

# Hail Quinlan Terry: our greatest living architect

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Since the early 20th century, Western society has been in the grip of a culture of repudiation -- rejecting one by one the institutions, offices, traditions and achievements of the past, while having often little but sentimental emptiness with which to replace them. The most telling instance of this is modern architecture. For three millennia Western builders looked back to their predecessors, respecting the temple architecture of the ancients, refining its language, and adapting it to the European landscape in ways that are subtly varied, entirely memorable and above all humane. Then Le Corbusier burst on the scene. His plan was to demolish Paris north of the Seine and to put all the people into glass boxes. Instead of dismissing this charlatan as the dangerous madman that he clearly was, the world of architecture hailed him as a visionary, enthusiastically adopted the 'new architecture' that he advocated -- though it was not an architecture at all, but a recipe for hanging sheets of glass and concrete on to crates of steel -- and set about trying to persuade the world that it was no longer necessary to learn the things that architects once knew. Thus was born the modernist movement.

One by one the modernists took over the schools of architecture and extinguished in each of them the light of traditional knowledge: this was their 'project', more pernicious by far than the 'project' of Blair and Brown.

Students of architecture were no longer to learn about the properties of natural materials, about the grammar of mouldings and ornaments, about the discipline of the orders or the nature of light and shade. They were not to be taught how to draw facades, columns or the fall of light on an architrave, still less how to draw the human figure. They were not to be taught how to fit buildings behind a

facade -- Corb didn't 'do' facades -- still less how to follow the line of a street or to slot a building gently among its neighbours or into the sky. The only skills permitted by the modernists were those exercised at the drawing board: designing horizontal sections that could be projected floor after floor into steel-framed towers, wilfully violating the organic texture of the town in which they were to be dumped. And when the buildings landed in our cities (for the modernist propaganda had infected the planners too) they destroyed the street-line, the skyline and every other form of visual harmony, staring from their faceless sides with the glazed eyes of corpses.

Everybody hated them, apart from the architects who had built them and the assorted megalomaniacs who had commissioned them. And even they chose to live elsewhere, usually in some Georgian pile built according to the principles that they were actively forbidding. Meanwhile the urban working class was swept out of its genial streets to be stacked up in hygienic tower blocks, according to Corb's instructions -- a brilliant idea that destroyed the city as a home, killed off the spirit of its residents, and in general released the population into the brave new world of anger, alienation and vandalism.

That was how things were when Quinlan Terry, our greatest living architect, entered the Architectural Association as a student in the 1960s. He attended classes that showed how to translate insane collectivist propaganda into childish isometric drawings. Real drawing, real looking, real measuring and real moral understanding had to be learnt elsewhere.

Converted to Christianity, which taught him to question all the self-serving dogmas on which he had been raised, including the dogmas of modernism, Terry set out to learn what his professors forbade, travelling to see the great monuments of Western architecture, drawing the details of country churches, studying the simple streets of our not yet ruined towns, and in general equipping himself with the knowledge that an architect needs if he is to adapt his art to its surroundings, instead of destroying the surroundings in order to draw attention to his art.

Needless to say, Terry's projects, submitted as his thesis, were failed by the examiners. In satirical spirit he submitted hubristic modernist designs instead, and was allowed to pass. He joined the firm of Raymond Erith, whose practice he inherited at a time when there was little private business and when all public commissions went to the modernists.

Terry's break came in 1984, when Haslemere Estates commissioned his designs for Richmond Riverside, which was to become one of London's most popular tourist attractions. This harmonious collection of classical buildings, rising on a knoll above the Thames and enclosing offices, restaurants and private dwellings, illustrates Terry's principles: to fit into the landscape and townscape; to use an architectural language that puts a building into relation with its neighbours and with the passer-by; to use natural materials and loadbearing walls so that the building will last and weather; to respect the realities of climate and the human need for light and air; to create forms and spaces that will lend themselves to the changing purposes of their residents and which will not die, as modernist buildings usually die, with their initial function.

Richmond Riverside showed that all those traditional goals could be achieved at a density and a cost that trump the rival plans of the modernists. As Terry has frequently pointed out, modernist buildings use materials that no one fully understands, which have a coefficient of expansion so large that all joints loosen within a few years, and which involve huge environmental damage in their production and in their inevitable disposal as waste within a few decades. Modernist buildings are ecological as well as aesthetic catastrophes: sealed environments dependent on a constant input of energy and subject to the 'sick-building syndrome' that arises when nobody can open a window or let in a breath of fresh air.

Terry's architecture, by contrast, is one long breath of fresh air, as anyone can now see from the beautifully illustrated new study of his work by David Watkin, aptly entitled *Radical Classicism\**. Watkin tells the story of Terry's quiet

pilgrimage in a country where the modernists retain tight control over all avenues to preferment. His buildings either go unmentioned in the architectural press or are subjected to dismissive polemic, focusing on their alleged nature as 'pastiche'. This epithet -- which, if taken seriously, would condemn all serious architecture from the Parthenon to the Houses of Parliament -- has been elevated into an all-purpose critical tool by people who are determined that no whisper from the past shall ever again be heard in our cities.

No one has been more malicious in the attempt to deprive Terry of work than the great guru of modernism, Richard Rogers, the first to translate Le Corbusier's plan for Paris into partial reality by demolishing a beautiful classical quartier and dumping the Centre Pompidou on the ruins. Rogers is the darling of New Labour, heaped with honours for his achievements, which include the hideous, costly and endlessly cost-absorbing building that ought to have warned the Names of Lloyd's that their money was no longer in safe hands. When at last Terry fought his way through to a public commission in London -- the new infirmary at the muchloved Royal Hospital in Chelsea -- and had obtained all the necessary consents, Rogers had the impertinence to write to the Deputy Prime Minister asking him to call in the plans.

For the modernists, it is a matter of life and death that the classical tradition should not be allowed to resurface. Once people begin to discover that classical buildings are not just more beautiful, less pretentious and less offensive than their modernist rivals, but also more economical, longer-lasting and more adaptable to changing human needs, the modernists will be out of a job. God speed the day.

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