

## **Neo-Georgian Architecture 1880-1970: a reappraisal**

Edited by JULIAN HOLDER and ELIZABETH McKELLAR

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This is a fascinating and tightly organised collection, that functions well as an illustrated survey while also providing ways of understanding the shifting discourses and contexts within which Neo-Georgian has been constructed, in the long timeline proposed by the editors. It is also a strong demonstration of the way architectural history can work as a collaborative enterprise, capable of addressing significant gaps in both intellectual history and practical knowledge. One voice missing, but implicit, is that of Timothy Brittain-Catlin, the subtitle of whose book *Bleak Houses: Disappointment and Failure in Architecture* will be in the back of the minds of many readers of this book. But the cumulative effect of these studies nevertheless feels constructive, and the positive advocacy of Neo-Georgian as something far more complex than pastiche (especially given its coincidence with the rise of the state) is well judged. The book works convincingly as reappraisal of a mostly default style that was never, in the first place, subjected to consistent and clear critical appraisal, despite all the insults it has had to endure.

In 1971, Robert Macleod's book *Style and Society: Architectural Ideology in Britain 1835-1914* did not have the term Neo-Georgian in its index, though he did provide some fruitful consideration of resurgent Classicism up to the Great War (which had a complex effect of consolidating Neo-Georgian as style and ideology). The urgent point for Macleod was to find a way to rethink sympathetically a more complex history for the modern movement. Holder and McKellar's organisation of their book makes clear the possibility for thinking about Neo-Georgian as a viable if

under-noticed aspect of architectural ideology, and as a rival response to the modern movement's conceptions of rationalism and the demands of the modern state.

The first section tackles head on the question of quality and Neo-Georgian's uncertain position in architectural history. 'Was Neo-Georgian automatically conservative or, in the absence of a form of modernism we recognise with hindsight as the "correct" line of travel, was it a halfway house or a destination in its own right?', asks Alan Powers. The positive claims made here (Raymond Erith, who rejected the term Neo-Georgian, occasions them), are cautious. Perhaps there was only 'the potential to be a halfway house on the road to a more subtle engagement between tradition and modernism'. The intellectual reconstruction that leads us to this judgment is, however, characteristically perceptive and wide-ranging in the way it opens up generational differences, and the range of meanings that classicism itself contained. Accounts of planning – C. H. Reilly and the Liverpool School of Architecture – and of the historiography of the Georgian in popular publishing before Summerson's *Georgian London* mean that multiple frames of reference are available for considering the talents, personalities and careers that are allowed to emerge, as the book progresses.

This means that when you reach the chapters on Edwin Lutyens, Vincent Harris, Giles Gilbert Scott and C. H. James, these function as studies of how Neo-Georgian functioned as many types of halfway house, not as showcases for the better-known figures of a movement – if indeed it was one. The contributors consistently manage to make good use of the inevitable interest of certain architects as a way to construct wider histories. Nick Chapple's essay on C.H. James is particularly fascinating. James's interest in small-scale housing opens up the way a SPAB-affiliated architect who did not entirely reject Arts and Crafts thinking found a way to

a meaningful pursuit of Neo-Georgian in relation to vernacular, suburban and working-class housing. James also co-designed Norwich City Hall, 1932-8, one of the most successful public buildings in the entire period, showing a strong Scandinavian influence and representational flair in how it celebrates civic function. It shows how ‘scaling up’ could be managed without grandiosity, in the right hands, and how the input of sculptors and craftsmen could also carry conviction, as it so often doesn’t in Neo-Georgian work. Scaling up, good and bad, is a sub-theme of the book, from Lutyens’s role in finessing multi-storey flats on Park Lane to Harris’s Bristol City Hall: a stern, imperious contrast to Norwich. The account of Harris’s earlier work on tramway architecture and electricity substations in plain brick and stone dressings shows more strongly his originality in finding dignity for new urban forms.

The discussions of the Georgian in modern movement circles and in the pages of the *Architectural Review* are considered in Elizabeth Darling’s essay, which returns the book to the ‘correct’, established line of travel, but without simply reinstating it, in that Elizabeth Denby is rightly put into the history now. Denby’s defence of terraced housing on the Regency model, modernised as the ‘All-Europe House’ of 1939, was a way to refurbish and renovate ideas of social order, not repeat them. Darling’s essay is relatively on its own in its consideration of this territory, but her contribution feels necessary. William Whyte’s thoughtful essay on Neo-Georgian’s role as the ‘other’ style of university architecture shows the way it differentiated itself from Gothic Revival at one end of the period, for a while functioned as a viable form of modern, and then was expected to set itself against modern at the other end of the period, post 1945: but that it rarely seemed wholly present as a firmly convinced positive choice in itself. Whyte’s reasoning about the flexibility with which the style signified gets at a central difficulty of accounting for its wide adoption and its confusing and sometimes

conflicted historical legacies and meanings, whether these are municipal housing schemes, military colleges or high street banks that now appear, on their prominent corner sites, as charming relics of a visible economy and community. There are essays here on Neo-Georgian in New Zealand and about ‘the messiness of American historical memory’ in relation to how colonial Georgian signified in the first place, before it reached the problem of being conserved and revived. Alongside these serious questions, there is some good research about Neo-Georgian interiors and the distant frivolity of the 1920s. The style that only reticently displays its skills and convictions, only now, rather belatedly, starts also to show its historical complexities.

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