

## **REITH LECTURES 1955: The Englishness of English Art**

**Nikolaus Pevsner**

### **Lecture 7: Architecture and Planning: The Functional Approach**

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You will have asked yourself more than once in the course of these lectures, and you have a right to ask me at the beginning of this last of the series: 'what is the good of all this? Where does it lead us? 'I have presented to you a number of qualities and shown where they appear in English art and occasionally in other fields of English life. I hope I have convinced you that they are English and in what way they are English. But so many of them seem to contradict each other. What, then, does it add up to?

My answer is briefly, much too briefly, this: First of all, you must expect polarities, as I warned you at the outset. National character much more than individual character is bound to be composed of seeming contradictions. I have analysed in greater detail those between Decorated and Perpendicular. You may now ask why Decorated appeared when it did, and why Perpendicular appeared when it did. It is hot too difficult to give one sort of answer to this question. Overriding all national differences, each period and each phase in the whole of European or western history of the last thousand years has its own spirit. That spirit in each country calls up certain national qualities at any given moment and has no use for others. So Decorated in 1300 and Perpendicular in 1400- 1500 are the specifically English expressions of European situations.

But I trust you will grant me that in these lectures I have gone one step further. I have tried to show that the seeming contradictions between Decorated and Perpendicular are not really contradictions. In spite of appearances, the two styles have certain basic things in common, just as Blake and Constable have, or Hogarth and Reynolds. Among such basic qualities I have referred to the curiously negative attitude of the English to the display of the body, to the grand gesture and the grand manner, to the kneading, as I called it, of mass or space. I have also tried to show how the forms in which English art expresses itself can be associated with such ubiquitous yet impalpable qualities as illogicality, detachment, or rationalism.

I call them ubiquitous, because they pervade English expression in the arts. They may be ubiquitous today but have they always been? This is a curious problem which I have touched on in my first talk. Some of the English qualities which are now considered permanent are quite recent the work in fact of Dr. Arnold and Ruskin and of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert's exemplary domestic life. The cruelty of the eighteenth century—to children, to the insane, to the poor if they broke the law—is beyond belief now. The grossness, the jollity, and public corruption of the eighteenth century are equally uncomfortable reminders of how recent our standards of ethics in small as well as large things really are.

Yet there exist, on the other hand, the many instances I have quoted in these lectures of typically English traits of today which occur as early as the Anglo-Saxon, the Norman, the Plantagenet age—the lively reporting of observed facts, angularity, thinness, a distrust of extremes, and so on. There is nothing conclusive here. You cannot expect, in dealing with a nation, to find permanently fixed qualities appearing and reappearing at permanently fixed moments, and if I have succeeded in proving that, I have certainly fulfilled one task I had set myself. But perhaps you are entitled to expect a little more than that, some attempt at answering the question as to what particular aspects of Englishness in my opinion are to the fore today, and what, by their means, England might achieve for her own benefit and perhaps for that of other nations as well.

To do that means that we must go back to what I have told you about landscape gardens and the theory behind them—the theory of the flowing line, the more general aesthetic theory of surprise and concealment, the way the Picturesque is tied up with English outdoor life, and ultimately the even more general British philosophy of liberty and liberalism.

But there is yet one more aspect of the Picturesque which has to come in at this stage. I will introduce you to it by another passage from Pope. It follows immediately after the lines I quoted in my last talk. This is how Pope continues:

Consult the genius of the place in all  
That tells the waters or to rise or fall  
Or helps th'ambitious hill the heavens to scale  
Or scoops in circling theatres the vale.  
Calls in the country, catches opening glades,  
Joins willing woods, and varies shades from shades.

There you have an extensive programme of improvements typical of what eighteenth-century landowners did indeed do. As you see from the details which Pope enumerates, all they did and nearly all contemporary theory concerns the garden and the grounds. You find, in addition, the occasional eighteenth-century model village, and the occasional remark in the books on village design. On the town there is, to all intents and purposes, nothing.

Yet to us today the problem of improvements in towns, including the metropolis, and the laying out (or, as we call it, planning) of new towns or new parts of towns matters much; planning in private grounds, little. It is my contention that the English theory of the Picturesque, or, as you may now just as well say, the traditional, national, English planning theory, has an extremely important message. To appreciate it to the full I would ask you to remember the first words of the passage from Pope which I have just quoted: 'Consult the genius of the place in all'. The genius of the place, the *genius loci*, is, if you put it in modern planning terms, the character of the site, and the character of the site in a town or city is not only the geographical but also the historical, social, and especially the aesthetic character. You want to plan for the City of London. What is the visual character of the City? Or of the centre of Cambridge, or of Blandford? Or of any town anywhere?

### **Each Case on Its Own Merit**

This kind of consideration is to me something profoundly English: it is to treat each place ‘on its own merit’, just as each political situation is taken on its own merit, or each case at the Ministry of Pensions (or so we hope). To cast our net yet wider, ‘each case on its own merit’ is the application of the principle of tolerance, a principle firmly established in England by the unbloody revolution of 1688 and by John Locke. Locke’s first *Letter of Tolerance* came out in 1689. Twelve years later Queen Anne presented one of the principal beams for the building of the still surviving synagogue in Bevis Marks, and the architect, a Quaker, presented his fee to the congregation. That is English, and that is why the first of Voltaire’s *Letters on the English* is about the Quakers.

In planning and architecture today ‘each case on its own merit’ is the functional approach. I do not understand that term ‘functional’ to apply to utilitarian needs only, but to include ideal needs as well. If, in this sense, present-day urban situations are treated functionally—taking into consideration what is practical for the walker as well as the driver, for the man in a hurry and the man with leisure to stand and stare, for the shopper on foot and from the car, and also for those who want to enjoy the looks and the feel of where they live and work—the result would not look like Versailles, with symmetry enforced on streets and buildings. The informal: it is a better term than the irregular; for the *regulae*, the rules, are not absent, they are only of a subtler kind. The informal is at the same time the practical and the English. To quote Voltaire once more, this time apropos Shakespeare: ‘It seems that up to now the English have only produced irregular beauties... Their political genius resembles a closely grown tree planted by nature, throwing out a thousand branches here and there and growing lustily and without rules. It dies if you try to force its nature and trim it like the gardens of Marly’.

Finally, a passage from another eighteenth-century writer, Sir Joshua Reynolds. It will be a surprise to those who remember what I said and quoted of Reynolds some time ago. So far he has only appeared to you as the rationalist and the purveyor of academic doctrine. Now here he is on architecture:

It may not be amiss for the Architect to take advantage sometimes of . . . accidents, to follow where they lead, and to improve them, rather than always to trust to a regular plan. . . . The forms and turnings of the streets of London and other old towns are produced by accident, without any original plan or design, but they are not always the less pleasant to the walker or spectator on that account. On the contrary, if the city had been built on the regular plan of Sir Christopher Wren, the effect might have been, as we know it in some new parts of the town, rather unpleasing; the uniformity might have produced weariness.

These new parts of London of which Reynolds speaks in 1786 must be the west end from Portland Place to Portman Square. We do not find them wearisome, or we would not, if Londoners had left them alone instead of interfering with them by incongruous additions. On the other hand, what other term than ‘wearisome uniformity’ would the visually sensitive choose for the High Victorian terraces of South Kensington and of nearly all the inner suburbs of London, let alone of the slums of the industrial north? Yet both are the outcome of liberty—and that shows how careful we must be in this

juggling with terms. The planning of Bath is liberty in the sense of the most imaginative irregularity; South Kensington and the terraces of back-to-back houses are liberty in the sense of *laissez-faire* that is a refusal to interfere even with those set upon blighting acres upon acres of the town with their unimaginative regularity.

England suffered from this blight earlier than other European countries, because she had undergone the Industrial Revolution earlier than others, and her faith in tolerance and in individualism had prevented her from checking the fatal effects on the appearance of towns of the rapid growth of industry and urban population. When the reaction came, and it, too, came earlier than on the Continent, it took, characteristically enough, the form of a return to the principles of the informal. The result is the garden suburb and the garden city. They succeeded in the blending of small-size housing with nature and the application of the principle of variety to the layout of streets, the provision of footpaths, and so on. But they failed in not being garden cities in so far as they neither were nor wanted to be truly urban.

Yet Bath under the two John Woods had already shown how, with the material of terraces of tall as well as small houses, of squares and crescents and circuses, varied planning in urban terms could be achieved, and variety and surprise, those visual blessings, obtained. John Nash, in his ingenious treatment of Regent Street and Regent's Park, succeeded even better. Here again was urban scale, variety and surprise in the bend and turns and well-placed accents of the street, combination of grand terraces and lush park, an area of picturesque cottages behind, called Park Village, and so on. So here is plenty of precedent to make use of in our situation today: not by copying but by applying the same principles, the same great English principles.

The situation in planning in all countries today calls for two things in particular, both totally neglected by the nineteenth century: the replanning of city centres to make them efficient as well as agreeable places to work in, and the planning of new balanced towns, satellite towns, New Towns, which really are towns. For a town is a unity *sui generis* and not an accumulation of garden suburbs with an occasional shopping centre as an urban enclave and a trading estate along the railway. Planning is of course largely a matter of economics, sociology, traffic engineering and traffic organisation, and so on, but it is also a visual matter, and if in the end the city centre or new town does not make you visually happy—not only in its buildings but as an urban whole—it is a failure.

I am being carried away into propaganda; but I am in fact close to my subject. The New Town built and the obsolete centre of the old town rebuilt are urgent problems for all countries, but what I have said about English character shows that no country is aesthetically better provided than England to solve it and thereby leave its imprint on other countries. If English planners forget about the straight axes and the artificially symmetrical façades of the Academy, and really set out to design functionally, that is Englishly, they will succeed. There are, in fact, promising omens in many places already: the consistent policy of *The Architectural Review* over the last twelve years and more, resulting in sketch plans for the City, the area round the Houses of Parliament, and several small towns; Sir Hugh Casson's and Mr. Misha Black's layout of the 1951 exhibition on the south bank of the Thames; then the Holden and Holford plan for the City of London; the new L.C.C. and Holford plans for the

Barbican area in the north part of the City; Sir Hugh Casson's plans for the Faculty of Arts precinct of Cambridge University; and—in the flesh as it were—certain parts of Harlow New Town by Mr. Frederick Gibberd and some of the new housing estates of the L.C.C. by Dr. Leslie Martin and his department.

These are the things eagerly studied by architects from abroad, but they are also things that still need support from the very highest quarters, as well as from all of us, against ignorance and short-sightedness, and against the stupid prejudice that any newfangled ideas which would give London, or your own city, a modern and worthy centre must be outlandish. You see now, I hope, how thoroughly inlandish they are.

### **Conservatism in Architecture**

But can the same be said of the twentieth-century style in architecture as distinct from, planning? Is it not true that this style came to England from abroad? It could not be created in England, because it had to be created by a revolution, and, once again, England dislikes revolutions. So England was not only inactive in bringing the new style about, but also slow in accepting it. But, surely, that can be called conservatism.

You see here how one can get tangled up in one's own categories. I have tried elaborately to prove that conservatism is an English quality. What reason can there be, then, to grumble over imitation Tudor suburban houses, Neo-Georgian villas, and the dead, dull, inert classical revival, classical re-revival of the new government offices off Whitehall? Conservatism can have two causes, and one is inertia or tiredness, while the other may well be reasonableness and the wish to see a thing tried out before one commits oneself to it. Besides, England has not always been conservative. She was not conservative at the time of Elizabeth I, and she was not conservative in the Industrial Revolution. Ralph Waldo Emerson, still in 1856, treated the English as the leaders of inventiveness and enterprise in the world. 'It is England', he wrote, 'whose opinion is waited for on the merit of a new invention'. Who would say that so categorically now? Not that the practical capabilities and the stamina of the nation have decayed. I may have mentioned them too little in these lectures, but then my subject was art, and this particular English trait does not often get opportunities of manifesting itself in art. In fact it manifests itself every so often in anti-art, I mean in an attitude hostile to the imaginative element in art. But today—and this is my point—the traditional English practical soundness has once more a great chance. I have shown how Englishness might benefit the whole urban scene. Now I want to suggest that Englishness could also contribute to humanising a rational, very intellectual style of designing buildings. I say humanising, not prettifying or watering down. However, that can be so only if the conservatism of inertia does not get the better of another, more constructive, conservatism which insists on carrying on from the Crystal Palace and the suspension bridge, from Wedgwood's eighteenth-century dinner-ware, and from Hardwick Hall.

Is that special pleading? It may well be, and I do not mind, for the moment, if it is. For what you will, I hope, take home from these lectures is that categories worked out honestly by the historian are neither meant to provide nor capable of providing a divining rod for the future. It would be fatal to exclude exploration and experiment because this, that, and the other has not been English in the past. Perhaps what has been the plight of the modern architect in England, and still is, is the conflict between

the sense of adventure in the individual and the sturdy resistance to adventure in the multitude represented by councils and committees.

But what is the plight of the modern painter and sculptor? There the case is different. It is, first of all, an international plight, that of a man without an accepted function and hence without a public. The rootlessness of fine art today has often been commented on and complained of. Remedies do not, to my mind, lie within purely national capabilities. They have to be ideological and do not concern us here. But it can perhaps be said that, if English painting today does not seem to have much to offer to the world at large, the reason is that the moment is once again, as we have come across them in the past, one of a clash between the spirit of the age and Englishness. Painting is all the expression of conflict now, of extreme dissatisfaction, of violent revolt. The Englishman's conflicts are still handled politely between a ruling party and Her Majesty's Opposition; there is no disparate dissatisfaction, no risk of revolt. That benefits us all; but it does not benefit the artist who, in this century, if he is a true artist, is driven to express the fact that western civilisation, and indeed survival, are both in utter peril.

Yet—and this takes me back again to the problems which we have met in these lectures—there is Mr. Henry Moore, and with him England can boast the greatest living sculptor. The greatest living sculptor, as the product of the most unsculptural nation. I made this point before, I have to make it again, because it underlines the impossibility of prophesying by means of historically discovered data. But, after all, Henry Moore was not a more improbable thing to happen than William Blake coming between Gainsborough and Constable, or the Decorated style coming between the Early English and the Perpendicular. The irrational element is there in England, more often latent than patent, and more often patent in poetry than in painting and architecture, but it may reappear any day in the visual arts and throw up a man of genius.

Many of you will ask whether this whole series of lectures has no other message than the one in the field of visual planning. But a historian's lectures cannot have much of a message, or else they cease to be historiography. However, in thinking over what else in the nature of a message you might be able to distil out of what I have told you, I thought it could perhaps be this: Please get to know the history of English art, and, if I say that, I include the Middle Ages, and I include architecture. Get to know them, because knowing them would not reduce but increase your estimate of English capabilities. You will agree your estimate is very low now. England has a veritable inferiority complex about her art in the past as well as her prospects in art. I feel sure Englishmen are more likely to make a pilgrimage to Amiens than to Lincoln. But they should know Lincoln; and they should remember that England was far ahead of the rest of Europe at the time of the Venerable Bede, in illumination as well as the sculpture of the High Crosses; that the art and civilisation of Charlemagne's court accepted inspiration from Britain; that Norman architecture in England was, if not ahead, certainly not behind the principal French schools; and that the creation of Gothic structure in royal France received its greatest stimulus, even if indirect stimulus, from Durham; that the Early English style of the thirteenth century was very different from the French High Gothic but architecturally, at least in its best works, such as Lincoln, not inferior; that English Decorated architecture of about 1300 was far more brilliant than any contemporary architecture anywhere else and English

illumination of the same time at least as fine as any anywhere else; that English Perpendicular architecture was an eminently original and telling creation, that Elizabethan architecture also was as original and as telling as that of France, the Netherlands, and Germany; and so on to Constable and Turner.

When Constable's pictures were on the point of leaving for the exhibition of 1824 in Paris, his friend Archdeacon Fisher wrote: 'English boobies who dare not trust their own eyes will discover your merits when they find you admired in Paris'. That is true to this day, and although English painting has not since been in the vanguard in Europe, Roger Fry had in my opinion no right to call the English school 'a minor school'. He was, admittedly, talking of painting only and of the last two centuries at that, but then that was just the mistake. To get a fair notion of what English art is capable of, everything from the illuminated manuscripts of the Early Middle Ages to William Morris' designs and the planning of precincts and buildings today must be included.

These lectures were an invitation to you to do so and to consider what you have seen and read about, not only historically—that is, as so many examples of so many styles; but also nationally—that is, as the examples of a national art and architecture which is all your own— or, will you give me leave to say, our own?