



Shaping the Modern Suburban Britain: Two American Designers in Devon during the Early 1930s

Gaia CARAMELLINO, Dr.

Politecnico di Torino, Faculty of Architecture, Italy
gaia.caramellino@gmail.com

The Swiss-American architect William Lescaze and the American housing reformer Henry Wright are mostly known with the architectural and planning work that they undertook on the East Coast of the United States in the 1920s and 1930s: especially with Lescaze “International Style” skyscraper in Philadelphia (PSFS) and with Wright comprehensive housing work with the RPAA.

In 1933, they were invited by local authorities for the planning of the Churston Housing Development, a suburban residential community for retired veterans and middle-class families in Devonshire. The 500 avant-garde modern houses, the community buildings and the facilities originally designed by Lescaze, as well as the site plan conceived by Wright, summarize their attitude as foreign professionals. The objective was to modernize local traditional architecture and landscape, a goal which was determined by the social and political circumstances and the conservative atmosphere of suburban England in the interwar years.

Lescaze, Wright and Beatrix Farrand as landscape designer, put forward a project, which aimed to combine architectural forms of European origins (imported in the UK and first undertaken by Lescaze in the Dartington Hall Project in Devonshire) and suburban planning schemes developed in the US during the Twenties (from Sunnyside Gardens to Radburn housing developments). However, their proposal for Churston brought forth radical operations on the existing design for British high-class suburban estates: having already worked together in New York as members of the Housing Study Guild, Lescaze and Wright obviously referred to community planning ideals in shaping the new settlement.

The paper assesses the role of pioneering residents, foreign design professionals, social reformers, as well as of European leading figures such as Gropius and Breuer, in the implementation of a transatlantic dialogue on residential suburban models. The importance of the case is directly related to the difficult reception of modernism and to the encounter with a “British way of life” and a local design milieu, as well as with local professionals, cultural elites, institutions, builders, clients and private developers, still defiant of modern design (which was extremely unpopular at that time).

Even if not built as originally conceived, this ambitious project of modernization in the field of suburban housing constitute a pivotal event in the architectural discourse on Modernism developed in England during the interwar period and became emblematic of the circulation, implementation and misreading of an internationally accepted set of norms at local level.

KEY WORDS: British modernism, circulation, suburban planning, William Lescaze, Henry Wright, international style.