A new art of environmental design

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This is the text of a talk given during the May Day celebrations at Kelmscott Manor, arranged by the Department of Architecture and Town Planning of Oxford Polytechnic.

One of the sad things about so many of the would-be tributes to Morris of the 150th anniversary year was the apparent absence of his actual influence. For example, although the fact of the attempts was encouraging, in the design of some of the publicity material, his own motifs and supposedly ornamental lettering were often assembled, in paste-ups for photocopying, in an unwitting jumble. Less flagrant but more upsetting—literally—was the uncomprehending reproduction of his designs upside down.

Just a year ago, in the May number of the CND magazine Sanity, this happened to an illustration of his first wallpaper design, Trellis, with the caption, ‘Morris’s famous wallpaper style’. At a glance, it looked as if the climbing rose had been blown down from the lattice and was bent over, dangling all awry, with lifeless birds trapped in it. Yet the essence of Morris’s pattern designs is life, growth, upward movement, vitality. It seemed to me that Sanity’s up-ending of the Trellis would make it an apt illustration to Dylan Thomas’s verse:

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

But overturning also happened to the frame of a 1984 calendar, featuring a portrait of William Morris, which was published by the Communist Party. The calendar’s border had been designed for Burne-Jones’s illustration of a banner, described in Morris’s A Dream of John Ball, which bears the slogan, aspiring to a classless society,

When Adam delved and Eve span
Who was then the gentleman?

But here the foliage, 1984 inversion, appears in comparison to be dropping—an autumnal cascade!

Without attributing any symbolism to that, it was certainly contrary to the imagery in a presentation of socialism, jointly written by Morris and Ernest Belfort Bax in
Commonweal. First serialised as Socialism from the root up, it was republished under the title, Socialism, its growth and outcome. There was an allusion, in each of these titles, to that of Engels’ pamphlet which, in the German version, means ‘The Development of Socialism—from Utopia to Science’.

In 1894, Morris explained in an article, ‘How I became a Socialist’. There had come a stage in his outlook when he realised that he faced a blank prospect for the remainder of his life,

‘if it had not somehow dawned on me that amidst all this filth of civilisation the seed of a great change, what we others call Social Revolution, was beginning to germinate. The whole face of things was changed to me by that discovery . . . .’

The imagery is again significant. So remember, it is ‘The force that through the green fuse drives the flower’ which you’ll find in Morris’s patterns . . . and in his philosophy: because, if his designs are misunderstood, what about his theory? These vigorous and often very lovely pattern designs for wallpapers and curtains which we can still buy are the source of many misconceptions about Morris and his theory of art.

For example, in The Work of William Morris (1967) (and just for good measure, the illustration of Morris’s Jasmine pattern is printed upside down in his book) Paul Thompson wrote, ‘When he came to formulate his theories of art, it was to patterns that he turned for examples.’

Similarly, Hans Maria Wingler, in Das Bauhaus (1962; English edition 1969) included an extract from an 1894 prize distribution speech which Morris gave at the Birmingham (Municipal) School of Art. On the basis of one short paragraph, which occurs almost in passing, Wingler refers to ‘the concept’ (in this talk by Morris) ‘of the artist in an industrial age as primarily a decorator.’ It indicated, according to him, the distance between ‘the thinking of the late nineteenth century’—by which he meant Morris’s theoretical position at that late date—and that of the Bauhaus.

Morris had been in practice as a designer for nearly 17 years before he began to formulate his theory, in lectures, articles and other writings. It can only be preconceptions based on the impact of his output as a practical designer, that can lead to such claims as these by Paul Thompson and Hans Wingler. For from his very first lecture at the end of 1877, to those such as this of 1894, towards the end of his life, Morris turned for examples to the English man-made landscape, whenever he expounded his theory.

In the body of the prize-giving speech which Wingler chose not to reproduce, Morris gave specific examples of

‘the sight of a Warwickshire meadow, or the hedgerows and little waving hills of my native Essex, or the flat fields and limestone banks of my adopted Oxfordshire—Berkshire land.’

That is, of the landscape which surrounds us at Kelmscott. Of villages such as this, each with its little church and houses, he told the art students of Birmingham,
‘... I have a hope that it will be from such necessary, unpretentious buildings that the new and genuine architecture will spring, rather than from our experiments in conscious style more or less ambitious, or those for which the immortal Dickens has given us the never-to-be-forgotten adjective, Architectoriallooral.’

This, he emphasised, was ‘really the foundation of the whole question of art’ and, notwithstanding Wingler,

‘... if we cannot build fit and beautiful (not necessarily highly-decorated) houses, we cannot have Art at all in our days.’

That being the case, protection of old buildings was even more essential:

‘... not only do not pull them down in the interest of railways, manufactories, public houses and the like, but mend them so as to keep them weathertight, and then leave them, genuine.’

Beyond that, and in relation to the vexed question of so-called ‘restoration’, he was content to leave consideration of any further treatment of the buildings

‘... to a period when we have at last conquered a genuine style of architecture of our own, and let that age settle the question.’

Now the Morris who said that, was the Morris who had already described that future, as he foresaw the possibility of it, in News from Nowhere. It shows how seriously his indications in that utopia were intended. News from Nowhere had been written by the Morris whose theoretical development had led him to study and propagate, for seven years already, the scientific socialism—which was the outcome of long and close investigation of Britain’s industrial capitalism by Engels and Marx. To say this ought not to be contentious any more. But it can be more substantiated.

If the key to ‘reading’ Morris’s pattern designs is the recognition of growth, the key to reading, or re-reading, his theoretical work is his concept of a ‘new art’.

In his first, complicated, even confusing elaboration of what he called his ‘philosophy’ in that 1877 lecture, ‘The Decorative Arts,’ he introduced this key concept... ‘the new art which is my subject tonight’. It was to be a popular art, an art of the people. He emphasised at the outset, ‘I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few.’ And he foresaw that this ‘new art of conscious intelligence’ would be ‘wrapped up... with changes political and social, that in one way and another we all desire’.

From then until the end of his life, you’ll find him talking about the ‘new art’, the ‘birth of a new art’, or ‘the new birth of art’. Sometimes when he speaks simply of art, without any qualification, it becomes clear that he is using the word in the sense of his novel concept. It is a new art of environmental design.

At the conclusion of ‘The Decorative Arts,’ he had indicated

‘That art will make our streets as beautiful as the woods, as elevating as the mountain sides: it will be a pleasure and a rest, and not a weight upon the
spirits to come from the open country into a town: every man's house will be fair and decent, soothing to his mind and helpful to his work: all the works of man that we live amongst and handle will be in harmony with nature, will be reasonable and beautiful . . .'

The clear statement which Morris had reserved to the end of his first lecture, he brought to the fore of his first outright socialist lecture. He directed his audience, at University College in Oxford High Street,

‘to extend the word art beyond those matters which are consciously works of art, to take in not only painting and sculpture and architecture, but the shapes and colours of all household goods, nay, even the arrangement of the fields for tillage and pasture, the management of towns and of our highways of all kinds: in a word, to extend it to the aspect of all the externals of our life.’

The new art had two conditions, which Morris might frequently re-phrase, but which he repeated consistently. They were pleasant work, and pleasant surroundings. Pleasant work required an end to that division of labour which, from the beginning of the industrial capitalist revolution, had geared humans to relentless machines. As for pleasant surroundings, this was the area where Morris considered that a beginning could be made, by improving living conditions in the towns.

These two conditions also illustrate the affinities between Morris's 'new art' and the means for achieving it which he found in the science of socialism. In Capital, Marx drew attention to the stunting of human faculties by the division of labour. He also explained how every division of labour had its basis, through the exchange of commodities, in the separation, the antithesis, of town and country.

Engels, too, had declared for total change in 'the old mode of production', so that the 'division of labour must disappear', with the consequence that 'productive labour will become a pleasure instead of being a burden.' In support of his conclusion that it would be necessary to get rid of the huge industrial towns, he acknowledges the prodigious ideas of the early socialists:

'The abolition of the antithesis between town and country was demanded by Fourier, as by Owen, as the first pre-requisite for the abolition of the old division of labour altogether.'

Morris's 'new art' and the 'science of socialism' of Engels and Marx were wholly consonant. Morris became very impatient with people who were constitutionally conditioned to reject this. On one occasion, a Philosophical Society had invited him to give a lecture. Something, they suggested, like his Making the Best of it, would be suitable—but 'free from socialism'. Morris vented his exasperation in a letter to a friend: 'The idiots', he wrote, 'didn't see the connection between art and Socialism—Yah!'

Now the achievement of the new art is embodied in News from Nowhere, that account of a visit to London and a voyage up the Thames, through the transformed environment of a communist society in the 22nd century. The happy circumstance of our being here in 1985, on May Day, at Kelmscott, provides an occasion for identifying some of the threads that are woven together in this tapestry of News from Nowhere.
A century ago, in 1885, Morris founded, edited, wrote for and financially supported *Commonweal*, the magazine of the newly-formed Socialist League; *News from Nowhere* was later published in *Commonweal*, in weekly instalments through 1890. Morris was already thinking out his ideas for it when he attended an International Socialist Working Men's Congress in Paris, July 1889, on the centenary of the French Revolution. At that Congress, May Day was established as an international day of celebration for the world's workers. In *News from Nowhere*, we find May Day still celebrated in the 22nd century. In the 'easterly communes' of London (as Morris describes them) young girls would sing old songs while standing on a mound in the green fields, below which were the demolished slums of 19th century London. The slum clearance, which was known as the 'clearance of Misery', had been carried out in 1955. That date itself, in Morris’s construction of his novel, commemorates his own visit to Paris in 1855, when Haussmann was carrying out his clearances, designed to prevent uprisings by the populace. But during the greatest uprising of all, that of the Paris Commune of 1871, it was on the First of May that the Commune delegated its powers to a Committee of Public Safety. In *News from Nowhere*, we also learn how, at the beginning of the Civil War, a convention of workers’ leaders 'sat under the old revolutionary name of the Committee of Public Safety'.

*News from Nowhere*, of course, culminates here at Kelmscott Manor and the church in the village. Morris apparently discovered Kelmscott on the 16th May in 1871. At six o’clock that evening, in accordance with proposals made by the painter Gustave Courbet, the Vendôme Column was demolished by the Communards in Paris.

There is no record of Morris's reactions to the events of the Commune at that period, apart from a very strong visual impression made on him, probably by a war artist’s drawing in the *Illustrated London News*, ‘of a half-ruined Paris Barricade’. But years later, in 1884, he took part in a thousands-strong procession to Highgate Cemetery, organised to observe the first anniversary of Marx’s death. The purpose was, as Morris put it, ‘to do honour to the memory of Karl Marx and the Commune’.

He evidently carried that dedication over into his writing of *News from Nowhere*—largely by drawing on Marx’s contemporary account of the Commune, *The Civil War in France*.

One chapter in *News from Nowhere* is entitled ‘Trafalgar Square’. It was there that, in 1952, a massacre of demonstrators had started the Civil War in England. Arriving at the transformed site in the de-urbanised London of about 2155 Morris had a ‘flashback’ to the Bloody Sunday demonstration in which he had been involved: The description makes particular reference to ‘a good many singularly ugly bronze images (one on top of a column)’. Now the column is conspicuously absent from the site, planted as an apricot orchard, in *News from Nowhere*. We can only conclude that it was demolished at the outbreak of the War. We should remember too, that a feature of the Vendôme Column (which Courbet, incidentally, had also considered to be ugly) was that the reliefs which spiralled up its height to
the figure of Napoleon at the top, were all cast in bronze from melted-down enemy cannon.

We find a further significance, in this absence of Nelson's Column from Trafalgar Square in Morris's utopia, by reference to Marx's *The Civil War in France*. In this, he wrote,

'to mark the new era of history it was conscious of initiating ... the Commune pulled down that colossal symbol of martial glory, the Vendôme column'.

It is only possible to claim the relevance of this remark by Marx because of the seriousness with which Morris embodied elements of *The Civil War in France* in his own chapter, the longest in *News from Nowhere*, 'How the Change came' Some of these are actual paraphrases of Marx's text. Here, picked out for comparison, are a few:

Morris: The Party of Order . . .
Morris: General Lecomte had four times ordered the 81st line regiment to fire at an unarmed gathering in the Place Pigalle, and on their refusal fiercely insulted them . . . .
Morris: I saw the officers going up and down the ranks urging the men to fire again; but they received the orders in sullen silence, and let the butts of their guns fall ... the soldiers stood there motionless while the horror-stricken crowd, nearly wholly unarmed ... drifted out of the Square . . . .

Marx: '... a riotous mob of swells ... secretly armed . . . .'
Morris: 'A band of young men of the upper classes armed themselves . . . .'

Marx: 'The exodus from Paris of the high Bonapartist and capitalist bohème.'
Morris: 'Many of the rich fled into the country . . . .'

Marx: 'The financial measures of the Commune . . . could only be such as were compatible with the state of a besieged town . . . .'
Morris: 'These measures . . . were in fact of the nature of regulations made by the commander of a beleaguered city . . . .'

It was not only Marx's work that Morris used in this way. He also drew on the writings of other Marxists—for example Engels, Eleanor Marx, August Bebel, creatively incorporating ideas, phrases, vocabulary, in his own text.

To return to the transformed Trafalgar Square for a moment: Morris concluded his description by extending it to the termination of the vista beyond:

'From the southern side of the said orchard ran a long road, chequered over with the shadow of tall old pear trees, at the end of which showed the high tower of the Parliament House, or Dung Market.'

That is one of the most striking images in *News from Nowhere*—the Palace of Westminster put to use as a dung market. The idea is not without precedent. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the magnificent Moorish halls of the 'Red Castle', the Alhambra at Granada, in Spain, were used as dung stores.
But the dung question was linked to that of abolishing the antithesis between town and country. Their fusion in the new socialist settlement pattern, besides ending the pollution of 'air, water, and land' as Engels put it, would also

'... change the situation of the masses now languishing in the towns, and enable their excrements to be used for the production of plants instead of for the production of disease . . . .'

When Morris, as Guest, in *News from Nowhere*, inquired about this new function of the Parliament building, his host commented

'well, dung is not the worst kind of corruption; fertility may come of that, whereas mere dearth came from the other kind of which those walls once held the great supporters . . . .'

So even this relates to Morris's great theme of fertility, growth, development, in relation to the new society.

To conclude. Marx had referred to utopias in *The Civil War in France*. The passage can serve as a key to Morris's construction of his utopian romance:

'The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune. They have no ready-made utopias to introduce by decree of the people. They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economic agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realise, but to set free the elements of the new society with which the old collapsing bourgeois society is itself pregnant.'

With an appreciation of that passage as the basis of the brief which Morris had worked out for himself, it is possible to read *News from Nowhere* and recognise the process of realisation of the new art of the new society.