

# CULTURE

## ESSAY EXCELLENT ORDINARY

Modest buildings that make an exceptional addition to the everyday

By Jay Merrick

In a polemic in *The Guardian* 10 years ago, Graham Morrison objected to the 'fatuous' allure of architectural iconism, and wrote of 'the quiet strength of ordinary streets and unexceptional buildings ... We need to look at the city as a whole, and no building should leave it worse off'.

There are, within towns and cities, countless unremarkable building types, ostensibly minor incidents in the greater urban sphere. But there is always a tipping-point, beyond which minor becomes major. The urban and existential traumas caused by increasing numbers of badly designed ordinary buildings has become of overwhelming significance to the evolving character of places, and our sense of place in them.

Three weeks ago, during the Guggenheim Museum competition roadshow in Helsinki, it wasn't only Graham Morrison's historically inclined architectural quietism that came to mind. Peter Smithson's phrase, 'good ordinariness' also hung in the air. But I began to wonder if these two takes on relatively plain architectural and urban qualities were demanding enough. In the 1935 Bio Rex cinema, Mark Wigley's smoke-and-mirrors explanations of the six shortlisted Guggenheim schemes recalled the Situationists' slogan: 'The décor of the spectacle ... Things and their prices'.

A short walk away from the Bio Rex, on Keskuskatu Street, three buildings stand side by side: the 1921 Kinopalatsi building by Eliel Saarinen and, on either side of it, Alvar Aalto's 1955 Rautatalo offices, and the 1969 Academic Bookstore. Their lack of décor and spectacle is priceless.

These buildings were not conceived as unique singularities. Their mass, their facades, their materials and their details certainly brought something new to their setting when they were built. But they did so in a way that, decades later, still serves urban change and civic endurance – a dual condition that is not precisely about background or foreground, yet gives substance to our fleeting notion of a specific place and time, and our deeper sense of urban origin and continuity.

This kind of architecture possesses something more than 'good ordinariness'. I would call it excellent ordinary architecture. Our towns and cities need, quite desperately I think, ordinary building types – housing, mixed-use buildings, offices, schools, and so on – whose design and qualities of presence are suitably virtuous; but not in ways that are bluntly historicist, or sentimental, or that seek to create what Neil Spiller has referred to as 'visual

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Buildings by Alvar Aalto flank Eliel Saarinen's Kinopalatsi on Keskuskatu Street, Helsinki



Jørn Utzon's Fredensborg housing, Denmark

vitamins' – so very Brave New World, minus Aldous Huxley's warnings.

But is widespread excellent ordinary architecture even possible? Based on two obvious indicators, it might seem not. Fewer than 300 buildings were gonged with RIBA Regional Awards in 2014, and not all of them can be safely described as excellent ordinary architecture.

Meanwhile, in most local authority areas, the current National Planning Policy Guidelines' fundamental emphasis on 'regenerative churn has systematised first-time acceptances of 80 per cent of all planning applications. They're passed, essentially, on the grounds of sustainability and consultation; poorly staffed planning departments deal with these crucial issues as tick-box processes. The NPPG has made the words 'fan', 'shit', and 'hit' uniquely operative.

Very few planning departments are equipped with highly experienced, architecturally knowledgeable professionals of the calibre of, say, Westminster's Graham King. Most developers, meanwhile, seem bizarrely unable to notice that the most significant silverbacks of their breed have proved, over and over again, that excellent ordinary architecture (not necessarily designed by big-name practices) makes more money, and urban sense, than more-of-the-same architecture.

The scope for excellent ordinary architecture is huge. Schools, for example: in Britain, four out of five school buildings are being used beyond their maintainable life cycles. As for small and medium-sized mixed-use developments, must the architecture of most of them be so utterly servile to the idea of place and human activity as profit centre?

In housing, successive governments have failed to take any decisive regulatory action against the profiteering that has crammed millions of people into patternbook contemporary homes with the smallest room sizes in Europe. Some architects are complicit

in the housing hustle: I know of one respected practice that charges £3,000 per masterplan for significantly scaled housing developments. For masterplan, read quickie cheque-in-the-post hutchplan.

The best practices – established or young – can convince clients to grasp the urban, civic, and commercial values of excellent ordinary architecture. This will have something to do with their non-threatening articulacy, which allows dialogues to develop, and designs to unfold that aim for a great deal more than the delivery of more or less standardised architectural products. However, we are now, post-Cabe, in a design review-lite age, and this might be the moment for the RIBA to find new ways to promote the specific and pressing need for excellent ordinary architecture to planning departments, developers, and other kinds of client. The RIBA will say it promotes good architecture successfully. But could they develop a specific campaign for the excellently ordinary?

What kind of architecture might this be? A random, international handful of buildings that seem to me to be excellent ordinary architecture would include Feilden Clegg Bradley's Gathering Hall at the GreenAcres Woodland Burial Park at Rainford, Lancashire: well-proportioned reflexive angularity; Douglas fir boards, intelligent detailing; humble but admirable. Hundreds more of this new genre of building are on the way. In Venice, Cino Zucchi's refurbished and new residential buildings are contextually sophisticated modellings of form and materials that stop just short of architectural solipsism. In Trondheim, the architecture of Brendeland and Kristoffersen's Svartlamoen housing block is essentially

obdurate, but in a modestly original way. And in Barcelona, the Josep Trueta Old Peoples' Centre, by Bru Lacomba Setoain, introduces modern architectural manners into an historic context. Buildings like these are architecturally excellent but, crucially, come across as ordinary participants in their settings.

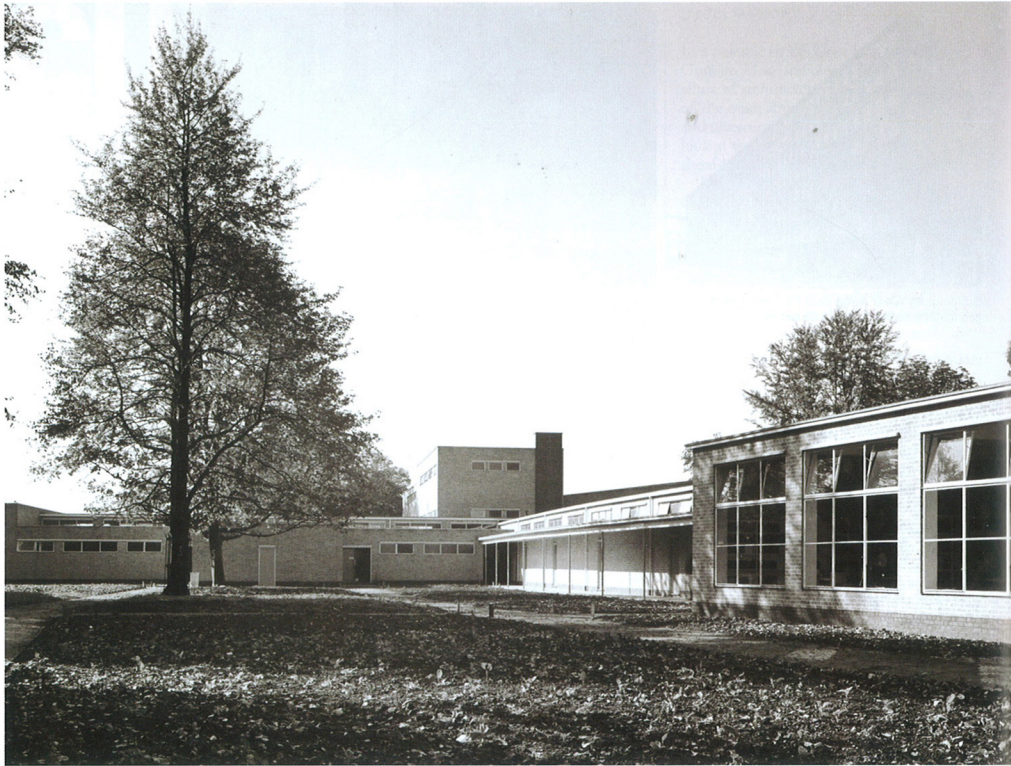
We might say the same of the relaxed lines of Walter Gropius's 1939 Impington Community College in Cambridgeshire, or Allford Hall Monaghan Morris's Angel Building in Islington. A notable recent example of excellent ordinary architecture is Henley Halebrown Rorrison's Copper Lane co-housing development in Stoke Newington, the first scheme of its kind in London. It was the direct result of highly co-operative procurement and design.

I like this comment from one Copper Lane resident: 'Behind every initiative is an inner and outer process that requires developing trust ... Recognising that we were all in it together, and actually powerless without the whole, was a very important lesson that can hold true for all projects that only prove their worth in their final manifestation.'

Trust, and powerlessness without the whole. Those are pretty good compass bearings for any pursuit of excellent ordinary architecture. So, too, is a remark by Patrick Lynch. 'Excellent ordinary? Yes, like when the quotidian and the epicurean seem to oscillate.' And, to return to Graham Morrison's original thought, how many thousands of new buildings, on site or on screen, are in the process of leaving our towns and cities worse off? How many of these buildings will express any intelligent addition to the quotidian, let alone to the epicurean? How many will illustrate the gluttony of profitable placefaking? In Helsinki, outside Aalto's Academic Bookstore, the alternative to this urban gluttony seemed wonderfully unexceptional.

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# JAY MERRICK'S EXCELLENT ORDINARY BUILDINGS



**Top** Impington Village College, Cambridgeshire, by Walter Gropius and Maxwell Fry  
**Above** Woodland Cemetery, Worsley, by Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios



Henley Halebrown Rorrison's Copper Lane housing, Stoke Newington, London

FAR LEFT: FEILDEN CLEGG BRADLEY STUDIOS LEFT: IOANA MARINESCU



HAT PROJECTS

HAT Projects' High House Artists' Studios, Purfleet, Essex