

# letters

## Halen: facing the forest

Sir: Carefully researched articles such as that on Siedlung Halen (*arq* vol. 2 no.1) always raise a number of interesting questions. In this case the perhaps most intriguing is why there are so few subsequent built examples of the generating idea.

I vividly remember visiting Halen in its early days and being most impressed by what Atelier 5 had created in a forest clearing outside Berne at the end of the 1950s. What made an obvious impression was not only the clearly Corbusian set of forms or the notion of laying the Unité d'Habitation on its side but the underlying assumption of precise and defined geometry in a virtually untouched landscape.

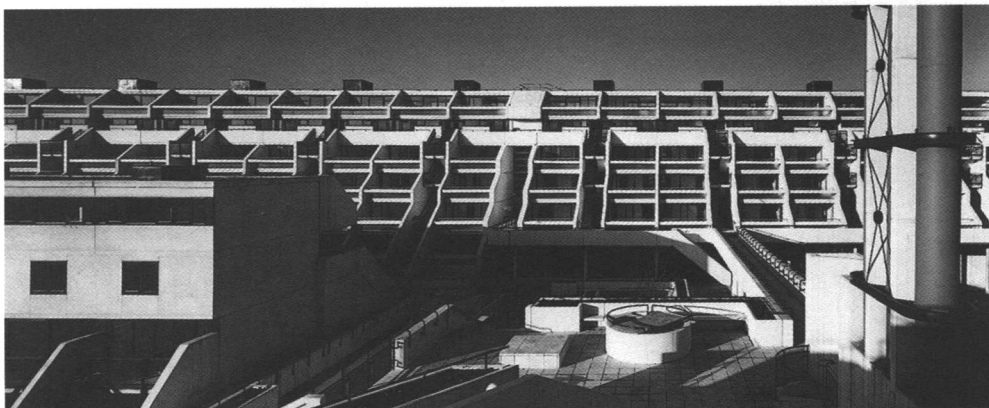
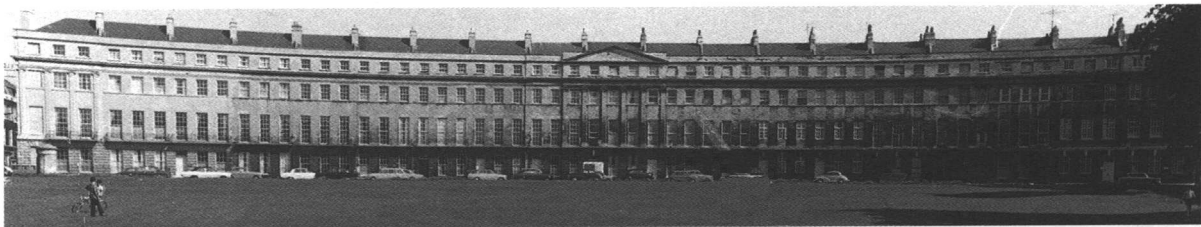
The notion could of course be described as Palladian: the mathematically ordered villa in the

countryside. It therefore belonged to an established and known tradition. After all, the work of the Woods in Bath – the Circus and Royal Crescent – consisted originally of similarly precise geometries in farmland at the edge of the city. It was also, arguably, an aristocratic notion and might, therefore, have been widely imitated by the socially ambitious. Yet this does not seem to have been the case.

That Siedlung Halen was low was most significant. Christopher Tunnard in his now neglected book *Gardens in the Modern Landscape* (1938) had advocated slab-like blocks set in eighteenth-century parks as the contemporary equivalent of the Palladian English country house: a much more obvious analogy than the ground-related forms of Halen; forms which Shadrach Woods was aptly to label 'groundscrapers'.

There is no doubt that Siedlung Halen must have been known to all those involved with the low-rise high-density housing designs which at one time were thought to be a highly appropriate housing solution. The similarity is most evident in Neave Brown's Alexandra Road in the London Borough of Camden. But even here we are dealing with part of the city – I suspect highly intentionally – and not with Euclidean geometry set down in the landscape.

The rural idyll is pervasive in much of the housing market but its aristocratic Palladian form does not seem to have captured the imagination. Is it that visually obvious forms of order do not mesh with late twentieth-century ideas of individuality, or is it possibly that we still demand nature to be subdued, to be turned into a cottage garden, before we feel



Siedlung Halen predecessor, Bath's Royal Crescent – and successor, London's Alexandra Road.

comfortable? Perhaps we do not have the self-confidence to face the forest.

**Michael Brawne**  
Bath

*Michael Brawne practises as an architect in Bath and is Emeritus Professor of Architecture at the University.*

#### **A change of educational setting**

Sir: There is no question that the dominant culture within architectural education, in both the United Kingdom and the United States, has left behind its commitment to a social agenda as a generative force (Leader, *arq* vol. 2: no. 1). That this should happen at a time when the centre of intellectual and creative energy within the discipline has shifted from Europe to the United States, or more specifically from London to New York, is certainly not insignificant.

In his introduction to *Five Architects* (1975) Colin Rowe wrote, very perceptively: 'Thus, while with regard to Europe, it is possible to argue that modern architecture was conceived as the adjunct of socialism and probably sprang from approximately the same ideological roots as Marxism, in America an indigenous modern architecture was very conspicuously unequipped with any such implicit social program or politically critical pedigree'.

He went on to say: 'In post World War I Europe, the combined promise and threat of Architecture or Revolution could seem to many important innovators to be a very real one; but in the United States, the presumption that only architecture could turn a "bad" revolution into a "good" one, that only a Wagnerian recourse to "total" design could avert social catastrophe, this could never seem to be very highly plausible. For in

the United States the revolution was assumed to have already occurred – in 1776, and it was further assumed to have initiated a social order which was not to be superseded by subsequent developments.'

And finally: '... the message of modern architecture was transformed. It was made safe for capitalism and, with its dissemination thereby assisted, the products of a movement which became crystallised in the stress and trauma of the central European Nineteen-Twenties became agreeably available to be catalogued – on either side of the Atlantic – among the cultural trophies of an affluent society'.

The Five Architects whose work is the subject matter of the book were, of course, Eisenman, Graves, Gwathmey, Hejduk, Meier. About them Rowe says: 'Apparently they are neither Marcusian nor Maoist: and, lacking any transcendental sociological or political faith, their objective – at bottom – is to alleviate the present by the interjection of a quasi-Utopian vein of poetry'.

In 1997 we live in an architectural educational world that has been largely shaped by these individuals, their colleagues and their followers, and in a set of societies which seem to be determined to be Americanised.

The second point in your leader regrets not only the loss of social purpose in our schools but also the lack of engagement with the realities of getting buildings built in our society and the challenge to integrate those realities into our students' design processes. You suggest that this is at least in part because of the absence of experienced professionals from our teaching ranks.

There is no question that in all but a few cases, the worlds of teaching and of practice have drifted further

apart. The old pattern of a school being predominantly staffed by practising architects with an interest in and a gift for education has been replaced by one in which the majority of teachers are full-time academics with a scholarly agenda of research and publication.

The question is whether all of this is to be regretted, nay lamented. Has the loss of a direct engagement with social and professional reality so weakened the schools that our graduates will no longer be equipped to sustain an architectural profession of moral stature and synthetic skills?

My simple answer is that I don't know. While certainly regretting the loss of the architectural educational culture within which I matured, I am not prepared to concede that all these changes are for the worse.

Outside the door of my office is an exhibition of some of the best current work of our architectural students, probably not too different from what would be found in most good schools. The issues that dominate are interaction with site (whether our extraordinary Arizona desert or an urban site of some cultural significance); a fascination with material, construction, and craft; formal complexity derived from the interaction of several geometries often derived from the morphology of the site; and engagement with the programme more as a cultural theme than as a catalogue of needed spaces. Although there is no shortage of scale models and drawings there are also photo montages, artefacts, computer-generated images, and freehand charcoal drawings which have a direct value and quality beyond that of simple representation.

The developing maturity of

architectonic skill and creativity manifest there leaves me with some considerable optimism. Architecture in the hands of these graduates will be worthy of the name should our society give them the opportunity to exercise their talents in pursuit of its purposes.

And there it seems to me lies the challenge. Can we, as responsible community leaders, ensure that our communities have a use for what our graduates could provide?

The changes you have identified have, it would seem to me, far more to do with changes in the settings of architectural education than with architectural education's internally driven goals.

John Meunier  
Arizona

*John Meunier is Dean of the College of Architecture and Environmental Studies, Arizona State University.*

### **Constructional imperatives**

Sir: A basic understanding of building construction has been something of an orphan in most schools of architecture. Education has left its dissemination to practice and practice has left it to education. In some instances it is barely taught at all. Where it is taught, it is considered a subject to be learned by rote by a similarly mindless process to that of following a recipe. Without analysis followed by invention, constructional method becomes a process which avoids the intellectual participation of the designer. It has not hitherto been considered a live subject as the essay by Colin Rice (*arq* vol. 2: no. 1) so refreshingly portrays it to be.

Better comprehension can come from the manner in which constructional matters are explored, analysed and presented. In *The*

*Architects' Journal's Architects' Working Details*, understandably beloved of so many, materials are annotated frequently unnecessarily. The graphic technique is usually sufficient to denote the material concerned. What is never explained is the role that each material or component, solid or void is playing in the behaviour of the building system as a whole. Further coherence to any understanding can also be provided by sequentially numbering parts in order of fixing.

The 1:20 section still holds sway at the expense of the plan. My erstwhile colleague, Jeremy Gould, who ran a punishing course in building construction at Plymouth, recognised the absolute need for the 1:20 plan to be studied simultaneously with the section and would only accept 1:20 detailed sections from students when proved by the accompaniment of the 1:20 plan.

Mechanical detailing is referred to by Rice but insufficient importance is given to the priority of mechanical detailing over that of the chemical detailing which should only be used in the last resort.

Adrian Gale  
Devon

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### **Critical appraisal**

Sir: 'Academic respectability is of no use' remarked Sir Ove Arup in the paper that you published in your last issue (*arq* vol. 2: no. 1). This may be of some comfort to those schools of architecture who scored badly in the latest research assessment exercise, but while none scored a starred five in the built environment sector, it has to

be admitted that most were trying. Academic respectability is what universities desire, and in spite of the government's wish to support vocational training, this is not seen as being respectable, as the general lack of enthusiasm for well funded National Vocational Qualifications would seem to reflect. Sir Ove's advocacy of the vocational nature of architectural education, and perhaps therefore the unsuitability of architecture schools being placed in universities, is an issue which you do not address in your editorial and which could do with airing.

If academic respectability requires the use of logic and rigour in discourse, then it certainly is at odds with the Humpty Dumpty proposals you published on 'A Philosophy of Building Construction', by Colin Rice. It has to be admitted that Vitruvius was equally anecdotal and disjointed on the same subject, but to suggest that the very beautiful Munich stadium illustrates an 'economy of means' is plainly wrong, disregarding the huge tension forces that were artificially introduced in the boundary cables, and compensated for by enormous quantities of concrete buried in the ground. Equally to use the illustration of the Pont du Gard to represent the 'principle' of 'high to low' seems perverse, as to suit its particular function this structure is the converse of the norm in most buildings, where the largest spans are economically located on the upper storeys, where they carry least load. If Rice's proposed principles allow such broad interpretations, then their general usefulness must be open to question.

Lest this letter should appear too negative, I would like to add that all the other articles were of great interest,

and it was particularly good to see Colin St. John Wilson's Spring House being properly reviewed. I did find some of the sources discussed to be somewhat surprising, and would have expected some acknowledgement of Louis Kahn rather than the comparison with Gwathmey. Wilson's design is an integrated whole, whereas Gwathmey's is an elegant assembly of discrete components, some of which might be removed without irreparable loss.

Michael Spens' notion that Spring House might somehow be equally valid sheathed in timber on the Amagansett coast appears to ignore the essential tension between the hard masonry external shell (the brickwork also being completely indigenous to the area) and the internal timber structure, which is explosively released at the corner. It would be greatly impoverished if it were all built in the same material, and it should obviously be listed, lest someone actually tries to implement an equally batty idea.

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**Letters, should be typed double-spaced and sent to Peter Carolin, Architectural Research Quarterly, c/o University of Cambridge Department of Architecture, 1 Scroope Terrace, Cambridge, CB2 1PX, faxed to +44 (0)1223 332960, or e-mailed to pc207@hermes.cam.ac.uk**  
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