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The C20 house - Trends for the Future

Twentieth Century Society, 23 November 2017

From a series of lectures held to celebrate the publication by Batsford of the Twentieth Century Society's 100 Houses 100 Years

Timothy Brittain-Catlin

This talk has one purpose above all others, which is to encourage all of you never to use the word 'traditional' again when describing recent houses of any kind. 'Traditional' is a word that was invented by planners, high street estate agents and the more hysterical kind of modernist critic, and it has no useful role to play in architectural criticism, and it has certainly done a great deal of damage.

References to earlier buildings in architecture are examples of history not of tradition. There's no reason to suppose that the current period is any different in that respect from its predecessors. When any architect who has taken an intelligent interest in buildings all their life is asked to design something new, the result is bound to reflect that. That much is obvious – but I want to go a little further and make the claim that when architects have consciously drawn on history, they very often come up with buildings that stand head and shoulders above the great mass of buildings around us.

History is not something that happened a long time ago – history can of course be last week. Generally, though, by 'history' I am talking about a period of time long enough past for there to have been some kind of critical appraisal of it in the meantime. It also means that the characteristics of that period are so familiar than the architect has had time to reflect on what they like and what they don't like. People tend to identify with different periods of the past in architecture for quite distinct reasons. So as it happens my first example of 'history' is going to be this one, Ken Shuttleworth's magnificent Winterbrook House.

What I am going to do this evening is show you how architects in recent years – the oldest example today is from 1992, but most are from the last ten years or so – have drawn consciously from historical elements of style. I have chosen six houses from our book, each one to illustrate a different historical period, and then I have found a few more examples from the work of the top rank of architects to show that these are genuine trends. In nearly every case, the architect has explicitly drawn on a particular type of historical architecture, entered it, thought about it, and re-expressed it with everything new that they had to hand. They may not have used the word 'history' themselves, but that is what they have done. You'll see also see that contrary to what you might think, there is a fabulous range of ideas in British domestic architecture, which is in many places profound and influential.

Historical Period One, then: Modernism. A young architecture student might describe Winterbrook House as being 'modern', because the success of the modernist critics was so sweeping that anything with white walls and big windows is called 'modern'. But here I am referring to the 1920s and 1930s, and the houses that appeared in England then. There's plenty we can say about the architecture of this period, and here are some of the most obvious of them: the architecture looked completely different to

what had happened before; it imitated the aesthetics of streamlined machinery; it made something out of the effects of electric light and new gadgetry; it did unexpected things with simple geometry as a way of trying to reestablish universal truths about the attraction of forms; it concentrated on the planes of the exterior surfaces instead of on the volumes of the walls; it tended to exaggerate the advantages of correct orientation, so that rooms very obviously face in different directions; and the more Corbusian ones made something of routes through the building, so that the route itself became part of the building – as did some earlier Victorian ones, and we’ll come to that later.

Now, those are historical attributes and they really are not applicable to the huge majority of boxy white houses called ‘modern’ that have been built since that time. But in the case of Shuttleworth’s house, every single one is, and yet the house still feels new and fresh. So he went right back to that early period, which I guess I could say was the time when his parents were young, and reinhabited those ideas. He took the circularising geometry which you can see in places like Frinton and did something new to it, turning it into two crescents which meet each other irregularly.

What I like about this is that circular plans tend to be so inconvenient that it is very hard to plan them internally, so I see this as going back and addressing a geometrical form that other architects – even Oliver Hill, never satisfactorily dealt with at the time. That’s why it is so gratifying. I hope you can see that what I’m getting at is not that architects have vaguely referred to the past – they have actually looked at precisely the same things and for the same reasons. In fact I know that the point I made about lighting is specifically true of Winterbrook, because Erco have used it to advertise their products. They also use this one – a terrific view of the back of the house, and that highlights a further point. When you go back into history you cannot help but reemerge with a view of the past which is coloured by everything you know about it since. This rear elevation looks to me like a reference to Eric Mendelsohn who was several miles ahead of his modernist rivals in terms of originality and creativity, mostly because he was able to express in his buildings a genuine sense of movement and light that most of them never could. That’s why his UFA building became the model for cinemas everywhere. And what I see in this view of Winterbrook House is a gesture to Mendelsohn, a way of leaving a lasting trace of someone whose massive influence on British architecture is never really appreciated outside the profession.

The Modernist architecture of the early and mid-century is not only white with big windows. There is what is called the Other Tradition, a Modernist term obviously, which generally means the Nordic one. David Kohn’s extension known as the Sanderson House was completed in 2014. In terms of the fabric of the building, he has drawn out elements directly from the work of Alvar Aalto, as he himself says. He has put one new wall up against an old one without any sense of merging the two together from the outside, and he has experimented with patterns in the brickwork and with broken gable lines in the way that Aalto did. The curved ceiling on the inside that wraps around the round window are interpretations of other Aalto features. For Aalto used not only round rooflights but, in his Villa Mairea, round lanterns everywhere. So you can see this window as a permanent lantern. To take a piece of expressionist mid-century rural architecture and to turn it into the kind of sculptural space that Modernism often talked about but rarely achieved, in the back garden of a London house, is a lovely move. David says that the clients’ children think it looks like a fox – I wonder whether the foxes that roam around London gardens think so too.

Historical Period Two: the 1820s. What are we doing here? Well, Andrew Saint always says that everything about our current world began in the 1820s, so it is at least as revolutionary as the Modernist period. And, I suspect, in British architecture rather longer lasting. There is so much to be drawn from the period that I’m going to split it into two: you might call them the Light and the Dark.

They overlap a bit and the distinction isn't entirely clear, but you will see what I am driving at. I'm talking about the reigns of George IV and William IV, and the tail end of the Georgian style which didn't gasp to a halt until Victoria was on the throne.

First, the light. That doesn't mean that there's anything light-hearted about it. I'm going to claim that the House for Essex, by Charles Holland of FAT with Grayson Perry, with which we close our book is essentially a late Georgian building. Here are two strong justifications for what sounds like an improbable claim. The first is that this is the great era of British ethnography – people are writing everywhere about who and what the British peoples are – what their epic stories are and what are the symbols we use to represent them. To give just one example, the writer Francis Palgrave, the father of the author of the *Golden Treasury of English Songs and Lyrics*, was publishing his seminal texts on English, especially mediaeval, history, all through the 1830s. These were properly researched accounts rather than the fantastical tales of earlier generations. Architectural writers are exactly in this period researching, drawing and defining historical forms of English architecture, and the very first reasonable attempts at building conservation come about as a result. John Britton's architectural and scientific surveys of historic buildings reach a very wide professional audience. People in this era are drawn to odd, what they would have called 'curious', ancient forms of buildings and start to try to interpret them: the one I'm showing you is the little church at Barfreton in East Kent, identified by Britton and scrupulously restored by R.C. Hussey in 1839-1842. I think you can see what I am getting at here – especially when you notice the little faces carved into the corbels.

The House for Essex was intended to evoke a wayside chapel, and the nave and chancel like-form clearly have echoes of buildings like Barfreton, as do the ceramic sheela-na'gigs. I suggested earlier that going back to history often means an interpretation through the lens of the time that has elapsed since, and I would say that Charles Holland is looking at a twelfth-century building rebuilt in the nineteenth from the perspective of the twenty-first. And that's where my second justification for aligning the house with the late Georgian era comes in. It is only in that period and in the 1840s, that the applied arts are revived. This is the world of colourful craft designed but mass-produced ceramics, including especially ceramic tiles and stained glass. Those things wouldn't have been possible when Barfreton was discovered and restored, but they are now. So the House for Essex it is taking the modern world back to the 1840s with a vengeance, also I think in the way in which it uses modern Essex motifs instead of the historical ones that researchers were writing about in the 1830s, and that's why it is such a powerful building.

I'm calling this first section of the late Georgian period 'Light' because in a way it is rational and optimistic: Britton for example described his historical work as 'scientific'. It is light in another way too. The early eighteenth century is the period of the cottage orné, and also the one in which the romantic pastoral idyll reaches a wide audience. I can across this when I was working on early nineteenth-century parsonages ten years ago, and what struck me was that before the gothic revival, architectural writers such as John Claudius Loudon wrote a great deal about the pleasures of comfortable, pleasant, genial building. It is an episode that was killed off by the Gothic Revival, whose protagonists never spoke about comfort at all, a weird legacy that has continued, along with their attack language of violent assault on buildings they didn't like, all the way through to the present day. When you look at it retrospectively you get a sense of gentle, wistful romantic comfort; the parsons, who by now would have had a classical education and read poetry, were clearly consciously recreating tiny versions of classical landscapes. This is the Teddington Folly, a recent project by Timothy Smith and Jonathan Taylor, which set out to capture that gentle classical atmosphere and which now that the foliage has grown up is succeeding very well in doing so. It's not possible to bring off this sort of thing

– and the detailing is excellent – without historical knowledge: you have to look at and know what our historical predecessors have done and to learn directly from it. I like the way that the exposed brickwork continues on inside the house in the form of a rustic-looking fireplace, so you have exactly that sense of the perfected simple-life cottage the Regency writers and architects very nicely set against a modern sense of what a sculptural brick fireplace should be like.

Historical Period Three is then the ‘Dark’ Georgian, again especially of the tail end of the era. Dark is intended to convey some sense of confusion or disorientation, which I emphatically do not intend as a criticism. We have illustrated in our book Ben Pentreath’s Woodland Crescent in Poundbury for a number of reasons. One of them is that he is amongst the best and freshest practitioners of a Georgian style working on housing at an extensive scale at present, and it is no good ignoring it. This is a design for a scheme called Royal Pavilion, now under construction, built entirely with eighteenth-century detailing to a high standard. He is also very interesting I think in that he works as an interior designer and has an erudite and often very funny blog, and so as a result he holds a significant position as an arbiter of taste, in a kind of Georgian sense.

The confusion in the case of Poundbury lies I think in the fact that you have no idea how old anything is or what order anything was built. I don’t think these are marginal matters. I think you can certainly see the idea of the explicit Georgian revival as being a kind of act of defiance, not only of contemporary watered-down Modern taste, but also of the whole Modern idea, in the real sense of Modern, that things proceed in a definable order towards perfection. To that you can add that a similar point to the one earlier, that these buildings refer bluntly to the type of architecture that the Gothic Revival set out to destroy. Pentreath’s buildings are not neo-Georgian – they actually are Georgian as far as the architect is concerned: as Alan Powers says in his entry in our book, he has tested modern builders to their limit in recreating the quality of the original buildings. There is another point too, and that is that eighteenth-century architecture, especially the plainer type, was supposed to represent a type of elevated building that was all-inclusive and spoke the same to everyone; buildings like Ben’s are also saying ‘Modernism tried this inclusiveness, and didn’t manage it – so we are back where we were’. I am myself sympathetic to the idea that just as there is no such thing as ‘traditional’, there is no such thing as ‘pastiche’ either. The idea of ‘pastiche’ is part of the Modernist idea that everything has to look as if it was designed a year or two into the future.

I want to show you two more examples of first-rate architecture that fall into the category of dark Georgian. The first one comes from Thomas Croft. This is his townhouse with a large garden in West London, a substantial remodelling project where the garden side was more or less rebuilt. Tom tells me that there were several elements in this design. The first was the house needed healing, as he put it, but in a way that was part of its history. This is what it looked like before, and you can see that it was lopsided from the start. The cleverest move was to reorient the windows so they now formed a grand formal set, but without moving the left and right-hand window bays. Irregular house elevations are not unusual in the early-mid nineteenth century, by the way – not everyone doing functional planning was a gothic revivalist, and although no one seems to have said it at the time, the clever shifting of axes within a single building for reasons of plan is very much an early nineteenth-century thing.

Now what the creation of the new set of windows did was to draw attention to the original layout of the house but be less apologetic about it. There was for example a staircase inside that couldn’t be moved. The result is a house that shows its structural logic behind a broadly functional layout, but which is also evidently a neo-classical building. Tom has mentioned Loudon, and this is a very interesting point of reference, I think. Loudon’s extraordinary contribution to Victorian architecture lies in its extreme

rationality and pragmatism, which he saw as much more interesting than style. In fact Loudon wasn't interested in style much. His encyclopaedia is full of designs for practically laid-out cottages in no discernible style at all. Tom referred to Loudon's own house in Porchester Terrace in Bayswater which pulls off the difficult trick of combining an irregular logic with a clever overall symmetry. That's why I'm calling it 'dark' here, in the sense that what you see is not quite what you get. But because Tom is designing now and not in 1825 he can make much more of the conflicting forces of the elevation, but it's the clever historical references that make this so relevant. Tom mentioned to me that he had looked at the work of Raymond Erith, which is an interpretation of the 1820s from the mid-twentieth century, and if you look at for example the street elevation of Erith's house in Aubrey Walk in Kensington, you can see something comparable going on. A further point worth making about both this house and Ben Pentreath's very different ones is the attention to the elevation as an object in its own right – something that as students in the '70s and '80s we were more or less forbidden from doing.

My third Dark Georgian example is actually darker. Craig Hamilton has been designing extraordinarily rich interior spaces which go where John Soane never managed to arrive. This is the hall of his own house in Powys. It has a sense of mystery about it, I think, because elements such as the balustrade appear more as objects than as anything practical. But what is particularly magnificent about this room is that it draws into a new house at least two aspects of early nineteenth-century architecture which had been more or less forgotten. The first is a ritual, changing sense of passage which Modernists sometimes talk about as if they had invented. But we know it from pharaonic tombs apart from anything else. James Stevens Curl's book on the architecture of freemasonry has reminded us that public buildings and certainly masonic temples had ritual types of entry that incorporated a kind of mnemonic symbolism – that is, an iconography perhaps of torches, pyramids, eyes and so on that were intended to initiate the incomer in preparation for arrival at the centre of the building. But the second is a realisation that not all rooms have to be equally cheerful, and it is possible through exaggeration of mood to impose the messages of the building on those passing through it.

Let's go to something very far from Georgian: historical Period Four – the Jacobean. Now this for me is the most intriguing of all of England's recurring architectural histories because it keeps on bouncing back even though critics have hated it at every period except perhaps very briefly in the late Georgian era. There must be something inherently English about it – in fact some writers from John Betjeman to Andrew Ballantyne have said exactly that. I was here at the beginning of the month talking to the Voysey Society, and what I found when I looked closely into some of Voysey's projects was that in spite of his reputation for smooth white building, Voysey did use quite a few explicitly Jacobean references, from ornamental gables to rows of grotesque timber figures. The great appeal of Jacobean architecture for the early nineteenth century, and then again in the early twentieth, was the imagery of comfortable domestic stability, of Walter Scott's novels and Joseph Nash's contemporary *Mansions of England in the Olden Time*, buildings that looked strong but welcoming in the way that timber can do when it is used for tough mullions, and where the decoration is explicitly an unpretentious British interpretation of continental decoration. Proctor & Matthews are some of the best Jacobean practitioners today. This is their Hall House in Overy Staithe in Norfolk, one of their earliest works, and not in fact much different from a Jacobean house of 1610, let alone 1830. They have also produced a great deal of high quality multiple housing with beautiful ornamental brickwork gables, the most characteristic of all Jacobean details. Proctor & Matthews have not only been long-term teachers at Sheffield but have also trained some of our other leading young practitioners. The bizarre way in which most magazine critics avoid the Jacobean because it isn't 'modern' is probably their laziest and most unhelpful failing.

Jacobean often means exposed timber construction and ornament but it doesn't always. I'd like to show you a house which I thought was in this category – Adam Richards' Mission Hall. One of the features of the late Elizabethan and Jacobean prodigy houses was that they assembled together a series of identifiable volumes but in a much more formal way than in a mediaeval house. One of the features of Adam's work that I particularly like is the way in which he presents the elements of the design in a formal way, each one designed to suit the method of its construction. By the beginning of the seventeenth century architects had begun to formalise the identifiable elements of a house and make separate objects of them. That was particular true of his magnificent Museum of Art + Craft at Ditchling, but you can see it here in the house too. Look for example at this grand central staircase, and the big chimney at the top of it. There's another feature of these late Elizabethan and Jacobean houses that marks them out from mediaeval ones, and that is that houses care much more about the garden and draw the garden planning into the house, and you can see this from his plan and indeed in the face-on way in which this photograph is taken. There's furthermore in this view a suggestion of one of those freestanding Jacobean banqueting houses, a small grand pavilion in a landscape where the route to it is part of the enjoyment of it.

Historical Period Five: Victorian. 'Victorian' obviously covers a lot of territory, and I'm going to demonstrate two different attitudes, one from each end of the period. I've mentioned Loudon before and I want to again because I don't think there was any other single individual who wasn't an architect who influenced what happened in that eventful period to the extent that he did. It's worth looking at the particular problems that house designers faced in the 1830s. The main one was that technological innovations were making it harder and harder to fit everything you needed into a plain and simple pile or double-pile box with formal elevations. New detached houses had water closets by now, in separate room that required little windows, and all the kitchen apparatus was spiralling massively. In fact the most recurrent problem in house design that I encountered when studying the houses of this period was what to do with all the kitchen outhouses, the big effective chimney and all the little rooms you now needed. Pugin of course pointed out that mediaeval kitchens did this perfectly well, and many Victorian architects followed him: the point for them was that instead of being embarrassed about all the technological bits and pieces that people quite reasonably wanted, you needed to blow them up in size, exaggerate them, distinguish them and make something of them – what is nowadays called architectural realism. This they did very effectively, to the extent that some high-Victorian architects made the view of a splendid kitchen part of the approach to a grand house.

All the while, at any rate from the 1830s-1850s, Loudon was ploughing away in the background, at first in his *Architectural Magazine* and elsewhere, pointing out what exactly this meant – what precisely the best details were. It was this combination of Loudon's practical knowledge and industry in promoting it, and Pugin's championing of a style which had no problem in expressing it, that created the Gothic Revival and the explosion of houses which were altogether different in plan, construction and everything else from late Georgian ones. So that I hope explains why Bill Dunster's BedZED of 2002 is here – it was one of the first notable examples of housing that turned an expressive, realist attitude to building technology into a coherent style, exactly as Pugin had done. The updraft stacks are the most obvious examples of this approach – they are brightly coloured for the same reason that Pugin's are decorated. Very few environmentally-oriented houses have achieved this degree of stylistic coherence, and there is a kind of puritanical tendency to relapse into technical solutions with no appeal or charm to them whatsoever, perhaps because too many see environmental standards as the polar opposite to architectural ornament and design. But of course they were not in the 1840s, and they aren't now, and the fact that the gothic revivalists pulled off precisely this marriage is what made their architecture so memorable, and why it worked and lasted.

You have probably gathered that I have a particular fondness for the first half of the nineteenth-century but overall, the influence of the second half has been immeasurably greater, and unlike Loudon and the early Gothic Revival it had international influence. There have been some terrific houses recently that have re-entered the late-Victorian territory of exuberant surface treatment that made the most of the technological advances and the mass industrialisation of the applied arts. Victorian architects of all kinds hated the long, flat, unrelieved, cheaply built late Georgian terraces of houses that made up a great deal of London by the time Victoria became queen in 1837. I've got here two slightly different ones which show what can happen once one is open-minded enough to accept the importance of a street front. This project, called London Brownstones, by Knox Bhavan for a pair of semi-detached houses in an Edwardian street in North Dulwich, is all the more striking because the rear elevation is larch-clad and completely different. In fact the overall construction is timber, so these are emphatically elevations rather than the front of the structure, and the redness is quite Victorian I think. The architects seem to have asked themselves – what can we do that drinks up the atmosphere and the quality of the rest of the street, in order to express those qualities? It seemed to be taken for granted for too long that the only way to deal with a site in a homogenous street was either to fit in – that is, do a cheap version of what was there already – or to go against it in a willful way. Here the colours and the string courses connect the new houses with the old ones so strongly that the architects have been able to express their own design skills in the detailing of the porches and mullions. There is tremendous dignity in going in and out through this porch which to me speaks of the period as well. This is a building of enormous formal elegance and it also has a lovely plan.

This next house, which has the great Victorian name of Red House, was recently completed by 31/44 Architects and it takes a different attitude to a similar situation, which was made more complicated here by the odd shape of the site and its position at the end of the terrace. The way I understand this one is that the architects looked at the ornamental detailing of Victorian terraces, which can be quite rich in some streets in London, even on small houses, and worked it into the main theme for their elevation I think this is significant because it was precisely the decorative detailing that tends to get missed out when architects have a go at reinterpreting something superficially: so they are saying here that that type of decoration is actually the important bit, the aspect of the design that the owners identify with. And they are right, of course. Designs for the fronts of buildings have been talked down for generations and this is one of a number of significant attempts to rectify that. But there is something bigger at work as well. All three principals of 31/44 worked for Proctor & Matthews, which is clearly significant, and it is worth pointing out, after this example of an urban infill site, that Stephen Proctor has always been very interested in historical house typologies and what they do for the fabric of towns and villages.

My final Victorian or Edwardian project is this one: Caring Wood, by James Macdonald Wright and Niall Maxwell. It was shortlisted for the Grand Designs House of the Year this month, and it has an immediate magical effect, I think. That's because this house does absolutely everything that the arts and crafts designers of the period that the architects admired. In fact one of the first connections I made in my mind was with Stonewall Cottage, the tiny house by Ernest Gimson that runs down the side of a hill, or maybe even that famous view of Norman Shaw's Leys Wood near Groomsbridge. Likewise, the setting of Caring Wood was carefully planned so that it flowed gently down the landscape in what is almost a dream setting, and which the landscape consultants are enriching further still, and just as Gimson went into ancient stone techniques for his house, so the architects here explored the vernacular traditions of west Kent, the oast roofs, the peg tiles, the terracotta – this approach has produced in this area some of the houses in England over the last 150 years, from Devey to Shaw, and it has worked magnificently again. It's worth saying too that the architects see this as being a house

about music and art just as the arts-and-crafts architects did. The architects have used a pinwheel plan – the invention of Pugin from the other side of Kent, made famous by Frank Lloyd Wright, himself a Victorian of course – which has enabled them to express the different elements in a curiously haunting way. I mentioned earlier that the incorporation of ecologically sustainable measures into the design language of a house has proved too much of a challenge for many, but this house set out to do that too and I can see it going straight into the canon of early twenty-first century houses.

And finally – Historical Period Six: the mediaeval. Of course I am talking here as with all my historical periods not only about mediaeval building as it may have been at the time, but as how we see it now. There's not much surviving mediaeval architecture that isn't actually a reworking of it if some kind, and to some extent the word now indicates a sense of what they might have been once. The mediaeval house in our book is Craddock Cottages, by Stephen Taylor Architects, a building I was very anxious to see included. What I like about it is the way in which it avoids any sense of formality – it has a kind of geological feeling to it that is going to be the element that holds all of these houses together. Obviously, it makes sense to say that nowadays that you only way you can look 'undesigned' is by being extremely designed – that's an example of what I mean by engaging with the past instead of letting it vaguely flow over you. John Britton, the architectural historian I mentioned earlier, seemed particularly attracted to buildings that were haunting and unexplained in some ways – and he saw himself as a very analytical person who could account for those things. One of the oddest things about him in that respect was that he got it into his head that the oldest surviving house in England – House One, as it were, the potential seed for everything that could follow – was a peculiar construction called Winwall House or Winnold House in the middle of nowhere deep in rural Norfolk, off Gibbett Lane, gaunt and on a hill, which at anything more than a cursory look soon emerges as a Jacobean house attached to a fragment of an external wall of a mediaeval priory. He can't seriously have thought it was that ancient – perhaps he just wanted it to be. Mystery, lack of resolution, an earthiness of material including the wonderful cast lintols and cills with their brick fragments, a feeling of being part of some vanished agricultural settlement – these are what mediaeval architecture is made up from for us today. You don't hear about any of that when you read about twentieth century movements of architecture – and it's obviously slightly weird and unsettling.

My mediaeval buildings don't have to be unsettling, but they do need that atavistic quality to them. Most supposedly old farm buildings are probably mainly sixteenth century at the earliest, but they presumably follow earlier patterns, and as we know from Alec Clifton-Taylor's *The Pattern of English Building*, the one book that all of you should have, they are very often long and low. Lucy Marston's Long Farm in Suffolk carries off that type of housing in a very noble way, I think. It was the 2013 Grand Designs winner. You can see straight away that unlike, say, Caring Wood, it is intended to stand out as a distinct object but at the same time, with its irregular fenestration it is trying to convey a sense of being a place where people both live and work. It's a home rather than a farmstead, but the big windows seem to me to indicate a kind of interaction with the landscape on the part of those within, and the timber outbuildings at ground floor level also convey a sense of busyness and no-nonsense practicality. It also has very elegant interiors.

My final houses – all with mediaeval themes – are made from flint. Clifton-Taylor said that 'England has perhaps no more curious material than flint, a stone of obscure origin quite unlike any other in colour or texture, and not used for building in any other country on so extensive a scale. For architectural purposes it has many limitations, but it also has decorative qualities, much in evidence in East Anglia and the South East.' When I first made my planning application for my own flint house in Broadstairs in 1999, I was told by the planners that they wouldn't accept it because flint was not

‘traditional’. By ‘traditional’ they meant the pink brick villas from the 1970s on the other side of the road. Of course the earliest surviving structure in Thanet are made of flint, as are Lord Holland’s follies which are pretending to be Romano-British or otherwise very early. He had probably seen the remains of the Roman Richborough Castle near Sandwich which survives in the form of rough, very thick irregular walls. Medieval buildings don’t have any front, or back, or sides, and flint ones don’t need to rely on ornament because the flints themselves are ornamental, differ from wall to wall, and don’t appear to age at all.

Flint tends therefore to convey a sense of ancientness, and even of archeology – that is, the layering of a building, the building up over time. Flint also has a kind emergency feel, to it, as if making the most of the situation, a slightly military quality. Charlotte Skene-Catling’s Flint House in Buckinghamshire has all of these qualities, especially in the way in which its walls rise and fall into the ground. It has a heroic and timeless scale that makes it, possibly, pre-mediaeval, and yet obviously these qualities haven’t remotely reduced the comfort of the spaces inside. And that in turn leads to the intriguing thought that I am reminded of when I see images of this house, that it is possible to see ruins of mediaeval castle building not as something cold and hard but as the outer parts of some considerable luxury inside, a nice and a modern combination in any case. The way in which the architect drew the house diagrammatically also had an archeological character to it as well.

There are two further flint houses which I want to show you, not least because I think it is fantastic that people are building in flint again. Charlotte Skene-Catling’s house was built up painstakingly by a craftsman – and it is a very long process – but of course you can now get concrete blocks made up with the flint embedded in it, which makes it perfectly feasible for many applications. This house by Cowper Griffiths is called Arboretum and like others you have seen is in North Norfolk. This too has a very strong archeological feeling to it, rather as if the basic house had been built of flint, and the other parts of the structure, such as the timber ones, had been added over time for perhaps agricultural reasons. It has that in common with Lucy Marston’s house, but this one has a more informal air. You can see that it almost appears to be a timber house built around a flint wall, rather than a flint house. In fact the flint wall really becomes a kind of decorative element. That makes it very different from Skene-Catling’s one, and it also has that agricultural feeling that I mentioned earlier, with the collection of timber outbuildings.

This is my final flint house. It is by Guy Stansfeld, who emerged from the office of CZWG in the late 1980s. What he said he wanted was a solid house, rooted to the earth, perhaps with the quality of a bunker to it. It isn’t like much of his other work and this was a particular attempt to relate closely to the flint which emerges from the cliffs directly below the house. Here is a detail of it – it actually looks as if it has been carved out of a cliff. This is a building that has carried the mediaeval theme right up to the present day.

So that’s my idea about using history – that’s the sole theme that holds this collection of houses together. Being aware of history as an architect is about interest and information as much as it is about mastery of historical techniques. In fact being aware and being conscious of what you are drawing from is the key. Know your old buildings well and don’t be afraid of them. As students we were actually told to stay away from anything historical before about 1920 in our work, even if it was a theoretical reference. Tutors screamed with horror if you made any historical reference, a very odd way of teaching. So be aware of it – think how you can go back into those debates, use those elements, relate to construction and decoration in the way the original architects did but with the addition of all our accumulated knowledge and experience as architects since.

These buildings are by some of the best architects working in Britain today. The projects may not all be familiar, but at the same time I should stress to those outside the profession here that they are not offbeat or odd – many of the architects I have shown here are teachers in the best schools of architecture, and employ some of the best graduates. These houses have all been published in the professional press, and most of them have been featured in ‘Inhabit’, which is the houses supplement of *Architecture Today*, the magazine that every architect gets. Some of these houses have won major national prizes. Yet if you take seriously many critics, you wouldn’t think that they existed at all. What you see in the general press or in the columns of those odd people who write articles in the newspapers and trade press about architecture which are mostly politics, sociology or amateur European cultural theory of some description, is not representative of what is happening. So the type of architecture I am showing here is yet to find a distinct unified voice as a movement. And please don’t ever use the word ‘traditional’ again.