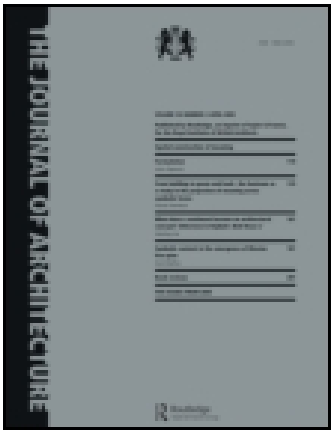

The Journal of Architecture
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjar20

Learning from Le Corbusier and Lubetkin: the work of Ryder and Yates

A. Peter Fawcett

Published online: 08 Dec 2010.

To cite this article: A. Peter Fawcett (2001) Learning from Le Corbusier and Lubetkin: the work of Ryder and Yates, The Journal of Architecture, 6:3, 225-248, DOI: 10.1080/13602360110061217

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13602360110061217

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 6
Autumn 2001

Learning from Le Corbusier and Lubetkin: the work of Ryder and Yates

A. Peter Fawcett

Institute of Architecture, University of Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK

In 1953, two young committed modernists, Gordon Ryder and Peter Yates, set up in architectural practice in Newcastle upon Tyne. The time was not propitious; provincial architecture was still dominated by an outworn pre-war classical model, and the North East region was no exception.

But Ryder and Yates' modernist credentials were impeccable; Yates had been a pupil of Peter Moro and had worked in Paris for Clive Entwhistle, who introduced him to Le Corbusier. Ryder, fresh from a studio assistantship at Durham University, met Yates at Peterlee New Town in 1948.

From 1953, when their practice was launched, until the late 1970s, Ryder and Yates produced a series of buildings of astonishing maturity within the Corbusian idiom, their zenith being major commissions in the 1960s for Northern Gas at Killingworth New Town, Northumberland.

A diverse output of buildings for social housing, health and welfare, commerce, industry and entertainment, ensured their position as the region's premier architects, and brought them national acclaim; this study assesses the prevailing influence of their mentors, Le Corbusier and Berthold Lubetkin, throughout a quarter of a century of exemplary architectural practice.

Less than two years after the South Bank Festival of Britain had closed its doors on September 30th, 1951, two young committed modernists, Gordon Ryder and Peter Yates, launched their progressive architectural partnership in Newcastle upon Tyne. The time was not propitious; Britain was yet to emerge from severe post-war economic restraint, and provincial architecture was still dominated by an outworn pre-war classical model whose proponents had been notoriously antagonistic to the new architecture[1].

Such sentiments were still prevalent in provincial Britain; in the South-west, Percy Thomas, in the North-west, Hubert Worthington, and in the East Midlands. Cecil Howitt, still dominated provincial practice by promulgating classicism for clients of equally conservative mien[2]. In the North-east, still officially regarded as a depressed area, the picture, according to Peter Yates, was no more encouraging:

> There was no modern architecture in the North when Ryder and Yates set up in practice in 1953[3].

1360–2365 / DOI:10.1080/13602360110061217

Gordon Ryder was born in 1919 at Redcar, in the East Riding of Yorkshire, the son of a bookmaker. The results of a boyhood contraction of polio left him with little formal education and excluded him from war service: he went on from articled pupilage in a Middlesbrough firm of architects to King's College, Newcastle upon Tyne (then an outpost of Durham University) to read architecture under the tutelage of Professor Edwards during the closing stages of the Second World War. In 1947 he was appointed as a studio demonstrator at the School of Architecture, coincidentally sharing lodgings with Peter 'Brutus' Smithson, also a Durham alumnus.

Peter Yates was born in 1920, in London, and studied architecture during the war years at the Regent Street Polytechnic under Peter Moro, another committed proto-Corbusian[4]. Moro had arrived in pre-war London a refugee from Nazi Germany (where his father had been professor of medicine at the University of Heidelberg) with a letter of introduction to, and a promise of work with, Walter Gropius. In the event, this did not materialise, and Moro spent his British pre-war years in the Tecton studio under Berthold Lubetkin. Following graduation, Yates travelled extensively in southern Spain, filling copious sketchbooks[5], echoing the Mediterranean journeys of self-discovery undertaken by the young Charles-Edouard Jeanneret three decades previously. Yates then sought employment in Paris, working for the English architect, Clive Entwhistle, who then ran the Unité D'Informations Visuelles. Entwhistle's chief concern was exhibition design, but his subsequent reputation in Britain rests upon his translations into English of key Corbusian texts. It was during this period in Paris that Entwhistle introduced the young Yates to Le Corbusier; many meetings followed and Yates became increasingly engrossed with the Corbusian *oeuvre*[6]. During this formative stage in his career, Yates got to know Le Corbusier and his *atelier* very well:

> We learnt from Le Corbusier that nothing is fixed[7].

Moreover, whilst in Paris, Yates worked on Clive Entwhistle's 'brilliantly inventive'[8] competition entry for a new cultural and recreational centre at Crystal Palace; the submitted drawings demonstrated Yates' consummate skills as a draughtsman. Ove Arup was engineer. But the first prize went to a neo-classical design, which, according to Kenneth Clark (the Arts Council representative upon the panel of assessors), was:

> . . . on Beaux Arts lines, but exceedingly functional[9].

whilst those entries of modernist persuasion he deemed to:

> . . . look nice but do not fulfil their functions . . .[10]

Gordon Ryder and Peter Yates met in 1948 when both were appointed as architects at Peterlee Development Corporation. Peterlee, situated within the heart of the Durham coalfield, had been designated a New Town under the provisions of the New Towns Act of 1946, along with satellite towns around London. Peter Lee (1864–1934), the legen-

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 6
Autumn 2001

dary Durham miners' leader, had lent his name to the eponymous new town on the eastern seaboard of County Durham. To the socialist Chairman of the Development Corporation, Dr. Monica Felton[11], Peterlee represented compensation to the mining community for their shameful betrayal during the General Strike of 1926, and given her political persuasion and that of the mining community she purported to serve, the celebrated modernist and Russian *émigré*, Berthold Lubetkin, with his professed leftist orientation, seemed a fitting appointee as Chief Architect and Planner.

Accounts of the subsequent recruitment of architects to assist Lubetkin vary hugely from an alleged pool of three thousand applicants[12] to a more credible eight hundred[13]. Those selected were a remarkably diverse and cosmopolitan bunch with a bias towards Architectural Association alumni. But Gordon Ryder came to Peterlee fresh from a studio assistantship at the School of Architecture, King's College, Newcastle upon Tyne; Peter Yates from Paris via Regent Street Polytechnic.

Given Yates' august pantheon of mentors, it is hardly surprising that Lubetkin, subsequently at Peterlee, likewise nurtured this considerable architectural talent. Indeed, Yates was the only assistant at Peterlee fully acknowledged by Lubetkin for truly comprehending and assimilating his design philosophy[14].

Whilst Lubetkin had never been in doubt as to his artistic debt to Le Corbusier, nevertheless, unlike Yates, he had equivocated over his personal experience of the master. Indeed, when Le Corbusier arrived in London, in 1935, to visit Tecton's Highpoint One, in Highgate, a third party was deputed to meet him; according to Anthony Chitty[15], Lubetkin thought that greeting Le Corbusier personally on arrival might undermine, as host, his own primacy. Highpoint One, in its formal outcome, was effectively two connected cruciform towers from Le Corbusier's project for Une Ville Contemporaine which had been exhibited at the 1922 Salon d'Automne in Paris. Le Corbusier was uncharacteristically enthusiastic concerning Lubetkin's achievement at Highpoint and a subsequent return visit to Paris was arranged to see Le Corbusier's recent Parisian projects.

But during Lubetkin's earlier sojourn in Paris in the 1920s, he had become deeply aware of Le Corbusier's *oeuvre*. He had worked on the Russian Pavilion at the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in Paris where Le Corbusier's seminal Pavillon de L'Esprit Nouveau had been exhibited. Like Le Corbusier, he had worked in Auguste Perret's *atèlier* and had mixed with Ozenfant, Cocteau *et al.* as a fellow member of Parisian café society. Indeed, Lubetkin's celebrated apartment block (with Moses Ginsburg) of 1928–31 at 25, Avenue de Versailles, owed everything in its ground floor plan to Le Corbusier's Maison Cook. Over half a century later, Lubetkin still remained in no doubt as to Le Corbusier's profound influence;

> The boldness with which he manipulated space, his power of abstraction. . . . I admit, I simply worshipped him[16].

There were differences, however, which distanced Lubetkin's architectural vocabulary from the Corbusian prototype; an absorption of Beaux Arts con-

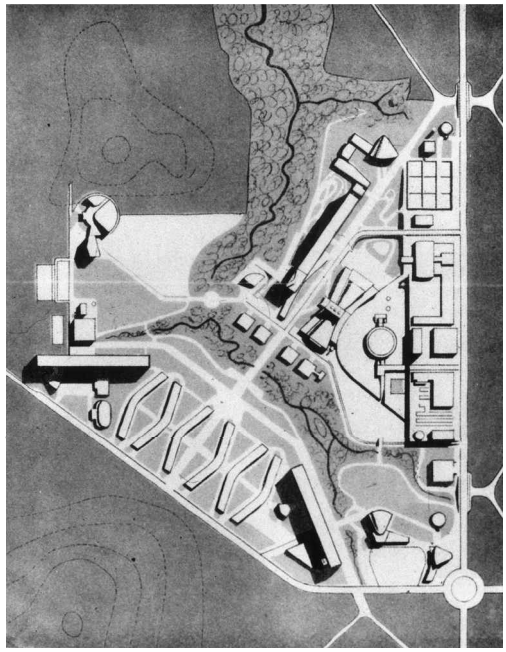

Figure 1. Peterlee Town Centre (project).

vention and a departure from the Corbusian ideal of 'type'. Lubetkin's output was overtly site- and client-specific.

Lubetkin's pre-war output with Tecton has been described as a 'conduit of European Modernism' for an oncoming fledgling generation of English Modernists[17]. Indeed, a new post-war Labour administration under Clement Attlee seemed sympathetic to procuring an architecture truly reflecting their social idealism. Most emphatically, such a situation obtained at Peterlee; a community reared on socialist dogma, and an administrator and architectural staff similarly motivated.

Such was the artistically and politically charged environment in which Gordon Ryder and Peter Yates established and developed their architecture. When appointed at Peterlee, Ryder was twenty nine and Yates twenty eight; their mentor, Lubetkin, was forty seven. According to Ryder:

> We learnt everything from Lubetkin[18].

But in the event, Ryder and Yates, and indeed their many colleagues under Lubetkin's supervision, built nothing at Peterlee during their two-year stay. Lubetkin resigned as Peterlee's architect/planner on October 19th, 1949, and his post expired on March 31st, 1950. His hand-picked team of architects resigned *en bloc* with him. Lubetkin retreated to a Gloucestershire farm, apparently forsaking architecture for good: Yates returned to Paris.

This cataclysmic event remains in the annals of post-war British architecture as perhaps its best known but least understood event. A General Election held on February 23rd, 1950, reduced Attlee's overall majority to seventeen. Silkin, architect of the New Towns Act, was superseded by Hugh Dalton as Minister of Town and Country Planning. A slim majority had drastically changed the political climate, and even though technical difficulties relating to high-rise buildings designed in areas designated for coal extraction have since been well articulated, the demise of Lubetkin's vision for Peterlee was most emphatically of political origin; it was simply unacceptable that not a single dwelling had been completed during Lubetkin's tenure.

As far as the youthful Ryder and Yates were concerned, the Peterlee experience had dramati-

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 6
Autumn 2001

cally enriched their already pro-Corbusian architectural sensibilities. A series of beautifully rendered plans for the town centre (Fig. 1) were drawn by Peter Yates, recalling not only his Crystal Palace competition drawings with Clive Entwhistle, but also Le Corbusier's plan for the eastern French town of Saint Dié, published in 1945. Moreover many of the powerful architectural forms which appeared at Peterlee were to reappear later; the tapered barrel-vaulted cinema and conference centre roof was reiterated in several subsequent projects, generally to celebrate a major living space within a domestic plan, and the boomerang-shaped terraces were repeated as late as 1974 in housing at Albany village, Washington New Town.

At a more detailed level, both architects worked on the Hundred Houses project, a series of cuboid linked pavilions to form terraces. Yates produced a vast range of wittily executed house elevations of varying provenance, from proto-Corbusian studies in Purism to an unashamed suburban 'Tudorbethan' pastiche in the manner of the contemporaneous Daily Express cartoonist, Osbert Lancaster. In one sense, this reiterated a long-standing concern of Le Corbusier's, demonstrated in both his Maison Domino of 1914 and his Obus Plan for Algiers of 1932; that a pre-determined 'support' structure could accommodate a pluralist infill of building fabric ranging in the case of Obus from Moorish to Modernist via Louis XVI and Italian Renaissance. Many of the devices employed in the more serious Modernist studies for these house elevations found a place in one-off house commissions when Ryder and Yates established themselves in architectural practice in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1953, an event, incidentally, which followed on from a chance meeting of the pair in a London underground station over two years after the Peterlee *débacle*.

Like most pre-war modernists in England, and, indeed, those from the 'heroic' period, much of Ryder and Yates' first decade engaged in architectural practice was devoted to one-off domestic commissions. Despite an initial sporadic and unpredictable workload, and consistently hostile reactions from regional development controllers unsympathetic to the modernist ethos, Ryder and Yates used such domestic commissions to establish a distinctive and highly sophisticated architectural vocabulary. Furthermore, it was reiterated with spectacular success during the next decade when major commissions from prominent public and private clients throughout the North-east region enabled Ryder and Yates to apply their formal language to an impressively wide range of building types; one-off domestic commissions were soon followed by buildings for commerce, industry and welfare and by two substantial forays into mass housing.

The dwelling place

Seven houses designed between 1953 and 1967 demonstrate the recurring themes which characterise Ryder and Yates' domestic commissions. These generally may be attributed to various combinations of Corbusian and Lubetkin precedent. Collectively, and because of their diversity, they promised an architecture apparently well removed from Le Corbusier's obsession with 'type'; by contrast, these houses are primarily site- and client-specific without a 'generic' outcome.

Apart from the urban example for J.M. Liddell at Grand Parade, Tynemouth, Northumberland, which has three storeys, the others are of one or two storeys for suburban or rural sites.

As to the nature of this 'thematic palette' which Ryder and Yates evolved during these early years of their partnership, much concerned the organisation of the plan rather than stylistic incident, although the latter always played an important, but secondary, role in Ryder and Yates' *oeuvre*. Plans responded to Le Corbusier's familiar exhortation:

> The plan is the generator[19]

which had, by the 1950s in England, become a modernist 'mantra'. But the text suffers somewhat from translation into English; 'The three-dimensional organisation is the generator' would have been nearer the mark. Much more authentic was Le Corbusier's subsequent exhortation to Architectural Association students in 1938:

> Architecture is organisation. YOU ARE AN ORGANISER, NOT A DRAWING-BOARD STYLIST[20].

Nevertheless, the manner in which building elements were manipulated externally, which to the casual observer gave these houses their distinctive visual imprint, owed more to Lubetkin precedent than to Le Corbusier. This is particularly evident in the careful elevational composition[21], and in the habitual marking of major events, such as entrance and threshold, by dramatic sculptural incident.

All of the plans conform to a strict rectilinearity, although without the overriding discipline of Le Corbusier's *traces régulateurs* or *Modulor*. Moreover, they invoke familiar Corbusian devices such as the promenade, a carefully orchestrated correspondence between inside and outside, and the division of spaces by staircases or columns. There is a preoccupation with narrow, linear, plan forms, incorporating major spaces, but with sub-spaces organised in discrete linked 'pods'.

Two houses on the Northumbrian coast at Beadnell, designed in 1953 for Mrs. J.A. Stanger, and which were to follow most closely a Corbusian prototype, never progressed beyond the project stage. Three-storeyed on 'pilotis', concrete-framed and with roof terraces, they were an authentic interpretation of Le Corbusier's 'five points' theory of almost three decades previously. Sadly, even such a well-worn (by 1953) provenance was too radical for local development control officers; final rejection ensued following a public enquiry. Ironically, Peter Yates' seductive perspective was to inspire Victor Pasmore in his subsequent involvement with house-type elevations at Peterlee[22].

Similarly intransigent were planning officers when presented with the design for the Damerell house, at Scotby, Cumberland, in 1954. The site was an existing garden and orchard to a Georgian house, and a radical linear plan (Fig. 2) of narrow depth occupied its northern edge. The organisation is deceptively simple; living, dining, kitchen and garage are arranged end-to-end in an extruded rectangle to which are appended discrete but linked pavilions for entrance, children's wing and main

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 6
Autumn 2001

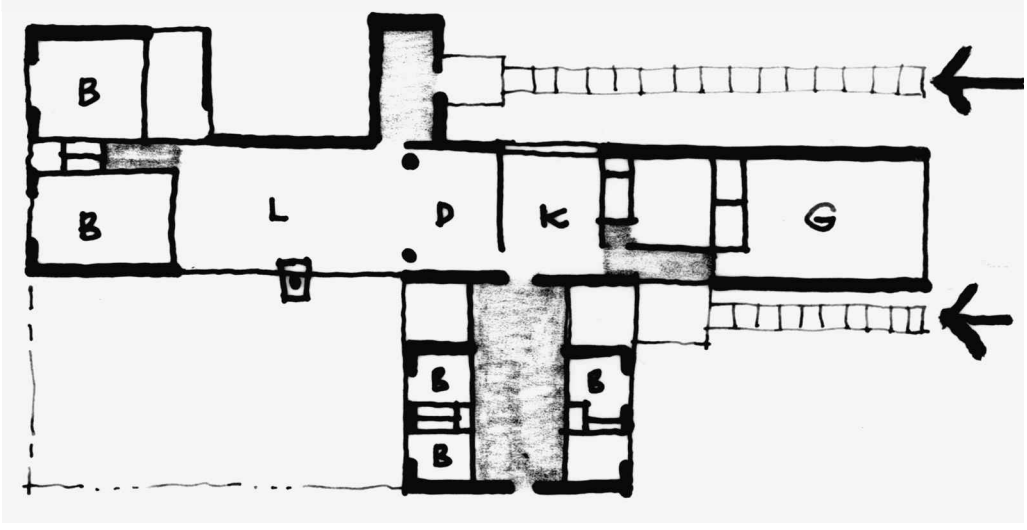

Figure 2. Damerell House, Scotby, Cumberland, 1954, plan.

bedrooms. The living space has a single southerly aspect onto a south-facing terrace.

At a detailed level, the east-west orientated living room has a double- tapered parabolic rooflight overhead, redolent of Lubetkin's penthouse at Highpoint Two, of 1937–38. The dining area is delineated by two free-standing columns, and the cuboid fireplace with cylindrical external flue are direct Corbusian references. The linear plan is an early manifestation of Ryder's preoccupation with this *parti* which was applied, subsequently, to a wide variety of building types.

In nearby Hayton, the single-storey Tonner house (Fig. 3) was built in 1956. Two wings running north-south are connected by a single aspect living room, the entire south face of which is a glazed screen of huge sliding sashes with minimal transoms and mullions. This gives access to an open terrace defined by the two projecting wings, bedrooms to the west, and kitchen to the east.

A sensitive location within the village centre adjacent to a gothic revival church and rectory elicited predictable hostility from the planners. In the event a (successful) planning appeal ensued but the curved red sandstone rubble wall was a concession, as were surprising (for their day) historical references in a rusticated flue in concrete, and a 'Gothick' oriel window with mild steel 'tee' mullions. Sadly, original coping details and fenestration (including the oriel) have been unsympathetically replaced. The architects were subsequently to receive a Civic Trust Award for this house, presented by the chairman of the County Planning Authority which had previously refused planning permission!

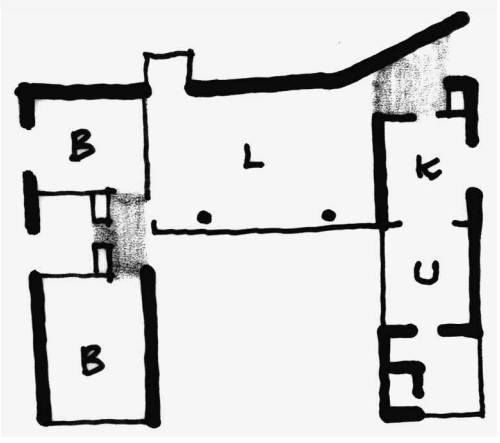

Figure 3. Tonner House, Hayton, Cumberland, 1956, plan.

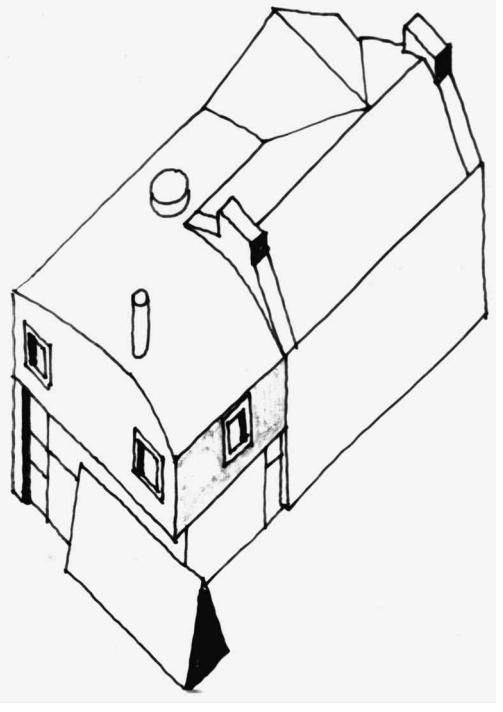

Figure 4. Oakley House, Hayton Townend, 1957, axonometric.

A mile to the south of the Tonner house, lies the extension to an existing farmhouse for Charles Oakley at Hayton Townhead (Fig. 4). A living room at ground floor level is bounded on the east by a snecked red sandstone rubble wall of triangular section which extends outside to define a paved terrace to the south. The obligatory cuboid fireplace and structural circular flue support a first floor bedroom clad in vertical cedar boarding and with a parabolic felt roof which engages with the gable of the existing house. A deeply recessed bedroom window with generous architrave and the rubble wall are the only concessions to a Cumbrian vernacular tradition. Sadly, the original clarity of the composition, with a 'solid' first floor hovering over the 'void' of the living space below has been utterly destroyed.

The Mamourian House, in Stanton, Northumberland, of 1959, represented a further refinement of the linear plan. As in previous commissions, the client's needs and the site location were highly specific; a wealthy septuagenarian widow who wished to return to her family estate north-west of Morpeth. Stanton Hall is a typical border fortified fourteenth century watchtower. An eighteenth century salon with associated *parterre* and kitchen garden had become derelict, but provided not only the site but a source of reclaimed eighteenth century brickwork.

As Gordon Ryder's elegant, minimalist, single aspect plan demonstrates, uninterrupted planes of

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 6
Autumn 2001

brickwork provide a dominant theme to the architectural expression, where north wall and gables 'wrap' the major spaces in contrast with curtain-walling to the south. Familiar devices are employed; the entrance promenade to the north via a visually detached cuboid entrance pavilion; a central stair which effectively delineates living and dining areas. The plan evokes Lubetkin's bungalows at Whipsnade of 1933–36, where circulation spaces are similarly minimal.

The final house built by the practice during the period was designed by Gordon Ryder for his own occupation in 1967. The suburban site in Woolsington, a few miles north-west of Newcastle, was unprepossessing. Ryder applies all the familiar devices so successfully employed in past commissions, in a simple extruded, rectilinear box of two storeys (Fig. 5).

A linear plan incorporates at one end a roof terrace with full-height screen walls. At the other, a celebration of the two-level living room, a typically Corbusian device, incorporates a double-parabolic ceiling changing from concave to convex. A fully glazed gable affords views of the landscape beyond. A curved stair recalls that at Le Corbusier's Pavillon Suisse at the Cité Universitaire, Paris, 1932, and screens a sunken dining area.

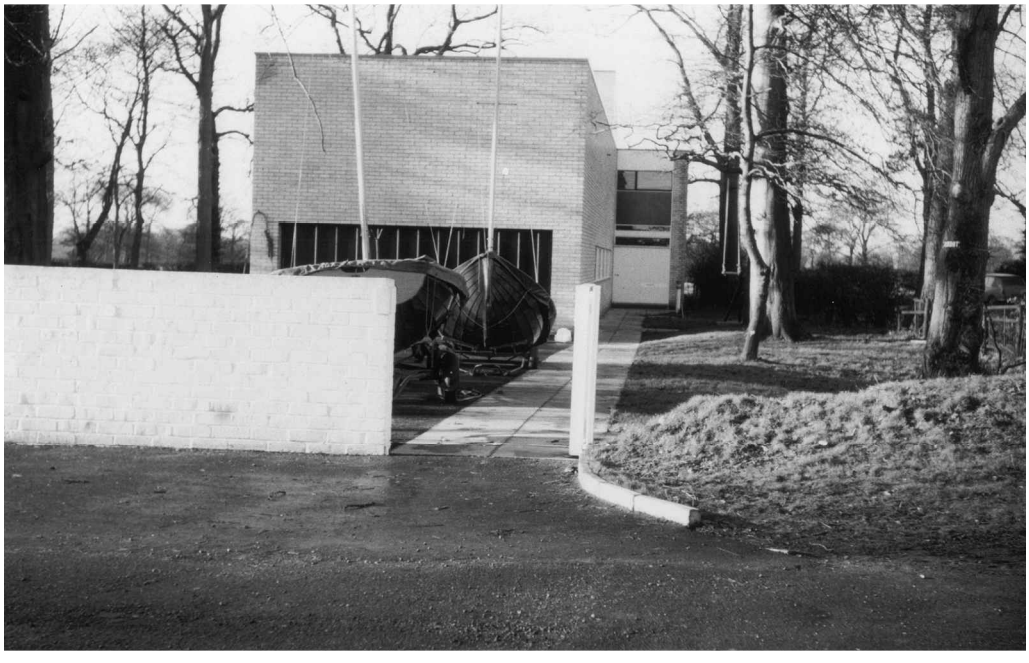

Figure 5. Ryder House, Woolsington, Northumberland, 1962.

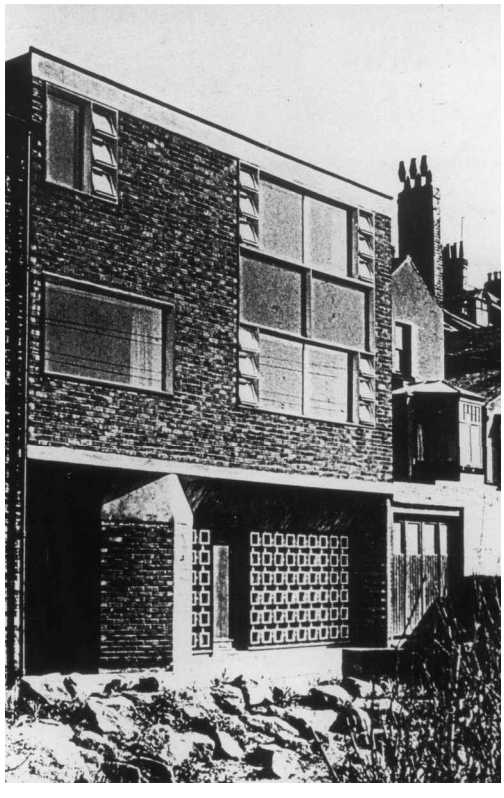

Figure 6. Liddell House, Tynemouth, Northumberland, 1958.

But a modest house built at Grand Parade, Tynemouth, in 1958, for the builder, J.M. Liddell, was to have unforeseen effects upon the development of the practice. Unlike other domestic commissions, this house was for a constricted urban infill site (Fig. 6). Like the Corbusian prototype, the living area is elevated to first floor with bedrooms at second floor level. But in architectural expression it differs considerably from previous domestic commissions; the first floor is of reinforced concrete and the board-marked, chamfered soffit with a suggestion of a massive *pilote* is an obvious reference to Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation at Marseilles completed six years previously. But with this commission Yates was able to realise his ambitions as a muralist; his wall paintings, together with a highly textured suspended ceiling, elevated this seemingly modest programme to the level of exoticism.

Nevertheless, this commission generated others of vastly increased scale and ambition which were to project the practice to regional supremacy and to national distinction.

This realisation of the practice's manifest ambition was by patronage; on completion, the Liddell house was visited by the regional director of Martin's Bank Limited who then commissioned Ryder and Yates to re-order his stock of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century banks. One distinguished example, at Hexham, Northumberland, was regularly visited by Dr. Burns, the then Chairman of the Northern Gas Board. So impressed was Burns, that Ryder and Yates were commissioned to design a series of major buildings at Killingworth, Northumberland, during the 1960s and 1970s for Northern Gas. Of these, the earliest, Norgas House and the Gas Council Engineering Research Station are of lasting significance, but were presaged by distinguished commissions of more modest scale for prominent regional clients.

The Commercial World

In parallel with their domestic work, Ryder and Yates produced a series of trade exhibition stands, notably for the Carlisle Plaster Company in 1957,

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 6
Autumn 2001

for the Gotham Group in 1959, and finally for British Gypsum which represented a final conglomerate of plaster manufacturers, in 1962.

For their time, all of these stands, produced for the annual Building Exhibition at Olympia, were remarkable for bold forms which clearly revealed their designers' provenance. Yates revisited his Parisian exhibition design experience, and the careful juxtaposition of primary forms was to inform all subsequent commissions during the period.

The use of fibrous plaster supported on a lightweight steel frame allowed the realisation of Le Corbusier's formal strictures as articulated in 'Vers une Architecture';

> cubes, cones, spheres, cylinders or pyramids are the great primary forms which light reveals to advantage[23].

or

> Absence of verbosity, good arrangement, a single idea, daring and unity in construction, the use of elementary shapes. A sane morality[24].

An identical formal language was transferred to a series of commercial re-fits, most notably for the optician, F. Robson and Company at Pilgrim Street, Newcastle in 1962, and for Northern Rock Building Society at Market Street, Newcastle, in 1964 (Fig. 7). The fibrous plaster forms of the exhibition stands were translated into equally crisp, but more durable, melamine-faced blockboard, a material which the practice used in a variety of applications during the period.

But the British Gypsum stand designed for the 1962 exhibition was to reappear as Ryder and Yates' own *atelier*; when the practice expanded quickly in the early 1960s, Ryder bought as scrap from British Gypsum the steel frame from their exhibition stand of that year, re-cycling it for the practice's new offices at Killingworth in 1964. It still exists but the crisp white melamine-faced blockboard panels have been replaced by pre-cast concrete. Nevertheless, the clarity of the original *parti*, an extruded rectangular prism with deeply recessed strip windows, remains intact.

Ryder and Yates' first major commission came from an apparently unlikely source, the motor trade. A major Ford distributor, R.H. Patterson, wished to move from its city centre location to Scotswood, west Newcastle. Ryder organised the building at two levels on a steeply-sloping site, so that an uncluttered showroom oversailed the workshop beneath (Fig. 8).

A brilliant Polish *émigré* engineer, Leszek Kubik, of Mellows and Kubik, who later joined Ryder and Yates, produced a startling structural solution where a sixty-metre frontage of showroom was minimally interrupted by three columns. Moreover, the truss which connected them, imparted an adequate scale to the street elevation, and included huge advertising banners. Yates' considerable expertise in exhibition design was brought to bear internally, where distinctive 'Ford' logos for the then current range of cars were employed in a dramatic exercise in graphic design.

But the combination of vast tracts of land at Killingworth New Town, reclaimed from the Northumberland coalfield, and an enlightened client

Figure 7. Northern Rock Building Society, Newcastle, 1964.

in Northern Gas, finally gave Ryder and Yates an opportunity to build a significant group of buildings within a virgin landscape. In this sense, it echoed their Peterlee experience; most emphatically it compensated for that *débacle*.

Norgas House (Fig. 9), completed in 1964, and the Gas Council Engineering Research Station (Fig. 10), completed in 1967, represent the high-point of the practice's architectural output, but also the clearest manifestation of their Corbusian provenance.

This is evident both in the *partis* and in the highly-developed formal language, now applied to buildings of significant scale. The buildings are equally explicit in their relationship with the landscape, man-made artefacts in dramatic juxtaposition with nature.

Norgas House, the headquarters of the Northern Gas Board, dominates its lakeside location, its Euclidian geometry in stark contrast to the landscape. But its architectural language represents much more than a reiteration of Corbusian precedent. Yates' aim at Norgas was:

> to refine a building so that it becomes completely non-representational[25].

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 6
Autumn 2001

Figure 8. Showroom for R.H. Patterson, Newcastle, 1964.

Within this process, familiar building elements were re-examined and refined so that they became abstract:

> This is not perverse; nature consists of these simple elements[26].

Yates described Norgas House as:

> poised like a bird in a green Virgilian landscape[27].

one of several references to antiquity; the striking form of the rooflight (now removed) over the single-storey canteen, modelled on the Minoan horns at Knossos, Crete, was another, and was, according to Yates:

> analogous to the wings of Daedalus[28].

The flexible two-storey office accommodation, elevated on pilotis, and arranged around an open courtyard, owed much to Sir John Burnet, Tait and Lorne's offices of similar configuration for the Bird's Eye frozen food distributors at Weybridge, Surrey, which the clients, the then Northern Gas Board, had identified as an office type, which potentially would meet their requirements. But there the similarities with Norgas House end; reflecting an increasing interest in the potential of the curtain wall for fresh architectural expression, Yates developed full two-storey height cladding panels, with flush spandrels and glazing, to conceal:

> the changing elements of the office complex with a giant order[29].

At ground level, the Corbusian references continue; immutable plastic forms clad in bright mosaics for auditorium and chauffeurs' waiting room are in stark contrast to the flexible repetitive elements above. The entrance is via a 'ceremonial' bridge over water; a tetrahedron marks the site entrance, and plastic forms emerge at roof level to accommodate lift motor rooms and water storage.

Despite vastly different functional requirements for the Gas Council Engineering Research Station

Figure 9. Norgas House, Killingworth, Northumberland, 1965.

(which followed the discovery of natural gas off the east coast), Yates was able to repeat the powerful Corbusian imagery. The fixed element of the programme is elevated above two floors of car parking, necessitating a ramped access with 'ceremonial' bridge via 'propylaea' of triangular section, thereby repeating the classical reference.

The public face of the building is no less than the apotheosis of the Villa Savoye; a clear expression at grand scale of pilotis emerging from exaggerated 'earth sculpture'[30] effecting a 'nicely ambiguous'[31] transition between building and landscape; strip windows, and the dramatic emergence at roof level of conical towers for water storage and air extracts complete the composition:

> No doubt they (the towers) will be condemned as irrational by the architectural puritans, but they are consistent with the firm's policy of playing off the hard lines of modern industrial architecture with built-in geometric sculptural forms[32].

Two speculative office developments complete the major commissions at Killingworth. The so-called Citadel at Amberley (Fig. 11) designed in 1967 was

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 6
Autumn 2001

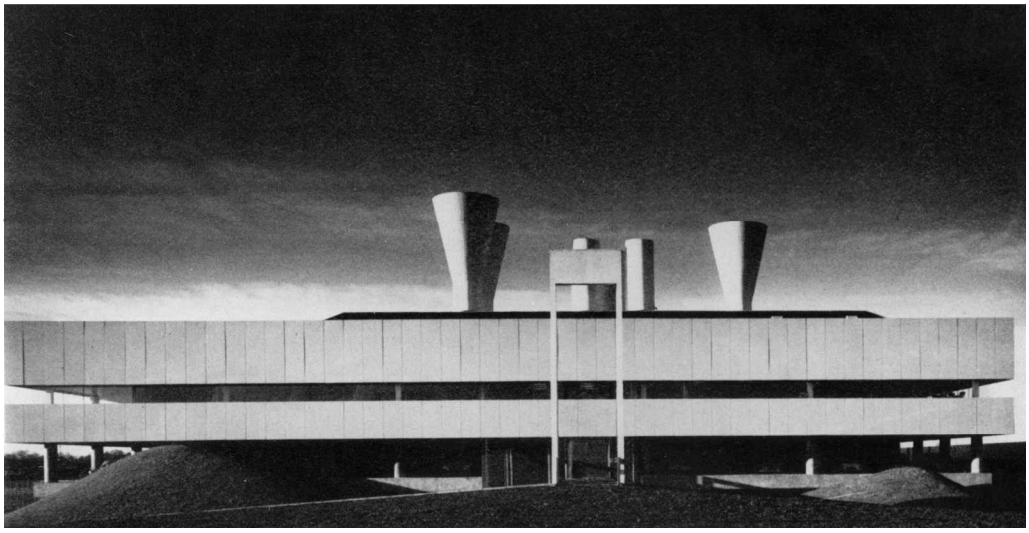

Figure 10. Gas Council Engineering Research Station, Killingworth, Northumberland, 1967.

a six-storey twin slab block of offices of approximately 12,000 square metres raised eight metres above ground to accommodate retail shopping units at a podium level. Occupying the most prominent site in Killingworth, it was conceived as the first stage of what would have been a burgeoning town centre, with a shopping deck connected to the access decks of adjacent concrete system-built housing.

A refined curtain walling system demonstrates Ryder and Yates' increasing concern for the smooth, all-enveloping fa ade, and the familiar devices of 'earth sculpture', primary forms for boiler house, flues and entrance canopy, are all present. Demolition of the housing removed the *raison d'être* for the Citadel which has since met with a similar fate.

More modest was the unremarkable Stephenson House of 1969, a two-storey speculative office building elevated on pilotis. The Corbusian references, however, were extended to the deeply-recessed strip windows and to the access ramp within the courtyard.

Buildings for the Community

During the next decade, Ryder and Yates were to produce a series of buildings for health care and welfare, reflecting seminal commissions of their mentors, most particularly, the Parisian Cité de Réfuge of 1933 by Le Corbusier, and Tecton's Finsbury Health Centre, of 1938.

Two Newcastle clinics, at Fawdon and Fenham in 1960, had established the practice's regional reputation for buildings of real social purpose, and these were followed in 1969 by Hopedene Maternity Home, Newcastle, and by two substantial commis-

Figure 11. Amberley shops and offices, Killingworth, Northumberland, 1967.

sions for the Salvation Army. Both Ryder and Yates had been familiar with Le Corbusier's Parisian prototype[33] and with Tecton's Finsbury project, and elements of both appear in the most rigorous of this group, The Salvation Army Men's Palace, City Road, Newcastle, of 1974 (Fig. 12).

A south-facing three-storey linear block in blue brick sits in a commanding position alongside the seventeenth century Keelman's Hospital. The carefully organised fenestration, evoking Le Corbusier's 'Modulor', allows for maximum flexibility of the plan, so that three-bedroom units may be formed from two, whilst the curved ramp access is via a boomerang-shaped canopy redolent of Lubetkin's *porte cochère* at Highpoint Two. The entrance route is punctuated by Peter Yates' familiar 'earth sculp-

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 6
Autumn 2001

Figure 12. Salvation Army hostel, Newcastle, 1974.

tures'. To the north, access is via the equally familiar 'proplaea' and ceremonial bridge, both significant elements of Cité de Réfuge and Finsbury Health Centre. Staff quarters at roof level complete the composition with a penthouse of parabolic section, another obvious reference to Highpoint Two. This project was originally designed as two linked parallel blocks; Ryder noted a powerful curve (a notional road improvement line) on a site plan, and immediately changed the roadside block's plan form in response to this[34].

MEA House (Fig. 13) of 1974 was Ryder and Yates' first major building of truly urban scale for Newcastle's city centre, and, significantly, was 'the first British building to house a diverse range of voluntary services'[35]. The result of a limited architectural competition, the winning entry responded to complex and severe site constraints, an unfortunate

Figure 13. MEA building, Newcastle, 1974.

product of Newcastle's planning 'blight' from the infamous T. Dan Smith era. Nevertheless, the familiar *parti* of an irregular ground floor plan surmounted by a multi-storey office slab made every attempt to stitch back together what had been, until the 1960s, a distinguished early nineteenth-century square.

Manifest are the obligatory Corbusian ingredients, but profoundly modified by the practice's growing interest in developing novel forms of architectural technology, particularly structural engineering. In this instance, three massive twenty-metre towers support two trusses from which the four office floors are hung on steel suspension yokes. The trusses and yokes accommodate a penthouse of familiar parabolic section. The uninterrupted glazed fa ade devoid of opening lights was, according to Yates:

> a magic mirror on the wall (which) eliminates architectural whimsy. . . . Our fa ades no longer embody a fixed and arbitrary choice of pattern and texture, but are instead a literal reflection of the place itself. It is good manners in architecture taken to the limit[36].

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 6
Autumn 2001

and effectively concealed the structural floor and spandrels.

When completed, it represented Newcastle's most distinguished modern building from a local practice. But the Romanian critic, Sherban Cantacuzino, remained unconvinced by its rationale, and clearly misunderstood the reasons for its technical virtuosity:

> It might have been a truly distinguished building had less money been spent on structure and services[37].

His response to the physical context was even more ascerbic:

> The building is much too good for its site and Newcastle has done little to deserve it[38].

Social Housing

Given Gordon Ryder's and Peter Yates' experience at Peterlee designing the abortive Hundred Houses scheme, it seemed fitting to revisit social housing when established in independent practice. Two large-scale housing developments clearly represent Ryder and Yates' housing output and their debt to Lubetkin's prototype at Peterlee.

Kenton Bar housing of 1964 (Fig. 14) represented a significant expansion of over six hundred dwellings to Newcastle Corporation's housing stock, whilst Albany Village at Washington New Town in County Durham (Fig. 15), of 1974, similarly added over six hundred dwellings to a 'neighbourhood' within the master plan produced by Walter Bor and Richard Llewelyn Davies a decade previously. But both were preceded by Beacon House, the region's first high-rise flat development, at Tynemouth, designed by Gordon Ryder, in 1959, for the builder-developer, J.H. Liddell.

Four of the eight house types, including a particularly inventive courtyard type[39] developed for Kenton Bar had been tested in a pilot scheme of twenty-two dwellings at St. Cuthbert's Green, Fenham, Newcastle. All the themes, such as vehicular and pedestrian segregation with peripheral garaging, and house types of terraced, courtyard and linked pavilion configuration were to be repeated on a grander scale at Kenton. The carefully-detailed architecture evoked Le Corbusier's Cité Fruges at Pessac, in 1925, and Lubetkin's Hundred Houses project at Peterlee, with flat roofs, strip windows, and cuboid forms clad in white render. Sadly, massive changes in government housing policy including subsequent owner-occupation have subjected the scheme to infelicitous amendment, ironically echoing the fate of Pessac and, indeed, the Pasmore-inspired housing at Peterlee. By contrast, sheer neglect has taken its toll at Albany Village, Washington.

By the early 1970s a 'vernacular revival' had emerged in Britain as one reaction to the alleged failure of international modernism. This movement was most prevalent in housing design and its influence was not to escape the younger members recruited to Ryder and Yates' office. Hence the rather schizophrenic quality of Albany. The site planning still reflects the Peterlee experience even twenty years on; three to four storey 'boomerang' shaped terraces of flats and maisonettes define the

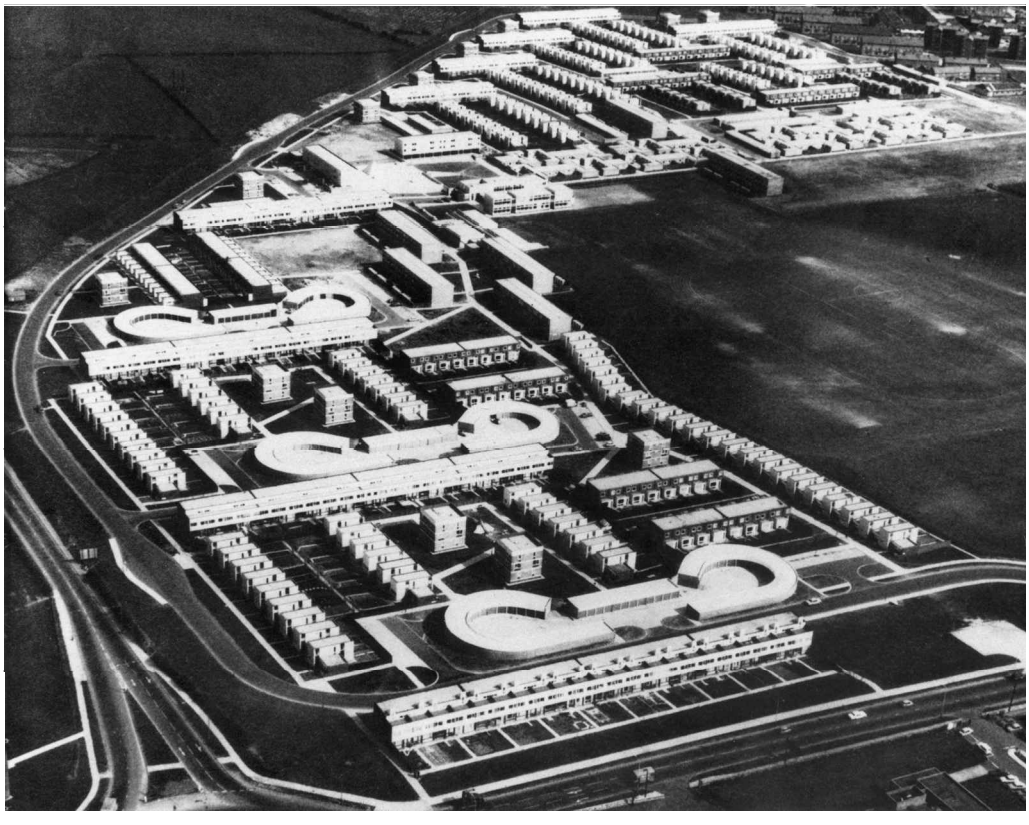

Figure 14. Housing, Kenton, Newcastle, 1964.

'edges' of the neighbourhood within the perimeter access road and enclose two-storey terraced houses within, themselves arranged around so-called 'mixer courts', a recognition that housing design orthodoxy had moved well beyond the 'sacred cow' of pedestrian and vehicular segregation.

Architectural expression had moved on too; Ryder and Yates succumbed to pitched roofs and traditional materials, but used in an innovative way; the roof form, clad in concrete tiles, owed little to tradition, and eaves were discarded. Sadly, much of Albany has now been crassly re-ordered or has fallen into neglect.

Albany Village signalled a change in Ryder and Yates' output away from overt references to Corbusian and Tecton models, an inevitable outcome,

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 6
Autumn 2001

Figure 15. Housing, Albany Village, Washington New Town, Co. Durham, 1974.

given the influx of new staff and the changing architectural attitudes of those well established within the practice. Moreover, Leszek Kubik's search for innovative structural expression, and the firm's interest in energy conservation and in radical solutions to the curtain wall, seemed, by the late 1970s, to have distanced them from their mentors. With declining health, Peter Yates undertook another sketching trip to the Mediterranean, this time to Greece, producing 'dozens' of paintings upon his return[40]. His profound influence upon the practice as form-giver waned, and his death from cancer in 1982 finally severed a direct link with Le Corbusier's legacy.

Ryder and Yates were not alone as English proto-Corbusians during the1960s, but the personal 'conduit' to their mentors, Le Corbusier and Lubetkin, was unique amongst provincial architects of the day; most certainly this authenticity not only imparted real conviction to their work, but allowed them to develop a received formal architectural language with such invention. This was also informed by an enthusiasm for new building technologies, which allowed Ryder and Yates to extend an established

Corbusian vocabulary well beyond that of even their metropolitan contemporaries. Indeed, the startling imagery of Norgas House or the Gas Council Engineering Research Laboratories at Killingworth, arguably surpasses in authenticity that of, say, Denys Lasdun or Peter Moro; of contemporaneous provincial practices, only Gillespie Kidd and Coia of Glasgow, or Cruickshank and Seward of Manchester pursued the Corbusian model without recourse to the banal. But Tayler and Green, having built a convincing interpretation of Le Corbusier's Maison Cook at their studio house, Highgate, London, in 1938, thereafter receded into 'people's detailing'[41]. for their post-war *oeuvre*.

This continuous search by Ryder and Yates for a fitting architectural language was also informed by Peter Yates' role as painter, a passion which paralleled his architectural pursuits throughout his career. Like his mentor, Le Corbusier, Yates not only used the canvas as a laboratory for exploring architectural form, but adorned his buildings with works of art integrated with the building fabric; this correspondence of art and architecture had been commonplace during the 'heroic' years of the Modern Movement, but was rare in post-war Britain, and further served to distance Ryder and Yates' work from their contemporaries[42]. But the practice moved on beyond the Corbusian language in pursuit of other architectural devices (most particularly the curtain wall); this shift in Ryder and Yates' architectural vocabulary began with Norgas House at Killingworth, Northumberland, but was profoundly modified at MEA House, Newcastle, after a visit by Gordon Ryder and Peter Yates to the Montreal Expo '68, where 'mirror' glass had first been exploited as a cladding device. Moreover, Gordon Ryder's strong links with painters of international standing, such as Victor Pasmore[43] and Kenneth Rowntree[44] did much to place the work of his practice into a prevailing cultural *milieu*.

Both Ryder and Yates pursued complementary architectural goals but had profoundly different characters; Ryder nurtured a wide range of contacts with the region's cultural, artistic and business communities, whilst Yates affected the role of the reclusive ascetic artist/philosopher. Jack Lynn, a student of Ryder's and later an associate, identified this essential difference as:

> Peter the educated form maker, Gordon with his flair and pragmatic business sense[45].

Throughout the period under scrutiny, Ryder and Yates' *oeuvre* was exposed to national coverage in the architectural press, but, as in the manner of the day, reportage was factual rather than critical, and their work was never subject to 'keynote' critical comment in prestigious journals, as was the case contemporaneously with, say, Lasdun, or Stirling. Nevertheless, Philipson Studios' dramatic photograph of the sculpted glass fibre translucent rooflight at Norgas House graced the cover of the Architectural Review[46], and the practice's Corbusian tendencies did not escape the attention of that ascerbic cartoonist, Louis Hellman, in the Architects' Journal.

As far as the office was concerned, assistants quickly became immersed in the formal language of the founding partners, even down to the level of detailing. But within this fairly rigid *milieu*, Ryder and Yates established a *régime* in which:

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 6
Autumn 2001

serendipity could occur[47].

Every opportunity was seized upon to explore the full formal potential from even apparently mundane situations, and such inventiveness informed a successful reinterpretation of accepted Corbusian canons.

From their early domestic commissions to later projects for a formidable range of clients and users, Ryder and Yates were to remain faithful to a modernist creed and to their mentors, Le Corbusier and Berthold Lubetkin. But by the late 1970s, reactions to a perceived failure of modernism, such as the vernacular revival, historicism and so-called post-modernism, represented a catalyst for profound (if short lived) change in British architecture, reflecting a national picture which was not to leave Ryder and Yates entirely unscathed: Gordon Ryder wrote presciently of this condition in 1981, a year before the death of his partner, Peter Yates, providing, in the event, an apposite postscript to thirty years of architectural endeavour:

> How delightful it was to have a belief in the future of society in the years following the war. However disastrous the war had been, it had swept clean the ideas of the 30s and had created a new base at a time when the work of genius, in particular the writings and buildings of Le Corbusier, helped the discerning student to form his own design philosophy. How different from today . . . when society is dragged along by events outside of (*sic*) its control and without a star to set or confirm a pattern for the future. No wonder architecture is in disarray and depends more and more on . . . re-finding . . . a tradition evolved by the early protagonists of the Modern Movement[48].

Notes and References

1. R. Blomfield, *Modernismus* (Macmillan, 1934).
2. Referred to in terms of derogation as 'banker's Georgian'. L. Brett, 'Universities Today', *Architectural Review* (vol. 122, no. 729, October, 1957), p. 251.
3. Peter Yates, 'Architects' Approach to Architecture', *Architects' Journal* (12th. November, 1975), p. 993.
4. Although from a mid-european tradition, Moro arrived in Britain when only twenty-four years old. His subsequent *oeuvre* was more influenced by Lubetkin (his first employer in Britain) and Le Corbusier than by his mid-European mentors.
5. According to Jack Lynn, in a letter to the author, '. . . filled with the intricate records of details of architecture alongside drawings of lacework, other textiles, ironwork and tiles.'
6. Yates would routinely relate the content of his conversations with Le Corbusier to an enthusiastic audience of students working in the office.
7. Yates, 'Architects' Approach', *op. cit.*, p. 993.
8. Anthony Jackson, *The Politics of Architecture. A history of modern architecture in Britain* (Architectural Press, 1970), p. 168.
9. 'The New Crystal Palace', *Architectural Review* (vol. 94, 1946), p. 63.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
11. 'A giant among men, a fabulous and terrifying creature', said Peter Yates. J. Allan, *Lubetkin* (RIBA Publications, 1992), p. 452.
12. Profile on Ryder and Yates, *Architects' Journal* (vol. 153, no. 3, 20th January, 1971).
13. Allan, *Lubetkin*, *op. cit.*, p. 462.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 440.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 309.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 565.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
18. Gordon Ryder, 'Architects' Approach to Architecture' *Architects' Journal*, *op. cit*., p. 993.
19. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, translated by Frederick Etchells (Architectural Press, 1946 ed.), p. 45.
20. Le Corbusier, 'If I had to teach you architecture', *Focus* (No. 1, Summer 1938), p. 3.
21. According to David Lonsdale (an ex-employee) Ryder was constantly exhorting his assistants to 'make elevations taut' and to break accepted compositional rules, for example, on dualities.
22. The original Peter Yates drawing was subsequently given to Maxwell Fry as a birthday present by Gordon Ryder. Rutter Carroll, 'Ryder and Yates: a Critical Analysis', unpublished MA thesis (University of York, 1985), p. 53.
23. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, *op. cit*., p. 31.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
25. Yates, 'Architects' Approach', p. 993.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 993.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 993.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 993.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 993.
30. Gas Council Engineering Research Station, *Architects' Journal* (No. 17, Vol. 147, 24th April, 1968), pp. 889–902.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*
33. According to John Winter (in conversation with the author) it was *de rigeur* for students of Ryder and Yates' generation not only to visit Cité de Refuge, but also to be temporary residents therein.
34. According to the job architect, Malcolm Newton, in conversation with the author.
35. Ryder and Yates and Partners, *RIBA Journal* (Vol. 83, No. 1, January 1976), p. 25.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Sherban Cantacuzino, *Architectural Review* (December 1975), p. 373.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Developed by job architect, David Lonsdale.
40. In a letter from Jack Lynn to the author.
41. Charles Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture* (Penguin Books, London, 1973).
42. Such was the case at the Damarell House, the Liddell House and with Gordon Ryder's own house at Woolsington.
43. Pasmore was Professor of Painting at the University of Newcastle during the 1960s.
44. Rowntree succeeded Pasmore to the Chair of Painting at the University of Newcastle.
45. In a letter from Jack Lynn to the author.
46. *Architectural Review* (vol. 139, no. 830, April, 1966).
47. According to Malcolm Newton, an ex-employee of Ryder and Yates, in conversation with the author.
48. Gordon Ryder, 'Architects' Approach to Architecture', *Architects' Journal* (No. 4, Vol. 173), pp. 148–9.

(*Peter Fawcett was employed as an architectural assistant by Ryder and Yates in the mid-1960s.*