

Twentieth Century Society

REDISCOVERING LUBETKIN

Author(s): JOHN ALLAN

Source: *Twentieth Century Architecture*, No. 8, BRITISH MODERN: ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN IN THE 1930s (2007), pp. 90-104

Published by: [Twentieth Century Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41859726>

Accessed: 14-12-2015 03:35 UTC

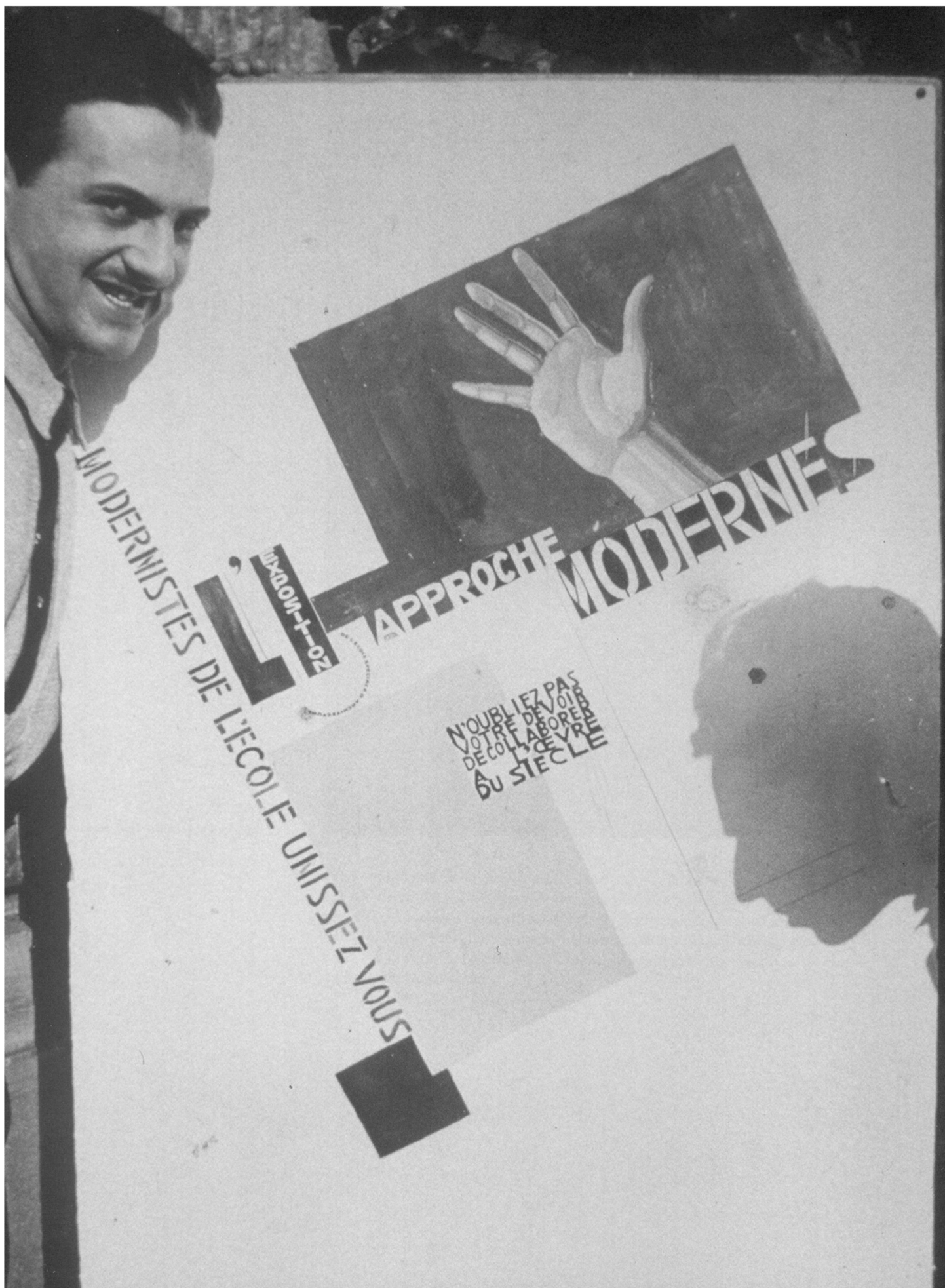
Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Twentieth Century Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Twentieth Century Architecture*.

<http://www.jstor.org>



REDISCOVERING LUBETKIN

JOHN ALLAN

At two important moments in 20th century architectural discourse we have, with unfortunate consequences, allowed Americans to codify the position and direction of the European Modern Movement. The first occasion was 1932 when Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson's study *The International Style*¹ imposed a specious singularity on the various manifestations of exploratory thought and design that in most European countries were still in a molten state, albeit beginning to show signs of local crusting. The second occasion was in 1966 when Robert Venturi's essay 'Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture'² employed a similar sort of generalisation in order to distinguish modernist aspirations from those of almost every other period or style in architectural history.

These respective dates, 1932 and 1966, which fortuitously coincide with the beginning and end of Berthold Lubetkin's professional career in England, might be regarded as defining the time frame within which his work is commonly interpreted. And both of the above-mentioned books, or rather the theses they promoted, helped to establish popular historical orthodoxies which I feel have diminished or distorted a full appreciation of Lubetkin's work and ideas. The first gave primacy to an apparent stylistic and programmatic consistency to the exclusion or detriment of other more complex themes: irony, metaphor, the exotic, the role of history; the second suggested that because such subtleties supposedly neither had been, nor could be, accommodated by modern architecture, a whole other architectural value-system was needed.

Conscious as I am of the risk of perpetrating an equivalent form of oversimplification, I nevertheless propose to address these problematic aspects of Lubetkin's artistic personality which tend to be either criticised or neglected as a result of the historiographic template reinforced by books such as the above.

By saying little about those issues that usually feature prominently in discussions of Lubetkin – his Socialism and the interaction of his political and professional agendas – I do not intend to downplay these crucial aspects of his story. I simply wish to focus on something else in this particular essay – that is, his *artistic* sources and their vital inspirational and polemical role in his work. To help appreciate this, some initial contextualisation might be helpful.

It is not necessary to make a straw man of Functionalism to differentiate Lubetkin's anomalous position in the context of inter-war British modernism. But precisely because he was such a key figure in its 'heroic period' his critical reputation began to suffer when his own work transgressed the received canon it had helped to establish. The fact that Lubetkin was a *second generation* modernist, being born some 15 years later than the 'founding fathers', Corbu, Mies et al., does not mean that his vision of modern architecture was *second hand*, or that he did not have his own vital and perhaps unique blend of formative influences.

On the contrary, in his case, an incredibly rapid mastery of modern architecture's new technical toolbox only hastened the moment when he was ready to give it his own spin. Not only was his 'professional education' as unconventional

Figure 1. Modernists Unite.
Berthold Lubetkin as a student at
the Ecole Speciale d'Architecture,
Paris, 1925.

1. H.R. Hitchcock & P. Johnson, *The International Style*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1932.

2. R. Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1966.



Figure 2. Apartment block, 25 Avenue de Versailles, Paris. Completed in 1931 by Lubetkin and Jean Ginsburg contemporaneously with Villa Savoye, when they were still in their 20s. (Photo Studio Jyska).

3. R. Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, London, Architectural Press, 1960, p.321.

4. B. Lubetkin, 'Modern Architecture in England', *American Architect and Architecture*, vol. 150. February 1937, pp. 29–30.

as it is possible to imagine (yielding no formal qualifications whatever), his early life in revolutionary Russia and the extraordinary auto-didactic decade spent reaching England via Germany, Austria, Poland and France, with all its fabulous exploits and encounters, had equipped him with resources of historical knowledge, imaginative insight and cultural range unmatched by any of his contemporaries. Moreover, even before reaching his thirties he had acquired experience of significant building, effectively graduating with the remarkable apartment block in Avenue de Versailles, Paris.

Yet while this unique curriculum vitae gave Lubetkin huge advantages over his new English colleagues it also presented him with special difficulties. At the very moment he was ready to develop his distinctive architectural vision he was constrained by the fledgling state of British modernism and by larger problems of transition and timing in the movement generally which had occurred around the period of his arrival.

Reyner Banham characterised this reductive change in modernism from the 1920s to the 1930s as a 'decision to fight on a narrowed front'. He wrote – *with the International Style outlawed politically in Germany and Russia, and crippled economically in France, the style and its friends were fighting for a toehold in politically-suspicious Fascist Italy, aesthetically indifferent England and depression-stunned America. Under these circumstances it was better to advocate or defend the new architecture on logical and economic grounds than on grounds of aesthetics or symbolisms that might stir nothing but hostility.*³

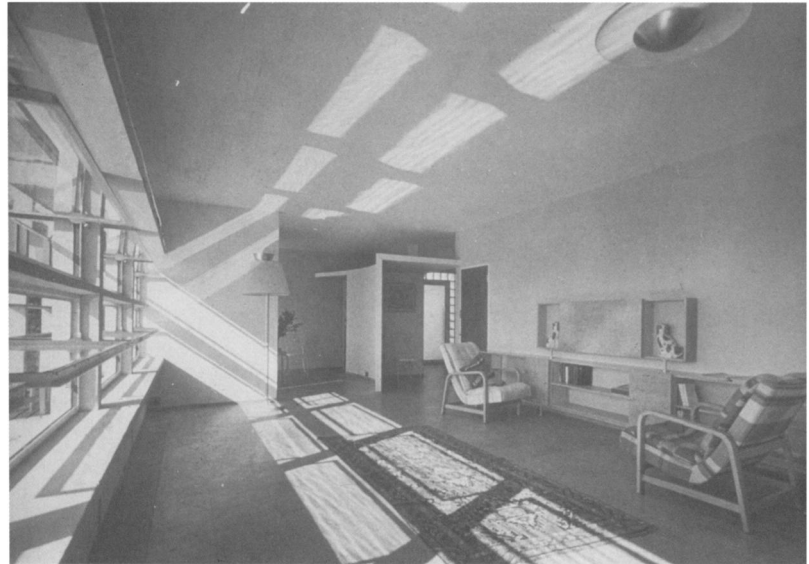
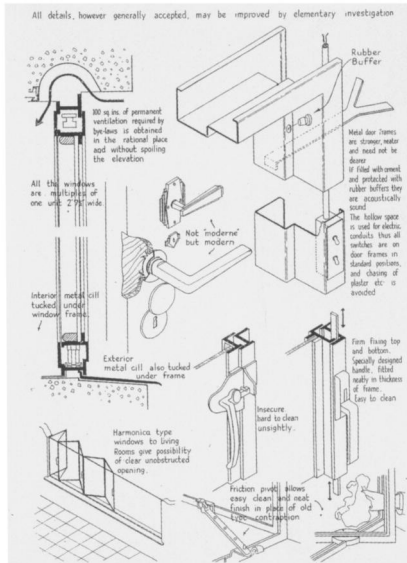
Experiencing the 'culture shock' of English social convention after the ideological turmoils of Russia and Europe, and now embarking in a foreign environment where new commissions would be a function of pure serendipity, Lubetkin found himself obliged to promote his professional credentials in terms of the economic and functional advantages of modern architecture as a deliberate and disingenuous marketing strategy. Tecton's house style would only compound this problem of misrepresentation in the way their didactic justification of design solutions – embracing everything from site logistics to ironmongery details – underscored the apparent primacy of functional considerations in every aspect of architectural decision making.

In consequence, at least in the initial context of public relations, Lubetkin's deeply ingrained formal and artistic preoccupations were largely suppressed, or rather, 'privatised'. The Tecton benchmark became a standard from which to measure deviation, such that Lubetkin himself would soon be judged through the non-compliance of his work with his own marketing. His increasingly embattled position might be characterised as that of one fighting on two fronts – against the traditional architectural establishment obviously, with its outdated values and techniques, but also against his own contemporaries for – as he once put it to me – 'their shamefaced attitude to any kind of artistic will'.

By the mid-1930s he was berating not only the obstructive effect of out-moded building regulations and conservative district surveyors, but also the lack of critical self-appraisal within the modernist camp itself. 'The result', he wrote, 'is that at present it is almost impossible to judge objectively the aesthetic qualities of a building ... and we see a return to the functionalist doctrine. If modern architecture is to make the progress of which it is capable, it should go without saying that every building fulfills the purpose for which it is intended; this should be the starting point, not the ultimate criterion.'⁴

The description of his own house in Whipsnade in 1936 reveals the frustration of a poet whose audience is only ready to hear prose:

It is not a 'Modern House' a 'shelter' which, according to professors, should be self-obliterating, unselfconscious and insignificant in its hygienic anonymity; a thing of which one can only say that it is made of reinforced concrete ... It does not try to prove that its design grew naturally from the



given conditions like an ordinary pumpkin or deep-sea fish. On the contrary the designer admits that there is on the walls of the WC a collection of cold-blooded tropical butterflies, while the bedspreads have little bells sewn on to them to brighten the dreams of the occupants.⁵

To gauge the anomalous nature of this declamation, and of other similar Lubetkinisms around this time, it is necessary to remember the local context. This was when the Modern Architectural Research (MARS) Group was just beginning to find its voice – having disbarred people like Howard Robertson whose main crime (prior to designing the Shell Centre) was to write a book called *Architectural Composition* – when Wells Coates, F.R.S. Yorke, Connell, Ward and Lucas were still setting out modern architecture's spartan stall. It was not the time for irony or humour – modern architecture was battling for its very survival. Indeed, if you will forgive the somewhat contrived link, there was serious *iconoclasm* to get on with – dismantling the establishment hegemony – and the new cause of modernism was too radical and important to be swept under the *carpet*.

So what were the creative sources that Lubetkin had brought with him from his exotic roots, that were so alien to the English cultural environment and his new professional circle? Two of his most important formative influences – icons and carpets – make as good a starting point as any. Lubetkin recalled vividly the impact of that quintessentially Russian artistic tradition – the icon – from the great Exhibition of Ancient Painting in Moscow in 1913 when he was hardly more than a precocious schoolboy.

All of a sudden the sheer splendour of this art burst on us like a revelation, summing up the entire course of Russian art. Some were 13th century icons from Novgorod, some were 15th century produced by the monks of Novodevichi Monastery. Others were Baroque ones of the 17th century Moscow School of Stroganov. But others had been made only yesterday by the village signwriter or some itinerant craftsman, and they combined centuries old traditions with authentic inventiveness and originality, saying what no one had dared to say before.⁶

Apart from its nostalgia, indeed perhaps even chauvinism, two points surely stand out from this sort of evidence. First Lubetkin's propensity for time-travel – his ease in connecting artifacts over a span of 600 years right up to the day before – suggesting the error in seeing artists of his calibre as drawing a line

Figure 3. Window exegesis. Typical example of the explanatory graphics employed by Tecton to market a functional interpretation of modern architecture, 1935.

Figure 4. Lubetkin's bungalow at Whipsnade, 1936 – 'Brightening the dreams of the occupants ... not a Modern House'. (Dell & Wainwright)

5. B. Lubetkin, 'Bungalows at Whipsnade', *Architectural Review*, vol.81, 1937, p.60.

6. B. Lubetkin, 'The Origins of Constructivism', 1969. Quoted in J. Allan, *Berthold Lubetkin – Architecture and the Tradition of Progress*, London, RIBA Publications, 1992, p.24.

across history and separating modernism from previous cultures. Wells Coates once remarked 'we must remember that the past is not always behind us, but more often in front – blocking the way'. Lubetkin on the other hand seems from the very outset to have understood modernism's task as not to reject the past, but to find a valid and creative relationship to it.

The second is surely his perception of the icon as primarily a social statement (even when couched in sacred phraseology) such that it was always narrative, often polemical and potentially even subversive. Thus from Lubetkin's perspective the traditional holy icon could be read as a specialised genre of religious propaganda – in effect a sort of refined billboard to canvas devotion from a suggestible and illiterate audience.

Lubetkin always referred to art as 'a weapon'. 'All art is a kind of propaganda,' he used to say, 'but it has to be art to be any good'. By this he meant the special capacity of art (so pivotal in his Russian experience) to incite the emotions of its audience and thereby operate as an agent of change. His formative years had revealed the link between the icons (and that indigenous sub-genre, the *lubki*) and the agitational art of the early revolutionary period with which Lubetkin identified himself so strongly. Both functioned as a medium of mass communication. Both traditions exploited the flat surface, the stylised image or 'visual slogan', the aggregation of components – whether the traditional iconostasis or the massed placards – to produce cumulative installations of declamatory power. And just as the icons spoke to a pre-revolutionary audience, so the agit trains and ships spoke to a revolutionary one, with a further expansion of the same tradition into the streets and squares in the fabrication of make-believe buildings which the Constructivists could only dream of.

So how does this relate to Lubetkin's personal development and specifically the artistic sensibilities he brought to England in the 1930s? I would contend that because of the impressionable age at which the huge drama of the Revolution was played out before him, these two-dimensional traditions of visual rhetoric with all their energy and urgency were, so to speak, *absorbed*



Figure 5. Iconostasis at Novodevichy Convent, late 17th century, by Klim Mikhailov, from Boris Brodsky, *Art Treasures from the Moscow Museums*, Moscow, Izobrazitelnoye Iskusstvo Publishers, 1980.

Figure 6. The icon as propaganda. Victor Deni's parody of the White Russian leadership in the Civil War, c.1920, from David Elliott, *New Worlds*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1986.

Figure 7. Cardboard Constructivism, c.1921. Typical polemical 'building' installation of the early post-revolutionary period – here used to promote steel production in the Don Basin, from David Elliott, *New Worlds*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1986.

rather than learnt. They were so intrinsic to the formation of his artistic vision that they pre-dated his conscious self-education as an architect. Or, to use current parlance, they were a signalling system hard-wired into his creative toolbox, long before he had even become a professional. Examples survive from even his earliest student days.

Translated into architectural terms, it suggests that the communicative role of two-dimensional elevational design, articulated surfaces, the 'talking façade', or, to use that most taboo of terms in the context of the 1930s, *composition*, was to Lubetkin so instinctual, so innate, as to have none of the reactionary associations that concerned orthodox modernists – preoccupied as they were with the de-materialisation of the wall-as-canvas in favour of the wall-as-plane, as a spatial agent in the formation of solids and voids.

This is directly related to a no less significant point of difference – Lubetkin's experience of classicism as an architectural inheritance. For most modernists their classical training in Beaux-Arts conventions, façade design and specifically the Orders was a yoke to be cast off. 'I knew it like a game played out ... and turned in a gesture of moral revulsion from everything I had been taught', later recalled the English modernist Maxwell Fry of his orthodox professional education at the Liverpool School.⁷ For Lubetkin, however, seeing beyond its literal vocabulary, classicism with its traditions of clarity and precision, and modernism with its social and programmatic agenda could share the same intellectual environment. If Lubetkin had an argument with traditional elevations, it was not that they talked, but what they said.

Unlike his disaffected contemporaries, Lubetkin had experienced his training and his 'rebellion' in the opposite order – his engagement with the Russian post-revolutionary upheavals preceding and thus 'conditioning' his professional education. Lubetkin's classicism had been absorbed through his reading of architectural history, on his avid European travels and most significantly through his voluntary attachment to the French master Auguste Perret at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in the mid-1920s. With his disdain of diplomas and his

7. Maxwell Fry, *Autobiographical Sketches*, London, Elek Books Ltd, 1975, p.136.



Figure 8. The wall as container – Highpoint II's cubic envelope conceals its internal columns and beams to serve as a metaphor for an ideal structure, yet its final composition is every bit as deliberate and fastidious as that of its neighbour, Highland II. (Dell & Wainwright).



clear how this spartan monolith, with its planar volumetric character, was so easily adopted by the local Modern Movement and how its sequel, Highpoint II, with its articulate surface expression, its luxuriant contrast of man-made and natural geometry, its sophisticated entrance, was so controversial. To the local audience this suggested a return to 'decoration' – or at least evidence of a suspiciously deliberate exercise in composition. To Lubetkin it was a contemporary interpretation of classical syntax, an attempt to speak in articulate language. While both blocks were a clear expression of their respective structure, a Functionalist's wishful belief that Highpoint I's façade was 'nothing but' its structure (ignoring Lubetkin's fastidious control of form, proportion, line and fenestration, not to mention the contorted structural manipulations of Ove Arup needed to achieve it⁸) suggested modern architects were now liberated from the traditional problems of composition.

And so the critique of Highpoint II in *Focus II* (1938) by Anthony Cox,⁹ to which reference has been made in every subsequent review of this building, indicted Lubetkin on the most serious charge for which a modernist in England could be accused – a preoccupation with 'ideas as a motive force in design', or to use the 'F' word itself – Formalism – as if this single term were sufficient either as analysis or censure. Seldom can a critique have so perfectly matched the mood of its intended audience – the generation-in-waiting impatient to supersede Lubetkin's achievement.

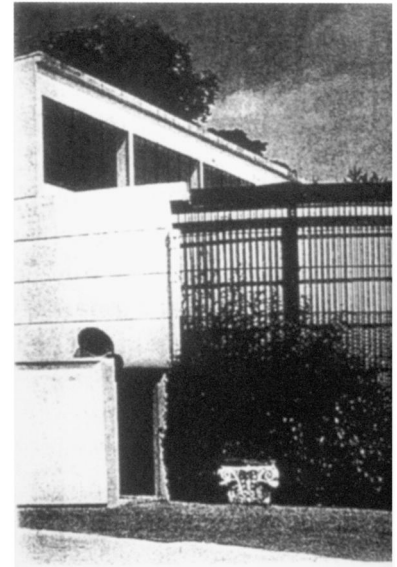
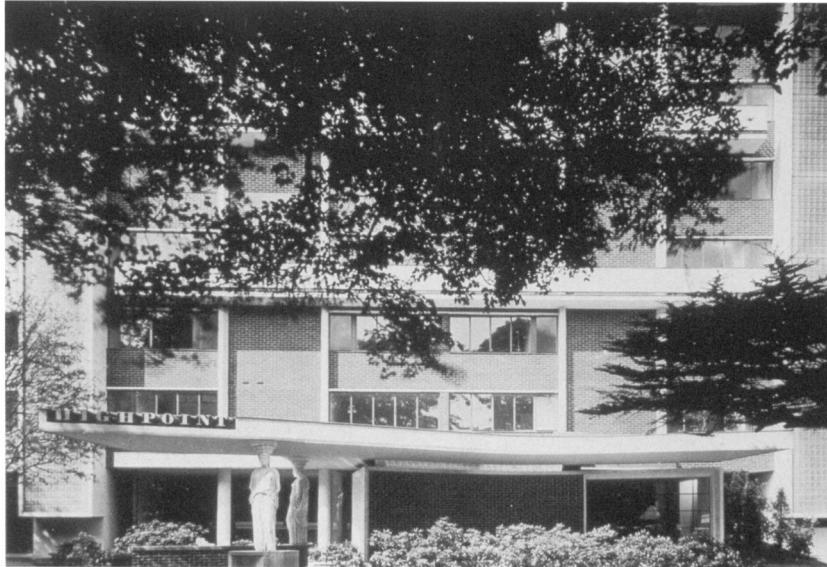
As Cox was later to elaborate, 'We were not interested in architecture as a cultural object for the individual, nor as a status symbol for the official or

8. Ove Arup, 'Arup Associations', *Architectural Review*, vol. 993, November 1979, pp.315–317

9. A. Cox, 'Highpoint Two, North Hill, Highgate', *Focus II*, 1938, pp.76–9.

commercial organization. The notion of the monument in architecture was anathema, and so was what we called the 'prima donna' architect. Equally suspect was the crystallization of architecture into a particular formal style.'¹⁰

Although both Highpoints were included in the first statutory roll-call of outstanding Modern Movement buildings, the so-called 'Pevsner list' of 1970, it took Highpoint II more than 30 years to catch up with the grade of its older cousin when both were eventually raised to Grade I. But in the minds of many observers, especially those of the generation of Anthony Cox and immediately following, Highpoint II would never be regarded on equal terms with its neighbour.



The scar left by its perceived betrayal, by its 'divergence' from 'the cause', never healed. Yet looked at now, without the mindset of a Functionalist zealot, it is abundantly obvious that each building is of comparable significance in driving forward the architectural progression of the 1930s, and that they need each other to relate the development of English modernism and of Lubetkin himself, neither of which could possibly have been 'frozen' in 1935 at Highpoint I's completion – however exhilarating and glamorous that moment might have seemed at the time. Indeed, considered in the extended perspective of the post-war period the constructional and architectural themes explored in Highpoint II, with its (then) exploratory eclectic material expression and prototypical frame and cross-wall structure, could be seen to have had by far the greater historical reach.

What I am trying to do is to detach the conventional, Anglo-centric, historiographic template from the interpretation of Lubetkin's work and discover an alternative way of understanding it as a product of his exotic provenance and his oblique relationship to the Modernist cause. So let's talk about the exotic – which the dictionary reminds us simply means foreign, 'originating in a foreign country, not native, having a strange or bizarre allure, beauty or quality 16th century from Latin *exoticus*, from the Greek *exotikos* foreign, from *exo*, outside. Which reminds me how Lubetkin always preferred to describe himself as an outsider, a rootless journeyman. Which in its turn recalls George Steiner's observation that 'the Jew has his anchorage not in place but in time, in his highly developed sense of history as personal context'.¹¹

Figure 9. The wall as canvas – Highpoint II's talking façade expresses its structure and becomes a composition of articulate surfaces. Caryatids stand as a human signal, and suggest the canopy is supported with ease. (Lubetkin also intended, in Prokofiev's phrase, that they should 'enrage the stupid'.) (Dell & Wainwright)

Figure 10. Detail of the Gorilla House, London Zoo, 1933, with its Corinthian capital suggesting a symbolic link across time. (Herbert Felton)

10. 'Architects' Approach to Architecture', *RIBA Journal*, Third series, vol. 174, June 1967, p. 232.

11. G. Steiner, 'A Kind of Survivor', *A Reader*, London, Penguin, 1984.

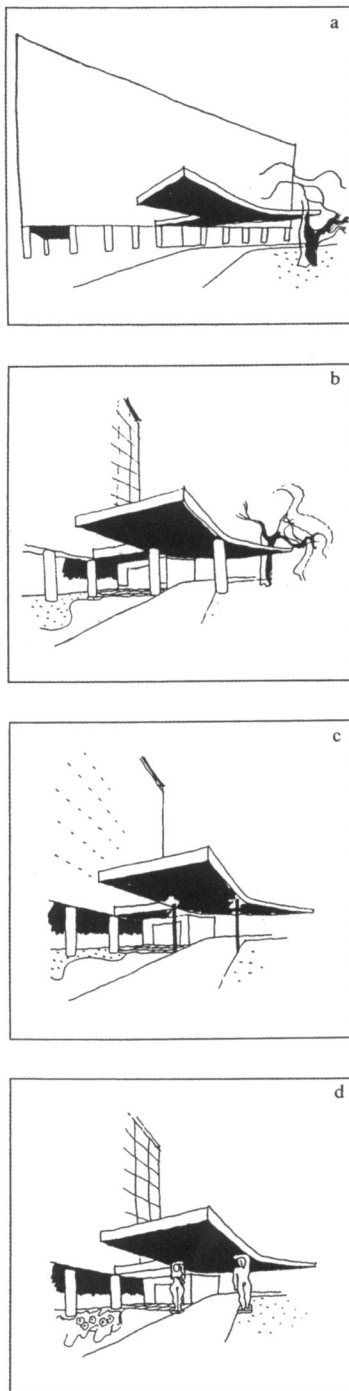


Figure 11. Lubetkin's alternative options appraisal – a: too light, b: too heavy, c: too thin, d: too personal – an ironical functionalist justification for using caryatids. (Berthold Lubetkin)

Figure 12. The Penthouse, Highpoint II, 1938 – Lubetkin's personal vision of an 'other' modernity embracing memory, time and allusion. (John Havinden)

So, resuming our inspection of Highpoint II, we confront the caryatids – another glimpse of Lubetkin the traveller. As Furneaux Jordan remarked, 'to dine out at Highpoint I, and arrive past the caryatids of Highpoint II just when the dark foliage is catching the lights, is to be so ineffably abroad'.¹² Yet these should not have been such a surprise if observers had been paid sufficient attention to the clues Lubetkin had left from the very beginning. I refer to that Corinthian capital which can be seen placed as a sort of classical talisman in early photos of the Gorilla House – surely an embryonic caryatid. It is clear however that a measure of irony has been added in Lubetkin's mock-functionalist justification for the use of these figures through a typically Tectonic comparative analysis of less suitable alternatives.

Building on those Whipsnade disclaimers, this deliberate parody of modernism's own methodology apparently infuriated contemporaries even more than the caryatids themselves, but it is the figures' affirmation that architecture has a storyline beyond the mere demonstration of its own technical solutions that differentiates Lubetkin's mission from that of his contemporaries and suggests we are entering the world of metaphor.¹³ For unlike the nearest prior example, the 'brand new' caryatids at St Pancras Church, the Highpoint casts are of *damaged* Acropolis figures, thus serving as symbols of time past and signifying the relativity of modernism's preoccupation with a supposedly unending present.

Upstairs, as if to reinforce the point beyond any possible doubt, the penthouse on the rooftop of Highpoint II was certainly the most personal statement of Lubetkin's artistic vision as anything in his entire oeuvre. And it surely bears out the continuing vitality of those early Russian experiences. The cosy 'dacha-like' space around the fireplace, the animal pelts turned to functional use as in the cabin of a resourceful trapper, the Pollock theatre prints 'flyposted' like peasant *lubki* on the kitchen wall, the rough timber boarding recalling Russia's ancient traditions of wooden construction, the prominence given to his own favourite 'icon' – an old *trompe l'oeil* Dutch tryptich, which he used to explain not as a decorative accessory but rather as a visually coded inventory of the social priorities of its period. The Calder mobiles, the Pajot marines, the enlarged amoeba door lining, the Leger gouache – acquired directly from the painter himself.

Alan Powers has referred elsewhere to the penthouse's 'overt decorative Surrealism'¹⁴ with what I detect as a hint of disparagement. This may or may not provide a stylistic classification, but I prefer to associate Lubetkin's vision with Colin Rowe's thesis of another interpretation of modernity, in contradis-



tion to the supposed mainline of Gropius, Meyer, and Marinetti: a counter-formulation represented by such artists as Stravinsky, Joyce, Picasso, Eliot and Proust that embraces metaphor, irony and multiple meaning.¹⁵ A tradition that accommodates humanity *and* its past. This difference could hardly be better illuminated than by recalling how Lubetkin placed himself vis-a-vis Marinetti.

*He was speaking about speed, engines, battleships, the benefits of tourism, of fist fights and smashed furniture, while we were drinking tea around the samovar, thinking of honey and dusty roads, of accordions floating high over the telegraph wires above the silver birches and the meadows.*¹⁶

What I am trying to suggest is that underneath Lubetkin's radical intellectual and professional stance lay an exotic inner landscape filled with images of Chagall, Pushkin, old Russia and its perishable folklore, and that both in the 1930s (and since) the inspirational influence on his artistic personality of this rare and largely inaccessible inheritance has been consistently neglected or reduced by British observers in the effort to accommodate him within our local category system. As David Sylvester once wrote, 'allegiance to one's own civilisation is largely an allegiance to its iconography: once iconography is irrelevant, all civilisations are equal.'¹⁷

As well as icons I also mentioned carpets, and without reference to this other formative and vital creative resource it would be impossible to understand the progression of Lubetkin's work from the 1930s towards its social fulfilment in his major post-war housing projects.

*As far as I remember, he once wrote of his first intimations of an artistic vocation, it all started in the dim past when, spellbound, I watched a grown-up finger meandering among lion-headed serpents in the rainless gardens of a wall-carpet.*¹⁸

This ancient craft of carpet making, which he encountered through his early years in Russia, then studied formally at the Berlin Textile Academy and later on a special scholarship in Vienna, was also understood by Lubetkin as a tradition of two-dimensional visual communication – the stylised motifs and formal conventions containing densely coded information of the makers' history, myths and location. And carpets continued to crop up in his travels, next at the Paris Exhibition of 1925, where he assisted in the realisation of the Melnikov pavilion and related kiosks, some of which served as carpet stalls.

*It was an important formative period as it taught me to link the purely geometrical compositions, whether plans, whether carpets, with an outlook on the world in philosophical terms. All composition involves a deliberate choice of relation of parts, an internal organisation reflecting in outline the concept of order we believe in.*¹⁹

Such unashamed use of the term 'composition' might seem unexceptionable now, yet as soon as reconstruction began after the war Lubetkin resumed his criticism of the movement his earlier work had done so much to foster. Already, in explaining his intentions in Spa Green, Tecton's first post-war housing project, he was complaining that,

*For too long modern architectural solutions were regarded in terms of abstract principles with formal expression left to itself as a functional resultant. The principles of composition, the emotional impact of the visual, were brushed aside as irrelevant. Yet this is the very material with which the architect operates; it is in this sphere that he is sole master, by virtue of his training and tradition ... Turning utility, practicality and functional economy of resources into the sole criterion of quality is the best way to divest architecture of that living richness and complexity that have throughout history given it significance and purpose.*²⁰

If the post-war British national housing drive is generally characterised by its concentration on social, technical and economic considerations – all of which



Figure 13. A statement of social priorities. Lubetkin's 17th-century Dutch *trompe l'oeil* triptych, actually painted on a flat board. (Berthold Lubetkin)

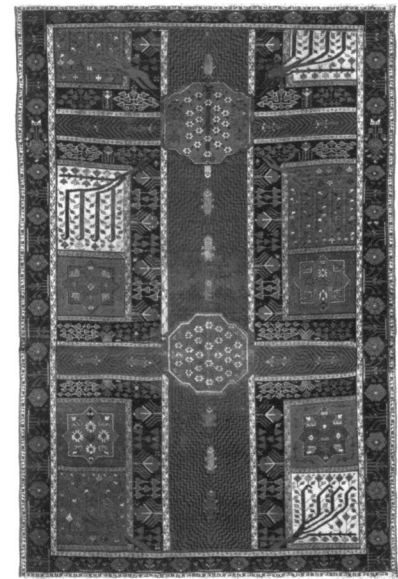


Figure 14. Example of a typical garden carpet employing formalized motifs to represent plots, pathways, planting, streams and fish. (from 'Islamic Carpets', Arts Council, Exhibition Catalogue, 1972)

12. R. Furneaux Jordan, 'Lubetkin', *Architectural Review*, vol. 113, July 1955, pp.36–54.

13. See Allan, *op cit.* p.297. Anthony Chitty, a Tecton partner, later wrote, 'The caryatid pillars at Highpoint II were a piece of whimsy we could all accept, but some of us thought Lubetkin's attempt to defend their inclusion as functional quite ridiculous'. Letter to the author, 13 December 1971.

14. A. Powers, 'The Search for a New Reality', *Modern Britain 1929–1939*, London Design Museum 1999, p.37

15. C. Rowe, & F. Koetter, *Collage City*, Cambridge MIT Press 1978, pp.137–43.

16. B. Lubetkin, 'The Origins of Constructivism', *op.cit.*

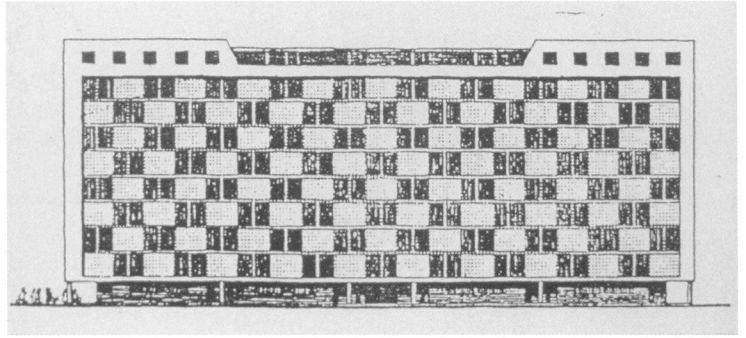
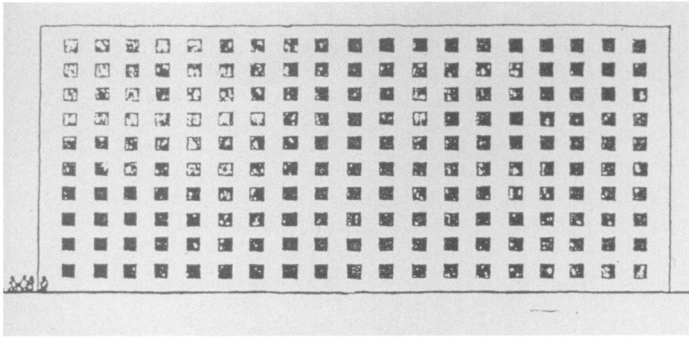
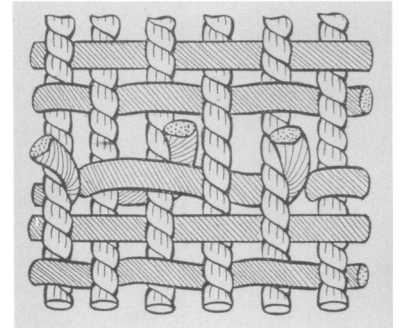
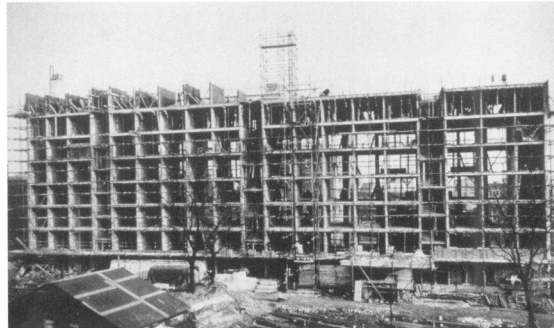


Figure 15. Humanising the slab. Tecton sketch showing (left) the raw ingredients of an elevation, and (right) how compositional intervention gives it scale, rhythm and architectural order. (Berthold Lubetkin)

Figure 16. The cross wall (boxframe) structure of Spa Green (1943–50) – an open canvas for expressive infill. (Sydney Newbery)

Figure 17. Example of paired or jufti knot used in Oriental and Caucasian carpets, studied by Lubetkin in Russia and at the Berlin Textile Academy, 1922–3. (*Islamic Carpets*, Arts Council Exhibition Catalogue, 1972)



equally of course conditioned the development of Tecton's work – the distinctive aspect of Lubetkin's contribution is his refusal to regard the reconstruction challenge 'simply' as a delivery problem, and his concern to give equal attention to issues of aesthetics, composition and expression.

In architectural terms the situation might be crudely defined as the point in modernism's development at which the problems of surface and scale were added to the more familiar themes of mass and volume. Lubetkin's evolving treatment of these can be traced through his own housing projects. Discounting the special circumstances of their ground and top floors, 25 Avenue de Versailles and Highpoint I were both only six flats high, and one flat wide. Their architectural expression was a limited and direct function of their volumetric organisation. Highpoint II (again discounting the exceptions at ground and roof level) was also six flats high though four flats wide, but here the central portion comprising duplex units formed in framed structure and differently planned were logically differentiated from the outer pair, thus allowing an overall compositional variety.

But what of the new post-war apartment blocks which might be up to ten flats high and eight flats wide, comprising 80 identical units? A single elevation might entail the organisation (that is *composition*) of up to 200 windows. To Lubetkin, this was not just a problem of domestic design – it was an act of urban declamation. In the terms of his early Russian experiences such an elevational task might be equated to designing a 16,000 sq. ft. billboard to last for 80 years.

In the light of what has been said already, it is surely not surprising that faced with compositional challenges of this magnitude Lubetkin should have reached deep into his artistic vocabulary and perceived the linkage between the repetitive nature of the contemporary façade and the rhythmic patterns of traditional carpet making, the ancient craft he had studied in his early travels. In his allusive and philosophical mind the cross-wall structure and floor plate strata of the blocks' construction were a precise equivalent of the warp and weft of the traditional carpet.

17. D. Sylvester, 'On Western attitudes to Eastern carpets', Essay in *Islamic Carpets from the Collection of Joseph V. McMullan*, London, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1972.

18. B. Lubetkin, *Samizdat by Anarchitect*, Unpublished personal memoir, 1978. Quoted from J. Allan, *op.cit.* p.21.

19. B. Lubetkin, 'A Commentary on Western Architecture', O.U. History of Architecture and Design, A305/27. 1975.

20. B. Lubetkin, 'Flats in Rosebery Avenue, Finsbury.' *Architectural Review*, vol. 109, 1951, pp.138–40.

The large housing blocks resulting from those economic conditions isolated and underlined the special problem of the elevation, but we could not accept a method that treated it as merely the diagrammatic projection of the plan. An elevation expresses something, it pleads for it. Those blocks must face the street and the people. They could be like a pyramid, enigmatic and inscrutable, or they could try to tell them stories about the world by affirming one of its fundamental laws – that it develops through the interplay of internal contradictions that generate change through the continuous process of becoming.²¹

It is also hardly surprising that in the austere atmosphere of the time the sophistication of Lubetkin's approach found little favour or even comprehension in the contemporary critical audience. Such overt concern for visual enrichment surely offended the hard-won empirical canon of modern architecture – regardless of whether any functional requirements were actually being compromised in the process.

'Façade treatments do not form part of the common theory of the Modern Movement as our elders and betters have it', declared Reyner Banham in 1954. 'In the pure theory the problem of the façade does not exist; form follows function, and when the problems of the interior have been correctly resolved, the exterior form will be found to have crystallized into an unarguable solution.'²²

Yet the continuing care and conscientiousness of Lubetkin's work in this respect, and indeed its surviving popularity, make a compelling alternative case, and in view of the subsequent castigation of orthodox modernism for its relentless poverty of expression it is surely a case that could now be seen to be vindicated.

John Summerson famously defined the distinctive contribution of modern architecture as *social*, and suggested that its source of unity was to be found in the architect's programme. 'The programme', he argued, 'was the description of spatial dimensions, spatial relationships and other physical conditions required for the convenient performance of specific functions ... and the resultant unity ... is the unity of a process.'²³ Fifty years ago, when this

21. Lubetkin in conversation with the author, September 1979.

22. R. Banham, 'Façade', *Architectural Review*, vol. 116, 1954, p. 303.

23. J. Summerson, 'The Case for a Theory of "Modern" Architecture', *RIBA Journal*, vol. 64, June 1957, pp. 307–13.



Figure 18. Caucasian classic dragon rug, (compare with 14). (from *Islamic Carpets*, Arts Council, Exhibition Catalogue 1972)



Figure 19. Façade detail of Sivil House, Bethnal Green, London, by Skinner, Bailey & Lubetkin, 1964. (John Allan)

pronouncement was made, it might have seemed sufficient. Yet the self-absorption in its own operational brief that such a definition suggests, with its inhibited silence on the emotional content of buildings and implicit justification for designing only 'from the inside out', could now be recognised as a fateful corollary of modern architecture's persistent failure to present a smiling public face. Likewise, looking back, it is easier to see how the modernists' commonplace citation of D'Arcy Thompson in support of the concept of organic architectural form failed to acknowledge the extent to which Nature's outcomes are also a response to *external* environmental factors.

Lubetkin's contribution, by contrast, contradicts modernism's disingenuous denial of the role of personal judgement in design, and deliberately attempts to exploit architecture's traditional capacity to communicate messages and metaphors beyond the mere demonstration of its own constructional logistics. This distinction between the operational obligations of building and the 'fictive body' of architecture is well summarized in Arthur Drexler's essay 'Engineers' architecture, truth and its consequences' which appropriately introduced the most substantial recent survey of the architecture of the Ecole des Beaux Arts – that same tradition which Lubetkin's contemporaries had generally considered was of no relevance to the modern architectural project.

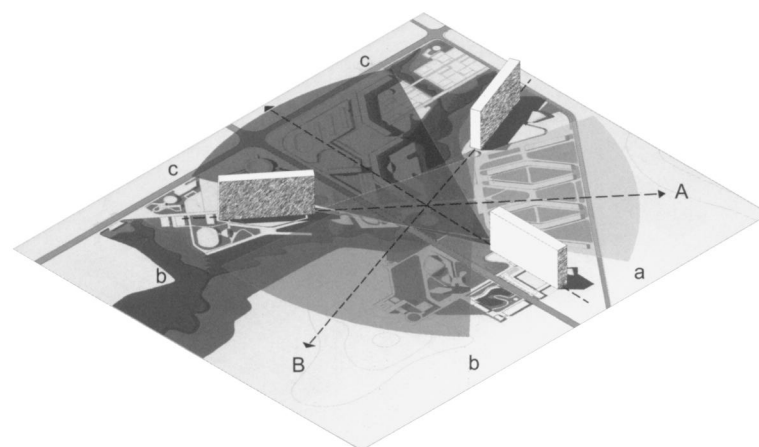
*Until the advent of the utilitarian engineering style, architecture always and everywhere insisted upon the distinction between itself and building. The former is the domain of freedom of action, conscious choice, and ulterior motives; the latter is the domain of minimum effort in response to external necessity ... Architecture entails a conscious effort to establish a hierarchy of values ... What we may now see as the common ground of all historic styles is not structure, as radical thought in the 19th and 20th centuries concluded, but rather the built metaphorical image by which value is declared.*²⁴

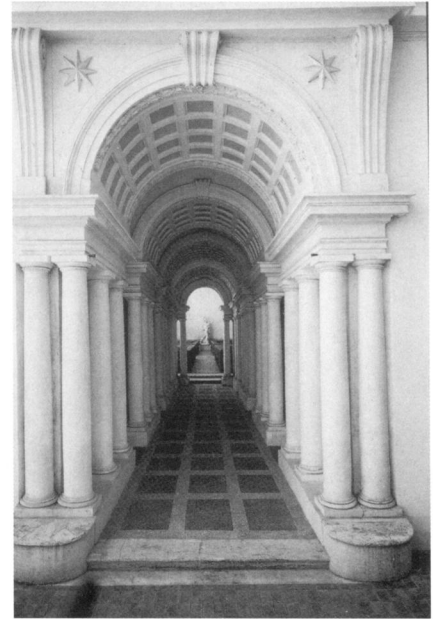
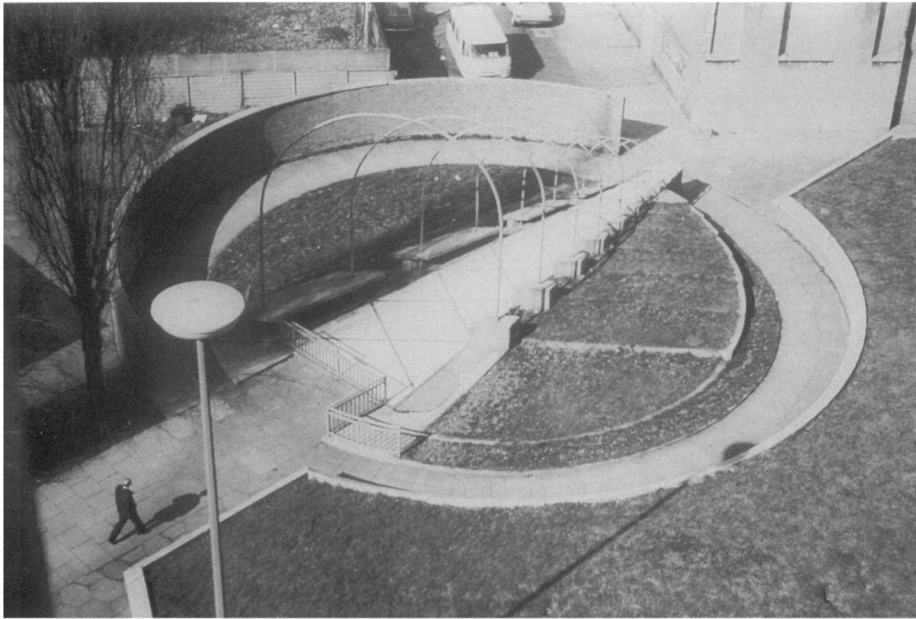
Study of Lubetkin's oeuvre in the awareness of his formative sources reveals that in addition to his well-noted social and political concerns, his *architectural* project attempted a reinterpretation of that communicative tradition in a contemporary idiom. He belongs in the select company of artists and composers of the modern era who understood modernism's dependence on its heritage, and who instead of suppressing the past sought to 'metabolise' it.

I have concentrated on icons and carpets because I wanted to get beyond the familiar and unhelpful caricatures of Lubetkin's 'formalism' and explore

Figure 20. Étoile, Paris, with Arc de Triomphe carrying the 'spatial vector' from Place de la Concorde. (photo: Lecomte, Editions Guy)

Figure 21. Spatial vectors at Peterlee New Town, 1950. Diagrammatic representation of Lubetkin's unrealised concept of the town centre as a triaxial spatial vortex, anchored by three urban markers. (Drawing: John Allan)





the fertile ground of his artistic memory. A similar quest would discover the ways in which other early sources of inspiration influenced the planning work of his later career and informed his distinctive vision of urban space.

This survey would link such vital formative experiences as his youthful contemplation of the Neva from Vassilievsky Island in St Petersburg, or Arc de Triomphe from Place de la Concorde in Paris, with the concept of the 'spatial vector' – the notion of urban space energised, and thereby made legible, by its architectural coordinates. Though usually submerged in the story of Peterlee as a political and bureaucratic fiasco it is this strategy that underlay the extraordinary unfulfilled design of its town centre and was variously realised in his final housing projects²⁵ – culminating in that *trompe l'oeil* monument at Cranbrook, a sort of farewell tribute to his inspirational mentors, in this instance Francesco Borromini. The difficulty of communicating such historically laden propositions in the mundane context of welfare state Britain in no way diminishes the integrity of their underlying intention. Indeed, in a paradoxical way, their appreciation may even become easier with the passage of time as they acquire their own historical patina. As Lubetkin himself wrote in 1955,

*Both baroque and classicism were in fact laboratories where the artificial atmosphere of the historic heights was maintained; the masquerade in both cases was necessary in order to lift sordid reality on to a pedestal. In both cases behind the masquerade lie grandiose spatial conceptions; on the one hand of monistic cohesion and on the other of cool analytical differentiation – penetrating intelligence combined with splendid vision: and in the synthesis of both lies the hope of modern architecture.*²⁶

In conclusion – on the one hand Berthold Lubetkin is widely regarded as the most accomplished architect of his generation to have practised in England, being cited by some commentators as one of very few in his professional cohort to achieve 'world standing' on account of his key works, most of which have been listed.

On the other hand his critical positioning has always been problematic, his career trajectory usually being described as a steeply rising gradient that peaked early and thereafter declined in a long downward curve. Specifically, his considerable post-war housing achievement, comprising a far greater out-

Figure 22. *Trompe l'oeil* aedicule to main axis at Cranbrook Estate, Tower Hamlets, London by Skinner, Bailey & Lubetkin, 1965. (John Allan)

Figure 23. *Prospettiva* by Francesco Borromini, Palazzo Spada, Rome, a 17th-century source of inspiration for Lubetkin's Cranbrook *trompe l'oeil*.

24. A. Drexler, 'Engineer's Architecture, Truth and its Consequences', *Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux Arts*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1977, pp.13–59.

25. J. Allan, 'Lubetkin and Peterlee', in Thomas Deckker, ed., *The Modern City Revisited*, London, Spon Press, 2000, pp.103–124.

26. B. Lubetkin, unpublished notebooks, c.1955. Quoted from Allan, *J. op cit.* p.534.

put than that of the 1930s, has long been undervalued. Then, bizarrely, in 1982 with the award of the Royal Gold Medal, he was reclaimed as a hero of the Modern Movement and ended his life as an honoured veteran. There is an ironic symmetry in Lubetkin being dubbed a formalist in an age of austerity and a functionalist in an age of affluence. It is the reflex of a culture disinclined to admit the interdependence of art and science, of emotion and reason. Yet as Lubetkin himself used to say, 'utility is the pursuit of purpose, but all purposes are born of emotion. Thus a purpose without emotion would produce utility without purpose.'

From our present historical vantage point, however, it is possible to consider an alternative interpretation, which supersedes his distracting non-compliance with the orthodox modernist template and encompasses the whole span of his oeuvre for what it attempted. Such a rediscovery might then acknowledge that the same exotic sensibilities and historical sophistication that occasioned such criticism from his audience in their day – and which through their consistent neglect by more conventional modernists duly provoked such catastrophic alienation of their audience later – have actually turned out to be the crucial factor that makes his contribution so rich and so durable.

Put another way, while the pretext and focus of the conference at which this paper was originally given were prompted by the exhibition 'Modern Britain 1929–39', to understand Lubetkin you have to look outside the temporal and geographical boundaries suggested by this title. Berthold Lubetkin was a part and a product of the Modern Movement unquestionably, but he was also one of its earliest and most intelligent critics. His vision extended far beyond its immediate programme and his work constantly challenged its self-imposed limitations. Only by studying outside his period can one begin to appreciate his contribution within it. Or, to return to my opening references, despite that fortuitous coincidence of dates, on no account place Lubetkin in the narrow context of 'The International Style'. And never be persuaded that 'complexity and contradiction' were discovered in 1966, or that the work of an architect of Lubetkin's calibre did not always embody such values.