

Architectural Research Quarterly

<http://journals.cambridge.org/ARQ>

Additional services for *Architectural Research Quarterly*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



Towards a new cathedral: mechanolatry and metaphysics in the milieu of Colin St John Wilson

Stephen Kite and Sarah Menin

Architectural Research Quarterly / Volume 9 / Issue 01 / March 2005, pp 81 - 90
DOI: 10.1017/S1359135505000102, Published online: 19 June 2006

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S1359135505000102

How to cite this article:

Stephen Kite and Sarah Menin (2005). Towards a new cathedral: mechanolatry and metaphysics in the milieu of Colin St John Wilson. *Architectural Research Quarterly*, 9, pp 81-90 doi:10.1017/S1359135505000102

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

Architectural debates of the 1950s – particularly between ‘empirical’ and ‘formal’ strands of Modernism – are highlighted by a study of the architectural projects, biography and milieu of Colin St John Wilson.

Towards a new cathedral: mechanolatry and metaphysics in the milieu of Colin St John Wilson

Stephen Kite and Sarah Menin

Recent studies such as *As Found: The Discovery of the Ordinary* (Lichtenstein and Schreggenberger, 2001) signal a renewed critical fascination with the contested trends of the 1950s whose concerns – such as the reciprocity between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, or the tension between the gloss of technology and the grit of the city ‘as found’ – mirror our own fears and desires. This essay uses the milieu and work of Colin St John Wilson (b 1922) as a lens whereby to better visualise the flux of these debates and tendencies. In recent years, Wilson has been best known for his achievement in realising the British Library at St Pancras, London (1974–97). However, he was also an active figure and polemicist from the very beginning of his architectural career in the 1950s. He was a member of the Institute of Contemporary Arts and its offshoot the Independent Group, and a participant in other lively circles of the 1950s such as the ‘salon’ of Reyner and Mary Banham, and the watering holes of Soho. In addition, he was active among those young architects of the London County Council (LCC) who participated in the shaping of the hoped-for ‘new world’ that would arise from the ashes of the Blitz.

At the heart of the LCC, a revealing stylistic and philosophical schism emerged between the so-called ‘Swedish Empiricists’ (‘softs’) and the adherents of Corbusian ‘Formalism’ (‘hards’). Indeed, as one of the first architectural newspaper columnists, Wilson was prominent in articulating the formalist position. The homage of the formalist ‘hards’ to ‘Corbu’ was made concrete in many major housing projects including two developed by Wilson and fellow LCC team members, most significantly the Bentham Road Estate which tested a radical narrow frontage maisonette form that echoed the template of the *Unité d’Habitation*.

But as the 1950s advanced, many of this generation sensed the reductivism of ‘The Functional City’ of the Athens Charter and sought richer patternings of place. At the same time they began to realise that the promoted rationalism of Le Corbusier’s oeuvre belied its socio-psychological depths. So Wilson, as he made trips to Paris in the 1950s to experience the work of Corbu and encountered the master himself

in his sanctum at Rue Nungesser-et-Coli, gradually began to realise the metaphysical depths that lay behind the Cartesian screen through which Le Corbusier was typically presented.

Here, an examination of Wilson’s marriage of the rational and the metaphysical in his design, with Peter Carter, for the new cathedral for Coventry – one of the major postwar opportunities in a period of great competitions – illustrates these themes and debates. Despite its defiant aesthetic, this project bears witness to the multiple influences of art, poetry and spirituality as they stirred Wilson’s creative imagination; initiating a significant shift from what might be perceived as a ‘hard’ rationalist architecture to one of invitation (Menin and Kite, 2005).

Building the ‘new world’

In 1950, Wilson became an architectural columnist for *The Observer*. His first article – ‘Architect and Patron’ of 4 June 1950 – describes J. M. Richards’ (1907–92) attack in the previous year on the low standards of the London County Council (LCC) housing programme as compared to the ambition of Scandinavian design. As editor of *The Architectural Review*, Richards was a forceful spokesperson for the Modern Movement. As Wilson’s piece points out, the early postwar work of the LCC was seen by many to have failed to match the communitarian ‘spirit of socialism, welfare and reconstruction’, or the radical vision of the Forshaw-Abercrombie Plan for London, conceived in 1943, and accepted by the LCC in 1945. Now, proclaims Wilson, the architect’s new patron is ‘the man-in-the-street’ (Furieux Jordan, 1956).

In response to such fierce criticisms, subsequent reorganisation had transformed the LCC Housing Division into a centre of architectural activity that attracted scores of bright young architects. It would grow rapidly from a nucleus of twenty staff in 1950 to over four hundred by 1956 (Glendinning and Muthesius, 1994: 104; Furieux Jordan, 1956: 302–324). Moreover it was organised on a team system that devolved a high degree of autonomy and creative initiative to the groups responsible for the various projects, whose members, like Wilson, were



often only recently qualified. 'Does this mean in practice that LCC work is sometimes immature and brash?' asked Furneaux Jordan rhetorically in 1956, 'Yes. Does it mean that it is alive, progressive, provocative and seldom dull? Yes. Does it mean that it is self-conscious? Yes. Does it mean that the individual schemes bear the hallmark of individual designers, of particular schools of aesthetic thought, rather than of the Department? Yes' (Furneaux Jordan, 1956: 321).

Le Corbusier: god of the 'hards'

Wilson was early in the tide, joining the LCC in 1950. In the dimly-lit basement room 7B of Ralph Knott's Edwardian Baroque County Hall where he was placed, the direction was set by a nucleus of three forceful recent graduates (June 1950) from the Architectural Association school: William (Bill) Howell, his wife to be Gillian Sarsen, and John Killick (Carter, 2002). In this group, for the first time, Wilson encountered real Modernist conviction: 'All of a sudden, one was with a young very, very lively – very, very pushy bunch!' he recalls (Wilson, 2002). A more reserved figure was Peter Carter, a recent graduate of Regent Street Polytechnic; he became Wilson's closest friend in the LCC years and collaborated with him on important competition projects including that for Coventry Cathedral.¹ As Wilson recollects:

'Le Corbusier was the god to the AA group. I was immensely refreshed and renewed by that form of pseudo-rationalism, that truly believed there were answers to all the problems and you simply had to organise systematically, tackling the task of housing for what was called 'le grand nombre' [...] We had been fighting the war to make the world a better place and we were now just about to do just that [...]' (quoted in Menin and Kite, 2005: 33).

Wilson now accepts the irony of this uncritical embrace of Le Corbusier at his most Cartesian, in view of the later integration into his work of the 'other traditions' of Modernism embodied in the English Free School and Aalto's Scandinavia. During these postwar years Scandinavia, in the guise of the

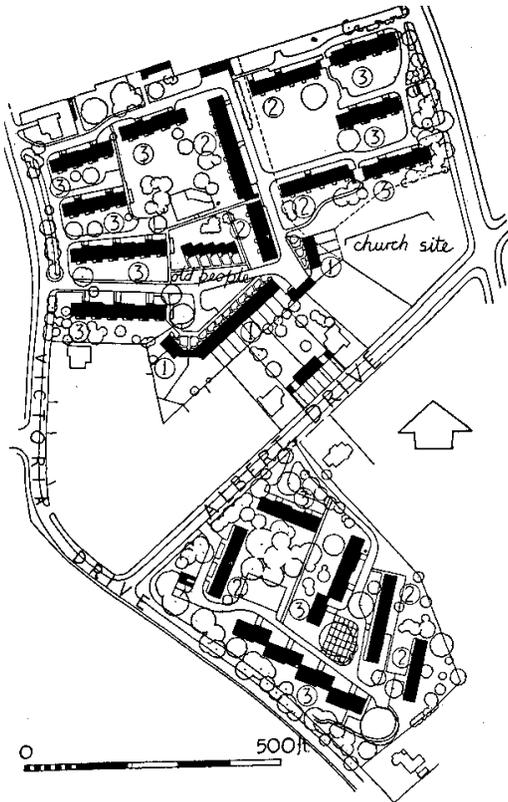
'Swedish New Empiricism' and married to the English picturesque, was also a powerful influence within the LCC. Advocates of this approach were labelled the 'softs', as opposed to the angry young Corbusian rationalists, known as the 'hards'. Peter Reyner Banham – Wilson's friend and neighbour in Primrose Hill – was a close witness of these struggles which he saw as 'a violent and sustained polemic on style, such as England had not seen since the nineteenth century' (Banham, 1966: 11). On the one hand this was 'a classic quarrel of the generations', but it also evidenced a sharp politico-ethical fault-line; the contested ground whereon the ethic of 'the New Brutalism' would be forged. It was natural for architects with a commitment to the Welfare-State ideology of the Labour Government to look to Sweden for examples of progressive Welfare-State architecture; many in key positions in the LCC were also closely allied to Communism (some were 'card-carrying' Communists), and promulgated a hard-line Socialist-Realist architectural policy. As a then 'hard', Wilson caustically described 'the "New Empiricism" [as] the bland language, drawn from Asplund at his most reticent, [that] deployed brickwork, low-pitch roofs, and striped awnings to balconies with lacey-white balusters' (quoted in Menin and Kite, 2005: 33–34). He and his group denounced the style as 'Commissar's Tudorbethan'. Thus, at the LCC's flagship Alton Estate at Roehampton in West London, Swedish-looking red-brick terraces are threaded with 11-storey point blocks in an undulating picturesque English landscape [1].

The Festival of Britain of 1951 focused these style wars and in another *Observer* article, 'The Vertical City', written in February 1952 four months after the Festival closed, Wilson attacked the Festival's live architecture exhibition at Lansbury in Poplar, London, for its 'extraordinary effeminacy [that] promises to convert London into the most overblown and "tasteful" village in the world: three and six-storey blocks of flats with the pitched roofs, peep-hole windows and "folky" details of the current Swedish revival, picturesquely sited around market-

1 Model view of Alton East Estate, Roehampton showing one of the 11-storey point blocks with low-rise maisonettes and terrace houses

2 Albert Drive, site plan

3 Albert Drive, view of dwelling blocks



places have been offered to us in the name of “live architecture” (Wilson, 1952).

Wilson’s article – reflecting the naïve utopianism of the ‘hards’ – posits Le Corbusier at his most dogmatic as a model for London who, in the 1937 Paris Exhibition, had proposed a true ‘live architecture’ for the reconstruction of Paris: ‘the vertical garden city’. In the ‘vertical city’ of London envisaged by Wilson and his peers, ‘each block of flats is sited among trees in a park, twenty to thirty floors high, with wide and splendid views (like that, for instance, from the top of Primrose Hill)’.

Corb meets Mies?: Albert Drive Estate

At the Albert Drive Estate in Wimbledon, West London, Wilson and his team members essayed some of these principles. Subsequently, from 1950 to 1955, Wilson section-led a group including Peter Carter and Alan Colquhoun that developed a more radical narrow-frontage maisonette prototype for Bentham Road, Hackney in clear homage to Le Corbusier’s *Unité d’Habitation*.

Albert Drive is composed of five-storey blocks of housing, each some forty metres in length, that consciously reject any of the cottage allusions of the low-rise elements of the empiricist Alton East Estate to the north. Here the arresting impression is of a tautly proportioned elevational black grid into which the dwelling units slot; their balconies are either contained within the grid or cantilever out towards the trees; above marches a Corbusian skyline of curved white lift towers and flues [2, 3].

Underlying this image are the two great iconic projects that haunted this generation in the early 1950s: Mies van der Rohe’s Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) at Chicago (1952-56) and, supremely, Le Corbusier’s *Unité d’Habitation* at Marseilles (1947-

2



3

52). As Banham surmised: ‘The fusion of the Mies-image with the Corb-image was an understandable, if philosophically reprehensible, step towards the creation of the kind of single vision of a real and convincing architecture that this generation sought’ (Banham, 1966: 18). So here a Corbusian silhouette surmounts a would-be IIT elevational black grid, hybridly executed of black brick pilasters and painted slabs. Though compromised, the estate projects a strong image. As Furneaux Jordan reported in *The Architectural Review*: ‘At Albert Drive, the formalist, with his geometric facade infilling between cross-walls is paramount and gives consistency, if even the architecture itself is for the esoteric’, as compared to more eclectic schemes



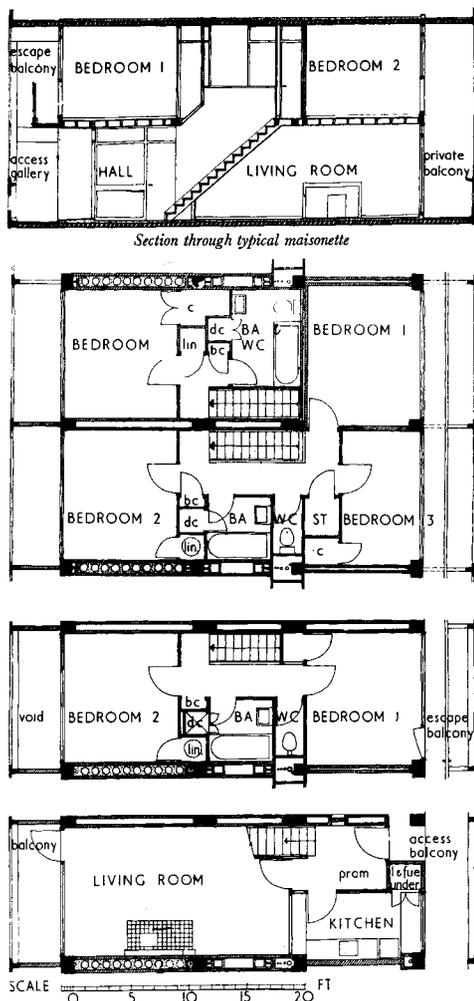
where ‘there is too much evidence of different and differing minds at work’ (Furneaux Jordan, 1956: 322). ‘Formalist’ was yet another counter to ‘empiricist’ in the insults traded between the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ camps.

The ‘esoteric’ can also enjoy plotting the play of golden rectangles on the facades of Albert Drive. Wilson was already recognised in his circle as an authority on proportional systems and the Le Corbusier *modulor*. In November 1953 he gave a lecture on ‘Proportion and Symmetry’ in the Institute of Contemporary Art’s series: *Aesthetic Problems of Contemporary Art*. Proportion had become central to architectural discourse due to publications such as Colin Rowe’s ‘The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa: Palladio and Le Corbusier Compared’, in *The Architectural Review* of March 1947 and Rudolf Wittkower’s *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* of 1949; works read as avidly by young architects as historians. Then, in 1950 and 1955, came the two volumes of Le Corbusier’s *Modulor*, representing a decade of the master’s proportional research and appearing, as Robin Evans has noted, at the ‘turbulent boundary’ between the cerebral Le Corbusier and the Le Corbusier of

4 Bentham Road, interior view of the mock-up of a typical maisonette

5 Bentham Road, plans and section of typical maisonette

6 The recently completed Bentham Road flats in their Hackney context



Ronchamp. In his famous 1955 article 'The New Brutalism' in *The Architectural Review*, Banham recorded the 'impact' of Wittkower's book as 'one of the phenomena of our time' for Wittkower showed a path beyond 'the doldrum of routine-functionalist abdications' in his significant linkage of form and function to the cosmos' (Banham, 1955).

Homage à Père Corbu: Bentham Road

At this time, remembers Wilson, Le Corbusier 'was blinding a whole generation in one way and Mies van der Rohe was blinding a generation in another way – the Unité and the Seagram building. For me it certainly rang true that I had allowed myself to be totally blinkered by those two visions' (Menin and Kite, 2005: 49). Where Albert Drive had awkwardly attempted to conflate the irreconcilable languages of Corbu and Mies, Wilson's next project at Bentham Road, Hackney, London (1950-55) emphasised Le Corbusier in its single-minded homage to the *Unité d'Habitation*.

Wilson had first seen Le Corbusier's architecture on a 1950 vacation trip to the south of France. At Marseilles he found the recently cast heroic pilotis of the *Unité* 'all strange and wonderful' (Menin and Kite, 2005: 46). Equally significant encounters ensued: in April and May 1953, the ICA held a significant exhibition of Le Corbusier's art work: paintings, drawings, sculptures and tapestries for which Wilson wrote the catalogue introduction (Massey, 1995: 51; Wilson, 1953). As a member of the exhibitions committee, the imminent show prompted Wilson to visit Paris earlier in the Spring to try and meet with the master and to study his work. With Alan Colquhoun he broke into the then unfurnished Villa Stein-de Monzie at Garches (1926-7) through an unlocked window where, intoxicated by the interlocking collage-like spaces, he wandered 'in a dream, almost like a drunk' (Wilson, 1997). In an instant he realised how one-dimensional it was to present Corbu merely as some high-priest of Cartesian method:

I had come to Paris in a spirit of deep respect for the Unité d'Habitation [...] which was the archetype for the work that we were currently pursuing in the Housing Division of the LCC. But in the course of that spell-bound hour in the Villa at Garches respect had been charged with a deeper colour as if I had caught a glimpse of secret practices in which conflict, tension and impulse project the inhabitation of a space formed to satisfy quite other expectations and appetites than those paraded by the orthodoxy of the "Modern Movement", and I became possessed by the desire to meet the sorcerer of this secret world' (Wilson, nd).

Probably owing to his ICA credentials, Wilson secured an interview with Le Corbusier at Rue de Sèvres. Wilson and Colquhoun were then allowed the privilege of meeting Le Corbusier next day at his apartment at No 9 Rue Nungesser-et-Coli. Compounding the insights of the Garches experience, in Le Corbusier's vaulted studio *sanctum sanctorum* overlooking Paris, Wilson glimpsed the agitated symbolical world of bulls, women and competing forces that lay beneath Corbu's dense

architectural syntheses: 'An easel holding a large painting stood in front of the famous random-rubble party wall', one of his *Taureau* series, lit by a shaft of sunlight from the shell-vault. As Le Corbusier probed him to uncover its meanings, Wilson began to grasp 'the whole world of alchemical figures that [Le Corbusier] was then evolving' (Wilson, nd) and which underscored the richness of the work. This meeting seeded a sense of how the formal, the practical and the metaphysical might be married in architecture. In the ensuing ICA catalogue 'Introduction', Wilson wrote of the 'disquieting "metaphysical" character' of Le Corbusier's forms summing up his achievement as the 'power [...] to invent plastic symbols that evoke with brilliance and clarity the joy and harmony that are the single aim of all his work in every medium' (Wilson, 1953).

Wilson and Colquhoun returned to London, both chastened and inspired with the treasured gift of a collage that Corbu had given each of them in the studio. Working with Peter Carter, they pressed on with the design of Bentham Road. Whereas the estate's two slab-blocks project a convincing *Unité* image, they lack the communal facilities of their great precedent, also there are no 'streets in the sky', only the familiar LCC deck-access walkways. But the extremely narrow 12ft gins (3.7m) maisonette frontages – echoing again the *Unité* apartment module – were radical for the time and, on Leslie Martin's suggestion, were tested out in a full-scale mock-up [4, 5].

Equally, the Bentham Road scheme follows the pattern of mixed development of other LCC projects. The ten acre (4ha) triangular urban site is dominated by the two 11-storey slab blocks, aligned west-east to allow the south-facing maisonettes to capture the 'essential joys' of nearby Victoria Park and its adjoining greens. Their assembly represented an early use of precast concrete cross-wall construction developed with Frank Newby of the Felix Samuely office. Four-storey maisonettes and two-storey houses of load-bearing cross-wall construction, running north-south, complete the estate's dwelling provision. Despite the estate's compromised homage to Corbu, it offered to excited Londoners a convincing vision of the 'new world' [6].

'Towards a new cathedral'

Even when most blinded by Cartesian dogma, Wilson's creativity has always inscribed a sense of the metaphysical, due in no small part to his Anglican ethic and heritage (his father was Bishop of Chelmsford from 1929 to 1950). As a student at the Bartlett his thesis design had been a cathedral, and he seized on the opportunity to design the new Cathedral of St Michael in Coventry to replace the medieval building blitzed in November 1940 – one of the great competitions of the period.

With Peter Carter, he embarked on a philosophically challenging attempt to fuse the needs of a great sacral space with the extreme possibilities of technology. Here his inclination towards the spiritual was at odds with the rational *raison d'être* of many of those around him. Indeed,



much later he came to declare in the 'Apologia' to *Architectural Reflections*: 'No one can be an architect who is not a metaphysician', voicing Ruskin's belief from *The Poetry of Architecture* (Wilson, 2000: viii). Even when most dazzled by technology, Wilson's long-standing conviction has remained that architecture's task as 'mother of the arts' is to link the other to the everyday: 'Architecture is inevitably drawn to reach precariously out from its own discipline to make contact with a world that is other [...] and to make out of that contact a common cause, an in-between order that is neither the order of art nor the raw assimilation of day-to-day experience, but the discovery of a common theme through which conduct begins to find its true rhythm, as stumbling feet are caught up in the measure of a dance' (Wilson, 2000: ix). Speaking from his Anglican roots, Wilson thus discovers the rituals of daily life mirrored in the patterning of the numinous in the liturgy; the architect's work is to 'raise the formless to form and give it an identity' (Menin and Kite, 2005: 43).

'Mechanolatry'

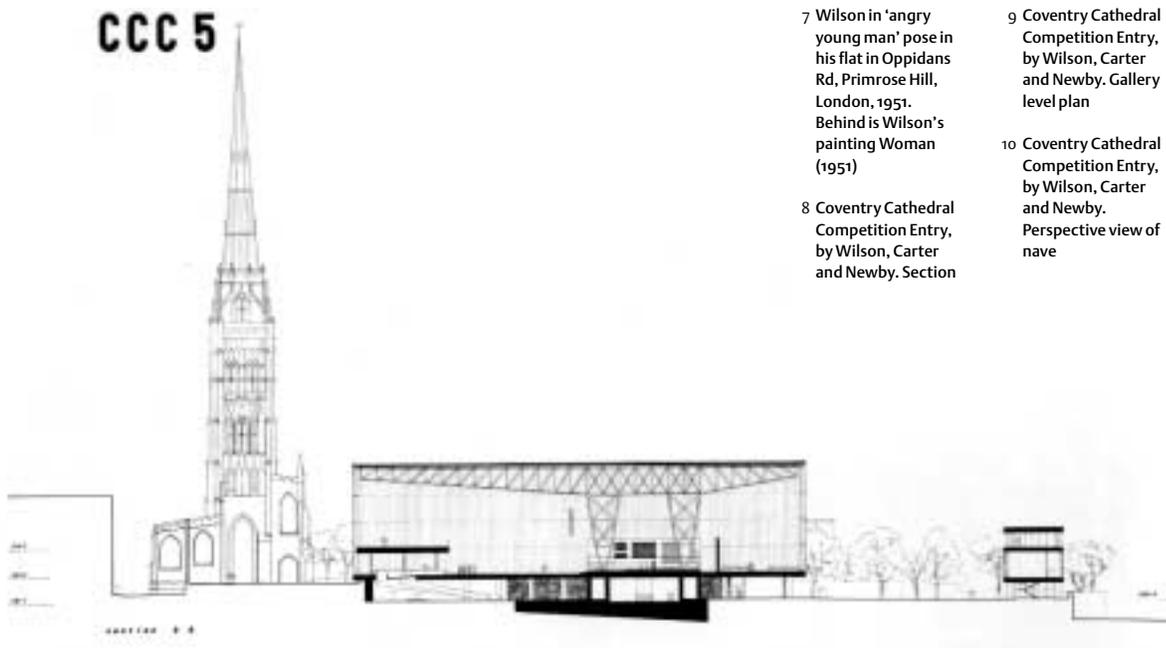
As it happened, Wilson's flat in Primrose Hill, London [7] adjoined that of Mary and Reyner Banham. The latter was on the staff of *The Architectural Review* and was rapidly emerging as one of the leading critics of the period. From 1951, the Banhams' flat became a 'sort of salon' crucial to the thinking of Wilson's circle. 'On weekends', he recalls,

'it shared honours with the "French Pub" in Soho as a rendezvous for our gang: Saturday morning the pub, Sunday morning the Banhams. Regulars included Turnbull, Hamilton, Stirling, Stevens, Colquhoun, Carter, McHale and Cordell' (Robbins, 1990). As prophet of the machine age, Banham was proselytising the architecture of technology. When his thesis research was published as *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, he dedicated it to 'those who made it possible and necessary to write it: [...] to Alison and Peter Smithson, James Stirling, C. A. St John Wilson, Peter Carter, Colin Rowe and Alan Colquhoun, my own contemporaries, for a constant view of the mainstream of modern architecture flowing on' (Banham, 1960). But Wilson's copy was soon 'smothered in notes of protestation' (Wilson, 1988). As he later wrote, Banham's branch of the Modernist stream – determined by the limitless application of mechanical engineering – would leave him washed up 'in a big bubble without a stitch on' (Robbins, 1990: 196); A reference to that most iconic image of techno-hedonism: 'the environment bubble', wherein Banham squats naked in an inflated bubble-dome, banishing the words 'domestic' and 'architecture' from any notion of home (Whiteley, 2002: 207–8).

Wilson and Carter's entry for the Coventry cathedral competition represents an extreme obsession with what Wilson calls 'mechanolatry'; 'high-tech' preceding the coining of that term. To create the great congregational space required by the brief, they adopted the most forcibly technocratic language available, based on Konrad Wachsmann's space-frame structural systems for aircraft hangars and vast column-free halls. As Wilson remembers [8,9,10]:

This was the only occasion on which I really became engrossed with the Miesian aphorism "less is more". However, this reduction of means was intended to bring maximum focus upon a few symbolic elements: the entrance ramp which circled round the baptismal font, and a roof structure springing from a slightly raised altar platform and spreading towards you in an enormous all-embracing [forty metre] cantilever' (Wilson, 1979).

The rock on which this church is founded is contemplation of the Christian message, for the four giant skeletal columns spring from a lower-level chapel of meditation. The space projects a convincing power in Peter Carter's perspective; but what the viewpoint of the perspective towards the altar doesn't reveal is an idea of Wilson's that Peter Carter thought a 'stroke of genius' (Carter, 2002). The space is delimited by vertical glass and polished aluminium louvres suspended from the rim of the structure, orientated towards the altar to enclose the worshipper, in Wilson's words, in 'a shimmering veil of entrapped light'. Entry to the higher level nave is a gradual ascent up a ramp that encircles the baptismal font, the place of enactment of the first of the church's rituals. But on turning to leave, the orientation of the louvres vividly links the inner and outer allowing sight of the world that the congregation is about to re-enter. Wilson proudly showed the design to Bishop Wilson who, with no



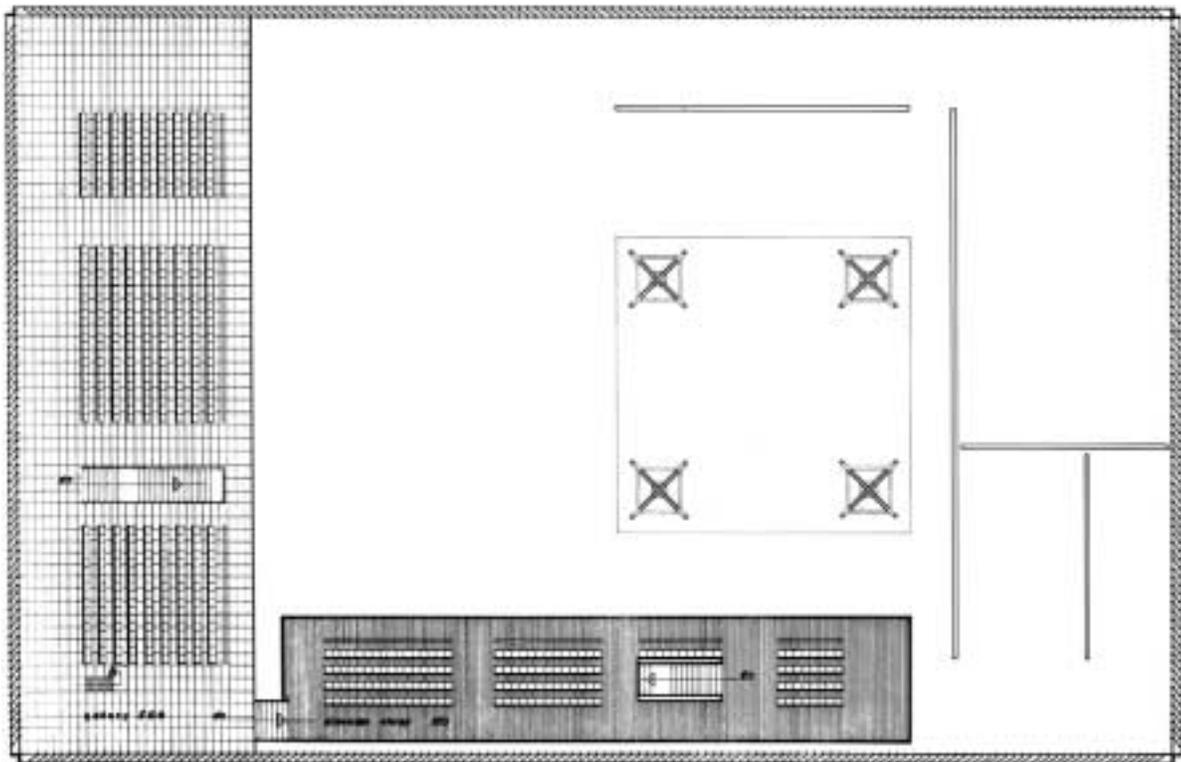
7 Wilson in 'angry young man' pose in his flat in Oppidans Rd, Primrose Hill, London, 1951. Behind is Wilson's painting *Woman* (1951)

9 Coventry Cathedral Competition Entry, by Wilson, Carter and Newby. Gallery level plan

10 Coventry Cathedral Competition Entry, by Wilson, Carter and Newby. Perspective view of nave

8 Coventry Cathedral Competition Entry, by Wilson, Carter and Newby. Section

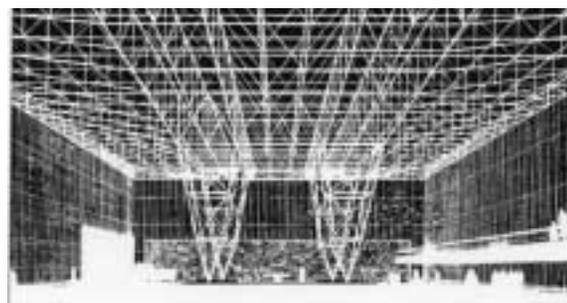
8



9

knowledge of the Wachsmann precedents, commented that it 'looks like an aeroplane hangar' – no compliment was intended (Carter, 2002).

In a wider reflection of the LCC style wars, radically Modernist schemes like Wilson and Carter's, or Alison and Peter Smithson's great tilted shell, were deemed too radical for the Festival of Britain era; the empiricists won. Basil Spence's winning design, and many of the placed and commended entries, are updated variants of a neo-Gothic formula. *The Architects' Journal* did, however, publish Wilson and Carter's design, with the Smithsons', among a



10

selection of unsuccessful entries (Thomas et al, 1951). Basil Spence's neo-Gothic scheme, selected in 1951 and consecrated in 1962, has been described as the Festival's apotheosis: according to William Feaver, Spence's cathedral – approached through the cosy scale of the Godiva shopping precincts with their flower tubs and fountains – is, with its furnishing and artworks, a total recall of the Festival style (Feaver, 1976: 54).

Symbolism and Modernity

Exploiting his power as an *Observer* columnist, Wilson had attempted to shape an audience receptive to a radically Modernist cathedral as soon as the competition conditions had been published, in his article 'Towards a New Cathedral' of Autumn 1950. While expressing relief that the competition conditions state no *a priori* stylistic restrictions and that 'the moderns are now entitled to enter the fray', he urges the reader to look at the Piazza of St Mark's in Venice where each architect worked directly in the "modern" manner of his day'. Citing Sansovino, builder of the new Renaissance library that faces the Gothic Doge's Palace, he contends that the concordance of styles – Byzantine, Gothic, Renaissance – 'makes for the most dynamic and refined combination of buildings since the Acropolis'. Here Wilson strives to reconcile the 'true nature of tradition', with Modernity and invokes one of his principal mentors, the poet, T. S. Eliot:

The claim of the poetry of Eliot – is precisely that [the arts] are not self-contained "movements" – but are the expression of a total way of living and thinking. If this way is really strong, it must find its own integral expression in architecture whose "function" will be to symbolise an activity and an awareness that are both traditional and unpredictable.'

'Symbolism and Architecture' was the title of a discussion arranged by the Students' Committee of the Architectural Association on 21 October 1953 focused around an exhibition of some of the more forward-looking Coventry Cathedral competition entries, including those of the Smithsons, Joseph Rykwert and Wilson and Carter. Wilson was 'desperate to be spokesman of the avant-garde' (quoted in Menin and Kite, 2005: 45) and we sense his pugnacious reputation in Fello Atkinson's opening remarks: 'People always like to get at St John Wilson, because he is willing to rise, and because he argues well' (Atkinson et al, 1953: 100). Wilson immediately reveals his colours in declaring that 'man is still a metaphysical animal. Below any reason that he may have lies his impulse to create myths, to create forms and images that correspond to his reason for living at all' (Atkinson et al, 1953: 103). The symbolism he advocates is not the crude gestural figures of wedding-cake Soviet Socialist-Realist architecture but principles so structurally integral to the architectural language that there can be no question of 'architecture *and* symbolism; it is architecture as symbol'. Accordingly Le Corbusier's project for the Palace of the Soviets is truly symbolic whereas the 'wedding-cake' Socialist-Realist one is not. His recurrent fear of architecture as the blind servant of

technical rationality is expressed: 'I am against what I would call the technological fallacy at the moment, the way in which Mies talks, not builds, that we simply put up a structure and do not particularise it in any way. I think that the Western tradition is to have an absolutely specific and characteristic form for every specific and characteristic function' (Atkinson et al, 1953, 104). Wilson's practice and thought has always refused the anonymity of 'universal' space, and he ended his opening remarks to this symposium with an appeal to the singularity of place:

'We work, as it were, with passion in a cold light, but we still have to achieve what has been lost and found and lost again throughout history, a home for man on this earth; and architecture is not the symbol of that, it is that itself' (Atkinson et al, 1953: 105).

All this accords with Wilson's later trajectory; but to remind us that his intellectual journey is far from complete at this time, this now-recognised champion of the 'other tradition' of Modernism dismisses the organic approach with scorn: 'We have the naturalistic school, who almost make me giggle. Frank Lloyd Wright must be on very good terms with the hexagon, because he refers to it as "the hex". He says that the hex is more human than the rectangle. I walk out again when I hear that' (Atkinson et al, 1953: 104).

Conspicuous mass

In an article significantly titled 'Brick' in *Scroope* (the Cambridge School of Architecture Journal of 1994–95) Wilson, in retrospect, viewed the extremity of the Coventry Cathedral project as a turning point: 'Shortly afterwards I became immersed in the writings of Adrian Stokes and very moved by some recent buildings of conspicuous mass – Aalto's Säynätsalo [1949–52] and Baker House at MIT [1947–51], Lewerentz' St Mark's Church and Le Corbusier's Jaoul Houses [1954–6]' (Wilson, 1994–5: 12). The Jaoul dwellings, for example, are demonstrably hand-made and show Le Corbusier's move to an architecture of charged surfaces. So Wilson, along with many of his generation, increasingly allied the cerebral to a greater phenomenological engagement with surface and space. Indeed, looking ahead to the Cambridge period work of Leslie Martin, Wilson, and Patrick Hodgkinson of the later 1950s and the 1960s (such as Harvey Court of 1957–62), Kenneth Frampton contends that these projects are 'the only serious attempt, after the English Free Style, to create a normative, yet unequivocally modern brick architecture for the British Isles, one that, in its capacity to respond appropriately to the triad of climate, context and programme, was to prove itself capable of being generally accepted by society as a whole' (Frampton, 2001: 11).

Wilson's immersion in the writings of Adrian Stokes (1902–72), as noted in *Scroope*, was crucial to his increasingly psychologised view of architecture as a body-language. Wilson is among a number of commentators who regard Adrian Stokes (1902–72) as one of the greatest English writers on art and



11 Grantchester Road,
frontage to street

architecture since John Ruskin. In the 1960s, Stokes became a friend of Wilson and visited and praised his newly-built concrete block home at Grantchester Road, Cambridge (1962-64) [11].

Mass and an 'intense wall consciousness' are central themes in the first of Stokes' books that Wilson encountered, his *Art and Science: A Study of Alberti, Piero della Francesca and Giorgione of 1499*. Developing ideas first essayed in *The Quattro Cento* (1932), Stokes tells how:

'[...] calm, steadfastness, measure are celebrated in the chief Quattrocento buildings, affording instantaneous apprehension to the eye; exuberances of the wall whose apertures are cavernous, encrusted, whose protuberances are those of branch and flower. The more massive Antique is sometimes staid when compared with so passionate yet uncontroverted a love of wall-space governed by Pythagorean-Platonic calm, amassed from dreams of self-fulfilment to rival ordered stone.' (Gowing, 1978: 192).

In *Art and Science*, Stokes' predilection to wall significance also deepened his recent readings of Wittkower: his papers for the Warburg Institute that resulted in the *Architectural Principles of 1949* and discussed earlier in relation to proportion. Following Wittkower's stress on Alberti's 'logic of the wall structure', Stokes argues that 'in the early Renaissance supremely so, the wall was the architectural focus, its apertures, demarcations, protrusions [...] never more fruitful to the mind' (Gowing, 1978: 193).

This classical sense of the wall-plane as constituting the centre of architectural meaning (in reciprocity with space) is a fundamental aspect of Wilson's architectural language.

Towards (an)other tradition

Wilson left the ICC in 1955 and spent a short unsatisfactory period working in Knightsbridge, London for the developer John de Vere Hunt.² Then, one morning in June 1956, Wilson received a call from Leslie Martin (who had become Professor at Cambridge School of Architecture) inviting him to move to Cambridge to work with him in teaching at the University and in practice. He left a half-finished boiled egg and dashed up to Cambridge to accept the offer.

A year later, in 1957, Wilson heard Aalto's RIBA Gold Medal speech 'The Architectural Struggle' (Aalto, 1986) which disavowed the functionalist dominance of both CIAM (*Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*) in general, and Le Corbusier in particular (Menin and Samuel, 2002). Inspired by Aalto's clarion-call, Wilson – as he himself recalled in his 'Brick' article for *Scroope* – began to recognise the features of a different architecture: of the vibrant walls and courtyard form of the Town Hall of Säynätsalo; the enclosed retreat of Muuratsalo; the different solutions to workers' housing at Sunila and Kauttua; and the flexible standardisation of the dormitory building of Baker House, MIT; all of which projects

worked in his mind to reinforce his growing rejection of the formalist aspects of Pèrre Corbu. To these influences, he soon added the work of Duiker, Häring and Scharoun. Consequently, having started the decade as a 'hard' in a basement office of the LCC, Wilson ended it by writing the first of those papers

that espoused an 'other' tradition – published in 1960 as 'Open and Closed' – in the Yale School of Architecture journal *Perspecta*. This essay was a significant forerunner to his treatise, *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture: The Uncompleted Project*, published 35 years later, in 1995.

Notes

1. Carter later went to the USA in March 1956 where he worked with Mies for thirteen years, after which he wrote an important book: Carter, P. (1974). *Mies van der Rohe at Work*, Pall Mall Press, London.
2. A period that resulted, however, in an ingenious 'low-rise high-density' apartment development at Hereford Square, London (1956).

References

- Aalto, A., 'The Architectural Struggle', reprinted in (ed) G. Schildt (1986), *Alvar Aalto: Sketches*, pp144-156, MIT Press, Cambridge MA.
- Atkinson, F., Wilson, C. St J., Butler, R., Furneaux Jordan, R. (1953), 'Symbolism and Architecture', *Architectural Association Journal*, 69, November, pp100-106.
- Banham, R. (1955). 'The New Brutalism', *The Architectural Review*, 118 (708), December, pp354-361.
- Banham, R. (1960). *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, The Architectural Press, London.
- Banham, R. (1966). *The New Brutalism. Ethic or Aesthetic*, The Architectural Press, London.
- Carter, P. (2002). Personal interview with the authors.
- Feaver, W. (1976). 'Festival Star', in (eds) M. Banham, and B. Hillier, *A Tonic to the Nation: The Festival of Britain 1951*, Thames and Hudson, London.
- Frampton, K. (2001). 'On Leslie Martin', *arq*, 5 (1), pp11-12.
- Furneaux Jordan, R. (1956). 'LCC. New Standards in Official Architecture', *The Architectural Review*, 120 (718), November, pp302-324.
- Glendinning, M. and Muthesius, S. (1994). *Tower Block. Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London.
- Gowing, L. (ed) (1978). *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes, Vol II 1937-1958*, Thames and Hudson, London.
- Jones, D. G. (1954). 'Some Early Works of the LCC Architects' Department', *Architectural Association Journal*, 70, pp95-105.
- Lichtenstein, C. and Schreggenberger, T. (eds) (2001). *As Found: The Discovery of the Ordinary*, Lars Müller, Baden.

- Massey, A. (1995). *The Independent Group. Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.
- Menin, S. and Samuel, F. (2002). *Nature and Space: Aalto and Le Corbusier*, Routledge, London.
- Menin, S. and Kite, S. (2005). *An Architecture of Invitation: Colin St John Wilson*, Ashgate, London.
- Rowe, C. (1947). 'The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa: Palladio and Le Corbusier Compared', *The Architectural Review*, Vol 101, March, pp101-104.
- Robbins, D. (ed) (1990). *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA.
- Thomas, P., Maufe, E., Robertson, H. (1951). 'Coventry Cathedral Competition', *The Architects' Journal*, 115 (2947), 23 August, pp249-262.
- Whiteley, N. (2002). *Reyner Banham. Historian of the Immediate Future*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA.
- Wilson, C. St J. (1952). 'The Vertical City', *The Observer*, 17 February.
- Wilson, C. St J. (1953). 'Introduction' in *Le Corbusier: Paintings, Drawings, Sculpture, Tapestry*, Exhibition Catalogue, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.
- Wilson, C. St J. (1979). 'Architecture: Public Good and Private Necessity', *RIBA Journal*, 86 (3), March, pp107-115.
- Wilson, C. St J. (1988). 'Colin St John Wilson. Personal Tribute. Obituary. Peter Reyner Banham', *The Architects' Journal*, 187 (13), 30 March, p20.
- Wilson, C. St J. (1994-95). 'Brick', *Scroope: Cambridge Architecture Journal*, Issue 6, pp12-13.
- Wilson, C. St J. (1997). Personal Interview with S. Kite.
- Wilson, C. St J. (2000). *Architectural Reflections: Studies in the Philosophy and Practice of Architecture* (2nd ed), Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York.
- Wilson, C. St J. (2002). Personal interview with the authors.
- Wilson, C. St J. (no date). 'A Visit to the Crow's Nest', unpublished typescript.
- Wittkower R. (1949). *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, Warburg Institute, University of London, London.

Illustration credits

arq gratefully acknowledges: *Architectural Design*, 5
The Architectural Review, 1, 2, 3
 Arthur Baker, 7
 Photo Fox Photos and Wilson Archive, 4
 Henk Snoek and Wilson Archive, 11
 Wilson Archive, 6, 8, 9, 10

Biographies

Dr Stephen Kite is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Architecture Planning and Landscape, University of Newcastle upon Tyne. His research explores the history and theory of architecture and its connections to visual culture. It has been disseminated widely through key conferences, and published papers and chapters within numerous books and journals including *Art History*, *Architectural Research Quarterly*, *The Journal of Architecture*, *Paideuma*, and the *Journal of Oman Studies*.

Dr Sarah Menin is a Lecturer at the School of Architecture Planning and Landscape, University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Her doctoral research explored parallels in the life and creative works of Aalto and Sibelius (currently finalising as a book). In 1999 she was awarded a Leverhulme Special Research Fellowship to further apply her ideas on nature and creativity resulting in *Nature and Space: Aalto and Le Corbusier*, co-authored with Flora Samuel. Her research also examines the place of the psyche in the sphere of architecture and its effect on the creative imagination and has been disseminated widely in academic journals and conferences.

Authors' address

Dr Stephen Kite
 Dr Sarah Menin
 School of Architecture Planning and Landscape
 The Quadrangle
 University of Newcastle upon Tyne
 NE1 7RU
 United Kingdom
 s.e.kite@ncl.ac.uk
 s.c.menin@ncl.ac.uk