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# The Populist Prince: Returning to Charles' *Vision of Britain*

Adam Sharr and Stephen Thornton

## **Abstract**

Following the coronation of British king Charles III, this paper returns to a book that he produced in 1989 while Prince of Wales. Titled *A Vision of Britain*, Charles's text promoted classical and traditional architecture. First, this paper examines the reception of *A Vision of Britain*, arguing that the prince acted as a "policy entrepreneur" and reviewing key consequences of his activism. While Charles's interventions are now typically interpreted along party political lines in Britain, we find that they were understood as more complex at the time. Second, we re-visit the book in the context of an Executive Order signed in 2020 by US president Donald Trump, which mandated traditional architectural styles for new federal buildings. This parallel serves to highlight dimensions of populism at work in Charles's former activism. It illustrates how Charles deployed his unusual power and influence in architecture, while denying the operations of his power to claim popular appeal.

## **Keywords**

Architecture – Planning – Politics – Culture – Populism

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# The Populist Prince: Returning to Charles' *Vision of Britain*

Adam Sharr and Stephen Thornton

## Introduction

The ascension of Charles III to the British throne in September 2022 prompted speculation about how the new king would conduct himself. Would he be more outspoken than his famously cautious predecessor on national issues, including Britain's architecture and urban planning? The new monarch has been "a devoted enthusiast – and critic" on these topics, as journalist Kriston Capps remarked in the week that Charles became king.<sup>1</sup> The former Prince of Wales "outlined his principles on design and planning in sometimes inflammatory speeches and essays," Capps notes, culminating in the book *A Vision of Britain*, making "his case that traditional methods and aesthetics which guided Britain's past should also inform its future."<sup>2</sup> The subtitle of that 1989 book – *A Personal View of Architecture* – reflects its intimate, confessional tone, addressed directly to the British public. The book became influential in UK public debate on the built environment, and is reputed to have been Britain's most widely-printed architecture book of the last 50 years.<sup>3</sup>

The first part of this paper examines *A Vision of Britain* at the time of its publication, including the book's newspaper serialisation, an accompanying exhibition at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, and a BBC television film. In particular, we examine

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<sup>1</sup> Kriston Capps, "King Charles, City Maker," *Bloomberg UK*, 9 September, 2022, available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-09/king-charles-iii-was-once-a-prince-with-a-passion-for-urban-planning> [accessed 11.01.24].

<sup>2</sup> Charles, HRH the Prince of Wales, *A Vision of Britain: A Personal View of Architecture* (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> We have found no evidence for this claim, although it is repeated in architectural publishing circles in the UK.

political dimensions of the book's past and present reception, following methods from cultural studies<sup>4</sup> and reception history.<sup>5</sup> There is now a tendency to believe that, when it was published, Charles' book was immediately linked to the UK's free-marketizing Conservative administration led by Margaret Thatcher and, therefore, that it was received along party-political lines in public and professional media. Indeed, it has become assumed that Charles was using his influence to condemn the modern architecture of Britain's post-war welfare state, seeking to replace it with an individualism nostalgic for an imagined golden age. This view was expressed, for example, by architecture writer Douglas Murphy in *The Guardian* newspaper in 2014. "Charles' political agenda was clear from the start", Murphy claims. "Rejecting modern architecture went hand-in-hand with fighting the unions, deregulating the planned economy, smashing industry and rejecting the spectre of socialism."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, journalist Robert Bevan has argued that Charles' ideas were part of "the 1980s culture wars that set Thatcherism against the so-called political correctness of local councils",<sup>7</sup> where promoting traditional architecture went "hand-in-glove with free marketeers intent on handing developers free rein." We illustrate Charles' role as a "policy entrepreneur" pursuing activism in architecture and urban planning, and we outline some of the consequences of that activism. We find that, while Charles's interventions are now typically interpreted along party political lines in the UK, their politics were

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<sup>4</sup> Adam Sharr, *Reading Architecture and Culture: Researching Buildings, Spaces and Documents* (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein, *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Murphy, "Prince Charles' 10 Principles for Architecture – and 10 much better ones," *The Guardian*, 27 December, 2014, available at <https://amp.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/dec/27/prince-charles-10-principles-architecture-10-better-ones> [accessed 11.01.24].

<sup>7</sup> Robert Bevan, "The Ugly Pursuit of Beauty: How Traditional architecture has become a Battleground for Right-wing Politicians," *The Art Newspaper*, 7 January, 2022, available at: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/01/07/the-traditionalist-lunatics-have-taken-over-the-asylum> [accessed 11.01.24].

understood as more complex at the time. Contrary to the common assumption that Charles' book was immediately regarded as right-wing propaganda, we argue that the reality was more complicated, and that the response of the architectural commentariat of that time was more nuanced than is generally remembered.

The second part of the paper returns to the reception of the book in our own time, revisiting it in the context of an Executive Order issued by former US president Donald Trump in December 2020 – signed during the fraught closing days of his presidency – which mandated “classical and traditional architecture” for new federal public buildings.<sup>8</sup> In an online opinion piece, journalist Billy Anania argues that Charles III's “longstanding push for a return to neoclassical design [...] echoes that of former US President Trump.” “King Charles wants to make Britain ‘beautiful’ again”, he asserts.<sup>9</sup> The Executive Order, which was subsequently revoked by the incoming Biden administration, portentously quoted one of the king's architectural heroes, “the great British Architect Sir Christopher Wren” who declared that “public buildings [are] the ornament of a country”. “[Architecture] establishes a Nation”, states the Executive Order, “draws people and commerce, makes the people love their native country [...and] aims at eternity”.<sup>10</sup> Staking a claim to cultural authenticity that echoes Charles' architectural pronouncements, discussing buildings in a strikingly similar vocabulary, the text of this Order draws *A Vision of Britain* into the orbit of Trump's “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) movement. This movement has been linked with white

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<sup>8</sup> “Executive Order on Promoting Beautiful Civic Architecture,” 21 December 2020, The Trump White House Archives, available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-promoting-beautiful-federal-civic-architecture/> [accessed 11.01.24].

<sup>9</sup> Billy Anania, “King Charles Wants To Make Britain ‘Beautiful’ Again,” *Hyperallergic*, 5 October, 2022, available at: <https://hyperallergic.com/764900/king-charles-wants-to-make-britain-beautiful-again/> [accessed 11.01.24].

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

supremacy, associated with violent events surrounding the supposed defence of confederate statuary, for example.<sup>11</sup> Seen from our present, the new king's views on architecture, as published in the 1980s, could be assumed to locate him now not only as a right-wing figure but one closely aligned with Trump's particular style of politics, described by Pippa Norris and Robert Inglehart as authoritarian populism.<sup>12</sup> "Beyond a common reputation for erratic behaviour and lifelong privilege", Anania writes, "these men embody a startling trend among conservative leaders today: the revival of anti-modernism."<sup>13</sup> Bevan links these ideas bluntly. "Beauty and tradition have become the dog-whistle words to white supremacists drunk on the Great Replacement conspiracy theory that sees a cultural genocide of Christian Europe at the hands of immigrants", he writes. "Classicism is not inherently right-wing but traditional architecture has become a vehicle of choice for the Right and Far Right."<sup>14</sup>

While various parallels drawn between Charles and Trump seem overblown, we find that Trump's Executive Order does serve to highlight dimensions of populism at work in Charles's former activism. Links between architectural criticism and the political phenomenon of twenty-first century populism, exemplified by Trump's presidency, offer fresh insights into Charles' twentieth-century activities.<sup>15</sup> The parallel illustrates how Charles deployed his unusual power and influence purposefully to claim popular appeal, while simultaneously denying the operations of his power.

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<sup>11</sup> S. Romi Mukherjee, "Make America White Again as White Political Theology," *Revue LISA*, 16:2 (2018).

<sup>12</sup> Pippa Norris and Robert Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Anania, "King Charles".

<sup>14</sup> Bevan, "Ugly Pursuit of Beauty".

<sup>15</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, "Populism's Building Complex; or: Is there such a thing as Populist Architecture", *Journal of Populism Studies* (2023), 1-15; Sophie Suma, "Trump's Aesthetic, Spatial and Architectural Dramalities", *Footprint* 15:2 (2021), 119-130.

## **PART ONE: A VISION OF BRITAIN AT ITS TIME OF PUBLICATION**

### **The author of *A Vision of Britain***

Since the work of Roland Barthes, there has been widespread academic acknowledgement that it is more fruitful to direct academic inquiry towards a text than towards its author.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the authorship of *A Vision of Britain* remains unusually significant to the book's publication and reception. When published in 1989, the then-Prince of Wales was in his early 40s: middle-aged, but still over three decades away from his future role as the British head of state. Even so, he was a conspicuous figure, one whose commentary was regularly seized-upon by the media, sometimes striking a chord with the public. As a former head of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) remarked:

The trouble is [that Charles] has tremendous influence amongst people generally. What he says has an effect out of all proportion to the comment itself.<sup>17</sup>

As a prominent representative of a hereditary system within a modern democratic state – albeit constrained by the limitations of constitutional monarchy – Charles' position has always been contradictory. As Rosemary Hill reflected in the *London Review of Books*:

Born in 1948, sometimes said to be the most fortunate year of the 20th century, he is one of the baby-boomers who grew up with the National Health Service, free milk and orange juice, student grants and proper occupational pensions, none of which was of any use to him. Instead he bumped uneasily through a

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<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author", trans. by Richard Howard, online at: <https://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes> [accessed 20.03.2023].

<sup>17</sup> Michael Manser, quoted in Jonathan Dimpleby, *The Prince of Wales: A Biography* (London: William Morrow, 1994), p.540.



rapidly changing postwar Britain, often the guinea pig for a modernising monarchy.<sup>18</sup>

Transported between palaces, villas, and churches in capsules of limousine and helicopter, circumscribed by personal security, Charles' lived experience of architecture has been largely that of Britain's royal estates and their opulent neo-classical and gothic edifices. His experiences of modern architecture, it can be assumed, were shaped instead through the staged encounters and ribbon-cuttings of numerous royal visits to new schools, offices, factories, housing projects and libraries. Whatever the stimulus, Charles had developed strong feelings about Britain's built environment by the mid-1980s. As one of his biographers explains:

His instinctive traditionalism had long been offended by what he saw as the ugly and impersonal environment that post-war architecture had imposed on the urban landscape, and especially on the inner cities. His spontaneous reaction to tower blocks and deck-accessed housing estates was one of revulsion against a blight which defaced the inner cities and for which he was disposed to blame the planners rather than poverty.<sup>19</sup>

Royal protocol has it that British monarchs should refrain from articulating private views beyond uncontentious generalities, and categorically not become involved in matters that suggest party political affiliation. Heirs to the throne have tended to enjoy freedom to pick a small handful of causes, but are still expected to remain circumspect. The causes chosen by Charles, as Prince of Wales, included the promotion of organic farming, support for so-called alternative medicine, and advocacy of "traditional architecture". Of these, it was his interventions on architecture that stretched constitutional conventions furthest. Indeed, Charles admitted that his first major speech on the issue was intended deliberately as a "secret bombshell."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Rosemary Hill, "Puffed Up, Slapped Down", *London Review of Books*, 39:7 (2017).

<sup>19</sup> Dimbleby, *Prince of Wales*, pp.380-381.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Dimbleby, *Prince of Wales*, p.381.

At an event to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the RIBA, Charles opined: “For far too long, it seems to me, some planners and architects have consistently ignored the feelings and wishes of the mass of ordinary people in this country.”<sup>21</sup> In the best remembered section of his “bombshell” speech, to the discomfort of the President of the professional body who invited him, Charles invoked a contemporary project to extend London’s National Gallery to launch a wider condemnation of modern design:

What, then, are we doing to our capital city now? What have we done since the bombing during the war? What are we shortly to do with one of its most favourite areas – Trafalgar Square? Instead of designing an extension to the elegant façade of the National Gallery which compliments it and continues the concept of columns and domes, it looks as though we may be presented with a kind of vast municipal fire station. I would understand better this type of High Tech approach if you approached the whole layout, but what is proposed is like a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much loved and elegant friend.<sup>22</sup>

This phrase “monstrous carbuncle”, widely publicised, has since entered the lexicon of British public commentary on architecture. Charles’ next intervention came in December 1987. He delivered a further speech, expanding on his themes, at the Corporation of London Planning and Communications Committee’s Annual Dinner at the Mansion House in London. Here, he made public his attempts to lobby for a redevelopment of the area around St Paul’s Cathedral – known as Paternoster Square – that conformed to his views. Extending his emotive language, Charles claimed that “in spite of all sorts of elaborate rules supposedly designed to protect the great view, your predecessors, as the planners, architects and developers of the City, wrecked the London skyline and desecrated the dome of St Paul’s.”<sup>23</sup> In case anyone in the room missed the point, Charles declared: “You have, Ladies and Gentlemen, to give this to the

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.382.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.383-4.

<sup>23</sup> A Speech by HRH The Prince of Wales at the Corporation of London Planning and Communications Committee’s Annual Dinner at the Mansion House in London, 1 December 1987, available at: <https://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/speech/speech-hrh-prince-wales-corporation-london-planning-and-communication-committees-annual> [accessed 11.01.24].

Luftwaffe: when it knocked down our buildings, it didn't replace them with anything more offensive than rubble."<sup>24</sup>

*A Vision of Britain* was produced in the wake of this speech. Highlighting the power of royalty to access various branches of the media simultaneously, the book was published shortly after a BBC TV programme of the same name, alongside an accompanying exhibition held at London's Victoria & Albert Museum. *The Guardian's* architecture correspondent Oliver Wainwright since characterised Charles as British architecture's "meddling supertroll", remarking that, "As [...] criticism goes, it was an unprecedented assault."<sup>25</sup>

### ***A Vision of Britain***

Published in hardback by Doubleday, *A Vision of Britain* was a lavishly colour-illustrated landscape-format volume. Emphasising the first-person voice, mixing Charles' characteristic assertive opinion with wry commentary, the text was organised in four key parts. First, the introduction repeated themes familiar from his speeches. The text challenged "the wanton destruction which has taken place [...] in the name of progress," and "the sheer, unadulterated ugliness and mediocrity of public and commercial buildings [...] not to mention the dreariness and heartlessness of so much urban planning."<sup>26</sup> Modern architecture was characterised as "a frenzied attack on long-established principles and values." The text began by positioning its author as someone

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Oliver Wainwright, "Carbuncles and King Charles: Was the Royal Family's Meddling Supertroll Right About Architecture?" *The Guardian*, 28 September, 2022, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/sep/28/carbuncles-king-charles-iii-royal-familys-supertroll-architecture> [accessed 11.01.24].

<sup>26</sup> Prince of Wales, *Vision of Britain*, p.7.

bravely cutting through the complexities of modern life to re-claim a widely-shared common sense rooted in the past:

Some time during this century something went very wrong. For various complicated reasons, we allowed terrible damage to be inflicted on parts of this country's unique landscape and townscape. Having summoned up my courage to express an opinion on the quality of our surroundings, I have been fascinated to discover on my travels just how many people seem to be appalled by what we have done to so many of our towns and cities since the last war. I can assure you that I wouldn't be saying all this now if I felt that I was alone in having these opinions.<sup>27</sup>

Charles argued that architects had upset traditional ways of doing things in the recent past. They "deliberately staged a revolution" in the 1960s and "convinced everyone that the world would be safe in their hands."<sup>28</sup> Yet, "[i]f we abandon the traditional principles upon which architecture was based for 2,500 years or more" he claimed, "then our civilisation suffers."<sup>29</sup> Architecture and its historical traditions thus had, for him, the capacity to evoke what he imagined as longstanding British cultural and societal values.

The second part of the book largely printed the script of the accompanying TV programme. Its concise text was set in large type supplemented with plentiful, extensively-captioned images. This part proceeded through illustrated case studies written in the first person, commenting on various recent architecture projects – which Charles broadly categorised as bad or good – and also historic buildings taken to represent local or national architectural themes. Classical architectures were celebrated alongside the forms of the gothic revival, and so-called traditional architectures (those typically designed without architects) emphasising the vernacular cottages of English

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.21.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.9.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.10.

villages.<sup>30</sup> Good architecture here was determined as that marked by “character”, which was defined as “part of an extraordinarily rich tradition which we’ve inherited from our forebears,” in a context where “there is something rather special about Britain.”<sup>31</sup>

The third part of the book set-out Charles’ architectural theory, presented as “Ten Principles we can build upon”. In order, these concerned: Place; Hierarchy; Scale; Harmony; Enclosure; Materials; Decoration; Art; Signs and Lights; and – last – Community. These principles were drafted with the help of (modern) architect Theo Crosby,<sup>32</sup> and the projects illustrating them came from (male) architects and architectural writers who promoted classical and traditional styles such as Léon Krier, Hassan Fathy and Andreas Duany, whose ideas featured prominently. Another of Charles’ architectural sources was Christopher Alexander, author of the books *A Timeless Way of Building* and *A Pattern Language*, which sought to overturn professionalised building by equipping people to design traditional architectures for themselves.<sup>33</sup> This architectural company, and their thinking, illustrates the contours of Charles’ thematics – which were presented in opposition to what he characterised as alienating modern-day industrial settings. “We must concentrate on creating environments in which people can prosper psychologically, as human beings, not merely as cogs in a mechanical process,” Charles argued. “We need design and layout which can positively encourage neighbourliness, intimacy, and where possible a sense of shared belonging to a recognisable community.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Prince of Wales, *Vision of Britain*, p.11.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17.

<sup>32</sup> Juliana Kei, *Pessimist Utopia: Theo Crosby 1950-1990*, PhD thesis, Royal College of Art, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Charles subsequently sought to get Alexander appointed as designer of the Mary Rose Museum in Portsmouth (see Dimbleby, *Prince of Wales*, p.570).

<sup>34</sup> Prince of Wales, *Vision of Britain*, p.156.

The fourth and final part of *A Vision of Britain* concluded, concisely, by linking Charles' architectural theories to his broader interpretation of Western culture and society in 1989. It repeated commonplace binary distinctions between cosmopolitanism and provincialism, as surveyed for example by cultural theorist Raymond Williams in his 1973 book *The Country and the City*.<sup>35</sup> Charles offered a kind of light-Heideggerianism, pitting technology and modernity on one hand against, on the other, a particular idea of an older, longer, European cultural continuity rooted in place and tradition. "What is the point of being the most technologically advanced society if, at the same time, we lose our right to be considered civilised?", Charles asked. He added, freighted with biblical overtones:

For this is what we have allowed to happen by deluding ourselves that we are somehow immortal; by losing our faith in eternity; by believing that this Earth was made for our dominion, and by losing that proper sense of humility which allows us to live in gentle harmony with our surroundings and with God's creation.<sup>36</sup>

His solution required architecture to be understood as the mirror of a supposedly authentic idea of a human place in the world, and a supposedly proper idea of culture, represented largely as a matter of architectural style and appearance. For the most part, Charles' prescription was contemporary classicism in the city, a revival of vernacular architecture in the countryside, plus sometimes also the right kinds of post-modernism, and even occasionally an approved contextual modernism. "People say that you can't house up-to-date office space, with all its ducts and cables, behind a neo-Georgian or a more traditional façade", Charles wrote: "Well I've looked into this and you *can*."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973).

<sup>36</sup> Prince of Wales, *Vision of Britain*, p.156.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p.73.

The distinctive vocabulary of *A Vision of Britain* stemmed from that of the British architectural conservation movement of the 1960s and 1970s as promoted, for example, by pressure group The Victorian Society and figures such as Gavin Stamp and Dan Cruickshank.<sup>38</sup> It celebrated “beauty”, “order” and “meaning” while coining colourful phrases to rail against modern architecture. Charles talked, for example, about “deformed monsters”, “concrete gulags”, and sarcastically, “monuments to progress”.<sup>39</sup> As Frances Tibbalds noted at the time: “Glass stump”, “monstrous carbuncle” and “jostling scrum of tower blocks” have [now] become part of the popular language of architectural criticism”.<sup>40</sup> The informality of this language – using nicknames and characterful or chummy turns of phrase – worked to close the gap between author and reader, between prince and public. It elides their differences, and the imbalance in who has the power to speak, seeking to establish a feeling of kinship while simultaneously covering-over how that feeling operates. Yet the book’s vocabulary, like its influence, became widespread in the UK. Charles remarked in *A Vision of Britain*: “Out of 5000 letters I received after the film [before email and social media], 99% agreed with my feelings on this subject [and] 0.5% were qualified in their approval of the points I was trying to make.”<sup>41</sup>

## Reception history

As outlined above, there is now a tendency to believe that Charles’ book was immediately received along party-political lines in the public and professional media,

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<sup>38</sup> The Victorian Society, *Saving a Century* (London: The Victorian Society, 2017).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, passim.

<sup>40</sup> Frances Tibbalds, “A Vision of Britain: A Review Article,” *Town Planning Review*, 60:4 (1989), 465-467, at 465.

<sup>41</sup> Prince of Wales, *Vision of Britain*, p.9.

and challenged forthrightly across the architecture and planning professions. This is to over-simplify, and repeats the binary tendencies of the book itself. Such themes were indeed present in the contemporary discourse around the time of the book's publication but they were less dominant, and less-often linked to party politics, than is now assumed. While the pique of Charles' book was sometimes echoed by his antagonists, various responses, even from unexpected quarters, were frequently nuanced and reflective.

Not unexpectedly, design critic Martin Pawley, writing in the left-leaning *Guardian* newspaper, saw *A Vision of Britain* as "propaganda", "a new demotic mode of architectural criticism":

Thanks to our gracious Prince we now know that the answers are much simpler than anybody thought. If we have a problem with the scale of new development, we only have to go and look at Dorchester. If we have a problem with new materials and methods, we simply shouldn't use them. If we have a problem with homelessness, then the homeless people can build their own houses. If we have a problem with a planning decision, he will have a word with the Secretary of State.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly conforming to expectations, the right-leaning *Sunday Times*, which serialised *A Vision of Britain* in its magazine-format colour supplement, heralded a "much awaited book" that "everyone wants to read," proposing "architecture which people really want," "challenging the fashionable theories of a professional establishment which has made the layman believe he [*sic*] has no legitimate opinions."<sup>43</sup> Also in the *Sunday Times*, however, its architecture correspondent, Hugh Pearman reviewed the accompanying exhibition and snobbily mocked Charles' "ten commandments" for architecture, "as if a

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<sup>42</sup> Martin Pawley, "Nightmare on Cromwell Road: Prince Charles' Vision of the Future of Britain," *The Guardian*, 8 September, 1989.

<sup>43</sup> *The Sunday Times*, "The Book Everyone wants to Read; A Vision of Britain by the Prince of Wales", 2 July, 1989.



quaffer of supermarket liebfraumilch had embarked on an intensive Master of Wine course.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the same newspaper’s design correspondent, Stephen Bayley, questioned a “princely vision dim and dangerous” that would “reduce discussion of architecture to whimsical preferences for this detail or that surface effect.”<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, William Rodgers, in the broadly centre-ground *Independent* newspaper, reflected concerns more with the manner of the book’s delivery, and with princely influence, than its content:

Prince Charles has written an engaging book [...] The Prince knows what he likes and likes what he knows. But he is not a private citizen [...] He has a special obligation to be fair when his words can hurt an individual and damage a reputation. Despite its charm this book would be lucky to sell a couple of thousand copies if it did not have the royal crest on its cover.<sup>46</sup>

Confounding expectations perhaps, Frances Tibbalds wrote approvingly in *Town Planning Review*, claiming that Charles “has, quite simply, articulated the concern of the British population at the poor quality of much of the built environment produced over the past twenty or thirty years.”<sup>47</sup> Likewise, although the classicising remedies of the book did not resonate widely among architects, the attention that Charles drew to problems of comprehensive redevelopment, top-down planning, and overscale profit-driven development were often welcomed. Peter Davey was then Editor of *The Architectural Review*, the pre-eminent professional journal in the UK, which had launched its own picturesque criticism of modern architectural townscape in the 1950s and ‘60s.<sup>48</sup> He wrote that:

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<sup>44</sup> Hugh Pearman, “A Royal Vision with Distorted Perspectives”, *The Sunday Times*, 10 September, 1989.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen Bayley, “Princely Vision Dim and Dangerous”, *The Sunday Times*, 17 September, 1989.

<sup>46</sup> William Rodgers, “Book Review: Building on the Past: ‘A Vision of Britain’ – HRH The Prince of Wales”, *The Independent*, 7 September, 1989.

<sup>47</sup> Tibbalds, “A Vision of Britain”, 465.

<sup>48</sup> The ‘townscape’ essays were collected together as a book: Gordon Cullen, *The Concise Townscape* (London: Architectural Press, 1961). The wider intellectual context of this work is discussed in: John Macarthur, *The Picturesque: Architecture, Disgust and Other Irregularities* (London: Routledge, 2007).

The Prince of Wales' own position is a good deal more moderate than that of some of his supporters. Though his tastes lie in the direction of Classicism, and he has a strong love of the real vernacular of old England, he is prepared to praise the odd Modern building [...]. And, although the principles are mainly concerned with external appearance, few of us could fundamentally disagree with them. The trouble is that they are mainly illustrated with historical examples which gives the impression that they can only be achieved if we all become pasticheurs.<sup>49</sup>

Such professional interpretations reflected the broader reception of *A Vision of Britain*.

While associations with party politics *were* present in the book's contemporary reviews, there remained a surprisingly wide acceptance of Charles' diagnosis of the British built environment, if not his neo-classical prescription for rebuilding it, or indeed his broader cultural diagnosis. Architects, planners and critics clearly challenged the book's classicising impulses, and they were joined more widely by broader criticism of Charles' "shrill"<sup>50</sup> tone and *ad hominem* attacks. Nevertheless, the book's claim to articulate public concerns was widely acknowledged and, indeed, frequently accepted.

### **The political context of 1980s Britain**

As we noted above, some commentators have seen *A Vision of Britain*, in retrospect, as part of a campaign attacking the recent past in general and the achievements of socialism in particular. At the time, however, the political response to the Prince's intervention was less clear-cut and, indeed, Charles' words were used to criticise then-current Conservative government policy.

Margaret Thatcher, prime minister from 1979 to 1990, was the dominant political figure of 1980s Britain. Ideologically sympathetic to the US president of the time,

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<sup>49</sup> Peter Davey, "Without Pastiche", *Architectural Review*, 1:126 (1990), 21-39.

<sup>50</sup> Stephen Bayley, "Prince's Attack too Shrill," *The Times*, 4 September, 1989.

Ronald Reagan, Thatcher is regarded as a break from previous Conservative Party leaders, favouring a more dynamically free market ideology than her more paternalistic predecessors. The associated concept of Thatcherism – though contested – signifies a political project that, *inter alia*, looks to the market rather than the state and established institutions to solve societal problems.<sup>51</sup> However, as Philip Norton has explained, while Thatcherism became a potent force, it remained only one of various traditions to which Conservative Party members, including key ministers, were attached during this period.<sup>52</sup> For example, there remained many from the so-called ‘One Nation’ tradition of Toryism, one that demonstrated a patrician concern for the less privileged in society.<sup>53</sup> Significantly, these ‘One Nation Tories’ were also wary about unfettered free-market economics and possessed a strong affinity toward historic traditions and institutions. In the parlance of the time, these Conservatives were derogatorily known as ‘wets’, in contrast to the ‘dry’ Thatcherites. In particular, it is these ideological tensions *within* the Thatcher administration that were exposed by particular issues of architecture and planning. For example, in his account of inner-city policy during the 1980s, Otto Saumarez Smith highlights a “dichotomy of capitalist ruthlessness and bumptious nostalgia” within the Thatcher governments.<sup>54</sup>

This conflict between the free market, on one hand, and the lure of a particular idea of history on the other, seems evident even in the words of Thatcher herself. In a July 1985 speech to mark the start of construction of the Broadgate office development in the City

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<sup>51</sup> Andrew Gamble, *The Free Market and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1994).

<sup>52</sup> Philip Norton, “‘The Lady’s Not for Turning’, But What About the Rest?” *Parliamentary Affairs* 43, no. 1 (1990): 41-58.

<sup>53</sup> Ian Gilmour, *Dancing with Dogma: Britain under Thatcherism* (London: Pocket Books, 1992).

<sup>54</sup> Otto Saumarez Smith, “Action for Cities: The Thatcher Government and Inner-city Policy,” *Urban History* 47 (2020), 274-291, at 274.

of London – a fusion of buildings claimed for high-tech and post-modern styles masterplanned by Arup Associates – she said, “First we have to remember that the architecture will be among architecture in the City built by Christopher Wren, Robert Adam, Inigo Jones.”<sup>55</sup> She argued that:

we are not only building architecture, we are preparing for the commerce of the future. We are in a great era of conservation. But we are also in a great era of technological change and these buildings must not only be buildings of proportion and elegance, they must be buildings that will take the very latest technology [...] as befits the City which is accustomed to be right in the forefront of new development.<sup>56</sup>

This illustrates not only the Conservative dichotomy around heritage and the market but also Thatcher’s own priority: that the market came first.

Charles’ interventions engaged directly with this tension. This is illustrated in two parliamentary debates – one in the House of Commons and another in the Lords – in the wake of Charles’ Mansion House speech. The first of these – called by Conservative MP Andrew Hargreaves – was held in the Commons on 8 December 1987, concerning “the effect of market forces on building design and planning in inner-city, urban and rural areas.”<sup>57</sup> Hargreaves referred to Charles’ speech, noting that, beyond the immediate hullabaloo, it “serves an excellent purpose in focusing our attention on whether designers and planners are yet giving sufficient importance to the essential correlation, or relationship, between quality and aesthetics, as well as to the human and environmental aspects of modern building designs.”<sup>58</sup> To address the issues Charles raised, Hargreaves argued that matters of design and planning “should not be left solely

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<sup>55</sup> Margaret Thatcher, “Speech commencing construction of Broadgate”, *The Thatcher Foundation*, 31 July 1985, available at: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106107> [accessed 11.01.24].

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *House of Commons Debates*, vol. 124 col. 236, 8 December 1987.

<sup>58</sup> *House of Commons Debates*, vol. 124 col. 237, 8 December 1987.

to the vagaries of market forces.”<sup>59</sup> Hargreaves’ position in favour of greater state intervention was largely supported by MPs from both sides of the house. Indeed Clive Soley, an opposition Labour MP, highlighted that there appeared to be a contradiction in the Conservative Party between those who favoured the unfettered market and those, like him, who would prefer greater constraints. He reflected: “now I find the royal family on my side. I cannot help feeling that there must be some anxiety on the Conservative Benches about that.”<sup>60</sup>

Responding for the government, a junior minister at the Department for the Environment, David Trippier maintained the government’s strongly pro-market line, arguing that “we can achieve better design only if we give the market the opportunity that it is crying out for to respond to people’s wishes and preferences without the constant frustration of control and regulation, with officialdom stating that it knows what is good.”<sup>61</sup> He added that any mistakes made were not the result of market failure but, instead, were a hangover from the 1960s and 1970s in the form of “a mistaken belief in the virtues of communal living and communal architecture.”<sup>62</sup>

A second debate was held in the House of Lords on 30 March 1988. Led by Lord St. John of Fawsley, it was again influenced by Charles’ speech, with Lord St. John claiming colourfully that Charles was “the most highly placed person in public life to speak with such knowledge about architecture since Thomas Jefferson.”<sup>63</sup> Similar to Hargreaves, Lord St. John – who was, back in 1981, the first of the ‘wets’ to be sacked from the

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<sup>59</sup> *House of Commons Debates*, vol. 124 col. 236, 8 December 1987.

<sup>60</sup> *House of Commons Debates*, vol. 124 col. 246, 8 December 1987.

<sup>61</sup> *House of Commons Debates*, vol. 124 col. 253, 8 December 1987.

<sup>62</sup> *House of Commons Debates*, vol. 124 col. 254, 8 December 1987.

<sup>63</sup> *House of Lords Debates*, vol. 495 col. 833-4, 30 March 1988. Note, Lord St John was, before his peerage, known as Norman St. John-Stevas.

Thatcher's Cabinet – wanted the state to respond to Charles' critique of contemporary architecture by doing more:

The Government have set their faces against aesthetic control. Perhaps I may make a plea to turn those faces back again. That is what the public want.<sup>64</sup>

Despite this entreaty, the Earl of Caithness, responding for the government, stuck to the departmental line that it was best for the state to distance itself:

The Government do not seek to promote better architecture by prescription or control on the assumption that those in Whitehall or the town hall know best. We have been down that road and have seen where it leads.<sup>65</sup>

For Lord Caithness, and the government, improving the quality of architecture remained a matter of creating an environment in which business and industry could largely build what they fancied.<sup>66</sup> Tellingly, the minister pointed to the redevelopment of London Docklands – designated an Enterprise Zone and thus not restricted by regular planning regulations – as an example of what he characterised as a success story.<sup>67</sup> In *A Vision of Britain*, Charles was noticeably critical of this development, suggesting that it had been hurried and lacked appropriate scale.<sup>68</sup>

Further insight into Charles' outlook was found in a letter, written in 1987, in which Charles describes the avowedly Thatcherite secretary of state for environment, Nicholas Ridley, in these terms: "I don't think he favours any kind of controls over anything, and being a free-market kind of buccaneer, also seems to think that conservationists are a general menace!"<sup>69</sup> In turn, Ridley clearly did not think much of Charles' ideas. He responded directly to a letter sent by the prince to admit that he was perfectly content

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<sup>64</sup> *House of Lords Debates*, vol. 495 col. 833, 30 March 1988.

<sup>65</sup> *House of Lords Debates*, vol. 495 col. 852, 30 March 1988.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *House of Lords Debates*, vol. 495 col. 851, 30 March 1988.

<sup>68</sup> Prince of Wales, *A Vision of Britain*, pp.53-55.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Dimbleby, *Prince of Wales*, p.547.

to let developers to do as they preferred without intervention from either central or local government.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, there are accounts to suggest that Thatcher herself was annoyed by some of Charles' interventions and regarded him pejoratively as something of a "wet."<sup>71</sup> Thus, while Charles' commentary tends to be remembered as an attack on the left, it was understood at the time also as an attack on the staunchly pro-market tendencies within the Thatcher government. Charles' main supporters were non-Thatcherite Conservatives, but – as Soley's words suggest – his intervention was also seen favourably within sections of the Labour Party.

In the 1989 context of its reception, then, *A Vision of Britain* was understood by some on the left as a political attack on the modern architecture of the welfare state, by others as over-reach from a future monarch, and by architects and urban planners in particular as an unprecedented royal attack on their professions and particular individuals. Even among these groups, criticisms of the book tended to concern Charles' right to speak, the text's antagonistic tone, and the insistence on classicism, more than its diagnosis of Britain's built environment. The book was most widely understood as an attack on existing models of development where the only alternatives appeared to be either the state-heavy, technocratic approach to comprehensive planning favoured by the Labour Party (in control of central government through much of 1960s and 1970s and a significant power in local councils in the 1980s), or the ruthlessly market-driven approach backed by Thatcherite ministers such as Ridley.

### **Charles: Policy Entrepreneur**

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<sup>70</sup> Dimpleby, Prince of Wales, p.549; See also, Nicholas Ridley, *My Style of Government: The Thatcher Years* (London: Hutchinson, 1991). Ridley was, incidentally, the grandson of architect Sir Edwin Lutyens.

<sup>71</sup> Howard Hodgson, *Charles – The Man Who Will Be King* (London: John Blake, 2007), p.363.

Charles asserted his case about architecture and the built environment in various fora, targeted towards media and public attention, as part of an assiduous strategy attempting to achieve policy change. As Charles' biographer notes: "in public there were the speeches and in private the seminars, the receptions, the lobbying, the letter-writing and the fundraising."<sup>72</sup> Indeed, Charles engaged in a long-running letter-writing campaign to ministers – certain details of which were released in the 2010s following a long Freedom of Information battle fought by *The Guardian* newspaper – illustrating his ability to access levers of power at the highest level.<sup>73</sup> Further to his private lobbying, Charles founded an architecture institute – the Prince of Wales's Institute for Architecture – which established courses in traditional design, in operation between 1986 and 2001. The Prince's Institute also launched a (relatively short-lived) magazine: *Perspectives on Architecture* (1994-1998). Charles' interventions directly changed a variety of building developments, particularly in London.<sup>74</sup> Architects Ahrends Burton and Koralek's competition-winning project for the National Gallery extension – the "monstrous carbuncle" mentioned above – was ultimately substituted for an alternative post-modern design by Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown finished with classical adornments (now itself subject to what many consider insensitive alterations). The famous international modern architect Mies van der Rohe's scheme for a tower opposite the Bank of England, branded the "glass stump" by Charles, became replaced by the stripey postmodernism of James Stirling and Michael Wilford's No.1 Poultry. And the post-war modernism of Paternoster Square adjacent to St. Pauls, designed by

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<sup>72</sup> Dimpleby, *Prince of Wales*, p.439.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Booth and Matthew Taylor, "Prince Charles' 'black spider memos' show lobbying at highest political levels", *The Guardian*, 13 May, 2015. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/may/13/prince-charles-black-spider-memos-lobbying-ministers-tony-blair> [accessed 11.01.24].

<sup>74</sup> Wainwright, "Carbuncles and King Charles".



William Holford and vilified by Charles, was ultimately demolished and replaced in 2003 according to an eclectic masterplan designed by William Whitfield.

Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of Charles' architectural activism involved using his hereditary status as a landowner through the Duchy of Cornwall, and his private income from that land, to initiate a new settlement. Poundbury, on the outskirts of Dorchester in Dorset, was begun in 1993 and construction remains ongoing [Figs. 1-4]. The masterplan was designed by Léon Krier to embody Charles' architectural principles. A selection of international and British traditional architects were hired to design public buildings and residential areas in neo-classical and vernacular styles. The result is not without contradictions: always faced in stone, brick or render, while frequently constructed in modern materials like steel and concrete. Poundbury has largely become the preserve of an elderly, wealthy, white demographic.<sup>75</sup> And it has a strange urban syntax: seemingly part village, part town, and part cityscape; combining a market square, town high street, and a group of urban *palazzi* somewhat curiously assembled. Ultimately, Poundbury was built as prototype, or a series of prototypes, hoping to stimulate public policy makers and private business leaders to initiate similar projects throughout the UK.

In the context of these interventions, Charles can be characterised as a policy entrepreneur. In the words of political scientist John Kingdon, policy entrepreneurs are those willing “to invest their resources – time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money – in the hope of future return, often in the form of policies of which they

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<sup>75</sup> See 2022 UK census data, mapped at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/maps> [accessed 20.03.2023].

approve.”<sup>76</sup> A policy entrepreneur is not necessarily a party-political figure.<sup>77</sup> They can operate across various activities, generating media attention, drafting proposals, writing memos, articles and books, all-the-while looking for any opportunity to translate ideas into action.<sup>78</sup> As Kingdon remarks, effective policy entrepreneurs “enjoy advocacy, they enjoy being at or near the seat of power, they enjoy being part of the action.”<sup>79</sup> We argue that this is how Charles operated with the book *A Vision of Britain*, its accompanying TV programme and exhibition. These can be seen, together, as part of a wider policy-entrepreneurial campaign in which Charles sought to mobilise all the resources available to him – across publishing, television, national cultural institutions, and indeed land ownership and property development – to apply pressure to policy makers, both directly and by involving the public, in an attempt to effect change. The outcomes of his activism demonstrate his success in doing so.

## **PART TWO: RETURNING TO A VISION OF BRITAIN IN THE PRESENT**

### **Donald Trump’s Executive Order on architecture**

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<sup>76</sup> John Kingdon, *Agenda, Alternatives and Public Policies*, (New York: Longman, 1995), pp.122-123.

<sup>77</sup> Robert Klein, a millionaire US housing developer, serves as a good example. As Michael Mintrom explains, he was pivotal figure in the process to change stem cell medicine policy in California. Policy entrepreneurial functions include attempting to “soften-up” both those involved formally in the policy process and the wider public. See: Michael Mintrom, “So You Want To Be A Policy Entrepreneur?”, *Policy Design and Practice*, 2:4 (2019), 307-323, at 317-318.

<sup>78</sup> Kingdon, *Agenda, Alternatives and Public Policies*, pp.127-131.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p.123.

*A Vision of Britain* is now over 35 years old. While the nuances of its original reception are frequently lost, the text remains doggedly significant in public discourse surrounding architecture in the UK. Its distinctive vocabulary continues in widespread use among generations who experienced the book's publication and reception: in everyday conversation, and among local planning committees who approve individual developments.

Charles' views on architecture have also had influence beyond the UK, including the USA. In 2012 for example, the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, awarded the Prince an architecture prize, noting that "Charles has put the ideals of traditional architecture and urban design into practice around the world."<sup>80</sup> Charles' advocacy has also informed the work of the National Civic Art Society, a Washington D.C. pressure group that was established in 2002. In its own words, the Society:

[...] educates and empowers civic leaders in the promotion of public art and architecture worthy of our great Republic. We do this by advancing the classical tradition in architecture, urbanism, and their allied arts. Through our programs and initiatives we guide government agencies and officials; assist practitioners; and educate students and the general public in the preservation and creation of beautiful, dignified public buildings, monuments, and spaces.<sup>81</sup>

Regarding Charles' influence, the president of the National Civic Art Society, Justin Shubow, said in a recent podcast interview:

When he was Prince, Charles was a vehement public opponent of modernist architecture. He gave this amazing speech at the Royal Institute for British Architects where he complained how about how ugly buildings had become [...]. So he had amazing rhetoric, and he also took positive action to put his beliefs into action [...]. He built an entirely new town called Poundbury, and he built it

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<sup>80</sup> Kara Kelly, 'Prince Charles Honored for his Architectural Patronage', *Notre Dame News*, 7 February, 2012, available at: <https://news.nd.edu/news/prince-charles-honored-for-his-architectural-patronage/> [accessed 11.01.24]. Notre Dame's School of Architecture is notable for its focus on classical architectural education.

<sup>81</sup> The National Civic Art Society, 'About the National Civic Art Society' (2023), available at: <https://www.civcart.org/%20about/> [accessed 11.01.24].

along traditional urbanist lines with traditional architecture. And the town is beautiful.<sup>82</sup>

In 2018, Shubow was nominated by President Donald Trump to serve on the United States Commission of Fine Arts, the agency that oversees the design of buildings in the nation's capital. Shubow was also, briefly, chair of the Commission. He became a guiding hand behind Trump's Executive Order no. 13967, titled *Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture*, which was signed on December 8, 2020 during the final weeks of the Trump presidency.

This Executive Order mandated that "traditional and classical architecture" should be "the preferred architecture" for all federal buildings of more than \$50m., including all federal courthouses and agency headquarters, and all federal buildings in the District of Columbia. It also mandated a President's Council on Improving Federal Civic Architecture to oversee implementation of the policy.<sup>83</sup> The architecture of the American federal state was defined here around a particular idea of its cultural lineage:

"Classical architecture" means the architectural tradition derived from the forms, principles, and vocabulary of the architecture of Greek and Roman antiquity, and as later developed and expanded upon by such Renaissance architects as Alberti, Brunelleschi, Michelangelo, and Palladio; such Enlightenment masters as Robert Adam, John Soane, and Christopher Wren; such 19th-century architects as Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Robert Mills, and Thomas U. Walter; and such 20th-century practitioners as Julian Abele, Daniel Burnham, Charles F. McKim, John Russell Pope, Julia Morgan, and the firm of Delano and Aldrich. Classical architecture encompasses such styles as Neoclassical, Georgian, Federal, Greek Revival, Beaux-Arts, and Art Deco [...] "Traditional architecture" includes classical architecture, as defined herein, and also includes the historic humanistic architecture such as Gothic, Romanesque, Pueblo Revival, Spanish Colonial.

The Order's narrative thus sought to "visually connect our contemporary Republic with the antecedents of [...] classical antiquity." Present-day federal architecture, by contrast,

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<sup>82</sup> Justin Shubow with Rachel Lu, 'The Architecture of the Republic', *Law & Liberty* (2023), available at <https://lawliberty.org/podcast/the-architecture-of-the-%20republic/> [accessed 11.01.24].

<sup>83</sup> "Executive Order on Promoting Beautiful Civic Architecture."

was described as “sometimes impress[ing] the architectural elite, but not the American people who the buildings are meant to serve.” The text thus claimed a supposedly authentic cultural tradition, in relation to a particular idea of common sense. It rejected contemporary professional elites, representing classicism as both a true cultural inheritance and an architectural style of the people.

The Order reflected Trump’s political tactics by seeking to appeal directly to the public, or a section of it, and to bypass established structures, norms and expertise which were portrayed instead as obstructive and retrogressive.<sup>84</sup> The text also echoed Trump’s political rhetoric. As Alexandra Holomor and Ronny Scholz argue, “Trump projected a romanticized and ahistorical (but past-derived) vision of the country onto the present to show that something essential to American existence had been lost – but could be regained.”<sup>85</sup> Jan-Werner Müller suggests that the Order can be regarded as a companion to Trump’s 1776 Commission which was established to promote a particular reading of US history – one that claims to promote “the informed and honest patriotism that is essential for a successful republic”,<sup>86</sup> but has been seen by critics as an attempt to promote a “whitewashed version of American history.”<sup>87</sup> Matthew R. Allen goes further to characterise the Order as a “nationalist doctrine”, which seeks to “exploit the affect of classicism” while simultaneously forgetting the “actual historic complexity” of classical architecture in the USA.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*.

<sup>85</sup> Alexandra Holomor and Ronny Scholz, “The Power of Trump-speak: Populist Crisis Narratives and Ontological Security,” *The Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), 344-364, at 348.

<sup>86</sup> “Executive Order on Establishing the President’s Advisory 1776 Commission”, 2 November 2020, The Trump White House Archives, Executive Order on Establishing the President’s Advisory 1776 Commission – The White House (archives.gov) [accessed 11.01.24].

<sup>87</sup> Müller, “Populism’s Building Complex”, 8.

<sup>88</sup> Matthew R. Allen, “Trumpism, Neoclassicism and Architecture as Propaganda”, PLATFORM, 17 May 2021, available at: <https://www.platformspace.net/home/trumpism-neoclassicism-and-architecture-as-propaganda> [accessed 11.01.24].

The extent to which the Executive Order aligned with President Trump's personal tastes as a property developer remains open to question. While Trump is a regular user of the word "beauty", albeit vaguely-defined, his own new-build developments invariably comprise corporate modernism, adorned with expensive materials typically assumed to be luxurious. Ian Volner characterises the architecture of the Trump organisation as the pursuit of "opulence at its absolute finest", irrespective of architectural character or atmosphere, largely designed for the "architect-in-chief" by "some well-meaning bread-and-butter firm":

The Trump Organization does not seem to be guided by any feeling for what it wants its buildings to look like. Not only is there no *there* there, but the more theres they build, the less *there* there is.<sup>89</sup>

Traditional architecture does not figure large in the Trump organisation's architectural portfolio. Indeed, as Sophie Suma points out, where developments might involve the possible preservation of historic buildings, Trump showed "no hesitation to demolish them if he wants the site they occupy."<sup>90</sup> Trump's embrace of the views of the National Civic Art Society – partly inspired by those of Charles – to "instrumentalise" classical and traditional architecture "for ideological purposes"<sup>91</sup> has thus been attributed primarily to his political project, rather than his background as a property developer.<sup>92</sup>

The Executive Order's architectural diagnosis and prescription broadly mirror the cultural outlook, vocabulary and tactics of *A Vision of Britain*. However, the

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<sup>89</sup> Ian Volner, 'Fool's Gold: The Architecture of Donald Trump', *Artforum*, 55:3 (2016), available at: <https://www.artforum.com/print/201609/fool-s-gold-the-architecture-of-trump-64212> [accessed 20.03.2023].

<sup>90</sup> Suma, "Trump's Aesthetic", 123.

<sup>91</sup> Suma, "Trump's Aesthetic", 127. Charles and Trump have met on a number of occasions, during and before the latter's presidency. There is no evidence to suggest either individual influenced the views of the other.

<sup>92</sup> Volner, 'Fool's Gold'.

contemporary politics into which it was signed was rather different. This was a context where the Black Lives Matter movement had erupted in response to the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020. It followed the previous removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville in May 2018 which had attracted conflicting protests,<sup>93</sup> resulting in President Trump notoriously defending white nationalists, supremacists and neo-Nazis, saying “there were very fine people on both sides”.<sup>94</sup> Within a month of the publication of the Executive Order, falsely-contested election results fuelled the storming of the US Capitol by far-right mobs, ignited, at least in part, by online echo chambers.

It is impossible not to read the Executive Order’s definition of traditional architecture in this context. The Order promoted a particular idea of American tradition which was imagined as a continuity stemming from the Enlightenment of Western Europe; from an admiration of the architectures of Greece and Rome, re-interpreted during the European Renaissance, arriving in America as a colonial export. This is a monocular idea of cultural tradition: one that explicitly omits First Nation traditions, Mesoamerican traditions and other, ethnically-diverse traditions in architecture and place-making. Indeed, as Amanda Colson-Hurley has reflected: “It would [...] suggest that what’s most valuable in our built environment is what was codified by a white male elite before women could vote and black Americans had full legal rights.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> See: Dell Upton, “Monuments and Crimes,” *Journal 18: A Journal of Eighteenth Century Art and Culture*, available at <https://www.journal18.org/nq/monuments-and-crimes-by-dell-upton/> [accessed 11.01.24].

<sup>94</sup> Glenn Kessler, “The ‘very fine people’ at Charlottesville: Who were they?”, *Washington Post*, 8 May, 2020, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/05/08/%20very-fine-people-charlottesville-who-were-they-2/> [accessed 11.01.24].

<sup>95</sup> Amanda Colson Hurley, “Trump’s Bizarre Plan to Make Architecture Classical Again,” *The Atlantic*, 8 February 2020, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/02/trumps-plan-make-architecture-classical-again/606286/> [accessed 11.01.24].

Colson-Hurley's claim has been countered by certain advocates of traditional architecture. Catesby Leigh of the National Civic Art Society, for example, argues that "[w]henever its prerogatives are questioned, the modernist establishment can be expected to play the race card [...]", "[J]ust as Rick and Ilsa will always have Paris, the usual suspects will always have Albert Speer."<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, the Executive Order appears to enact architecturally – in federal building – a Eurocentric, white idea of America; one which is simultaneously silent about black, intersectional, other, and global-majority Americas. Indeed, commentators have implied that a line can be drawn – arguably recognisable in the intentions of the former Trump administration – between mandating these particular architectural traditions and the dog-whistle celebration of "fine people on both sides."<sup>97</sup>

### **The populist prince**

As noted above, scholars such as Müller and Suma have identified a clear populist dimension to Trump's architectural vision.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, Suma identifies two populist architectural strategies: "the visibilisation of borders", which is a reference to Trump's much vaunted expansion of 'The Wall' marking the boundary between the US and Mexico, and – more relevant here – his "institutionalisation of ideology through building" as made manifest through Executive Order 13967.<sup>99</sup> This shines a new light back across the Atlantic on *A Vision of Britain*. It draws the book deeper into

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<sup>96</sup> Catesby Leigh, "As Went Charlottesville, So Goes The Republic", *City Journal*, 1 October, 2021, available at: <https://www.city-journal.org/donald-trump-architecture-controversy-in-retrospect> [accessed 11.01.24].

<sup>97</sup> Allen, "Trumpism, Neoclassicism and Architecture as Propaganda"; Müller, "Populism's Building Complex".

<sup>98</sup> Müller, "Populism's Building Complex"; Suma, "Trump's Aesthetic".

<sup>99</sup> Suma, "Trump's Aesthetic", 126.



contemporary “culture wars”. Moreover, it calls attention to a decisive element of the text that previously remained largely overlooked: populism.

The *modus operandi* of populism typically takes selected ideas of history and tradition and employs them selectively to evoke an idea of common sense, directed towards mobilising popular opinion for the purposes of effecting change. One of the most influential definitions of populism was put forward by Cas Mudde, who has described it as: “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”<sup>100</sup> Thus, a populist – who could be from the left or right of the political spectrum – can be regarded as someone who claims power through a proclaimed ability to discern the common sense of ordinary people. Furthermore, as Mudde explains, wealth and power in themselves do not make one part of ‘the elite’. Rather, the distinction between the masses and the elite is not based on class or status, but instead on a perceived moral position, one that is simply proclaimed authentically ‘pure’ rather than ‘corrupt’.<sup>101</sup> Thus a billionaire businessman, or a royal, can still be a populist. Other features include the regular use of a “host ideology” to help propel the populist message. For example, the Indian People’s Party combines it with nativism, and Syriza in Greece did so with socialism.<sup>102</sup> There is regularly a sense with populism that the “pure people” are actually from a narrow band in society. As Mudde notes, “in the discourse of many of the original American populists,

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<sup>100</sup> Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition*, 39:4 (2004), 541-563, at 543. It is worth noting that Mudde’s conception is contested, and that Mudde himself has since refined his definition. For the purposes of demonstrating that the literature on populism can contribute to architectural discussions, this simple conception works effectively enough here.

<sup>101</sup> Cas Mudde, “Populism in Europe: An Illiberal Democratic Response to Undemocratic Liberalism,” *Government and Opposition* 56:4 (2021), 577-597, at 579.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 580.

‘the people’ were white Christian farmers.”<sup>103</sup> This emphasises that much populist discourse, at least of the nationalist variety, makes an appeal to lost golden eras of supposed greatness – illustrated most vividly by Trump’s exhortation to make America great *again*.<sup>104</sup> Paradoxically, its effectiveness relies on denying or downplaying the operations of populism in order to foster a sense of proximity and connection between the populist and the public. As Müller observes, contemporary populists tend to operate under the imperative of “Don’t make it too obvious!”.<sup>105</sup>

Following Trump’s Executive Order of 2020, the populist tendencies of *A Vision of Britain* from 1989 come to the fore. It becomes clearer to see how the text repeatedly claims to articulate the voice of the public. The book refers to a vaguely-defined but selectively nostalgic past, asserting an authentic purity for England’s green and pleasant land. It promotes a distinctive idea about a lost classical inheritance, attributing intellectual authenticity to that inheritance. It suggests that traditional architecture represents a supposedly correct architectural image that can be reclaimed in the present to retrieve the idea of a lost ‘golden age’. Charles, like Trump, promoted distrust of architectural experts, portraying them as an elite, preferring to make direct appeals instead to the “silent majority”. This is a “tactic cherished by demagogues everywhere”, as the late journalist and architecture critic Herbert Muschamp remarked.<sup>106</sup> Indeed Muschamp, writing in *The New Republic*, was one of the earliest commentators to draw attention to the populist dimensions of Charles’ book, a lone voice in making this connection at the time. Writing in 1989, he explained that *A Vision of Britain* was not

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 579.

<sup>104</sup> Moran Mandelbaum, “‘Making Our Country Great Again’: The Politics of Subjectivity in an Age of National-Populism,” *International Journal of Semiotic Law*, 33 (2020), 451-476; Holomar and Scholz, “The Power of Trump-speak”.

<sup>105</sup> Müller, “Populism’s Building Complex”, 10.

<sup>106</sup> Muschamp, “Prince Charles’ War against Modern Architecture.”

about architecture at all, but rather about “the contract between a Post-Modern prince and his subjects”:<sup>107</sup>

He wants us to know that “99 percent [of the letters he received after his BBC broadcast] agreed with my feelings,” that “although I’ll be criticized for my ideas [by “porcupine-like professionals and cantankerous critics”] I’m sure there is general agreement” among the good folks. No doubt Charles does feel deeply for Madge Atkins, the resident of a Modern high-rise building [whom the book mentions briefly] that has developed such serious problems that water pours in through the cracks and the window frames keep falling out. But, like silent majoritarians everywhere, Charles exploits the plight of the poor Madges of the world to hide the cracks in his own privileged position. It’s Madge’s job to wrap the populist veneer over a sagging structure of privilege.<sup>108</sup>

Furthermore, “When Charles recalls the English to their heritage”, Muschamp reflected, he speaks:

whether he knows or not, for all who resent the [so-called] invasion of former colonials. This time round, the white man’s burden isn’t religion, it’s classicism. Charles has nice things to say about contemporary Islamic architects who use traditional forms, but he uses this praise as an analogy to drive his countrymen back to their Gothic and Classical roots.<sup>109</sup>

There is evidence to support this reading in *A Vision of Britain*, where Charles connected the supposed authenticity of classicism in the UK with childhood innocence, in the face of what he assumed to be the degradations of modernity. “Nowadays”, he wrote, “with the virtual demise of classical education and of any attempt to provide school-children with a perspective on our shared heritage of European civilisation, I suppose it is little wonder that any reference in our buildings to that European heritage is considered old-fashioned and irrelevant to today’s ‘modern’ conditions.”<sup>110</sup> Indeed, the text argues, “we have managed, through our Western arrogance, to make at least two generations feel ashamed of their ancient, traditional customs, culture and spiritual values.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Prince of Wales, *A Vision of Britain*, p.155.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

*A Vision of Britain* can be understood now as a reaction, at its time of publication, against the overwriting of an old British idea of gentlemanly authority with, first, industrial modernity, and, later, a post-war culture that trained, celebrated and enabled professionals. Until the end of the nineteenth century, cultural capital in architecture had been the preserve of a relatively small circle of gentlemen who were acculturated to debate aesthetics within the same set of social and educational references.<sup>112</sup> By the post-war era, the professions of architecture and planning, whose establishment paralleled other new professions in other fields, opened-up the field of aesthetic adjudication to a new circle.<sup>113</sup> This circle was also limited in its diversity, and indeed shared plenty of the same cultural sources. But priorities and spheres of influence nevertheless changed, producing an intellectual space in which the changed urbanism and fresh architectural forms of modernism became widespread. Pursuing activism through policy entrepreneurship in the 1980s and '90s, Charles used his book to make a direct – populist – appeal to the public, seemingly attempting to work around the relatively new professional class to reinstate what he saw as an authentic visual order shared with “the people”, signifying his preferred ideas of social and cultural tradition. Indeed, as we have seen, Charles was effective in exploiting his particular political moment to achieve key objectives, consolidating a particular vocabulary for discussing architecture, changing the design of certain projects, and constructing Poundbury as a prototype.

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<sup>112</sup> Andrew Saint, *Architect and Engineer: A Study in Sibling Rivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>113</sup> Mark Crinson and Jules Lubbock, *Architecture, Art or Profession: Three Hundred Years of Architectural Education in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994). This book was published in association with the Prince of Wales' Institute of Architecture and has a Foreword by Charles.

It is not our intention here to depict Charles as an authoritarian or a white supremacist. Instead, our point is to highlight how he has operated as a populist: as an active policy entrepreneur, denigrating professional expertise, deploying his unusual power and influence purposefully and tactically to advance an agenda, while simultaneously denying the operations of his power to claim popular appeal.

Indeed, Charles' architectural advocacy has arguably opened-up cultural and intellectual opportunities for contemporary populist architectures. Developing the work of Guriev and Triesman, Müller distinguishes between "the twentieth-century 'fear dictatorships' and the twenty-first century 'spin dictatorships', with the latter being demonstrably less violent and primarily focused on manipulating public opinion."<sup>114</sup> Under these latter-day populists, Müller suggests, "particular artists and architects (and styles and symbols) might be shunned; monuments and buildings might be dismantled – but nobody is sent to prisons or camps."<sup>115</sup> Focusing on the architectural proclivities of populist leaders such as Trump – but also including Hungary's Viktor Orbán, India's Narendra Modi and Türkiye's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – Müller argues that these 'spin' populists, if they get the opportunity, will attempt "to reshape the built environment in line with their understanding of 'the real people'." The reconstruction of the Castle District in Budapest promoted by Orbán is offered as an example, which "evokes a late nineteenth century bourgeois 'Golden Age'."<sup>116</sup>

Populism can be seen in retrospect as a key factor in the influence of *A Vision of Britain*, and in the achievement of various consequent outcomes. The book will inevitably be

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<sup>114</sup> Müller "Populism's Building Complex", 3.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

read differently as times and circumstances change around it. History itself always shifts around a work of architectural history. But the book's most important legacy now, we argue, is no longer to do with its author's likes or dislikes, his qualifications to speak, or implicit affiliations with party politics. Rather, it stands as a prominent illustration of the operations of populist discourse in the fields of architecture and urban planning.

At the time of writing in early 2024, events suggest that populism will become an increasing feature of world politics. Such events include recent surprise election results in Argentina and The Netherlands, and Trump's continued popularity in the US which could propel him once again to the White House. As a result, it seems likely that we will see more attempts by political leaders to use architecture to tap – as Charles put it in 1989 – “the deep-rooted feelings of ‘ordinary’ people.”<sup>117</sup> *A Vision of Britain* is increasingly discussed in terms of politics. We argue that – while most commentators seek to locate the book in British cultural debates of the 1980s, and the legacies of those debates – the populist dimensions of the text have recently become more apparent, and they seem increasingly consequential.

## CAPTIONS

1. Market town square, Buttermarket, Poundbury, UK.
2. Village square, Middlemarsh Street, Poundbury.
3. Fire station and office building, Peninsula Way, Poundbury.
4. Urban *palazzi*, Queen Mother Square, Poundbury.

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<sup>117</sup> Prince of Wales, *Vision of Britain*, 12.

