

# Hoarding Knowledge: FR Yerbury and Howard Robertson's Records of the Modern Movement

**“These two, journeying around the world found architecture in a ferment of which England knew nothing, and they combated this ignorance in a famous series of weekly articles, spread over the late ‘twenties and early thirties...For they were cheerfully eclectic, and reported all that they saw, irrespective of style; they were prepared to share enthusiasms of any enthusiast”<sup>1</sup>.**

Photography in Germany during the late 1920's and early 1930's often cited for its technical and formal innovation as well as its self-promotion through numerous exhibitions, illustrated magazines and polemical writings dominated the European modernist discourse of the time. The *Neue Sachlichkeit*, which was purportedly a movement dedicated to the re-infusion of essential ordering principles, heralded what was seen as the highlighting of a “new age” through monumental images of production, machinery and the objects produced by these new effects of industrialization. It also instigated highly polemical investigations into the relationship between nature, style, and artistic practices. The photography of architecture was sensitized by these developments, and debates ensued between those artists and architects who staked claims on the productive effects of the medium, and others who were accused of a tautological reproduction of objects for object's sake. These struggles between often seemingly opposed modernist strains within and outside avant-garde practice were largely excluded in British architectural photography, which maintained an affinity for traditional building types largely in the service of publications such as *The Studio* and *Country Life*.<sup>2</sup> It is in this context that the F.R. Yerbury and Howard Robertson's illustrated writings on the modern movement are introduced. While their oeuvre is not contemporary, I propose that their forays into media and journalism - and the perils therein – serve as precursors to current anxieties about architectural knowledge in relation to agency and national identity. While new technologies of reproducibility and dissemination promise to subvert borders, architects and their historians persist in claiming discreet territories of authorship.

Through their positions as Principal and Secretary of the Architectural Association (AA) respectively, as well as in their writings and photographs, Robertson and Yerbury have often been cited as some of the most influential figures in British architecture culture. Specifically in the late 1920's and early 1930's, the two were responsible for numerous articles, books, study tours abroad, as well as teaching ventures. Under their leadership, the AA extended its reach beyond its own institutional limits, fostering ties with influential architects in England and abroad. Yerbury's photographs, which were printed alongside over 200 articles by Robertson in *The Architect* and *Building News* reflect their prodigious joint effort. However

JASMINE BENYAMIN

University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

significant their work was for infusing a particular strain of internationalism in an otherwise professional architectural class in England, little analysis has been undertaken into their contributions, largely due a seemingly dominant perception of their lack of critical rigor, and their ambivalence towards the modernist projects they so faithfully recorded. However, this ambivalence can be read as deliberate and crucial feature of their stance towards the subjects of their inquiry.

In comparison to the larger context within their work began to appear in print, Robertson and Yerbury distinguished themselves from other contributors, whose predominantly pictorial use of photography resulted in painterly depictions of local vernacular. However, it would also be inaccurate to view them as implacably opposed to the kind of work being produced in England; while Robertson and Yerbury were critical of the traditionalist tendencies in building at home, they were also only cautious supporters of the new continental forms that they introduced to their readers. The provisional quality of the photographs and the hesitant prose reflect the proclivities of their target audience (practicing architects), whereby the conduit through which radical architectural production in Europe was conveyed was often softened. Nevertheless, while their itinerant reportage successfully mediated between international innovations and local taste, Robertson and Yerbury's choice to cover all recent building made enemies of both traditional and modernist camps.

Curiously enough, there appears to be a fundamental disconnect between the reception of the work and the work itself, even among its admirers. Yerbury's photographs were never as technically experimental as Moholy-Nagy's production or conceptually rigorous as August Sander's archival based projects and reflected a lingering yet potent mistrust of advancements in the medium among English architectural critics. Early reviews of his images from 1922-23 set the stage for the tone of reception to follow in the ensuing decade. At Yerbury's first exhibition at the AA, a reviewer was "struck by the artist's outlook, in many cases the outlook of a painter."<sup>3</sup> But what was described as a painterly predilection actually revealed his use of low contrast printing procedures, which tended to favor the material and objective features of the structures.<sup>4</sup> Thus, his relatively modest compositional and technical motivations portrayed a favorable and acceptable (unlike his German counterparts) use of architectural photography as *métier* rather than polemic.

In other reviews for a show of the same year at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), critics bemoaned the fact that there were few drawings on view relative to the hundreds of photographs. In this case, the critic nostalgically noted that "the less technical looking camera pictures" were perhaps more "attractive" than the more precisely scaled drawings.<sup>5</sup> The need for visual clarity was a source of criticism for the quality of reproductions presented, which tended towards "pictorial treatment" rather than "pure architectural photography."<sup>6</sup> Yerbury's efforts fared relatively well in this regard,<sup>7</sup> but in general the field is described "at a very low ebb."<sup>8</sup> As THB Scott notes: "Gothic interiors and picturesque ruins are the ready-made subjects and have been repeated ad nauseam, and there has been nothing new...We yearn for good photographic appreciation of modern architectural expression."<sup>9</sup> This sentiment would seem to aim for an English version of the New Vision, yet Yerbury's images belied that assumption.

Yerbury's overriding concern was to document all new building, including but not limited to representatives of the modern movement. His and Robertson's desire to report on all developments taking place on foreign soil was inspired in part by a wish to reinvigorate local architectural design away from 'ancestor worship,' and towards the formulation of a 'fitting' contemporary English style. The contributions from 1926-1932 to *The Architect and Building News* covered all major building on the continent, evidence of their extensive travels across Europe to Scandinavia, and to Russia, as well as to the United States in their first year of collaboration.<sup>10</sup> Robertson would remark in 1927 that any subsequent survey of the

ENDNOTES

1. Rayner Banham, "Howard Robertson – A Biography," *The Architectural Review*, (September 1953), 162.
2. Alvin Boyarsky, introduction, *Frank Yerbury, Itinerant Cameraman – Architectural Photographs 1920-35*, (London: AA publications, 1987), 5.
3. LH Bucknell, review of Yerbury show, *RIBA Journal*, Vol 29 (Third Series, 1922), 507.
4. Yerbury was self-taught, and throughout his career he developed and printed all his own negatives.
5. "Contemporary Architecture" (Review ), *The Building News*, (December 8 1922), 370-371.
6. THB Scott, "Architecture in Relation to Pictorial Photography," *The Building News*, (December 21 1923) 689.
7. "Contemporary Architecture," 370.
8. "Architecture in Relation to Pictorial Photography," 688-689.
9. *Ibid.*
10. The first writing commission by the Architect and Building News for Yerbury and Robertson involved the subject of building operations in the United States. An article of the same title appeared in October of 1926, followed by subsequent studies of particular recent buildings in New York and Chicago. The pair made their first transatlantic trip in 1926, the same year that Mendelsohn's 1924 travel photographs were published as *Amerika*. In a February 1927 article entitled "Problems of the Tall Building," Robertson reports in amazement the "fantastic developments," in the American urban architecture, leaving the stunned "poor humble European" to wonder how they have not been able to exceed twelve stories in their own countries (Howard Robertson, "Problems of the Tall Building," with photographs by F.R. Yerbury in *The Architect and Building News*, (February 25 1927), 351). Tracing some of the latest episodes in the race for the tallest building, Robertson notes that while the projects proposed have "a vigorous architectural expression," the tall building, such as the proposed Larkin Tower, not only does not solve any of the existing problems of congestion and traffic, it also seems to exacerbate them. While citing a *New York Times* article in which its author Harvey Corbett defends the idea of 'taller is better,' Robertson, ever worried about practical concerns, doubts the efficacy-economic, formal and otherwise-of the new type. Examples of the "monotony" and architectural "irresponsibility" of the terraced silhouettes created due to their conformity with zoning regulations are evidenced in the photographs, and according to Robertson, the images illustrate the potential for "architectural menace and even terror," where the city dweller as "bewildered traveler," engulfed by the gargantuan scale of the buildings, will no doubt fall prey to the "strange ills" provoked by the deprivation of light and air.

architectural history of the first quarter of the century would be faced with the "difficult but fascinating task" of evaluating the multifarious modes of fabrication and stylistic sources of inspiration for the new structures: "Never has there been a keener search for a fundamental basis, and never has design been more tentative and uneasy in the manner of outward expression."<sup>11</sup>

Robertson praised this need for experimentation with equal uneasiness, acknowledging the necessity for new formal resolutions to new problems, but he was unwilling to evaluate the overt praise for the machine merely as a matter of formal and structural logic. Rather he balanced these advances with aesthetic and pragmatic concerns of propriety, use and context. Yerbury's uncropped photographs of the Pont Transbordeur, unlike their more famous counterparts, emphasize the exaggerated scale of the megastructure as it hovered uneasily over the port of Marseilles. While, as some have recently noted, Yerbury's versions seem in retrospect "comfortably prosaic,"<sup>12</sup> what Yerbury's tableaux vivants lacked in spatial dynamism, they made up for in information. Rather than abstracting the bridge out of its site, Yerbury eschewed close-ups and details that obscured the structure's positioning over the water and above the harbor. His recognition of the often-terrorizing monumentality of these forms remained an ongoing theme in his choice of images.<sup>13</sup>

In three consecutive issues in November of 1927, Yerbury and Robertson summarized a recent trip made to the Stuttgart Weissenhof Siedlung, a showcase of new housing organized under the joint auspices of the German Werkbund and the city municipality. In the first instance where Yerbury was cited as both photographer and co-author, he and Robertson noted: "While England has looked on with more interest than enthusiasm, it has remained for Germany to foster this new movement..."<sup>14</sup>. The "housing scheme-type," developed in part to present the virtues of standardized dwelling units modeled on the "latest developments of the most modern architectural thought,"<sup>15</sup> cannot be dismissed, since it is "a very serious aim indeed."<sup>16</sup>

Having said this, they qualified their enthusiasm by elaborating on the foreignness of the movement to the English sensibility. Neither formally relevant nor practical, the houses embodied an "effect of strangeness," attributable to "the idea behind (their) conceptions, an idea which pre-supposed not only a change in architectural standards, but a change in the human personality of the sort of tenant for whom these houses were destined."<sup>17</sup> This new type of "advanced modernist" dweller "may either be modified, become extinct, or multiply exceedingly."<sup>18</sup> But in any case, the war "between romance and hygiene" had been staged and the latter had won: the details of everyday life, "pictures photographs, curios," were comforting for the memories that they triggered, but not fashionable or sensitive to the germ-free demands of good décor.<sup>19</sup> The authors revealed their nostalgia for the "gay nineties" where "even the bathroom had its hunting scenes."<sup>20</sup>

Yerbury's photographs were usually clad with the traces of use. In Stuttgart, all signs of life - pedestrians, cars, horse drawn carriages and baby strollers - were evacuated. With little exception, the series of exterior views presented a vision of the Siedlung as unpopulated and uninhabitable. The excess of hygiene over romance indicated for them "manufacture" not "growth," thereby severing any "kinship with nature" - a privilege that in their view architecture had historically enjoyed.<sup>21</sup> At times, there was a disjunction between what was praised in the review and the photographs; for example, the "expression" of Hilberseimer's entry was praised, but no visual illustration of it appeared, and at other times, particularly in the discussion of color, the black and white photographs did nothing to enhance the argument. However, Yerbury did eventually move to the interior, and this decision provided richer illustrative counterparts to the relentless "flat roofs and white boxes," and also allowed a thematic transition to the third and final article in the series.

Roberston and Yerbury began their concluding article by referring to a review from Ernst Wasmuth's influential *Monatsheft*, which cited the particular symbolism of Le Corbusier and Jeanneret's housing, and appeared to quote Le Corbusier himself when referring to the "hospital like efficiency" of the dwelling as "a machine to live in."<sup>22</sup> In their discussion of the interiors and furnishings, Robertson and Yerbury praised them for being "unfussy," and yet an "extreme reaction" to the basic needs for comfort, light and shelter.<sup>23</sup> Always anticipating their conservative critics, they reminded their audience that the work would be neither acceptable nor tolerable, but "if we feel superior to the results that have been attained, we must put this feeling down in part to our own lack of imagination."<sup>24</sup>

Two years later at Garches, Robertson and Yerbury seemed to have hit upon a "sudden realization":

The 'English' houses are wrong and that Le Corbusier's house is right. A motorcar stands before the door. One sees that the motorcar and the house are in tune, that the design of house and car are in the natural harmony which has always obtained between man-made objects of any epoch which is truly a period. The coach has gone, the garb of its occupants, the house, which filled them. To-day, another vehicle, another dress, another architecture.<sup>25</sup>

Yerbury's photographs here were compositionally more sophisticated, both better lit and better situated. The car was shown in consort with the glazed façade, with a figure (obscured in reproduction, but standing in front of the vehicle), and with the adjoining landscape. Using both elevation and detail views, the images of the Garches project echoed Yerbury's extensive documentation of Parisian auto showrooms, a new commercial building type which he admired for its "fashionable functionalism." These projects for them suddenly exemplified all that was good about modernism: They were formally clear and efficient, yet spatially and tectonically complex, and the photographs helped emphasize their "simple contrasts."<sup>26</sup> Here adopting *Neue Sachlichkeit* qualities of oblique and elevated views, Yerbury profited from the dramatic plays of filtering daylight upon the multi-leveled interior.

While French Modernism was covered in numerous articles, Holland and Sweden were the first subjects of Yerbury and Robertson's foreign travels, and as such were formative sites that established a basis for their subsequent documentation and analysis. They also regarded these countries as sentimental favorites, embodying "a softer version of the modern" where an architecture of social concern was embraced, one which lacked an "absolute" formalism but was replete in humanity.<sup>27</sup> But Yerbury and Robertson viewed the German examples - whether by Höger, Poelzig, or Mendelsohn - as more likely to form the basis of a new modernist tradition than the work by Bonatz, Asplund, or even Le Corbusier. As they note, "In a survey of executed work of the modern school, it is to Germany that falls the premier position."<sup>28</sup> For them only this work embraced "the essential character of the age," a *Zeigeist* that was imbued with functional expression.<sup>29</sup> Buildings such as Mendelsohn's Berliner Tageblatt offices of 1923 distilled a form of rationalism (introduced but not codified in nineteenth century industrial architecture) which exceeded national concerns. The authors recognized the "growing mechanization of life" throughout Europe, and recognized in such structures "the same restless vitality of form...the same subtle yet unmistakable imprint of the machine."<sup>30</sup>

Robertson's writings on the Schocken store design continued the theme of energy and transition. He viewed the building as a bit somber and "over-intellectual," but "in no way unpleasantly startling nor half as insistent as it appears in the photograph."<sup>31</sup> The declarative graphics of the over-scaled signage and the glazed cylindrical stair tower were stark features that nonetheless did not diminish the overall "element of romance" of the building, which stood in harmony with downtown Stuttgart. It was in this 'spirit' of gesturing to the city that Mendelsohn "acts as a tonic, and that is his value to us in England."<sup>32</sup>

11. Howard Robertson, "The Significance of Structure: Some Examples of Modern Engineering," *The Architect and Building News*, (August 19 1927), 314.
12. Robert Elwall, *Photography Takes Command: The Camera and British Architecture 1890-1939*, (London: RIBA Heinz Gallery, 1994), 65.
13. Ian Jeffrey, "Answering to Architecture: Frank Yerbury in the Jazz Age," in Frank Yerbury, *Itinerant Cameraman - Architectural Photographs 1920-33*, 22.
14. Howard Robertson and FR Yerbury, "The Housing Exhibition at Stuttgart," *The Architect and Building News*, (November 11 1927), 763.
15. Howard Robertson and FR Yerbury, "The Stuttgart Housing Exhibition II," *The Architect and Building News*, (November 18 1927), 799.
16. "The Housing Exhibition at Stuttgart," 763.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 766.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. Howard Robertson and FR Yerbury, "The Stuttgart Housing Exhibition -III," *The Architect and Building News*, (November 25 1927) 829.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, 832.
25. Howard Robertson and FR Yerbury, "The Quest of the Ideal - I, The Villa Garches by Le Corbusier and Jeanneret," *The Architect and Building News*, (May 10 1929) 624.
26. Howard Robertson and FR Yerbury, "A New Conception of Display - The Marbeuf Automobile Showrooms, Paris," *The Architect and Building News* (April 25 1930), 542.
27. Andrew Higgott, introduction, *Travels in Modern Architecture*, (London: AA publications, 1989), 17.
28. Howard Robertson and FR Yerbury, "Some Modern German Buildings," *The Architect and Building News*, (March 9 1928) 354.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, 355-356.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*, 482.
33. FR Yerbury, "In Germany Now - (Part One)," *The Architect and Building News*, (May 5 1933), 141.
34. *Ibid.*, 142.
35. *Ibid.*, 143.

36. FR Yerbury, "In Germany Now (II)," *The Architect and Building News*, (May 12 1933), 163.
37. Ian Jeffrey, "Answering to Architecture: Frank Yerbury and the Jazz Age," 15.
38. Francis Yerbury, Preface, *One Hundred Photographs*, (London: Jordon Gaskell, 1935 ) unpaginated.
39. Ibid.
40. Reyner Banham, "Howard Robertson – A Biography," 163.

Yerbury did not return to Germany until 1933, and given that his collaboration with Roberston had ended the year before, he set out to write several articles on his own. With two consecutive articles bearing the title, "In Germany Now," Yerbury's writing acquired a more overtly patriotic tone, and his photographs were captioned in a manner that was explicitly polemical. For example, he remarked with displeasure that new building in the country had come to a halt and that the Nazi regime "will presumably decide the course of German architecture and building for the future."<sup>33</sup> He continued:

If the present state of affairs continues, one can be pretty certain that nothing which has not a traditional feeling nor a full measure of the romantic will be accepted by the powers that be. Modernism as we have known it in Germany is dead. Anyone who wishes to be up to date next year and go 'all continental' or German in their London buildings better go straight away to Germany and study Potsdam or the Siegers Allee, for the Nazis have decreed that Germany shall be German.<sup>34</sup>

Roberston and Yerbury's previous praise for work that for them captured the essence of the movement's internationalism had been for Yerbury decidedly mobilized towards nationalistic interests. The Bauhaus in his view had also succumbed to the party line, and "no one quite knows what will happen in the future." In an asterisked footnote, he added, "Stop Press – It is closed down."<sup>35</sup> In such an atmosphere of sweeping political change, Yerbury's writings and photographs from this period reflected his unique position as "lone foreigner," and a sense of urgency to report on events was palatable. His role as mere recorder seemed to him as suddenly inadequate, since architecture itself had in his view been occluded by an overarching and reactionary romanticism: "Of such things is the history of architecture made. All theories and logic go by the board in a national upheaval such as Germany is experiencing."<sup>36</sup>

In an introduction to a recent collection of their most celebrated reviews, photo historian Ian Jeffrey has noted that Yerbury and Robertson were belated in relation to the larger context of European documentation of the Modern movement, appearing to have "arrived well after the launch parties and civic opening."<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, within the framework of English photo documentary and architectural journalism, they were forerunners. It can be stated that the often-ambiguous nature of their criticism mirrored the transitional state of English architectural production itself. In addition, their work also confronted the apparent seamlessness with which modernists of the time presented the movement, editing those examples that did not quite conform. In contrast, Yerbury and Robertson undid the editing by celebrating non-conformist and canonic buildings alike.

With a varying measure of success, Yerbury inserted his place as visitor rendering each moment "in its hour,"<sup>38</sup> and at other times he maintained the uneasy distance of an itinerant critic. Images of obsolescence and speculation were treated to the same sense of contingency, neither being firmly rooted in the present. Structures of all scales and functions, palaces, and civic buildings, vernacular and urban dwellings, as well as numerous figures operated as both subjects and metaphoric stand-ins, such that Yerbury's impulse was not merely documentary or photojournalistic, but implicated in a highly personal engagement with his various assignments.<sup>39</sup> His and Robertson's firm basis in the practicalities of their profession superseded stylistic considerations and any radicalism lay in subject matter and not in technique or method of inquiry. They concerned themselves with both celebrated figures and others like Mendelsohn, who, as Reyner Banham notes, languished in the "limbo of footnotes by the standard histories..."<sup>40</sup> As such, they were the makers of opinion despite their eclecticism and because of their adaptability and refusal of any one idiom. While often appearing as no more than a miscellaneous collection of writings and images, Robertson and Yerbury's work nonetheless persists as a matter of permanent record.