

‘...a subtle but vital critique of the cultural landscape of England ...’

‘...the human need for effort and creation ...’

Dorian Wiszniewski on News from England

Dwelling on the Future: Architecture for the Seaside, Middle England and the Metropolis

By Pierre d’Avoine

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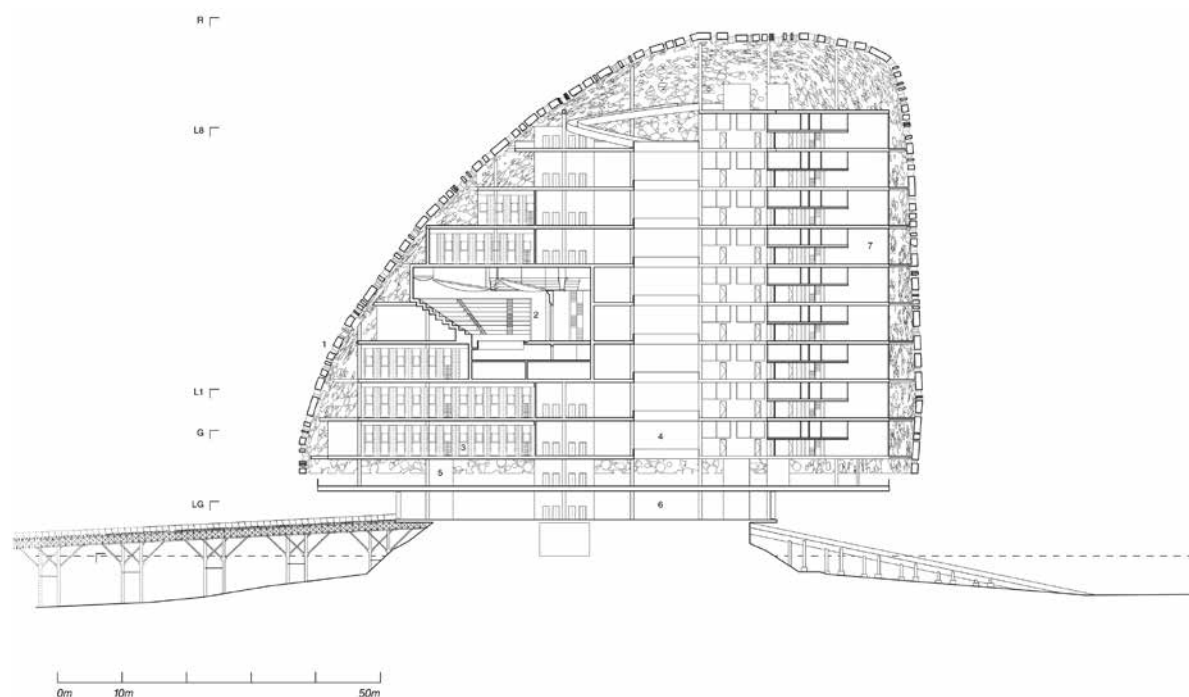
Reviewed by *Dorian Wiszniewski*

This book is an extension of the ‘Land Architecture People’ exhibition first held in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts School of Architecture, Copenhagen (2009), and then in the Ambika P3 Gallery, University of Westminster (2010). Ostensibly, this is a book of twelve unbuilt

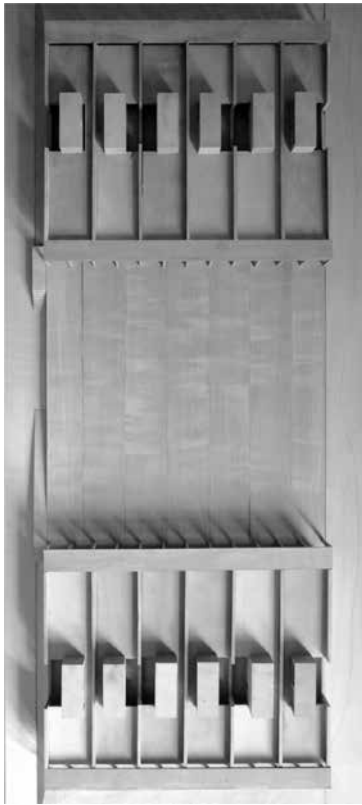
projects prepared between 2002 and 2015 by the office of Pierre d’Avoine. Yet, it also is far more than that. The projects are presented graphically through drawings and accompanied textually by transcriptions of interviews with a range of people connected to each project. The drawings are as you would expect if you have read *Housey Housey: A Pattern Book of Ideal Homes*: ‘an immaculate series of precise-line plans, sections, elevations, isometrics, axonometrics, and perspectives, sometimes collaged with photographs of context – and mostly seen from inside to out – which are absolutely without excess. These occasionally come supported by predominantly black-

and-white photographs of models, all constructed in neutral materials focusing more on formal arrangements but which nonetheless give an overall sense of how the material qualities are intrinsically consistent to their disposition. Between text and drawings, not only do we see skilled architectural design conducted in exacting conditions, we also gain illuminating insight into a socially minded view of architecture with a subtle but vital critique of the cultural landscape of England.

There is a modesty about each project. Even ‘Pleasure Holm for Birnbeck Island’ has reserve [1]. At first glance it seems quite unlike the eleven other projects, in that it is a visually striking project that



1 Cross-section of ‘Pleasure Holm at Birnbeck Island’.



2 Model of twelve houses, pearwood.

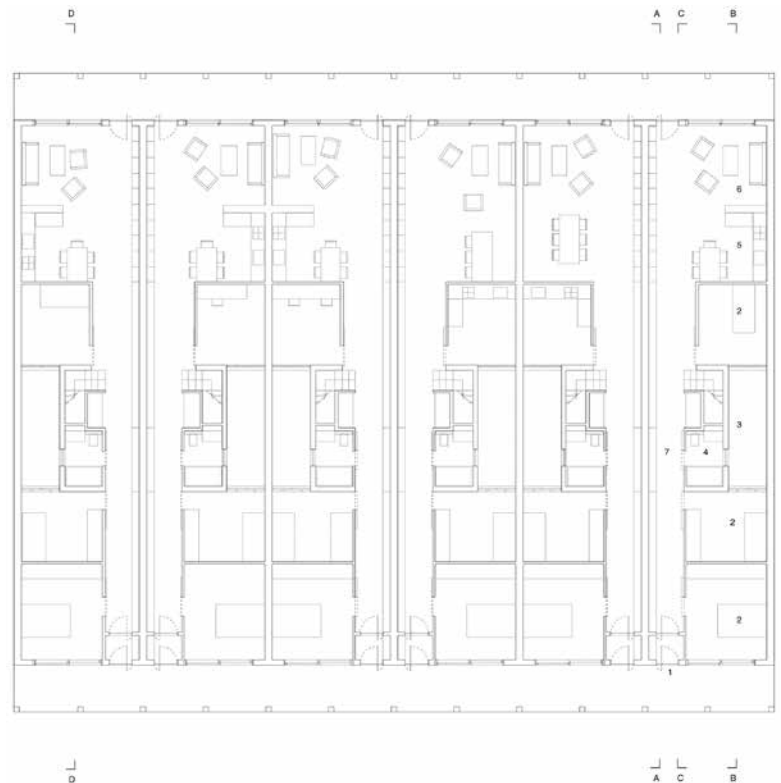
makes a mini-mountain out of a small island, welcoming a parametric process for wrapping an amorphous carapace of lush vegetation, described by line alone, over a typically well-organised unfussy orthogonal slab and frame structure. However, on analysis, although somewhat more hybrid, it holds the same organisational clarity, spatial and social virtues of all other projects, exemplified by ‘Sixty Houses for Crouch Field’, a more contextually nuanced series of ground-holding low-lying single-storey terraces of longhouses, courtyards, and commons connected and framed by outwardly and inwardly facing syntactically explicit loggias [2–4].

The transcriptions of interviews provide excellent insight into the prevailing conditions in which each project was undertaken. It becomes progressively clear, on reading through every interview, how the multiple voices that sound out each project establish a coherent methodology for the exhibitions and book. They also indicate how the collation of recurrent discursivity is a methodological impetus for the conception of each project. The voices begin with short biographies situating each speaker in their broader cultural context, providing educational, social, economic,

career, and (sometimes) political backgrounds. These are followed by a series of questions pointed more directly toward the specific projects. When linked with the introductory texts and postscript there is progressive evidence of how responses to these vocalised extensions of each project follow a considered consistent ethical standpoint. The voices include: co-architect; structural engineer; environmental engineer; historic landscape consultant; chief executive of an alms-house charity; estate agent; ICOMOS World Heritage committee member; CABE enabler; development manager; client landowner; architectural and urban design activists; a domestic client representing one diasporic narrative among many in the United Kingdom (not least that of Pierre d’Avoine); developer. What

they speak of here, which often remains generally unspoken, is not only triggered by their own life experiences, mixed culture, current situation, and propensities but also by apparently simple but probing and illuminating questions. Thus, the interviewees’ responses are revelatory not only about each project but also yield insight into the England that Pierre d’Avoine Architects have navigated while maintaining, nurturing, and further developing an architectural and design integrity that is rather rare.

My title of this review – *News from England* – invokes William Morris’s *News from Nowhere*. Morris sought greater social equality. He was critical of how technologisation increased the wealth of the few over the many. Morris’s narrative described an open landscape of cultural continuity between rural and



3 Ground floor plan, twelve houses.



4 Model, two Cottage Terraces and communal garden, with staircase and ramp to lower level, pearwood, 1:100.

urban craft-based co-existence. Urbanism, countryside, agriculture, and industry were conceived not as in conflict but instead organised to provide pleasure and reward for everyone through work and everyday life. An echo of this aspiration runs through *Dwelling on The Future*. Morris's narrative was not only set against Industrial England and its historical abuse of workers, but it was also deliberately set against Edward Bellamy's mechanised socialist utilitarian 'cockney utopia'.

This tendency to see the co-extensive progressive relationship between city and technology was later also criticised by George Orwell.² So, although this book does not tackle the question of technology directly, it does see architecture as a means for overcoming tensions between technology and craft. However, just as importantly, this book promotes the skilled architecture of housing as means for developing social contexts as part of an English tradition of critical social commentary, which includes William Morris, J. B. Priestley (see his *English Journey*),³ George Orwell (*The Road to Wigan Pier*),⁴ to whom I would add Owen Jones as a contemporary voice (*The Establishment, And How They Get Away with It*).⁵ However, the history of England's apparently reluctant engagement with socialism is inconsistent and fraught, for example: by class prejudice, from within supporters and opposition; by misrepresentation, inevitable within prejudiced and disproportionate systems of political representation; by suspicion, of illiberal objectives; by ignorance, of the detail and textures of varied socialist discourses; by systematised selfishness, unwillingness to confront the problem of inequity in case it means redistribution of personal privilege; by in-fighting between different socialist groups;⁶ and by the accusation of bourgeois sentimentalism – Orwell, for example, was concerned by an artsy-crafty legacy of Morris. England has neither held onto its craft-base nor has it achieved greater land equity through industrialisation. The historical feudal pattern and the enforced privatisation of landscape is the basis of the mechanisation of landscape patterns. The mechanisation of

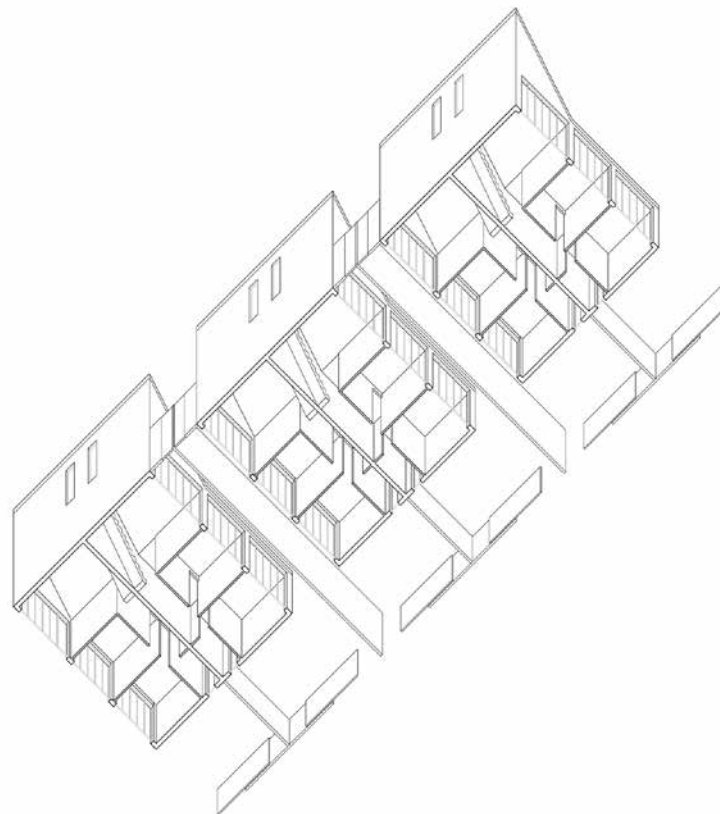
production was paralleled by the mechanised division of land and labour, with two clear architectural consequences for the consideration of housing. On one hand, urban and suburban sprawl is widespread and now infected greatly by post-agricultural, post-industrial, and neighbourhood neglect – rather than ready assistance and maintenance, places are abandoned by landowners when there is no money to be made. On the other hand, suburbia provides the mass housebuilders' bread and butter where 'the ubiquity of the semi is in part a triumph of mediocrity'⁷ and the greatest symbol of an ongoing insensitivity to ecology. To quote one of the book's interviews:

*British history from the Tudor period was one of enclosure – the creation of a landless working class. By the time you get to the Victorian period, enclosure is legalised, systematised and rampant. The creation of a landless working class is what the British state is all about. The 1947 Planning system is a preservation of the achievements of the enclosures [...] planning wasn't about the containment of urban England, it was about the containment of the working class.*⁸

This is the difficult terrain that the projects in this book attempt, knowingly, to navigate.

Pierre d'Avoine rues the fact that the post-Second World War experiment to provide decent housing for everyone was abandoned in favour of Margaret Thatcher's enthusiasm for neoliberalism.⁹ However, this was the England he was thrust into shortly after leaving architecture school. He registers his frustration at how the hegemonies of economics have been progressively responsible for 'diminishing the potential of the architect to make a contribution beyond that of stylist – servant to a system unable to re-imagine and implement a world beyond the corrupting impact of an unfettered market.'¹⁰ Consuming less and working for more qualitative production is what Morris wanted. This book, sympathetic to Morris but not utopian, also promotes the human need for effort and creation over the frightful debauchery of taste.¹¹

This book seems driven by two opposing sentiments: there is a pessimism that, under current political trends, England is becoming more unequal; however, conditioning this view is a practically situated optimism that



5 Worm's-eye axonometric, 'House + Garden + House'.

architectural skills can be at the vanguard of a communitarianism that will deliver a more equitable share of England's landscape.

Even though the projects have seemingly become paper architecture, they are nonetheless premised on being buildable and economically implementable. Thus, this book takes the opportunity for using them as the basis for a particular character of theorisation that hopes to make a difference. This book promotes localism, situating England's everyday across a range of different landscapes, seeing housing in its various configurations as a celebration, a right, and a means of coordinating enriched experience for everyone. This is entirely consistent with the socialism and anarchistic principles of Kropotkin, a member of Morris's *Socialist League*,¹² but particularly as espoused by the 'humane thinking' of Colin Ward,¹³ where anarchy simply means 'any social space in which the techniques of mutuality predominate.'¹⁴

The authoritarianism of techno-economic production is eschewed at every possible turn and replaced with architecture that looks for opportunities for its occupants to select and reappropriate for personal fulfilment the 'pattern book' organisational system of well-designed dwellings. Many of the larger housing projects propose varied housing types alongside allotments, commons, or 'productive parkland', for example, 'Swaythling Housing' in Hampshire.¹⁵ 'House + Garden + House' is presented as 'another letter in the alphabet of London building types',¹⁶ that develops the 'Invisible House'¹⁷ as a way of densifying suburbia without loss of private and collective garden amenities [5]. Given Pierre d'Avoine's Indian heritage I am tempted to suggest that this is also entirely consistent with the context-sensitive specificity of Indian culture rather than the context-free universalising tendencies of analytic traditions and the concomitant techno-economic rationale.¹⁸ Despite the recurrence of the same patterns in varied circumstances, the ethical context-sensitive basis of all projects is never lost, nor is the tenacity with which architectural integrity is maintained and communicated through numerous precise thoughtful and skilled series of drawings, despite what must be significant serial disappointment for an architect who clearly loves to build.

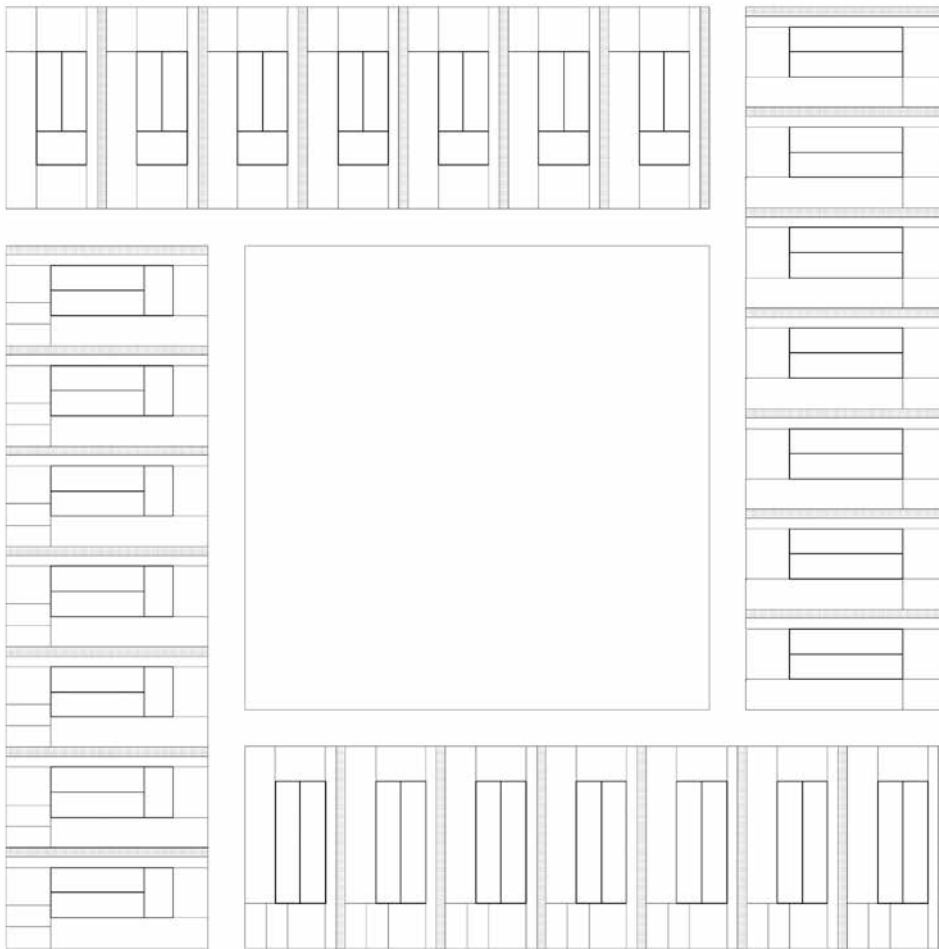


6 Plan and section for house types 2 and 4.

This book arranges its twelve projects through three subheadings: Seaside, Middle England, and Metropolis. Each project begins with a series of historical maps that show the shift in land patterns and how each project results from these. Despite invocations of Priestley and Orwell, the absence of projects in the north of England is notable. Perhaps this is inevitable for a small practice working out of London. Nonetheless, this organisational system, along with the multiple voices, framed between Clare Melhuish's and Pierre d'Avoine's anthropological-architectural views, give a very strong sense of England as it really is. The twelve projects do not attempt to present a whole. The projects declare themselves clearly as architectural design more than urban design or suburban design. They celebrate their fragmentary role in the equally fragmented political and cultural landscape of England. They do not speak of an overarching idealism of place, but they do seek to underpin the possibility, and perhaps need, for architecture to

act as the negotiating medium between the range of formal differences through which the history of England has marked its landscape.

Pier Vittorio Aureli makes a big claim for urbanism as the consequence of architectural assemblage. He suggests that Nollis's seminal figure-ground plan is mistakenly read as the dialectic between public and private space. Rather, Aureli proposes it is an arrangement of the difference between architecture (complex figure) and urbanism (figure as reductive block).¹⁹ It seems both arguments are possible. However, the importance of this conception is the role of architecture to operate as an adequation of articulated fragments, thereby giving substance to the possibility of varied urban part-to-whole relationships. In other words, we can either allow urbanism and suburbanism to drive the conception of dwelling through reductive sprawling techno-economically derived repetitive urban and suburban blocks and units, or we could look to architects



7 Site plan.

to encourage localised mutuality that would figure things out differently with consequent varied textures of expression. This book promotes architects and fellow community enablers as necessary for resolving this complexity of figuration, not only to develop specific architectural means for dwelling appropriately, but also to preserve and celebrate a varied and textured cultural and physical landscape, with the attendant healthy range of economies and ecologies.

The project 'Patterns for Letchworth: From Garden City to Patchwork City' is key in presenting the book's thesis. It is a project developed by a team comprising Pierre d'Avoine (architect), Ian Abley and Alec Scragg (the architectural and urban design activists previously referred to), Nabeel Hamdi (pioneer of participatory planning),²⁰ and Clare Melhuish (anthropologist). This project develops the question of how to develop England's landscape in response to the brief for the Wolfson Economic Prize, 2014, that asked 'How would you

deliver a new Garden City which is visionary, economically viable and popular?'. Lord Wolfson and his Aspley Guise are given something of a Leveller's treatment through this project. It operates between a simultaneously healthy and necessary critique of Richard Rogers' urban densification that divides private space from 'public realm' and the mythical 'self-sufficiency' of Ebenezer Howard's suburban Garden City, examples of the recurrent polarity between city and countryside. Both are considered examples of top-down, managed urbanism – outcomes, perhaps, of an alliance between the self-interest of economic hegemonies and what Orwell refers to as the 'beehive state'. Neither contain the requisite architecture or varied expression that might be expected from the mutuality of becoming community. This is perhaps the most radically framed work in the book but it allows the politic of all the other projects to be more clearly sensed.

This counter-project accepts low density and urban sprawl as an affirmative condition, but with

strong caveats as to how its mixes are achieved and governed. It proposes 'permissive, participatory and popular places in which to live, work and play for all its inhabitants and visitors.'²¹ It proposes architectural assemblages of detached long houses in private gardens, where each long house belongs to one of four types, allowing for different arrangements of flats and two- or three-bedroom houses, arranged in pinwheel terraces as each edge around a square garden common. The architecture acts as 'opportunistic patchwork settlements' deployable through 'action plans'.²² Action planning under the stewardship of local sovereignty is preferred over top-down master planning pushed by landowners. Action plans are complex, deliberative, and serial processes necessary to stitch together the physical incongruities that continue to arise as aspects of this deeply riven surface of urban, suburban, and rural England. It proposes to join villages and existing communities with extensions through enclaves of

inexpensive, affordable, but beautifully designed houses around common green space [6, 7]. It proposes ‘plot lands and their biodiversity versus the sterility of large fields’;²³ and it stands against any version of ecological or technological monoculture.

This book and its projects show Pierre d’Avoine working with his respected friends to present architecture as not just a code for developing landscape and building, but as a code of conduct. The book is a subtle, delicate, and open rather than shouty, ideological, and foreclosed manifesto. It is informed by analyses drawn between career-long professional in-situ experience and engagements in the academy. Perhaps it is also motivated by the frustration that so many significant projects have come to limited fruition because of the fraught politico-economic context of England. Even so, this book can be considered a contribution to England’s socialist traditions. Rather than *nowhere*, d’Avoine is situated somewhere. That somewhere is affirmatively England. It is not that d’Avoine puts his body on the line in the manner of Orwell, but rather that he respects that practical aspect of Orwell to focus on the basics, through a sensibility attuned to the craft of Morris. This book proposes decent housing, common amenities, and a more equitable distribution of space for everybody by committing to the articulating delicacy of the architectural lines that hold varied spaces of and between dwellings.

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Notes

- Pierre d’Avoine, *Housey House: A Pattern Book of Ideal Homes* (London: Black Dog, 2005).
- For an account of the recurring difficult ‘tradition’ of holding socialist views in England as a cultural commentator, see Anna Vaninskaya, ‘Janus-Faced Fictions: Socialism as Utopia and Dystopia in William Morris and George Orwell’, *Utopian Studies*, 14:2 (2002), 83–9.
- d’Avoine, *Housey House*, p. 317, although I am sure d’Avoine does not sympathise with Priestley’s views on the Irish.
- Ibid.*, p. 235.
- Owen Jones, *The Establishment, And How They Get Away with It* (London: Penguin, 2015).
- For example, the breakaway in 1885 of Morris’s *Socialist League* from Hyndman’s *Socialist Democratic Federation*, the first socialist organisation in England formed in 1881. See M. S. Wilkins, ‘The Non-Socialist Origins of England’s First Important Socialist Organisation’, *International Review of Social History*, 4:2 (1959), 199–207.
- Pierre d’Avoine, *Dwelling on the Future: Architecture for the Seaside, Middle England and the Metropolis* (London: UCL Press, 2020), p. 17.
- Ian Abley, in d’Avoine, *Dwelling on the Future*, p. 233.
- Ibid.*, p. 248.
- Ibid.*, p. 9.
- Vaninskaya, in d’Avoine, *Dwelling on the Future*, p. 88.
- John Slatter, ‘The Correspondence of P. A. Kropotkin as Historical Source Material’, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 72:2 (1994), 277–88.
- d’Avoine, *Dwelling on the Future*, p. 247.
- Stuart White, ‘Colin Ward: Pioneer of Mutualism’, *Next Left* (14 February 2010) <<http://www.nextleft.org/2010/02/colin-ward-pioneer-of-mutualism.html>> [accessed 7 February 2022].
- d’Avoine, *Dwelling on the Future*, pp. 162–83.
- Ibid.*, pp. 245–68.
- d’Avoine, *Housey House*, pp. 40–7.
- See A. K. Ramunajan, ‘Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay’, in *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, ed. by Amit Chaudhuri (London: Picador, 2001), pp. 421–37.
- Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 108–09.
- See Nabeel Hamdi, *Housing Without Houses: Participation, Flexibility, Enablement* (London: Intermediate Technology, 1995).
- d’Avoine, *Dwelling on the Future*, p. 223.
- Ibid.*, p. 236.
- Ibid.*, p. 233.

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Competing interests

The author declares none.

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