Following our recent publication of a paper on John Voelcker (1927–72) one of the assistants in his rural practice submitted this other perspective of the architect and his work.

John Voelcker, Team 10 founder member: a view from the practice

Peter Carolin

Aldo van Eyck, in an interview twenty-five years after John Voelcker died [1], remembered him as follows:

> *There were, of course, other highly interesting men in Team 10, for their personality and intellect and passion; one of them was John Voelcker. He really thought about the great problems of urbanism. He was one of the first people, in Aix already, who talked about quantity, number and identity and in such a way that I thought 'hey, now I have a new scale; somebody is tuned in rather differently, with a completely other approach* [...]'
>
> *He wasn't the kind of person to organise himself to build. He did build several things, but not much. He was younger* [...] *and anyway with the kind of ideas he had it wasn't easy to hook onto British building practice. His ideas went very far, though they were not utopian. John was a quintessential Team 10 thinker. He was urbanistically the best of the Team 10 thinkers, by far. He knew a lot, he was interesting, inclined and open.*[1]

High praise. However, apart from The Zone (discussed below) presented at Aix, the evidence upon which van Eyck based his assessment is nowhere fully documented. Scraps can be found in the *Team 10 Primer*[2] and *Team 10 Meetings 1953–1984*,[3] both edited by Alison Smithson, and in Risselada and van den Heuvel's splendid *Team 10 1953–81, In Search of a Utopia of the Present*,[4] but most are hidden in the group's collective statements or lost both in the disastrous fire that destroyed its archive[5] and in the conversations between Voelcker and the two Dutch members, van Eyck and Bakema, to whom he was particularly close. Thus Voelcker remains a puzzling figure – downgraded (in respect of his contribution to Team 10) by Alison Smithson in the later edition of the *Primer*[6] and yet clearly respected by Reyner Banham who dedicated a book to his memory.[7] Struggling to unravel the mystery of Team 10's vanishing man, the temptation is always to concentrate on three works – The Zone, the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition and the Lyttelton house – and Voelcker's surviving writings and to ignore or misunderstand the significance of the context in which he worked.

In the twenty years between graduating from the AA and his death, Team 10 took up little of Voelcker's time. Most of that period was spent running what he referred to as his 'small provincial practice'[8]



1 Architect, builder and client. John Voelcker, Mr Pollard and Humphrey Lyttelton on site, Arkley, 1959

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supplemented by writing and teaching.[9] The other members of Team 10 had more conventional – usually metropolitan – practices and, even in the England of the late '50s and '60s, Voelcker's rural practice with its mix of cottage amenity upgrades, dairy units and fruit cold stores was an oddity.[10] So what, outside Team 10, did he achieve and why is he so little known?

The Zone

If there is one project with which Voelcker is indelibly linked, it is The Zone *[2a–b]*. One of five 'grids'[11] presented at CIAM in Aix-en-Provence in 1953, The Zone was a fourth and fifth year thesis undertaken with two fellow AA students, Pat Crooke and Andrew Derbyshire,[12] in 1951–52. On 120 sheets, the three drew up their proposal for a seventy-two square mile 'micro-region' set in Hertfordshire on land 'falling into and draining into the Lea Valley'. The area contained a diversity of agriculture with 'extended farming on the higher ground, intensive growing in the valleys and mixed holdings in between. The industry [...] is light engineering and only dependent on good means of access for raw materials and on transport for taking away the finished products, and service industry, storing, marketing and distributing agricultural products.'[13] Agriculture was a key component and, in a curious way, the proposed mix of farming and light industry was much the same in the area of Kent where Voelcker was later to practise.

The Zone's population was set at 72,000 – of whom 60,000 were in the city at its centre. Reacting against the town/country separation created by green-belt policies,[14] the three students adopted 'a dead-pan analytical framework' in which 'qualitative differences between groups of people would provide the differentiation in the Zone structure'.[15] They started their analysis with the individual and the family group. 'The dwelling had for us a great emotional, and perhaps sentimentalised, importance. We felt that [...] the form of repeated dwellings should determine the form of social extensions to the dwelling.' Looking back, Voelcker was critical of many aspects of this huge project, describing the method of design and organisation as 'very schematic' and a 'dramatic over-simplification [...] Nevertheless the method showed us that it is possible and necessary to find a method of work through which any environment can be ordered, through which every part [...] has its own quality as a place, and through this, a value to every other part.'[16]

The gestation of The Zone was much influenced by conditions at the AA, where post-war staff shortages and the presence of ex-servicemen led to a certain freedom and much mixing between years. It was this experience which made Voelcker such a strong proponent of the 'vertical' atelier system which, as he later observed, was a feature of the Beaux-Arts system.[17] Searching for guidance, the three students called on Arthur Korn, Ernö Goldfinger and Ronald Jenkins and were 'uplifted' by a visit from the Smithsons.[18] Among other background influences were Rudolf Wittkower's *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* and Le Corbusier's *Modulor* – the second volume of which, published in 1958, was to include Crooke's sketch of a modulor monkey *[3]*.[19]

Following The Zone's completion, the MARS (Modern Architectural Research) group asked its authors if they would present it as part of the UK's contribution at Aix the following year. Voelcker whittled down the 120 drawings to a 'grid' of eighty drawings based on the format devised by the ASCORAL (*Assemblée de constructeurs pour une rénovation architecturale*) group.[20] Nearly twenty-five years later, four years after Voelcker's early death, Reyner Banham cited The Zone as the earliest example of the relationship between academe and megastructure.[21] He pointed out that, because it was largely concerned with agriculture, not all of the project could be seen as 'proto-megastructure' – although a substantial part of the urban portion was contained in a single complex multi-storey residential structure.

This is tomorrow

In 1956 there was one project which sits strangely with the rest of Voelcker's work. This was his collaboration with the artists Richard Hamilton and John McHale as Group Two in the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition at London's Whitechapel Gallery.[22] Banham later asserted that Group Two's installation was 'the first Pop-Art manifestation to be seen in any art gallery anywhere in the world'[23] but he was silent on its spatial and constructional evolution. The art historian John-Paul Stonard has claimed that: 'Although Voelcker played an important role, the combined interests of McHale and Hamilton largely determined Group Two's contribution.'[24] Construction drawings for the screens upon which the displays were mounted exist but nothing is known about the evolution of the intriguing grid which formed the basis for their disposition.[25]

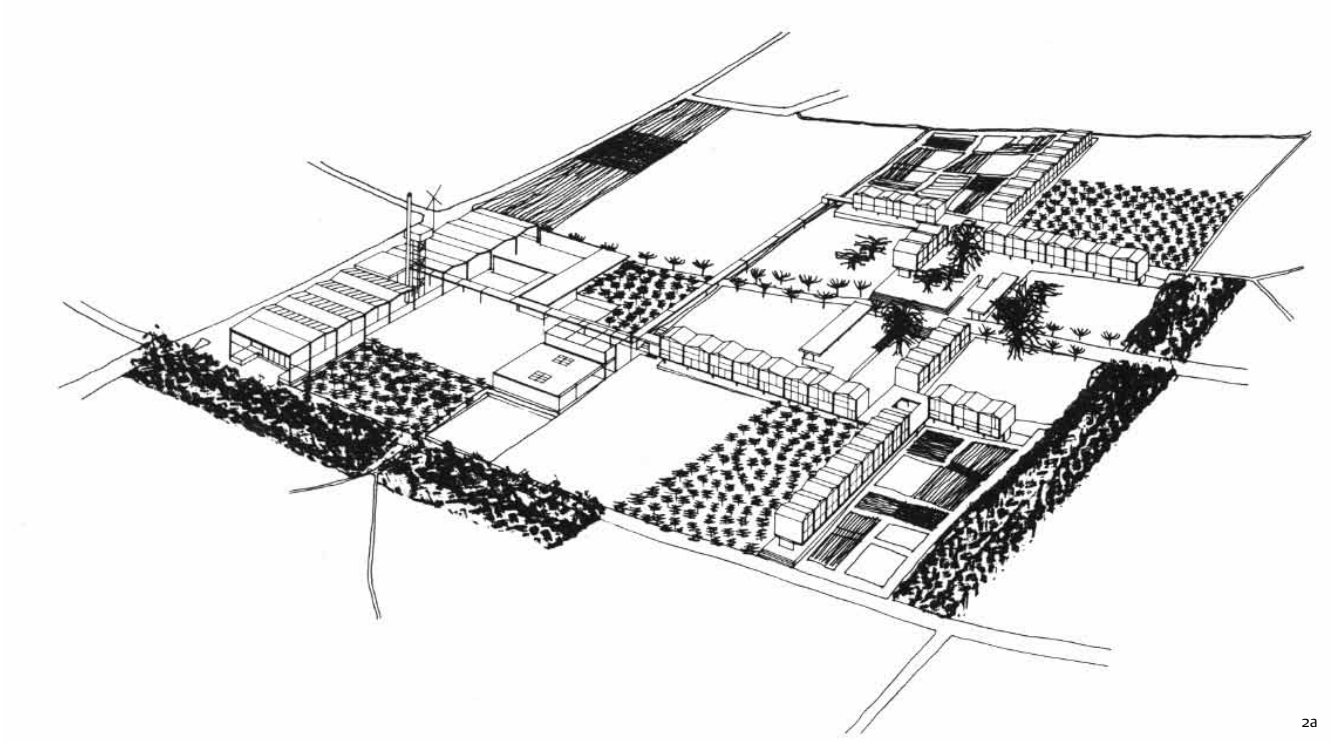
Rural practice

On graduating, Voelcker went to work for Farmer & Dark on the design of electricity generating stations, chiefly Marchwood at Southampton. He was there for a year, coming to the conclusion: 'how very little knowledge I had about building construction, architectural science, and office organisation'.[26] Always 'independently minded', he left Farmer & Dark to set up in practice in Kent and managed to get some part-time teaching at the Medway College of Art in Rochester. Voelcker had a peripatetic childhood, but his wife, Ann's, family came from Kent. Staplehurst, the small village they first settled in, is now greatly expanded but in those days it was a distinct community.

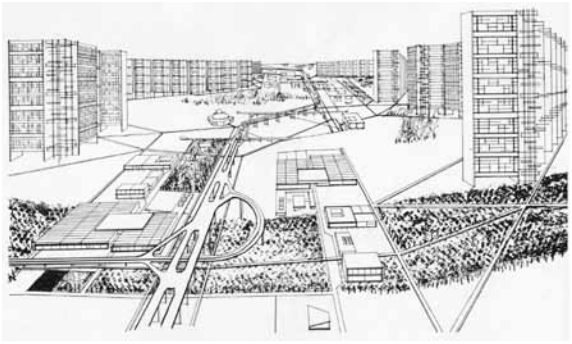
Five years after setting up on his own, Voelcker wrote for *The Architects' Journal* on 'The small country practice':

> *The choice of how to work as an architect must lie somewhere between the extremes of a large public office in a city where a routine develops from the building programme, and the minute individual do-it-yourself (typewriter, stenorette, car, Cowley level, gum boots) outfit where no routine is ever possible because there are perhaps*

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2a

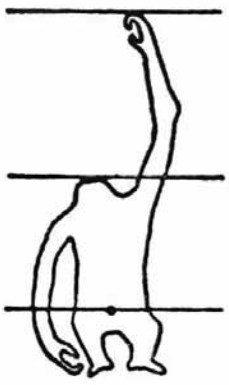


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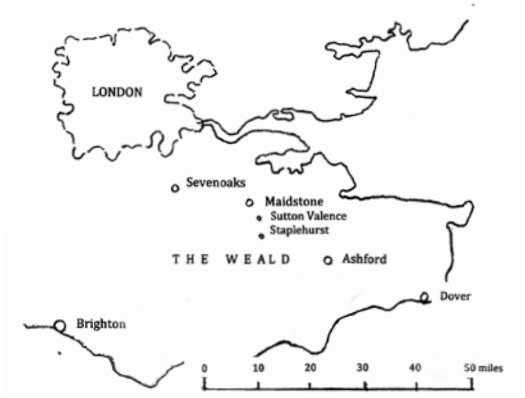
2 The Zone, 1951–2. Student final thesis with Crooke and Derbyshire
a Rural unit
b City view. Cited by Banham as an early example of megastructure

3 Pat Crooke's modulor monkey

4 The practice area. The office opened in Staplehurst and then moved to Sutton Valence



3



4

thirty completely different jobs running at once with an average duration of three months [...]

Sometimes [...] *I spend days floundering in waterlogged Wealden clay, scratching details on sodden floorboards, or, with more enthusiasm than experience, demonstrating how concrete blocks can be laid* [...] *Other times I become enmeshed in the city, writing articles as a means of keeping up to date technically, teaching as a way of keeping alive intellectually* [...] *Best times, I have the balance of both, using the city, working and living in the country.* [...]

For the time being I believe that there is a real need for country architects because agriculture is becoming mechanised, even industrialised, quietly, but at a pace which already puts the building industry to shame. [...] *People are mobile; moving from farms into agricultural subcontracting and servicing industries, moving into the towns and cities. New buildings and groups of buildings are needed urgently to transform and replace the outworn and worn-out forms of farmstead and village.* [...]

In the country it is still possible for the architect to become involved in all kinds of building. He is not a high level tech-man nor is he a luxury, his clients include stockmen, gypsies, greengrocers, farmers and bricklayers. I believe that this involvement is essential for architecture and that much of it [...] *has been lost to those who work in the cities.*

For those who think that architecture is a function of living and not merely a means of expression I can recommend a spell of country practice. I shall try the cities again someday.[27]

Apart from two houses, an exhibition structure in London, a farm building in Cornwall and another in Sussex, Voelcker's work was confined to Kent *[4]*. He once described the area as follows:

I have my office in a small village about five miles to the south of Maidstone, the county town of Kent [...] *By chance* [...] *this situation is extremely favourable, to the east and south my boundaries are the sea, to the north the River*

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Thames. Road communications are good and [my] *work is concentrated in an ellipse 120 miles from east to west and 50 miles from north to south. The geographical centre of this subarea is the Weald of Kent, a broad valley extending from Sevenoaks to the Romney Marsh. This is a fruit and hop growing area with milk, beef and sheep farming toward the eastern end. On the higher ground toward the north there is arable farming, grain and potatoes, and to the north-east* [...] *there is an area of intensive vegetable cropping. In addition there are the usual agricultural supporting enterprises, pigs and poultry.*[28]

To begin with, work was limited, consisting of the modernisation of agricultural dwellings (providing, with grant aid from seven local rural district councils, basic kitchen and bathroom facilities) and conversions. On the former, the first task was quickly to assess the internal condition and servicing and do a measured survey. Back in the office, a very simple single-sheet working drawing would be completed and a specification written to accompany the standard clauses on workmanship. Details were unnecessary. Conversions and extensions were rather more elaborate affairs.

The practice expands

In 1957 the government introduced the Farm Improvement Scheme which provided direct grant aid toward the construction of farm buildings. Later, and important in this area of Kent, the grant aid was extended to fruit enterprises under the Horticultural Improvement Scheme. The introduction of these grants stimulated farmers to construct the farm buildings so badly needed and, on account of the constructional conditions imposed, provided Voelcker with a considerable amount of work. Ann Voelcker, herself an AA graduate and architect, assisted with typing in the evenings and was her husband's constant support and sounding-board.

By 1962 the practice had expanded to employ two or three (usually recently qualified) assistants, a student and a clerk of works with a part-time assistant to cover the vast number of jobs spread around the county.[29] A local engineer and estimator were employed for some projects. In this year, the Voelckers moved from the small house in Staplehurst to a much larger, former farmhouse at Sutton Valence, with a magnificent view over the Weald. There was more room for the family, the expanding office and the cars.

For the period between 1959 and 1968, there are 277 surviving job sheets – an average of around thirty a year and, at its height, around 1963, nearly double that.[30] Managing this growth and the shift from primarily small projects to a mix of small and large was a source of concern to Voelcker. But he was convinced that if architects were 'to be able to maintain any position in the building industry, they must be sufficiently flexible in their organisation to encompass anything from the addition of a bathroom to the development of a region'.[31] From this it followed that he was also anxious not to be typecast as a specialist in agricultural buildings – 'specialisation inevitably leads to the formation of technicians, or in the case of architects, technocrats'.[32] Commissions for other building types gradually came in, notably some houses, a primary school and two offices.

Designing for agriculture

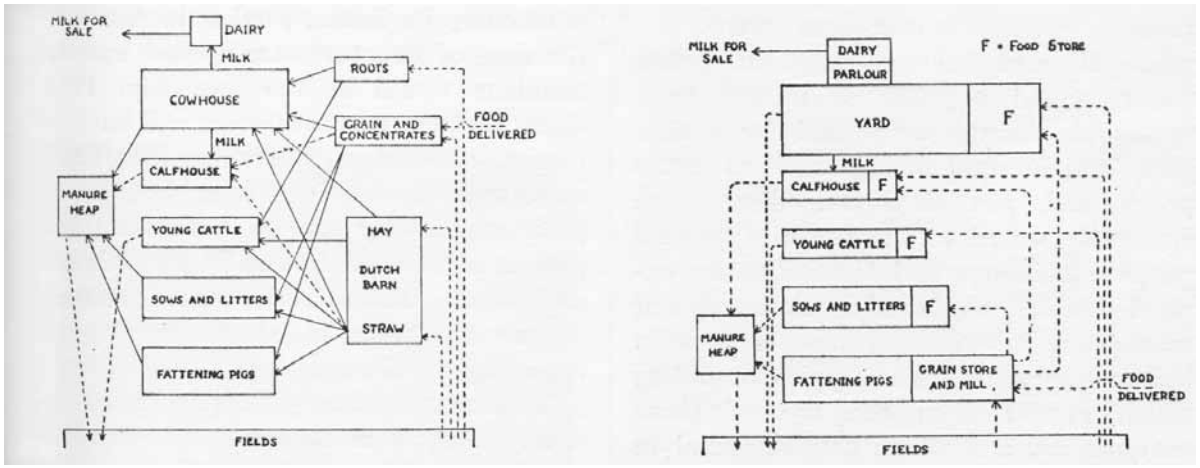
Immersing himself in this agricultural context, Voelcker familiarised himself with the impact of the war-time growth in agricultural production, with the post-war concern for continuing food security and with the impact of mechanisation.[33] He was well aware of the likely impact of US-type 'agribusiness' and the demands of supermarkets for perfect, packaged produce. The old timber barns and covered yards with their internal timber posts were completely unsuitable for 'mucking-out' by tractors and so, too, were the small yards between farm buildings – entire farms were being rebuilt around more efficient movement and tractor turning circles *[5]*. Cows, usually milked by several hands, were now looked after by a single dairyman in a mechanised milk parlour *[6]*.[34] Hops, previously picked by London's 'East Enders' during their annual holiday,[35] were now processed by machines in large sheds and apples were stored in new cold stores for gradual release to the supermarkets.

Voelcker recognised the need for extreme economy in the construction of farm buildings and considered the simple long-span structures developed in the immediate post-war years to be an effective answer to the farmers' needs. But, as farming grew more sophisticated, he (and others) grew increasingly concerned that farm buildings were not meeting rising aesthetic concerns and functional requirements. Meanwhile, the administrator of the Improvement Schemes, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, continued to dispense grants without the benefit of the kind of research undertaken in Scandinavia, Germany and the Netherlands. Collaborating with others, he set up a consortium to develop an open system of frame, cladding and other components and attracted the attention of the editors of *The Architectural Review*. 'Farm Buildings'[36] – a ten-page exposition of contemporary building for agriculture – was meant to be followed by another, also by Voelcker, on 'progressive agricultural opinions [...] leading to positive proposals for better components and [...] buildings, functionally and aesthetically'. It never appeared.

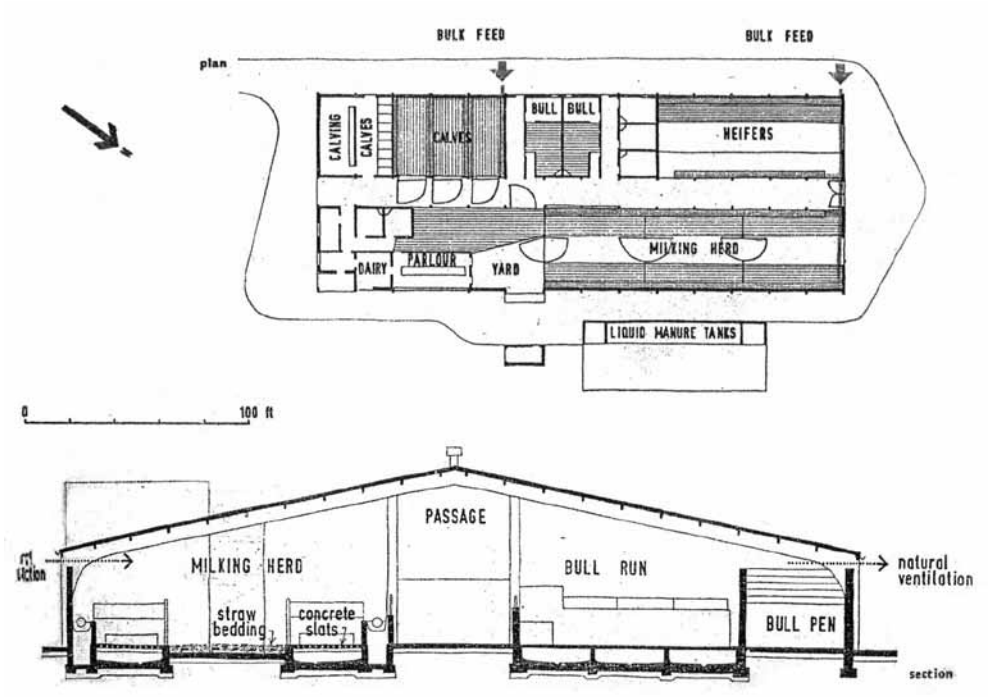
Agricultural buildings

The practice was involved in every local type of agriculture building from pig pens to sheep dips, and complete dairy farm units to a sheep sales ring. Two of the early farms, Blackwall[37] *[7]* and Goodcheap, were on the Hinxhill Estate, near Ashford. In both cases, an original oak-framed barn was retained as a feed store. At Goodcheap, on a sloping site, the new covered yard was sited below the barn – thus allowing feed to be supplied to the mangers by a skip raised and lowered electrically and running the length of the yard on a monorail suspended from the standard precast concrete frame. Costs had to be kept very low so lower walls were always in six-inch blockwork, upper

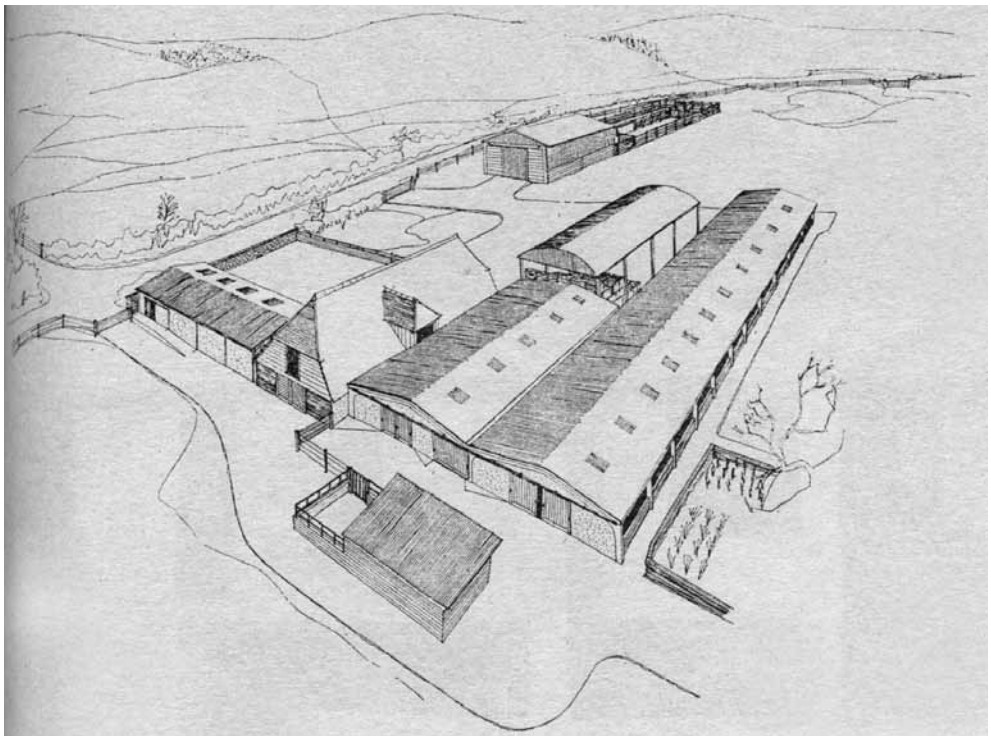
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5



6



7

5 The key diagram in Voelcker's 1960 *Architectural Review* article. Left, traditional farmyard with 17 daily and 10 occasional movement lines. Right, improved layout with two daily and 14 occasional movements

6 Experimental cattle unit, Bodiam, 1961. Designed to reduce labour through mechanical feeding, handling, recording and cleaning. 100 milk cattle, 60 fatstocks and heifers, 2 bulls and calves. Not built *(Job architect: Edward Lane)*

7 Blackwall Farm, Hinxhill, improvements, 1960–1. With the exception of the closed and open barns and the shed at the top, all the buildings were designed by Voelcker. 1000 sheep and 120 beef cattle were accommodated. No longer in operation *(Assistants: Edward Lane and Peter Carolin)*

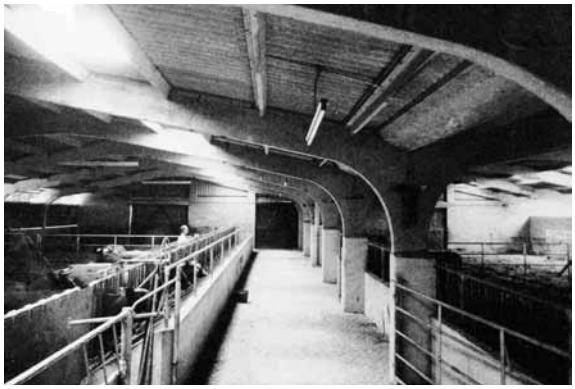
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cladding and roofs in asbestos cement sheeting, gates and rails in galvanised steel tube *[8]*. Only the simple western red cedar or pressure-impregnated pine doors and screens were purpose-made.

Voelcker's most significant client was Rudi Sternberg (later Lord Plurenden). Major projects for this colourful entrepreneur-cum-farmer included two huge grain and potato stores in Tenterden and a showcase 120-cow dairy unit in Bethersden *[9]*. Supported by massive grants, the latter incorporated four covered yards, two collecting yards, two silage towers, a concentrates store with automatic feeding augers running under a central walkway/viewing platform between the yards and double 'herringbone' milking parlours. Ancillary livestock and storage buildings were subsequently added to this huge unit.

There was a certain nobility about the great covered yards and dairy units – especially in their unclad state, with the elegant concrete frames fully exposed. But, architecturally, it was perhaps the sheep sales ring in the Ashford livestock market that was the most interesting agricultural building *[10a–c]*. The ten-sided plan with the auctioneer's rostrum, raked seating, sheep ring and entrance was enclosed in blockwork walls and plywood panels and covered with a timber roof engineered by Richard Hobin. Like the farm buildings, this 'basic' (and distinctly unphotogenic) building worked well.

Visiting Voelcker's farms today can be a sad experience. Many are no longer in use – barn doors swing in the wind, covered yards are filled with decaying vehicles and sheep-dips hidden under brambles. The sounds of tractors and cattle are nowhere to be heard – it is the distant rumble from motorways that fills the background together with the swish of the high-speed Eurostar trains, the Ashford station for which now occupies the livestock market site. EC agriculture policies and globalisation have changed Kent, the 'Garden of England'.



8



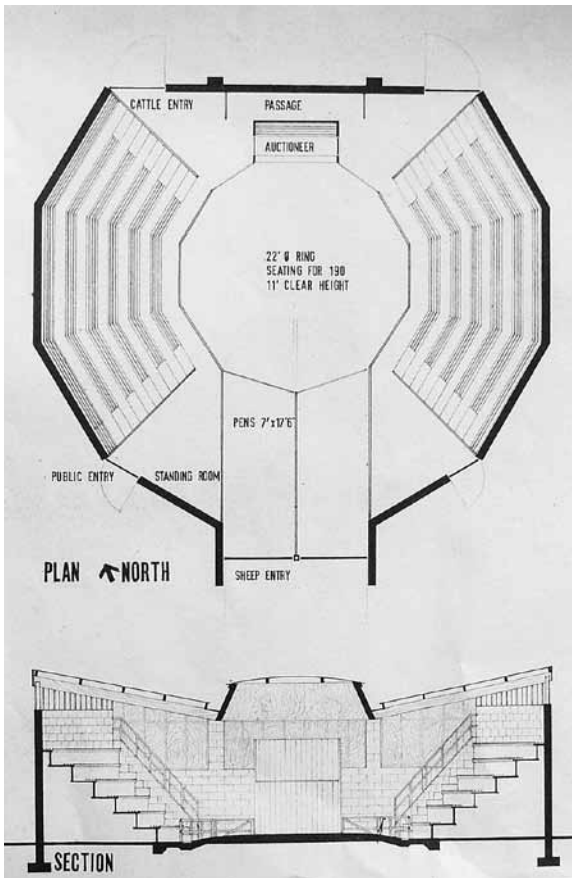
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10a

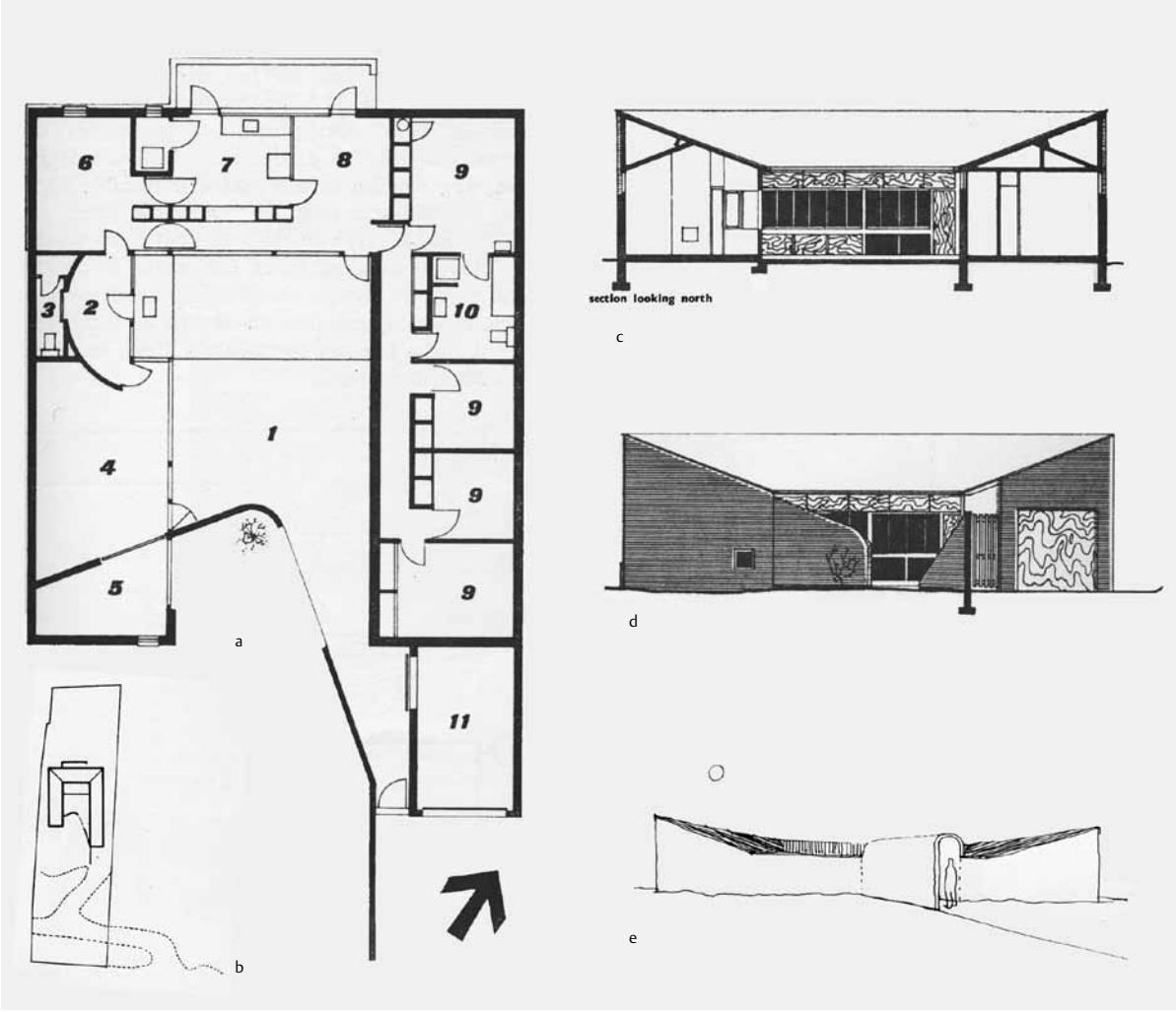


10b



10c

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11a–e

8 Blackwall covered yard interior. Two large concrete portal frame sheds combined with a tractor route asymmetrically located to provide a shared feeding passage

9 The largest project. The Sternberg dairy unit at Plurenden for 150 cattle, 1965. This unit was used by its owner as a marketing showcase *(Job architect: Jeffrey Cuthbert)*

10 Ashford sheep sales ring, 1964. Demolished for the Eurostar station *(Job architect: Jonathan Greig)*
a Exterior cladding in concrete blockwork and stained plywood
b Interior. Built on a minimal budget with precast concrete seating and no heating John Voelcker, sons and wife Ann seated in top row
c Plan and section

11 Lyttelton house, Arkley, Herts, 1959. Demolished following Lyttelton's death in 2008
a Plan
1 court
2 entrance hall
3 lavatory
4 living room
5 studio
6 dining room
7 kitchen
8 playroom
9 bedroom
10 bathroom
11 garage
b Site plan
c Section
d South elevation
e Voelckers's early sketch emphasises the client's desire for privacy

Houses

The basis for the 1953 move into private practice, a 'commission for a house, which fell through because of inability to control costs'[38] was almost certainly a house in Highgate published in *Architectural Design* under the rather provocative heading of 'The New Formalism'.[39] But Voelcker's second house design – for the jazz trumpeter Humphrey Lyttelton – did get built, at Arkley, Hertfordshire [11a–e, 12a–b].[40] Now demolished, it is the work for which he is generally known. Lyttelton's obsession with privacy accounts for the introverted courtyard plan and the high-level windows on the outer side walls. The articulation of the external area into public approach, shared courtyard and private garden – and the way the garden walls, with their raking copings, articulate these spaces, while preserving privacy – is simple and effective.

The house occupies a significant place in English planning history. Consent for construction was refused on aesthetic grounds by the planning authority, Barnet Urban District Council. Somewhat courageously, Lyttelton decided to appeal and the case became a cause-célèbre in both architectural and planning circles.[41] Most of the council's case was based on the need to protect the neighbours (none of whom had objected) from the 'austere' elevations and 'anti-social' atmosphere of the design and so on.[42] The clerk to the council claimed that, with a

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small internal alteration, it could easily be converted into a stable. Voelcker, the rural practitioner, replied 'I don't think you could get the horses and cows in there, for a start'. Lyttelton won his appeal and he and his architect were selected by *The Architects' Journal* as two of the eleven Men (no women) of the Year 1959: 'For typifying the determined client with faith in his architect, and the architect with conviction, who were prepared to fight against repressive planning control.'[43]

Later in the year, Voelcker presented the newly completed house at the CIAM conference in Otterlo. This was one of only two conferences that he attended to be fully published. His was by far the most modest of the schemes shown and he used it as a basis for discussing the problem of the house which, as a type, is repeated the greatest number of times and 'in its embryonic form [...] contains every function of a big city'.[44]

A few years later, Reyner Banham featured the Lyttelton house in *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*.[45] There, it sits strangely in the company of buildings such as Stirling and Gowan's Ham Common flats and the Smithsons' Sugden House, completed three years earlier, just fifteen miles away, in Watford.[46] But in the directness of its response to internal and external conditions, the simplicity of its construction and its use of standard components, the Lyttelton house might, perhaps, be seen as a Brutalist building.[47]

There were a few other houses by the practice but photographs exist of only two in which Voelcker was closely involved.[48] The first, in 1960, was for the Conservative politician Martin Lindsay and his wife. With a view of the English Channel at St Margaret's Bay, near Dover, it opened out onto a deck overlooking a circular sunken-garden. With its roof terrace, flat roof and white roughcast rendered walls it had echoes of the 1930s *[13a–b]* and was later complemented by a semi-circular garden pavilion *[13c]*. The second, two years later, was the Argles house set on a slope in Sutton Valence, with a magnificent view over the Weald *[14]*. With its locally sourced bricks, cedar boarding, shingle roof and its traditional form, it exemplified (it is now altered), far better than the Lindsay house, the modesty and economy of Voelcker's approach.

Other projects and buildings

Besides the individual houses there were four housing schemes designed by Voelcker. The first and second, in 1955, were two of a group 'prepared by members of the MARS group for presentation to CIAM 10'.[49] In the first, *[15]* groups of two to ten dwellings, orientated to east and west or south, 'extend the existing rural pattern [...] of a number of adjoining or closely-related cottages owned by a farm and tenanted by the labour'. A shed by the entrance to the group accommodates cycles and communal equipment. Each dwelling has an enclosed garden and shares a common orchard or green. A standard agricultural precast concrete frame with an asbestos cement sheet roof covers each three-bedroom dwelling, the cost of which is two-hundred times a


12a


12b


13a

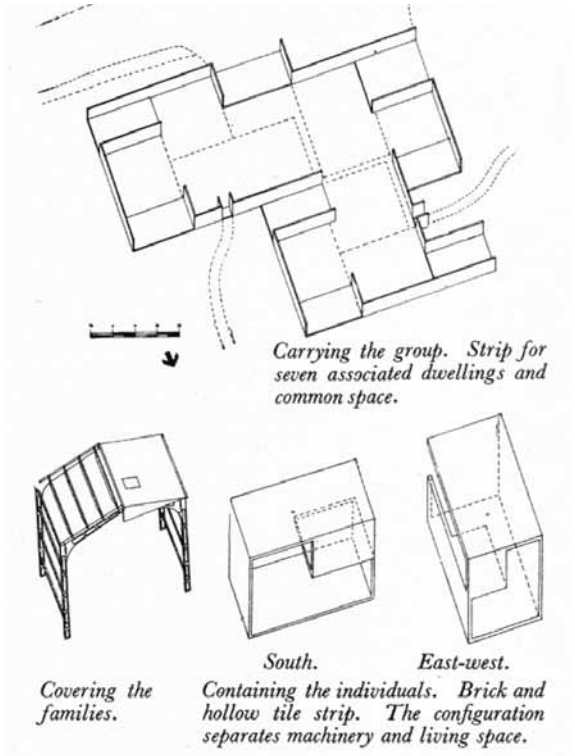

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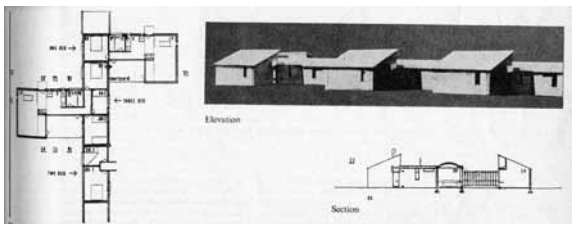
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14



15



16



17a



17b

farm worker's average weekly wage. The group is built in a continuous strip of mass concrete or concrete blocks chosen to establish 'the completeness of each group, and equally of each dwelling [...] once joined the strips can neither be added to nor subtracted from: they are finite. [...] The strip motive modulates space from man-made to phenomenal, from individual to collective'. The 'idea' is 'that there is continuity in all things, in space and time, in customs and techniques. To become comprehensible this continuum must be justly articulated as the particular instant and circumstance demands'.

The second of Voelcker's two CIAM 10 projects [16] was originally an entry to an ABS (Architects' Benevolent Society) competition. Based on a bedroom spine linked to living space by a services block, it stood out from the schemes by the other members of the English group (Howell and Partridge, the Smithsons and Stirling) which, superficially, had a certain similarity. The third project, near Trottiscliffe, for a speculative house-builder, was for detached houses on a gently sloping site. After the initial design, it appeared to falter and no further work was done on it. Passing through the area some time later, Voelcker was surprised to see it constructed – recognisably to his design. The fourth project – in Maidstone,[51] for the local authority, around 1966 – was initially over-designed. The changes arising from the cost-cutting exercise were deeply regretted by Voelcker and added to his difficulties at the time when the practice was failing.

By 1962 Voelcker had attracted the attention of the Kent County Architect and was commissioned to design the first stage of a primary school for Staplehurst [17a–b]. His preferred scheme, in which the classrooms were concentrated round the assembly hall, was rejected by the County because the hall had no outlook.[52] In the built scheme, the classrooms are placed in a linear arrangement. Years later, in 2004, Erskine, who liked the school, remembered that 'the Smithsons shot him down in flames, as they did at other times with other people'.[53] The building is much altered today.

12 Lyttelton House
a View from the garden
b View into the south-facing court

13 Lindsay house, St Margaret's Bay, 1960 and 1964 *(Assistant: Edward Lane)*
a View from the east
b View from the west
c Garden house

14 Argles house, Sutton Valence, 1962. Now extended and altered *(Assistants: Peter Carolin and Jonathan Greig)*

15 CIAM village housing, 1955. A cluster of seven dwellings, each covered by an agricultural frame sheltering a two-storey, three-bedroom unit with a private garden and shared green or orchard space

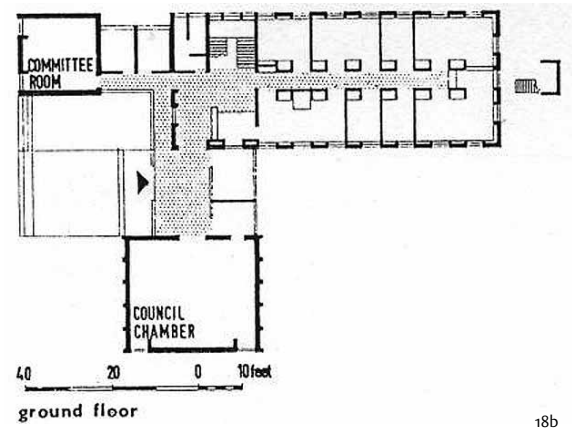
16 CIAM village housing, 1956. Typical unit plan and section. The bedrooms acted as a spine off which service wings linked living spaces, forming south-facing courtyards

17 Primary school, Staplehurst, 1963. The Smithsons disapproved but Ralph Erskine liked it. Now much changed and extended *(Assistants: Jonathan Greig and Peter Carolin)*
a Classroom wing
b Assembly/dining hall with classrooms beyond

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18a



18b



18c

18 Council Offices, Swanscombe, 1964. Demolished following local government reorganisation *(Job architect: Douglas Sanger)*
a View from the park. The council chamber is on the other side
b Ground floor plan. The U-shaped structural piers acted as service risers and built-in storage units
c Park shelter

19 Aldo van Eyck's dedication to Voelcker of a magazine article on his own work

At the same time, two other buildings were commissioned. Swanscombe Rural District Council wanted new offices and a council chamber[54] *[18a–c]* and Bensted Contractors, a civil engineering and speculative house-building firm, needed new offices in their yard on the outskirts of Maidstone. Voelcker developed the initial *partis* and the repeating U-shaped structural pier and window arrangement (each equivalent to a single workplace) used on both buildings. A few years later, Swanscombe RDC was abolished and the building demolished and replaced by speculative housing.[55] The Bensted offices suffered the same fate.

The offices were presented to Team 10 at Royaumont in 1962.[56] The individual workplace cell was not well received. Voelcker's other project – the possible structure of a rural area in Kent – was not even discussed. Drawn on two A4 sheets, it was the start of a study exploring how the area might respond to the impact of the EC on farming, transport and population location. He believed, eleven years before the UK actually joined the EC, that the pressures for change would be significant: '[...] one has very mixed feelings, it's very centralist. My aim is to keep this centralist trend down'. Sadly, the study went no further.

The end of the practice

By 1965, the practice was in difficulties. No major buildings followed the Maidstone housing. A project for Maidstone Rural District Council offices was never built and the agricultural improvement programme had, locally, largely run its course. The Labour government's new Selective Employment Tax[57] hit architects hard and the remaining architectural staff left the practice and became occasional consultants to it. Voelcker was unwell – sometimes confined to bed, in acute pain and hardly able to move – and overstretched financially.[58] He had always done some teaching and now sought to do more.[59] He was a 'supportive, if diffident'[60] teacher who, by his own admission, was uneasily aware that his intenseness was, among students, no compensation for a certain lack of charisma.[61] It was not a happy period and it pursued him even to his last post, as first Professor of Architecture at what was to become the new Mackintosh School in Glasgow. By 1971, he was very ill. He died, aged forty-five, in 1972.

Years later, his fellow Team 10 colleagues, Aldo van Eyck and Ralph Erskine, spoke warmly of Voelcker, both disapproving of the Smithsons' treatment of him. Van Eyck had already dedicated an account of

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19

his own work to Voelcker [19].[62] Erskine said, characteristically simply, that he held him in 'high esteem'.[63]

It was his fellow students, Pat Crooke and Andrew Derbyshire, and a former employee, Andrew Mason, who, in the AA newsletter, were to write most perceptively about Voelcker. For Crooke and Derbyshire:

> [...] *the sharpest and brightest memories of John must be as a student* [... He] *sharpened* [our] *ambitions with his creative discipline as a designer.* [...] *He was often difficult to understand – not because he hid behind any jargon, but because he was struggling to express thoughts and connections between ideas that were new to us.*
>
> *John was a complex, often baffling and irritating character to work with. He somehow managed to combine his impulsive cheerfulness with a hesitant and elaborate manner, as though his high spirits were often battling with a personal diffidence and an intense regard for other people's feelings. To see all these sides of his character acting upon a design problem – searching for and finding an answer that exactly resolved his own inventiveness, his sensitivity to colleagues' arguments and his demand for geometrical discipline and harmony – this was a revelation and a delight* [...]
>
> *But he battled against bouts of increasing illness and his full potential as a designer and thinker was never fully realised. Professional practice, whose lazy orthodoxies he fought so hard as a student, too often frustrated his talents and stole his ability.*[64]

Mason, who worked in the practice during its busiest period, recalled that John was uninterested in office administration:

> *But each job he accepted in his small country practice he approached with the same practical clarity. This brought out in his designs a sense of purpose and place that can only have added to the lives of the people who live in and use his buildings.* [...]
>
> *His home and office* [...] *a large rambling farmhouse overlooking the Weald of Kent and converted by himself, had a fresh and uncluttered atmosphere. It was a pleasure to work there.* [...]
>
> *There* [was] *a lucid coherence to* [... his] *designs, which was built up from understanding the purpose of each building and being able to interpret this understanding in an equally direct and simple way.*
>
> *It was difficult for John to explain in words, even to those who worked for him, such an unassuming and profound intention and at times he himself failed to encompass the logical contradictions of his approach. But in those buildings where his approach was successful* [...] *he made an outstandingly clear contribution.*

Looking back

When the Voelckers left Sutton Valence in 1969, the practice records were whittled down to fill two small steel deed boxes. Job sheets, talk scripts, articles, photographs and a few letters fill them. All the drawings apart from the working drawings for *This is Tomorrow* were disposed of – even the exemplary set for the Lyttelton house with Voelcker's freehand full-size details. What is left today raises more questions than answers – and regrets at not having asked (or noticed) more at the time.

The closing of the practice hit Voelcker hard. The year before he died, in a last letter to the author, he referred to 'the dog-end of an unsuccessful practice'.[65] He would have felt the downgrading, by Alison Smithson, of his position in Team 10 very keenly and been aware of how little, by the standards of his friends, he appeared to have achieved.[66] He felt passionately about teaching but, reading some of his lectures, it becomes clear that he knew he couldn't hold his audiences. Diffidence, immense regard for the opinions of others and difficulty in conveying intentions are crippling characteristics in a teacher – and in an architect, too. As the Lyttelton house showed, Voelcker was a talented designer but the practice workload was so immense and diverse that it was in the nature of things that the architects and assistants had a very free hand – Voelcker virtually never intervening when he might, feeling, one member of the practice believes, that 'he didn't have the right to intervene'.[67]

Looking back, another architect in the practice considers that Voelcker 'sometimes felt in an alien environment'. Rural life was socially conservative, architecturally tending towards conservation. It gave him little intellectual or architectural stimulus. He poured scorn on the conservation studies being carried out at that time on York, Chester, Bath and Chichester: calling it 'pickling'. He was also out of step with the prevailing planning policies which inhibited rural development.[68] Yet another practice member observed that the 'small non-specialised practice [which Voelcker ran] is very difficult to sustain commercially and, despite Aldo van Eyck's views on John, is probably utopian'.[69]

Voelcker was little understood by his London contemporaries. His rural practice was something quite beyond their ken. Had he designed farm buildings like Häring's at Gut Garkau, they would have understood him – but, for them, his

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unassuming, economic and entirely appropriate agricultural buildings were of no interest. James Stirling probably encapsulated their views when he described Voelcker as 'a madman who has buried himself in the country'.[70] Stuck in the middle of Kent with a young family, a busy practice and occasional visits to London, he was on the edge of the capital's architecture scene and there is no evidence – indeed, it is highly improbable – that he was involved with the LCC 'carnivores'.[71]

Modest, engaging and intensely human

Critics, sensing that his was an extraordinary talent, have struggled to 'place' Voelcker. Banham is a case in point – he was clearly puzzled that Voelcker had agreed to the Highgate house being dubbed as 'formalist' and his own inclusion of the Lyttelton house in *The New Brutalism* is as unconvincing as his failure to explore Voelcker's personal contribution to *This is Tomorrow* is disappointing. The recent attempt to link the Lyttelton house with Brutalism on account, in particular, of its 'careful brickwork and its "meaty", "hard" walls' and with 'the Modernist tradition' because of its 'sharp angular lines' is misplaced.[72] There was nothing Brutalist about the house's materiality, nor Modernist about the simple, almost agricultural, lean-to section. As for Team 10 – interpretations of his role are hampered by the paucity of Team 10 contributions directly attributable to Voelcker. His own writings about the group say nothing of his own input but are wonderfully eloquent about issues like the debate on the formalism of the Torre Velasca.[73]

Those of us who worked for John Voelcker were attracted both by his modesty and manner and by the nature of his practice rather than by his individual buildings: although we admired the Lyttelton house, it was as much for its role in the struggle against aesthetic control as for its architectural qualities. The Zone and *This is Tomorrow* were in the past and John's membership of Team 10 hardly impinged on us when the van Eycks and Bakemas dropped in (usually at a weekend, when the office was not at work) or Stefan Wewerka came to stay. For us, the practice was an opportunity to engage with a local economy in a state of transition, with building types responding to rapid change and, in many cases, a direct involvement with every stage of the process. All this in a beautiful part of the country where, unlike our colleagues in the cities, we experienced the changing seasons in a very direct way, every day. And as the practice developed and flourished, it did so within a remarkably efficient framework which John, that hater of administration, had devised. We remember it as a superb example of architecture as a social service and John as the engaging, humble and intensely human man who made it all possible for his clients and for us.

Notes

1. Celia Tuscano, 'Everybody Has His Own Story: Interview with Aldo van Eyck', in *Team 10 1953–81, In Search of A Utopia of the Present*, ed. by Max Risselada and Dirk van den Heuvel (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2005), p. 330.
2. *Team 10 Primer*, ed. by Alison Smithson, *Architectural Design*, December 1962, 539–602. This contains ten 'entries' by Voelcker, but that on p. 595 (from the *AA Journal*, 11 June 1957) is most relevant to van Eyck's comment.
3. *Team 10 Meetings 1953–1984*, ed. by Alison Smithson (Delft: Publikatieburo Bouwkunde, 1991).
4. *Team 10 1953–81*.
5. At the Technical University in Delft in May 2008. Dirk van den Heuvel holds copies of a tiny miscellany of documents relating to Voelcker which escaped the fire and believes there may be the odd document in the Smithson Archive at the NAi in Rotterdam. The Archives at the Institute for History and Theory of Architecture (gta Archives) at ETH Zurich contain CIAM material relating to Voelcker.
6. *Team 10 Primer*, ed. by Alison Smithson (London: Studio Vista, 1968). Papers held by Dirk van den Heuvel indicate that Alison Smithson had initially proposed that Aldo van Eyck should also be excised from the group.
7. Reyner Banham, *Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976).
8. John Voelcker (JV), Talk, Glasgow Institute of Architects (GIA) dinner, 6 November 1970. Voelcker Archive (VA).
9. Voelcker wrote extensively on building products in *The Architects' Year Book* (nos. 6–9) and in several issues of *The Architectural Review*. Other publications contributed to include *Architectural Design*, *The Architects' Journal*, *Forum* (Netherlands) and *Le Carré Bleu* (Finland).
10. One other English architect, John Weller from Bildeston, Suffolk, was known at this time for his expertise in agricultural buildings – for which he later became a consultant to *The Architects' Journal*.
11. The others were by CIAM Alger, GAMMA, the Smithsons and Bakema et al.
12. Pat Crooke (1928–) spent his entire working life overseas, working (at one stage for the UN) on responses to slum and squatter settlements resulting from rapid urbanisation in Colombia, Peru, Sudan and Nigeria. Sir Andrew Derbyshire (1923–) after working for Farmer & Dark, West Yorkshire County Council and the Sheffield City Architect's Department, became a partner at Robert Matthew Johnson Marshall & Partners (RMJM) associated with university building, urban masterplanning and so on.
13. JV, 'The Zone 1951–1952', Talk to AA students, 8 February 1965, VA (later published in *Arena: The Architectural Association Journal*, June 1965, pp. 11–14, 19). See also 'The Zone', in *Projects: Architectural Association 1946–71*, ed. by James Gowan (London: Architectural Association, undated), pp. 20–21 – this places the project in the context of other AA student large-scale planning studies of the period.
14. Green belts were first devised in the mid-1930s as a means of restricting urban growth and of providing space close to cities for agriculture and outdoor recreation.
15. JV, 'The Zone 1951–52'.
16. This brief description does little justice to a monumental project of great rigour. Some of the original drawings are held by the AA but the Aix grid is in the RIBA Drawings Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The links to Le Corbusier's Radiant Farm and Radiant Village (1933–

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34) and Co-operative Village (1934–38) are worthy of exploration.
17. JV, 'The Zone 1951–52'.
18. Arthur Korn (1891–1978) architect and urban planner, member of Der Ring Berlin, who emigrated to Britain in 1938 and became chairman of the Modern Architectural Research (MARS) town planning group responsible for drawing up a plan for post-war London. Taught at the AA School 1945–65. Ernö Goldfinger (1902–1987) Hungarian architect who studied and worked in Paris before moving to London in 1934, where he built widely after the war. On the occasion, in January 1963, when *Architectural Design* published a special issue on Goldfinger, JV told the author of this paper that he considered Goldfinger to be 'the only architect today who really knows what he is doing'. This was partly a reflection on Goldfinger's use of proportional systems. Ronald Jenkins (1907–1975), one of the first partners in Ove Arup & Partners, a specialist in concrete shell design who was involved in the earlier stages of the Sydney Opera House design. He was also the engineer for the Smithsons' steel school at Hunstanton – this may account for the unusual use of steel for the structure of the residential urban megastructure in The Zone.
19. Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1949); Le Corbusier, *Le Modulor* (Boulogne: L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, 1950); Le Corbusier, *Modulor 2* (London: Faber & Faber, 1958), p. 24.
20. JV, 'The Zone 1951–52'. The grid was a method of comparing designs.
21. Banham, *Megastructure*, p. 142.
22. Banham, 'This is tomorrow', *The Architectural Review*, October 1956, pp. 186– 188. Later, McHale was to design the photo-mural for the Lyttelton house. See *The Architectural Review*, May 1960, p. 320.
23. Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (London: Architectural Press, 1966), pp. 87, 107.
24. J-P Stonard, 'Pop in the Age of Boom: Richard Hamilton's "Just What is it that Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?"', *The Burlington Magazine*, September 2007, pp. 607–20.
25. The Voelcker Archive contains a single letter to the engineer Ronald Jenkins seeking his advice on an earlier structure. It would be interesting to know on what basis Stonard makes his assertion about Voelcker's role.
26. JV, untitled paper dated 6 April 1972 intended as a talk to students at the Mac, VA.
27. JV, 'The Small Country Practice', *The Architects' Journal*, 15 January 1959, pp. 83–84.
28. JV, talk to RSUA Belfast, 17 April 1962, VA. The distances quoted would be more accurately expressed as 75 miles east to west and 40 miles north to south.
29. Between 1960 and 1965, architects and assistants included Edward Lane, Peter Carolin, Jonathan Greig, Jeffrey Cuthbert, Roger Turner, Douglas Sanger, Andrew Mason and George Denny. John Freeman was clerk of works.
30. Estimate by the author. A few jobs never got beyond the initial meeting, others finished once planning and by-law approvals had been granted.
31. JV, talk to RSUA.
32. Later, in 1966, Voelcker was much concerned by Professor John Page's assertion that 'the future will [...] lie with those who are prepared to become specialists. [...] The day of the omniscient man is over. We become specialists in the professional sense or we perish.' See 'John Voelcker', *The Architect* (Australia), no. 3, 1966, Special Issue: Students Convention, p. 90.
33. The Voelcker Archive contains typescripts of several talks, reports and articles relating to agriculture. The most publicly accessible document is his article 'Farm Buildings', *The Architectural Review*, September 1960, pp. 180–89.
34. For an (unbuilt) example by Voelcker, see 'Cattle Unit, Bodiam, Sussex', *The Architectural Review,* January 1962, p. 69.
35. One of the occasional pleasures of driving to and from sites with Voelcker was visiting a hop- or fruit-pickers' settlement. For most of the year these were deserted. No two were alike and Voelcker would comment on the social arrangements (centred round the communal cooking facility), and the way the layout reflected the site contours, orientation and so on. Mechanisation of hop-picking eliminated the need for these settlements.
36. JV, 'Farm Buildings'. Perhaps the reason why the planned sequel never appeared was that the topic just failed to connect with the readers and the editors therefore did not press for a sequel.
37. 'Farm, Ashford', *The Architectural Review*, January 1961, p. 61.
38. AJ 'Man of the Year' introduction, *The Architects' Journal*, 15 January 1959, p. 84.
39. The Voelcker Archive contains no job sheets or records of work undertaken before March 1959. This project was published in *Architectural Design*, April 1954, p. 96, together with a note that: 'At the time of going to press, we have been informed that this scheme has unfortunately been abandoned.' Banham, surely aware that Voelcker was no formalist, drew attention in *The New Brutalism*, p. 15, to the fact that the title of the 'article' in which this house was published, 'The New Formalism', had Voelcker's approval. The Archive contains photographs of a model of another house, New Priory Cottage, dated 1956, about which nothing is known – but which must also have been abandoned.
40. 'House at Arkley, Hertfordshire', *The Architectural Review*, May 1960, pp. 319–21. Intriguingly, the preceding pages to this article contain another by Jürgen Joedicke on Hugo Häring's farm at Gut Garkau. The house was also published in Oscar Newman, *CIAM '59 in Otterlo: Group for the Research of Social and Visual Inter-relationships*, ed. by Joedicke (London: Alec Tiranti, 1961), pp. 157–59 (the sketch drawings on p. 158 are not by Voelcker) and in Banham, *The New Brutalism*, pp. 87, 107.
41. Aesthetic control, although not described as such in the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947, was a major source of concern to architects at this time. See, for example, 'Aesthetic Control', *Architectural Design*, April 1954, p. 93 and examples of rejected designs on pp. 94–5.
42. 'HUMPH! Or, a Trumpery Affair', *The Architects' Journal*, 23 January 1958, pp. 57–59. Signed by M. M. (Malcolm McEwen).
43. 'Men of the Year', *The Architects' Journal*, 15 January 1959, pp. 78, 82–84.
44. *CIAM '59 in Otterlo*, pp. 157.
45. *The New Brutalism*, pp. 87, 107.
46. Ibid., pp. 66–67, 77.
47. Intriguingly, not long before work must have started on the Lyttelton house, a letter of Voelcker's on the 'New Brutalism' appeared in *Architectural Design*, June 1957, p. 184. Addressing issues that had arisen in an *AD* debate two months earlier, he identified the Brutalists' key concerns as the rejection of Classical symmetry, the use of certain topological techniques, the rejection of technological doctrine and the invention of unique images from 'bits and pieces'.
48. The only house for which there was, in the office in 1960–63, a

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complete set of design and working drawings by Voelcker was the Lyttelton house. In the case of almost every other building apart from the Lindsay and Argles houses, the job architects were given considerable freedom.

49. A. and P. Smithson, 'CIAM 10 Projects', *Architectural Design*, September 1955, pp. 286–89. Voelcker's scheme is on p. 287. CIAM 10 was planned for Algiers in 1956 but was actually held in Dubrovnik.
50. W. G. Howell, 'Village Housing', *The Architects' Journal*, 19 September 1957, pp. 428–36. Voelcker's project is on p. 435.
51. 'Ringlestone Estate, Maidstone, Kent', *The Architectural Review*, January 1966, p. 42. This is the first, unbuilt, scheme.
52. JV, 'Staplehurst County Primary School', paper for a talk dated 29 January 1965, VA. There are also photographs of a rough model of this first scheme.
53. Celia Tuscano, 'At the Heart of the Matter is Life: Two Days with Ralph Erskine, Strolling from Rome to L'Aquila', in *Team 10 1953–81*, p. 324. Erskine described the school as 'very nice'.
54. 'Council Offices, Swanscombe, Kent', *The Architectural Review,* January 1964, p. 70.
55. But not before it had been recorded – 'Grey brick and hot brown woodwork. All the forms deliberately jagged and broken up in the 1960s way' – by John Newman in *The Buildings of England: West Kent and the Weald* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1969), p. 540.
56. See *Team 10 Meetings 1953–1984*, pp. 57–59.
57. The Selective Employment Tax (SET) was introduced in 1966. It taxed employment in the service sector and passed the revenue to the manufacturing sector.
58. Voelcker, in conversation with the author, c. 1969.
59. He had been a tutor at the AA and was Director of Senior Studies 1965–66. He subsequently briefly taught postgraduate urban design at the University of California, Los Angeles.
60. Jonathan Greig, email to the author, 11 April 2012.
61. In one paper in the Archive, Voelcker recalls how, talking to students at Perth in 1966, van Eyck had 'demolished the four foot height of the stage between himself and the students' and kept them captivated. When it came to editing the recording of his talk it made no sense. In contrast, Voelcker's own talk had, as ever, been delivered from a script and made sense – but evidently had not held the students' attention.
62. A. van Eyck, 'In Search of Labyrinthian Clarity', *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, January/February 1975, p. 14.
63. Tuscano, 'At the Heart of the Matter', p. 324. Erskine stated that Voelcker, 'while convinced of the ideas' of Team 10, 'did not have strong ambitions'.
64. P. Crooke, A. Derbyshire, and A. Mason, 'John Voelcker: A Tribute', *AA Notes*, 30 (August/November 1972), 5. (There was also an unperceptive obituary in *The Times*, 15 September 1972.)
65. JV letter to Birgit and Peter Carolin, 25 September 1971.
66. Letters held by van den Heuvel from Voelcker to Alison Smithson suggest that they were back on friendly terms two years after the break.
67. Jonathan Greig, email to the author, 5 May 2012.
68. Roger Turner, email to the author, 19 May 2012.
69. Jeffrey Cuthbert, email to the author, 25 May 2012.
70. To the author in 1960, when he asked to be released from temporary employment with Stirling and Gowan in order to work for Voelcker.
71. Suzanne Frank, 'John Voelcker: Redefining His Place in Team 10 and Post-war British Architectural Culture', **arq**, 16.1 (2012), 59–73.
72. Idem. The unqualified use of the term 'vernacular' to describe Voelcker's agricultural buildings is also questionable.
73. JV, 'Aix en Provence to Otterlo, or the Dying and Death of CIAM', *Le Carré Bleu*, no. 4, 1959, pp. 9–10.

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In memoriam
John and Ann Voelcker, architects and friends.

Biography
Peter Carolin worked for John Voelcker, 1960–63, and with Colin St John Wilson & Partners (British Library and other buildings), 1965–80. Technical editor and then editor of *The Architects' Journal,* 1981–89. Professor of Architecture and head of the University of Cambridge Department of Architecture, 1989–2000. Founding editor of **arq**, 1995–2003.

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