The Best of Edwardian London

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

LONDON

"London, 1900," an exhibition of English turn-of-the-century building on view at the Heinz Gallery of the Royal Institute of British Architects on Portman Square through July and August, is London's architectural event of the summer season. Scheduled to tour internationally when it closes, the show includes photographs, drawings from the RIBA collection, and at least one spectacular model, of Westminster Cathedral.

On the face, or facade of it, London buildings of the decades from 1890 to 1914, a period and an oeuvre that have been largely ignored, seem like an uncontroversial enough subject. The show is, in fact, an architectural historian's delight in terms of the intensity of its scholarship (Gavin Stamp is its organizer and the author of its text), the quality of its photography (splendid pictures of both famous and little-known buildings have been taken by André Goulancourt) and its chauvinistic nostalgia at just the right remove (this is the architecture of the Edwardian Age and the Imperial City at its zenith).

The subject, and its outstanding documentation, comes at exactly the right moment to ride the current international wave of historical revisionism, and what may look like perverse or revolutionary vision at first glance is more accurately the predictable swing of time and taste, coupled with the rise of a curious and articulate generation that has no use for another generation's standards. But this show is one of the more solid exercises in cultural reexamination, and we are the richer for it.

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Still, "London, 1900" turns out to be a surprisingly controversial subject after all. By the very act of displaying this mixed bag of exuberant eclecticism, so long out of favor, an absolute Pandora's box of questions about what is good and what is bad architecture is opened, with all kinds of reputations turned inside out and upside down. Coming out for Tradition with a capital T still ranks as radical in some circles. Even the most skillful changing of styles like so many hats rankles those who continue to believe that there is at least some tacit moral liaison between appearance and structure, or use.

André Goulancourt

The Islington Central Public Library, London, designed by H.T. Hare

Architectural Design, the English magazine which prides itself on its forward stance in the profession, has devoted a double issue to the exhibition, under the guest editorship of Gavin Stamp, which also serves as the catalgue for the show. Reading Mr. Stamp's essay, there is no question about the contribution being made to architectural scholarship.

In fact, there should be no controversy about the show or the work at all, Mr. Stamp explains in person, like a patient parent to a slightly slow child, except for those so steeped in the "dogma" of modernism that they are unable to perceive the quality or value of a period and kind of practice that modernism rejected—an age not only of monumental building and profligate eclecticism, but of symbolic image-making and a grand urban ideal.

Its leaders were in unashamed pursuit of classical nobility, as well as of all kinds of interpretations of the architectural past, from Italianate to "Pont Street Dutch." Such establishment practitioners as Sir Edwin Lutyens, who denied modernism out of hand, are becoming the new cult figures, and names like Sir Aston Webb, E. A. Rickards, John Belcher and Reginald Blomfield, who dealt in everything from classical and baroque to fashionable mannerism and such specialties as "Champs Elysées French," are commanding new respect. Mr. Stamp puts them just slightly higher in the pantheon of English architecture than the previously enshrined "proto-modernists" Norman Shaw, W. R. Lethaby and Philip Webb, as men who understood what city-building was truly about.

There is no doubt but that these men built very, very well. As for style, the show clearly asks whether it was either possible or necessary to create a "new style" at the time, and whether style is not properly a slow, organic development of tradition and lessons from the past. It can be argued, of course, that this is a selective or partial definition.

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But what seems to be most disturbing about the show to many people is that there is so little consistency in the work—in the sense that outstanding creative periods in the arts have produced strong esthetic typologies—a fact that has caused some discomfort and a bit of reluctance to swallow the show's thesis whole. Critical judgment will undoubtedly

Continued on Page 20

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

Continued from Page 19

be hoisted on the avant-garde's own petard of "pluralism." However, it is this inconsistency, and the lack of a unifying esthetic ideal, in spite of the high quality of much of the work, that is the most serious argument for a period of high competence rather than of greatness.

The amount of work involved is staggering. It was a time of extraordinary building activity that produced much of London as we know it now. Examples range from Sir Aston Webb's classical refacing of Buckingham Palace in 1912-13 and his creation of the Admiralty Arch for a formal processional axis to the Strand, to the large-scale erection of new business palaces like Lloyd's Registry of Ships, in the "Arts and Crafts Baroque" of T. E. Colcutt of 1900-1, or Lutyens's suave Georgian models. In addition to great numbers of public and private buildings, there were the new museums, libraries and educational buildings, and commercial construction including department stores and factories, as well as hotels, theaters and flats.

Visiting London with increasing admiration over the years, I have loved all of it. Those solid turn-of-the-century structures with their confident, conservative images are a large part of the essential London, beyond the genius of Wren and Hawksmoor and the familiar Victorian monuments, beyond landmarks or clichés. In this sense, there is indeed a London "style" unrecorded in textbooks and guide books, but powerfully present on its streets.

If Mr. Stamp is right that the argument of the "goodies" versus the "baddies" no longer applies, then "London, 1900" redresses many wrongs. "Are we to dismiss the architects who did most to embellish London in those years?" he asks. "Do we dismiss the buildings that give form and symbolic shape to the city as tedious shams?"

"According to the standard interpretation," he explains, "all went well in the 1890's, but round about 1900 English architecture took a lurch in the wrong direction and the torch of Artistic Progress was passed to Germany, to the delicate, eager hands of Herren Behrens and Gropius."

He is clearly unconvinced, and that is not very delicate irony. As Robert Venturi has said, we do not need to kick our fathers to honor our grandfathers. But honor them this show does, quite gloriously and rewardingly, and that is almost enough. ■