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At this year’s annual symposium, just under 100 attendees packed into Charles Holden’s Senate House over two days in June. ‘Architecture, the Built Environment, and the Aftermath of the First World War’ examined the impact that the Great War had on the built environment and architectural culture of Britain and the Empire in the interwar period. The subject is timely as 2018 marks a century since the end of the war and the passing of the Representation of the People Act—which, in the words of the symposium convenor Neal Shasore (Leverhulme Early Career Fellow, Liverpool School of Architecture), ‘expanded the franchise significantly, ushering in a new age of democratic participation’.

The interwar period is often framed as the second great ‘battle of the styles’, one in which a still characteristically Edwardian architectural profession fulminated against encroaching young modernists. One thinks of Sir Reginald Blomfield’s horrified comparison between modernist architecture and ‘the atonal music of Herr Schoenburg’ at the RIBA’s famous 1928 debate on the subject. In contrast, this symposium sought to decentre style as the sole lens or primary framework through which to understand the period. Instead, the symposium examined not only democratisation, but also ‘reconstruction’, a phrase often associated with the period after the Second World War, but which was frequently used by contemporaries after the First. The resulting two days of papers were rich and diverse both in subject matter and methodological approach, casting architecture and the built environment in a wider context of multifaceted social and political change in Britain and abroad.

Friday’s sessions traced a line from the Imperial and global to the local and the domestic. The first papers traced the complex network of connections between the architectures of Imperial Britain, namely the new dominion of South Africa, and the changing administration of the British Raj in India. Geoffrey Tyack (University of Oxford) discussed the function of memory in Sir Herbert Baker’s Rhodes House in the University of Oxford. Baker’s almost ‘literary’ approach to symbolism was carefully dissected; the building served as memorial not only to Rhodes Scholars who died during the war, but also in complex ways to Rhodes himself, whom Baker hero-worshipped, and indeed evoked the imperial-national identity.

Post-war paradigm

Ewan Harrison and Sben Korsh look back on the 2018 SAHGB annual symposium, ‘Architecture, the Built Environment, and the Aftermath of the First World War’
expressed in Rhodes’ Groote Schur, later the official residence for the South African premier. Importantly, Tyack touched upon the manner in which the building has recently become a focus for post-colonial protest through the ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ movement in Oxford, illustrating the mutability of memorialisation.

The richness of post-colonial perspectives on an architectural culture which was deeply implicated in the late British imperial project was carried forward by Smriti Pant (Brandenburg University of Technology). Pant looked closely at Baker’s work on Delhi’s Central Legislative Assembly Building, designed between 1921 and 1927. Pant illustrated the manner in which the building reflected and responded to the Government of India Act of 1919, which established a restricted form of parliamentary representation, known as ‘diarchy.’ This diarchical perspective – in which the Indian population had a constitutive role in the making of the new Imperial capital at Delhi, promises to push the history of this important project beyond merely ‘Lutyens’s Delhi.’

The session was rounded off by the SAHGB President, Neil Jackson (University of Liverpool), who explored the changing nature of Japanese Imperial architecture in the period. He charted the emerging influence of European

below Stamps released on the occasion of the official inauguration of the new capital at Delhi (1931).
Unknown artist / CommonsWikimedia

opposite Australia House on The Strand, London, designed by Alexander Marshall Mackenzie and his son and built by Dove Brothers. Construction began in 1913 but was delayed by the First World War and the building was completed in 1918. RIBA Collections

‘Reconstruction’, a phrase often associated with the period after the Second World War, was frequently used by contemporaries after the First modernism and the ‘Crown Emperor Style’, a merging of beaux-arts axiality with traditional Japanese forms, and the highly idiosyncratic work of Ito Chuta, influenced by the classical architecture of the Gandhara region. Jackson also demonstrated that the influence went both ways – illustrating, for example, the impact that traditional Japanese forms had on Bruno Taut.

The afternoon session shifted scale and tone, to housing and the making of ‘home,’ chaired by Mark Swenarton (University of Liverpool) who, of course, produced foundational work in this field with rigour and clarity, beginning with *Homes Fit For Heroes* (1981). Though the session moved away from the machismo of the building centre, it showed that the Imperial saturated the domestic sphere too. Elizabeth McKellar (Open University), for instance, discussed the little-known work of Annabel Dott, ‘from Cape Town to Croydon.’ Dott had the distinction of being a non-architect who nevertheless designed and funded the construction of a rural community for disabled officers in 1918. Dott was interested in standardisation and new domestic technologies, a theme Deborah Sugg Ryan (University of Portsmouth), pushed further, boldly demonstrating the presence of an Efficiency Style. ‘Efficiency’ evoked a form of architecture that eschewed ornament and emphasised workability for its inhabitants, reaching its apotheosis in ‘The House that Jill Built’ at the 1930 Daily Mail’s Ideal Homes exhibition. Labour-saving ‘efficiency’ also promised to push the history of this important project beyond merely ‘Lutyens’s Delhi.’

The session was concluded by Tess Pinto (Twentieth Century Society), who gave a paper reappraising the compressed-greenwood houses of Ernest Trowbridge. Pinto suggested that, despite their air of whimsy, Trowbridge’s houses were conceived
of as a practical answer to post-war housing shortages, and were carefully planned to suit the needs of modern consumers. Trowbridge’s description of Neo-Georgian as ‘the Bastard Hanoverian Style’ potentially says much about his attitude to the continent in the immediate aftermath of the War.

The afternoon was rounded off by a panel discussion on the tangibility and intangibility of heritage, chaired by Catherine Croft and Clare Price of the Twentieth Century Society. Lively conversation on this and other topics spilled over into drinks at The Lamb, in Bloomsbury.

Saturday was structured as a survey, examining the impact of the war on a number of areas of social, political, commercial and economic life. The day began with a stimulating overview of the period by economic historian Peter Scott (Reading University). Thereafter Jessica Kelly (University of the Creative Arts London) unpacked the instructive ways in which architectural critique of the 1920s sought to enfold new publics by ‘licensing’ readers to produce their own judgements about architecture.

The second panel, on corporations, delved into greater detail about architects’ role in political economy, examining new trends in commerce, local government, and the changing nature – and scale – of architectural practice. Dennis Wardsworth (Independent) looked at the formation of American-inspired corporate behemoths like Imperial Chemical Industries, Lever Brothers and Anglo-Persian Oil. He charted the emergence of the new typology of the large commercial office – many of these rank among the best-known monuments of 1920s and 30s London – and the detail of how increasingly large (and predominantly female) clerical staff operated within them. By contrast, Horatio Joyce (University of Oxford) argued that the large commercial architectural firms that had emerged in the United States in the late-19th century – aping their corporatist clients in management-style and operation – was in fact slow to emerge in Great Britain and limited in influence. The notion of the brass-plate ‘Gentleman Architect’, he argued, remained firmly entrenched in this country. Though, as Julian Holder’s comments from the floor reminded us (drawing on his own SAHGB Symposium on ‘Official Architecture’ in 2016), the War also stimulated the growth of large commercial and governmental architects departments too. Fittingly, Robert Proctor (University of Bath) rounded off the panel, presenting new work on Percy Thomas, whose construction of civic set-pieces in the 1920s projected a concrete image of an increasingly corporatist and welfare-oriented state, embodied in, for instance, the Cardiff Temple of Peace and Health.

Next was institutions: David Frazer Lewis (University of Oxford) discussed Giles Gilbert Scott’s Liverpool Cathedral and Adrian Gilbert Scott’s Cairo Cathedral as exemplary of a liberal techno-Protestantism that emerged in the aftermath of the War to modernise the Anglican Church’s societal position. In Cairo, this took the form of producing a building that was recognisably Anglican Gothic, yet also incorporated local building traditions and styles; while at Liverpool, representations of local trades were included in the cathedral’s decor, thus signposting the relevance of the church for its local community. The interwar period was also a time of change and democratisation at the level of the parish, and Clare Price (University of Oxford/Twentieth Century Society) demonstrated this with lucidity. Her paper examined Parochial Church Councils and Diocesan Advisory Committees, and Price traced the Church’s response to the twin challenges of the need to expand into new housing estates, and the increasing representation of the laity in the briefing and design processes. Kieran Mahon (University College London) then untangled the client-architect relationship at Impington Village College – designed by Walter Gropius, and inspired by the pedagogical views of reformer Henry Morris, the Chief Education Officer for Cambridgeshire. Although Impington is well situated in histories of British Modernism, the influence of the client’s conception of the programme is often underrepresented in accounts of the building’s significance. Mahon’s paper re-inserted Morris into the story by tracing the links between his ideas and the physical form of the building.

After lunch, focus turned to the public realm. Adam Walls (University College London) discussed the tense and traumatic urban atmosphere of Virginia Woolf’s post-war London. Walls undertook a close reading and mapping of Mrs Dalloway to explore how interpretations of the London sky became emotionally imbued with both joy and grief. Following this, Ben Roberts (Teesside University) discussed the manner in which civic open spaces were both used and rejected by communities seeking to mark Armistice Day and Peace Day. Luca Csepely-Knorr (Manchester School of Architecture) then presented a differing perspective on the planning and use of public open space in the period, discussing landscape architect Thomas Mawson’s plans for Blackpool’s Stanley Park. The paper used Stanley Park as representative of the shift in Mawson’s practice from pre-war private domestic commissions to more community-centred commissions reflecting
the emergence of a new democratic client body. James Nott (University of St Andrews) spoke on perhaps one of the most archetypical public spaces of the interwar period, the dancehall. Nott demonstrated that the dancehall both reflected and was made possible by, the reduction of the working week and the greater purchasing power of the working and lower-middle class – this represented an important post-war trend of widening access to leisure.

The final panel, on warfare, was kicked off by Volker M Welter (University of California at Santa Barbara), who discussed the manner in which wartime trauma was reflected in the peacetime careers of architect-soldiers, tracing the influence of the battlefield on the works of Richard Neutra and Adrian Berrington. Fiona Smyth (Trinity College Dublin), winner of last year’s Hawksmoor Essay Prize, then discussed how the chance meeting between the architect Hope Bagenal and the physicist Alex Wood at a Red Cross Hospital during the hostilities, led to a reinvigoration in the former’s interest in architectural acoustics and the production of their seminal text Planning for Good Acoustics. Hanna Smyth (University of Oxford) discussed the imperial and dominion memorials erected by the Imperial War Graves Commission throughout northern France, examining how the memorials addressed numerous tensions between individuals and the collective, nations and empire, and different religions. Elizabeth Blood (University of Leicester) concluded proceedings by discussing the role of women in producing war memorials. Focusing on three female designers, Blood showed that the narrative of women’s involvement in memorialisation, usually casting them as passive mourners, is deeply flawed and partial.

An eclectic set of themes ran across both days including, though by no means limited to, gender and the changing societal role of women; changes within colonial governance and relationships between imperial centres and peripheries; public presentation and performance of the domestic spheres; changes in professional practice; and the changing relationship between architects and the consumers of architecture. What was striking was the range of disciplinary and sub-disciplinary perspectives, with architects, economic historians and urban historians taking their place among art and architectural historians. It asserted the growing strength of scholarship of the interwar period in Britain among a vibrant community of academics and heritage professionals.

This has real implications for our understanding of nineteenth and twentieth century architecture, in which the interwar period is still too often seen as an embarrassing parenthesis. As Shasore stated in a provocative introduction to Saturday’s sessions, challenging periodisation, recasting the ‘interwar’ as a period of productive ‘reconstruction’, opens up new possibilities for investigation. If we put to one side the inevitability of the radical progress of the post-Second World War welfare state, the 1920s and 30s emerge as sites of radical possibility and social innovation in and of themselves. Such a reconceptionalisation, almost ironically invokes a historical theory first put forward in the period itself — that of the critique of ‘whiggish’ history. Herbert Butterfield, author of the 1931 The Whig Interpretation of History, referred to the impulse of retroactively identifying historical foreshadows, writing, ‘There is a magnet forever pulling at our minds, unless we have found the way to counteract it.’ It would seem the symposium’s content might allow for an opposing pole of sorts, freeing our minds to look back to the period for new paradigms.