

Two Editorial Approaches to the De La Warr Pavilion

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'A knowledge of photography is just as important as that of the alphabet' – László Moholy-Nagy

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The Modern period was a changing time for architectural discourse. Discussions about how best to enact modernism (or if to enact it at all) played out across the pages of architectural and building trade journals and some magazines quickly aligned themselves with the Modernist movement. However as Elizabeth Darling suggests in their paper on *Focus*, an architectural Little Magazine, 'the fact that the medium of the printed word and image might be a crucial tool in the development of architectural ideas [...] is something that historians of the periodical and the book have largely overlooked'.¹ In addition Darling argues the idea (although referencing *Focus* rather than either of the two periodicals I attend to in this paper) that when disseminating ideas about 'the creation of a new architectural culture' the form that a periodical adopts is 'integral to the message it promoted'.² In this paper I will explore the different ways that two periodicals contemporary to the period of construction represented the De La Warr Pavilion in print.

¹ Elizabeth Darling, "Focus: A Little Magazine and Architectural Modernism in 1930s Britain", *The Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* 3:1 (2012): 47.

² Ibid. 50.

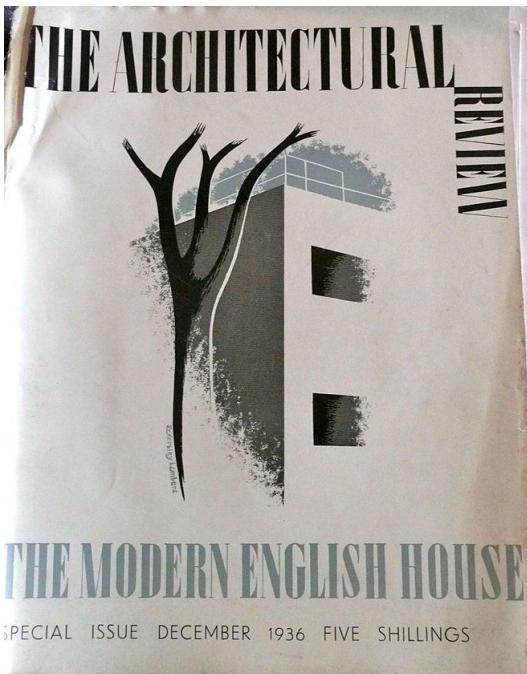


Figure 1: Cover of *The Architectural Review*, December 1936

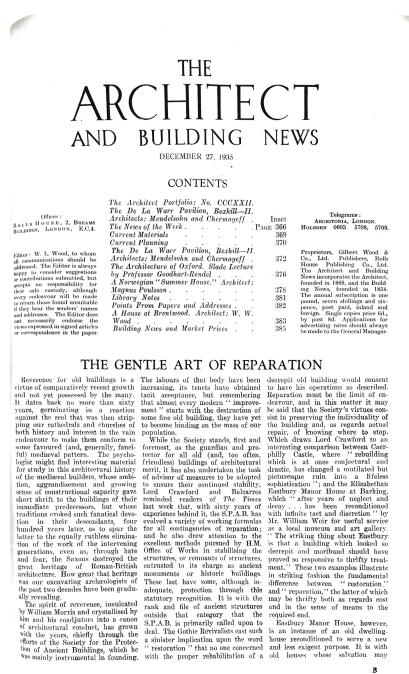


Figure 2: First page of *The Architect and Building News*, 27 December 1934

Before even handling an architectural periodical, it is evident by looking that there is a difference between the various publications. *The Architectural Review* is large in format, with a cover that aims to communicate itself as a champion of the current zeitgeist (see Figure 1).³ It's generous size refuses to simply be tucked under your arm and read while commuting, instead it demands to be read while perhaps relaxing in a *Model B3* chair away from your desk. The text is bold and commands your attention (but there isn't too much of it), while the illustrations that can be found on the individual covers are relevant to the content inside - giving you a teasing glimpse into the world of modernist architecture.

³ Unfortunately the cover of the issue featuring the De La Warr pavilion was not available, but this example is from later in the year.

By stark contrast *The Architect and Building News* looks far more like any other paper that you might find on the newsstand (see Figure 2). Its bland formatting and lack of illustration doesn't give any hint that it might belong to an industry of design; were the title removed you would struggle to know at a glace what this publication was about at all. The smaller size points to a throwaway product rather than one that is meant to be treasured on a bookcase like *The Architectural Review*, and this is in line with its weekly publishing schedule. Even just by looking at the two periodicals we can start to see an alignment for and against the modern architecture movement. *The Architectural Review* positions itself visually as a periodical that is going to make statements that you want to keep on your fitted bookcase (or perhaps from 1939 in your Penguin Book Donkey) so that you can refer back to this bible of good taste in the future. On the other hand *The Architect and Building News* is a periodical that doesn't contain guidelines for living, but quite simply the news of the trade. This is almost certainly a reflection on when architecture was professionalised as a practice in the nineteenth-century, where the architect was seen as a 'businessman'.⁴ In this sense *The Architect and Building News* reflects the conservative appearance of other business newspapers such as *The Financial Times*.

There is a sense of architectural writing and photography as an important part of overall architectural practice in *The Architectural Review*. Indeed in 2002 Hyungmin Pai suggested that 'Architecture was established as an institution

⁴ Darling, "Focus: A Little Magazine and Architectural Modernism in 1930s Britain", 47.

through the agency of an array of texts and images' during the modern period.⁵

The evidence for this kind of new thinking at the time by *The Architectural Review* editor is visible in their commissioning of László Moholy-Nagy for the layout and photography of the feature on leisure at the seaside (of which the De La Warr Pavilion makes up a section).⁶ Moholy-Nagy's writings on photography from 1932 mark them out as someone who understood the potential for photography to work closely with architecture. '[With the help] of the new school of architects, we have attained an enlargement and sublimation of our appreciation of space, the comprehension of a new spatial culture' Moholy-Nagy wrote in his essay titled *A New Instrument of Vision*.⁷ Moholy-Nagy appeared to have a belief that photography could help architecture be understood in a new way. Traditional sketches and technical plans belonged to a time before modernism; only photography provided a new experience that could convey the dynamism found in modern architecture. From reading Moholy-Nagy's writing it is clear that they saw parallels between the public reception of both modern photography and modernist architecture. Moholy-Nagy describes photography as 'a "mechanical" thing' that was 'regarded so contemptuously in an artistic and creative sense' – this was the same uphill battle that modernist architecture was fighting.⁸ Not only that, but the proponents of modernist architecture often suggested that good architecture should work like a machine, supporting the

⁵ Hyungmin Pai, *The Portfolio and Diagram: Architecture, Discourse, and Modernity in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 13 quoted in Darling, "Focus: A Little Magazine and Architectural Modernism in 1930s Britain", 47.

⁶ Osbert Lancaster et al., "Leisure at the Seaside", *The Architectural Review*, July 1936, 7–27.

⁷ László Moholy-Nagy, "A New Instrument of Vision", in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells, (London: Routledge, 2009), 95.

⁸ Ibid.

inhabitants of the building mechanically wherever possible. For these reasons it makes sense for *The Architectural Review* to select bold photography when considering its layouts, especially that of Moholy-Nagy who arguably understood the potential for photography as a modernist intervention better than any other photographic artist at the time. It was, after all, Moholy-Nagy who predicted our contemporary obsession with imaging when he stated that 'the illiterate of the future will be ignorant of the use of camera and pen alike'.⁹

In addition to Moholy-Nagy being commissioned to illustrate and lay out this section on Leisure at the Seaside, there are four contributing writers named. This collaborative group-work ethos reflects that of the MARS Group (Modern Architectural Research Group), and potentially is also a reflection of labour politics of the time which involved working together in order to improve conditions for everyone. One of the most interesting aspects to note out of the four writers is that Peter Maitland is a pseudonym for the architect Serge Chermayeff – Erich Mendelsohn's architectural partner for the De La Warr Pavilion.¹⁰ He writes the section within Leisure at the Seaside titled 'IV The Architect' which primarily concerns itself with the problems of British seaside architecture and how the De La Warr Pavilion has addressed those issues. The authors particularly scathing comments about some aspects of British seaside culture (in particular about 'mustard and cress' in side street tea shops) may have given a hint as to the real identity of the writer.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Lara Feigel and Alexandra Harris, eds., *Modernism on Sea: Art and Culture at the British Seaside* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 5.

In *The Architect and Building News* the author of the article on the De La Warr Pavilion is not credited, leading to the conclusion that it was more likely written by the editor (or at least it suggests that the editor did not believe the name of the author mattered to the article itself). W.L. Wood (the editor of *The Architect and Building News*) had also been an early director for *British Vogue*, which makes it all the more surprising that no conscious thought appears to have been put into the design and illustration of the periodical.¹¹ However James Sexton makes an interesting observation when considering Aldous Huxley (an architectural critic who was friendly with Wood and who wrote for Condé Nast Publications) that writers for *British Vogue* were not always credited in the magazine during this period.¹² The difference between the two periodicals does suggest that two distinct schools of thinking are emerging in architectural publishing. The aspirational high-society leaning of *British Vogue* magazine could potentially be associated with a more conservative political affinity. This would tie in, through Wood, with the apparent conservatism of *The Architect and Building News*. On the other hand many of the main figures pushing for modernist architectural practice at this time were associated with the MARS Group that largely had utopian and socialist aims. This is reflected in the appearance and layout of *The Architectural Review*, as well as the choice of their artists such as Moholy-Nagy.

¹¹ James Sexton, *Aldous Huxley Annual. Volume 9 (2009)* (Berlin; London: Lit ; Global, 2011), 5.

¹² Ibid., 1.



Figure 3: Leisure at the Seaside, The Architectural Review, July 1936, p.8

The feature on seaside architecture within *The Architectural Review* can be read three ways: as a textual essay, an illustrated essay, or potentially as a photo essay while ignoring the text. White spaces and bled out images are interspersed with illustrations that seem casually splashed across the pages in comparison with the rigid demarcation of the photography. Moholy-Nagy not only tells the story of historical architecture to modernist architecture with the subjects of the images, but also with the framing and composition. The images at the bottom of page eight (see Figure 3) are quite old fashioned in their character. They recall earlier styles of photographing scenes, from a standard eyelevel view that remains static from image to image. This suits the buildings being shown, which are typical British seaside promenades of the kind the article is suggesting we should replace. We are then treated to montages of images that Moholy-Nagy seems to think represent British seaside culture: donkeys, piers, and pints of prawns are laid carefully out with the sheet music to 'I do like to be beside the seaside' on page ten. Inserted after page ten is a yellow card with circles reminiscent of classic Bauhaus designs cut out and allowing us a voyeuristic glimpse through to

Edwardian pictures of ladies promenading on the beach, and when the card flips over (see Figure 4) we are treated to a similar view of what Moholy-Nagy seems to think are the absolute key elements of the British seaside down – food, relaxation, and entertainment.

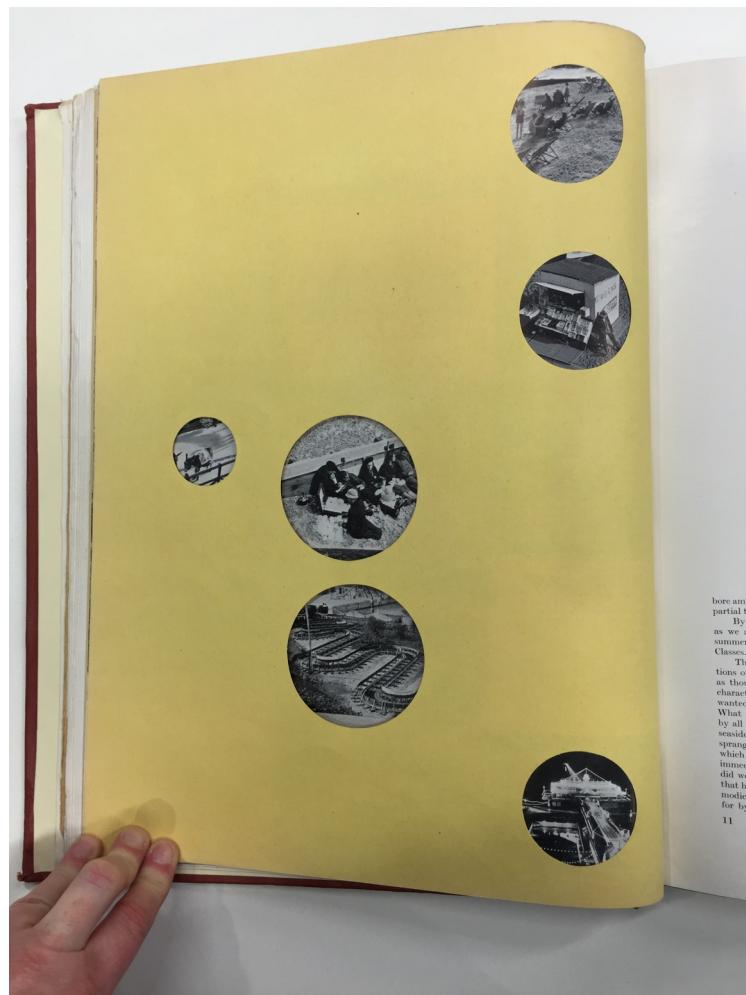


Figure 4: Leisure at the Seaside, The Architectural Review, July 1936, p.10

As we move through the article the photographic images become more abstract.

On page 14 'the visitor' is represented symbolically by a set of train tracks gently curving away to a vanishing point. Page 17 sees high vantage points turn chairs (and people) into repetitive patterns that echo the graphic photographs Moholy-Nagy made several years before. Moholy-Nagy's unusual perspectives begin to creep in when the architecture turns more modern – the buildings are rarely shot at eye level anymore, instead low or high points of view are preferred where possible. The great spiral staircase of the De La Warr Pavilion is shot from low down and framed with leading lines composed from the floor tiles and the long horizontal lines of the façade of the auditorium. The almost full size image is

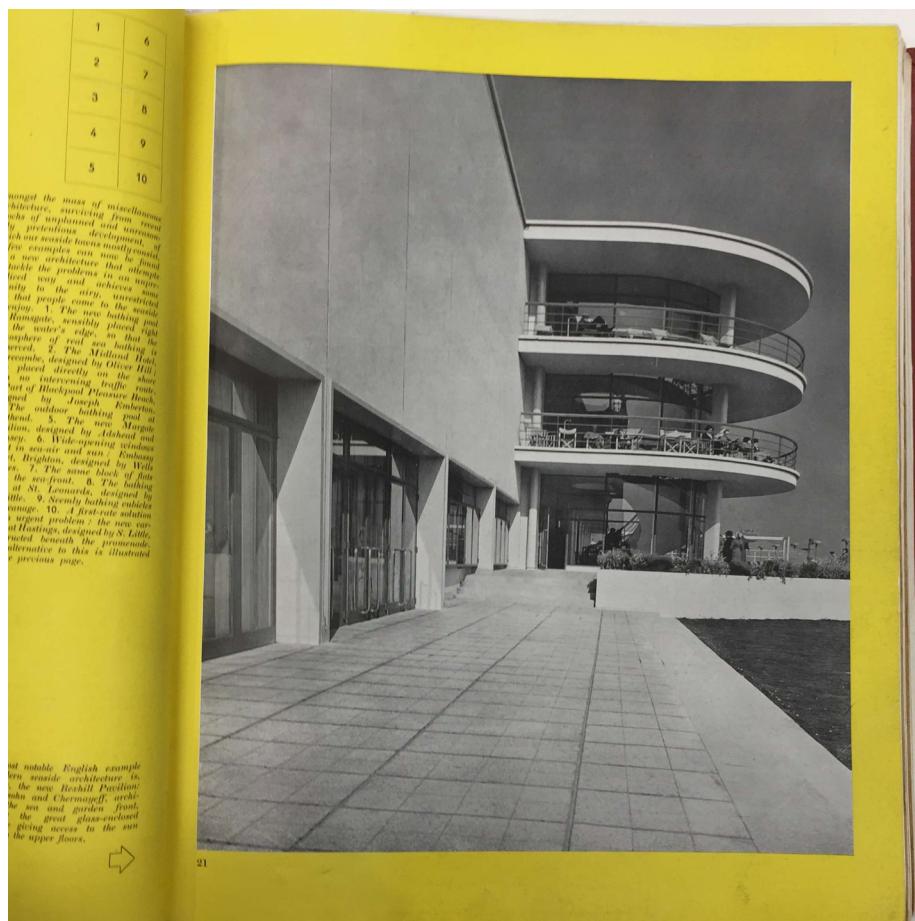


Figure 5: Leisure at the Seaside, *The Architectural Review*, July 1936, p.21

framed with vibrant full bleed yellow – this is a picture that we should be paying attention to (see Figure 5). Maholy-Nagy takes us by the hand and leads us through this photo essay as if he were guiding us through the building, and the simplicity with which we can read the pictures mirrors the comments of how easy the De La Warr Pavilion itself was to navigate.



Figure 6: Leisure at the Seaside, *The Architectural Review*, July 1936, p.26



Figure 7: Pont Transbordeur Marseille, László Moholy-Nagy, Gelatin Silver Print, 1929, The Met

As we near the end of the feature Moholy-Nagy appears to examine the tubular, almost industrial constructions that were used in the De La Warr staircase and balconies, with images that could not be closer to the almost-Constructivist styles that they have worked in before (see Figure 5 and Figure 6). If Moholy-



Figure 8: The De La Warr Pavilion Bexhill-II, The Architect and Building News, December 27 1935, p.372

Nagy is taking a lead from the Constructivists here by adopting their style, is there an indication that the De La Warr Pavilion is some kind of utopian dream?

The Architect and Building News is much more formal with its approach to photography and it is virtually impossible to read the images as an essay in themselves without the text to explain what is being shown. The December 27 issue shows the simple, static approach to photography that this periodical appears to favour (see Figure 7). The style of the imagery can be compared to the first images in the layout by Moholy-Nagy, shot from eye-level with no

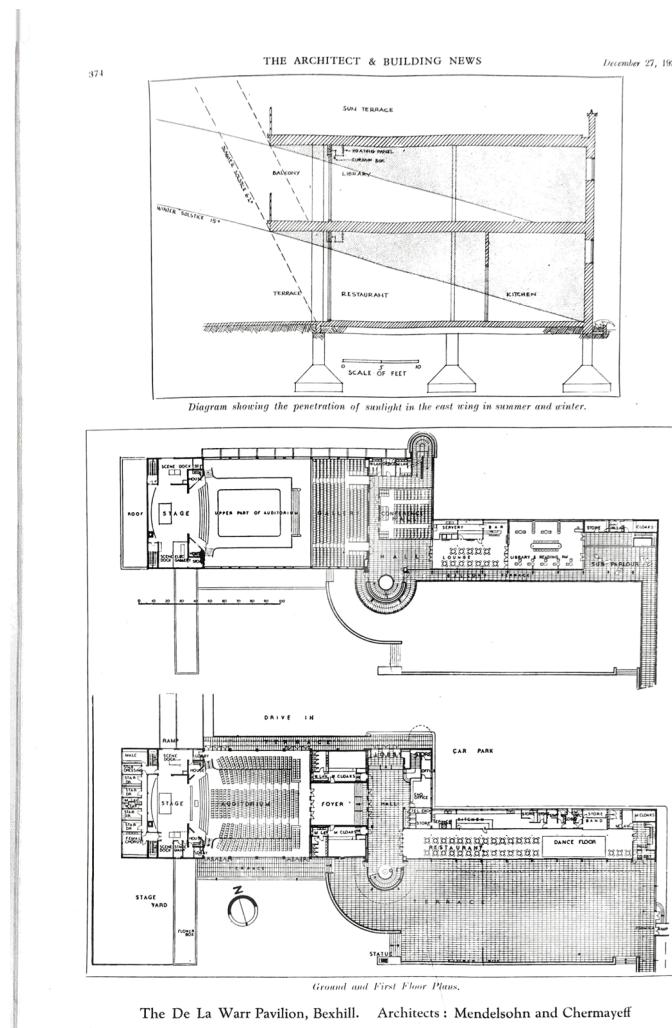


Figure 9: The De La Warr Pavilion Bexhill-II, The Architect and Building News, December 27 1935, p.374

consideration for interesting composition (see Figure 3). It seems like the objective of the images shown was simply to show the features of the building without any consideration to style other than 'have we got everything important in the frame?' In this way the photographs are similar to the diagrams that appear in almost every feature of *The Architect and Building News* (see Figure 8), demonstrating particular technical feats that the building has achieved and the prowess of the architect. Figure 8 for example shows the innovative design when it came to natural light entering the building. There is much more focus on

the way that the building operates and has been constructed compared to *The Architectural Review* where the feature is much more about social problems and how they might be solved through the medium of architecture.

It is also worth considering what kind of feature the editors have chosen to place before and after the De La Warr features in each periodical. *The Architect and Building News* follows both the features in the December 20th 1935 and December 27th 1935 issues with parts two and three of a three part series on Oxford architecture.¹³ The articles focus on the beauty of the collegiate architecture of the city of Oxford, and in particular Professor Goodhart-Rendel seems a proponent of sticking more or less rigidly to the classical doctrine. From reading the articles one cannot imagine Goodhart-Rendel welcoming modernist architecture into the heart of the city of dreaming spires. The language of the articles on the De La Warr Pavilion and Oxford couldn't be more different. For one the Oxford articles are a transcription of a lecture, but the editor must have realised how its warm and almost fondly romantic tone is at odds with the clipped, basic language of the piece on the De La Warr Pavilion. The two articles on the De La Warr Pavilion do very little more than describe the facilities that have been created by the building of the pavilion and the materials used in its construction.¹⁴ There is a real sense that the writer had no desire to spend any

¹³ Goodhart-Rendel, "The Architecture of Oxford-I (continued)", *The Architect and Building News*, 20 December 1935, 348–49; Goodhart-Rendel, "The Architecture of Oxford-I (concluded)", *The Architect and Building News*, 27 December 1935, 376–77.

¹⁴ "The De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-I, Architects: Mendelsohn and Chermayeff", *The Architect and Building News*, 20 December 1935, 343–47; "The De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-II, Architects: Mendelsohn and Chermayeff", *The Architect and Building News*, 27 December 1935, 372–75.

more time than was required to finish these short articles that must be no more than a thousand words in length per issue. They also go to great lengths to mention the materials used and the even suppliers of those materials. This is a periodical that is about spreading the news of the trade and who you could use to build a similar building rather than spreading a message that has idealist underpinnings about the future of architecture.

In *The Architectural Review* the feature on 'Leisure at the Seaside' is followed by an elementary school that 'achieves a considerable step in the proper direction' within modernist architecture.¹⁵ The choice of placing a well-designed and similar in appearance social project (i.e. a school) immediately after the De La Warr Pavilion reinforces the Warr Pavilion's status as a similarly well-designed social project. This subtle reflection of the views of the editor of *The Architectural Review* cannot be missed when reading the periodical.

The Architectural Review and *The Architect and Building News* both have very different views of what architecture should be. *The Architectural Review* is a periodical that clearly believes that visuals are as an important part of the architectural debate as the written word, one that goes to great lengths to push a message of social change for the better through modernist architecture. *The Architect and Building News* on the other hand comes across as being much more old fashioned, conservative even. Its focus on how the buildings are physically planned and constructed is of much more interest than abstract feelings about

¹⁵ "Current Architecture I", *The Architectural Review*, July 1936, 29.

the building. It's also quite clear to see that *The Architect and Building News* is not interested in promoting any modernist agenda.

However the two articles on the De La Warr Pavilion need to both be read in tandem in order to best understand the extraordinary achievement that is the work of Mendelsohn and Chermayeff. The Warr Pavilion must be understood not only as a great symbol for seaside development and an example for the leisure possibilities of a utopian society, but also as a well-designed machine where every material is carefully selected and every part of the design is considered as to how will interact with others. The genius of the De La Warr Pavilion is only truly discovered when we understand both of these approaches to architecture.

(Words: 2920)

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