



1 Mubarak Mahal, Jaipur, 1895 - 1900 (status 2010)

Darmstadt in Context

Architecture and Design Reform c 1900

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It is the turn of the 19th into the 20th century. A wealthy nominal ruler of a small state, recently annexed into a larger empire that restricts his room for political manoeuvre, erects an exquisite building that serves as an emblem of his good taste and also of his hope that the economy of his realm will be improved by his commitment to high standards of craftsmanship. This could be an account of the Ernst Ludwig House in Darmstadt, but it also describes the Mubarak Mahal in Jaipur, India, where in the late 19th century colonial officials adopted the approach espoused by the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) in London to renew indigenous artisanship threatened by mass production. (Fig. 1 and Ill. V) The effort, sponsored by Maharaja Sawai Madho Singh, was successful, as the city became one of India's chief tourist attractions, with visitors coming to buy printed cottons, hand-knotted rugs, and gem-studded jewellery as well

as to tour the city's historic palaces. Many of those who flock to the city today do not realise that this pavilion, built as a guesthouse for distinguished foreign visitors, was erected more than a century after the rest of the palace of which it is a part.¹

Ernst Ludwig House and the Mubarak Mahal are unusual examples of turn of the century design reform precisely because they were built for princes; the wave of innovation that swept across Europe and the English-speaking world was mostly the province of a reform-minded subset of the upper middle classes. The main difference between Sawai Madho Singh and Ernst Ludwig was that the latter embraced an approach to design that made a clear break with history. In this he was encouraged by his dynastic network. While Singh was confined to a colonial relationship between London and India, both the Grand Duke and his Austrian architect Joseph Maria Olbrich had wide-ranging international



2 Edwin Lutyens, Munstead Wood, view from the southwest, Goldalming, 1897 (status 1921)

connections. The Mathildenhöhe is a testimony to the extent of these networks, but equally interestingly perhaps also to their limits.

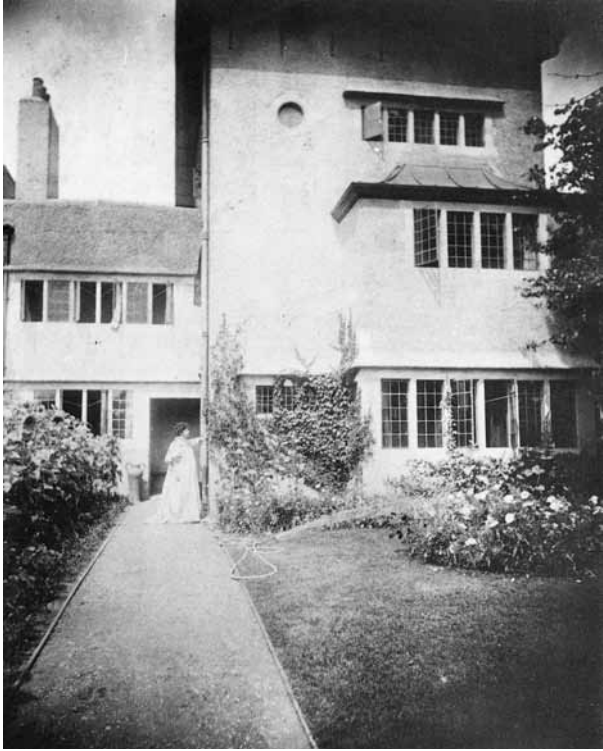
Dynastic ties

Knowing someone does not mean agreeing with or being influenced by them. Through his engagement with architecture and design Ernst Ludwig put clear distance between himself and Kaiser Wilhelm II. Wilhelm, who was both Ernst Ludwig's first cousin and his sister's brother-in-law, had an active interest in the visual arts, but the Grand Duke did not share his sovereign's enthusiasm for either conventional monumentality or historicism (these were epitomized by his sponsorship of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche in Berlin; he later charged its architect, Franz Schwechten, with building a palace for him in Posen).² Although it also appears to have played little role in his design network, Ernst Ludwig enjoyed a particularly high social status in part because of his close ties to the Romanovs; his great-aunt and sister were both Russian empresses, a second sister married a Russian grand duke, and his first wife was the granddaughter of a Tsar.

Instead it was Britain that served as the point of departure for the Grand Duke's engagement in the arts. After his mother's premature death when he was only ten, Ernst Ludwig spent a great deal of time at the court

of his maternal grandmother, Queen Victoria. Although his grandmother herself was not engaged in the reform of the visual arts, other members of the family were, as Ernst Ludwig would have been well aware, strongly committed to different aspects of it. His grandfather Prince Albert's patronage of the Great Exhibition of 1851 had led to the founding of the South Kensington Museum, and to its innovative programmes to train industrial designers. Meanwhile, at least one member of the next generation of the royal family embraced less technologically oriented approaches to design reform. In 1896 Ernst Ludwig's aunt Louise, an accomplished artist and a supporter of various Arts and Crafts activities, commissioned Edwin Lutyens to renovate the Ferry Inn, a former tavern, for her in a vaguely medieval style.³

Lutyens would later become an important imperial architect, designing the colonial capital of New Delhi in India as well as the Cenotaph in London and the British monument to the Somme in Thiepval, France. When Princess Louise turned to him, however, he was only twenty-seven, and had just begun work on his first major commission, Munstead Wood, built for the landscape architect Gertrude Jekyll, with whom he would often collaborate. (Fig. 2) Munstead Wood is emblematic of the nostalgic recall of a pre-industrial past that had characterised British Arts and Crafts architecture already for nearly 30 years. Its understated, informal tone, if not the elaborate gardens using native



3 Charles Voysey, 14 South Parade, Bedford Park, 1891



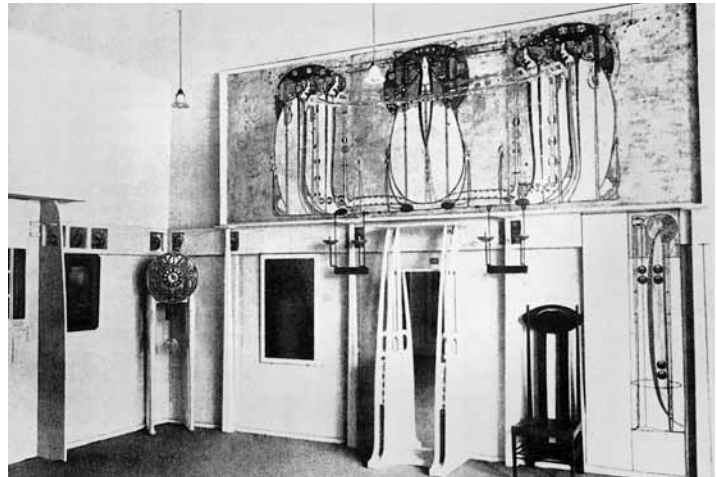
4 William Preston, Chatham Courthouse, Clocktower, Savannah, Georgia, 1889 (status 2016)

plant species, are far more closely tied to the close study of vernacular buildings than anything found in Darmstadt.⁴ Here John Ruskin's and William Morris's goal of improving the working conditions of the labouring classes was replaced by the equally path-breaking but very different focus on the emancipation of professional women. Across the English-speaking world, such women often found in design reform an outlet for creative expression as well as a respectable means to earn a living.⁵

The creation of an Artists' Colony in Darmstadt clearly recalled the construction of Arts and Crafts-inspired neighbourhoods in London, particularly Bedford Park, much of which had been designed beginning in 1877 in a Queen Anne style by Richard Norman Shaw.⁶ 14 South Parade, Bedford Park, Charles Voysey's striking white addition to this largely red brick community, must have been known to Ernst Ludwig's architect, Joseph Maria Olbrich, when he embarked upon the equally radically reductive villas exhibited on the Mathildenhöhe in 1901. (Fig. 3) It was Voysey's first London building. By this time publications such as "The Studio", in which it appeared in 1897, and "Dekorative Kunst" disseminated news of such new designs across Europe.⁷ A modest house with a parlour and kitchen on the ground floor, three bedrooms on the first floor, and a studio occupying the entire second story, 14 South

Parade was built in 1891 for the artist J. W. Forster, and thus would have been a particularly useful precedent for the artists' houses in Darmstadt.

Domestic commissions dominated Arts and Crafts-oriented practices in Britain, but by the turn of the century artistic reform could also be married to explicit social reform. Ernst Ludwig and Olbrich were almost certainly aware of the recent London work of Charles Harrison Townsend, much of it inspired in turn by the example set by Henry Hobson Richardson.⁸ Townsend, whose brother Horace had written an important article on the American architect, clearly appreciated Richardson's bold arches and plastic forms while eschewing the American's geological metaphors. He must also have been aware of William Preston's recent Chatham County Courthouse in Savannah, Georgia, which had been published in the pioneering American architecture journal "American Architect and Building News".⁹ (Fig. 4) Just as important, however, were the utopian goals Townsend's buildings embodied. The Bishopsgate Institute was "erected for the benefit of the public to promote lectures, exhibitions and otherwise the advancement of literature, science and the fine arts" and explicitly targeted at the working class.¹⁰ The Whitechapel Gallery is located in East London where it hosted temporary exhibitions of mostly modern art in what was then a slum setting.¹¹ (Fig. 5) The South London suburb of Forest



5 Charles Harrison Townsend, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1899 (status 2005)

6 Mackintosh Exhibition, Secession Building, Vienna, 1900

Park provided a more salubrious environment for the Horniman Museum, founded by a tea merchant who donated his varied collections to the London City Council for the edification of his fellow citizens.¹² There is little evidence, however, that either Ernst Ludwig or his architect shared the Fabian socialist aspirations of many of Townsend's clients, even as they clearly appreciated the forms through which they were concretised.

The only more original architecture in Britain was probably better known to Olbrich than to Ernst Ludwig. In 1900 the work of the painter Margaret MacDonald Mackintosh and the furniture designs of her husband, the architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh, were exhibited in Olbrich's recently opened Secession Building; the couple travelled from Glasgow for the occasion, which opened up a dialogue between what were then the two geographical extremes of cutting edge European design.¹³ (Fig. 6) At the time only the first phase of Mackintosh's Glasgow School of Art had been completed, but it is difficult to imagine that Olbrich was unaware of a building whose purpose so closely resembled that of the Ernst Ludwig House or that he failed to appreciate MacDonald's painting "The May Queen", designed for the Ingram Street Tearooms run by Glasgow businesswoman Kate Cranston and exhibited in Vienna. At the same time, however, that it opened as a public exhibition, the Mathildenhöhe maintained a decorous remove

from Cranston's progressive commercialism, which entailed providing working as well as middle-class women with respectable places in the city centre to eat alone or with friends.¹⁴

Impact and influence

As important as the buildings that set the scene for the Mathildenhöhe were those designed as a result of it, whose purposes ranged as broadly as did their locations. Two completed thousands of kilometres apart in 1908, the year of Olbrich's untimely death, demonstrate that his influence travelled along professional networks very different from the dynastic ones so crucial to Ernst Ludwig's emergence as a patron. Olbrich had worked for Otto Wagner before striking out on his own, and the senior Viennese architect clearly kept abreast of the work of his talented former assistant. Indeed, by this time, it was arguably Wagner who was the more innovative architect, preferring the flat, decorated surfaces seen in a storage building intended to assist in the regulation of the water levels on the Donaukanal to the monumental classicism of Olbrich's last works.¹⁵ (Fig. 7) Frank Lloyd Wright liked to think of himself as an American original, but he was clearly impressed by Olbrich's installation at the World's Fair held in St. Louis

in 1904, and his recasting of pre-Columbian precedent in Unity Temple would have been unthinkable without the precedent of Olbrich's Secession Building.¹⁶ (Fig. 8) Paradoxically, at the same time that Olbrich's example helped lead Wagner away from monumentality it propelled Wright towards it.

The published perspective drawing of Wright's first church was the work of Marion Mahony, who would later marry another one of Wright's talented employees, Walter Burley Griffin. Her drawing skills would help him win the competition to design the Australian capital of Canberra. Mahony, a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was one of two women to work in the Wright office during his Prairie Style years; she is credited with half of the drawings published in his influential Wasmuth portfolio.¹⁷

Olbrich's, like Wright's, was a synthetic talent. The Hochzeitsturm in Darmstadt, perhaps his most original work, lacks clear sources, although certainly its brick detailing and even aspects of the classical massing of the adjacent structures demonstrate an awareness of recent work in the Netherlands, particularly by Hendrik Berlage.¹⁸ (Ill. III) Olbrich's complex probably inspired subsequent developments in Scandinavia, especially the work of Anton Rosen in Copenhagen and Eliel Saarinen in Finland, including Rosen's Palace Hotel in Copenhagen of 1910 and Saarinen's 1908 design for a Finnish Parliament.¹⁹ This direction would bear rich fruit after World War I, when Michel de Klerk in Amsterdam and Fritz Höger in Hamburg would be among those architects who would experiment with an emphatically brick and tile architecture.²⁰ (Fig. 9)



7 Otto Wagner, Schuttenhaus, Vienna, 1908 (status 2012)



8 Frank Lloyd Wright, Unity Temple, Oak Park, Illinois, 1908 (status 2007)



9 Michel de Klerk,
Het Schip, Amsterdam, 1921
(status 2011)

Beyond Darmstadt: other approaches

The sources and the impact of the Mathildenhöhe were wide-ranging and can only be hinted at here, but it is important as well to note what currents of design reform were not present in Darmstadt. Although Olbrich had exhibited at the Exposition Universelle held in Paris in 1900, he was not strictly speaking an Art Nouveau architect. Unlike the French-speaking stable of artists associated with Siegfried Bing and his gallery, or the Belgians upon whom they drew for inspiration, neither Ernst Ludwig nor Olbrich were interested in the fusion of ferrous structure and ornament that characterised much Art Nouveau work in Brussels and Paris, or in the resolutely urban settings into which most such buildings continued to be set.²¹ (Fig. 10) The Mathildenhöhe would be an important way station on the road to the founding of the German Werkbund, but neither man was interested in engaging industry and its products as directly as happened here.

Because of his *Maison du Peuple* for the Belgian Worker's Party, Victor Horta is often considered a man of the left, but he and his clients were also implicated in King Leopold II's horrific exploitation of the Congo, which left many dead and even more maimed. Edmond van Eetvelde built his Horta-designed hotel with the fortune he had made administrating the Congo for Leopold; like many of Belgium's Art Nouveau buildings of the period it featured tropical woods from there as well as local iron.²²

Nor was anyone in Darmstadt much interested in the integrity of structure that obsessed the disciples of Viollet-le-Duc, including Antoni Gaudí and the other imaginative Catalans at work in turn-of-the-century Barcelona.²³ The emergence of a new generation of architects and patrons born in the 1860s and sympathetic to the goals of the Arts and Crafts movement was marked by a new willingness to engage commerce as well as industry and to break free from historicism. But there were distinct paths towards this shared goal. What happened in the Whitechapel district of London, in the tearooms and suburbs of Glasgow, on the Mathildenhöhe, and in Wright's Prairie Style was clearly distinct from the Art Nouveau that spread south from Brussels to Paris and Nancy and beyond to Barcelona. The Vienna – Darmstadt – Glasgow – Whitechapel – Chicago axis was less interested in whiplash curves, or indeed decoration for its own sake, or for that matter in exposed iron or steel. An extremely plastic monumentality mattered more, whether inspired above all by Viennese Baroque or Richardson's geological metaphors.

Around the world, the years on either side of 1900 were marked by experimentation in architecture and the decorative arts on the part of those who believed in the ability of their work to improve the lives of artisans and consumers alike. The degree of social commitment and the exact political nature of the cause varied wildly, however. Rather than believing in the ability of this body of work to live up to the rhetoric that surrounded it, we should focus on appreciating the high quality of craftsmanship and design that resulted from it, as well



10 Victor Horta, Hotel Tassel,
Brussels, 1894 (status 2008)

as the way in which it laid the foundation for almost all architectural experimentation to come. What happened in Darmstadt may have descended from only specific strains of what was everywhere in the air, as neither Ernst Ludwig nor Olbrich appear to have been nearly as interested in developments in French as in English-speaking communities, but it had an easily discernable impact upon the way in which design reform was em-

braced by German-speaking elites and on their ability to detach it from meaningful political reform. Neither the Werkbund nor the Bauhaus, nor for that matter the Weissenhof-Siedlung and the many subsequent German housing exhibitions, would have been conceivable without the crucial precedent Mathildenhöhe set; nor would the plastic architecture in concrete and other materials been possible without Olbrich's imaginative example.

Zusammenfassung Darmstadt im Kontext – Architektur- und Kunstgewerbereform um 1900

Die Künstlerkolonie, die sich auf der Darmstädter Mathildenhöhe an der Wende des letzten Jahrhunderts gründete, verschmolz zwei ähnliche Netzwerke: die des Großherzogs Ernst Ludwig und die des Architekten Joseph Maria Olbrich. Einflüsse aus Großbritannien und Wien schufen eine überzeugende Alternative zur in Deutschland vorherrschenden Richtung, die einen wichtigen Einfluss auf Frank Lloyd Wright haben sollte.

Die neue Generation von Architekten und Gönnern war in den 1860er Jahren geboren und den Zielen der Arts and Crafts-Bewegung wohlgesonnen. Sie einte die Bereitschaft, den Handel und die Industrie für ihre Zwecke in Anspruch zu nehmen und sich vom Historismus zu befreien. Doch es gab unterschiedliche Wege zu diesem gemeinsamen Ziel. Was im Whitechapel-Viertel von London geschah, in den Teestuben und Vororten von Glasgow, auf der Mathildenhöhe und in Wrights Chicago,

wich deutlich vom Art Nouveau ab, der sich von Brüssel Richtung Süden nach Paris und Nancy ausbreitete. Die Achse Wien – Darmstadt – Glasgow – Whitechapel – Chicago interessierte sich weniger für Peitschenhieb motive oder Dekoration um ihrer selbst willen, für freiliegendes Eisen oder Stahl. Worauf es ihr ankam, war eine extrem plastische Monumentalität, ob inspiriert durch den Wiener Barock oder die geologischen Metaphern des talentierten Amerikaners Henry Hobson Richardson. Die Stärke und der Charakter der Bande, die diese neue Architektur und das Design an soziale Reformen knüpften, ist häufig überbewertet worden. Das Engagement, das mehrere Mitglieder der britischen Königsfamilie zeigten, beweist: Schöne Formen ließen sich leicht von John Ruskins und William Morris' Kritik des Status quo lösen. Die neuen Formen standen der Stärkung von Frauen der Mittelklasse viel näher als denen der Arbeiterklasse. Das zeigte sich in Darmstadt weniger deutlich als in Glasgow oder Chicago. Gleichwohl verdient es dieselbe intensive Aufmerksamkeit, die der Art und Weise zuteil wurde, in der diese Reformer den Werkbund und das Bauhaus bestimmten.

Notes

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