Nikolaus Pevsner on Democracy in Architecture: 1947-1972

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This paper examines Sir Nikolaus Pevsner’s view on ‘democracy in architecture’. Ever since his student days in Germany, Pevsner, a twentieth-century titan in the history of architecture, art and design, had always believed that art should be functional, imparting meaning to the people for whom it is created. As for twentieth-century post-World War II civic architecture in the Western world, in his view, it was supposed to instill, or at least be capable of instilling, the ideal of democracy in the people for whom it was designed and built.

By ‘the designer’, Pevsner said, he meant ‘a man who invents and draws objects for use’; and the purpose of these objects, whether they are architectural or industrial products, is, in one way or another, to fulfill contemporary needs. The contemporary needs of a society mirror its systems, its sense of values, its politics, its social life, its scholarship and, above all, the spirit of the age. Based on the notion of the link of the spirit of an age to the contemporary needs and preferences of society, and to the role of the designer in inventing and creating objects for fulfilling these needs and preferences, Pevsner thus came to identify the act of design with the spirit of the age; and artistic creativity, whether it takes the form of painting, industrial production, or architecture, as the ultimate manifestation of the spirit of an age. To him, the triumph of democracy was the spirit of an age, worthy of being manifested and celebrated in art and architecture.

Pevsner’s academic life, especially in its early stage, was hugely affected by the political and social preferences of the majority of the society to which he then belonged. Since
the winter of 1929-1930, he had been a ‘Privatdozent’ at Göttingen University, teaching seven art history courses a semester. Although ‘Göttingen had nothing like the reputation for art history’² that the universities which Pevsner had attended as a student — Leipzig, Berlin, Munich and Frankfurt — enjoyed, it is said that his reputation as a young academic had contributed to Göttingen’s reputation for art history, as a result of which ‘some of Germany’s brightest students started enrolling’ at the otherwise modest university.³ But Pevsner lost his academic position as a result of the ‘non-Aryan’, newly passed Civil Servants’ law, officially known as the ‘Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service’.

Pevsner himself lived in Britain during World War II, but lost his mother, who had remained in Germany, under the democratically elected but fascist government. She committed suicide in February 1942 in Leipzig, at the age of sixty-five, out of fear of her imminent transfer to a concentration camp. Having had such an experience of both an academic and personal life affected by politics, racism, and ostracism, his attention was naturally directed, if not compelled, to the question of how post-World War II architecture could convey the triumph of democracy over ultranationalistic absolutism.

Pevsner referred to the subject of democracy in architecture in one of his radio talks, ‘The Architecture of Washington’, broadcast in July 1947 by the Third Programme, a newly launched BBC radio station aimed at highbrows. In this talk, Pevsner raised the question of whether the most stunning, seemingly immutable public buildings in Washington, D.C. (figure 1) were appropriate architectural forms for monuments symbolizing the ideal of democracy.

1. Photograph of Washington D.C., a copy of which Pevsner clipped from a newspaper for reference, now held in the Pevsner Archive at the Getty Research Institute
At the beginning of his talk, Pevsner summarized the history of the ‘absolutely patternised plan’ of Washington, D.C., a city which he described as ‘grandiose’.

The spaciousness of the layout is stunning and ten times as stunning if you realise that it was conceived a hundred and fifty years ago when Major L’Enfant, a Frenchman brought up to admire the Place de la Concorde and the Champs Elysées, designed Washington as the Federal City. He was a bold man to put forward an absolutely patternised plan, miles across each way, with a gridiron broken up by plenty of ronds points with wide radiating avenues. The Capitol was to be the centre; along its west axis far away was to stand the national monument to Washington in the exact spot where that axis would intersect the axis due south from the White House.

It was a magnificent plan, probably the most magnificent the Baroque ever conceived, and it was wonderfully mad — or visionary — considering that in 1800 the federal staff from the President down to the most lowly clerk numbered 117 and there was no reason for anyone else to live in Washington.⁴

In 1810, the population of Washington was about 8,000 and, in 1840, 23,000. In 1842, from January to June, Charles Dickens was visiting the U.S. and had the chance to make a tour of the capital. He was not impressed by the fact that ‘what seemed bound to happen happened’.⁵ The grand scale of the city in contrast to its small population resulted in a rather unbalanced streetscape of ‘spacious avenues’ lined with homely, red-brick houses of two or three storeys. Dickens describes what he saw in the city:

… spacious avenues, that begin in nothing, and lead nowhere; streets mile-long that only want houses, roads and inhabitants, and public buildings that need but a public to be complete …⁶

The Baroque monumentality of the city was, in point of fact, only to be found on the city planning map.
It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that L’Enfant’s initial vision of monumentality was rediscovered. The dome and wings of the Capital were added between 1851 and 1865. The ‘immaculate colonial appearance’ of the White House was completed in 1902 by Charles Follen McKim, a member of the Committee for the Improvement of Washington, which had been set up in 1901. Improving the Federal city was necessary, yet ‘[t]he new buildings with their giant columns came slowly, only three or four before 1925.’ It was during the years 1925 to 1941 that the monumental streetscape that we see today, with its interminable frontage of giant columns, was finally realized.

But are those overwhelming frontages really the appropriate architectural expression of the aspirations and industry of a society glorying in its democracy? Pevsner had his doubts about the ways in which the ideal of democracy was expressed through architecture.

Pevsner saw that ‘the shiploads of giant columns for the monumental buildings of Washington’ were as trite as the mottoes on those buildings, evocative of civic pride. Written on Constitution Hall are the words ‘Let our object be our country, our whole country and nothing but our country,’ and, on the wall of the National Archives, ‘The Glory and Romance of our history are here preserved in the chronicles of those who conceived and built the structure of our nation.’ ‘Well, it is easy to be facetious at the expense of this kind of triteness,’ says Pevsner, who then goes on to admit that the immense columns of those monumental buildings do in fact accomplish a very effective feat: inspiring the ‘vast majority’ with a profound feeling of patriotism. Claiming that the majority of people are induced by ‘the shiploads of giant columns for the monumental buildings’ and the trite mottoes to feel national pride, Pevsner asks, ‘does not democracy build for the many?’

In Pevsner’s view, architecture whose purpose is to impress the majority naturally assumes the forms of ‘borrowed monumentality’, viz., a rehash of the past glories of Greece and Rome. As for the plan of Washington D.C. by L’Enfant (figure 2), ‘it is really a variation of a type of plan that was invented for Louis XIV, especially at Versailles, and so
2. A map of Washington, D.C., owned by Nikolaus Pevsner, now held in the Pevsner Archive at the Getty Research Institute

demonstrates absolutism and domination'. For Pevsner, this is deplorable ‘... the Monumental is bound to turn towards the most permanent, immutable-looking; and a new style, a style as unprecedented as ours of this century, cannot yet look immutable’.

Of course, Washington, D.C., is not the only example of imitative architecture with ‘borrowed monumentality’. But it is definitely one of the cities where architecture which is a rehash of the past glories of Greece and Rome is widely appreciated and admired by many of the public as being emblematic of the triumph of democracy. The majority of people were and are even today pleased with these public buildings and monuments.

2. Pevsner on Democracy in Architecture

We come now to the point at which it is necessary to deal with what Pevsner saw as
criteria for the expression of democracy in architecture. Pevsner suggests a whole new way that architecture can celebrate democracy. Pevsner, probably more than anybody in his field, was well aware that 'the preference of the majority of human beings is not necessarily for the good' and that the consensus of the majority can be utterly wrong.

In the early 1930s, Pevsner had seen first-hand in Germany how the taste and will of the majority could lead, in a 'so-called democratic' manner, to the rise of a terrifyingly inhumane, anti-democratic regime of terror which had ultimately killed his mother. Interestingly, Pevsner seemed initially totally unaware of the destructive power of fascism. Iain Boyd Whyte refers, in his highly informative and comprehensive study on 'Pevsner's debt' to German art history in the early 1930s, to Pevsner's 'optimistic position' and his paradoxically and 'essentially positive view of National Socialism', which he kept until 1935 when he braced himself for being condemned 'to stay in England' in consequence of 'the enactment of the Nuremberg Race Laws' of that year. Although he hoped that 'the National Socialist reign would be short and that life in Germany would soon, somehow, return to normal, invigorated and cleansed by the right-wing interlude, but no longer anti-semitic', the situation was utterly contrary to his expectation, and he was forced to live in Britain as an exile. Sooner or later, he had come to realize how, across the Strait, under the anti-semitic fascist regime, architecture had come to be treated as a mere tool employed to blind the eyes of an aesthetically naïve people, a façade of spurious overblown neoclassicism whose purpose was to invoke a sense of national and racial pride.

Pevsner was empirically convinced that 'democracy in architecture' should not be 'simply following the taste of the majority'; for, in the Third Reich, trite monumental buildings which borrowed from Classicism had been erected specifically to stir the masses: their seemingly immutable-looking exteriors did in fact satisfy the taste of the majority. The Pevsner Archive at the Getty Research Institute in California holds photographs of supramonumental, quasi-immutable Nazi architecture, copies of which Pevsner clipped from magazines for reference (figures 3 and 4). For him, they were all perfect visual proof of the error in believing that 'the architect [is] supposed to show his social responsibility
3 & 4. Photographs of supra-monumental, quasi-immutable Nazi architecture, copies of which Pevsner clipped from magazines for reference, now held in the Pevsner Archive at the Getty Research Institute

by following what the majority wants’.18

Distrusting any decision based on the view and taste of the majority, Pevsner came instead to define ‘democracy’ as the ‘public duty of helping people on to develop their faculties — mental and spiritual and also aesthetic’.19 Democracy thus defined entails that architecture find new means of expression, both aesthetically and morally functional, capable of helping people to develop their mental, spiritual and aesthetic faculties.

Rather than the principle of majority rule, what Pevsner emphasized is the architect’s social responsibility to erect architecture which can be instrumental in developing people’s individual, overall faculties. According to Pevsner, one of the major obstacles to the architect’s ability to fulfill such a duty was the architect’s desire for praise and prestige. Pevsner was very critical of the idea that the main purpose of architecture was to display and put on parade the gifts of the architect. For him, architecture should never be an art which the architect practices primarily as a way to receive accolades from the public.

The most respected, well-known twentieth-century architects are rather bravely criticized by Pevsner for their desire to impress. Paul Rudolph’s design for the School of Architecture and Art at Yale (figure 5) was dismissed by Pevsner as being intended to ‘overwhelm the visitor with extremely heavy, extremely chunky blocks of concrete’.20 He claims that, at
Yale, Paul Rudolph failed to express the function of the building and evoke what ‘it is in the interest of a school to evoke’. Therefore, it seemed natural and inevitable to Pevsner that, when Rudolph resigned as the Chairman of the Department of Architecture and left Yale two years after the opening of the building he had designed, Rudolph’s successor felt compelled to immediately begin redesigning the interior of the building. For Pevsner, the Yale School of Architecture and Art had been designed by Rudolph as a monument to himself, not as a building with the purpose of serving ‘the needs of many’ its staff and both current and future students.

Frank Lloyd Wright may best illustrate the egoism of the architect as seen by Pevsner. Pevsner tells a story originally told to him by Finnish architect Alvar Aalto. When Aalto was on a visit to the U.S., Wright drove Alto to Taliesin, Wright’s architectural farm and self-made kingdom, and as they drove along Wright suggested he and Aalto play ‘a parlor game’. He said to Aalto: ‘You look out left and I’ll look out right, and any building influenced by me counts one.’ Pevsner says that, when Aalto told this story to him, ‘there was a little pause and Aalto finished [the story] with a broad grin: “Funny thing, he always won”.’ Wright’s competitive desire to best his competitors, for Pevsner, revealed Wright to be a self-glorifying egotist.

For Pevsner, the key for resisting the architectural temptation to flaunt one’s talent could be found in the words of Walter Gropius in his 1961 explanation of his Bauhaus days: ‘How to dwell, how to work, move, relax, how to create the life-giving environment; these were what occupied our minds.’ ‘This [Gropius’s statement] is to me precisely
what ought to occupy the minds of all architects," said Pevsner. There should be no space for the architect's ego to take over.

Philip Johnson once remarked to Pevsner, 'Nikolaus, you are the only man alive who can still say functionalism with a straight face'. Pevsner, the defender of Functionalism, maintains that, 'if an architect neglects function he neglects duty', and goes on to say that a building designed by an architect 'must not only function', but 'it must also look as if it functioned'. Rather than function demonstrating the architect's talent, genius and obsession with details, good architecture should evoke '[t]he pure expression of function, the pure consideration of the duties of the architect toward the community', not merely the idea of function as a manifestation of practicality.

One more obstacle to the fulfillment of the architect's duty, for Pevsner, is the arrogance of an architect who assumes that he or she knows precisely what the people ought to want. Pride in being a professional architect, a master who 'embraces the consideration of the whole external surroundings of the life of man', can lead an architect into the delusion that he or she is superior to the masses and therefore allowed to impose his or her view on the public.

If, however, architects seek to erect architecture capable of helping people to develop their mental, spiritual and aesthetic faculties, that is to say, a kind of architecture which truly deserves to be described as an 'architectural celebration of democracy', they will find their way, according to Pevsner, through a spirit of anonymity, of caring more about the practical, aesthetic and moral function of the work for 'anonymous' people than about praise from the public and the taste of a majority which is prone to be aesthetically naïve.

3. Democracy in Architecture and Architectural 'Anonymity'

Although Pevsner never wrote a book or essay devoted exclusively to 'democracy in architecture', he touched upon this subject in 1972 when he delivered the Raoul Wallenberg
Lecture at the University of Michigan under the title of ‘Architecture as a Humane Art’ (figure 6). The Raoul Wallenberg Lecture series had been instituted late in the previous year in order to commemorate Raoul Gustaf Wallenberg, a University of Michigan graduate.

Wallenberg, a Swedish national, took an honors degree in architecture in 1935, and, following a career in banking and inter-export businesses in the second half of the 1930s and early 1940s, became, in 1944, the first secretary of the Swedish Legation in Budapest in charge of a department responsible for the protection and relief of Jews. It is said that ‘he issued thousands of protective passports of his own elaborate design, complete with official seals and triple crown insignia of Sweden’, and, due to those documents, thousands of Jews were saved as bearers who awaited emigration to Sweden under the protection of the Swedish government. Wallenberg also rented thirty-two apartment houses, ‘raised the Swedish flag over them, and used them as safe houses for the sheltering of Jews’. The Wallenberg lecture series, of which Pevsner was asked to deliver the very first, was expected to evoke the spirit of Wallenberg, whose ‘whereabouts since the liberation of Budapest in February 1945’ are still unknown.

In his lecture, Pevsner insisted on the importance of the architect’s awareness that what he designs, unless it is strictly intended for a private client, has the possibility of being used by ‘a number of people who are all anonymous’, and therefore the architect’s core social responsibility is ‘to create a building which is anonymous enough fully to serve the needs of a number of unknown people’.31

As has been mentioned earlier, for Pevsner, Paul Rudolph had failed to realize this spirit
of anonymity and instead intended the Yale School of Architecture and Art building to be a monument to himself. Mies van der Rohe at the Illinois Institute of Technology (figure 7) was, for Pevsner, the same. Rohe’s unrelenting pursuit of Modernist details was, in Pevsner’s view, essentially another demonstration of architectural egoism.

Pevsner believed that, if architects were serious in assuming their social responsibility to work creatively, yet humbly, for anonymous people, they were able to attain a truly architectonic celebration of democracy. The question of democracy in architecture finds, according to Pevsner, its best representation in the municipal housing architecture of Britain. A concrete example of such housing is the Roehampton Estate of Greater London Council, designed by Sir Leslie Martin and others in the 1950s, in which a wide variety of building types was either erected or preserved to house a community of 10,000 (figure 8).

9-12. Varied types of housing which constitute the Roehampton Estate, reported in the *The Architectural Review*, 126: 750, July 1959

While ‘groups of ten- and twelve-story blocks’ were newly constructed, ‘old people’s housing of one story, two-story cottages and terraces, duplexes, and so on’ were also all provided; and ‘detached mansions from the eighteenth century and later, as well as other valuable old houses’ (figures 9-12), all evocative of the garden city movement in England, were carefully preserved.\(^{32}\)

The buildings are quiet and anonymous in style, yet, with lawns and trees surrounding them (figures 13-16), a humane, life-giving environment had been created, an environment
13-16. The current state of the Roehampton Estate, after more than half a century since its completion in the late 1950s, photographed in September 2013.

which evokes neither the power and vanity of an autocrat nor an architect’s ego. Rather, variety has been the aim, with the environment of each inhabitant and the right to be different from others fully respected, and the need for anonymity served. The whole scheme has been worked out for the purpose of practicing democracy, *viz.*, in Pevsner’s words, the ‘public duty of helping people on to develop their mental and spiritual and also aesthetic faculties’. Pevsner never doubted that, through the architectural challenge of practicing democracy, major threats to democratic society such as poverty and racial conflict could and would be roundly defeated.
Finally, I wish to emphasize that, if in fact the architectural education of the University of Michigan played a significant role in the formation of Raoul Wallenberg’s vision and his courage in attempting to defeat the Third Reichian policy of racial genocide, this, more than anything else, signifies that architecture can function, as Pevsner believed, to further the practice of democracy, and that architects should pursue their duty to help people to develop aesthetic, mental, and spiritual faculties.

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articles/2013/2013-oct-dec/whyte-pevsner (date of access: 6 December 2013). In this article, Whyte examines in detail the texts written by Pevsner in the early 1930s, ‘Kunst und Staat’ and ‘Kunst der Gegenwart und Kunst der Zukunft: Zehn Abschnitte von ----------’, in which his adoption of ‘the language and tone of the National Socialist Party’ can be ‘most clearly’ read (¶8).

17. Pevsner, 2003, p. 16.
18. Pevsner, 1972, p. 16. For Pevsner’s own criticism of Nazi architecture, see his short article written under the pseudonym of Peter F. R. Donner for the Architectural Review, vol. XC, no. 540, December 1941, pp. 177-78.

23. Pevsner, 1972, pp. 33-34.
24. Pevsner, 1972, p. 34.
25. Pevsner, 1972, p. 35.