as this would devalue the authentic article".

There is, however, a much more worrying tendency coming increasingly from a more bureaucratised planning system. Many officers and their auditors have no compunction in defining design quality strictly in terms of Modernist ideology. I quote first from two planning departments:

"... this rigid adherence to the architectural style of a former era ... prevents the scheme from falling into the category of being of the 'highest quality' and 'truly outstanding in terms of its architecture'."

"Whilst pastiche* may be appropriate in some circumstances ... a more appropriate response to new development should be modern and innovative".

Here are two examples of the comments of advisory local authority architect's panels:

"... this proposal ... does not reflect ... the cultural period in which it is to be erected and ... does not advance the course of human endeavour in the arts and architecture."

"If only such skill and evident hard work had been exercised in preparing a scheme for an outstanding contemporary dwelling and garden! ... How is tradition to develop and advance if contemporary architecture is avoided or ignored?"

(In the interests of impartiality I have avoided any comments on my own buildings.)

I hope that everyone agrees that it is wrong for aesthetic auditors, as experts, (or, for that matter, councillors as decision-makers) to use their influence to force any aesthetic ideology onto the owners of property through planning law. The imposition of institutional Modernism is, to my perception, however, on the increase. This is, I think, due to the increasing bureaucratisation of planning, the conversion of more professional planners to Modernism but, above all, to the creation of the World of Audit. The World of Audit is in severe danger of creating an official style. Those who adhere to a Modernist ideology should be as much against this as those whom it seeks to exclude.

What can be done to prevent it? We are locked into the World of Audit for the foreseeable future.

First, we must be completely up-front and recognise the problem. I hope this talk goes some way to achieving this.

Second, it requires eternal vigilance. I was on a government's Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions' (DETR) sounding committee (another audit) of about 20 people and I was only one of two who objected strongly to this statement in several drafts of the "By Design" document. "Most of the places we now think of as being pleasantly distinctive were not built by copying some historic style of building" - what about Bath, Edinburgh New Town, Regent's Park, Bedford Park? I could go on. That raw and factually incorrect piece of Modernist ideology came dangerously close to appearing in a government document.

Third, we must develop auditing frameworks which look to the objective aspects of design assessment. There are two: CABE's excellent guide "Design Review" and the RIBA's "Guidance in the Preparation of Full Planning Applications".

Paul Finch in his introduction to CABE's guide is quite clear: "By good design we mean design that is fit for purpose, sustainable, efficient, coherent, flexible, responsive to context, good

looking and a clear expression of the requirements of the brief. ... What matters is quality not style".

The RIBA's guide (which I drafted) is brief and clear, the first words are "Adherence to these procedures will not create a good design - a good design can only be created by a good designer. The standards are intended to indicate the considerations that underlie most good designs". Locked into its stages 8 and 9 are the key principles: "Clear and demonstrable design principles or a design vision should be established. ... A design should be ... consistent throughout with the design principles or vision". An auditor does not have to agree with or like the vision but can accept it intellectually and assess how well the design lives up to the intentions of the designer. This requires discipline, detachment and decency. No auditor should be without them.

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