

## Early influences and images

Le Corbusier's buildings, esp. the later ones in very rough materials and finishes, the solidity of form and the toughness of detail

Frank Lloyd Wright's writing, esp. 'The home of Man' and some of his buildings

'This is Tomorrow' exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery which demonstrated for the first time to a lot of us that materials 'as found' have an inherent aesthetic quality peculiar to themselves.

Flats at Ham Common by Jim Stirling.

Four houses in Hampstead by Howell. Killick etc who had just built the Roehampton housing scheme at the LCC--- another influence!

Working for the LCC architects dept. and taking part in the continuous debate going on there in its heyday.

and all sorts of things going on in the architectural world at the time which obviously rub off and help to form one's attitudes!

## My first building--Askett Green

A house on the edge of a tiny "Village Green' on the outskirts of Princes Risborough, Bucks.

Asked to design a 'Cottage'--said I would, but it would be a modern interpretation of whatever a cottage was! Cottages to me had tiny windows (certainly smaller than the minimum Building Reg. size), low ceilings and head bumping beams and doorways, They often seemed to have oversized beams and other elements, in other words, large chunky things in small spaces.

This all builds up to a unique sense of scale difficult to relate to the modern regulation complying dwelling!

The resultant building is a strongly modelled 'box' made out of white painted brick and black stained concrete which supports and contains a rich and 'chunky' timber secondary structure. There is one large full height volume with a tall full ht. window onto a small court which provides the regulation day-lighting to the main living spaces. These smaller low and compressed spaces open off the main volume and have, almost, head-bumping beams and doorways using massive timbers, and small heavy timber windows. Before the walls were painted white these spaces were too dark to work in and the builder had to operate by artificial light all day! This to me was what a cottage was all about! The building is low on the public side to reflect the scale of its older neighbours, and higher (two storeys) at the rear.

This was a 'machine for living in' in that very little was needed in the way of furniture etc. No furniture is not 'built in' in the accepted sense of that description, but rather it 'grew' out of the building's structure. Brick walls started extending to support concrete kitchen benches, concrete corbels grew out of the walls to carry joist sized pieces of timber which become book shelves etc. etc. It is, maybe, a piece of hollow functional sculpture which one lives inside....but....there is no indication of all this richness on the outside. Askett Green fails to embrace its external spaces. It does not become 'at one' with them. It possibly could do no other because it fills its available site from front to back (only 35 ft.) and so it was a natural reaction to that site to make it introverted....and most 'cottages' are introverted anyway!

## Turn End - a development and a reaction

The aim was to build a small group of houses in a village of strong individual character. To me at that time the detached one-off house which architects tended to favour for themselves was an anachronism and in conflict with the social philosophies many of us preached in our daily work designing mass housing. It was also an anachronism in the village context, where houses are frequently joined to their neighbours, having often grown in that way over the centuries.

The design is a response to what I felt about and saw in Haddenham. It is also a reaction to, and development of the work done and lessons (some subconscious) learned from Askett Green, where we eventually lived for three years.

The structure based aesthetic developed at Askett was further refined, but the principal change was that the buildings are made to 'embrace' outside spaces by not building a 'box' which contains the structure as at Askett but allowing the structure to speak outside, and wrapping buildings round external spaces which are treated as though they are internal spaces without roofs.

The masonry 'box' has been disintegrated, there are no longer 'holes in walls' to let light in., but gaps between walls which are closed with folding glazed doors or large areas of glass. There are still some tiny holes punched through the walls, but these are there to provide lighting interest or views at specific places as a contrast rather than a main theme.

The material chosen for the masonry elements is a foamed concrete block. This gives a much bolder scale than the brick used at Askett but it is also a material which is not weather resistant on its own. Thus the blockwork needs the protection of render on the outside, just as the native material of Haddenham does, to protect it from rain and frost erosion.

## Me

I'm a 'doer' and maker of buildings, not an 'intellectualiser' or theoriser!

I am happiest putting things together, and should really have been a designer/maker of some sort. Hence the satisfaction of gardening I suppose!

So....my buildings are 'made' rather than 'designed' They grow out of the materials and technology used to make them. They are about putting things together. 'Things' that is why 'This is Tomorrow' was so important--it made me realise that architecture and design of all kinds can be about all sorts of materials and how they are assembled to enable them to best express their own identities.

But buildings must also 'grow out of their surroundings, and so the houses at Turn End could not have been built anywhere else--a truth blindingly obvious to me but so obscure to every planner I have ever met!....why?

Turn End is Haddenham specific.

## **The site at Haddenham**

This is a village of strong and individual character.

The houses are, in the main, built out of a very local material called Wychert, which is made from the local clay puddled with straw and built up in layers rather like concrete without the shuttering. The height of a layer is determined by the material's ability to stand on its own until it dries out. This material and the way it has to be used (how it 'speaks' to those who use it) determines the character of the village.

So the village literally 'grew' out of the earth it stands on....and it feels like that.

There are miles of walls, not hedges, not fences, but walls, defining boundaries, providing enclosure and creating privacy. This was the locally available material and presumably the most economic one. These walls have stone bases and tiled (used to be thatched) tops to prevent damp rising and rain soaking, both of which will cause them to collapse! They are also rendered to prevent weather erosion to their sides.

The site which spans between two village streets, has its own strong character, and many disciplines, which have helped to shape the design. There is a group of tall trees on the east boundary which mark a bend in the High Street. We are the guardians for the time being of this important feature in the village.

There are a large horse chestnut and two walnut trees in the centre and a group of accacias on the southern boundary, all of which had a determining role to play in considering building layouts. There were a number of hundred year old conifers on the boundary with the adjoining 3 storey Victorian house whose garden the site once was (now the flats and office). The site was partially divided by a Wychert wall which formed one side of the garden store and divided the orchard from the vegetable garden.

There were small cottages on Townside both sides of the only entry point in the south west corner. Another cottage on High Street abuts the south-east corner.

All these were design generators which have helped to shape the finished building layout.

## ***Design concepts***

The ideal was to build houses of today for today's car-borne commuter/business man who lives a fast and stressful life and whose house, I felt, could be a spiritual haven away from that world, and yet clearly grown out of it.

The houses were to be built in the middle of a village born out of the needs and ways of life of a very different age....a village grown gradually over many centuries, with buildings of all ages telling their own stories.

So....the buildings we were going to add to this tapestry had to tell their own story also....and it must be today's story, not yesterday's regurgitated with added icing sugar! But their story must be firmly based on the stories told by the older buildings....a continuation of a living tradition!

The design is informed by the way village houses relate to one another; the 'scale' of the surrounding buildings; the way simple houses are put together and how that 'way' affects the way they look; and the character generated by the local building materials.

To 'copy' or imitate the forms and details of houses built for a different way of life and a different age was seen to be inappropriate as an answer to, and an expression of, 20th century living.

The design makes use of modern technology not available to the builders of previous ages...it would be being socially irresponsible if it didn't! egs: the ability to span large openings simply and fill the resulting space with glass or sliding walls; the availability of heating systems which make large open volumes a practical reality; insulation products which enable houses to remain warm and yet have a large external wall area in relation to the enclosed space, thus for the first time in northern climes allowing buildings to extend their arms and wrap-up outside spaces...until recently the preserve of warmer climes only.

## The housing group

The houses are single storey because this enables them to wrap around and enclose outside space without bulking too large. They are also low to reflect more closely the height of the cottages next door which have floor to ceiling hts. far less than modern regulations allow.

Each house has three elements which accommodate...Living, dining/kitchen/circulation, and sleeping. Each of these elements has its own roof, clearly identifiable from both inside and outside. This device not only articulates the internal spaces, but breaks down the perceived volume from the outside with the aim of respecting the scale of the neighbouring cottages. (a 'small' modern single storey house of, say 1000 sq. ft., and with a 30° pitched roof, is many times the bulk of a cottage which maybe no more than 500 sq. ft. arranged on two head-bumping high storeys).

Clarity of thought leads to a clarity of expression....this basic thinking and conceptualisation is at the root of all good design.

Haddenham is a walled village, it has many enclosed courts, alleyways and walled gardens.

The houses are inward looking onto their own walled courts or small gardens. The living areas face west onto the courts, but receive high level east light from the other side, even when this is 'borrowed from the neighbouring garden! Bedrooms face north, away from the outdoor living spaces looking out from a slightly raised floor level over the garden proper. Living areas and bedrooms are linked by the third element, circulation/dining/kitchen, with the kitchen area in the centre of the house and forming the focus for all its activities. This space faces south onto the courtyard. There are very few internal divisions which reach roof level and so the perception of space is greater than the floor area of each individual space would suggest.

The largest of the walnut trees is in the geometric centre of the site and so, having made a decision to retain it, this tree became one of the strongest influences on the eventual design of the house forms and the layout.

The houses join on their east sides in an echelon fashion...so the east wall is always a boundary....Except at Turn End where it is the boundary with the garden, in this case the old orchard. Here the east wall is pierced by a wide opening containing a pivoting door leading to the 'wild' spring garden under the old apple trees.

The custom of siting more formal garden areas adjacent to the house is broken here, but there is another aspect which is more formal, the courtyard, or outdoor room which is enclosed by the house on three sides.

## The garden

A woodland path leads from the garden door to a grass 'glade' which curves diagonally across the site so creating the longest vista possible. This element is also used to tie together all the other garden elements or 'rooms' The garden attempts to be 'English' while reacting to the modern houses and relating to the uniqueness of the surroundings. There is a strong focal element in the form of a large 'Monica Young' pot which is placed on the axis of the west/east route through the house and which also terminates two other vistas This pot is key to the whole design: it draws you through the house and into the garden, and once you are there it provides a reference point back to the house. We have not always owned the pot, but the spot where it stands has always been marked by an object and its position refined over the years.

None of these axes is reflected in the ground plan....they are just there as sight lines, and provide a structure to what otherwise might easily become an amorphous collection of spaces.

Other more formal areas have developed as adjoining properties were acquired, and the designs for these have reacted to and grown out of the buildings and spaces around them. New axes have been set up by making openings through walls or building pergolas or piercing buildings, but they all lead eventually back to the initial glade, or 'ribbon', which ties the whole composition together.

Trees have been carefully added to reinforce the axes and to take over when the inevitable happens and the apple trees die or fall over.

The central walnut still stands clearly demonstrating its pivotal role in the whole layout. The group of accacias became the generator for the courtyard of Turn End. There is now only one of these as about 15 years on, they became too large to be realistic in such small space! The pond in Turn End courtyard is a direct result of a decision to move a young walnut from here to its present site in the entrance and deciding what to do with the resultant hole!

I have said that I am a maker rather than a theoretical designer....and this is demonstrated best in the processes which produced the garden. Until recently there has never been a drawn plan.

The garden was 'made' not planned on paper. Decisions were made by wandering around with canes and drawing shapes full size on the ground in the places where they were to be, sometimes studying them over three or four seasons. Poles and tall canes were used to represent trees and shrubs....a process that requires a deal of imagination, and a willingness to change and move things that do not work (my former partner once remarked that my plants would be happier if they could grow wheels instead of roots!).

The original parts of the garden were shady areas and so this dictated the sort of planting and the character of the design. The first area we made after the house courtyard, was that immediately outside the living area door in the East wall. This was, and still is, a part of the old orchard which had generated its own character over the years of neglect prior to our arrival. There was a thriving undercroft of primroses, bluebells, snowdrops, narcissi and other spring flowers, as well as an all pervading ivy cover. We decided to make paths through this but to retain most of what was there, gradually building on and enhancing its character. In this way the part of the garden nearest the house became a spring woodland garden.

It was natural that the next phase, the grass 'glade' should be summer orientated, both in contrast to the woodland area, and as a reaction to its more open character.

Other areas, some more formal have been generated by their immediate surroundings, shape or aspect. When we acquired no8 High Street (the flats) the driveway to that building was annexed and turned into a secondary glade leading to a new brick enclosure and sitting area ( whenever do we sit in our garden???)....this seemed a natural thing to do with a long thin space.

The Coach-house also came at that time, but its almost pivotal role was not fully realised until we acquired no6 High Street (now the office) a few years later. This gave us the land behind the coach-house, the office court and

the land beyond the chestnut tree, which until then had terminated the 'glade'. At this time the glade was extended, level differences rationalised and a hedge planted to enclose the area beyond the coach-house. Piercing the rear wall of this building seemed a 'natural' and this set up a clear axis through the space in front of the building and on into the middle of the, then, embryo summer borders. So an intervention was made here in the form of a square pergola which works on two axes, linking visually and functionally with new gravel steps, both the two glades and the new formal spaces each side of the coach-house. The office court, which uses imported lime free soil provides a natural termination to this spatial sequence.

At the other side of the site, the acquisition of part of the garden of 16 High Street in 1969, apart from providing vital garaging space, enabled us to make a garden beyond the house courtyard, and so link this to the rest of the garden. This area is the most open and sunny of all the spaces, so twelve years ago, we made an English summer garden, setting up an off centre axis from the house through the courtyard and on to a pergola which terminates the design....and our territorial ambitions!

I believe that the structure of a design whether building or garden, using straight lines or curved ones, should be bold and strong so that furnishing or planting can be as flamboyant and out of control as one wishes without masking the basic structure. So planting here, while some is there to do a job, like enclosing screening or emphasising, and is disciplined at some levels like colour choice, shape and leaf form, can be allowed to 'happen'. Over the years the birds and the bees have made some wonderful contributions. We try not to hoe so that accidents can be allowed to happen, and these days we do as much disciplining of their efforts as we make our own new contributions.

A garden is never a static thing, and this one is still evolving, albeit at a much less hectic pace than it used to! The methods are still the same and the canes are still to be found drawing plans on the grass or through the borders. Occasionally the drawing-board is brought into play.....