Picturesque Architecture
2nd Term 1956 (B3.6)

In a number of lectures given during the term Professor Burke has shown how during the 18th century, in both the decorative treatment of interiors and in landscape gardening, the principle of symmetry gradually gave way to asymmetry; and regularity to irregularity. This morning I want to show how architecture itself was affected by this new desire for irregularity. It is quite an important point. How important we can see by throwing our thoughts back briefly for a moment over the architectural past we have traced during the year. The Egyptian temple, the Mesopotamian temple, the Greek temple, the Byzantine church, the Gothic church, the Renaissance church, the Baroque church, the rococo country house and the neoclassical palace were all governed by the principle of symmetry. However irregular the Gothic itself became by virtue of its piecemeal building processes, or however wild the Baroque and the Rococo became in their architectural embellishments, they never failed to balance one side of the building with the other side, about a central axis.

Let us turn for a moment to our time. Symmetry is certainly not, as we see in out next slide, an overriding rule of contemporary planning. If a symmetrical plan is chosen by an architect today, it is the result of a deliberate choice, chosen for being most suited for the circumstances, and not, as it was in the past, an accepted architectural presupposition dating back to the very beginnings of architecture itself. Today plans are far more often asymmetrical than symmetrical. And only a moment’s reflection is necessary for us to realize what a major advance in architectural planning became possible once the overriding principle of symmetry was abandoned. Once this principle of abstract balance as broken through it became possible to relate a building far more organically to its environmental setting, and to relate it more judiciously to the material requirements of living it was intended to serve, to make it we might say, more like a plant than a mathematical equation.

It is plain therefore that this principle of irregularity is o fundamental importance in the history of architectural design. And it is most desirable that we should trace this break from symmetrical planning back to its roots.

In the year 1774 a young man who had just returned from his grand tour began to build a house for himself in the west country of England on the borer of Shropshire and Herefordshire. His name was Richard Payne Knight and he called his house Downton Castle.* It took four years to build and it was deliberately planned to be irregular from the beginning. And it was, it would seem on the basis of our present knowledge, the first of its kind. It is therefore an important landmark in the history of architecture.
Its irregular features are at once apparent. Square and octagonal towers abut from the walls in the form of huge irregular bastions; the fenestration, too, is irregular, some windows are flat, some are crowned with pointed arches, there are some oriels, and some are mere machicolations in the manner of a Gothic keep.

Now the architectural style in which this irregular buildings is presented is a form of Gothic revival known at the time as the ‘castellated’ style. Asymmetrical planning, one of the greatest freedoms which the contemporary architect his inherited from the past, as, in short, a child of the Gothic Revival. And yet contemporary architects still persist in talking about the Gothic Revival as though it was merely an architectural aberration, or sentimental interest only, of no consequence for the emergence of modern principles of construction and design. My subject this morning is not the Gothic Revival but the picturesque, and therefore I shall content myself b saying that the Gothic revival is still all too frequently approached in a state of ignorance and prejudice, it is time, that it was replaced not necessarily by one of approval, but by one of curiosity and a desire to get at the truth.

How are we to account for the irregularity of Downton? There were, of course, irregular buildings existing in England before knight began to build Downton. They are associated with the names of Sir John Vanburgh and Sir Horace Walpole. Sir John Vanburgh built a castle for himself at Blackheath in 1717, and between 1717 and 1726, when he died, he added wings to it, which gave the building and asymmetrical appearance. There was quite a deal of medieval sentiment about Vanburgh: his love of battlements, for instance, and his enjoyment of natural gardens, as at Castle Hoard. And the asymmetry which he introduced into Blackheath Castle appears to have been quite deliberate. Then there was Horace Wapole. In 1750 he remodeled his cottage, Strawberry Hill at Twickenham into a pseudo-Gothic castle; we have already examined it as an example of the Gothic element in the Rococo. Walpole was a champion of things medieval. His Castle of Otranto, which as published in 1764, is one of the great literary landmarks of the Gothic Revival, with its gloomy castle, secret passages, skeletons in monkish habit, and a ghost which gradually grows so big that he ends the novel by pushing the castle over. Walpole favoured irregularity not only in gardens decoration but also in building. ‘I am almost as fond of the Sharawadgi, or Chinese want of symmetry in buildings, as in grounds and gardens’ he wrote to a friend on one occasion. But Walpole’s Strawberry Hill and Vanburgh’s castle at Blackheath were built gradually, or added to; they were not consciously planned to be asymmetrical from the beginning. This is the crucial distinction between them and Payne Knight’s Downton Castle.

It is not certain what inspired Vanburgh to add the round towers with their strong medieval character. He may have derived them from the towers of medieval (Churches? Chester?) where he grew up as a boy, he may have derived them from the
towers of the Bastille where he was impassioned in 1692 and where such towers are plentiful. Or he may have derived them from the stage designs of Indigo Jones.

Just where Payne Knight got his ideas for Downton we cannot say with certainty. Nicholas Pevsner suggests that it was not inspired by real buildings at all, but by the buildings in the pictures of Claude Lorraine. Payne Knight was a fine connoisseur and classical scholar, one of the greatest of his time, and like many of his generation he collected Claude and Poussin. He was, moreover, a highly original thinker on matters of art and aesthetics. When he came to write his *Analytical Enquiry into the Principles of Taste*, many years after he had built Downton (it was published in 1805) he criticised the building of buildings of classical symmetry in the English countryside. They were quite out of place in England he said. Houses, he wrote, and I quote ‘should be irregular where all the accompaniments are irregular… the best style for irregular and picturesque houses, which can bow be adopted, is that mixed style, which characterise the buildings of Claude and [Poussin].’

(1774 – the building. 1805 – the statement)

(Claude’s “Enchanted Castle”; two engravings of Downton—certain similarity)

The Picturesque: that, of course, is the clue to the irregularity of Downton. We have seen already from out earlier lectures, how the picturesque idea, that desire to make gardens look like the landscapes of Claude and Poussin, had tended to remove lines and levels from landscaping, since the second quarter of the eighteen century. And now in the last quarter of the century the principle of irregularity had begun to influence the building itself. For centuries man had been imposing himself upon the chaotic wilderness of nature, and now, at last, the wilderness had hit back.

The fact that the idea of the picturesque, which had been, as it were, in the air during the greater part of the century, now began to dominate taste was due largely to the fact that it became the object of serious aesthetic discussion. Three publications of special importance appeared between 1794 and 1775. First, Payne Knight’s long treatise on aesthetics in verse, entitled *The Landscape, A Didactic Poem*, second, a treatise by his friend, Uvdale Price, a neighbouring West county squire, entitled an *Essay on the Picturesque*, and thirdly a book by a landscape gardener who had worked extensively in the Western counties, Humphrey Repton. His book was called *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening*. Then, later Payne Knight produced his *Analytical Enquiry into the Principles of Taste*.

By means of these works the word “picturesque” passed into popular currency and was constantly upon the lips of the fashionable and the sensitive, and of those who wised to be fashionable and sensitive. Let me illustrate what I mean by quoting a passage from Jane Austen, a passage which, in any case, cannot possibly be omitted,
from a lecture on the picturesque. It is a passage from Northanger Abbey, in which Jane Austen discusses the advantages of folly in charming women; it was a subject she delighted to dwell upon. The hero, Henry Tilney, is initiating the heroine Catherine Menaecid into the mysteries of the picturesque. I quote:

“The advantages of natural folly in a beautiful girl have been already set forth by the capital pen of a sister author; and to her treatment of the subject I will only add, in justice to men, that though to the larger and more trifling part of the sex, imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms, there is a portion of them too reasonable and too well informed themselves to desire anything more in woman than ignorance. Catherine did not know her own advantages; did not know that a good-looking girl with an affectionate heart, and a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man, unless circumstances are particularly untoward. In the present instance, she confessed and lamented her want of knowledge; declared that she would give anything in the world to be able to draw; and a lecture on the picturesque immediately followed, in which her instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in everything admired by him’; and her attention was so earnest, that he became perfectly satisfied of her having a great deal of natural taste. He talked of foregrounds, distances, and second distances; side screens and perspectives; lights and shades; and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar, that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make part of a landscape. Delighted with her progress, and fearful of wearily her with too much wisdom at once, Henry suffered the subject to decline, and by an easy transition from a piece to rocky fragment, and the withered oak which he had placed near its summit, to oaks in general—to forests, the enclosure of them, waste lands, crown lands and government—he shortly found himself arrived at politics; and from politics it was an easy stop to silence.”

Now if it had been a part of Jane Austen’s intention to lay bare the mind of Henry Tilney as wonderfully as she lays bare the mind of Catherine, I do not doubt that she could have revealed that the hero’s mind was just as muddled as the heroine’s on the true nature of the picturesque. And this would be fine; any attempt to define the essential nature of the Picturesque is, it seems to me, doomed to failure, for it is an omnibus word, like Democracy, Liberty and so on, meaning different things to different people at different times. It stands not for a single idea but for a constellation of associated interests and attitudes. Let me draw your attention to three of these attitudes of mind (1) the cult of the historic past (2) the cult of the primitive and (3) the cult of the exotic.

One, the cult of the historic past, which revealed itself in England in the form of the Gothic Revival. I cannot deal with the Gothic Revival. I cannot deal with the Gothic Revival in detail here. We have already seen examples in the works of Van Brugh, Walpole and Payne Knight, while discussing irregularity. And Professor Burke has
already shown how neo-Gothic helped to modify or disguise Rococo taste in England. And just as we may speak of a Rococo Gothic so we may speak of a Picturesque Gothic. Downton is a picturesque Gothic. Picturesque Gothic begins as informal architecture featuring gothic decoration placed picturesquely to close a prospect or to enhance a view in a picturesque garden. From informal garden architecture it graduates to country house architecture. If the house was situated in a hilly country rich in historic associations like the Welsh and Scottish borderlands—where one is never far from an ancient ruin or a true medieval castle—what more suitable style to adopt than the Gothic. The doctrine of suitability for setting is one of the truly important principles stressed by the Picturesque idea. It would be interesting if someone would make a careful geographical survey of Gothic revival buildings in England, in order to find out what relation they bear to real ruins, and real medieval churches and castles. Downton is on the marchlands of England and Wales, Scott’s Abbotsford near the marchlands of England and Scotland.

Two, the Cult of the primitive. The cult of the primitive is associated with the increasing interest in cottage architecture. The great majority of the world’s population had lived in cottages since neo-lithic times. The plan of a stone Age cottage in Cyprus or Palestine is remarkably like the plan and construction of many cottages which Irish peasants live in today. The cottages had always been there, but during the 18th century many of the educated and cultivated classes of Europe filled with the enthusiasm of the Enlightenment, much as Deistic philosophy, the love of the noble savage and the delight in simple nature noticed that the cottages were there A little village was built in the great Baroque Garden of Versailles-you can still visit it--- and there Marie Antoinette played at being milkmaid. It is all very touching. The cottage being an object of sentimental devotion. Wordsworth write poems to idealise the yeomen of England. And in the year in which he and Coleridge published the Lyrical Ballads 1798—the date which is generally accepted as a kind of official beginning or the Romantic Movement—James Malton published his Essay on British Cottage Architecture. He drew attention to old English cottages which, together with country churches, he regarded as ‘the most pleasing ornaments of art that can be introduced to embellish rural nature.’

There followed a great spate of cottage designs. Endsleigh Devonshire, dating to 1810, may be taken as an example of the cottage orné, with its ornamented barge boards on the gable, oriel windows, and Tudor fenestration. The veranda however is not a medieval feature. It came, according to Summerson, from India in the last decade of the century, and this brings me to my third interest, or attitude of mind, associated with the picturesque, namely, the exotic.

Third, the cult of the exotic. Professor Burke has already shown how the interest in China became a feature of the rococo. Whereas rococo exoticism tends to feature Chinese interests, picturesque exoticism tends to feature Indian interests. The reason
is clear enough. Britain was building a great empire in India in the second half of the eighteenth century. Many Englishmen connected in some way with the vast military and commercial ramifications of the East India Company, spent part of their lives there. English artists began to visit India. The first landscape painter to visit the country was William Hodges. He received the patronage of Warrant Hastings, made a small fortune, bought a fine house for himself in Mayfair and began to publish engravings of Indian buildings. That was in 1785. In the year following, Sir Joshua Reynolds delivered his 13th Discourse before the students of the Royal Academy. On this occasion he had a good deal to say about architecture. And although he was a great advocate of the classical style in painting in his earlier discourses, we find him on this occasion definitely praising the picturesque in architecture. He praises Vanbrugh’s Gothic buildings and he gives a nod of approval to William Hodges Indian engravings.

“Vanbrugh appears to have recourse to some of the principles of Gothic architecture; which though not so ancient as the Grecian, is more so to out imagination, with which the artist is more concerned than with absolute truth”.

“The splendour of those Asiatic buildings, which are now published by a member of this Academy [the reference here is quite definitely to Hodges] may possibly in the same manner, furnish an Architect, not with models to copy, but with hints of composition and general effect, which would not otherwise have occurred.”

Some years later two more English artists, Thomas and William Daniell, also returned from India and their engravings too made Indian architecture more Widely known. Humphrey Repton the landscape gardener was influenced by the works of Hodges and the Daniells and in 1803 he built Sezincote in Gloucestershire for Sir Charles Cockerell, ‘an eminent servant of the East India Company’.

The Prince Regent became interested in the architecture of Sezincote, and Repton was commanded to go to Brighton to advise him upon the plans for his Royal Pavilion which he was building there. But Repton never carried out the designs for the Brighton Pavilion. It was Repton’s partner, John Nash, who competed the style in the Indian fashion. Nash (1752-1835) was, in many ways, the most representative architect of the picturesque style. He had begun to practice in London but became bankrupt and retired to Wales. Here he joined with Repton, then developing a great practice in the West Country improving gardens. While Repton improved the gardens, Nash improved the buildings, adding picturesque garden ornaments and so on. Nash’s Caerhys, Cornwall,* may be taken as typical of his asymmetrical neo-gothic style, and it immediately calls to mind Payne Knight’s Downton Castle. Nash gained influence in the Prince of Wales’s circle, broke with Repton, and soon became one of the most fashionable architects in the land. Gossip had it that his influence was due to the fact that he married a lady suspected of being the prince’s mistress. Certainly he came into much money immediately after marriage, and the large family of
mysterious children for whom Nash’s wide acted as guardian, proceeded, it was widely whispered, from the other side of the Royal blanket. But nothing has ever been proved. One thing at least is certain, Nash became one of the Prince Regent’s closest friends.

We noted earlier that Richard Payne Knight believed that it was only country houses which should be planned in a picturesque, irregular and asymmetrical way. His own townhouse in London in Soho Square was a typical late 17th century townhouse—plain, classical, symmetrical. But it was inevitable that the idea of the picturesque which had begun with the speculations of essayists, the enthusiasms of poets, and had come to effect the practice of landscape gardening and the architecture of country houses, should, in the end, invade the town itself, the last citadel of classical symmetry and balance. It was John Nash who bought the picturesque to London. It occurred in this way. In 1811 Marylebone Park in the N.W. of London reverted back to the Crown. It was necessary to prepare a plan to incorporate the property within the growing city. Nash was in an ideal position for planning the great scheme involved.

The first plan prepared by Thomas Leverton of the Office of Works merely extended the existing pattern of squares and grids of Marylebone and Bloomsbury across the fields. But Nash, schooled in Repton’s picturesque, envisaged a kind of garden city, a vast park containing over fifty villas hidden in their groves, decorative lakes and a pleasure palace for the Prince, who having become Prince Regent now wanted an urban planing scheme for London, that would rival Napoleon’s Paris.

In our next slide* we see John Nash’s first plan published in 1812 for the replanning of Marylebone Park. Note the little black dots, which represent villas, dotted among groves of trees. In the centre is a great circus, with a National Valhalla, in the middle. At the top right is a guingette, or pleasure garden for the Prince Regent, at left a great serpentine lake in the Reptonian manner. Round the margins of the park are terraces, at the south east, another circus where the New Road, now Marylebone Road, meets the southward road, with markets and a working class area to the right. The plan was approved by the Treasury and work began immediately. Bu the plan had to be modified considerably because of the great expense involved. The great central double circus, the Valhalla, the guingette and the villas within he park area were all abandoned. Regent’s Park thus emerged as but a shadow of the original plan.

Our next slide will reveal how Regent’ Park actually emerged after completion.* he access to the Park is from Portland Place, into the neatly detailed Ionic colonnades of Park Crescent, which constitutes the southern half of the projected circus. The crescent was badly damaged during the war bit has been carefully restored. To the north of the Crescent is Park Square, from which lines of terraces flank the park to the East and to the North. The northern rim was not flanked by terraces, in order to preserve the view towards Primrose Hill and Highgate.
In our next slide we see a view of Cumberland Terrace on the East of the Park*. Sommerson calls it a ‘marvellous adorable extravaganza’. With its high podium, its statuary and its abutting porticos it is an architectural extravaganza in the manner of Vanbrugh. York Gate is more restrained.

In connection with these terraces let me read a quotation from John Summerson’s Georgian London, because it sums up I think perfectly the appeal and the limitations of perhaps, no only Regent’s Park, but the greater part of London’s Regency Architecture (and it is written by a man who unites his scholarship with a good deal of critical horse-sense):

“The truth is that these buildings, careless and clumsy though they are in many ways, have an extravagant scenic character which, perceived through nostalgic mists of time, makes them irresistible. They are dream palaces, full of grandiose, romantic ideas such as an architect might scribble in a holiday sketch book. Seen at a distance, framed in green tracery, perhaps in the kind light of autumn, they suggest architectural glories which make Greenwich tame and Hampton Court provincial. Carved pediments, rich in allegory, top the trees; massive pavilions, standing forward like corps de garde of Baroque chateaux are linked to the main structures by triumphal arches or columnar screens; each terrace stretches its length in all the pride of unconfined symmetry. It is magnificent. And behind it all—behind it are rows and rows of identical houses, identical in their narrowness, their thin pretentiousness, their poverty of design. There the eye apprehends great mansions, supported by lesser mansions and service quarters, the mind must interpret it as a block of thin houses, with other blocks of thin houses carrying less ornament or none at all. The sham is flagrant and absurd. The terraces are architectural jokes; and though Nash was serious enough in his intention, the effect is an odd combination of fantasy and bathos which only the retrospect of a century can forgive.”

The other important architect whose work was affected by the picturesque was Sir John Soane. But, unlike the work of Nash, the picturesque is only one aspect of the work of Soane, and not by any means the most important part of it. Soane was born in 1753 and died at the age of 4 in 1837. His life thus spans a great period of transition in English architecture. The son of a small builder of Reading, he won medals during his training, and studied in Italy between 1777 and 1779.

Soane was a scholarly, introspective and single-minded architect who slowly carved out for himself a personal style from the great welter of influences surrounding him on all sides. Soane had a keen feeling for geometry, volumes and surface values, and in his mature work he strips away the non-essential decorative features of the
academic style. His designs for the Bank of England whose architect he became in 1788 are the first expressions of his mature style.

Take his reduced annuities Room at the Bank of England. You will notice that apart from the drum of the dome, no academic units, columns, cornices and architraves, and so on) have been introduced into the design. In their place the surfaces have been modelled with thin grooves, delicate medallions within the spandrels. Most surprising of all is the fact that where the soffits of the arches meet the piers there is no break at all. Or compare, in our next slide, the massive simplicity of the piers and the plainness of the cornice in the loggia, in the Governor’s court. Here the Peluida (?) for the Bank of England. We said earlier that one of the attitudes associated with the picturesque as the desire for the primitive, as already revealed in the interest in cottage architecture. But here we have a form of simplicity (primitive quality) which goes to the heart of the fundamentals of architectural design. How are we to explain it? We can explain it by turning to France. In the year that Soane as born—1753—the Abbé Laugier, a writer on architecture published his Essai sur l’Architecture. The book preached a very severe form of neo-classicism, that bordered upon a functional approach to architecture. Laugier questioned Vitruvius. Even the Greek orders were to be tested as to how far they fitted modern needs. Laugier found fault with heavy projecting cornices, and we have noted that Soane abolished interior cornices in his designs for the Bank of England. Laugier claimed that internal entablatures made no sense at all. He denounced lavish ornament. The exterior of a building should be severe in appearance, should stimulate noble and moving sentiments. Soane read Laugier. And from the number of copies of Essai in his library it is assumed that he gave it to his students to read after he became the Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy in 1806.

Soane’s primitivistic style is also to be seen in the Art Gallery and Mausoleum at Dulwich. The Gallery was built from a bequest of Sir Francis Bourgeois to house a collection of paintings he had inherited from his friend Desenfans, and to house the coffins of Desenfans—who had expressed great objections to being buried—his wife and of Bourgeois himself. In the will the Mausoleum was to be attached to the Gallery.

The Dulwich building is one of Soane’s finest designs. It has something of the strength and forthrightness of Vanbrugh, and something of Robert Adam about it.* but the primitivistic note is everywhere apparent. The broad simple arches*, the wide flat pilasters and shallow cornices. Note the sarcophagi and the memorial urns at the top of the Mausoleum, which may remind us of Soane’s keen archaeological interests. His house at no 13 Lincolns Inn Fields,* now the Sir John Soane Museum, was and still is quite an archaeological museum.

The idea of the picturesque then affected architecture considerably. How shall we evaluate its importance? Was it nothing more than an elaborate fake of sham facades
erected in country and city settings by people with little real appreciation of the fundamental principles of architectural design? A good deal of the picturesque is, it is true, little more than that. But it did promote and nourish three principles of great importance in architecture today.

1. The principle of the Garden city, with its notion of providing city dwellers with access to rural beauty.
2. The principle of irregularity—which provides contemporary architecture with greater freedom of planning.
3. The principle of suitability—that a building should be organically related to its environment.

We might also note in closing that the principles of irregularity and suitability were thought out to a very large extent within the context of Gothic revival architecture. Many contemporary architects today approach the Gothic revival in a state of ignorance and prejudice; it is time that we replaced this attitude by one of curiosity and a desire to get at the truth. But that, of course, is to enter the realm of art politics—and from politics it is still—fortunately—an easy step to silence.
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