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Why are houses interesting?*

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Shortly into his path-breaking study of *The Small House in Eighteenth-Century London*, Peter Guillery remarks that 'houses are principally interesting because people live in them' (p. 10). To urban historians the observation might seem unexceptional, even banal. To many architectural historians his comment would be incomprehensible. Therein lies the difficulty for the urban historian with a concern for housing, public buildings and planning. There is a wealth of serious academic studies of architecture, but the majority are written in a language which can seem arcane to the uninitiated and address an agenda which appears little interested in those who inhabited the buildings. At the heart of the problem lies the requirement to treat the built form primarily as a work of art, so that what is studied has to justify itself as an object worthy of aesthetic consideration, and has to relate to an established stylistic canon and chronology. Judged in this light, considerations of user and usage are largely irrelevant, and can appear an invitation to slip into the sort of popular architectural discourse, common in the Victorian and Edwardian periods, in which dwellings are valued primarily for the celebrities and anecdotes associated with them. People are germane only to the extent that they designed buildings, as architects, or commissioned them, as patrons of the arts. Among the two most influential figures in developing and in particular disseminating the art-history perspective on architecture in twentieth-century Britain were Nikolaus Pevsner and John Summerson. Today their presence is felt not only in the world of scholarship, where it has not gone unchallenged,[1] but also and more importantly in popular

* Peter Guillery, *The Small House in Eighteenth-Century London*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with English Heritage for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2004. viii + 351pp. 278 figures. Bibliography. Index. £40.00.
Barbara Arciszewska and Elizabeth McKellar (eds.), *Articulating British Classicism: New Approaches to Eighteenth-Century Architecture*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004. xvii + 269pp. 77 figures. Bibliography. Index. £59.95.
Michael Forsyth with contributions by Stephen Bird, *Pevsner Architectural Guides: Bath*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. xiii + 330pp. 172 figures. Further Reading. Glossary. Index. £9.99 pbk.
Andrew Foyle with contributions by Bridget Cherry, *Pevsner Architectural Guides: Bristol*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004. xii + 324pp. Further Reading. Glossary. Index. £9.99 pbk.

[1] T. Mowl, *Stylistic Cold Wars: Betjeman Versus Pevsner* (London, 2000); D. Watkin, *Morality and Architecture Revisited* (London, 2001), 78–122; S. Games, *Nikolaus Pevsner on Art and*

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perceptions of architecture, as mediated through guide literature, the amenity societies (like the National Trust, the Georgian Group and the Victorian Society) and the conservation movement. It is an influence which has been ambivalent. On the one hand, it has led to a far deeper popular understanding and appreciation of architectural form and its history, and has saved many fine buildings. On the other hand, it is has led to a dissociation of form and human usage, a devaluation of structures and traditions not defined as canonic and a blindness to the subjective and ideological nature of architectural history itself.

Peter Guillery, a senior investigator with English Heritage, has produced a study of London which is a wonderful breath of fresh air. Combining impressive and painstaking research in the archives and field, and showing a commendable keenness to engage with the broader historical literature on the eighteenth century, he challenges the dominant art-history tradition of reading eighteenth-century urban architecture. The meat of the book is a series of highly detailed case-studies of house-building on the 'periphery' of the eighteenth-century metropolis, especially to the south and east, outside the 'core' central and western areas. Earning a chapter each are the silk-weaving district of Bethnal Green, the tanning and timber areas of Southwark and Bermondsey, the 'wastes' of the Mile End and Kingsland Roads, the shipbuilding centres of Woolwich and Deptford and a cluster of small developments in the semi-urban 'villages' that once ringed London like Highgate, Islington, Hampstead, Clapham and Peckham. Prefacing these case-studies are two general chapters sketching in the broad demographic, economic and social development of the metropolis, and the history of the small house. The book's coda is provided by brief chapters which speculate, in the light of the London study, on small house construction in maritime and industrial towns in the English provinces and North America; and chart the impact of 'improvement' and standardization on the small house in the later Georgian period.

The central contention is that undue emphasis upon the metropolitan core, and within this upon its most fashionable buildings, has badly skewed our understanding of the evolution of London's housing stock in the eighteenth century. What has come to be portrayed, if only by omission, as the typical Georgian town house was in truth the domicile of a tiny minority of the population. The tendency of survival rates for domestic fabric to drop off rapidly the lower down the social scale has made it difficult to reconstruct the dwellings of the mass of the population. However, sufficient survives, tucked away behind modern shop fronts and often mutilated by change, to reconstruct the sort of houses occupied by what Guillery estimates to be the 'the bottom half of the top half' of the social structure (p. 1). Though the homes of the poorest half of London's

Architecture (London, 2003), Introduction; P. Draper (ed.), *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner* (Aldershot, 2004).

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population remain a mystery, it is possible to access the dwellings of that group in society immediately below the middling order, artisans. It is they and their culture that lie at the heart of this study. Characterized as a skilled, relatively well-off and above all independent social class – much in the manner of Edward Thompson's handloom weavers, and Thompson's influence on Guillery's thinking is critical – the houses of London's artisans are seen to trace a quite different course through architectural history than their polite superiors. Dwellings were small, often built to a one-room plan (though the total number of rooms depended upon the vertical articulation of the building), and methods of construction were what Guillery defines as 'vernacular'; façades expressed 'functional asymmetry' (p. 227) rather than the classical dictates of proportion and symmetry, local customs were influential and traditional materials and modes of building continued to be deployed, such as in the extensive use of timber framing and cladding, and the centrally placed chimney stack. There was an engagement with the ornamentation and language of classicism, but it was at an essentially surface level, 'a pick-and-mix collection of words – or at best phrases – that might, if convenient, be inserted into the vernacular language, the syntax of which remained unaffected' (p. 72). Underpinning all this was an artisan culture that stressed conservatism rather than innovation, practice rather than theory, and mutuality rather than emulation in social relationships. From the later eighteenth century the vernacular tradition began to decline, with the growing trend towards 'standardization and monotony' (p. 294). This led to 'the negation of agency and identity among a large part of London's population' (p. 296), and the emergence of the soulless working-class terrace (and latter day slum). In part this was the outcome of a policy of 'improvement', an exercise in social policing prompted by growing anxiety amongst the elite about the threat posed by the lower orders to political and social stability. In part it reflected the demise of artisan culture itself as capitalist economics polarized society, with London artisans 'either managing to retain their "precarious gentility", through upward mobility into the middle class, or, more often, to lose it through downward mobility into the working class' (p. 297).

The Marxist thesis of immiserization might seem a little less plausible now than it did say 30 years ago. How quickly and completely did an artisan strata and culture die out, and what is the relationship between that strata/culture and the emergent skilled working class? Perhaps more problematic than this is the close identification – a critical axis of the study – of a particular style in housing (vernacular) with a particular social group (artisans) and a very precise proportion of society (the 25 per cent between the masses and the middle and upper orders). The approach is commendable in that it avoids the pretence that the houses examined were the dwellings of the poorest, but it leaves half the population occupying an 'architectureless' world. Can Guillery be so confident of his social proportions, or of the boundaries that separated the

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artisans and the masses? When he describes 'the nature of the housing stock in Southwark, Bermondsey and Rotherhithe' as 'diversity through a spectrum of options that would have accommodated all but the poorest people, housing artisans, tradesman and entrepreneurs of widely varying means' (p. 146) there is a real ambivalence. 'All but the poorest' seems to imply the vast majority, whereas 'artisans, tradesmen and entrepreneurs' suggests something narrower. His identification of the vernacular mode with artisan culture is in many respects persuasive but how does this tally with the fact that classicism was being delivered to elite consumers by artisan craftsmen?[2] Guillery is keen to emphasize that though artisan vernacular encompassed classical ornamentation, this was at a superficial level and did not imply the use of that ornament for social emulation. This may preserve the notion of an independent artisan culture based on mutuality, but it does raise the question that if classical ornament was not being used for emulation what was it being deployed for? Was artisan culture as devoid of snobbery as is suggested here? One broader criticism of Guillery's approach might be the manner in which the bulk of the research is contained in case-study chapters, so that the volume as a whole has a disaggregated feel, with some inevitable repetition of points. However, it has also to be said that one of the great strengths of the book is the fascinating portraits it paints, and not just architecturally, of London beyond Westminster and the City. What emerges is a multi-faceted metropolis – a view developed in some of the recent work on the city[3] – whose kaleidoscopic variety is impossible to contain within any single vision. All this is supported by a wealth of high quality illustrative material (maps, plans and photographs) including some stunning early camera plates.

One of these photographs, taken in 1913 and adorning the front cover of the book, is of a mid-eighteenth-century house in east London, which has elements of classical fenestration (including a Serlian or Venetian window), but is timber framed and timber clad on the exterior. In one image it challenges the orthodox, purist view of the progress of classicism in post-Restoration London, and by implication of the classical revolution of the eighteenth century as outlined by Summerson in his *Georgian London* (1945) and *Architecture in Britain 1530–1830* (1953). It is a revisionist agenda also taken up on a broader front in a volume of essays, *Articulating British Classicism*, which investigates 'classicism both as a subject, of supreme importance to the eighteenth century, and as a pervasive methodology which forms attitudes to and interpretations of buildings by historians' (p. xix). Elizabeth McKellar, whose own research on post-fire London has

[2] J. Ayres, *Building the Georgian City* (New Haven and London, 1998).
[3] P. Clark and R. Gillespie (eds.), *Two Capitals: London and Dublin 1500–1840* (Oxford, 2001); E. McKellar, 'Peripheral visions: alternative aspects and rural presences in mid-eighteenth-century London', in D. Arnold (ed.), *The Metropolis and its Image: Constructing Identities for London, c. 1750–1950* (Oxford, 1999), 29–47.

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questioned the universality of polite classicism and explored vernacular influences,[4] examines John Summerson, a figure whom Guillery describes in his volume as 'a larger than life presence looming over any attempt at a revisionist history of houses in eighteenth-century London' (p. 2). Revealingly McKellar emphasizes not so much Summerson's orthodoxy, as his complex and changing views, observing that in latter life he modified his earlier position on the paramount position of Anglo-Palladianism, expressed anxiety about the way his work was used by preservationists in the heritage movement and emphasized – though this was already clear in *Georgian London* – the importance of economic and social context in architectural analysis. In this sense Summerson anticipated the way the essays in the volume set out to problematize Palladian classicism and challenge its dominant position in the literature. Barbara Arciszewska's introduction does this by placing Palladianism in its historiographical context, Elizabeth Chew's essay by challenging the Jonesian strand in the Anglo-Palladian tradition, stressing the extent to which architects and patrons in the early Stuart period chose to mix courtly classicism with indigenous traditions in so-called artisan mannerism, and continued to respect and utilize Gothic styles. The Palladian revival of the early eighteenth century is often portrayed as elitist and centralist, an expression of the newly ascendant Whig state, but Matthew Craske demonstrates the extent to which architecture at the time 'had become a matter of public concern and its history and standards a matter of public debate' (p. 115), and Carol Watts argues that in Bath John Wood used Palladianism not to reinforce the centre, but to 'wrest cultural power to the periphery from the metropolis in the context of state formation' (p. 135). By the later Georgian period, Daniel Abramson shows the degree to which classicism was commercialized and popularized, prompting a backlash among those who sought to preserve standards of taste, while Andrew Ballantyne suggests, in a study of Joseph Gandy and model rural dwellings, that the dominance of classicism was being threatened by its association with French rationalism. The mixing of the vernacular and classical traditions, rather than the progressive destruction of the former by the latter, is demonstrated not only in a piece by Bernard Herman and Peter Guillery, which examines both London and North America, but also in a study of Spanish Town, Jamaica, 1655–1792, where James Robertson discovers a 'vernacular townscape whose buildings with their one- or two-storey porches, "piazzas" and jalousie blinds did not follow metropolitan usages' (p. 250), and where 'local designs re-adapted classical architectural orthodoxies to tropical realities' (p. 242).

The revisionist agenda of *Articulating British Classicism* is underpinned by the 'cultural turn'. Classical architecture is here subject to the sort

[4] E. McKellar, *The Birth of Modern London: The Development and Design of the City 1660–1720* (Manchester, 1999).

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of radical cultural analysis already applied to literature and painting, not to mention the writing of history itself. As a result classicism is reconceptualized as a pluralist not singular phenomenon. There was no absolute form, such as Palladianism, that acted as a gold standard by which other versions should be judged, but a multiplicity of forms. Classicism was also seen to be engaged in a continuous relationship with other styles and traditions, such as the vernacular, which involved negotiation and fertilization rather than domination. Finally, classicism did not occupy some value-free, socially and politically neutral aesthetic zone, but was shaped by and articulated forces such as commercialization, gender, social class, localism and state formation. All this is good news to the urban historian alienated by the abstractions of architectural history. It may, however, still be argued that the focal point of architectural history writing on classicism is not the town house but the country house, and it is the locating of classicism in rural Arcadia that has isolated it from critical examination. There is more than an element of truth in this. However, urban historians may be surprised at the extent to which towns figure in some of the architectural literature. The *Georgian Group Journal*, an annual publication which now runs to some 300 pages of detailed archive-based studies, has – though the art-history tradition still predominates, and there is a distinct metropolitan bias – since its inception in 1986 included items not only on urban houses but churches, town halls, workhouses, gardens and street planning. It must also be said that country house classicism is now itself being 'de-coded', so that Dana Arnold, for example, can emphasize the 'diversity of classical formulae', warn of Summerson's 'Anglocentric focus' and remind us that 'every house was a microcosm of the social, political and cultural trends in Britain and had a crucial role in maintaining the status quo'.[5]

Urban historians who like to walk their towns will have long turned to Pevsner's *Buildings of England* as a cherished companion. Work on the guides began in 1945, the first volumes (Cornwall, Staffordshire and Middlesex) were published in 1951 and the series was completed in 1974 (Oxfordshire and Staffordshire).[6] Free from the colourful digressions of much local topographical writing, they offer a concise and authoritative window through which to view a town's built environment. The key buildings are listed; itineraries are plotted which take in all the elements in the townscape worthy of attention; information on date, architect and style is provided, judgements are delivered on artistic importance and quality and structures are located in the received stratigraphy of architectural history. Arguably the guides have become the single most important instrument in educating and directing public opinion on the history of

[5] D. Arnold, 'The country house: form, function and meaning', in D. Arnold (ed.), *The Georgian Country House: Architecture, Landscape and Society* (Stroud, 1998), 10–11, 16.

[6] B. Cherry, *The Buildings of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales: A Short History and Bibliography* (Penguin Collectors' Society, 1998), 7–18.

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the built environment. Yet many historians who have used Pevsner must also have finished their urban visits with a certain sense of dissatisfaction, with more questions left unanswered than answered. First, given the revisionism outlined in the books reviewed above, and more broadly the current concern among historians with historiography and culture, is it possible any longer to accept the notion of a received canon and chronology, or to imagine that there is some abstract test of value and importance? When Pevsner describes, somewhat patronizingly, an early classical house in Warwick, part of the rebuilding after the town's Great Fire, as 'an excellent, if a little rustic, job of 1696',[7] is he testing all classical housing against some purist Palladian model, and is there a failure to recognize the fertilization of vernacular and classical, metropolitan and provincial elements in a style which is a product not of ignorance but cultural negotiation? Second, why are buildings prioritized in the order they are? Why do churches appear before music halls, cinemas and football grounds, if these last three categories appear at all? Indeed, what is being omitted? Swathes of the townscape fail to register on the Pevsner radar. Third, what activities transpired in these buildings, and how did their human occupants interact with their material surroundings? Fourth, what were the economic, social and political contexts in which the townscape was constructed? Pevsner is relatively silent on these matters.

The *Buildings of England* was never a one man show. Moreover, as new editions have appeared (and the other nations of the British Isles been included), compiled by a post-Pevsner generation, the range of content has broadened considerably, with far more historical context and a much more pluralistic approach to content. There have also begun to appear a series of *Pevsner Architectural Guides* devoted exclusively to important cities. In the original county-based format Bath and Bristol were packed into a single volume on *North Somerset and Bristol* (1958), and between them took about 150 pages. In the new independent format, each city has its own book of over 300 pages. Though the underlying structure remains the same – introduction, major buildings and itineraries – the entries have been completely rewritten, modernized and expanded, there are a wealth of maps and sumptuous colour illustrations integrated with the text and at the price of under £10 they are quite simply a ridiculous bargain. It is hard to imagine any serious urban historian wanting to be without them. Not the least reason for this is that they address many of the concerns raised about the original series. Whereas Pevsner virtually ignored Bath's post-Georgian landscape, with only perfunctory reference to the nineteenth century, and a claim that 'nor has the C20 so far done anything that would call for recording here' (p. 96),[8] Michael Forsyth draws the products – including commercial and industrial structures – of both these centuries

[7] N. Pevsner and A Wedgwood, *The Buildings of England: Warwickshire* (Harmondsworth, 1966), 463.
[8] N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: North Somerset and Bristol* (Harmondsworth, 1958), 96.

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into his purview; for example, whereas the Brunel railway station earned only two lines in Pevsner, in the new volume it enjoys almost two pages, and is treated as one of the nine 'major buildings' in the city. Pevsner was, of course, not uninterested in Victorian and modern architecture. He was at one time chairman of the Victorian Society, and his *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936) was a key text advocating Bauhaus-inspired modernism. Though he included substantial entries for Temple Meads Station and the Clifton Suspension Bridge (handsomely expanded in the new volume) in his Bristol account, he too easily accepted, and thereby reinforced the myth that Bath was a Roman and Georgian city, with little significant history or architecture outside those periods. In fact Pevsner's tendency to omit 'minor' architecture as a whole may have contributed to the so-called 'Sack of Bath', the destruction, after World War II, of terraces of small late Georgian dwellings. As Michael Forsyth points out, the 'lack of mention of lesser buildings' helped create an 'apparent ambivalence towards the Georgian architecture' that provided a rationale for 'the principle of retaining the architectural set pieces and "clearing" much of the remainder, in the effort to create a new and better world' (p. 45). Reflecting on and reassessing Pevsner's original agenda is a stimulating feature of both volumes. Andrew Foyle includes an inset box in the Bristol guide which shows how Pevsner's view of the international significance of the cathedral choir has been questioned by other critics (p. 56). Forsyth and Foyle acknowledge, and rightly so, their debt to Pevsner's monumental efforts, but they have taken the guides to a new level, with accounts which absorb much of the recent research on their cities' architecture, are more inclusive in their treatment of period and subject, contain a good deal more historical context (Foyle, for example, has insets on 'Private money, public works', p. 38, and on 'Bristol and slavery', p. 202), and add a valuable bibliographical essay.

And yet it remains a moot point to what extent they meet Guillery's criterion, that 'houses are principally interesting because people live in them'. The inset boxes, undoubtedly an attractive and informative feature, attempt to meet some of the expectations here. Forsyth has ones on 'Illustrious residents of the Royal Crescent' (p. 146) and 'Famous residents around Great Pulteney Street' (p. 182). However, these are in a long tradition of associating celebrities and buildings – precisely the approach Pevsner was, understandably, reacting against – and they tell us little about the way people lived in and interacted with the buildings. The same could be argued, to a degree, of Guillery. He treats his small houses as the expression of a culture and therefore of the values and beliefs of their occupants. He also provides useful evidence of size, plan, room disposition, interior furnishings and industrial usage of domestic properties. But how people actually lived and worked in the houses, how social relationships were managed in relation to the physical forms

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and spaces available remain largely unexplored territory.[9] To what extent was space gendered? What were the boundaries between private and public space within and at the edges of the household and house, and how did physical forms express and mediate these boundaries? How did space and form articulate relationships between the different constituents of the family, including apprentices, servants and lodgers? How did fixed decoration and moveable furnishings interact to give space meaning? These are questions which the traditional art-history approach to architecture has by and large ignored, though the pioneering work of Mark Girouard and others on the social history of architecture has pointed to a new approach.[10] That said, the volumes reviewed here – and particularly Guillery's study of London, a book which deserves, like Summerson's *Georgian London*, to become a classic – demonstrate that the agenda in architectural history is moving on, and in a direction which urban historians will applaud.

[9] For a micro-study of how this might be done, see J.D. Melville, 'The use and organization of domestic space in late seventeenth-century London' (unpublished University of Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, 1999); see also F.E. Brown, 'Continuity and change in the urban house: developments in domestic space organization in seventeenth-century London', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 28 (1986), 558–90.

[10] M. Girouard, *Life in the English Country House* (New Haven and London, 1978); idem, *The English Town* (New Haven and London, 1990); C. Saumarez-Smith, *Eighteenth-Century Decoration: Design and the Domestic Interior in England* (London, 1993). Part Two, 'Life in the house' of D. Cruickshank and N. Burton, *Life in the Georgian City* (Harmondsworth, 1990), contains valuable material on the social routines operating in the better-off London houses, but it rather perpetuates the dominant image of the Palladian classical town house.

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