Alan Powers’ two-part historical essay reveals World War One’s repercussion on the maturation of Modernism and encourages us to re-evaluate, a century later, both the Modernist canon and its impact on British architecture.

The ‘missing years’ of British architectural history extend both sides of 1914. As argued in *History* last month, the habit of looking for Modernist pioneers in this period has obscured other ways of seeing it. The result is that a large chunk of the story has disappeared from sight, despite its buildings looming large in cities and in almost every small-town post office or telephone exchange. Art Deco is the best catch-all label for the period, but so much British
work is at best only on the edge of this description, beyond which there is mostly darkness and silence.

The First World War, contrary to expectation, made little immediate difference to architecture in the years that followed. While it is true that shortages of materials and skills in the years after the war forced a temporary move towards steel frame and concrete block buildings for the new state-supported housing, the only cases in which the design methodology and appearance came anywhere close to Modernism was in the small group of workers’ houses in Braintree designed by CHB Quennell for Crittalls – flat-roofed, concrete-block construction with modular steel windows. The effect of these was negligible, and the housing designed in accordance with the Tudor Walters Report, as directed by Raymond Unwin, was a realisation of pre-1914 ideals of mute Georgian-Vernacular uniformity. As in the years before 1914, modernity had arrived through a strong belief in standardisation (the British Standards Institution was founded in 1901 and extended its remit in 1918), and a continuing pursuit of the campaign for Efficiency. These qualities could be effectively transmitted within the classical canons whose dominance in architectural education and competitions remained unchallenged until the 1930s.

In much of the celebrated work of the period, however, there was an emotional numbness suggesting the difficulty of coming to terms with the meaning of the war. Silence becomes a form of rhetoric, above all in Edwin Lutyens’ Cenotaph of 1919, which a character in John Galsworthy’s Forsyte Saga described as a ‘monument to the dread of swank’.¹

‘And removing their hats, they passed the Cenotaph. “Curiously symptomatic – that thing,” said Sir Lawrence; “monument to the dread of swank – most characteristic. And the dread of swank –” “Go on, Bart,” said Michael. “The fine, the large, the florid – all off! No far-sighted views, no big schemes, no great principles, no great religion, or great art – aestheticism in cliques and backwaters, small men in small hats.”’

Far from the public view, the Ministry of Pensions at Acton, built rapidly with concrete blocks on a steel frame by James G West of the Office of Works, 1914-21, exemplified muteness. It was, in Goodhart-Rendel’s words, ‘extravagantly praised’ although it had no ‘particular merit other than that of discretion, of keeping out of trouble’.² The Builder saw it as ‘architecture reduced to its simplest terms; it is expressive, dignified and straightforward’.³ Here, only lightly masked by classicism, was efficiency in built form, exaggerated in scale in a manner similar to the contemporary housing blocks of Copenhagen by Kay Fisker and others, with which it shared a place in Werner Hegemann’s 1929 book, Facades of Buildings.
There was undoubtedly a deadening quality in much architecture of the 1920s, obsessed as it was with the Georgian period but rarely capable of recovering its qualities of precision and balance. Normally the continuation of a historical style basis (Georgian, Gothic, Tudor or other) has been seen as the root of the problem, when the clues to resolving the problem of stylistic dependency were available locally in the work of Mackintosh and Voysey. These pioneers needed to be seen with more hindsight than the 1920s was yet ready to give them.

The melancholy silence of the Acton building is not the mood normally associated with the 1920s in Britain, a period identified with ‘Bright Young Things’ and what the literary historian Martin Green termed ‘The Children of the Sun’. This was a generation – of which Evelyn Waugh’s Oxford generation or the Sitwells, were at the core – which chose aesthetic rebellion and dandyism as a way of expressing its alienation from ‘the fathers’, the term Green uses to describe what were in many cases literally fathers, in others the leaders of the older generation, typified by Rudyard Kipling in literature, who had naively viewed the war as a desirable expression of patriotic values. As with literature, dandyism was not a new trend after the war, but a continuation of an existing one, linked especially to the decadence of the 1890s. Architecture in the 1920s makes more sense when viewed through this lens, potentially a still eclectic proto-Modernism, as seen in the wide range of styles of music and decor used by Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, rather than the Modernism of sober fact and social purpose which we are accustomed to seek in the historical development of architecture.
The *Sonnenkinder* of Europe denoted different things to rebellious and disaffected English youth — sexual and artistic freedom, politics of both left and right, and an understanding that reshaping the past was a way of reforming the present. Before 1914, British architecture was astonishingly insular, apart from its infatuation with classicism in France and America. This began to change rapidly, with an expanding panorama of influence, including Sweden and Denmark, countries whose architecture had hitherto no impact in Britain at all. Clough Williams-Ellis was aged 37 in 1920, placing him in the category Green describes as ‘uncles’ — those who encouraged the rebellions of the young without going all the way with them. Travelling to visit the Gothenburg exhibition in 1923, he found ‘the living breath of a new and vigorous world, where beauty was a natural fact of life ... For the Scandinavians are not “modern” in the ruthless and revolutionary French or Dutch way, iconoclastically, violently breaking with all that has gone before. They have learned to speak an old language in a crisp and vivacious fashion, adapted to a quickened tempo of living that makes it seem like a new language ... the traditional speech of a people, rediscovered and developed’.5

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This linguistic analogy, combined with a new hedonism, may help us to understand the British Pavilion at the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1925 by JM Easton and Howard Robertson, a seemingly weak piece of decorative design in a sub-Swedish style that has usually been seen as an absurd contrast to the major Modernist projects of the exhibition by Le Corbusier or Melnikov. It was clearly on a different planet, yet the *Times* (probably the perceptive critic Charles Marriott) reported how ‘Parisians, at any rate, find it vastly entertaining, and flock through it in such numbers that it is difficult to see the individual exhibits.’

Colour, pattern, glitter – these were 1920s attributes that were not exclusive to the Children of the Sun, but were also carried forward by some of the ‘uncles’. Clough Williams-Ellis never dropped this mode which he had discovered before 1914, but we may also think of even older figures who remained active in the 1920s, such as the church architect Ninian Comper (aged 56 in 1920), who was rediscovered as an ‘uncle’ in 1937 by one of the archetypal Sonnenkinder, John Betjeman. With attributes of a genuine dandy aesthete of the 1890s, albeit one whose focus was almost entirely ecclesiastical, Comper’s direct influence was confined to church design and embellishment, but his work has a passion and intensity, resulting not only from a fine sensibility but also from an intellectual grounding that was able to bring it round in a full circle, attracting admiration not only from Betjeman...
The term ‘Medieval Modernism’ was in use between the wars as a provocative paradox, and was more recently resurrected by Michael T Saler as a post-Pevsnerian master-narrative for Britain’s transition from the Arts and Crafts to Modernism proper. If, as we are apt to conceive it, the 1920s in Britain was no more than a waiting room for the delayed Modernist train, then more conspicuous figures such as Giles Gilbert Scott and Edward Maufe, who abstracted Gothic by diluting its historical character, making it a ‘stripped’ style, seem more relevant to the future than Comper. When the train came in, which for church design can be symbolised by Peter Hammond’s book *Liturgy and Architecture* of 1961, it included Comper on the basis of his ‘advanced’ liturgical planning rather than the more traditional plans of his semi-Modernist rivals.

Another ‘uncle’ was WR Lethaby, aged 63 in 1920 and still contributing his thoughts through lectures and journalism when Mackintosh was invisible and Voysey merely a tetchy eccentric. Lethaby had inspired the architecture of the LCC in the 1890s, and his influence extended there into the 1920s and beyond. Often dismissed as too Georgian, even the housing schemes created under the leadership of G Topham Forrest deserve reappraisal for their lack of pretentiousness and high quality of construction. Following the LCC style down to the end of the 1930s, we find remarkable designs such as the City Lit in Stukeley Street and St Martin’s School of Art (now cleaned and reborn as Foyles Bookshop) in Charing Cross Road, both of 1939, in which a steel frame is rationally expressed, but its brick cladding patterned with playful combinations of standard forms, while carvings indicating the building’s use appear at ground level. These buildings seem to be perfect expressions of what Lethaby saw as the potential for future architecture, rather than what was already happening before his death in 1931, described by him as ‘only another kind of design humbug to pass with a shrug. Ye olde modernist style – we must have a style to copy – what funny stuff this art is’.
Much historical effort has gone into defining which was the real Modernist train, and consequently we are apt to identify, if not pioneers of the 1920s, at least those who stood closest to the platform edge on the lookout for its arrival. The designers of the old St Martin’s, EP Wheeler and HFT Copper, are not among them, and among the categories of interwar architecture that have been identified over time, their brand of rational decorated construction, which has much in common with Goodhart-Rendel’s office building in North Street, Brighton of similar date, has fallen through the cracks of history altogether.

Another ‘uncle’, also, in Martin Green’s terminology, something of a ‘rogue’ in his rule-breaking, was Oliver Hill (33 in 1920), who by the whimsicality of his personal aesthetic approach, with colour co-ordinated rooms, evoked the 1890s while managing more successfully than most of his contemporaries to make a transition to Modernism, including its spatial creativity, an aspect that commentators such as HR Hitchcock and Pevsner felt was weak in the Modern Movement in Britain generally. It might seem the ultimate aestheticism to define a period by its use of colour rather than what are normally seen as more intellectually respectable aspects of form, yet this is probably the key to finding the unity of the 1920s, so far as there was one. Most of the generation preceding the Modernists, from Comper to Williams-Ellis, used bright strong interior colour in a new way that is found only in rare surviving interiors, and was absent from the printed record, with only a handful of exceptions. While not suppressed by Modernism in the 1930s, its exuberance of pattern was certainly curtailed, yet colour was a quality universal enough to ease the transition when the train came in.

By 1930, many of the architectural dandies of the previous decade, like several of their literary counterparts, found a new sense of purpose in linking style rebellion with an almost Christian Socialist conscience about the state of the nation, emerging rapidly as the patrons and performers of an identifiable European Modernism. Elizabeth Darling has made a significant contribution in linking the nightclubs of 1920s London to the dreams of concrete social architecture in the 1930s. Not only is the 1920s a period awaiting insight and analysis, but even the Modernism of the 1930s, which we think we know better, has much more variety of intention and form than is often recognised.

The problem remains of how to evaluate or position those who crossed the platform and boarded a different train to the familiar one. The St Martin’s building has been illustrated only once, on its completion, prior to its reemergence in the summer of 2014, yet with its attention to materiality and surface it seems more relevant to the architectural discourse in London now than, say, the Lawn Road Flats. This must surely be an indication that there is still a long way to go in rearranging our understanding of the history of the past 100 years.

References

A music room by Oliver Hill demonstrates his mastery of colour. The ceiling is covered in gold leaf

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Since 1896, The Architectural Review has scoured the globe for architecture that challenges and inspires. Buildings old and new are chosen as prisms through which arguments and broader narratives are constructed. In their fearless storytelling, independent critical voices explore the forces that shape the homes, cities and places we inhabit.

1 John Galsworthy, *The White Monkey*, 1924, Chapter 1. This passage was quoted by HS Goodhart-Rendel as a telling comment on the time.
7 See John Betjeman, ‘A Note on JN Comper, Heir to Butterfield and Bodley’, *Architectural Review*, vol 85, 1939, pp70-82.
The architecture of the United Kingdom, or British architecture, consists of an eclectic combination of architectural styles, ranging from those that predate the creation of the United Kingdom, such as Roman, to 21st century contemporary. England has seen the most influential developments, though Ireland, Scotland, and Wales have each fostered unique styles and played leading roles in the international history of architecture. Although there are prehistoric and classical structures in the United Alan Powers' two-part historical essay reveals World War One's repercussion on the maturation of Modernism and encourages us to re-evaluate, a century later, both the Modernist canon and its impact on British architecture. The 'missing years' of British architectural history extend both sides of 1914. As argued in History last month, the habit of looking for Modernist pioneers in this period has obscured other ways of seeing it. The result is that a large chunk of the story has disappeared from sight, despite its buildings looming large in cities and in almost every small-town post office or t Before the war, Britain maintained colonies all over the world, which provided valuable raw materials, manpower and strategic bases. By 1945, however, colonies were an expensive liability for Clement Attlee's Labour government. The United States' rising global influence and its opposition to imperialism made colonialism less politically viable, while Japan's wartime victories had destroyed Britain's imperial prestige. The Cold War added further complexities, as Britain attempted to insulate former colonies from the influence of the Soviet Union. In 1997 Hong Kong returned to Chinese administration. Though Britain still maintains overseas territories, the handover marked the final end of Britain's empire. British Architecture Post WWI. Battersea Power Station was designed in the brick cathedral style. It is now one of few existing examples in England of this once-common design style. Even after World War I, some superb buildings were raised in Britain. One of my favorites is the Hoover Building. The firm of Wallis, Gilbert, and Partners was renowned for its Art Deco designs. After the long misery of the Great Depression, with its widespread unemployment and decaying housing, came the catastrophic Second World War. Sure enough, the bombing soon began—it was worst for Britain in the nine months beginning around September 1940. A famous photograph shows St. Paul's Cathedral standing proudly amid the bombarded wreckage of the neighborhoods all around it.