

Picturesque today

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PICTURESQUE TODAY

Talking to Jonathan Sergison

Many of the buildings we saw while travelling through southern England, have a great capacity to represent a certain idea. In some cases this capacity is even more important than the physis and materiality of the built work. Looking at the scale, the architectural design of the elements and a certain imperfection in a Palladian villa like Chiswick House, we came to the conclusion that such buildings are more than just physical structures in that they also express the idea of a classical architecture: surprisingly the image of an architecture seems to be more important than the architecture itself. Do you share this perception and do you think that this emphasis on representation is still of relevance in current British architecture?

Jonathan Sergison: I would say that there is some relevance in this question. In my opinion all architecture works with images or rather with an image language. In contemporary architecture this is rarely discussed but inescapable. When we look at something, it communicates something of its own identity. Architects have always worked with the tension between architectural language and a manipulation of formal expression.

I find it interesting that you describe buildings in terms of physical and material characteristics. We always think of buildings in these terms (among others), but our instinct is increasingly to return to a study of weight and mass. In part this is a form of resistance to the fascination with tension and lightness in high-tech architecture.

How do you find the appropriate image for a project?

The English architects Alison and Peter Smithson have been instructive here, particularly in one project, the Sugden House. I remember the time we first saw it we were drawn to the manner in which the Smithsons had gently manipulated the image of an English suburban house. The lessons we learnt from this project were important to us at a time when we were first establishing our

practice. Our education had been a modernist one, as Stephen had been taught by, among others, James Gowan and Derek Walker, an architect who had planned Milton Keynes, while I had studied with Adrian Sanson, a member of the Grunt Group, and Rodrigo Perez de Arce. Stephen was also taught by David Chipperfield and I worked in his studio at a time when he was questioning the possibilities of the canon of international modernism. Perhaps in part as a reaction to our own formal education and also a curiosity about questions of place and notions of 'as found', in our first two buildings we proposed an image language that directly works with an interpretation of context. The public house in Walsall attempts to make reference to the large abstract, often black industrial sheds that surround the city. The double house in Stevenage re-interprets the ubiquitous English semi-detached house. Experience has shown us that situations are not as permanent as one might expect. We have also found that what we think is obvious in the image of a building is not universally understood by the building's users and this has led us to be freer and bolder with the images we employ in our projects.

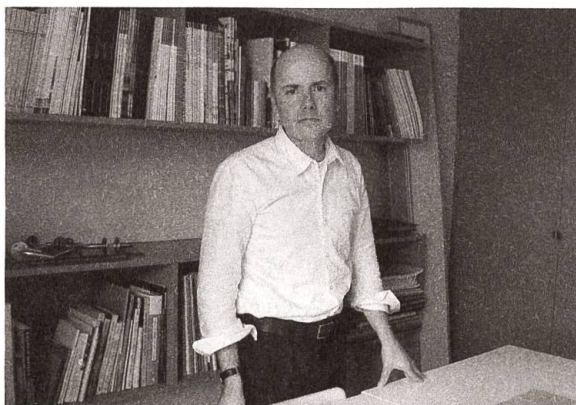
We think that the sense of the picturesque goes beyond the meaning of representation. Peter Smithson for instance used the term to explain relevant aspects of his work and related it strongly to ethics in architecture. Therefore, we think that a revised definition of the picturesque should contain both aspects: aesthetics and ethics.

I broadly agree with what you are saying, inasmuch as all movements in architecture have a close relationship between ethics and aesthetics – although sometimes they are not aware of this. In my own definition, or rather understanding, the picturesque represents a man-made evocation

of a state of naturalness. Of course, this is a form of manipulation, but in landscaping terms it could not be further removed from the French tradition of landscape, which is all about a powerful controlling of not only the way plants are planted and how they can grow (pleaching, pruning, coppicing, etc.) but also man's (small) place within a vision of landscape.

I realise that the picturesque attitude was extended to inform the manner in which the towns and cities of England grew and developed. At times they defy any sense of being planned, although really some form of control always existed.

And, I must say, we are in so many ways a product of a lifetime's exposure to this tradition.



One of the major strengths of the picturesque, as we see it, is the ability to synthesize completely different elements or qualities in one composition. This is more than just a montage of its elements and we would say that it applies not only to the 18th century but also to the 20th, especially in the work of the Brutalists.

I find the connection you are making between the picturesque and Brutalism an interesting one in that they both work with a sense of controlling different elements. And this is, as you suggest, more than just compositional; it has implications for urban planning, it involves a material understanding and, above all, an interest in experience. A helpful example to make this point is the Upper Lawn Pavilion. The garden was proposed by the Smithsons as the embodiment of the Brutalist landscape. And the landscape of artificial, natural-

looking mounds at Robin Hood Gardens perhaps most explicitly suggests a connection between Brutalism and the picturesque.

The Upper Lawn Pavilion is also a composition consisting of a ruin and a new structure. The term picturesque could also mean a union between the existing context and the new building. In this respect it is also very close to a popular architecture. Your Walsall project, for example, is popular among both professionals and the general public. And we know that pop architecture has often been misunderstood by the public. That was also a problem of the Smithsons. They wanted to be popular but in fact they were very intellectual and not understood at all. How do you deal with this problem?

With some difficulty, frankly. We do not intend to be too challenging, too polemical. We hope what we do will be understandable, communicable, rather than merely challenging. Without wishing to sound pretentious, we do understand that the direction we have chosen to take, which involves teaching and writing, is at times misunderstood. The Smithsons do offer an example here, and we find their writing to be inspiring. They frequently encountered criticism. In some ways, their character did not help, but in Britain there is a general unease with an approach that is perceived as too intellectual. You mention Pop – I think this originated from an anti-intellectual tendency.

The dilemma you suggest requires us to deal with the context in which we live and work in this country, which is often challenging, to say the least. It also explains why we find it necessary to escape to parts of continental Europe where we encounter more support for the way we want to practice. I am happy that we do have alternatives.

Talking to Adam Caruso

Do you think that the picturesque as an aesthetic category is still of relevance in current English architecture?

Adam Caruso: That is a very broad question, but I think that the idea of the picturesque is still a powerful formal strategy. Though, if you called people's work picturesque in England, they

would get offended, but we wouldn't. I think that when you make architecture or landscape you are making a picture and there is nothing wrong with that, and the amazing thing about architecture or landscape architecture is that you are changing or intervening in reality much more than when you make a painting that hangs in a room. The idea of a picture that more or less people hold in their heads is a very powerful way to communicate.



How do you deal with that notion in your daily business, do you work with pictures?

We have always worked like that. When Peter and I talk about a design it's always in terms of: You know that building... It is about what it looks like, what it feels like, and not so much about what it signifies. I guess lately the references are becoming more eclectic. Historical examples have had a major effect on the work. Maybe half of that is because one wants to be provocative and in the British context the discourse is so thin that one wants to be more and more shocking.

How do you find a picture for a certain project?

Mainly it's about memory: during one's travels one sees things that are memorable, and actually, most of the amazing places I've been are memorable because of their old buildings. However, sometimes you can be very influenced by a photograph and using photography as a reference source is quite picturesque isn't it? What is so powerful about photography is how you define

the content by choosing, by framing the image. In our teaching we use a lot of photography to understand the qualities of the site and to communicate the character of a project.

How would you define the meaning of picturesque? On the one hand you are saying that it is associative and about remembering, and on the other you are suggesting that it is also something that is consciously composed. In one of your statements in the competition for the Landesmuseum in Zurich, you talked about the issue of the picturesque as part of a composition.

Do you know Standen by Philip Webb? What I love about that house is that you can't tell if it is new or old. The composition is picturesque, it is non-classical, but still it is controlled and rigorous. Webb was such a rigorous architect, the way tectonics have been used in the interiors is almost didactic, the way almost every room has a beam in the middle of its ceiling except for the biggest and most important room, which finally has three bays. Webb was an intellectual architect, and yet he was also eclectic. There is plenty of rhetoric but it all has a purpose. I think it is at the level of making pictures that a house is like that, that one material feels sympathetic and appropriate while another does not. Of course perceptions do change- We have a lot of difficulty now in this country, because the orthodoxy is to make buildings that are all glass; somehow for politicians an all glass building stands for progress and social transparency. We just had a big discussion about our building in Nottingham because it is not all glass; it has ornament and colour, things that I thought would be accessible and popular.

You have said that you want to evoke emotions. Are these emotions somehow related to the picturesque?

Yes, emotions can arise from the image of a project, or from its materialisation, and most often through a combination of the two. Brick can be deployed to make a room with a very strong, interior character, and brick is how you make houses in London.

Do you believe that people will eventually understand?
 Take a building like the thermal baths in Vals. Before I visited, I thought that I would not like it so much; it seemed too contrived and not 'real' enough. After experiencing it, on holiday with my family, I realized that it was exactly like being in a bath in Budapest or in Istanbul; it's the same experience of being in a stone room, which is hot or cold. When I'm in Vals, submerged in the water, I cannot stop myself from running my wet hands along the wall and watching the water evaporate from the surface of the stone. You are in the water without much clothing on, and this strong engagement with temperature and water in all of its states emphasises the sensual. The building exploits these things and I think it is amazing in the end. It is completely about the body and about the traditions of the hammam and the Roman bath. This is a kind of figural architecture where the picture and the haptic envelop you in a memorable experience.

Talking to Tony Fretton

Visiting the southern part of England and looking for architectural peculiarities, we've detected – very broadly speaking – two salient formal directions. One is related to Classicism while the other is more related to vernacular or informal architecture. We observe both tendencies in your work. How do you decide on one or the other position in a project and how do you change your position from project to project?

Tony Fretton: Because I am English I think and work empirically, starting from experience, particularly from sensory observation, rather than primarily from logic, and that makes me susceptible to vernaculars. I also have an affinity to British Classicism, for example in the work of Nicholas Hawksmoor, Thomas Archer and Robert Adam. Added to this is my fascination with art from Duchamp to conceptualism, which engaged with the social aspects of objects, and my tendency to see architectural objects as both works of art and cultural artefacts. Together

these factors make it natural for relations to occur between buildings that I am designing and their surroundings (which I also recognise as cultural artefacts), relations that are revealed pictorially.

We are interested in a certain mentality. We suppose that the phenomenon of creating an informal architectural expression is also related to recent debates, such as the 'carefully careless'. And we assume that this debate is linked to the tradition of the picturesque in England.

The carefully careless was a comment about English insouciance in matters of dress, which Robert Maxwell took as part of the title of his collection of articles and applied to English architecture, claiming I think that it possesses informal formality.

What about the picturesque in your work?

The picturesque is something different from what I do. 'Picturing' is probably a better term for what goes on in my work. I think it's interesting to talk about how contemporary architects like Caruso St John or Sergison Bates have been attracted to the picturesque rather than to the abstract. Let's make a comparison between those architects and OMA. For instance, certain rooms of the Casa da Musica in Porto have got Portuguese tiles. For OMA the use of such a material has an ironic connotation, whereas the adjectives 'pictorial', 'pleasant', 'good looking' or 'sweet' are intriguing to people like Adam Caruso and Peter St John. Like Adam, it's very interesting to me to look at the Casa da Musica by OMA since the hall is beautifully decorated and, in fact, very original. But I have a desire to be more abstract in my work.

Do you understand the term picturesque then only in the sense of decoration or could it also be understood in a more abstract sense?

Picturesque had a theoretical basis so it was not just decorative. It was, however, about the senses, so not abstract. Faith House, a wooden building

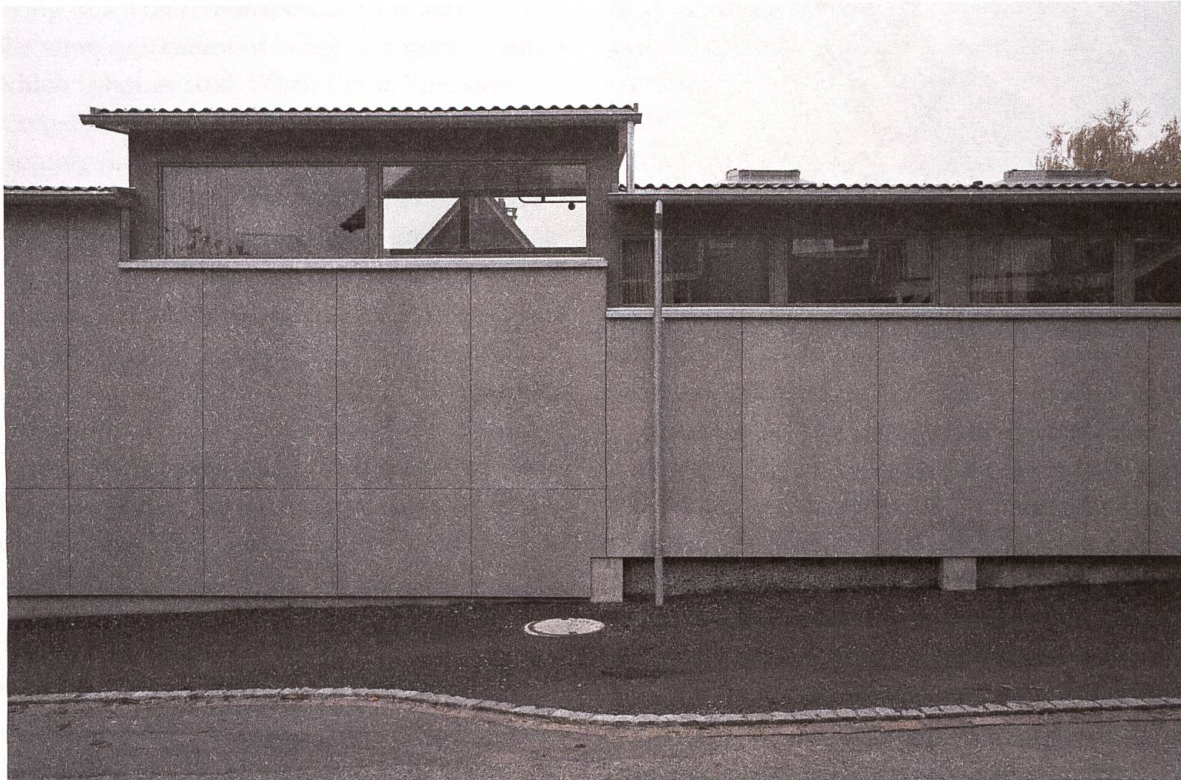
we've done in the countryside, works through mental and visual pictures to say something about the surrounding landscape and its status as a creation both by nature and human beings.



In one of the rooms of Faith House you put a circle of cut trees to create a contemplative environment. We would call the making of that harmonious union between nature and architecture a picturesque method.

I think that picturesque landscape designers in 18th century in England felt that they were in touch with natural truths. I am more inclined to Picasso's view that art is not the truth, but a lie that lets you see the truth, except I don't even think in terms of truths. I suppose I believe in the need to believe. Rituals and symbols play a large part in belief and in the ways that societies negotiate with physical reality in order to make sense of it.

Objects made by creative practice, such as buildings, play a part in all of this. Faith House and its tree circle attempt to provide symbols for a multicultural society, symbols that have no fixed meaning and are therefore open to many different beliefs.



Edelaar Mosayebi Inderbitzin: Haus für einen Gärtner, 2006–2007, Hinterforst/Altstätten SG