

A files

Afiles

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Half a century after the tower block's reign as the preferred solution for high-density housing, the English terrace and the modern movement stand in opposite architectural and political corners. A recent episode saw these strands pitched against each other as Tory planning minister Nick Bowles made a rare foray into questions of beauty and ugliness in our national housing stock. Addressing his thinktank Policy Exchange with the launch of a new campaign, Create Streets, in January 2013, he argued that it

was time to replace the dilapidated towers of our city skylines with low-rise residential development. The same collapse of modernist ambition, and the same recourse to cliché, is invoked by the opening sentence of Alain de Botton's celebrated *The Architecture of Happiness* (2006), which makes 'A terraced house on a tree-lined street' England's definitive signifier of home, over and above any more recent architectural silhouette. Architectural historians, too, have consistently cast the terrace and the tower block as antithetical typologies. Stefan Muthesius, for instance, introduces his survey of *The English Terraced House* (1982) by remembering 'the period, roughly from the 1940s to the early 1970s, when some architects condemned the suburban row house and advocated other types of dwellings, like high-rise flats'. Typical of architecture's binary language of self-definition, if the terrace is Englishness, horizontality and streets, then modernism is international, vertical and, in Le Corbusier's vision, 2,700 people sharing one front door.

Muthesius's timeline ends precisely where the prehistory of the modern movement begins – in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the reign of the terrace as England's housing type of choice was superseded by the 'domestic revival' of the arts and crafts. Trace back to this moment through two generations of the Muthesius family tree and you find Stefan's great-uncle, Hermann, a well-connected architect and scholar who in 1896 was appointed cultural and technical *attaché* to the German Embassy in London. Settling in Hammersmith with his wife, he became fascinated by the idiosyncratic theories of house building practised by the followers of William Morris such as Philip Webb or Richard Norman Shaw. In contrast to the European civic ideals espoused by terraced streets – as later documented by Stefan's self-consciously hereditary endeavour – these arts and crafts houses were for him English eccentricity incarnate, rejecting ornamentation in favour of a practically minded attitude towards domestic comfort. Hermann conveyed his findings to a grateful and populist audience in Germany, culminating in the three-volume tome *Das Englische Haus* (1904), an architectural and sociological study of the development of the building type that advanced its modesty and utility – what he saw, in essence, as its Englishness – as a riposte to the ostentatious historicism of contemporary German architecture. Hermann continued to promote this agenda in his subsequent role as superintendent of the Prussian Board of Trade for Schools of Arts and Crafts, and by installing fellow-believers in influential teaching positions he was instrumental in the chain of events gathering pace in German art and design schools that led to the formation of the Bauhaus in 1919.

It was this narrative of cause-and-effect that was so famously expanded by Nikolaus Pevsner in *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936). As is the case with both Muthesiuses, Pevsner's intellectual

The Curious Case of Brian Housden

Tom Brooks

project can be closely mapped to his status as a German-born scholar working in England, though under significantly less convivial circumstances. Forced by the rise of Nazism to look for work outside his home country, the young academic, who was of Jewish origin, typified the story of a growing number of continental *émigrés* who found themselves in England in the mid-1930s. Hampstead in North London became a particular focal point for this influx of cultural refugees, appealing both as a rural retreat outside the city proper and as an existing centre of artistic production. The key figures in the English avant-garde – Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson, Henry Moore and Herbert Read – had converged on Mall Studios, Tasker Road, around the beginning of the 1930s, and for the remainder of the decade Hampstead played host to a remarkable roll call of *émigré* artists and architects, including Piet Mondrian, Naum Gabo, László Moholy-Nagy, Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and Eric Mendelsohn (Pevsner relocated his young family to a Victorian terraced house on the western fringe of the heath in March 1936, finally gaining a permanent residence permit with the help of the Academic Assistance Council two years later).

While Mall Studios had been purpose-built in 1872, this wave of cosmopolitanism brought some of London's first modern movement buildings to the neighbourhood. One of the earliest, Wells Coates's Lawn Road Flats (1934), was commissioned by Jack and Molly Pritchard as an experiment in collective housing to complement their modern furniture enterprise Isokon. Home, at various times, to Gropius, Breuer and Moholy-Nagy, the impressively modernist structure became a built emblem for Hampstead's new community, especially after the shared kitchen was converted into a club (the Isobar). There were also self-contained private houses, two of which – the Sun House (1935) by Maxwell Fry and 66 Froggnal (1937) by the firm of Amyas Connell, Basil Ward and Colin Lucas – appeared almost next-door to one another close to the Pevsner residence. Like the Lawn Road Flats, these buildings were designed in the international style, with Crittal strip-windows, flat white planes and cruise liner handrails. In a contrasting programme, the Hungarian *émigré* Ernő Goldfinger built a terrace of three houses opposite the heath on Willow Road in 1939. To counter resistance from Hampstead residents, who had finally cottoned on to the outbreak of modern houses in the area, he clad the concrete structure in brick and argued that it had been designed in strict accordance with English standards of Georgian symmetry.

When wartime bombing reduced much of London's terraced housing stock to rubble, Hampstead fared particularly badly due to its proximity to the train line running north from Euston. But this sudden availability of infill plots contributed to a significant strand of English architectural culture in the early 1950s, quite distinct from modern movement buildings of the 1930s, which were typically the result of private commissions for spacious, empty sites (and were usually executed by foreign architects). More specifically, the year 1953 can be pinpointed as being crucial to this culture's defining movement – the development of Reyner Banham's brutalism – on account of three events: the first two being the Smithsons' presentation of the Urban Re-Identification Grille at CIAM IX, which

delineated city planning from the single dwelling upwards and signalled the inauguration of Team X, and their ICA exhibition, 'Parallel of Life and Art', with Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson. The third, most modest event, gave the latent movement its name and agenda. In *Architectural Design* in December 1953 the Smithsons published 'House in Soho', a scheme for their own dwelling in Grenville Place, central London, proposed as one unit within a large section of bombed terrace. The brick, concrete and wood structure was intended to have no internal finishes at all – 'had this been built', the description explained, 'it would have been the first exponent of the "new brutalism" in England'. A month earlier, *House and Garden* had showcased a similar brief with a response by another of brutalism's future protagonists: William Howell's contemporary house for a bomb site, sandwiched into 4m of space between two Georgian facades, charmed an entirely different audience with its 'ephemeral glass' panels framed in 'varnished mahogany', while also allowing 'space for a garage'. Overlapping the realms of architecture and popular culture, the two schemes raised common concerns, placing the unstable notion of the postwar home in direct relation to the dilapidation and destruction of England's historic terraced streets.

While Pevsner had traced the early history of the modern movement back to developments in English housing, during and immediately after the war a number of other architectural historians began to question the international style as the *de facto* model for reconstruction. In 1944, for example, John Gloag – friend of Pevsner, former resident of the Lawn Road Flats, brother-in-law of Jack Pritchard and co-founder of the Modern Architectural Research Group (MARS) – published *The Englishman's Castle*, a study of the English house from Roman Britain to the present day. Like Muthesius, he aimed not only to identify its defining characteristics according to national psychology, but also to apply this discussion to the topical debate of the moment. The preface made Gloag's intentions clear, declaring that the book was 'dedicated to the experts – the officials, the reformers, the architects, the teachers – who make plans for the way their fellow countrymen should live, in the hope that all such highly qualified technicians will remember that the Englishman's House is his Castle.'

Surprisingly, considering Gloag's conspicuous advocacy of modern design in the 1930s, this warning carried with it a stern assessment of modernism's suitability for English buildings. Finely knitting together the national character and climate, in a manner that would be absorbed by Pevsner in 'The Englishness of

English Art' (1955), Gloag pointed out that modernism's 'influence on English house-building in the 1930s' had been erroneously based on 'the extraordinary belief that England is a land of hot and almost continuous sunshine'. In a practical sense, large windows meant poor insulation, flat roofs were prone to leak, and white walls without cornices soon became stained by rain. On another level, however, the windows were an affront to 'the Englishman's mastery of the art of living a private life', the roofs 'deprived houses of useful lofts and box-rooms' and the walls 'were inclined to forget that ornament is an ancient human need'. If interwar modernism in London – and England as a whole – had been the preserve of a few progressive members of the middle class, and this material experience gradually filtered down through society after the war, at the hands of the welfare state, then there was a further mandate for young architects in the 1950s: to better align the teachings of the 1920s and 1930s with a residual Englishness, and to design and build their own houses in the rubble-strewn plots that had been made available throughout the city.

We find the AA in the mid-1950s at the centre of this trend. Having played a pivotal role in importing modernism into the country during the 1930s, the school now saw the need to assess its built legacy, and in 1955 reorganised its own *AA Journal* accordingly. An advisory committee had been formed the previous year, leading to the implementation of a separate editorial board with a salaried editor and two student representatives. One of these was Brian Housden. Born on 26 September 1928, Housden had been brought up at Harrow, where his father was a schoolmaster. With no family connection

to architecture, he began his education in 1950 at the Northern Polytechnic on Holloway Road, but quickly became dismayed by its conservative attitudes. One tantalising connection to modernism came through Goldfinger, who had found a willing supply of cheap labour in the school's undergraduates. Although he never took up the offer of employment, Housden did visit the house at Willow Road, and for a brief period in 1950–51 the two even planned to make a short educational film on the effects of light on architecture – Goldfinger as researcher and narrator, Housden as cameraman and producer.

Instead of moving straight into practice, however, Housden successfully interviewed for a place at the AA in the spring of 1953, and he was enrolled into third year that September. Much has been made of the increased weight of editorial media in the architecture culture of the decade, as demonstrated by the fact that the Smithsons' and Howell's infill schemes were published rather than



Edward Wright,
portrait of Brian Housden, c 1968
Photo Charles Hosea

built. This argument gains further significance within the context of the AA. Its founding charter had, in 1847, specified that the school must produce publications in order to be considered as an association. Today, schools of architecture are increasingly sold through their publicity strategies, and the reformation of the *AA Journal* in 1955 was an important step in this trajectory, by which, rather than being seen as a contradictory project, an editorial career became an integral aspect of architectural maturity. Moving beyond its established role as an institutional bulletin, the *AA Journal* would now publish critical investigations into specific topics. As scribbled in the editorial board's minute book (now held in the AA Archives), its aim was to 'bring to light the architectural and educational controversies always being discussed and argued by the members and students'.

The story of the uproar when the panels from the 'Parallel of Life and Art' exhibition were moved to the school, as told in Banham's seminal 'New Brutalism' article, gives us a sense of the shift in power taking place when Housden arrived. This simmering atmosphere boiled over during a discussion led by the Smithsons, Paolozzi and Henderson on 2 December 1953, with students rejecting the exhibition's 'deliberate flouting of the traditional concepts of photographic beauty, its cult of ugliness and "denying the spiritual in Man"'. Two years later, Peter Smithson took up a teaching position at the AA and Housden became a close associate, attending meetings of the Independent Group and sharing an interest in opening up new interpretations of architectural modernism by looking back at its achievements in the 1920s and 1930s.

The first special edition of the *AA Journal* was published in November 1956. Its subject, as selected and researched by Housden, was the practice of Connell, Ward & Lucas, 1927–39 (Basil Ward also happened to have been appointed chair of the editorial board). Nearly 20 pages were devoted to their work, comprising individual and speculative commissions mostly in the Home Counties, such as New Farm, Surrey (1932) and the High and Over Estate, Amersham (1934), but also in London, including 66 Frognal (1937) and Kent House, a significant earlier block of flats built in Camden Town in 1935. Their uncompromising white walls and plate glass windows were captured by spectacular photographs, especially where the buildings are shown in the landscape. Several of these photographs were taken by Housden himself; he also contributed a table cataloguing their oeuvre, a bibliography and short biography of the three partners. While Lucas was English, Connell and Ward were New Zealanders who had studied architecture together and travelled to London by working on a merchant ship. Despite the colonial ties, there is a lingering sense that these revolutionary buildings of the 1930s had been simply imported into the country. This uncertain relationship between England and modernism was a

recurrent theme of the journal's critical commentary. Housden had approached several leading architectural writers for contributions, securing articles by Peter Smithson, Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Thomas Stevens (while Pevsner declined with thanks). Hitchcock, who had consecrated the international style with an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1932, took the opportunity to position the practice within a wider historical account of 'the English and the international scene', or, as his title put it, 'England and the Outside World'. Similarly, Stevens picked up on Pevsner's identification of English arts and crafts in the development of continental modernism, pointing out that if this native impulse had continued to evolve only in isolation, it was hardly conceivable that the same outcome would have occurred. For Stevens, the work of Connell, Ward & Lucas was yet another 1930s example of the European modern movement in England, 'as opposed to a wholly English scale of values'.

As now reprised by Housden, the self-organisation of Hampstead's prewar artistic community also drew attention to this seeming dichotomy between Englishness and modernism. Through the membership of avant-garde groupings such as Unit One (1933) – an exhibiting group which included Lucas and Wells Coates as the two architects – and Circle (1937) – a survey of constructivist art organised by Ben Nicholson, Naum Gabo and architect Leslie Martin – a complex Venn diagram emerges by which four categories (native, foreign, art, architecture) were distilled into a series of attempts to create a unified and international modern movement. The difficulties that this evoked for English practitioners had been encapsulated in 1932 by Unit One's founder, Paul Nash, when he asked if 'it is possible to "go modern" and still "be British"', and they remained just as pressing for young architects trying to comprehend the role of modern architecture in the postwar world.

A letter by Colin Rowe in the January 1957 issue of the *AA Journal* makes Housden's influence clear. It thanked the editor with 'the most extreme relief to be allowed to recognise that English architecture is not necessarily degraded nor essentially corrupt. The Connell, Ward & Lucas houses are so authentic and so English, and yet rise so far above that provincial quality of "Englishness" lately so much valued, that they still have, after all these years, the invigorating qualities of a manifesto.' Meanwhile, according to the letters on the correspondence page, there was a more pressing matter at hand: the AA Council's recent directive to hold general meetings in formal dress. As much as any architectural debate, the flurry of opposition to this move demonstrates the provincialism and clash of tastes and generations that made up the institution in the 1950s. For one appalled writer, this proposition went far beyond the merely sartorial: its underlying implication was surely the



Brian Housden at his desk at 78 South Hill Park, c 1977
Photo Magda Segal

'return of beaux-arts formalism'. However, as James Gowan recalled in his memoirs of teaching at the school, an individual's predilection to modernism or historicism couldn't always be determined by their fashion sense.

In his clothes as much as in everything else, Housden seems to have been a particular anomaly. Rather than participate in his peers' increasing informality, he dressed, as Gowan noted, 'in a near military fashion and was quietly admired for his bravery'. Similarly, Kenneth Frampton remembers Housden the student editor as 'avuncular, pipe-smoking, whimsical... an enigma'. The two were near exact AA contemporaries and shared an unorthodox interest in interwar modernism that matched Housden's apparently eccentric persona. This rarefied trend in the student body must also be considered in its relationship to the generation who immediately preceded them. Recent scholarship has given canonical status to Stirling and Gowan and the Smithsons, hailing them as the two most important practices to have come out of England in the mid-1950s. Both were a presence at the school at this time – Gowan and Peter Smithson as teachers – and both have been identified as renewing an interest in the radical modernism of the 1920s and 1930s. With this in mind, the publication of Housden's research on Connell, Ward & Lucas assumes an increasingly important position in the architecture culture of the period. The AA's end-of-term festivities in December 1957 included a celebratory dinner at which the speakers were the Oxford professor Bernard Ashmole, Basil Ward and Peter Smithson. Though Smithson's transcript doesn't survive, his article for the *AA Journal*, originally rejected by the other members of the editorial board, was published at Housden's insistence in the following issue. It recalls how the partnership had been one of the most important influences on determining his direction as a student. 'On consideration', Smithson writes, 'I still think I was right, and that Connell, Ward & Lucas were the nearest we had in England to first-generation modern architects.' The sense of distance from this 'Heroic Period of Modern Architecture' on the continent would become an increasing preoccupation for the Smithsons, culminating in their own editorial project for *Architectural Design* in December 1965.

Although Housden, in this way, can be seen to have connected two previously disparate strains of English modernism, there was a more obvious bridge between the heroic period of the prewar years and the design mandate at the AA in the 1950s. The architect Arthur Korn had played a part in the celebrated activities of 1920s Berlin, including *The Ring* with Mies van der Rohe, Gropius and Mendelsohn; like them, he was forced to leave Germany when Hitler came to power. Settling in London in 1937, he collaborated first with F R S Yorke – author that year of *The Modern House in England*, which Housden would purchase from Foyle's on Charing Cross Road in January 1950 – and then with Maxwell Fry, before teaching at Oxford and being appointed to the AA in 1945. For the next two decades, Korn was instrumental in setting the revolutionary tone of the school (arguably more so than the famous avant-garde mobilisations of Cedric Price, Archigram and Alvin Boyarsky in the 1960s and 1970s). He was nominated to represent the teaching staff on the *AA Journal* board, and provided the introduction and captions for the Connell, Ward & Lucas issue. Shortly afterwards, Housden proposed that Korn himself should be the subject of the next special number. Published in December 1957, this took on a familiar form, with autobiographical notes, pages of plans and

photographs, and an appendix listing his buildings and published writing. Most interesting is the discussion set out by Housden in his introduction to the issue, in which he argued that while some opinions and buildings of the interwar period had been subsumed successfully into mainstream discourse, others had been forgotten, sidetracked by the ruthless sweep of certain ideas into the path of architectural progress. 'The nostalgia felt in Britain today for the 20s needs some explanation', he began. 'Why should so many architects feel this considerable interest in the buildings either proposed or built at this time? Are the 20s taking the place of antiquity as a store of useful ideas to be exploited?'

Although the Smithsons' survey in *Architectural Design* was to treat this period in isolation, as an illustrated timeline of solely continental developments, Peter Smithson's note on Connell, Ward & Lucas had recalled that the work of Le Corbusier and Gropius 'did not hit me as hard as did the *Modern House in England* and the back copies of the *Review*'. As a student, too, Housden was fascinated by this documentary record of continental modernism's dissemination into an English cultural context in the 1930s. Leaving the AA sometime in 1957 (the question of whether or not he actually graduated remains unclear), he continued to pursue his editorial project for the *AA Journal*, turning after Korn to an examination of Phillip Morton Shand, who contrastingly had been born into a quintessentially upper-middle-class English family. Housden's interest hung on the relationship between this privileged establishment background and Shand's radical activities in pursuing modern architecture in the 1920s and 1930s. While the postwar generation of architects has been cast as 'red-brick', in tandem with their services for the welfare state – and in opposition to the dominance of old-boy networks, of the kind that had certainly been furthered by organisations like the AA – Housden's biography of Shand plots a new connection between the 'dotty tendencies' of high Englishness and the core values of the modern movement. For him, this eccentricity redeemed the 'normally Philistine English': Shand's father followed Ruskin's teachings to the letter; his uncle was an 'Old Harrovian' doctor (and thus probably known to Housden's family) who played tennis at the expense of his patients every Sunday.

Published in January 1959, this special issue of the *AA Journal* was structured around the reproduction of several of Shand's articles for the English architectural press in the early 1930s. Strangely, Shand's centrality in the MARS circle – he had been both co-founder and progenitor, after correspondence with Sigfried Gideon – alongside figures such as Wells Coates, Maxwell Fry, John Gloag and Jack Pritchard (with whom he helped arrange Gropius's emigration) is absent from Housden's account. Despite this lacuna, the merit in presenting Shand's articles together for a contemporary audience lay in their alignment of the European modern movement and English sensibilities. As Housden put it, these texts 'contain some of the best *English* English on the subject ... in the way the architect demonstrates how life should be led by enclosing with his structure space for various activities'. Furthermore, it was a happy coincidence that Shand's writing on architecture had actually first appeared in the *AA Journal* – a July 1924 review of the Paris International Exhibition that saw the construction of Le Corbusier's canonical L'Esprit Nouveau pavilion.

The Shand issue of January 1959 featured several of his technical pieces – on concrete, engineering and iron and steel – alongside a group of historical and critical essays. As the bibliography

compiled by Housden reveals, four of these are short excerpts from a larger, seven-part series, 'Scenario for a Human Drama', first published in *The Architectural Review* between July 1934 and March 1935, and now given new titles and presented in chronological order as isolated explorations of a particular topic: 'Poetry and the Wall', 'C.R. Mackintosh', 'Van de Velde, Hoffmann, Loos and Wagner' and 'The Machine: Peter Behrens'. This treatment, a response to the limited print space of the journal, erases all trace of Shand's original narrative purpose, which had been to work backwards, grounding the international modern movement against centuries of historical development in English house building.

Since Muthesius, it had been widely understood that England's contribution to modernism lay in a comfortable yet simple domesticity, but Shand's was a rare perspective in a historiography dominated by foreign voices. In one passage reproduced by Housden he draws on a remarkably diverse range of English antecedents, notably in Georgian and Regency townhouses – 'admirably planned for the needs of the life of that age', and with an emphasis on glazing that was held back only by reliance on the load-bearing wall. Since, by the early twentieth century, that obstacle had been voided by technical developments, the scarcity of modern houses in England was defined as a moral, not a material, matter. Shand's discussion thus divided itself into 'Poetry and the Wall', where the former represented the real barrier to progress, 'the whole population aspiring to be tenants of metaphorical castles'. For the Englishman, the perennial islander, 'the prospect of a new manner of life is almost as alarming in its implications of the unknown as the prospect of an existence after death unsimplified by marriage lines, pass-books, income-tax returns, season tickets and dog-licences'.

Housden's own life, meanwhile, had advanced considerably. Having married in 1953, at the beginning of his AA career, he now began the subsidiary course of starting a family and looking for a plot on which to build a house. This was a common pursuit for architects graduating in the mid-1950s, but few had the financial security not to seek employment at the same time. A decade earlier, William Howell, his wife Gillian and friends Stanley and Isabel Amis had built a row of six townhouses for their families and four clients on a bomb plot in South Hill Park overlooking the heath. This repeated the individual module proposed in the earlier *House and Garden* design across several facades. John Killick, who would go into partnership with Howell, Amis and John Partridge in 1959, purchased

the remaining land to the west of the South Hill Park terrace with the intention of adding his own house. He, too, taught at the AA, and had been appointed editor of the *AA Journal* in February 1957. When he heard Housden was having difficulty obtaining a plot, the two of them came to an agreement and it changed hands once more.

Housden and his wife Margaret had considered several other options by this point, including three derelict cottages opposite St Paul's on the South Bank, two bomb sites in the Charlotte Street area – near the Smithsons' prospective location for Soho House – and, in Hampstead, one at 40 Frognal, just north of the houses by Maxwell Fry and Connell, Ward & Lucas, and two other sites in South Hill Park. After securing the plot from Killick, Housden successfully submitted his first plans and elevations for No 78, South Hill Park in 1958. The design at this stage was reinforced concrete with brick infill, capped by an offset double mono-pitch roof and a somewhat peculiar, oversized chimney (there was also a party wall with the generic 1950s infill on the left, an institution of a particularly English bureaucracy sidestepped by the independent structural frame of the built scheme).

Around this time, a shift also becomes apparent in Housden's joint editorial-architectural project. Critically, his interests moved towards a broader, more fluid and less strictly historical understanding of modernism, in line with a wider tendency towards its reassessment taking place at the AA in the late-1950s. This involved questioning the received, white-walled functionalism of the international style, as imported into England by a number of private houses in the 1930s, and now revived on a grand scale for housing the postwar state, as in Leslie Martin's South London Loughborough Estate (1955). Instead, Housden joined

figures such as the Smithsons and Stirling and Gowan in looking back to the early impulses of the European avant-garde. 'What, then, makes this generation different from their forerunners and closer also to the continental architects of the 30s?', Korn asked in 1959. 'It is their attitude to the unlimited possibilities that surround us, all of which are welcomed as the basis for a new interpretation of materials, functions, expressions and symbols'.

This generation also saw an increase in travel throughout Europe as national infrastructures and economies recovered after the war. English architects were now able to track down and visit the early works of celebrated modern masters – most of all, Le Corbusier – that they had only ever known through books (although, as John Winter recalled in an interview in *AA Files* 63, Le Corbusier's

own office was sometimes unsure as to the exact whereabouts, or even survival, of landmark buildings like the Villa Savoye). In an article for *The Architectural Review* in September 1955 Stirling took Le Corbusier as a lens through which to read the wider shifts in modern architecture that had taken place since the 1920s and 1930s. Based on site visits recorded in his 'Black Notebook' (recently republished by Mark Crinson), it compares two private houses in Paris – the high international style of the Villa Stein (1928) and the grungy vernacularism of the Maisons Jaoul (1956), then under construction. Similarly, on an AA members' trip to Berlin in the summer of 1957, Housden visited two housing schemes: Bruno Taut's Horseshoe Development (1925), encapsulating all the heroism of the 1920s, and Le Corbusier's Unité (1957), again at that point still being built. In typical AA fashion, his write-up for the *AA Journal* that September makes a note of the various dinner addresses and welcome speeches that greeted the party, which included Maxwell Fry, Jane Drew, Theo Crosby and Ove Arup. A keen and precise photographer, Housden was also to undertake many more pilgrimages after graduating, capturing numerous slides on medium-format film. The resulting images remain almost entirely unpublished but, as with Stirling's project, encompassed both the historical unit of prewar modernism and its most recent incarnations – for example, Jan Duiker's Cineac in Amsterdam (1934) and Le Corbusier's monastery at La Tourette shortly before its completion (1960).

This widespread duality – of documenting and understanding the built monuments of the early modern movement alongside new approaches to material and scale – extended to Housden's private agenda in the design of No 78 South Hill Park. After his first planning application had been approved he visited and photographed two important modernist experiments in domesticity, neither of which was well known in England at the time. One was the Maison de Verre in Paris (1932) by Pierre Chareau and Bernard Bijvoet, where he interviewed Annie Dalsace, the client and occupant. The other was Gerrit Rietveld's Schröder House in Utrecht (1924), where he and Margaret were invited to lunch with Truus Schrodër and Rietveld, who had lived there since the death of his first wife in 1958. Not only did Housden secure a substantial collection of furniture, including a Red and Blue Chair, made for them at cost by Rietveld's cabinetmaker Gerard van den Groenekan, but, as the story goes, he was asked to send a copy of his design for No 78. He never summoned the courage to do so, but, returning to London both embarrassed and enlightened, he revised the plans completely.

On the way home, the Housdens had met Aldo van Eyck on the site of his Orphanage in Amsterdam (1960), then, seemingly like every other key contemporary building in Europe, also

still under construction. If, in the evolution of his house design, Housden's journey from Holland to England can be read historically and stylistically as well as geographically, then this must be seen as a crucial mid-point. Since the early 1950s, Housden had been aware of the Smithsons' Team X collaboration with several Dutch architects, including van Eyck (and his enthusiasm for an AA talk by Jaap Bakema had been noted at the first editorial board meeting in 1955), but it was only now, when addressing the question of how best to build a house for his family, that their importance became integral to his own architectural ambitions – and to his ongoing editorial project.

In December 1960 Housden edited a special issue of the *AA Journal* on the Dutch firm of 'M Brinkman, JA Brinkman, LC van der Vlugt, JH van der Broek, JB Bakema'. Consisting of an ambitious chronology spanning the rise and fall of the international style, it included photographs, plans, critical comment and a list of works, all collated and written by Housden and accompanied by an impressive, if enigmatic, range of literary and architectural quotations, from Morton Shand to William Blake. Despite the fantastic stylistic change that their buildings encompass, the firm's defining contribution was depicted not in terms of altering the way architecture looks, but in rethinking what it means. Housden introduced the piece by questioning the historiography of modern architecture, as established by Pevsner in the art historical tradition, 'that development in western Europe has consisted of a logical series of changes, each adjustment leading on from the next, as if the men concerned were looking over each other's shoulder'. Instead, we read a crisis of the formal values on which modernism was inaugurated and subsequently documented. 'Our confusion becomes daily more acute', he continued. 'We now have no structural problems since anything can be built... And yet our

buildings resemble far too often jumbles of boxes... That buildings might have a meaning over and above a formal meaning is undeniably true and our effectiveness as architects today will I believe be measured by our ability to discern and make others aware of meaning through buildings.'

Alternating back to his own home, after several further years of evolution, the revised design for No 78 South Hill Park was granted follow-up planning permission in 1962 and 1963. Construction finally began that October. The influence of the Schröder House and the Maison de Verre is immediately apparent, especially in the exterior – Chareau in the glass lenses, Crittal windows and orange frames, Rietveld in the de Stijl handling of projecting form. There is also a close relationship between these radical models of the 1920s and 1930s and the emergent, postwar dialogue of English brutalism and Dutch structuralism that Housden was exploring



Brian and Margaret Housden's daughter Jane, on the rear terrace of 78 South Hill Park, c 1967

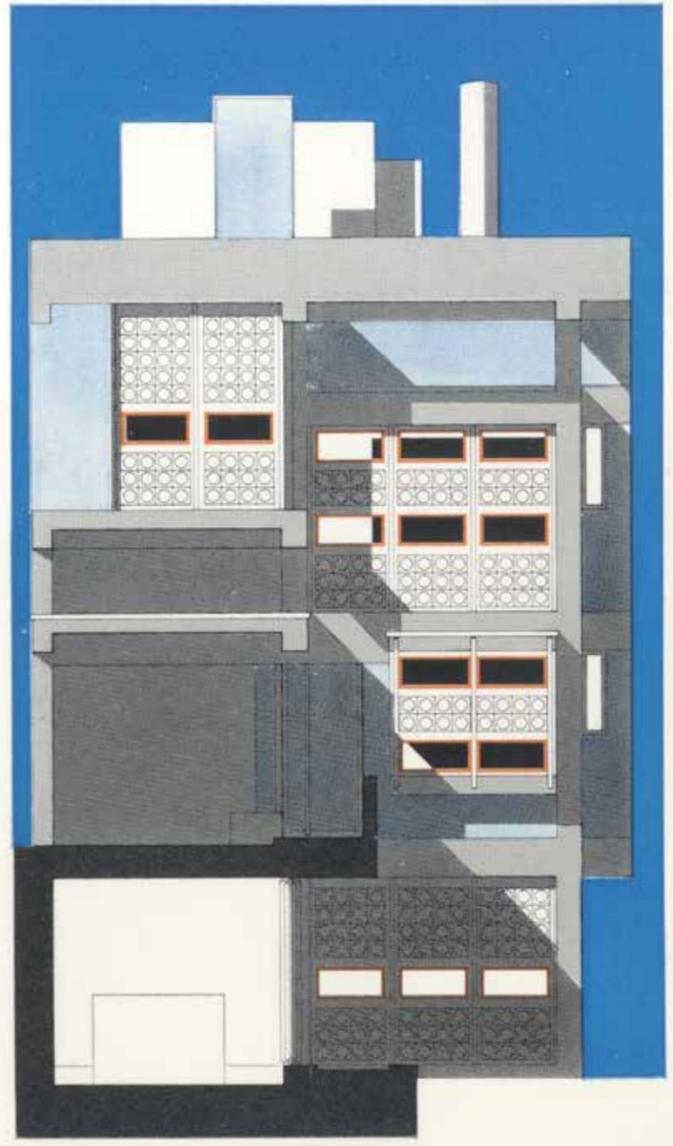
– that they had only ever known through books (although, as John Winter recalled in an interview in *AA Files* 63, Le Corbusier's



Brian Housden, 'To Aldo van Eyck', from *Architects' Year Book* 10, 1962

through his new editorial agenda. The previous year, in 1962, he had published photographs and plans of van Eyck's completed Orphanage in the *Architects' Yearbook 10*, where he was employed for a short time as technical editor. It was a role to which he brought a remarkable, if unwarranted, scholarly depth. The volume's technical supplement, on 'Building Boards', was introduced with reference to a novel by Anatole France; and the Orphanage was prefaced by a poem of his own: 'to Aldo van Eyck, for recognising that buildings are symbols, for trying to satisfy the deep unconscious needs of those who shelter in buildings, for standing at the centre looking outwards...'

While emblematic of widespread postwar attitudes concerning the revision of material, history and meaning, the finally completed No 78 goes well beyond the mainstay of English architecture, especially in the radically anti-rational setting out of its plan. Citing van Eyck in the *Architects' Yearbook*, Housden had aligned himself with a conscious transformation of first-generation modernism, by which, 'in the image of man', the abstract nouns of Giedeon's 'space' and 'time' become instead 'place' and 'occasion'. This is apparent as soon as one reaches the front door, a symbolic threshold situated beneath the cantilevered carport. Like all of the switches in the house, the doorbell is industrial issue, wired theatrically outwards from the frame; the handle-bar door pull contains a vertical inscription in Ancient Greek and the door gives way to a change of pattern in the mosaic floor tiles. Inside, an enclosed stairway leads up to three bedrooms, occupying one and a half floors, while an open, freestanding flight of steps drops down into the single lower-ground-floor living area. This lower staircase occupies the symbolic centre of the house, finishing in a large square step at the bottom from which all the inner workings of the house are visible, both mechanically – in the orange boiler tank dispatching copper pipes to the bedrooms above – and socially – in the surrounding kitchen, dining and living areas. These spaces are demarcated by changes of floor level and a series of three pink hospital curtains on suspended rails. The kitchen occupies a white-tiled module at the front of the plan, cut into the facade, which drops beneath street level,



Brian Housden, elevation of 78 South Hill Park, c 1962

with utilities composed in a central unit. Access to the garden is through French doors to the rear – the only large clear section of glazing amidst the distinctive Maison de Verre-esque grid of smaller panes of glass, which serves as a dramatic contrast to the conventional plate-glass of the Howell and Amis terrace next door.

Beyond referencing the Maison de Verre as an aesthetic precedent, the lenses offer a balance of light and privacy to internal activities, as well as contributing to Housden's own carefully considered symbolic programme. The circular indentation in the centre of each lens is echoed by large embossed rings in the shuttered concrete at significant points throughout the house: at the end wall of the carport, and on the ceilings above Housden's desk, the master bedroom and the dining table (which is, in itself, a circle within a circle). Housden attributes this motif to the mandalas of eastern mythology, which are often counterposed to a square, as in the angular frame of the house and the complex, patterned mosaics that run throughout the interior and exterior. Along these lines, the door-handle quotation, from the Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, announces a world of diversity and contradiction.

And yet, for all the incredible eclecticism of these sources, reinforced by the intellectual weight of the continental modernist tradition, No 78 remains underwritten by an inescapable Englishness. In *The Englishman's Castle*, John Gloag had reminded his readers what functionalism had been so prone to forget, namely 'that ornament is an ancient human need and that an Englishman likes privacy and comfort'. In Gloag's reactionary language, the terms of which remain in common parlance today, architects 'have sometimes forgotten that they are architects and have become social reformers, intent on telling their fellow-countrymen how they should live, instead of providing them with the best background for living in their own way'.

If the project to house the welfare state was, in its technocratic, top-down approach, condemned to fail its inhabitants in a fundamental discrepancy between architecture and life – ribbed concrete, net curtains – then, despite certain structural and aesthetic similarities, No 78 represents a different strand of modernism

entirely. Like other self-designed dwellings by architects, however, it is just as legible in, and inseparable from, its status as a product of English class politics and everyday domesticity. There is a certain irony in the fact that Housden's decidedly radical insert into the Victorian terrace has helped precipitate a remarkable process of gentrification undergone by Hampstead in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in South Hill Park itself, as the bohemian, avant-garde village of the 1930s modernist diaspora gradually became an aspirational middle-class residential area. This has brought its own, small-minded Englishness to bear on local attitudes towards the house, whose aggressive street manner sits uncomfortably with the national nostalgia for the Victorian terrace (and faux-Victorian, as in the block diagonally opposite, which dates to 1999) and the acceptably mild modernism of the surrounding infill.

The Housdens and their three young daughters moved into the uncompleted structure in the winter of 1964. There were still wooden battens fixed around the concrete frame with polythene covering the window-openings, while Housden fought with the district surveyor for permission to install the lenses. In a remarkable display of near-wartime resourcefulness, Margaret made do with a standpipe and portable Baby Belling cooker for a kitchen. She recalled how they didn't have a bath either, until her mother came to stay and gave them £1,000 to install one. With money for the construction beginning to dry up, Housden sourced one for less than £20 and kept the change. In fact, since structural completion in 1965, No 78 has been continually added to as funds have allowed. For the most part, this has been in accordance with Housden's revised design, which was three times more expensive than the one initially submitted for planning. With the internal walls left as exposed concrete or rendered white, decorative embellishment has been provided by furniture, fixtures and fittings. Much of this – the downstairs seating area, the beds and en-suite units in the bedrooms – is built-in, a concept Housden attributes to Adolf Loos (via van Eyck), creating an undulating and surprising interior landscape. Colour is largely provided by fabric, as in the blinds, which are individually coded to each bedroom, and the pink curtains and purple upholstery in the living area. The kitchen table, of Housden's own design, is a central element, both visually and iconographically: two semicircular slabs of polished Irish slate on a pair of interlinked teak rectangles. There is also the substantial, 14-piece collection of Rietveld furniture, which he assembled through several trips to van de Groenekan's workshop, carrying each piece back on the roofrack of his Morris Minor. Wooden bookcases and wardrobes, both stock and bespoke, are bracketed onto walls, extending the fragmented spaces of the de Stijl furniture. This is especially dramatic on the double-height wall besides the central staircase, which also serves as a Salon-style hang of the Housdens' collection of paintings. Several of these, including a portrait of Housden, are by the graphic artist Edward Wright, a key member of the Independent Group circle whom he had met at the AA in the 1950s. It was also Wright who developed the typographic technique used for the cast concrete, or 'glyptic', house number at the entrance to the forecourt of No 78. Wright had been responsible for a redesign of the *AA Journal* in June 1961, and his work formed the subject of Housden's final editorial contribution in the July–August 1963 issue. By this time, in a reflection of the new identity of the school in the 1960s, the board had shifted to include figures such as Alan Colquhoun, Cedric Price and John Voelcker.

'The English sin has always been eccentricity', Herbert Read wrote in 1936, 'by which I do not mean a lack of conformity, but simply a lack of social coherence'. In Housden's case, perhaps it was both. No 78 South Hill Park was to be his only complete building and, stylistically, nothing else came even close: residential extensions; a holiday home in Greece for a family friend; a brief spell working in Max Fordham's office in the 1970s. He inhabited his castle as a gentlemanly connoisseur of the modern movement, while children grew up, grandchildren came to stay, and architecture turned its back on the radical stirrings of the early and mid-century. And yet, in this retreat from the establishment, there is an admirable quality of refusing to play their game; of subverting the increasingly Americanised ideal of architectural success based on public relations and middle management.

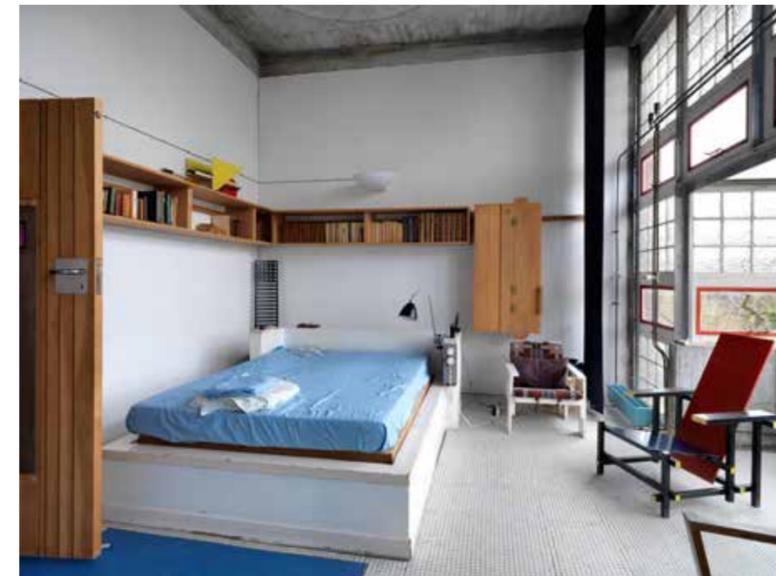
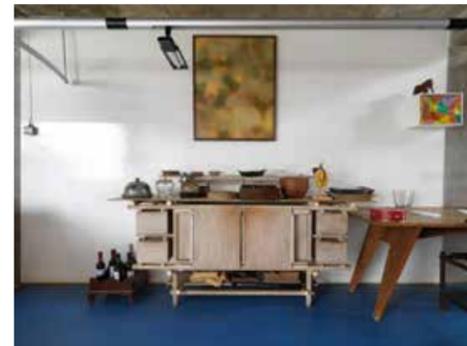
Housden's editorial legacy at the AA in the 1950s, amid the seminal architects and critics of the ensuing decades, is considerable; like them, his first step after graduating was to find an empty site on which to build his house. Beyond that, two unsuccessful competition entries hint at what might have been. The first was for Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral, won by Frederick Gibberd in 1961, the second for Cardiff Bay Opera House, won by Zaha Hadid in 1994 (but never built). While the winning schemes present a succinct demonstration of the course taken by English architecture in the second half of the twentieth century, very little had changed in Housden's designs. The story is both tragic and magnificent – a wholly English combination of wasted potential and sheer audacity in refusing to admit defeat. In 1995 Housden finally installed industrial steel black gates at the entrance to the forecourt of No 78, in accordance with his design and the planning permissions. Public outrage immediately ensued, triggering a four-year dispute with the borough council that ended in a sizeable fine and a court order for their removal.

By this time, Goldfinger's own house at Willow Road, just across the pond at the rear of No 78, had been absorbed into the National Trust's cherished property portfolio. From the construction of their respective family homes beside Hampstead Heath, Goldfinger had gone on to play a central role in the postwar reconstruction of London while, in an absurd display of Englishness, Housden turned the triumphant narrative of modernism on its head. He recalls the last time he saw Goldfinger, in the car park between their houses during the Winter of Discontent, 1978–79. With the bin men on strike, and faith in the public sector and welfare-state stimuli of the modernist project collapsing, the two architects met in the snow. 'I appeared with my rubbish in a wheel barrow and there was Ernö chucking his rubbish into the compound. It was a grey winter afternoon. The heath was deserted except for ourselves. Ernö was laughing.'

The concluding section of this essay is indebted to all four existing studies of No 78 South Hill Park: Paul Overy's technical and scholarly examination in *Twentieth Century Architecture 4: Postwar Houses* (London: Twentieth Century Society, 2000), Elaine Harwood's advice report for English Heritage (unpublished, 2001) and articles by Tom Dyckhoff (*The Guardian*, 19 October 2001) and Edwin Heathcote (*Wallpaper*, May 2011). For archival information relating to Housden's time at the AA, both as student and editor, I am grateful to Edward Bottoms at the AA Archives. For all other information regarding the house and Housden's career as a whole, and for the use of archival images, I remain thankful to the kindness and generosity of Brian Housden, his wife Margaret and their daughter Tess. Many thanks also to Lisa Tickner, tutor of my master's degree at the Courtauld Institute, and of the thesis out of which this essay emerged.



78 South Hill Park
Photographs by
Charles Hosea, 2013





Contributors

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Mathew Aitchison is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Queensland's ATCH research centre and an architect and teacher. He is editor of *Visual Planning and the Picturesque* (2010), the first publication of Nikolaus Pevsner's treatise on Townscape, and is currently working towards a retrospective monograph on the movement. His recent research focuses on the architecture of industry, in particular the building and planning related to Australia's mining industry and the design and construction of prefabricated housing.

Pedro Ignacio Alonso directs the MARQ masters programme in architecture at the Catholic University in Santiago, Chile, and has also taught at the AA since 2005, currently as a visiting tutor in the History and Critical Thinking MA. He is the author of *Deserta: Ecology and Industry in the Atacama Desert* (2012), and recently exhibited his work in 'Cold War Cool Digital' (together with Hugo Palmarola) at the Pratt Institute in New York (2013) and 'Deserta' at the Chilean Pavilion at the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale. A book on the research he and Palmarola have been conducting on prefabricated concrete housing systems exported into Chile in the 1970s from Soviet Russia will be published by the AA in 2014.

Hilla Becher is a photographer who was born in Potsdam in 1934. After six war years that saw her repeatedly evacuated across northeast Germany, in 1954 she managed to leave the East for Hamburg before moving again to Düsseldorf in 1957 to work in an advertising agency. There she met Bernd Becher (1931–2007) whom she married in 1961. Known collectively as 'The Bechers', the two of them proceeded to engage in a continuing project to photograph a whole series of industrial buildings. The resulting images have been exhibited all over the world and published in numerous titles by Schirmer/Mosel.

Tom Brooks is an architectural writer and historian. He studied the history of art at the University of Bristol and then the Courtauld Institute, where he specialised in twentieth-century British architecture, completing his master's thesis on Brian Housden's house at 78 South Hill Park. He currently works in the building conservation team at Alan Baxter & Associates.

HT Cadbury-Brown (1913–2009) was educated at the AA, where he later taught, in addition to academic positions at the Royal College of Art and Harvard University, and served as AA president, 1959–60. He worked with Ernő Goldfinger for a number of years and was also closely involved with the Modern Architecture Research Group (MARS). He is perhaps best known for the Turntable Cafe at the 1951 Festival of Britain and the RCA building on Kensington Gore with Hugh Casson and Robert Goodden, 1962–73.

Mark Campbell teaches history and design at the AA, where he also directs the 'Paradise Lost' research cluster. He will shortly defend his PhD dissertation on Geoffrey Scott's *Architecture of Humanism* at Princeton University. In addition to the AA, he has previously taught at the Cooper Union, Princeton University and Auckland University, and served as the managing editor of *Grey Room* and the Cooper Union Archive.

Ryan Dillon is an architect and currently teaches at the AA as the programme coordinator for the DRL and as a history and theory tutor in the undergraduate school. He studied at Syracuse University and the AA, and previously worked for Safdie Architects on projects such as the Peabody Essex Museum and the Khalsa Heritage Centre.

William Firebrace teaches design and theory at the University of Westminster, specialising in film and architecture. He is the author of *Marseille Mix* (2010), the first part of a planned trilogy of books published by the AA. The second part, *Memo for Nemo*, examines undersea inhabitation, and the final part, *Hop Baltic*, explores the architecture and culture of a number of Baltic cities. His extended essay here on the London Planetarium will also reappear as part of a forthcoming AA series of books on specific, unheralded buildings.

Adrian Forty is professor of architectural history at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. He is president of the European Architectural History Network and the author, most recently, of *Concrete and Culture: A Material History* (2012).

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Joshua Mardell is an architectural historian, and recently completed his MPhil at Cambridge on the 'multiple modernisms' of certain key AA graduates practising in the immediate postwar period. His present research is concerned with the role played by antiquaries in the formation of neo-medievalism up to 1840. He currently works at the RIBA Drawings Collection cataloguing the papers of architects William Hayward Brakspear (1819–1898) and Rex Hawkesworth (1939–).

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969) was born Maria Michael Ludwig Mies in Aachen, Germany. He began his architectural career in 1908 as apprentice to Peter Behrens, leaving in 1912 to set up his own office. Over the next 25 years he progressively established his pioneering architectural aesthetic, moving from the neo-classicism of his first villas to his European masterpiece, the Villa Tugendhat in Brno in 1930. In 1937 he left Germany for the US, as head of the architecture department of the newly established Illinois Institute of Technology, and through his offices in Chicago went on to enjoy an even more productive American career, with buildings like the Farnsworth House (1946), Seagram Building (1958) and Neue Nationalgalerie (1968). His appearance at the AA in 1959 was on the occasion of his second visit to the UK to receive the RIBA Gold Medal.

Moshe Safdie is an architect, urban planner, educator and author. Born in Haifa, Israel in 1938, he went on to study architecture at McGill University in Montreal, and then moved again in the mid 1970s to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he still lives. Embracing a comprehensive design philosophy, some of his most notable works include Habitat 67 in Montreal, Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, the National Gallery of Canada in Alberta, Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort in Singapore and the United States Institute of Peace headquarters in Washington, DC. He also the author of *Beyond Habitat* (1970), *For Everyone a Garden* (1974), *Form and Purpose* (1982) and *The City After the Automobile* (1998).

Irénée Scalbert is an architectural critic based in London and a member of the AA Files editorial board since 1998. He taught at the AA between 1989 and 2006, has been a visiting design critic at the GSD, Harvard and currently teaches at SAUL in Ireland. In addition to his academic work and frequent guest lectures he has published articles and essays on a wide range of issues. In 2004 he curated an exhibition on Jean Renaudie and he is the author of *A Right to Difference: The Architecture of Jean Renaudie* (2004).

Laurent Stalder is professor of architectural theory at the ETH Zurich. His research focuses on the intersection of the history and theory of architecture with the history of technology. His publications include *Herman Muthesius: Das Landhaus als kulturgeschichtlicher Entwurf* (2008), *Valerio Olgiati* (2008), *Der Schwellanaltas* (2009, with Elke Beyer, Anke Hagemann and Kim Förster), *GOD & CO: François Dallegret Beyond the Bubble* (2011, with Alessandra Ponte and Thomas Weaver) and *Atelier Bow Wow: A Primer* (2013, with Cornelia Escher, Megumi Komura and Meruro Washida).

Helen Thomas studied architecture at Liverpool University and has a PhD in art history and theory from the University of Essex. A specialist in Latin American and post-colonial history, she has been an editor and lecturer at the Victoria & Albert Museum, Phaidon Press, the AA and London Metropolitan University.