

Situating the Red House

MARY MCAULIFFE
University of Michigan

In broad narratives of mid-nineteenth-century British architectural history, the Red House maintains a far greater iconic status than many of the large public projects of the time. Designed by architect Philip Webb for the noted Arts and Crafts reformer William Morris, and constructed in 1859, the house is still regarded as a pioneering example of Arts and Crafts values (straightforward construction methods, modest planning, convenient interior layout). The aim of this paper is twofold: firstly, to provide a brief review of the slight changes in the assessment of the house, prompted by shifts in the historiography of the modern movement; and secondly, to argue, through a sketch analysis of some of the house's spatial aspects, for a more attentive treatment to the particular physical and cultural context of artifacts, even within the constraints of broader historical surveys. Such attention, I would argue, would productively challenge the persistent tendency towards historical narratives based on the opposition between innovative and conservative tendencies.

THE RED HOUSE AND THE HISTORIANS

The Red House did not seem to figure prominently in accounts of British architecture until the end of the nineteenth century. As has been pointed out by historian Sir John Summerson, it received little critical attention from contemporary journals when it was built. There was little reason at that time as to why it should merit notice. It was a modest house, and the first independent commission given to its young architect. The client, William Morris, was a young bohemian of independent means, just a few years out of Oxford - not the major national figure he would become twenty years later. And Philip Webb, the architect, was notorious for his resistance to publicity, refusing to have any of his work published during his lifetime. But it would be overstating the case, as Summerson went on to argue, that its lack of national press coverage meant that the house had little or no contemporary influence. The circle of visitors it accommodated during the Morris family's brief six-year ownership included some of the most prominent artistic figures of the day. It was a social and artistic circle which would later attract an important group of clients around what became known as the Arts and Crafts Movement. Any accounts of life in the house under Morris's ownership, we owe to brief passages in the memoirs of members of

this artistic circle, by Georgiana Burne-Jones (wife of painter Edward Burne-Jones), and others.

Apart from Pre-Raphaelite biographies, the first critical evaluation of the architecture of the house may be found in Hermann Muthesius's *The English House (Das Englische Haus)* published in Berlin in 1904-5, in which he characterized the house as "the first private house of the new artistic culture, conceived as a unified whole inside and out, the very first example in the history of the modern house." (1) Muthesius's description of the house was accompanied by floor plans and a black-and-white photograph of the rear garden. It was not until 1936, however, and Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, with its significant subtitle, *From William Morris to Walter Gropius*, that the link between Morris's design reforms and later reforms in German industrial design and education exemplified by the German *werkbund* and the Bauhaus was made explicit. (2) (Muthesius himself, of course, was a key figure in this narrative thread). Pevsner cites the picturesque qualities of the house, the honest construction of its plain red brick walls, and the overlaid pointed and segmental arches of its window openings, mentioned previously. He also stresses its middle-class affiliations, its exterior expression of interior demands, the rustic simplicity of its interior, and the soundness rather than brilliance of its architect.

H-R Hitchcock, whose *Architecture. Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* successfully resists the temptation to emphasize nineteenth-century architectural history as prophetic of Modern Movement developments, may be the first survey historian to provide an architectural ancestry for the house. (3) In a chapter on High Victorian Gothic developments in England, Hitchcock notes the well-laid brick walls, the informality of the novel plan, the high roofs and red tile, the multi-arched window openings attended to by previous commentators. However, in accordance with the typological emphasis of the text, he connects these features to Butterfield's vicarages of the 1840's, and notes that Webb had worked on similar domestic projects while working (as did Morris) in the office of G. E. Street in the early 1850's. (4) In a later chapter on nineteenth-century Anglo-American domestic planning, Hitchcock expands on the important role played by the parsonage house in the early nineteenth century. As a model, the parsonage, by the efficiency of its domestic planning, offered a combination of economy, dignity,

and amenity, to a family of modest means. Hitchcock cites as examples, Butterfield's complexes of church, vicarage, and schools, such as Coalpit Heath and Baldersby St James developed from earlier Tudor Picturesque parsonages, noting their attention to the amenity of rooms, variety of window size and shape, and their relatively generous circulation. (5) Hitchcock concludes this chapter with the Arts and Crafts houses of Shaw and Voysey in the U.K., and Stanford White and Frank Lloyd Wright in the U.S. When he returns to refer to the Red House in the context of this discussion, it is to claim that it is "considerably less revolutionary than has sometimes been supposed." (6)

Hitchcock's placement of the Red House in the context of wider developments in domestic planning, based in particular on the model of the parsonage, set the terms of a revised dominant narrative in more recent histories. The first chapter of British historian Kenneth Frampton's *Modern Architecture. A Critical History* (1980) begins with a quote from Morris. (7) In this chapter, Frampton's account moves from the English Gothic Revival movement to the Arts and Crafts movement, culminating in the turn-of-the-century Garden City planning movement, and uses Morris as a central figure. He makes link between Pugin and the 'craft ideals' exemplified by the Red House, via Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite painters of Morris's acquaintance, also noting the precedents of Street and Butterfield's vicarages. Frampton's account adds to the prevailing narrative, brief references to the relevance of Morris's pre-Raphaelite intellectual milieu, and a new emphasis on house's sensitive siting and use of local materials. This passage is illustrated by the usual rear garden view of the house and its floor plans.

More specific recent treatments of the house have tended, in their expansion of the narrative conventions mentioned already, to suggest further lines of enquiry. In a 1986 article on the house, Peter Blundell-Jones clearly disagrees with the emphasis on functionality and autonomy promoted by commentators such as Muthesius and Pevsner. (8) He situates the house more forcibly in the intellectual context of Puginian and Ruskinian doctrines (both influential on Webb) and cites again Street and Butterfield's parsonages, illustrating Butterfield's Alvechurch rectory (1855), and Street's Church Cottages at Boyne Hill (1857) as architectural forebears. He also delineates the circumstances of the commission, and provides a clear analysis of the siting and spatial organization of the house, using Webb's original drawings and new color photographs. In his treatment of the house's critical reception, Blundell-Jones suggests a repeated overemphasis on generalized picturesque qualities, common to both the accolades of Arts and Crafts admirers, and the condescension of classicist critics like Summerson. Very pertinently, Blundell-Jones opens up the word 'function,' as applied to the house, to a historical reading involving aspects of symbolism, ritual and ceremony. This tantalizing suggestion, however, remains at the level of a general semantic redefinition, and doesn't animate any major new departures the specific analysis of the house. Phaidon's *Architecture in Detail* series devotes a volume to the Red House, copiously illustrated by photographs and Webb's drawings. (9) The volume opens with a loving introduction by Eric Hollamby, owner of the house since 1952, which insists on the significance of Morris's literary intent, citing aspects such as its location on Chaucer's pil-

grims' route to Canterbury. Again, these hints remain tentative and undeveloped.

The modifications traced here in the particular role played by the Red House in the plot of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century architectural histories, reflect the increasing influence of a broader cultural history on the narrative conventions of these histories. The houses's introduction, begun by Muthesius and circulated by Pevsner, as a revolutionary originator of Arts and Crafts principles, has been expanded to include its role as part of a wider currents of the domestic reform of bourgeois housing types. These shifts in the narrative, although significant, are attended by certain ambiguities: although no longer seen as completely ordinary and innovative work, the Red House continues to be illustrated more prominently (in lectures and books) than the parsonage and cottage models with which it is now usually linked, showing the persistence of the iconic pattern set by earlier modern movement histories of the 'instrumental' kind, to use Tafuri's term. Thus it continues, in representing a large part of the story of nineteenth-century domestic developments, to be linked with *innovation*. Paradoxically, it is also linked, implicitly at least, with *conservatism*, as typical of ongoing broader evolutions of modest domestic types. This conservative account, however, leaves unexplained both the specific attributes of the parsonage and other models to which the house is ostensibly related, and the specific transformations of such models the house might suggest. Thus, the enfolding of the house into a more complex cultural narrative has merely expanded an account based on successive innovations, to one based on the oscillation between innovation and conservative typicality. Using the proposal that any artifact effects a *specific transformation* of cultural practices and material, the remainder of my paper will be devoted to suggesting that two aspects of Webb's design might offer clues to a fuller reading of the Red House: its siting and garden design, and selected spatial relationships within the house.

RED HOUSE: GARDEN AND SITE

The most usual illustration of the Red House, a photograph of the rear garden side of the house from the south-west, shows a foreground of lawn with a herbaceous border arrangement - a layout reflecting developments in the garden design after Morris's brief tenure during the 1850s. This view does emphasize the close connection between the organization of the house and the lush amenity of the garden, a relationship far more intimate than that of the contemporary parsonage example and its small rear scullery yard. To piece together some idea of the intent behind the garden design, we could begin with Webb's earliest surviving site sketch. The L-shape of the house, with its stair tower projecting at the inside corner, is already evident, as are its immediate surroundings: a rural Kent site with an existing apple orchard (in which a clearing was to be made for building), the house's entry sequence and frontage to the main road from Upton, and the neighboring group of cottages in a hollow called Hog's Hole. In addition to ease of access to London (the recently built railway ran a few miles away through Upton) Morris and Webb looked for a site with mature vegetation. The ex-

isting orchard rooted the land in an old Kentish agricultural tradition. This clearing made for the house was not as extensive as it appears today, and included, in addition to the main garden to the rear, a narrow strip for lawn bowling (a favorite sport of Morris and his colleagues at Oxford) to the West of the house. The proximity of the orchard to this face of the house is remembered almost claustrophobically in many early descriptions, which involve laden apple trees despoiting their cargo through open windows in early Fall, and boisterous indoor games of pitching windfall apples across the upper level drawing room.

Completing the L-shape of the house, Webb drew a border emphasising its seclusion, and worked closely with Morris (who already had very clear ideas on garden design) on the choice of planting and landscaping. Flowering creepers, planted soon after the walls were constructed, are visible in Webb's elevation drawings, and appear to have overgrown its entire surface in Muthesius's later photographs. A well, connected to a more convenient water supply location in the kitchen by a pipe, and echoing the main materials of the house in miniature, became the focal point of the rear garden. Contemporary accounts of the garden detail a modest area sheltered by the apple trees, and bordered by flower-laden trellises. Georgiana Burne-Jones account of the garden is the most vivid:

In front of the house it was spaced formally into four little square gardens making a big square together: each of the smaller squares had a wattled fence round it with an opening by which one entered, and all over the fences rose grew thickly. The deep porches...were at the front and back of the house; the one at the back was practically a small garden-room. There was a solid table in it, painted red, and fixed to the wall was a bench where we sat and talked or looked out into the well-court, of which two sides were formed by the house and the other two by a tall rose-trellis.(10)

Perhaps a lecture entitled "Making the Best of It" (written by Morris in 1879, and given as a lecture to the Birmingham Society of Artists), will give us some clues as to his design for the gardens at Red House. His intention in this lecture was to suggest improvements in the design potential of the middle-class urban dwelling. Morris began with the small garden, suggesting that the modern taste for miniaturized landscape gardening with formal planting was misguided, and should be replaced by simple, orderly boundaries surrounding informal floral planting:

... the merest common sense should have taught them to lay out their morsel of ground in the simplest way, to fence it as orderly as it might be, one part from the other (if it be big enough for that) and the whole from the road, and then to fill up the flower-growing space with things that are free and interesting in their growth, leaving Nature to do the desired complexity, which she will certainly not fail to do if we do not desert her for the florist..." (11)

Color masses of flowers were to be of small wild varieties of roses, poppies, sunflowers and cornflowers. Surrounding fences were to be of hedge, stone, wood, or wattle material, never iron. The small

garden would thus be a secluded enclave, and should not imitate the wildness of nature, but look compatible with the house: "it should, in fact look like part of the house," divided "and made to look like so many flower-closes in a meadow, or a wood, or amidst the pavement." (12) Morris's illustrations and many Pre-Raphaelite paintings depict epic narratives in which figures are surrounded by the shallow bounded 'interiors' of such gardens.

The idyllic seclusion of the Red House's garden was offered to a steady trickle of house-guests during the Morris' early married years. Webb, Rossetti, Lizzie Siddal, the Burne-Jones' and others formed a kind of extended family to which its hospitality was offered. Accounts of the experience of arrival for weekend visits include being met by Morris at the country station at Abbey Wood, then driven uphill along three miles of winding road in a covered wagonette specially designed by Webb. The house's presence would be announced by the gateway past the row of cottages, and perhaps, over the treeline, by a metal weathervane, designed by Webb to crown the roof of the rear stairtower. This beacon used the graphic power of white paint against the sky, and juxtaposed Morris's initials WM with his father's family crest of a white steed. (A family crest purchased by Morris's businessman father, as was the privilege of relatively 'new' Victorian money.) The deep front entrance porch was intended to offer the hospitality of the house to the weekend 'pilgrims' from London, as an interlude in the Medieval epic journey whose theatrical staging had begun at Upton station, or perhaps before.

RED HOUSE: INTERIORS

The convenience and amenity of the Red House's L-shape plan and its openness to the South-East has been mentioned by many commentators. The kitchen of the house no longer lay in a dark basement, but on the southern end of the ground floor service wing - an innovation shared by the comparable contemporary vicarages. However, despite what modern-day commentators might regard as desirable orientation of living space towards the morning and afternoon sun, most of the rooms are oriented toward the north-western 'outside' leg of the L. The inner garden is almost completely surrounded by corridor and stair circulation space, and viewed on the move small leaded window lights, set deep in the wall.

Another feature that sets the Red House apart from its vicarage prototypes is the arrangement of its living space. The typical vicarage plan had downstairs living rooms and kitchen space, bedrooms upstairs, and a formal parlor off the entrance hallway for conducting parish business. In the Red House, the major living space on the ground floor was the dining room, occupying the corner of the plan, and served by the kitchen wing. The main drawing room was located on the upper floor, over the dining room. The remainder of the ground floor plan was given over to a guest bedroom on the north and the service wing to the west. The remainder of the upper floor was devoted to servants' bedrooms in the west wing, and the Morris' own bedroom and dressing suite in the north wing of the house. The house can be seen then as three tower houses, consisting of a living/dining room core at the corner, a bedroom north wing,

in front, and a service wing to the west - a subtle hierarchy visible in Webb's manipulation of the roof surfaces.

The upper level drawing room, immediately off the stair as it approached the upper landing, was the focus of much of the house's initial decoration. The door opened onto a bay window/niche, pushed outward to catch the western sun, with leaded lights in all directions. Some of Morris's furniture from his previous London lodgings was moved and redesigned to fit the rooms of his new house. These settles, wardrobes and sideboards were first attempts by Morris and his friends (already known as 'The Firm') to produce painted furniture for modest houses using Medieval craft principles. One such settle, with images of Dante and Beatrice by Rossetti on its upper doors, was positioned in the drawing room between the door and the bay window. Wood-panelled wainscotting along the wall linked the furniture and the window recess. Wall paintings by Rossetti, of the wedding feast of Sir Degrevant, taken from Arthurian legend (with portraits of Morris and his new wife Jane Burden as the wedding couple) were completed on either side of the settle, above the wainscotting. Other decorative schemes for the dining room, bedrooms and hallway, based on either Medieval or Ancient Epic tales, were completed, using painting, stained glass and tapestry and embroidered wall-hangings.

To facilitate the decoration of the drawing room, the Morris' and their early guests congregated the room at the other end of the north wing upper floor, which, with the drawing room, bookended the couple's living/bedroom suite. This was to be Morris's own studio and office - he had ambitions at the time of being a painter, like many of his colleagues. It occupied a position of unusual amenity in the house, at the end of circulation routes, with exposure to the east, south over the garden, and into the cleft in the roof between the two pitches. Georgiana Burne-Jones describes it a "a most cheerful place...with windows looking three ways and a little horizontal slip of a window over the door, giving upon the red-tiled roof of the house where we could see birds hopping about all unconscious of our gaze." (13) Morris's own desk to be placed in the room's inner sanctum, in front of a window looking south over the garden, over the garden porch below. On emerging from the seclusion of this study, Morris could view along the wide upper corridor towards framed views of the living room and its bay window. Jane Morris's embroidery stand still occupies this window recess (Morris himself had taught her to embroider) and she would sit in the window seat with her handiwork in the mornings, completing the tableau of domestic industry and virtue. Much has been written about enigmatic voyeurism of the Pre-Raphaelite images of women (narratives using the images of the women in their own circle, including Jane Morris, not as portraiture, but for idealized narrative effect), and the architecture of the Red House participates in staging similar framed views of domestic life.(14)

CONCLUSION

When he left the house in 1865, Morris did so because the proceeds from his father's copper-mining stocks, the source of his independent wealth, had dwindled, forcing him to commit to making a living. He then chose to develop the furniture-making activities of 'The Firm,' until that time an enjoyable hobby, into an organized business. To do this, he chose to move back to London, although not without considering the possibility of establishing a workshop with Burne-Jones on a site near the Red House. Webb prepared a design for an extension to the Red House, to accommodate the Burne-Jones family. This design, which extended the house around the rear garden, and converted Morris's upstairs studio into a new drawing room for the Burne-Jones', was not executed. At this time, Morris elected a future in commerce and the city, and his friends quickly began to liken the idyllic years at the Red House to a memory of early childhood. Although Morris never returned, the memory of the Red House as an experimental theater revealing the heroicism of bourgeois domestic life, remained with him, testament to the power of an artifact Rossetti described as "more a poem than a house."

NOTES

- ¹Muthesius, H., *The English House*. New York: Rizzoli, 1979, p17.
- ²Pevsner, N., *Pioneers of the Modern Movement. From William Morris to Walter Gropius*. London: Faber & Faber, 1936.
- ³Hitchcock, H.-R., *Architecture. Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958.
- ⁴Ibid, p178.
- ⁵Ibid, p257
- ⁶Ibid, 259
- ⁷Frampton, K., *Modern Architecture. A Critical History*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1980.
- ⁸Blundell-Jones, P., "Masters of Building: Red House," *Architects Journal*. Jan 15, 1986, pp36-56.
- ⁹Hollamby, E., *Red House. Philip Webb. 1859. (Architecture in Detail)*. London: Phaidon Press.
- ¹⁰Burne-Jones, G., *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, Vol 1. London: The MacMillan Company, 1904, p212.
- ¹¹Morris, W., "Making the Best of It," *The Collected Works of William Morris*. Vol 22. New York: Russell & Russell, 1966, p87
- ¹²Ibid, p91
- ¹³Burne-Jones, op cit, p211.
- ¹⁴See, for example, Callen, A., *Women Artists of the Arts and Crafts Movement 1870-1914* (New York: Pantheon, 1979) and Pollock, G., *Vision and Difference* (London, New York: Routledge, 1988).