**PUGIN: PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN versus REVIVALISM**

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It is often held that the Gothic Revival in England confused architecture with ethics and religious revivalism, that it was a spirited movement which produced original personalities and disappointing buildings, and that these last were either dilute versions of the Picturesque Gothic or lean studies in the revival of a style which could not be revived. It is further believed that the Gothic Revival was based on the propositions that good, religious, Christian societies produce good art, that Christian art—the Gothic—was produced by a good society and was therefore better art than pagan classic and that it should for that reason be revived.

My study of Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin was begun with some such preconceptions in mind, but upon looking more closely at his buildings and those of his contemporaries I found that the architecture and work in the arts of decoration were singularly free from archeological pretensions and in them could be discovered the aesthetic doctrines of the revivalists freely and imaginatively applied, sometimes to the virtual exclusion of direct borrowing from the Gothic. This was not so true of the larger churches, for these the architects were inclined to turn into pompous accumulations of over-studied ornament, precisely because they were preoccupied with religious purpose. In the margins of their work, however, in their smaller churches, in their designs in the decorative arts, the Gothic Revivalists escaped from moral obligations to their mother style. By examining these works at first hand and refusing to accept the Gothic Revival's serious view of itself, one may formulate a new interpretation of the achievement and meaning of the movement.

The theory which I tentatively suggest here is that, under the leadership of A. W. N. Pugin between 1835 and 1852 the prime concern of Gothic Revival was not the revival of Gothic. It was rather the discovery of a definition of art and the establishment of rules, principles of design, which could be used to reform England's impoverished taste in architecture and the arts of decoration. Proof of the theory is finally to be found in the buildings and designs in decorat-
Houses of Parliament. He entered practice for himself in 1837. Between 1840 and 1844 he wrote all his major books, designed his best buildings and set up abiding relationships with the craftsmen and manufacturers who worked from his designs in the decorative arts. After 1844 his practice in architecture declined sharply and he turned his attention to the arts of decoration, to the interior decoration of the Houses of Parliament and to designs for china, tiles, stained glass, bookbindings, rugs, wallpapers, furniture, metal work for ecclesiastical and domestic purposes, and textiles.

It is, perhaps, as well to let Pugin introduce himself so that the reader may see the world through his lancet-shaped spectacles. In 1842 he visited Fleetwood which he described in these terms in a letter to the Earl of Shrewsbury.

I think Fleetwood is the most detestable place I ever was in. It is only four years old and it is half ruin already. Everybody sold up and bankrupt. It is the abomination of desolation, a Modern Greek Town. It is quite insupportable. I am sitting in a Grecian coffee room in the Grecian hotel with a Grecian Mahogany table close to a Grecian marble chimney piece, surmounted by a Grecian scroll pier glass and to increase my horror the waiter has brought in breakfast on a Grecian sort of tray with a pat of butter stamped with the infernal Greek scroll. Not a pointed arch within miles. Everything new and everything beastly.

Pugin’s theories, as presented in his books, are composed of two parts, the purely aesthetic and the ethical and religious. He made a great point of his identification of Gothic excellence with Catholic supremacy, but he began his structure of theory with his aesthetic principles and to them he returned in the last years of his life. They are surprising when separated from his religious argument.

There should be no features about a building which are not necessary for convenience, construction or propriety.

All ornament should consist of enrichment of the essential construction of the building.

The smallest detail should have a meaning or serve a purpose.

The natural properties of the various materials should be turned to their full account . . . the architect should use their mechanism as a vehicle for his art.

The external and internal appearance of an edifice should be illustrative of and in accordance with the purpose for which it is destined.

Articles of utility should not be disguised but should be beautified in such a way that the real purpose for which the object is made is emphasized.

It is only when mechanical invention intrudes on the confines of art and tends to subvert the principles which it should advance that it becomes objectionable. We do not want to arrest the course of inventions but to confine these inventions to their legitimate uses and to prevent their substitution for nobler arts.

From a study of his letters, journals, drawings and buildings I have concluded that Pugin developed his principles in the following way: He was extraordinarily gifted visually and already in his youth the ugliness of sham architecture, fallacious design in the decorative arts appalled him. He found the Gothic was not sham. Reasoning from this discovery he studied mediaeval art to uncover where its beauty lay. The process of his reasoning can be found described in his argument in The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture, and so can the rules which he felt should govern design if his analysis of Gothic was indeed correct. It should be noted in passing that Pugin was the son of a Frenchman, that he was bilingual, and that his father, A. C. Pugin, knew well and probably taught his son the theories of Marc-Antoine Laugier and Jacques-François Blondel.

With his principles in hand, two ways lay open to Pugin: To recommend that there be a new style created upon the theoretical foundation of his principles, such a style to be free to develop its own forms of ornament, its own methods of construction without direct reference to the Gothic. Or to recommend that the Gothic, for its glories, be revived because in it the principles were realized. Pugin sought to take the way of revival for he had in the course of his research become addicted to his own erudition and to the beauty of Gothic art, and also his attachment to Gothic made it impossible for him to accept the principles without the resources of the Gothic style to draw upon, for by themselves the principles were too cold, too bald. He had discovered them but he could not assume the responsibility of giving them the ornament which would satisfy fully his visual demands. He solved his artistic problem by means of his religious enthusiasm, for he justified revival of Gothic by declaring that a good society is one in which art follows the principles. The Catholic society of the Middle Ages produced the Gothic, he reasoned, and England’s return to Rome would be hastened by the revival of her ancient art, and her taste considerably improved.

Pugin’s argument is never clear when he approaches the moment of recommending revivalism. He veers and places his emphasis upon the ethical and religious question. The principles had, in other words, assumed a life of their own. Pushed to a final declaration he was not prepared to say that the Gothic as such should be revived.

We do not wish to produce mere servile imitators of former excellence of any kind, but men imbued with the consistent spirit of the ancient architects, who would work on their principles and carry them out as the old men would have done, had they been placed in similar circumstance and with similar wants to ourselves.

His books are tracts aimed at the bad building, the inconsistency of design which filled the void as classicism was pushed beyond good taste by speculative builders and the uncontrolled extravagances of design produced by manufacturers of machine-made articles in the decorative arts.

Pugin: Principles of Design versus Revivalism
By the end of his life Pugin realized the full import of his doctrine, for he was no longer pleased with what he himself had produced. He was not satisfied with his own Gothic. In 1851 he wrote to a friend:

My writings more than what I have been able to do have revolutionized the taste of England. My cause as an architect is run out. . . I am really ashamed of our things. They are good when compared with the Beasts, the Brutes, who belong to this age. But by the true standard they make me ill.

The Gothic Revival is remembered for its connections with religious revivalism, for its concern with ecclesiastical accuracy, for its suggestions that life in the Middle Ages was better than life in the nineteenth century. In point of fact the implied social and political meaning of Pugin's famous plates from *Contrasts* (1841) has been greatly exaggerated. The aesthetic principles formulated by the Revival have been so little noticed that their relationship to theories of design being developed outside the Revival has not yet been described.

Pugin's work illustrates the quality of his artistic capacities and the subtle adjustment which he made between his principles, his affection for Gothic and his great personal gifts. In it may be found both evidence of knowledge of Gothic which went beyond pedantry and pronounced tastes which make his buildings immediately identifiable as Victorian rather than mediaeval. Beneath the Gothic surface he worked carefully within his principles at the creation of a characteristic Gothic Revival style which was more expressive of Victorian taste than it was of Gothic.

I have already mentioned the Houses of Parliament competition design as Pugin's first major work. The Committee that decided that the new Houses should be in the Gothic or Elizabethan style explained its choice in these terms:

The peculiar charm of Gothic architecture is in its associations; these are delightful because they are historical, patriotic, local and intimately blended with early reminiscences.

C. R. Cockerall, as might have been expected, said that the only recommendation for the Gothic was as a reminder of "our aristocratic past." Both were right. The choice of the style belongs to the picturesque taste for the Gothic. The design which was chosen did not. The judges, when awarding Charles Barry the coveted commission, gave little consideration to practicality, functional efficiency or probable cost. What appealed to them was the quality which was indeed the great strength of the design, its visual unity. It was a massive composition of boldly expressed, huge units over which was hung a lacework of unifying ornament, kept small in detail but in high relief, designed to enhance the scale of the building by repetition emphasized by shadow.

There was about the competition design produced by Barry and Pugin none of the leanness of the Gothic of Fonthill Abbey. The ornament was lavishly used to assist in the architectural expression of the whole, a product of Pugin's research into Gothic and Barry's ability to qualify and manage Pugin's exuberant enthusiasm. In the Revival buildings before 1835 ornament was applied sparingly, usually high on the building, often around doors and windows, rarely over a whole wall surface. It was never used in relief so high as to cast shadow, for beyond suggesting pleasurable association with "our aristocratic past" it had no function and it was expensive.

Sir Kenneth Clark calls the Houses of Parliament "a necropolis of style," which I suppose it is if one considers it detail by detail, but his phrase omits any description of the organization to which the details were submitted and the effect which their repetition achieved. The Houses of Parliament are not Gothic revived nor are they classical surfaced with Gothic ornament. There are suggestions of the horizontal emphasis, the feeling of a building which wears its interior on its exterior, the square-end features of Jacobean houses. The national and patriotic reason for the choice of the style cannot have been strong, however, for Charles Barry told a Select Committee that the town halls of the Low Countries had inspired the design, a sensible choice because the town halls were urban structures meant to be seen broadside.

Notable in the Houses of Parliament is the degree to which archeological revivalism was not enforced, the extent to which its architects exercised originality in the choice of the inspiration and their use of it, and the successful way in which they managed the adjustment of building to site, to political significance and to its practical usefulness as a meeting place or Parliament. There was no precedent in the early Gothic Revival for this degree of architectural proficiency or erudite boldness.

In the Houses of Parliament Barry was responsible for the general conception of the plan and the elevations. He also remained in continuous contact with the building as it passed through revisions in the course of construction. Pugin designed the west front and the whole of the decorative detail. Neither man could have done without the other.

The design for the Houses of Parliament would be without significance other than as a successful product of an imaginative collaboration between two gifted men had Pugin not gone on to develop the ideas which underlay its design. He did not copy its style. The following examples of Pugin's work which illustrate this development are drawn from his productive years, 1840-1844, also the period of his definitive writing. Pugin's churches have been criticized as over ornate, flimsy, a judgement based upon examination of his London and Birmingham cathedrals. The Cathedral at Nottingham is neither flimsy nor ornate nor is the small church of St. Mary, Brewood, Staffordshire (Fig. 1). The influence of Pugin's admiration for the Norfolk parish churches is apparent in the simplicity of the
Fig. 1. St. Mary's, Brewood, Staffordshire. Exterior. (Marcus Whiffen)

Fig. 2. St. Mary's, Brewood, Staffordshire. Interior. (Marcus Whiffen)

Fig. 3. St. Mary's, Brewood, Staffordshire. Rectory. (Marcus Whiffen)

Fig. 4. Alton Castle, Staffordshire. Exterior. (Marcus Whiffen)

Fig. 5. St. Giles', Cheadle, Staffordshire. West doors. (Marcus Whiffen)

Fig. 6. Alton Towers, Staffordshire. Interior. (Marcus Whiffen)
interior (Fig. 2), but St. Mary’s is not a copy of a Norfolk church. It is composite Gothic, largely Early English in inspiration but with subtle variations from the Early English. The squat broach spire, the long roof-line broken only at the division between aisles and nave—suggested perhaps by the roof of Oakham Castle, Rutland—the characteristic Pugin porch, the understatement of the interior, all result in a building of good proportions admirably suited to the site and the village setting. The indebtedness to Gothic is identifiable but there is no possibility that the building is anything but Victorian.

Pugin was perhaps most successful in the buildings which he designed for domestic purposes, for in them he was not required to work other than most generally from Gothic prototypes. For each of his churches he designed a residence and that at Brewood (Fig. 3) is typical. It is village architecture, simple to the point of barrenness, forthright in its use of local materials, totally without decoration, the elevations carefully conceived and expressive of the plan. These small inexpensive houses are not distinguished architecture but they illustrate a willingness to rely on expressed structure rather than ornament and to design in sympathy with the setting. They are far from the heavy villas which were common in Pugin’s time.

The Castle and the Hospital at Alton, Staffordshire, were commissioned by the Earl of Shrewsbury and though funds were not unlimited they represent the kind of work which Pugin chose to do when he was supported by a generous and sympathetic patron. The Hospital is best known from Pugin’s etching of it, and it is therefore surprising to find how little his rendering conveys of its solidity, simplicity or the subtle adjustment of the building to the singularly beautiful site.

The Castle (Fig. 4) is less a castle than a large house, set upon, and its foundations sunk into, a great stone outcropping which crowns the hill. The plan is irregular to take advantage of the view across the valley. There are reminders of French architecture in its design and the site which Pugin chose shows the influence of a Rhine journey which he had enjoyed. The Castle survives these reminiscent qualities. It may be that its weakness is a too strict adherence to the principle that the external appearance of an edifice should be illustrative and in accordance with the plan and the use to which the structure is to be put.

The west door of the church of St. Giles’, Cheadle, Staffordshire, with gilt talbots on a brilliant but dark red ground (Fig. 5), shows the tendency which is marked in all of Pugin’s designs to broaden and flatten and simplify patterns, always with respect for the surface to which the pattern is to be applied, and the part which the textile or wallpaper, for example, was to play in a whole decorative composition. In True Principle of Pointed or Christian Architecture Pugin attacked modern wallpapers because they failed to treat the panel or the wall in a “consistent” manner. He recommended flock papers because they gave pattern without shadow. His designs for the wallpapers for the Houses of Parliament are brilliant in color, exaggeratedly simple, the scale of the design carefully adjusted to the size of the room in which they were to be used. Certain of these papers are now being accurately reproduced for the renewed decoration of the Houses.

When Pugin received responsibility for Alton Towers it was a sprawling house, floridly decorated in the height of the provincial Gothic taste of the early years of the nineteenth century. His efforts there are marked by attempts to subtract from the ornament and to add elements which would unify the enfilade of state rooms. Among his additions were the oak and glass doors (Fig. 6), for by using glass he was able to open the rooms to each other and so to qualify the claustrophobic density of the decoration.

After 1844 Pugin spent his energies upon the completion of the interior decoration for the Houses of Parliament and the design of good-looking objects which could be produced in large quantities at moderate prices. Scarcely a Catholic church in England is without some piece of church furniture or metal work designed by Pugin or produced posthumously from his designs. These rugs, candela-bra, tables, chairs, vestments were consciously designed to be reproduced in quantity. To John Crace, who manufactured his furniture, Pugin wrote in 1849 of his hopes for the success of their collaboration:

I am so anxious to introduce a sensible style of furniture of good oak and constructively put together that shall compete with the vile trash made and sold. These things are very simple and I am certain with a little patience can be made to pay.

The heavily carved extravagance of the demonstration pieces which Pugin displayed at the Great Exhibition is better known than the anonymous examples of his personal attempt to introduce reforms in design which William Morris was later to advocate. It is significant that, unlike Morris, Pugin nowhere suggests that mediaeval methods of production be revived.

Barry and Pugin passed every detail of the decorations of the Houses of Parliament through repeated revision and alteration. The result which they achieved demonstrates the composition and taste in interior decoration which was gradually being worked out beneath the veneer of Gothic ornament. The interior space of the rooms was not violated; the form of all the rooms—the walls—was stringently maintained and underscored. When a major or minor ornamental detail projected into a room or divided two rooms it was kept delicate, even lacy. In all ornamentation applied to the walls the scale was kept small and effect was obtained by repetition and the reinforcement of the wall as surface and spatial boundary. The stained glass was regarded as a continuation of the wall decoration and made to form a
part of the continuous pattern in subdued color and dark gold which lined the rooms. Wherever a projection or interruption occurs it is gilded or executed in polished metal.

Certain conclusions may be drawn from this scrutiny of Pugin: First, in his writing and his building, in spite of his noisy emphasis upon religious revivalism his main concern was for his aesthetic principles. Between 1840 and 1844 he passed through a process of reasoning similar to that described by Viollet-le-Duc in the Dictionary of 1854 and the Lectures of 1863. Pugin was neither as rational nor as explicitly exact as Viollet-le-Duc for it was not in his nature to be so and he was preoccupied with his share in the growing confusion of ethics and aesthetics.

Fortunately his buildings provide the evidence to bridge the gap between his aesthetic theory and his practice of modified revivalism. His rigid adherence to his principles gives them strength, coherence, and the singular originality they possess. It is finally the principles which control his errant Gothic enthusiasm and his scholarly and religious propensities.

His theory was astringent, emphasizing construction, equating ornament with it, and it was styleless and without ornament. Pugin and his contemporaries could not do without a style and ornament; they could not follow the theory of the principles to their logical conclusion as did Viollet-le-Duc. Comforted by religious revivalism which sanctioned the use of Gothic they produced a style of sorts of their own. Its products are sometimes uninspired but hardly ever ugly, and some of their work, the Houses of Parliament, for example, is as dramatically successful as any work of the nineteenth century. Pugin’s work, revisited, is surprising for he has for so long been considered an architect who wrote better than he built.

Pugin drew a large part of the English Gothic Revival with him and gingerly made his way along the argument which was the foundation of modern theories of art in architecture and the decorative arts. That he was assisted in this process by his religious conviction serves only to link him with yet another of the major philosophical currents of his time.

Second, Pugin’s taste and theories foretell the coming of Pre-Raphaelitism and the Arts and Crafts Movement. Pugin knew and admired Overbeck and he drew constantly upon the resources of German painting and German theory. In 1843 he summed up his assault upon classical figure painting in this fashion:

We do not want to revive a facsimile of the works of any style of any particular individual or even period, but it is the devotion, majesty, and repose of Christian art for which we are contending. It is not a style but a principle.

Here again all Pugin was left with was a principle, which did not indicate the form in which the principle is to be embodied if revivalism is not employed. His principles lack a third dimension. They were an attempt to solve a problem by reasoning from a study of history to a general truth which must then be clothed in some sort of form.

William Morris carried the argument of the revivalists well beyond the depth to which Pugin was prepared to follow it. Return to craft methods had occurred to Pugin but he had not recommended it. Morris secularized the theory of the Gothic Revival, substituting for religious revivalism the re-establishment of the mediaeval relationship between the craftsman and his craft.

Third, and last, there exist connections between the Revival and the movement which S. Giedion has called “the search for basic principles of design.” Giedion argues that in England between 1845 and 1860 a small group of men sought to discover the principles which should be the basis of a reform in taste, that they were men of influence, that their theories were sound but that they failed because they had “an inability to profess a new artistic vision.” To these men, Henry Cole, Owen Jones, Richard Redgrave, and Gottfried Semper who was associated with Cole at the Great Exhibition in 1851, Giedion attributes “the first protest against the abuse of mechanization.”

Henry Cole, 1808–1882, edited the Journal of Design from 1849 to 1852, founded Summerly’s Art Manufacturers in 1847 to illustrate the union of art with manufacture. He was a powerful member of the executive committee for the Great Exhibition. Owen Jones was a gifted designer, Superintendent of the Works of the Exhibition, advocate of formal as opposed to naturalistic ornament. Richard Redgrave was Surveyor of the Queen’s Pictures. These men did not want to revive any style; their aim was, instead, to correct the abuses prevalent in design and to do this they emphasized utility. Gottfried Semper’s definition of art, written after his association with Cole and his circle in England, best describes the attitude of the group. Art was the result of craft, the ultimate product of decorative forms which are produced by a combination of materials, the methods used in treating them and the practical purpose for which the object was intended. This doctrine is not far from Pugin’s principles published six years before Cole founded his journal. I do not wish to say that Pugin had any direct influence upon Cole, though they were well acquainted and Cole respected Pugin. I feel, however, that the Gothic Revival despite its revivalism was early a participating part of the attempt to create an art which would relieve the situation which Cole described when he said “man has become the servant of the machine.”

The journalism of architecture and the theories of taste and design in England between 1840 and 1851 have never been described. If and when they are I believe that the Gothic Revival will appear as one part of the search for principles of design, or, to put it another way, one part of the search for a nineteenth-century style.

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