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## Working with the given

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In this essay the author suggests that although the resulting architectural style may be ambiguous, a dialogue with an existing place can be creative, rewarding and appropriate. Just how this might be so is demonstrated in the following article, 'New meanings from old buildings', on p.312–331.

A large monastery in the city of Catania in Sicily has been converted during the last few years into university accommodation by Giancarlo De Carlo. His interventions are relatively small and as usual very considered, and when the long drawn out conversion and rehabilitation programme is eventually over – these things take decades in Italy – the main impression for visitors and users will certainly be of the historic church and cloisters. Much of what is most valuable in De Carlo's work will be invisible: the preservation of parts that would have been destroyed, the judicious reading and exposure of historical layers, the careful ordering of new functions in old spaces so that they harmonize rather than oppose each other, the resistance against erosion by bureaucratic norms. The architect's signature is evident here and there, sometimes even in outspoken new elements like the power station [Fig. 1a], but these parts are subordinated to a more important whole. The new interventions are no more or less important than the ancient street unearthed at the front of the complex by archaeologists, for example, which runs out of alignment with the main complex [Fig. 1b] and recalls the period in antiquity when Sicily belonged to the Greeks. De Carlo has accepted the territory as a palimpsest, a much written over manuscript, acknowledging that the writing of different periods by different builders is what makes the place what it is. It should never be scratched out to be rewritten 'from scratch'.<sup>1</sup>

Contrast De Carlo's attitude with that of an earlier architect visitor who left the fabric unchanged but posited a bold interpretation and so 'mythologized'



1a



1b

<sup>1</sup> Architectural intervention and archaeological discovery in and around the monastery converted into

university accommodation in Catania  
 a The lava cliff on which Giancarlo De Carlo's new power station is sited

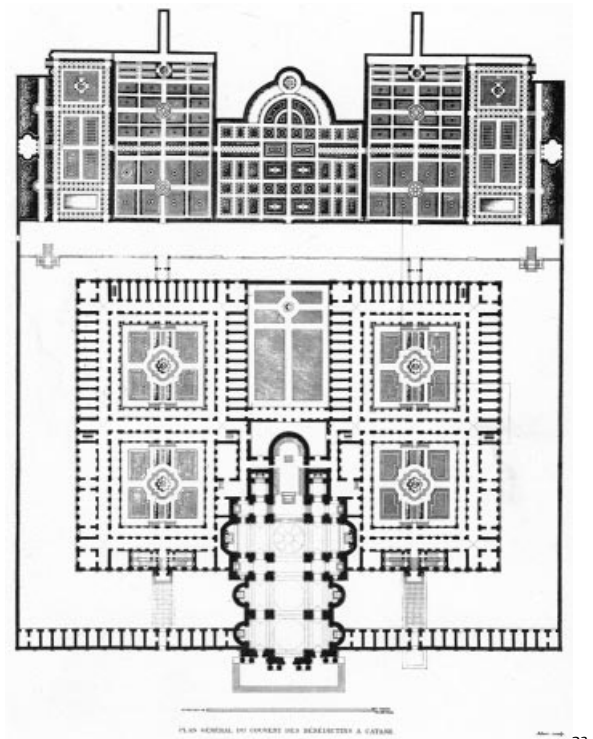
recalls the 'miracle' following Etna's 1669 eruption  
 b The ancient Greek street recalls the time Sicily belonged to the Greeks

the place in print. Representing the new broom of enlightenment Rationalism, Jacques-Ignace Hittorff<sup>2</sup> from Paris visited Catania around 1830 in search of ideal types and published a formal plan [Fig. 2a] that seems to justify the monastery as an ideal Baroque type with axial church and four identical courts (Hittorff, 1835). No matter to him that it had never been achieved, that one court remained wholly conjectural while even the church front was but a torso [Figs. 2b and c]. He permitted himself also to regularize the site boundaries, and despite having measured the uneven arcading of the gradually-built cloisters, ironed out all discrepancies. Most remarkably of all, he eliminated evidence of the most dramatic event that had ever occurred to the site. Catania stands close to Mount Etna, which in 1669 suffered a momentous eruption. A river of lava flowed towards the town engulfing much of it, and stopped just short of the monastery church, leaving a smouldering cliff 10 metres high [Figs. 3a and b]. The monks saw its preservation as due to divine intervention, which made the cliff evidence of a miracle. Its removal was impossible, so reconstruction on the lava plateau necessarily followed the two-storey discrepancy between north and south. Although Hittorff ignored this in his plan, he could scarcely have failed to see it. Presented as a reality to readers unlikely to visit, Hittorff's idealized plan served the ideology of French Neoclassicism. With its dimensional 'corrections' to existing structures, his ideal version exceeded even the most ambitious intentions of the Baroque era, while all specificities of place and signs of change over time were ruthlessly expunged.

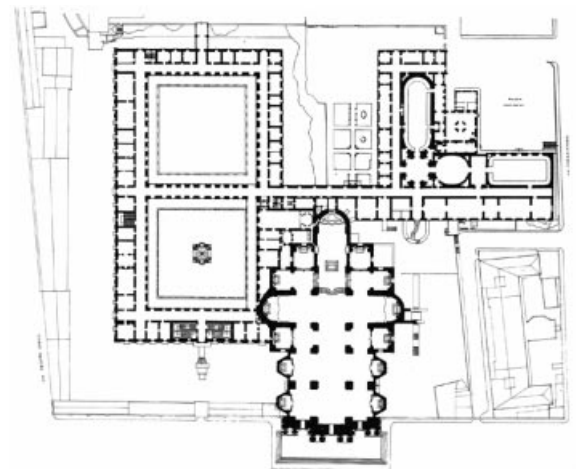
If it is an exaggeration to divide architects into two kinds, there are certainly here two kinds of vision. While De Carlo's inclusive 'reading of the territory' tried to accept all the layers of history and idiosyncrasies of the place, enjoying its complex intersecting geometries and adding links and adjustments, Hittorff's idealized version condenses time into a perfect moment and ignores space on the ground in favour of the ideal space of an architectural geometry. Requiring to be built in one go, it seems to combine the hubris of the abbot who actually planned a church beyond his means with the ambitions of an imperially-minded architect bent on defining a timeless type. Its rational self-containment cleans it, purifies it, reducing it to a neat object of contemplation in the encyclopaedic age and erasing the memory of all else. Given the opportunity, Hittorff would doubtless have restored it to what it 'should have been' as was so often the case with nineteenth-century restorations. De Carlo's restoration tries, in contrast, to leave historical layers exposed and adds tentatively, accepting that he offers neither the final interpretation nor the last word. Others will add layers to the building's history if it survives.

#### The nature of conversions

Conversions are considered by many architects second-rate jobs, full of problems and difficulties, and constraining freedom of expression. If an



2a



2b



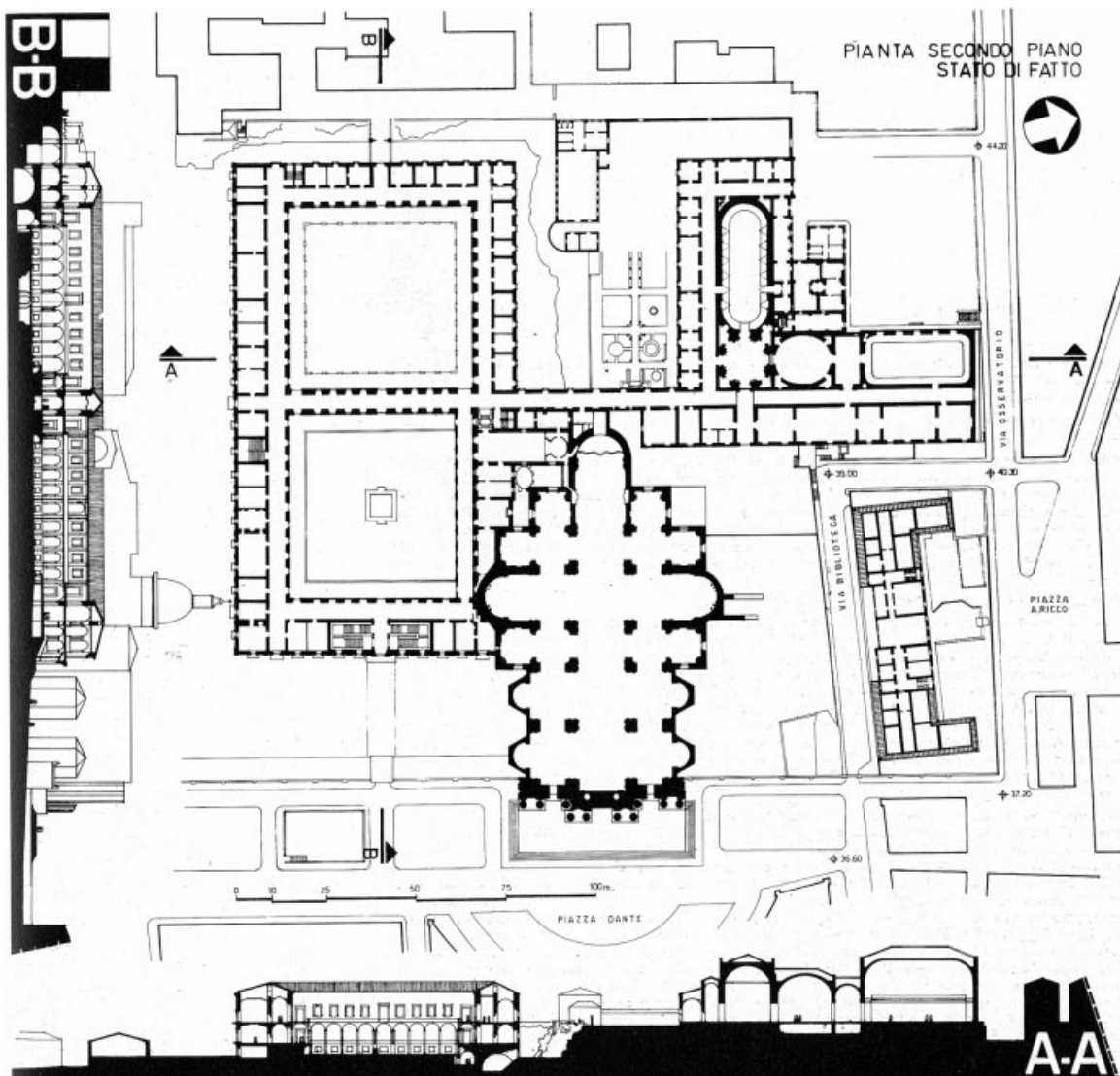
2c

2 Eliminating the evidence: the outcome of a search for the ideal  
 a Hittorff's plan of the Catania monastery as published in 1835 ignored ...  
 b the incomplete development of the plan and the lava cliff (top centre) and ....  
 c the incomplete church front

3 Ignored by the ideal version  
 a The 10m high lava cliff is impossible to miss. Here De Carlo's tower connects the level change created by it  
 b Plan and section today showing (AA) South-north section of site with De Carlo's power station was constructed on top of the cliff (at centre).



3a



3b

architect feels it his or her mission to develop a personal style or signature, not only is the opportunity restricted by an existing building: there may also be a perplexing clash of styles. What is done is likely to be conditioned by what was there, demanding flexibility of approach and architectural language, and producing diverse results. The treatment as a special case which an old building usually demands is also consuming of time and energy, first for research and survey, second for the shoe-horning type of planning often required, third for supervision of what may be a difficult and unpredictable execution. Furthermore, the commercially or technologically-minded architect is less able to repeat from drawings already in the drawer and to reuse familiar details. Clashes with ever more stringent building regulations can be problematic, particularly if old rooms and old staircases are expected to retain their character while withstanding imagined fires. Listing is an additional torture, the architect often caught between impatient clients and the inflexible guardians of heritage who insist on their own interpretation and demand expensive and anachronistic techniques.

In most places and most cases it would be practically easiest to pull everything down and start again. With mechanical excavation and lorries to carry off the rubble for dumping in landfill sites, whole areas can be cleared in hours, levelled off for efficient modern construction. Old orientation lines, site boundaries and even whole streets can be ploughed in, making it easier to add the compulsory car parks on a standard grid, and to impose the rhythm of the framing system with square corners. The left-over patches of ground can be 'landscaped' with trees and flowers and the odd bench, with occasional use for a sandwich lunch.

So why do we convert? Sometimes buildings are listed as historic monuments<sup>3</sup> because they are reckoned of particular historical or artistic value, but even quite ordinary ones are saved if they become scarce enough. We have already destroyed too much to consider that only artworks or monuments need be preserved. We regret the wholesale destruction of places and the dispersal of communities, but above all it is the memories carried by buildings, proof of who we are and what we have been, that we need. These are carried not only in visible inscriptions, styles or emblems but are built into the very organization of buildings and cities.<sup>4</sup> Not only do rooms tell us by size, shape, furnishing and interrelation how and why they were conceived: the very meaning of space and the way it is shared are defined by the complex interaction of setting and activities (Blundell Jones, 2000). The traditional urban street, for example, with its shops and markets and its café tables on the pavement, serves a network of interactions which evolved over a considerable time and is maintained through practice.<sup>5</sup> The memory of relationships is carried not only in its shape, signs, local bylaws or recorded property rights, but by people daily observing each other using it and associating it with particular activities. In this sense the 'space of activities'<sup>6</sup> as a

self-perpetuating phenomenon might be compared with a living organism.

Although it saves many buildings and places from destruction, the practice of listing and monumentalizing has confused the issue. First it imposed a somewhat arbitrary limit of historic value which overvalues things within the line and undervalues things outside it, but this was perhaps inevitable.<sup>7</sup> Second and more seriously, it has given rise to the idea that things within the line should be preserved unaltered for perpetuity, while things outside it are expendable. Those within cannot always be so sacrosanct, for buildings have to live by adaptation to new circumstances, otherwise they have no interaction with life except as empty monuments, and more crucially they get no economic support. The state and tourism can support a few, but the rituals of the latter may be more damaging to memory than actual destruction of the fabric.<sup>8</sup> With reuse too there is bound to be change, and necessarily some loss, but not all is lost. For the unprotected buildings outside the line all may indeed be lost, though they carried memories too and constituted places just as much. The vacuum of their elimination often produces anomie (AugÈ, 1995).

The listing procedure implies that some places are more important than others, and most people would agree, but there is no such thing as a 'nowhere place'. Every dull suburb, every factory site, every horrible road was not long ago something else, and our island is riddled with history.<sup>9</sup> Every line on the map tells a story, every acre has a history of occupation. Until the twentieth century it had to be built and tended by hand with much labour, and still it carries the marks of that toil. But now whole hills can be levelled in days for motorways, and every site is at the mercy of the JCB.<sup>10</sup> Farmers, insulated in the cabs of their giant tractors, never set foot on most of the ground they till. Hedges are grubbed out and trees torn down. In stone country field walls maintained for millennia are disappearing. We can erase as never before, and to do it we use up energy stored over millions of years. We endanger the planet with carbon dioxide and pollution. The economy prospers but our lazy habits promise to be unsustainable (Sayle, 2001).

### Adding to the landscape

The ideal for the self-obsessed architect is the 'greenfield site' where he or she can supposedly create in an untrammelled way. But just as there is no such thing as a 'nowhere place', so there is no 'greenfield site'. A green field is no *tabula rasa* but rather a particular type of landscape adapted to a particular use, and it is green only with appropriate attention in due season. If we accept that a place is constituted by a relation between the landscape (including its built additions) and the inhabitants, then every act of architecture is not so much an act of raw creation or personal will, as the modification of an existing place. If we feel obliged, even while constructing anew, to respond to the ground and context, then a new building is in essence not so

different from a conversion – both, in fact, can be regarded as converting an existing landscape. The less selfish and autistic we wish the addition to be – and some mid-twentieth-century buildings were extremely so – the more the intervention should reflect whatever is specific to the place: the given. At the same time, the more specific each work becomes, the more likely it is to differ from the next produced by its author. Specificity produces both diversity and identification. It prevents repetition and the consequent boredom, but perhaps at the price of threatening incoherence.

It may have been that the death of the Arts and Crafts Movement in the first decade of the twentieth century was due to this problem of coherence, for the English Freestyle became perhaps a little too free, and architects too rudderless. Certainly that movement was opposed by a classicizing return to order which concerned both formal methods of planning and a vocabulary of column orders. Later the architects of Organic Modernism also lost out to those of the International Style orthodoxy because their irregular work was hard to understand out of context, hard to reapply as a general example. Mies, at the opposite pole, became the father of the International Style precisely because he could break loose from his roots, cross half the world and continue to build perfected types. In later life he said relatively little in words in a language he had mastered insufficiently, yet the visual power of his ideas was immediately understood by all.

General ideas and universal architectural solutions – as offered also by Hittorff with his idealized Catanian monastery – have always made a strong appeal through their simplicity and clarity. At the most basic level this is a question of easy comprehensibility and reproducibility, for with the reductive typologies of Durand or later of Aldo Rossi, or the deceptively minimal boxes of Mies, one can hardly miss the point. Complex and layered buildings, inherently much ‘dirtier’, more ‘compromised’ by circumstances, need to be described in detail to be understood, and often remain too specific to serve as repeatable models. They can be exemplars only in terms of principle. More problematic than this gap of understanding is the aesthetic effect, for in an architectural culture driven by photographs and magazines, a building needs to address its audience in a few clear gestures. Stylistic consistency and clarity of intention take priority, while buildings needing deep study to reveal themselves are disadvantaged. They get neither the page space nor the reading time, and the less obviously attractive they are the less coverage they get. Yet in real life, buildings are better for having subtlety, for taking time to reveal themselves, for reflecting memory and interacting visibly with the activities housed. First impressions are less important and photos taken the day before opening a misleading mirage: real life is dirtier, but also truer.

#### **From production-line to monument**

In the period of high Modernism of the 1960s, the

work of Organic Modernists such as Aalto and Scharoun was not taken seriously largely because their buildings were one-offs, negating the demands of technology and the production line.<sup>11</sup> Nearly half a century later we recognize that the experiments of system building were unfortunate, the technology unsound. The price paid in autism – lack of response to place and community – was far too high, and the promised economies never arrived.<sup>12</sup> Far from architects being compelled by the available tools and methods to subordinate all work to the disciplines of construction, the range of materials and techniques has in fact become wider and wider, while computerization has overcome the pressure for repetition and allowed the proliferation of complex forms. So ironically – in relation to the predictions of half a century ago – architects now have a larger palette than ever before in history. Even the High-Tech brigade,<sup>13</sup> some of whom continue to pay lip-service to the idea of mass-production, build one-off structures with hand-made details. Meanwhile the real economies of mass production in the housing industry are hidden behind reassuring fake half-timbering and leaded lights, a memory that is wanted but improperly supplied. The technical alibis supplied by High-Tech architects are still believed by clients and commentators, but we surely recognize by now that a building like Centre Pompidou succeeds as a monument for the image and experience that it offers, not in terms of the arguments by which it was conceived: the series was not extended, nor did it become a model for arts centres elsewhere, and the much-vaunted flexibility failed to allow for changes that have actually happened.

We need not doubt that Piano and Rogers were excited by their great trusses and their red and blue pipes, and the world fame of the building as an image should not be underrated. It takes its place among other international monuments at least as well known through page and screen as in reality. Queen of them all is the Sydney Opera House, seen endlessly on travel posters and in film location shots, whose dubious performance as a theatre is entirely secondary. Gehry's Bilbao is a parallel case, the sculptural effect on the townscape having proved such a powerful catalyst to the town's self-image and economy that arguments about whether it is a suitable place to hang artworks are beside the point. Cases like these reassure architects because they show that buildings have not lost power in contemporary culture, and most of us would love to have created one. The question we should ask ourselves, however, is how many such buildings there can ever be. And if we all compete within this exclusive field, what happens to the rest of our environment, to buildings whose duty is more down-to-earth and less image bound?

#### **Get the look**

A recent magazine programme on BBC television featured among other things a 10-minute visit to the Alhambra.<sup>14</sup> It was introduced by one of the designers from a makeover programme,<sup>15</sup> but also included

interviews from some authoritative persons and was not badly done. Then as it ended up came a placard 'Get the Look'. This was followed by other placards showing potted trees and a plastic fountain ('water feature') and giving prices. The BBC is not supposed to be selling things and no supplier's name was given, but it looked like a commercial nonetheless, and the implication was that the point of showing the Alhambra was to encourage people to emulate it in their back gardens. There was no discussion of how difficult this might prove, how appropriate it might be in Croydon, how much it might devalue the Alhambra to repeat elements of it, or how one might overcome the confusion of wanting also to emulate the Taj Mahal shown in next week's programme. What will be done with the skip in which its debris will be put when the fashion has passed? Getting the Look seems to involve no ethical considerations whatsoever.

The most positive interpretation of the recent craze for home makeover programmes is that people largely expropriated from decisions about their environment are being encouraged to re-engage with it and so re-empowered. But it is not generally the inhabitant's expression that is realized, rather that of the programme-makers and their egocentric designers, who are employed as much for their screen appeal as for their creativity, while the programme-makers are ruled more by their ratings than by the satisfaction of their clients. The work done on the home or garden must be quick and startling, if possible trying to beat the clock and ignoring the context to make as many obvious changes as possible. The optimistic pricing seems

never to cover the enormous labour input, the durability of the construction techniques is never put to the test, and those skips disappear as if by magic. The reward for the people involved seems to lie less in the new room they gain than in having become part of television's dreamworld, envied by their neighbours and friends. The distorting effect of 15 minutes of fame outweighs all other considerations.

The pursuit of the image shows the persuasive power of page and screen, but also the effect of a century's increasingly effective advertising which seems to veer ever closer to editorial content. While the ideology of free-market capitalism is accepted as a fact of life, it is in everybody's interest to serve the economy, which means we all have to buy too many things in order to throw them away, and that we must never be satisfied, but always looking for the next fix. The superficial parade of styles in all areas of life creates a turnover which is no longer dependent on real need or on the useful lives of things, and squanders real cultural capital (the Alhambra as *The Look*) along with everything else. We change for the sake of change, obliterating what was there before, often without finding out what or why it was, and squandering the planet's resources along the way. Sooner or later a longer-term attitude will have to be adopted and the landscape be treated with more respect. It will have to be more carefully studied and understood, so that those 'lines and wrinkles in the ground' as Theodor Fischer called them,<sup>16</sup> can be read for what they mean, and our contribution can be set in the context of our fathers'.

#### Notes

1. For my detailed description of this project see *The Architectural Review*, October 1993, pp.24–33.
2. Hittorff (1792–1867) was born in Cologne but studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts under Percier and B elanger, and later in life was architect of the Gare du Nord. He is best known for his controversial theories on polychromy in Greek architecture.
3. 'Listing' in England is a way of protecting buildings of merit from inappropriate changes. Once a building is listed, any alterations have to be approved by the authorities before work can start. The severity of restrictions increases with the perceived historical value of the building.
4. See for example Markus, Thomas A., *Buildings and Power*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993.
5. Habraken has a helpful way of conceiving this interaction as a nested series of power structures: see Habraken, N.J., *The Structure of the Ordinary: form and control in the built environment*, MIT Press, 1998.
6. Here I am veering close to the theories of Lefebvre, but also to the concept of *Geschehensraum* as defined by Hugo H aring, see Peter Blundell Jones, *Hugo H aring*, Menges Stuttgart, 1999, p.187.
7. Pevsner justified the division famously in terms of cathedrals and bicycle sheds but his argument about aesthetic intentions is now quite untenable, and looks more like a justification of his own selective procedures. The problem is that all artefacts in a culture have meaning and operate in a relative scheme: see Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods*, Penguin, 1973.
8. Joseph Rykwert makes some pertinent observations about this in his *The Seduction of Place*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 2000, pp.153–159.
9. W.G. Hoskins famously opened the subject up with his *The Making of the English Landscape*; his successors, such as Christopher Taylor, have added much, see Taylor, Christopher, *Village and Farmstead: a history of rural settlement in England*, George Philip, 1983.
10. JCB is the generic name in the UK for a mechanical excavator, named after the largest British manufacturer.
11. When I first became interested in the work of Scharoun as a student, around 1969, I was repeatedly told that this was why he was a bad architect. There was also the 'Expressionist' slur carried over from Pevsner.
12. The Hertfordshire schools programme and subsequent consortia produced the greatest economies of scale but were still not cheaper than traditional methods, see Saint, Andrew, *Towards a Social Architecture: the role of school building in post-war England*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1987.

13. High-Tech is the name given in Britain to an architectural movement centred around the work of Norman Foster, Richard Rogers and their many fellow-travellers and followers.
14. *The Heaven and Earth Show*, Sunday morning 17/6/01 BBC1, presentation of Alhambra by Dairmut Gavin, main presenter Gaby Roslin.
15. General term for a plethora of television programmes in the UK in recent years whose main theme is to redecorate a room or a garden space, for example *Changing Rooms*.
16. Theodor Fischer (1862–1938) was one of the most famous German architects in the first decade of the twentieth century and the teacher of Bruno Taut, Erich Mendelsohn and Hugo Häring. He was a pioneer

contextualist, believing not only that buildings should respond to the site but also that they should relate to the local culture. The quoted phrase is from his *Sechs Vorträge* and was cited in Winfried Nerdinger, *Theodor Fischer: Architekt und Städtebauer 1862–1938*, Ernst & Sohn, Berlin, 1988, p.30: my translation.

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#### Illustration credits

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