Book Review

Designing Modern Britain
Cheryl Buckley


Reviewed by Peter Hughes

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Designing Modern Britain is a history of British design in the twentieth century written by Cheryl Buckley, Professor of Design History at the University of Northumbria. It is no coffee table book of the sort that provides a simple linear narrative signposted by star designers and iconic designs. This is immediately evident in the scale of the book; at 8½ x 6¾ in. (22 x 17 cm) and 256 pages, it does not lend itself to the large, lush illustrations that characterize such publications. Although there are 130 illustrations, 46 in color, the focus here is clearly on the text. Buckley’s aim is to examine design not simply as “things” but as a “matrix of interdependent practices” and to consider “the ways in which it represented and constructed modernity at crucial moments from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first” (p. 7).

Designing Modern Britain is divided into six chronologically ordered chapters, each of which each covers roughly two decades. Buckley has avoided the usual stylistic divisions, such as art nouveau, art deco or 1950s pop, giving her chapters thematic subtitles, such as “‘Going Modern, but Staying British’: 1930 to 1950” and “The Ambiguities of Progress: Design from the Late 1960s to 1980.” By so doing, she has been able to create a fluid narrative, free of the lock-step sequence of stylistic developments that characterizes much design history. This narrative is built up through a number of thematic threads that surface and resurface throughout the text. In addressing design in particular—as the warp through
which these weft threads are woven—her account focuses on industrial and interior design as well as architecture and town planning. While the studio crafts form part of this account, they are a minor one. The crafts enter Buckley’s narrative in two ways: through the formidable heritage of the Arts and Crafts movement and its slow demise, and through the subsequent rise of the studio crafts and their complex relationship with modernism.

The two main axes determining the narrative field of Designing Modern Britain are modernity and identity within these lies the particularly vexed issue of modernism in architecture and design. During the nineteenth century, Britain was at the forefront of modernity; it had been precocious in developing a consumer culture in the eighteenth century and consequently became the first European nation to industrialize on a large scale. Britain also created an empire that, at its apogee at the end of the nineteenth century, was the most extensive the world has known. An awareness of this heritage continued to inform the British sense of identity throughout the following century; for surely some intrinsic quality of the inhabitants of this comparatively small island nation and their culture must be the source of these great achievements? Britain’s pioneering industrialization, however, also led to some of the earliest reactions against its negative social and environmental impact. The Arts and Crafts movement, with its utopian socialist and reformist ideologies, was an important and highly visible aspect of these critiques in the second half of the nineteenth century. The movement continued to cast a long shadow over Britain’s twentieth century, serving to complicate the reception of modernist design and its pro-industrial philosophies.

Early in Designing Modern Britain, Buckley traces the twentieth-century history of the Arts and Crafts movement as it is progressively stripped of its reformist critique and devolves into a collection of stylistic attributes to join, ironically enough, the panoply of British nationalist and reassuringly traditional styles. She describes how, in the early years of the century, a less radical version of its original political motivations survived in the suffragettes’ use of needlework before the First World War; in the Garden Cities movement, and the early efforts of the Design and Industries Association to bring affordable and good design to all. Shifting her focus from the mainstream, Buckley describes the resilience of the Arts and Crafts in Scotland, where practitioners such as the embroiderer Jessie Newberry at the Glasgow School of Art and Phoebe Anna Traquair in Edinburgh remained loyal to Ruskinian values. Scotland, however, had also witnessed a more indicative turn in design from social issues to stylistic ones. The “Glasgow Four”—Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Herbert McNair and Margaret and Frances Macdonald—were influenced by developments in Europe and moved away from the vernacular promoted by the Arts and Crafts movement toward an abstract and universalizing aesthetic.

Perhaps ironically, the Arts and Crafts movement’s anti-urban identification with the countryside and its conjuring of the past through continued engagement with traditional crafts was easily subsumed into conservative ideas of “Englishness” that were central to certain dominant understandings.
of "Britishness." Buckley describes how a particular part of the island, the southeast and London, was repeatedly used to stand for the whole nation, eclipsing the English regions as well as Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. She notes the tension between progressive, modernist members of the design profession and the more conservative, pragmatic approach of manufacturers and retailers. She cites a Waring and Gillow catalog of 1903, stating their aim to combine "modern methods, and the resources of modern machinery, with what one may venture to call a splendid ancestry," and Lord Waring's 1924 criticism of the "excessive individualism of the Continental school" (p. 75). These constructions of British identity made modernism of the kind promulgated by the Bauhaus in the 1920s and architect-designers such as Le Corbusier highly problematic in Britain, and its influence during the 1920s was limited.

Despite this, Buckley argues that the crafts served as a vehicle for modernist aesthetics by mediating between the harshness of its geometry and abstraction and notions of British/English traditions. She describes how the growing interest in preindustrial and non-Western design was one important point of entry. For example, the potter William Staite Murray (1881-1962) studied historic Chinese and Korean ceramics and developed an aesthetic consistent with modernist truth-to-materials philosophies that eschewed decoration and was based on simplified, well-crafted forms and spectacular glaze effects. Equally, Britain's preindustrial pottery tradition was seen to embody both expressive spontaneity and truth to materials, offering an alternative to the perceived deadening effects of industrial perfection and conservative commercial decoration. In the 1920s ceramics was identified as a plastic art, and Buckley provides a full account of the relationships among potters such as Staite Murray, collectors of oriental ceramics, the critic Roger Fry, and the Omega Workshops. This modernizing aesthetic, in turn, bounced back to influence the industry that it had criticized, and Buckley describes how firms such as Wedgwood withdrew elaborate Victorian and Edwardian designs and turned to the eighteenth century for inspiration. A similar turn to the Georgian is observed in furniture design and architecture, uniting conservative notions of Britishness with a simplified, quasi-modernist aesthetic.

The contribution of women to twentieth-century British design is one of Buckley's major themes and is evident in her accounts of the influence of the crafts in ceramics and textile design in the 1920s and 1930s. Potters such as Katherine Pleydell-Bouverie and Norah Braden were inspired by Tang and Song ceramics and believed that their work should express the intrinsic qualities of materials. Pleydell-Bouverie is quoted: "I want my pots to make people think, not of the Chinese, but of things like pebbles and shells and birds' eggs and the stones over which moss grows" (p. 78). The designer Susie Cooper embraced both decoration and modernism, designing mass-produced wares that accommodated the consumer's desire for decoration with a simplified, graphic form of pattern making. In textiles, the weaver Ethel Malet had traveled widely and, under the influence of traditional Ceylonese, Yugoslavian and Scandinavian designs, moved away from the naturalistic decoration that had characterized Arts and
Craft textiles. Phyllis Barron and Dorothy Larcher formed a partnership in 1923, designing and making block-printed textiles. Once again, non-Western traditions—Larcher had traveled to India—provided a point of contact between crafts traditions and modernist aesthetics. Their designs referenced natural forms and deliberately eschewed the technical perfection of industrially produced textiles, but they were also emphatically concerned with surface, color, and technique over representation.

With rising criticisms of modernism from the 1950s on, the position of British design changes considerably. Beginning with pop art in the 1950s and developing into postmodernism from the 1960s, artists and designers embraced popular culture and historicism. From the 1950s on, Designing Modern Britain focuses more narrowly on industrial design, as the crafts spin off to become an increasingly autonomous field of practice associated more closely with the fine arts than with industry. While the market for crafts remained strong after the 1950s, crafts practitioners were more often influenced by developments in the fine arts and popular culture than by the concerns of industry. Notions of truth-to-materials, rational design, and perfection of form, in the crafts as elsewhere, tended to give way to a communicative aesthetic.

Buckley’s account is largely one of Britain’s particular position in the twentieth century and how this had made an acceptance of modernism there difficult. There is no doubt that parallel struggles with the universalizing idealism of modernism in design and architecture occurred in their own way in many places. Buckley’s book is refreshing inasmuch as it avoids a simplified linear narrative of progressive enlightenment toward the inevitable. It focuses, rather, on the concrete, the contingent and the particular, emphasizing and celebrating complexity and contradiction. While Designing Modern Britain is not specifically about the crafts in twentieth-century Britain, its account of the complexities of design culture, and of the role of the crafts in it, will be of value to any student of the history of the crafts as an integral product of, and contributor to, material culture. For the student of design more generally, Buckley’s account goes some way toward explaining the intriguing peculiarity of British design from 1900 to the 1950s. The book also provides a background to the nation’s later comfortable embrace of design in the 1980s and 1990s and the knowingly ironic phenomenon of “Cool Britannia.”