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## Architecture, utopia and history in Morris's thought

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Morris's interest in architecture was life-long, even if his appreciation of its meaning changed considerably. We know that as a young man he became an enthusiastic admirer of medieval Gothic, was an avid reader of Ruskin, and a passionate pilgrim making two journeys in 1854 and 1855 to inspect the cathedrals of Northern France. We also know that in the next year he started training as an architect, spending nine months in George Edmund Street's office, and spending much of his time there drawing Gothic ornament. In this office he met two promising young architects, Richard Norman Shaw and Philip Webb. The latter was to become a life-long friend and a fellow socialist. It was this same Philip Webb who designed Morris's new house commissioned just after his marriage, the famous 'Red House' in Bexley Heath (Kent). In this youthful phase Morris's interest in architecture was largely that of a modern aesthete, critical of the vulgarity of the commercial architecture of his times. The second phase we can identify is that of his long involvement with the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, from 1877 onwards. In a practical manner, it led Morris to start writing and lecturing about architecture, thus developing his thought about its

history and significance for his times. During his socialist phase, which began shortly afterwards, Morris's finally anchored artistic work in a political analysis of society which opened revolutionary perspectives. Thus he was led to imagine the status of architecture in the communist society of the future, as we can see in *News from Nowhere*.

The problem I am going to discuss in this paper is that of the changing meaning of architecture for Morris throughout his career. The general trend I will identify is that his definition was less and less narrowly aesthetic. Morris's early enthusiasm for Gothic and detestation of the classical style gave way later to a more tolerant attitude to the question of style, as is clear in *News from Nowhere*. Architecture was gradually understood more and more in terms of a total art of the environment, as he suggested in a lecture of 1881, where he wrote that "it embraces the consideration of the whole external surroundings of the life of man"<sup>1</sup>. Morris denounced the ugliness of the urban environment and the degradation of the countryside as particularly repulsive features of contemporary society. Symmetrically, one of the aims of the future revolution was to restore a general enjoyment of the fairness of the earth. In this perspective, architecture tended to merge with ecology, as we can see in *News from Nowhere*. However Morris did not turn his back on the history of

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1. *William Morris on Architecture*, ed. Chris Miele, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996, p. 64.

architecture, and, as I will show, assigned it the role of the memory of mankind, a memory that had to be retained even in the ideal civilization of utopia.

## I.

I will first examine Morris's early enthusiasm for Gothic, and in particular Ruskin's influence on Morris. It was in his Oxford years that the young Morris nurtured his passion for mediaeval architecture and society by reading key texts such as Augustus Pugin's *Contrasts*, Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present*, and of course Ruskin's famous chapter on 'The Nature of Gothic', published in 1853 in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice*. This was Ruskin's second book on architecture, in which he retraced the evolution of the Gothic style in Venice. He identified six major formal features in Gothic, by order of importance: "Savageness, Changefulness, Naturalism, Grotesqueness, Rigidity, Redundance". These features were clearly not found in current Victorian architecture, which was still under the sway of a belated neo-classicism, and this romantic primitivism clearly fascinated Morris.

Secondly Ruskin connected the rise and decay of architecture with political and social factors. He situated the beginning of decline of the style about the beginning of the 14th century, in connection with the evolution of its

institutions, when the nobility became a ruling oligarchy with interests different from those of the people. And this was to be a crucial lesson for Morris, who was to develop it in more theoretical terms later on.

Another essential feature of the chapter was of course Ruskin's critique of the division of labour in the industrial civilization, as opposed to the supposed autonomy of the medieval craftsman at work. This parallel was repeated by Morris in his socialist phase, and even theorized with the help of Marxism. Such was Morris's veneration for this chapter that he reprinted it separately at the Kelmscott Press in the 1890s, adding a preface of his own, in which he declared it was "one of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century."<sup>2</sup>

Less well-known, but equally essential, are Ruskin's *Lectures on Architecture and Painting*, delivered at Edinburgh in 1854 and printed in the same year. We know that Morris and Burne-Jones read them enthusiastically at Oxford, especially the fourth lecture in praise of the Pre-raphaelite movement. But for our purpose, we have to insist that Morris could also find in these lectures a comprehensive definition of architecture that was to influence him later in life. Ruskin rejected the notion that proportion was the essential feature of

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2. William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. C. Wilmer, Penguin Books, 1998, p. 367. Referred to below as *NfN*.

architecture, and explained that ornamentation was the truly important part of architecture : “ The noblest thing in a building, and its *highest* virtue, is that it be nobly sculptured and painted ”<sup>3</sup>. We find this same insistence on the necessary fusion of architecture and the decorative arts in many later texts by Morris, for example in the first paragraph of his lecture of 1881 on ‘Architecture in civilization’ :

Noble as that art is by itself, and though it is specially the art of civilisation, it neither ever has existed nor ever can exist alive and progressive by itself, but must cherish and be cherished by all the crafts whereby men make the things which they intend shall be beautiful<sup>4</sup>.

Ruskin and Morris shared a conception of architecture as a total art, which addressed both the mind and the senses, the scholar as well as the ordinary man. They believed it absolutely required ornamentation in the form of sculpture and fresco because these alone would immediately appeal to a wider public, by their historical associations. *Romance* was for them an essential part of architecture, that is the ability to stimulate the imagination. We find the word ‘romance’ in the account Morris gave of his first visit to Rouen in the summer of 1854 :

I first saw the city of Rouen, then still in its outward aspect a piece of the Middle Ages : no words can tell you how its mingled beauty, history, and romance took hold on me ; I can

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3. John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture, Lectures on Architecture and Painting, etc.*, New York, n.d., ‘Addenda to Lectures I and II’, p. 277.

4. Miele, p. 64.

only say that, looking back on my past life, I find it was the greatest pleasure I have ever had<sup>5</sup>.

In *News from Nowhere*, we can find several examples of ornamented architecture in the description of the Hammersmith guest-house and the hall of the Bloomsbury Market. There is a significant discussion of the decoration of the latter in chapter XVI. Guest says :

I found it difficult to keep my eyes off the wall-pictures... I saw at a glance that their subjects were taken from queer old-world myths and imaginations which in yesterday's world only about half a dozen people in the country knew anything about ; and when the two Hammonds sat down opposite to us, I said to the old man, pointing to the frieze :

'How strange to see such subjects here !'

'Why ?' said he. 'I don't see why you should be surprised ; everybody knows the tales ; and they are graceful and pleasant subjects, not too tragic for a place where people mostly eat and drink and amuse themselves, and yet full of incident.'<sup>6</sup>

In *Nowhere* architecture and its ornaments address everyone, as there is no longer any elite culture.

Another aspect of architecture as a total art is the co-operation between autonomous but co-ordinated workers which is mentioned by both Ruskin and Morris as a positive feature of mediaeval art. In Morris's lecture of 1884 on 'Architecture and History' we can read :

All architectural work must be cooperative ; in all co-operative work the finished wares can be no better in quality than the lowest, or simplest, or widest grade, which is also the most essential, will allow them to be. The kind and quality of

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5. Text quoted par J. Lindsay, *William Morris: His Life and Work*, London : Constable, 1975, p.51.

6. *NfN*, p. 130.

that work, the work of the ordinary handicraftsman, is determined by the social conditions under which he lives, which differ much from age to age<sup>7</sup>.

We also find an example of this vital cooperation in the chapter of *News from Nowhere* about the 'Obstinate Refusers', where two sculptresses are at work among a team of enthusiastic builders. This sort of ideal collaboration Morris had experienced in 1859 in the design and decoration of his 'Red House' at Bexley Heath (Kent). The main contributors were the architect Philip Webb and Morris's Pre-raphaelite friends, notably Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. This house was the very opposite of the pretentious 'cockney villa' derided by Morris in *News from Nowhere*. Its plan was irregular, its material apparent, and its general outline reminiscent of Kentish farm-houses. The interior decoration was even more revolutionary, with its austere hand-painted furniture and its specially designed wall-papers, tapestries and carpets. If Morris had not turned out later to be a socialist prophet, we should now probably describe the Red House only in terms of as a rich man's experiment in *avant-garde* architecture and decoration. But with hindsight we may say it also anticipated on the synonymity between work, art, and pleasure that is so striking a feature of life in *News from Nowhere*.

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7. Miele, p. 104.

## II.

Let us now turn to the creation of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877 which was for Morris an occasion of developing his ideas about the function of architecture in society. The aim of the Society was to protect ancient buildings of considerable architectural interest from the overzealous restorations (that sometimes amounted to reconstruction) by such architects as George Gilbert Scott. In the Manifesto of the Society, first published in 1877, Morris connected the current craze for restoration to the absence of a truly living modern architecture :

For Architecture, long decaying, died out, as a popular art, at least, just as the knowledge of mediaeval art was born. So that the civilised world of the nineteenth century has no style of its own amidst its wide knowledge of the styles of other centuries....<sup>8</sup>

For Morris, British architecture, after its final flowering in the 14th century, had been declining since the Reformation. He considered the so-called Renaissance as the time when theoreticians and scholars took the upper hand over architectural creation. They published beautifully illustrated architectural treatises but were increasingly divorced from the building trade, while masons and decorative artists were reduced to the role of irresponsible executants. This fatal division of labour continued and developed in later centuries

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8. Miele, p.53.

until the Victorian age. On the contrary, Morris defended the conception of architecture as a collective creation, and did not believe that a building should be judged only on the merits of the architect.

Another important idea publicized by the SPAB was the value of architecture as historical evidence. According to its Manifesto it was absurd to restore a building to its supposed pristine purity, because it could mean "to strip a building of this and that and the other part of its history, of its life that is"<sup>9</sup>. Morris considered a building shared the lives of men, to some extent, and was naturally to be adapted to their changing needs. He objected to the sacralization of ancient architecture, especially as in many cases, little was known about the original state of a building. It was wiser to respect the additions or destructions effected by successive generations, as he wrote in the Manifesto:

Every change, whatever history it destroyed, left history in the gap, was alive with the spirit of the deeds done amidst its fashioning. The result of all this, was often a building in which the many changes, though harsh and visible enough, were by their very contrast interesting and instructive and could by no possibility mislead<sup>10</sup>.

Here we find a major theme in Morris's understanding of buildings as products of a society, not just on their erection, but throughout the duration of their existence.

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9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

Of course looking backwards sometimes can give rise to the accusation of being more concerned with the past than the present. Conservationists and the 'heritage industry' to this day are often represented as simply conservative. Morris has not escaped this kind of criticism, especially from those who consider that his mediaevalism is stronger than any other influence. Yet Morris took care to explain that the action of the SPAB was forward-looking, as for example in this speech of 1879 :

I will be bold to say that many of the best men among us look back much to the past, not with idle regret, but with humility, hope, and courage ; not in striving to bring the dead to life again, but to enrich the present and the future : I may well use the word enrich, for if we of the present are not the more careful, the future will on some sides be but poor, I fear<sup>11</sup>.

Anchoring the future in the past may not sound a very promising attitude for a revolutionary socialist like Morris. Yet, as we shall see, he gave the past an important role in the utopian world of Nowhere.

In the course of his work for the SPAB Morris also discovered how the practice of architecture, whether for restoration or for new building, was deeply conditioned by the competitive and commercial spirit of the time. According to him Victorian architecture was clearly more of the nature of a business than an art, even in the hands of such luminaries of the Gothic revival as George Gilbert Scott and his former

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11. 'Speech seconding a Resolution against Restoration', in SPAB, *The Second Annual Meeting of the Society*, London, 1879, p.30.

master George Edmund Street. Morris increasingly doubted that beautiful architecture could at all be created in such a society. In his lecture on 'The Revival of architecture' of 1888 he explained the aesthetic failure of the Gothic revival in the 19th century in social and economic terms :

The enthusiasm of the Gothic revivalists died out when they were confronted by the fact that they form part of a society which will not and cannot have a living style, because it is an economical necessity for its existence that the ordinary everyday work of its population shall be mechanical drudgery ; and because it is the harmony of the ordinary everyday work of the population which produces Gothic, that is, living architectural art, and mechanical drudgery cannot be harmonized into art<sup>12</sup>.

According to Morris, the current ugliness of Victorian architecture extended even to the houses of the rich, for reasons explained in *News from Nowhere*. At one point, Ellen exclaims :

But why the rich men, who had the time and the leisure and the materials for building, as it would be in this case, should not have housed themselves well, I do not understand as yet<sup>13</sup>.

William Guest then explains to her that even the architecture produced for the rich in a society based on the oppression of the poor could only be vulgar and ugly, as it reflected the sordidness of the whole system. Good architecture simply could not exist in such a society.

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12. Miele, p.138.

13. *NfN*, p.212.

### III.

On the contrary, in the utopian world of Nowhere, good architecture does exist. Not that we find many detailed descriptions, or many indications about architectural style. After all, we could not expect them from a utopian text which aimed more at opening general perspectives than at providing a blueprint for the future. What we know of the beauty of architecture in the egalitarian society of Nowhere is mostly that it is the direct result of popular creativity. It results from the kind of co-operative work Ruskin and Morris believed had existed in the Middle Ages. It is significant that the word architect is not found in the book, any more than the name of one. Dick does mention in passing that he designed the great doors of the Hammersmith playhouse himself, but we understand this was done by way of hobby, in the same way as he designed the clasp of damascened steel of his own belt.

Architecture in Nowhere is therefore truly popular. Most people are even said to have some technical competence in building, acquired in childhood :

You see, children are mostly given to imitating their elders, and when they see most people about them engaged in genuinely amusing work, like house-building and street-paving, and gardening, and the like, that is what they want to be doing<sup>14</sup> .

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14. *NfN*, p.68.

We are also told that many children can thatch a house and have notions of carpentry. Architecture, in other words, is no longer the speciality of educated and exclusive professionals. It is now restored to everyone, and is practised as a useful art answering the real needs of the inhabitants, without meaningless luxury or pretention. We are told that most private houses are simple, and often built of cheap materials. For example Guest described those he sees as he drives through Hammersmith :

They were all pretty in design, and as solid as might be, but countrified in appearance, like yeomen's dwellings ; some of them red brick like those by the river, but more of timber and plaster, which were by the necessity of their construction so like mediaeval houses of the same materials that I fairly felt as if I were alive in the fourteenth century<sup>15</sup>.

The use of cheap and natural building materials is of course typical of the simplicity of life which the inhabitants of Nowhere have adopted. The stone house built by the 'Obstinate Refusers' is said to be an exception. However its erection takes place with the usual cheerfulness of manual workers, and also features an artistic element in the frieze sculpted by Philippa. A house now generally combines beauty and use, and results from the association of work with pleasure. In other words, architecture in Nowhere is the most visible product of the new civilization, a kind of emblem of its values.

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15. *NfN*, p.61.

Furthermore, the treatment of architecture is closely linked with that of nature and the countryside. Low density housing is another feature of Nowhere that stands in sharp contrast with the densely built Victorian cities. The houses all seem to be surrounded by open access gardens, as for example on the banks of the river at Hammersmith ; and there is general impression that the inhabitants of Nowhere are living in a healthy environment. Polluting factories and railways have disappeared from the land, trees have invaded cities, and the text even mentions the expeditions of naturalists close in a forest close to central London.

This concern with the health of towns was of course not specific to Morris. It is no coincidence that Ebenezer Howard's definition of the 'garden-city' was proposed in the same decade as Morris's utopia. It is to be found in *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Social Reform*, a book first published in 1899, and later to be re-titled *Garden-Cities of To-Morrow*. The initial title is sufficiently eloquent of the reformist ideology pervading Howard's book. It is also significant that Howard never mentioned Morris's name. He did advocate the building of entirely new towns, where factories would be relegated to the outskirts, and where there would be wide streets and communal facilities. But he was no socialist, and demonstrated these garden-cities could be financed and erected without changing the economic system.

For Morris, on the contrary, the greening of cities, and indeed the transformation of the English territory into a kind of inhabited garden was to become possible only if a total economic, political and social revolution took place.

#### **IV.**

This does not mean, however, that Morris was prepared to make a clean sweep of the past, as the internationalist song suggested. This appears very clearly in *News from Nowhere*, where the architecture of the past has not entirely disappeared, even when considered ugly and ridiculous.

A number of great public monuments of the past are still to be seen in the London of the 22nd century, even though they were designed in the hated classical style : St Paul's Cathedral, the British Museum, the National Gallery, Hampton Court Palace. We understand it was partly by inertia that they had escaped destruction. But when the survival of the Houses of Parliament is mentioned, Dick also mentions that this was due to the influence of " a queer antiquarian society " (which of course humorously reminds us of the SPAB) :

It was so energetic, and had such good reasons to give, that it generally gained its point ; and I must say that when all is said I am glad of it : because you know at the worst these

silly old buildings serve as a kind of foil to the beautiful ones which we build now<sup>16</sup>.

New public buildings seem to be few and far between in Nowhere. As there is no longer any State, any Church, any monarchy, any army or navy, there is no need for a monumental public architecture with a function of representation. Yet when Guest discovers some of the market-halls and other public buildings, he notes that they have diverse stylistic sources. For example he says about the Hammersmith Market :

It seemed to me to embrace the best qualities of the Gothic of northern Europe with those of the Saracenic and Byzantine, though there was no copying of these styles<sup>17</sup>.

The other public building he noticed in Hammersmith was an octagonal playhouse, somewhat resembling the 12th century Baptistery in Florence. The admiration Guest expresses for these two buildings has nothing to do with their style, but with their way of expressing the vitality of the new civilization :

This whole mass of architecture which we had come upon so suddenly from amidst the pleasant fields was not only exquisitely beautiful in itself, but it bore upon it the expression of such generosity and abundance of life that I was exhilarated to a pitch that I had never yet reached<sup>18</sup>.

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16. *NfN*, p.69

17. *NfN*, p.62.

18. *Ibid.*

The architecture of the past, then, can still be relevant to modern times either as a model, as in the case of the Florence Baptistery, or as a counter-model, as in the case of the Westminster Parliament. In his lecture of 1893 on 'Gothic architecture', Morris explained about the architecture of the future:

The style of architecture will have to be historic in the true sense ; it will not be able to dispense with tradition ; it cannot begin at least with doing something quite different from anything that has been done before ; yet whatever the form of it may be, the spirit of it will be sympathy with the needs and aspirations of its own time, not simulation of needs and aspirations passed away<sup>19</sup>.

The Gothic revival of the 19<sup>th</sup> century failed to be good architecture because it was not based on the same 'needs and aspirations' as those of the mediaeval people. Still, the inhabitants of Nowhere have something to derive from its knowledge, and have indeed preserved many a mediaeval abbey in the upper valley of the Thames. Architecture, for the best as well as for the worst, provides an important lesson to mankind. The best example Morris gives is that of Kelmscott House, which is featured in the last chapters of the book :

This many-gabled house built by the simple country-folk of the long-past times, regardless of all the turmoil that was going on in cities and courts, is lovely still amidst all the beauty which these latter days have created: and I do not wonder at our friends tending it carefully and making much of it. It seems to me as if it had waited for these happy days, and held in it the gathered crumbs of happiness of the confused and turbulent past<sup>20</sup>.

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19. Miele, p. 156.

20. *NfN*, p. 220.

## ***Conclusion***

Morris's utopian Britain appears to me as firmly rooted in history. Not because some of its more picturesque features are borrowed from the civilization of the 14th century. We know Morris was very critical of some of the political and religious institutions of the Middle Ages, and his utopia can in no way be said to be a revivalist piece. The society of the future can never repeat that of the past. On the other hand, it needs to know and to make use of the experience of the past. For one of the characters in *News of Nowhere*, Ellen, loss of memory is indeed dangerous, and she insists on the general usefulness of the knowledge of history. Utopia should not be the country of oblivion, and might be faced with change for the worst if it had no sense of history. In a crucial passage of chapter XXIX, she imagines that even in the happy country of Nowhere people might one day change their minds about the organization of society, good as it is:

Who knows? Happy as we are, times may alter; we may be bitten with some impulse towards change, and many things may seem too wonderful for us to resist, too exciting not to catch at, if we do not know that they are but phases of what has been before; and withal ruinous, deceitful, and sordid<sup>21</sup>.

The "epoch of rest" in Nowhere, then, may just be part of another historical cycle. The utopian society of Nowhere certainly does not mean the end of history. The history of

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<sup>21</sup>. *NfN*, p.214.

mankind, Morris implies, is a never-ending process, full of ups and downs.

In this interplay between the past and the future, architecture has a major role to play. For Morris, it was closely connected with true civilization. We have already quoted his lecture of 1881 in which he said of architecture "it is specially the art of civilization"<sup>22</sup>. This is certainly what he learned in later life. In the early part of his career, as we have seen, he loved Gothic architecture above all in romantic, individualist terms, as a style that seemed to him to embody his vision of creative freedom. In later life, he came to appreciate it rather in collective terms as one of the most expressive achievements of any society, for the best or the worst. He was so violently critical of Victorian architecture, including the Gothic revival, because he felt it was the product of a society of oppression and alienation. In his utopian romance, on the contrary, he illustrated architecture as the expression of the reappropriation of their environment by human beings. It was no longer a specialist art, but had to do with the proper management of the earth, in an ecological perspective. The logical outcome of this could well be the extinction of architecture as a 'fine' art. But Morris probably loved it so much that he refused to take this drastic step.

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<sup>22</sup>. Miele, p.64.