The English Genius for Townscape, 1850-1950

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Introduction

> . . . we in England once showed a natural genius - the genius of creating towns that
> nearly always have had a whole character; that generally have had pleasantness and
> seemliness; that often, even, have had a quite remarkable beauty; . . .
> Thomas Sharp, *Town and Townscape* (1968 9)

It is always flattering to be told you are good at something, especially if you did not realise
it. In Thomas Sharp's *Town Planning,* we learn that a hundred and fifty years ago there was a
strong and virile town tradition in England and that our towns used to be as fine as any in
the world (1940 16). And if that is not good enough we are amazed to read that:

> Paris, less than a hundred years ago was nothing more than a vast, squalid,
> insanitary huddle of narrow, crooked streets and tumble-down houses with a few
> bold squares and one or two magnificent vistas that had been vaingloriously
> planted on to it by a succession of dictators. . . whilst London as late as seventy-five
> or a hundred years ago, was a supremely civilised city.' (1940 18)

Sharp's message was patriotic, progressive and popular, offering consolation and hope to an
audience needing good news. Like many wartime writers, he put present misery into
proportion. He presented English urbanism as a great tradition temporarily lost, 'a fine,
singing, high-flying bird .. knocked to smithereens by two wretched missiles: one the
smothering dough-lump of the Romatic Revival; the other the iron-hard money-bag of the
Industrial Revolution' (1940 23). *Town Planning* became a best-seller for a readership who
were about to see their own urban world knocked to smithereens, and found in Sharp's
vivid neo-Georgianism a formula for its replacement. In it, and in subsequent works, Sharp
uncovered riches in familiar English towns built, as he put it, for no other purpose than to
house free citizens as comfortably and pleasantly as was possible. Even if the English town
tradition took a knock from the Industrial Revolution the beauties of our old towns are still
there if we care to look for them and we can do the same and better in the future.

These towns seemed to have a quality that was more than the sum of their parts and he
found it necessary to invent a new word, townscape, by analogy with landscape, for what he
saw. Townscape is therefore picturesque, although as Sharp is at pains to tell us not in a
quaint and irregular way.

> Each street, in other words, must be judged as a single composition, as a single
> picture. And the word picture is important here, for curiously enough it is on the
> question of picturesqueness that the traditional continuous street has generally been
> condemned of recent years. The very word picturesque has been vulgarised out of
> its proper meaning. Nowadays it is only applied to the quaint, the irregular. Yet
> picturesqueness is essentially the quality of being like or being fit to be the subject of
> a picture. A picture demands, composition, unity, balance . . . (1940 92-3)

Sharp showed townscape using plain black-and-white photographs. He avoid artiness; no
use was made, for example, of long lenses to flatten and naturalise, or of wide angled

perspective. His photographs resemble snapshots taken with the camera positioned as a pedestrian would see things and look natural except in one respect: in them we see England artfully arranged without the car. In *Oxford Replanned* only one in five pictures includes a car or even a bus, and then often it is only peeking around a distant corner [1]. This is despite the fact that much of that work is concerned with how Oxford can deal with motor traffic.

Sharp's images seem today to possess an otherworldly quality that goes beyond what England used to be like early on a Sunday: the photographs resemble the landscape of post-apocalyptic science fiction novels popular at the time. They are rather poignant, in them we see empty streets ready for us to walk down in our imagination where round the corner almost anything might be waiting for us. Parts of Oxford were this year returned to this romantic condition of primitive beauty for the film of Philip Pullman's novel *The Golden Compass*. Roads were cleared and masked with grit, signs taken down and for a few moments we could see the Oxford of Thomas Sharp.

Figure – Oxford in 2007

That is not to say that he was unrealistic about the car. After all, he wrote the *Shell Guide to Northumberland*, was deeply concerned with the design issues of petrol filling stations and was of course willing to sacrifice Christ Church meadow and the entirety of lower Exeter for traffic by-passes. Like Sir Patrick Abercrombie and Sir William Holford and the other great mid 20C exponents who brought town planning to the forefront of public imagination,

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[1] This elimination of the car occurs in an even more extreme degree in Gordon Cullen's *Townscape* who as late at 1961 contrived matters so that less than one in twenty of his photographs include a car *Townscape* contains 668 drawings and photographs, only 31 show motor vehicles, when they do occur they are old fashioned and in the distance. He evidently uses old photographs, indeed sometimes shares those of Sharp, e.g. Town & Townscape 148 = Townscape 48. Of the 154 photographs in *Oxford Replanned* , 33 feature cars or buses.

Sharp was a moderniser (Pendlebury 2004). His clients were municipal councils grappling with practical problems. The building cycle had left the fabric of towns and cities largely untouched since Queen Victoria's reign, and the consensus - blitz or no blitz - was that they should be remodelled for the era of welfare democracy and mass consumption. Sharp brought to this process a peculiarly deep knowledge of the layout and massing of villages and market towns in rural England, never better displayed than in the 'Buildings in Landscape' chapter of his 1932 book *Town and Countryside.* In it he found the basis for a truly English school of visual urbanism, preindustrial and pre-Romantic, based on pleasant streets of comfortable buildings, without architectual bravura or monumental effect, places 'designed for living in'.

Our paper takes a critical look at this English townscape ideal from two perspectives. First we examine Sharp's narrative of the picturesque tradition in English architectural history. And secondly we ask what the townscape school meant for architectural practice - the design process, the communication of ideas, and the professional formation of architects and town planners. The whole paper is an interrogation of that opening quotation from *Town and Townscape* about natural, national genius..

The Englishness of English Townscape

We could begin thinking about English pictorial tradition with that most distinctive national school, the landscape watercolourists. Practitioners such as Thomas Girtin, J R Cozens, Samuel Prout, Richard Bonington, Thomas Shotter Boys, and the Fielding brothers were townscape painters too, as much at home in urban topography as in natural landscape. Their street scenes were often from continental Europe, capturing moments on the tourist itinerary - Marcia Pointon's account of *The Bonington Circle ... 1790-1855* shows how frequently these artists crossed the Channel. But they also made many images of towns at home, celebrating their place in the landscape canon. It was a curious branch of art. Dressed in their top hats and frock coats the painters would make their sketches in the hubbub of the busiest streets. They were acutely sensitive to townscape effects - enclosure, perspective, axial views, skylines, great buildings seen over lesser rooftops, ornamented monuments set against humbler regional vernaculars. If their paintings flattered local pride they also -- collectively - gave unprecedented painterly attention to regional architecture in its immediate setting of public streets and places. The connection is strongest in the work of John Ruskin, a consummate landscape artist, author of the best-selling *Elements of Drawing* (1857), and the 19C's most influential architectural theorist.

Ruskin was sent to Copley Fielding at a young age to learn the craft of watercolour washes (Pointon 1985 145). His images of the built environment were not only remarkable as works of art - Sir Kenneth Clark described them as 'some of the most beautiful records of architecture ever made' (1967 352) - but also the basis of a aesthetic that was liberating, contemporary and peculiarly English. It was Ruskin who encouraged architects to break away from the canonical harmonies of the classical tradition and be painterly in their designs of the building's 'wall-veil' or expressive skin, its external façade. Doctrinally he was hard to pin down, but in terms of practical effect he was, as Joe Mordaunt Crook writes, the original latitudinarian, whose
>   celebration of Romantic criteria in art - freedom, creativity, originality. subjective, imagination - had, paradoxically, released the Victorian architect from the incubus of historical orthodoxy. (Crook 1987 97)

Ruskin taught the architect to work from close observation of old buildings, first from photographs and then in the field, always working through the action of drawing and painting (Saint 1983 34). Every detail of building and context held lessons: 'if studied closely and well there is a not a single corner of a street which would not be beautiful' (Daniels and Brandwood 2003 49).

Ruskin's teaching turned a whole generation of young architects into townscape sketchers and watercolourists, cultivating the observation of detail and the sensibility for street

context which is Victorian architecture's outstanding legacy. According to his favourite disciple Alfred Waterhouse of Manchester, true picturesque architecture should grow so naturally from its site 'as to seem and be the inevitable building for the spot' (Crook 1987 97). This was a national tradition, part and parcel of the English cult of individualism and freedom of property. As Donald Olsen shows in *The City as a Work of Art* (1986) the public effects of townscape in great European cities were impossible in Victorian England. Here architects operated in an environment of commercial laissez-faire without any of the stylistic constraints imposed by the *ordonnances* of continental autocracy. Every building announced its client's line of business or staked a position in the battle for hearts and minds (Girouard 1990 191). However, they all jostled for attention within the common framework of the street wall (Scruton 1979 249). The Victorians were supremely adept at the (by definition) superficial art of facade architecture, as Nikolaus Pevsner recognised in his surprisingly appreciative contribution to Paul Ferriday's *Victorian Architecture* (1963 32). Their townscape skills helped at every stage of the process. Sketch books were mined for picturesque detail; perspective renderings helped to win commissions and competitions; once a building was completed it too could be painted in context, an outstanding example being Alfred Waterhouse's Royal Academy diploma work. And this pervasive practice of art helped to define the status of the 'art-architect' and justify his creative autonomy and professional fee.

Victorian eclecticism and picturesqueness had their day. By the end of the century the relationship between architecture and townscape was entering a new phase. The middle classes were deserting the towns as places for living. They wanted their city centres to be ordered and businesslike. The picturesque effects of the Victorians were already seen negatively as distractions from the proper formality of civic space. Thomas Mawson showed slides to the citizens of Bolton encouraging them to see ugliness in streets they might well have thought handsome. He recalled Ruskin's parable of the butterfly and the bee. The butterfly has more freedom but the bee has greater honour because it is subject to the laws of its colony or hive. 'The power and glory of all creatures and all matter consists in their obedience not in their freedom' (1911 28)

Architects looked to the emerging field of town planning as a medium to assert these values of civic orderliness through symmetrical layout and axial planning (Triggs 1909). However, they lacked opportunity to practice these ideals. In the fast-growing suburbs the English tended to combine Arts and Crafts cottage with formal Enlightenment layout, but these 'silly symmetries' (Sharp's phrase) needed little architectural skill and could be drawn on a plan by any municipal engineer. Beaux-Arts plans hybridised with vernacular architecture soon became a national stereotype (Girouard 1990 309). Raymond Unwin played a paradoxical role in these shifts of townscape thinking. On the one hand his *Town Planning in Practice - an Introduction to the Art of Designing Cities and Suburbs* (1909) expounded Camillo Sitte's concept of irregularly planned high density townscape, replicating the qualities of historic settlements. Continually reprinted, running to its eight impression by 1932, and richly illustrated [2], Unwin's text is a more effective exposition of townscape theory than any published in the 1940s. But on the other hand Unwin in his role of housing reformer and (after the war) civil servant was the leading exponent of open layout, low density, and the broken building line, principles that were to have the greatest impact on the pattern of suburbanisation - both municipal and private - in interwar England. Findlay Lyons, writing to commemorate the centenary of Sir Raymon Unwin's birth, commented mournfully on his legacy: 'the unqualified repetition of the Garden City's most superficial assumptions and layout artifices led to the disappearance of any urban building tradition, experience and experiment in this country' (1963 356).

However, the disappearance did not go uncontested. The phenomenon of development at a statutory 12 units to the acre attracted continuous architectural sniping.. As early as 1910

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[2] It contains 170 street plans, 130 street views, 18 urban panoramas, 16 street cross sections, 13 views of landscapes and gardens, 13 building elevations, 10 building plans, 9 town maps and 7 folding town plans at scales of 1;5,000 or larger.

Courtney Crickmer's excursion guide for the RIBA Conference trip to Letchworth deprecated the lack of dignity and urbanity in a new town of small houses on separate plots with varying roof lines. Soon afterwards Trystan Edwards emerged as one of the most constant and articulate critics of the loss of enclosure and street composition in twentieth century suburbia, beginning with two brilliant broadsides against the Garden City in *Town Planning Review* (1913). His 1934 pamphlet for *100 New Towns* written under the pseudonym J47485 (his service number) called for a national programme of town-building as a memorial for the dead of the First World War:

> One important effect of the hundred model towns would be to provide an example of urban development which is really urban and not the hybrid mixture of urbanity and rurality such as we see in so many of the housing estates laid out in recent years. It would be fully established to the satisfaction of the average man that in formations of continuous architecture, whether of streets or quadrangles, not only can he have housing accommodation exemplifying comfort and hygiene, but he may also be privileged to dwell in buildings more expressive of human dignity than are the vulgarly designed little villas against which the Council for the Preservation of Rural England and other cultural agencies have for so long been protesting' (1934 18).

The terraced streets of Georgian England, loathed by Ruskin and Morris, were extolled by Edwards and Neo-Georgian contemporaries as an ideal type for modern urbanism - compact yet spacious, simple but elegant. Edwards systematised their qualities in *Good and Bad Manners in Architecture* (1924), of which more below. He also expounded the importance of observation and drawing, co-authoring with Cyril Farey the 1931 text-book on *Architectural Drawing, Perspective and Rendering* which ran through several editions before and after WW2. The book includes some of Hanslip Fletcher's London townscapes as well as Edwards's own simplified and didactic drawings. He did not use photographs but many others were doing so to make similar points about the relevance of the Georgian tradition. As motor car ownership spread through the middle classes, so did the visual serene imagery of the market towns and coaching inns in the high-contrast black and white plates of J Dixon-Scott and the *Country Life* photographers.

They bring us back to Thomas Sharp's narrative of the fine, singing, high-flying bird of the English townscape tradition. The Victorian cities and their individualistic Ruskinian architecture were a dreadful interruption – part and parcel of the great smothering dough-lump of Romanticism and the iron-hard money-bag of industrial capitalism. Suburbia was another interruption. The authentic national tradition of urbanity was to be found in the Georgian street, reinterpreted for modern use. Steen Eiler Rasmussen, regularly visiting from Denmark, took that view of the English landscape tradition in *London - the Unique City* (1934). Nikolaus Pevsner, newly arrived in the country and alert for evidence of national character and *Zeitgeist*, did the same in an unpublished essay on the English Modern Movement interrupted by the outbreak of WW2 and only just brought to light by Bridget Cherry (Pevsner 2007), which finds the essential spirit of Englishness in the proportion, simplicity and regularity of late 17C and 18C brick architecture. So did John Summerson, whose *Georgian London* - originally lectures for the Courtauld Institute written but not delivered in 1939 - was the first scholarly narrative of the long tradition from the Restoration right up to its mid-19C demise 'in a profuse tangle of florid ends and stern beginnings, of complacence and criticism, cynicism and faith' (1947 279).

Summerson founded the Georgian Society but never argued for the tradition to be resuscitated for modern use. Poundbury would have astonished these mid-century admirers of the English Georgian tradition. Thomas Sharp was very clear about this:

> In speaking of street, square and crescent one is not, needless to say, advocating an imitation of the 18th-century streets that were so successful in their time. There is no need for us to *imitate* anything. We must express our own purposes in our own modern way (1940 104).

Sharp was not arguing for a historical design style but for a building habit based upon street architecture. The natural genius would find its new expression through the practice of town planning.

The Practice of English Townscape
Ruskin and Sharp both saw the English tradition in terms of a rupture - for one, the arrival of Renaissance classicism, for the other, the return of Victorian Gothic - and both saw their task in terms of recovery of lost principles and practices. What were these rules ?

Ruskin's thoughts these matters occur mostly in his *The Stones of Venice, Elements of Drawing,* and *Modern Painters*, in which his opinions are supported by many uncanny examples of drawings and buildings which obey his rules. He addressed the architect as a maker of buildings and disliked any formal theatricality of street design. He expounded many forceful rules of composition - the putting together of elements into one thing (1904 *15* 161). There was the *law of principality* by which artists should arrange their material so that one feature is more important than all the rest while others are grouped in subordinate positions, (1904 *15* 164). The rule is often illustrated by a cluster of leaves where one is larger than the others. He is insistent that it be used subtly, which is most easily achieved if the principal feature is larger than the other by a modest amount and if there are plenty of competing forms. In short there should be a hierarchy, but not too much. Another method of expressing unity in *Seven Lamps of Architecture* is the *law of repetition,* in which 'one group imitates or repeats another, not in the way of balance or symmetry, but subordinately, like a far-away and broken echo of it' (1904 *8* 110). This is found in the vocabulary of repeated forms found in good townscape, not all the same but too different either. *The law of continuity*; '.. an .. orderly succession to a number of objects more or less similar... most interesting when it is connected with some gradual change in the aspect or character of the objects'. Examples of this sort of continuity might be flanks of valleys or successions of clouds in which we see Ruskin's admiration for picturesquely varying series of objects. 'If there is no change at all in the shape or size of the objects, there is no continuity; there is only repetition - monotony. It is the change in shape which suggests the idea of their being individually free, and being able to escape, if they liked, from the law that rules them, and yet submitting to it' (1904 *15* 170-171). The picturesque variation in the irregular rhythms of old buildings echoed the intrinsic aesthetic of Nature.

Ruskin expounded these and many other laws with all the assuredness and fervour of his Non-Conformist upbringing. For every emphatic utterance there is another in some part of the 39 volume Library Edition equally emphatic in the opposite sense. As he himself recognised, in the architectural process he was describing something that cannot be described. He likened pictorial composition to composition in music and poetry, and was sceptical of design by rules, remarking that 'You might much more easily receive rules to enable you to be witty' (1904 *15* 163). Nevertheless, he did communicate a consistent underlying rule, which was principle of the architect as artist, steeped in careful observation of building and topography. As Gill Chitty puts it, he taught people to see the urban scene as a landscape - in modern terminology, an environment (Daniels and Brandwood 1989 50).

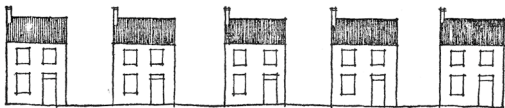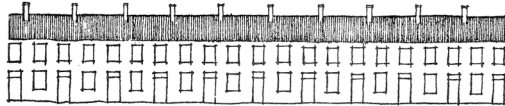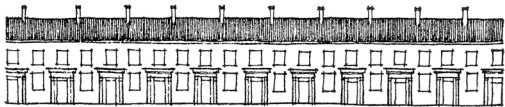FIGURE 26A

FIGURE 26B

FIGURE 26C

FIGURE 26D

Figure - Trystan Edwards 1925, 95. A,B,C,D.

STREET CONTINUITY AND DETACHMENT.

DESIGNED STREET CONTINUITY.

Figure – Thomas Sharp 1940

In historical reaction from the experimental spirit of Victorian street architecture, 20C urbanists sought different qualities – streets of visual coherence and geometrical order. French Beaux-Art formalism and American Civic Art had an all-pervasive influence. Sir Charles Reilly's fascinating essays on *Some Manchester Streets and their Buildings* (1924) criticised the decorative excess of Edwardian bank buildings which broke the integrity of the street wall. In the same year Trystan Edwards's *Good and Bad Manners in Architecture* asked how buildings behave towards one another, and contrasted selfish, presumptuous and rude buildings with those that have a fitting regard for their neighbours. In this allegory he found a way to understand urbanity as a society of buildings that are conscious of each other and whose true character is only fully revealed to us by mutual association. Edwards's approach leads easily to a theory of composition, for example, we can see that buildings ought to resemble each other and be different from each other at the same time. Particular rules appear: he dislikes gables on street frontages because they stand out, they are too assertive and individual. It is better to use rectangular shapes as they are suited to be fractions of a whole, (this is why Georgian is good), and so on. One of Edwards's illustrations shows how to improve a monotonous street (A), in three steps. Things are not really improved by detaching the houses (B), but get better when each house is dignified with bay and gable (C), and looking most interesting when all differ within limits of size and style (D) (1924 95). A version of this diagram occurs in Sharp's book *Town Planning* where he improves the gabled

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street by unifying it with a cornice and distinguishing the houses with porticos. The top row is monotonous, and the broken up middle row is little better - neither Sharp nor Edwards like the separation of suburban houses. Finally perfection is achieved in a street where each house is dignified by a portico so that it occupies a middle ground between unity and difference.

The quality of street composition is something perceived extensively not intensively, something apprehended in several buildings considered as a whole. Sharp says it is seen in movement, and used the expressions *kinetic experience,* and *kinetic eye,* (1968 43-44). It manifests itself best in curved or irregular streets in which there is continuous unfolding. This is why the High in Oxford is so good; it can be read in four ways, either pavement, either direction. So straight away we see that townscape will be difficult to represent because it may involve relations between buildings that cannot be seen simultaneously. To get round this difficulty Sharp uses sequences of photographs, a device later used to good effect by Cullen.

Townscape is not based on a quality that all the buildings share. Of course towns can be found that have been unified in this way, such as some continental planned examples or those where a single material dominates, but Sharp's examples of good townscape do not fall into these categories. What he admired in townscape is connected with the diversity of its buildings as well as what they have in common. Saying what makes them cohere is much harder than pointing out where thing have gone wrong, A lot of what is written about townscape is negative, we can see what is wrong even it we cannot say what is right. It can be spoilt by *disruption* (especially by motor cars and high buildings) and the sort of stupidities Cullen used to write about for the *Outrage* series in the Architectural Review. But a *via negativa* definition seems inadequate, because as Sharp points bad buildings can contribute to townscape (1968 44). This last point seems important because it follows that Townscape is more than a sum of good things. Buildings constituting townscape do not share an essence but form a society.

Berel Lang (1987) describing the ways that art objects can be said to have the same style finds that their similarities form a family resemblance class concluding that even though we may feel we can recognise style there is no single element which will allow us to identify it. He describes style as being like character, or a face that we recognise without being able to say in which particular feature its identity resides. An explanation of how this can happen is to be found in Michael Polanyi's theory of tacit knowledge.

> An art which cannot be specified in detail cannot be transmitted by prescription, since no prescription for it exists. It can be passed on only by example from master to apprentice. This restricts the range of diffusion to that of personal contacts, and we find accordingly that craftsmanship tends to survive in closely circumscribed local traditions. Indeed, the diffusion of crafts from one country to another can often be traced to the migration of groups of craftsmen, as that of the Huguenots driven from France by the repeal of the Edict of Nantes under Louis XIV. Again while *the articulate contents of science* are successfully taught all over the world in hundreds of new universities, *the unspecifiable art of scientific research* has not yet penetrated to many of these. (1958 53)

Our knowledge of something is tacit if we can show it by example yet not be able to explain it in words - so that we can recognise but not describe it. Skills like connoisseurship are tacit because they can be communicated only by example, not by precept. As Trystran Edwards continued to insist to an unsympathetic postwar world, the quality of architectural 'good manners' cannot be prescribed by rules, it must be acquired through practice and demonstrated in buildings which have urbanity (Edwards 1968 11-12) Polanyi gave an account of the influence of what he called the *tacit knowledge* principle in many fields of thought. Our knowledge of other people is largely tacit insofar as we can recognise and know them, but not explain just what it is we know to a stranger. In a similar way if we come to understand a town as a society of buildings then our knowledge of their character

may be tacit. In fact Polanyi points out that it is just those people who know a district best who are often worst at giving directions, such as the always unhelpful 'You can't miss it'. This is because their knowledge of their locale is tacit not explicit.

Conclusion

In this paper we have looked at two conceptions of the English picturesque, one individualistic and eclectic, the other ordered and compositional. The time-frame of the paper begins at the high point of Victorian laissez-faire and ends with the birth of the Welfare State, and the differences we have remarked in townscape philosophy reflect the spirit of those different times. From today's perspective the Victorian and Georgian versions of the English genius do not seem so incompatible. Both are embodied in our national history and the streets of our towns and cities, and both still offer models of urbanity and liveability to a 21C world in which these qualities have become even more precious and elusive than they were for Thomas Sharp. So the question is not which but how.

Thomas Sharp, in his optimism for collective planning, points to the postwar urban design movement, to design guides, CABE, design review, development frameworks, design codes, master-plans and all the panoply of the policy process. But prescription can never compensate for a lack of sensibility. It cannot kindle tacit knowledge or connoisseurship, and by definition it is no substitute for natural genius. John Ruskin's ardent advocacy of observation, drawing and environmental respect is still the better starting point.

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