Quiet, Humane and ‘Anonymous’:
Pevsner’s art-historical response to wartime

Ariyuki Kondo

1. Pevsner, a Modernist-Functionalist

‘Nikolaus, you are the only man alive who can still say functionalism with a straight face’: this was what the architect Philip Johnson once remarked to Nikolaus Pevsner (1902-1983). Best known for his *Pioneers of Modern Design* (1948), Pevsner, throughout his life, was unquestionably one of the most eminent standard-bearers for Modernist functionalism. However, he never gave Modernist-functionalist architecture absolute priority and didn’t always rate it highly. While Pevsner described St Catherine’s College, Oxford, designed by Arne Jacobsen, as ‘a perfect piece of architecture’, he disparaged the thoroughly Modernist design of the Illinois Institute of Technology as a demonstration of architectural egotism in which Mies van der Rohe’s unrelenting pursuit of Modernist functional details was undertaken primarily to satisfy his own self-esteem. This shows how selective Pevsner was in his architectural-historical apology for functionalism and Modernism.

By Modernist-functionalist architecture, Pevsner never meant geometrical, undecorated glass and iron structures. Instead, what he meant was humane and ‘anonymous’ buildings and groups of buildings, which solely serve the everyday needs of ordinary people and are poles apart from architecture which was undertaken by architects as self-glorifying projects or expressive of the ideologies and superiorities of a powerful few.
2. Pevsner's criticism of Nazi architecture

Before and during World War II, Pevsner had seen that, in the Third Reich, the triteness of monumental, seemingly immutable-looking buildings, mainly designed in Neo-classical style, had been erected solely to appeal to the masses. For Pevsner, they were all perfect visual proofs of the error in believing that the architect is supposed to dedicate his work to the proper authorities or to 'show his social responsibility by following what the majority wants'.

In December 1941, Pevsner wrote a critical note on Nazi architecture for the magazine *The Architectural Review*, under the nom de plume of 'Peter F. R. Donner' [Pl. 1]. The note, which Pevsner opens by quoting from Dryden's words 'All, all of a piece throughout. Thy Chase had a Beast in View', criticises the Nazi architecture as being built merely for the deification of 'militarism'. Pevsner criticized not only buildings constructed in Hitler's favourite Neo-classical style, such as the Hall Dedicated to the Memory of the Great Soldiers of the Past in Berlin, but also Nazi architecture designed in the so-called Modern Style, for to Pevsner they all shared the 'nasty combination of the pompous and the demonstratively taciturn, the brutal and the romantic, the crude in obtaining effects, and the subtle in using them for impressing the people, which we have learnt to connect with Nazi mentality'.

---

Writing of ‘the Hall of the Great Soldiers’, Pevsner says: ‘Everything is overdone. There are no manners, no tact, no delicacy’. Instead, Pevsner says, enormous size and space, immense scale, grand and massive structure, and ostentatious designs were emphasized, all for impressing the masses.

Pevsner quotes from Hitler’s own address, given on January 22, 1938 at the opening of the First National Exhibition of Architecture and Crafts in Munich: ‘This exhibition ... represents the beginning of a new era. For the first time since the building of our cathedrals we see here a truly great architecture, i.e. not an architecture using itself up in the service of petty everyday commissions and needs, but an architecture reaching out far beyond everyday needs’.

In this address Hitler was, according to Pevsner, thinking of ‘buildings for the purpose of representation’, erected on a large scale. Under the Nazi regime, says Pevsner, architecture was meant to be and considered an effective means of propaganda, brainwashing the naïve into taking inordinate pride in their nation, race, and what their own race could achieve. Pevsner maintained that every feature of the Nazi design, viz., the ‘mad’ scale, the enormity, the Neo-classical ‘over-obvious symbolism’, was ‘all dodges to achieve an easy appeal with the masses and hide the Beast in View’.

While a number of specimens of ‘spectacular representational architecture’ were built in Berlin, Munich, Nürnberg and many other cities, the Nazis had no intention of building quiet, humane, ‘anonymous’ architecture which would serve specific purposes for the everyday needs of ordinary citizens. Housing for the common people, in particular, ‘has been monstrously neglected ever since Hitler came into power’, Pevsner averred.

---

3 Donner, 1941, p. 177.
4 Donner, 1941, p. 178.
5 Donner, 1941, p. 177.
3. Pevsner’s optimistic view of Nationalist Socialism in the early 1930s

No more than ten years prior to writing this article, however, Pevsner expressed a totally different view of National Socialism in anticipation of what it could bring to ordinary people’s lives. Interestingly, Pevsner seemed initially totally unaware at that time of the potential destructive power of fascism. In his highly informative and comprehensive study on Pevsner’s debt to German art history in the early 1930s,\(^6\) Iain Boyd Whyte, Emeritus Professor of Architectural History at Edinburgh, refers to Pevsner’s rather ‘optimistic position’ and his ‘essentially positive view of National Socialism’. Even after Pevsner lost his academic post (as a ‘Privatdozent’) at Göttingen University as a result of the ‘Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service’, he held this view until 1935, when he finally braced himself to face the fact that he had been condemned ‘to stay in England’ in consequence of the enactment of the Nürnberg Race Laws of that year.\(^7\)

While the theologian Ernst Troeltsch and others had already, by the early 1920s, expressed their serious concerns over the fact that anti-Semitism was becoming inextricably linked with the campaigns of both Conservatives and Nationalists in Germany, Pevsner, still in his early 30s in the early 1930s, was much more optimistic, if not naïve, in thinking 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’ and ‘most importantly, it would


\(^7\) Whyte, 2013, ¶ 7.
be culturally progressive and modernist'.

He had been very much caught up at that time with the over-optimistic idea that National Socialism (not anti-Semitism) might be able to foster good, cheap, quiet, anonymous, yet humane, Modernist-functionalist architecture which served the everyday needs of ordinary people. In the Middle Ages, the people who had designed the cathedrals remained anonymous and ‘were content to be workmen working for a cause greater than their own fame’. Pevsner had set his hopes upon the revitalization of such mediaevalistic values in post-World War I social reformation in Germany.

The reality, however, turned out to be utterly different than what he had hoped for. Pevsner’s optimism was shattered and his hopes were destroyed, and he soon realized that, under the anti-Semitic fascist regime, architecture had come to be treated as a mere tool employed to blind the eyes of the aesthetically naïve and ethically lost in order to invoke national and racial pride.

Pevsner himself, being based in Britain after 1933, was able to escape being sent to a concentration camp, but he was soon to lose his mother, who had remained in Germany. 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.

Pevsner, having been ostracized both academically and personally by the Nazis and realizing how wrong he had been about National Socialism, came to see his own architectural-historical emphasis upon quiet, humane and ‘anonymous’ buildings and living communities as a way to resist fascism and fascist ideas of architecture and the environment. Existing from day to day at close quarters with death and destruction during the war, Pevsner’s insistence on the aesthetic value of an architectural environment serving

8 Ibid.
the everyday needs of ordinary people was a demonstration of a calm, quiet, yet indomitable spirit, indispensable in helping one who had endured and survived war.

According to Pevsner, a historian must always be aware of ‘contemporary developments’ in society and must be aware of ‘contemporary needs’. Galvanized by the bustling social conditions of the 1930s and 40s, Pevsner came naturally to his assertion that ‘the historian can no longer shut himself off from contemporary needs’. This included art historians. The essential role of the art historian, Pevsner maintains, is to ‘command a knowledge of the historical relations and [he] is thus, through his experience of past events and thought processes, able to mobilize his spirit for the ideas of the present’. In the days just prior to and during World War II, what ordinary people needed most were the calm, indomitable determination to survive the war and, at the same time, the power to resist the demands of authoritarianism.

Pevsner felt his role as an art historian was to actively oppose his views of architecture and its importance to those of the kind a fascist dictator envisioned, and to make those views widely known. He felt it was his moral duty in contemporary society to further the dissemination of architecture which embodied Sir Winston Churchill’s famous dictum, ‘Stay calm and carry on’.

4. Pevsner on Frank Pick

In 1942, Pevsner wrote a commemorative article for *The Architectural Review* about Frank Pick,¹⁰ the first Chief Executive of The London Passenger Transport Board, who had died in November 1941 [Pl. 2]. The two men had been close friends: it was Pick who had spared no trouble on

various occasions to help Pevsner, an academic in exile, to settle in Britain.\textsuperscript{11}

According to Pevsner, the London Passenger Transport Board, a public supervising body of the London tram, bus and underground network formed in 1933, had, under the strong leadership of Pick, by means of building underground stations and other daily-used facilities and through adroit publicity, ‘bec[o]me the most efficacious centre of visual education in England’. Pick had revealed his refined taste in art and design throughout London in various ways. His first undertaking was to commission posters for the London Underground by such spirited designers as Fred Taylor, Gregory Brown, and Edward McKnight Kauffer.


\textsuperscript{11} Pick urged the Ministry of Labour and the Home Office to give Pevsner a permit to work when Pevsner first settled in Britain and, a few years later, even helped him to find a place to live in Hampstead. When Pevsner was placed in the Huyton internment camp as an alien in 1940, it was again Pick (along with Josiah Wedgwood of Josiah Wedgwood & Sons Ltd. and Kenneth Clark, then Director of the National Gallery, among others) who made efforts to obtain his release.
Their works made an important contribution to the aesthetic education of ordinary Londoners. Pevsner, as an architectural historian, naturally regarded highly Pick’s (and architect Charles Holden’s) modern-functional station design and its ‘quiet’, ‘unostentatious’ style [Pl. 3]. Stating that the value of those underground stations lay in being ‘educationally ... more effective than any other English buildings designed between 1930 and 1935’, Pevsner also referred to many other examples of ‘quiet and unostentatious’ design that ordinary people could appreciate through daily use of London public transportation: underground booking halls, ticket booths, lighting fittings, platforms, station seats, bus shelters, bus stop signs, etc [Pl. 4]. Clearly, Pevsner’s intention in this article was to draw his readers’ attention
to the quietly and anonymously existing masterpieces around them in their daily lives.

In this article, Pevsner specifically emphasised Pick's motivation as a top-ranked civil servant, a motivation which we find expressed in Pick's own words:

If we are to achieve our hopes and forge the armour of light, everyone will have to work for the community in some way or other for nothing. What we seek can only be gained by voluntary work, which is work of love .... What excuse is there for relieving anyone of his share of tidying up his street; protecting his park or public garden; caring for his neighbour in misfortune; watching against abuse amongst those in authority; doing something to beautify and adorn his surroundings, which all may share ....

These words were quoted by Pevsner from one of Pick's pamphlets, *Paths to Peace*, published by Routledge in 1941, the year Pick died. These words, written during increasingly turbulent days, are in essence Pevsner's own urgent message, that of a man who personally witnessed and experienced, not 'Paths to Peace', but paths to ruin: the rise of fascism and the outbreak of war. As for Pevsner's own words, for instance, he had already stated in 1937:

Personally I have no doubt that beauty, both of nature and of things made by man, beauty surrounding us in the streets, in the places where we work and where we live, beauty not only as a passing enjoyment of something outside our ordinary lives, but expressing itself in all the implements of everyday use, helps to make our lives

---

fuller, happier and more intense.\textsuperscript{13}

5. Pevsner’s ‘Treasure Hunt’

In the very same year that he wrote the article on Frank Pick, Pevsner published a series of ‘critical notes’, intended to be aesthetically ‘enlightening’ and ‘instrumental’, for \textit{The Architectural Review}, again using the pseudonym Peter F. R. Donner [Pl. 5\textsuperscript{\textdagger}]. The series, of eleven articles, was titled ‘Treasure Hunt’, and was published monthly, except for April. The aim of these articles was to put across the ideas expressed in the above-mentioned Pick quotation.

Intended for an audience of anonymous urban residents and ‘workaday passer[\textsingles\textdoubles]-by’ who ‘care to embark on [architectural] expeditions of their own will’\textsuperscript{14} in their daily lives, the series was essentially an educational attempt to turn ordinary people’s attention to the aesthetic merits of their everyday

\textsuperscript{13} N. Pevsner, \textit{An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England}, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937, p. 11.

environment and foster outright resistance to a war which was destroying lives and ruining Europe’s cultural inheritance. Pevsner intended to re-introduce the public, in the stress and tension of wartime, to the charming, all-but-forgotten aesthetic merits and visual pleasures of the quotidian world around them, the marvellous art and architecture which had been created, for the most part, by anonymous architects and designers who had worked ‘for the community in some way or other for nothing’.\textsuperscript{15}

For Pevsner, the calm realm of the visual pleasures to be found in the everyday environment was thoroughly detached from the relentless impulse to fight, public feelings of anger, fear and fury, and a widely-felt sense of despair. The ‘Treasure Hunt’ articles were essentially a series of architectural-historical attempts to stress the need for moments of peace and calm in everyday life in everyday environments and the importance of the resolve to ‘stay calm and carry on’ no matter what the circumstances.

6. Pevsner after World War II

After World War II, Pevsner continued to affirm the value of quiet, humane architecture designed by anonymous people working for a cause greater than their own fame. In his first post-World War II publication, \textit{The Leaves of Southwell} (1945), Pevsner writes of the nobility of the spirit of anonymity which had existed in the Middle Ages:

\ldots surprisingly few names of artists and architects of the Middle Ages have come down to us. They are not mentioned by the chronicles, because their work was but regarded as competent craft. Neither the term architect nor the term sculptor was in use. Architecture and sculpture issued anonymously from the cathedral

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
or abbey lodge, that is workshop, not because there was no creative genius, but because it was taken for granted. If we hear of master masons of cathedrals or of sculptors, it is usually only by chance records of wages paid or by chance deeds.\textsuperscript{16}

In 1972, when Pevsner was invited to deliver the Raoul Wallenberg Lecture at the University of Michigan under the title of ‘Architecture as a Humane Art’, it was only natural for him to return to and reclaim the ideology that he had been so keen to propagate during wartime: the significance of quietness, humanity and anonymity in architecture in opposition/contrast to the ‘loudness’ and ‘violence’ of ‘architecture for the purpose of representation’. The Raoul Wallenberg Lecture series had just been instituted late in the previous year in order to commemorate the famed anti-Nazi activist Raoul Gustaf Wallenberg, a University of Michigan graduate in architecture, whose own resistance to the Nazis had saved thousands of Jewish people in Budapest.

In this 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’\textsuperscript{17}. Pevsner believed that architects must be serious in shouldering their heavy social responsibility to work creatively, yet humbly, for their unknown public, and that therefore their works should be calm, quiet, understated, humane, not in the service of their own fame, wealth and power, nor that of dictatorial rulers.

Pevsner particularly referred in his lecture to the Roehampton Estate

\textsuperscript{17} Pevsner, 1972, p. 24.
of the Greater London Council, designed by Sir Leslie Martin and others in the 1950s. A wide variety of buildings — from groups of ten- and twelve-story blocks to terraces and duplexes to one- and two-story cottages — had all been either erected or preserved to house a community of 10,000. The buildings, surrounded by lawns and trees, evoke neither power nor vanity. In building them, Sir Leslie and his fellow architects and designers revitalized the spirit of anonymous service of the Middle Ages and were content to be of service in a cause greater than their own fame.

7. Concluding remarks

Pevsner believed that architecture built for ‘the purpose of representation’ could never truly be great architecture or a ‘treasure’ of its time. He insisted that everyday works of quiet, humane, and even anonymous design deserve our serious attention, and calls upon the reader to take part in protecting these works and guard against the abuse of art and architecture by those in power, who are capable of destroying our ‘treasures’ and the tranquillity of peace.

Pevsner exalted what Hitler denigrated: ‘petty everyday commissions’ designed to serve daily needs and maintain peace in everyday life. People’s interest in their own communities and environments was, for Pevsner, the
fundamental basis for a sound society; just as the eighteenth-century painter William Hogarth had depicted, in one of his didactic prints, *Beer Street* (1751), a sound and peaceful society consisting of anonymous people who work for the community in some way or other for nothing, tidying up their neighbourhoods, protecting and caring for their old houses [Pl. 6].

Architectural design can be a tool/weapon for either good or evil. It can destroy a sound society. It is perfectly capable of fostering a spirit of racial solidarity. It can increase extremism in nationalists who are aesthetically and ethically naïve. It can intensify a campaign for the expulsion of minority ethnic groups. Pevsner knew through his own first-hand experience how architecture can be abused and misused. Thus, as an art historian who had been buffeted by two world wars, Pevsner came to appeal to his contemporaries, through his various wartime writings, to *Stay calm and look around; protect your daily living environment; truly appreciate those works of architecture designed by anonymous people in the past for a cause greater than their own fame, racial pride, or political propaganda; and carry on your quiet, yet indomitable and humane everyday lives.* Despite all the horrors of the world wars and the rise of fascism in the 1930s, Pevsner must never have doubted, as the Enlightenment sociologist Adam Ferguson had put it in 1767, that the ‘virtues of men have shone most during their struggles, not after the attainment of their ends’.

**Acknowledgements**

This paper was first read at the 2014 annual Design History Society conference held at Oxford University in September 2014. For the original recording of the presentation, see: [http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/people/ariyuki-](http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/people/ariyuki-)

---

kondo. The research by the author on which this paper is based was supported by KAKENHI, the Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (type C) of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (No. 24520188).