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European Year of Cultural Heritage
Lectures on Architecture: 5

Pugin's House – a home for all Europe

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15 February 2018

The relationship of British architectural history with Europe when it's at its finest and its most influential is so profound and so exciting at times that it is hard to know when to start. This talk is about the nineteenth century – which culminated in the only period in English architecture when our houses were of worldwide interest – and we can see straight away a number of European themes which all come together in the work of Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin. What I thought I would do this evening is to draw some of those themes together by looking not only at Pugin's best known houses but also at why they look the way they do, and why they went on inspiring architects from other places and other periods.

Pugin is of course in the news again at the moment because of the decision by the Houses of Parliament to relocate and to allow restoration works to take place – if they had allowed the collapse of the complex to continue any longer, they would have been in danger of recreating the circumstances of the fire which, in 1834, was responsible for Barry and Pugin's extraordinary design to have been realised in the first place. It's always worth remembering that as well as everything else that it represents, the Palace of Westminster is an absolutely gigantic building, and as Pugin's admirer C.F.A. Voysey said about it at the end of the nineteenth century, there isn't a single one of the many hundreds of detail that Pugin designed for it that is out of place. He made something like 10,000 drawings for it himself. It's a staggering achievement, and it's related to one of the main themes that 'd like to present to you: that what Pugin introduced into the design of the house was an absolutely rational, ordered, coherent way of designing, that was born of a pan-European search for positivistic values in more than one way.

Pugin's father Augustus Charles was a French designer who came to London from Paris in 1792 and made a name for himself as a designer of ornamental interiors and architectural work. He worked for example on the Brighton Pavilion. But the lasting impact of the elder Pugin's work lies in the other area of his activity – as a draftsman of unparalleled accuracy. Let me say a word about the milieu in which he was working. From the early nineteenth century onwards, the topographical writer John Britton is publishing a series of illustrated books on the development of British architecture. Other people had been doing something similar, but Britton is different – he wanted to present gothic buildings, especially, in what he called a scientific way, by which he meant that his volumes were going to be accurately researched and written, by reliable antiquarian writers, and the illustrations in

particular were going to be accurate too. In fact when he decided that an illustration had been insufficiently accurate, he published a better one. He was going to avoid the eighteenth-century tendency towards fanciful or superstitious stories – he was going to represent the truth. In that way, said Britton, contemporary researchers and architects were going to be able to see how gothic architecture really worked and to build on its development.

Now, it's worth saying straight away that seeing accurate representations of gothic churches and cathedrals was itself a complete novelty. It's very clear from pre-Britton drawings, engravings and paintings that architects either were unable to take in what they were actually seeing without understanding the history and detail of these old buildings or, more likely in fact, that the buildings themselves had been so mutilated in the Reformation or the English Civil War, or neglected and battered about in the eighteenth century, that it was difficult in any case to get an idea of what they had once looked like. Britton needed for his task draughtsmen and engravers of very high quality to be able to record and represent these buildings. It was the elder Pugin who did this. He ran a drawing school in his house in Bloomsbury and he was assisted by his pupils, including his young son. You can see here on the left an illustration of St Mary Redcliffe in Bristol from one of Britton's many publications – this would have been the first time an architectural readership actually had seen an accurate representation of the church. On the right-hand side, you can see one of Augustus Charles Pugin's contributions – the cover of Britton's book about the *Architectural Antiquities of Normandy*. Britton by this time was so confident of the quality of British topographic writing that he felt that his contributors could make a better job of recording these monuments than any French historian – especially better than Charles Nodier, whose romantic and inaccurate views were populated by monks and virgins of legend. It's quite possible that the buildings illustrated within the arch were actually made by Pugin's teenage son, because he was part of the trip to survey the buildings and they look rather in his style. Furthermore, Britton employed the Le Keux brothers to engrave the Pugin plates, again because of their sharpness and their accuracy.

There are two specific contributions that the elder Pugin made to topographical publications like this. The first is that he worked out how medieval masons had constructed the geometry of their pointed arches, and published examples within one of Britton's volumes. Regency architects, however gothic they wanted to be or romantic they felt, hadn't grasped the geometry of the structural form, and never really got it right. And then the second contribution he made was that he illustrated buildings as they had looked when built, and as they could appear if they were restored. The Normandy volume has some excellent examples of this – here for example is the Abbaye aux Dames in Caen, where in reality the floor level had risen some way up the columns obscuring the proportions and the details. And here too is Thaon church outside Caen – it's been restored, but at the time, when Pugin drew this, it was badly dilapidated. So this again was completely new, and also very exciting if you were interested in mediaeval architecture.

The British were close behind the French in their interest in what their national characteristics were, and how they were different from the other neighbouring countries. There's a great of activity in this in the period after the French Revolution, in the case of Great Britain because writers and politicians

of all kinds were anxious to prevent anything of the sort happening over here, for some 50 years afterwards at least. So you can look at John Britton's work as providing core information which, whilst aimed at architects, was of great benefit to historians and scientists of all kinds. But there's an aspect in the background of all this which I think is much more important, and that is the growth of the positivist frame of mind across Europe at the time, even before the term was coined by August Comte in Paris in the 1840s.

I have put up this image of phrenological head to illustrate this. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, phrenology sold more books in Europe than any other subject, including for example the popular novels of Walter Scott in Britain. What phrenology tried to do was to rationalise how people saw the world – not as a mass of vague qualities, but as definable attributes. People were not simply mad, or bad, or sad, but made up from different degrees of specific characteristics – envy, foresight, refinement, and so on. However much the science of it was nonsense, this basic idea was enormously attractive to people because it sounded scientific, and as we know, the same period saw a tremendous expanse of dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and so on which defined terms and territories, so that for example the Natural Sciences became, specifically, physics, biology, geology, botany, chemistry and so on, all with their own terms. The prolific Britton was proudest of all of his *Dictionary of Architecture* for example, because he knew that without these definitions, it was impossible to develop historical knowledge. So you can see that behind Britton's publications and Augustus Charles' drawings, there is a kind of common pattern applicable to many fields of activity.

And especially applicable to architecture. This is where I want to bring in at last the younger Pugin's own house, and the houses he built afterwards. Let's move forward to the early 1840s, when the 30-year old architect is working at extraordinary rate, in fact about to take on the massive task of assisting Charles Barry with the Palace of Westminster. He has already published three major books as well as much else. His first book, *Contrasts*, made an impact among all the influential people he so wisely sent it to, and his second book, *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, makes an impact on architects because Pugin, an architect himself of course, knows that architects will only read the first page of a book, and then they will just look at the pictures. So all the memorable texts of that book are on page 1: 'There should be no features about a building which are not necessary for convenience, construction and propriety'; 'that all ornament should consist of the essential enrichment of the construction', and so on. But at this point he has had only limited opportunity to apply these rules to buildings like medium-sized houses that don't have any realistic ancient precedents to act as models.

When Pugin came to design his own house, St Augustine's Grange, as he called it, in Ramsgate in Thanet in East Kent, domestic architecture in Britain was very limited in scope. The houses were pretty, but plans had become paralysed, and this was a problem for the kind of lifestyle that the early Victorians expected – especially, for example, in respect of the sophisticated kitchens that they now needed. This parsonage house, at Walkeringham in Nottinghamshire, by an architect-engineer called James Trubshaw, was designed in the late 1820s and is absolutely typical. In these houses one went in through the main door, into a corridor type of hall, and the main rooms were arranged

symmetrically on either side. In this image I have placed side by side the Walkeringham plan on the left, and then the two other house plans that had emerged by the time that Pugin came along. Walkeringham has that almost symmetrical plan, and what you can see straight away is that all the kitchen accommodation is not only at the back, but also that it doesn't form any part of the architectural composition of the house as a whole. In fact when Trubshaw drew the front elevation he simply missed it out, and here on the plan you can see that it is obscured by some shrubs. One further problem with these plans was that visitors entering the house could see people in the private area on the first floor, and that led to the tweak you can see here in the middle – the stairs are tucked into the side. The third plan is a lot more adventurous, although still fairly rigid: in this one, the main rooms are arranged in a row facing the garden and are reached by a corridor extending from the front door at one end. This kind of plan was suitable for those who wanted a big classical house, as unlike the other models, you could put the central bay in the middle of the house. But that was it.

Now look at the plan of Pugin's Grange, which I've put here next to the Walkeringham one. Everything about it is completely different. First of all, that kitchen problem. One of the many striking features of the Grange is that you approach the house by going past the back of the kitchen – that would have been completely incomprehensible to the Georgian architect. The second thing that you notice is that the rooms are different from one another. In fact the ground-floor rooms at the Grange have different types of window from one another as well. They face different directions, so that the Library – Pugin's workroom – and the dining room face south-east, to reduce overheating by the evening, the drawing room south-west, and the kitchen faces north east, and north for the pantry and larder at the end of the range. The result of all of this is that you end up with a different sort of hall. This isn't big enough to use as a room – it isn't a kind of modern version of a mediaeval great hall – instead it's a kind of hub around which everything happens. Pugin planned buildings, especially in fact institutional ones, so that people had to walk further than was strictly necessary to reach the rooms and I think what he was doing here was taking the new scientific attitude to the elements of life a stage further. He was emphasising the distinctions between different types of room in definite ways. Sir George Gilbert Scott once addressed the question of whether the architect, in giving function such a high priority, was in danger of losing control of the overall composition and coherence of the house. His reply was that we should remember that Pugin was an artist – he did have a natural sense of composition. In this hallway you can see that balustrade echoes the layout of the house as a whole, the elements revolving around a square central hub. Here's the outside of the house and you can see that the elements hold together beautifully. Just as in the Houses of Parliament, where the degree of coherence so astounded Voysey, Pugin was able to carry through the overall ideas of even a small house to the smallest detail. This for example is a detail of a bargeboard at the front of the house, taken before the restoration of 2006. Pugin hated details where pieces of timber were held together with glue, because you couldn't see what the different functions of the elements were. So this mortice and tenon joint was designed so that any idiot, as it were, could see precisely what was doing what here.

This approach is what we now call realism. Architectural realism means that every part of the building, large or small, expresses its construction and its purpose. It's the characteristically British,

non-theoretical and non-intellectualising answer to French functionalism, but it is to some extent answering the same architectural requirements. Often realism means exaggerating the design – so that that our old friend of ours, any idiot, any architectural critic or historian, can get it. At Rampisham, near Dorchester in Dorset, Pugin built another of the six houses he designed following the Grange-type plan, but here he solved it to a greater degree of sophistication. Some of this is clear when looking at the house from any direction – the steep slope of the roof and the deep projection of the eaves are exaggerating what needs to be done to keep the rain away from the house, perhaps the primary function of any house in rainy England and something that flat-roofed Georgian houses often had problems with. If you go round the side to the front, and here's a view taken by Graham Booth who restored it beautifully a few years back, you can see not only that the details hold together, but also the entire form of the house makes itself clear to you. Each of the separate rooms rises to its own gables, its own chimneys. You can see precisely how the whole thing holds together, and that doesn't stop it from being attractive or from making an impact on architects everywhere.

The early Pugin historian Phoebe Stanton spent much of her time looking for signs that the radical slogans of Pugin's *True Principles* were going to produce an entirely radical new architecture, and she was often disappointed. She thought, for example, with some disappointment I suspect, that the Rampisham house looked like 'the work of a local mason builder of the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries'. But it does no such thing – it's absolutely a product of its time. Here's the front of another of Pugin's mid-late 1840s houses – Oswaldcroft on the outskirts of Liverpool. There's the window of the ground-floor water closet, in full view of the front door – as indeed it is at Rampisham – and there is the service stair. It's an astonishingly brutal, shall we say functionalist elevation. No wonder architects were excited, and some of the easier aspects of Pugin's houses, such as the hub-like hall, spread very quickly around England. Pugin himself wrote just as the Grange was about to go up that 'the smaller detached houses which the present state of society has generated, should possess a peculiar character', by which he meant their own distinct character. In 1840 you could be pretty sure what a new house was going to look like. By 1850 you had no idea.

Britain's most obvious contribution to early nineteenth-century Europe must surely have been the processes of industrialisation that completely changed cities and industrial towns everywhere. Obvious too is the fact that British industrial structures and especially railway stations and bridges were studied with enormous interest by European designers. But it's important too to notice how technically proficient the post-Pugin house was. As you will have guessed from what you have seen, Pugin himself had no problem with modern technological improvements. The Christian architect should 'gladly avail himself' of them, he wrote. Many very productive architects who fell under his spell were happy to do so. Here for example is a plan by the prolific country house architect William Burn, who often borrowed planning ideas from Pugin's houses. You can see that to lay out a very big house like this, with all the service rooms in exactly the right place as much as the major ones, which Burn was unusually good at, requires a spectacular ability to think like a realist and as a positivist, through and through, and also to share, to some extent Pugin's sense of composition that Scott referred to. A different type of example but an equally British one from the same period is this, the chateau at Ferrières-en-Brie to the east of Paris, by Joseph Paxton for James de Rothschild. For all the

ornamentation within, this building is as much a technological masterpiece as anything else, with much use of iron and glass, and installations for ventilation and heating. The ceiling of the grand central saloon was studded with 11,000 gas lights, twelve metres above the floor, and according to Frederic Bedoire's study of it, there was an underground railway that connected the house to the kitchens 100 metres away to the west.

So I would say that it is perfectly possible to see Pugin, for all the romance attached to his name, as being in the forefront of the same movement that forced architects to think rationally and clearly about layout and construction. But in fact his message began to develop a related but to many purposes completely different set of meanings once it was readopted by a new generation of architects – ones born mostly in the two decades after his premature death in 1852.

The story of what happened to Pugin's own reputation, among architects as well as the public at large, is a very strange one, really quite unlike that of other architects of world stature here. In the 1850s there seems to have been a concerted attempt to avoid mentioning him in particular among those architects of the Church of England who were not, as Scott and William Butterfield had been, personal friends and admirers. But what is certain is that the generation who grew to maturity towards the end of the nineteenth century included many architects who admired him to the exclusion of all others. Whenever I have researched the architects of the arts-and-crafts period, the only period in the entirety of British architectural history to have had a Europe-wide impact until high-tech, I found the same message again and again: Pugin was the only architect ever mentioned admiringly by name. One of the older ones, John Dando Sedding, born in 1838, famously wrote towards the end of his life that 'We should have had no Morris, no Street, no Burges, no Shaw, no Webb, no Bodley, no Rossetti, no Burne-Jones, no Crane, but for Pugin'. I know from my own experience as a design teacher in an architecture school that young architects cannot always say what it is that they admire about their contemporary heroes – it seems to be something of a sense that a certain designer is on to something that enriches the profession without being able to define it exactly. In Pugin's case it must be true to say that he enormously extended the role and significance of the architect as a person whose attitudes and whose control of every part of a building changed the profession out of all recognition from what it had been at its nadir in the late eighteenth century. But it is worth pursuing what it was that Pugin had, and Pugin gave them, because whatever it was, it forms the heart of one of the most influential European texts on houses – Hermann Muthesius's *Das englische Haus*, published in Germany in the opening years of the twentieth century.

Muthesius, attaché at the Imperial German embassy on London from 1896-1903, described Pugin in one of his other works as the first of the 'bright stars' that shine in the 'firmament of nineteenth-century English architectural history', along with the goths Scott, George Edmund Street and John Loughborough Pearson. In the section on interior design in the third volume of *Das englische Haus*, he wrote that 'one can have no doubt that Pugin's work stands supreme. Not only did he create the whole repertoire in which the next generations of Gothicists worked, but also put into it the best of anything that was ever done'. In doing this, Muthesius placed Pugin's name before a very wide and, it turned out, influential audience of German and Austrian readers. But Pugin's influence was not only

there as a designer. Across the three volumes of his book, Muthesius was writing with the specific aim of providing a 'scientific' analysis for a German professional audience to follow, to see what they could learn from British practice in order to get Germany out of a rut of what he saw as tasteless, imitative, repetitive design. The way in which he presented the history of the development and current form of the English house was intended, as with his other writing, to say to his audience, if the English can do this, just think what superior work we Germans can achieve; and actually he was helpfully astute about the problems of contemporary British work, its stifling perfection and its expense. Like Britton in his day, Muthesius wanted his analysis to have a comprehensive quality, so he started his historical section in the year AD 450. The three volumes of the book include a description of the interior fittings and furniture of English houses, including the drainage and the English water closet that fifty years earlier had evidently amused or intrigued the novelist Balzac as well, but the centrepiece of the set is his presentation of recent middle and upper-middle class houses designed by British arts-and crafts architects – that is, by the circle of designers who admired Pugin above all others.

Muthesius' contemporary hero was Norman Shaw, whose architecture makes frequent appearances in the book; it is possible that stylistically, Shaw's Tudor or Old English as the most immediately appealing, aesthetically, to his German readership. But the other leading contemporary to attract his extensive approval was Charles Francis Annersley Voysey – and Voysey is part of the Pugin story.

Muthesius illustrated across several pages in the first volume of his book Voysey's house Broadleys, on Windermere in the Lake District – in fact, it is often Muthesius' plans that one sees in books on Voysey. Muthesius himself thought that Voysey was 'particularly influential' among the architects of his generation that he described, and that he was the 'most active and best-known'. He said of Voysey that 'his means of expression are of the simplest so that there is always an air of primitivism about his houses', and he also praised the fact that Voysey, like Pugin, designed the whole contents of a house as a coherent, organised set. At the moment I am trying to put together a new history of the new domestic architecture of the first decade of the twentieth century, and by and large emphasise the less known among the architects of the period, but what I have discovered is that Voysey is absolutely unavoidable however one tells the story of the period.

There are two main reasons for this, and they are related. The first is that Voysey was Pugin's greatest admirer of the whole of that generation, as far as we know. The second is that his first job on completing his apprenticeship at the end of the 1870s was as assistant to George Devey, an architect whose practice commenced during the final years of Pugin's life. The young Voysey copied quite a bit from Devey's design vocabulary, especially his Jacobean gables and decorative brickwork. But Devey's most important contribution was that he seems to have been the first architect to work with old vernacular buildings and to restore and enlarge them using their original building technology. Of course architects of all periods had always extended or remodelled cottages, but they hadn't done was to make the new work indistinguishable from the old. He did it first here, at Leicester Square in Penshurst in Kent. Muthesius wrote in his book that vernacular architecture was the 'starting-point for modern domestic building' – he added that the 'escape' from the bad architecture of the early

nineteenth century 'consisted in the architects recovering the traditions of the old master-mason, abandoning any suggestion of fine architecture and beginning to build simply and rationally like the old guild-masons'. He saw in Voysey's primitivism this direct appeal to ancient building traditions – as indeed did Voysey himself. It often seems odd that Voysey liked to refer to his assertively bright, white houses as being calm and restful things, when at first sight they so obviously were no such thing, but what I think he was getting at was a sense of returning to the natural character of simple construction, and this seems to have been what interested Muthesius in him.

A further architect whom Muthesius was interested in was W.R. Lethaby, who provides a further but a more indirect example of how Pugin's influence reached an international twentieth-century audience. Muthesius said that he was 'one of the architects who today uphold and continue the best traditions of English house-building', and he also thought that his work was 'Modern in the best sense in thought and sensibility'. He was describing Lethaby's house at Avon Tyrrell in Hampshire, but there is an excellent book by Trevor Garnham from about 25 years ago that explains how Lethaby's Melsetter House, on the island of Orkney, is a wonderful demonstration of some of the principles in British design that Muthesius was trying to encourage among his German-speaking readership. That's especially true of the subtle layout of the ground floor. Pugin, as you will remember, took a great deal of interest in differentiating between the character of different rooms, and how to move from one to another. He had already understood the importance of the correct sequence, partly from the point of view of the family's way of life, but also I think as an architectural experience. At Melsetter Lethaby took up this theme in a powerful way. The plan has some similarities to Pugin's Grange – the stairs act as hub and the rooms lead off at different angles from it. But what Lethaby did and Pugin didn't was to go beyond style and try to address some basic truth about the varying activities and traditions of the rooms through the use of simple materials and symbols. Although Muthesius thought that an open staircase in a hall gave private buildings a public air, he did see a future for this kind of space as an informal sitting room, and he also enjoyed the spectacle of the guests and household descending theatrically from their bedrooms for dinner. Lethaby's arrangement at Melsetter conjured up a rich spectacle, and it drew those passing through it past a grand fireplace with heraldic symbols and a kind of iconography of the seas. In other words, Lethaby was developing further those aspects of domestic architecture that originated in Pugin's house, and which Muthesius was anxious to convey in Europe. And he added other aspects of his own – for example, he connected the drawing room, which Muthesius saw as the women's preserve, with the rose garden beyond, and he brought the garden into the room at the same time, through the floral designs of the ornamental plaster and the use of Morris fabrics.

Lethaby's use of symbolic architecture – these are gables like waves, decorated with rope-like forms to represent ships and boats – sound as if they are a long way away from Pugin's realism. It looks as if Lethaby was trying to give a rational form to many things that were not themselves rational at all, perhaps by definition irrational. But Pugin too could be sentimental and irrational. The most important source of ideas for him was his father's copies of those romantic and unhistorical Nodier volumes on ancient Norman architecture – he went on copying the proportions of the buildings in Nodier's illustrations even though he knew them to be inaccurate because he had measured them

himself. This one is typical – Pugin's own buildings had exaggerated vertical proportions and that very often marks then out from houses done by his imitators.

Architecture is more than practicalities. In one of his first articles for *Country Life* in 1907, the writer H. Avray Tipping wrote that 'Matter-of-fact England, busy with material needs, has only excelled in art and architecture when kindled and fed by outside influences. When cut off from continental imaginativeness and intellectualism ... it has tended to revert to the characteristics of its first Teutonic settlers, whom Carlyle somewhat brutally described as "a gluttonous race of Jutes and Saxons lumbering on in pot-bellied indifference"'.

And that brings me to my final point. This is the cover of the book that anyone between the ages of 40 and 60, and probably more, will have read to tell them about the development of the modern movement in Europe. Nikolaus Pevsner set out to tell a story that put Germany at the centre of the picture, and so Muthesius, and the architects whom Muthesius admired in it, form the introductory section of the book. Pevsner did not at that point know much about Pugin – he later 'discovered' him, in a sense – and so the story starts with William Morris and the search for honesty and truth in life and materials that Muthesius had admired. In so doing, Pevsner was following an exactly Puginian line, that truth and design have got something in common. I don't think that Pugin himself believed that beyond the late 1840s, but it provided one of the most successful narratives in European architecture that there has ever been, and the complexity of this story and its historic ingredients are the strongest evidence that we can find to show how much everything in British architecture is bound deeply across Europe, and always has been.