

## Beyond Space

# Wireless Sites: Architecture in the Space of British Radio, 1927–1945

SHUNDANA YUSAF

Between 1927 and 1945 the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) aired an average of two radio programs a month on architecture. This article explores the effect of these simulated wireless sites on a traditional mode of knowledge like architecture. What happened when architecture, framed within the institutional vision of the BBC, encountered the specific mode of production, reproduction and diffusion of the radio? I argue that early radio in Britain was not just another medium of *representation*, but one of *simulation*, which reinvented the social identity of architecture. This historical account of wireless sites enables us to rethink the perceptual category we call “tradition.”

Since the early 1980s Jean Baudrillard has mesmerized the imagination of the intellectual community across disciplines and continents with his formulation of an order of things he insists is new. This order, he has demonstrated, is established by electronic mass media. In particular, modern media have destroyed the relationship of mimesis between a model and its representation characteristic of classical media like painting and the novel. This has freed images from the function of representing reality and enabled them to simulate messages with no reference in life. Baudrillard’s inquiry has revealed a role reversal between image and reality. Images now precede reality, and, conversely, reality imitates images. We — the producers and consumers of simulations — misrecognize this role reversal and make our lives in the shadow of these autonomous images. We, thereby, create a reality that is based on unrepresentative images. This is what Baudrillard has called “hyper-reality.”

This revisitation of the ideas of Baudrillard stems from a paper I presented at the tenth IASTE conference in 2006. The conference invited participants to consider the rise of hyper-traditions for the study of traditional built environments. Hyper-traditions are engendered by the confluence of globalization, electronic mass media, and the latest technologies like that of travel. These three forces have a common trait: they foster contact between “uninformed” and “fleeting” consumers (TV viewers, tourists, ordinary home

*Shundana Yusuf is a Ph.D. candidate in the History and Theory Program at the School of Architecture, Princeton University, and a junior fellow at the Paul Mellon Center, Yale University.*

buyers) and environments that have hitherto been rooted in what can heuristically be called vernacular modes of sense-making. This contact necessarily unhinges and undermines the previously more stable relationship between the appearance of places and spaces and their traditional cultural context.

In this article I look at the form and content of architectural programs produced on the radio by the British Broadcasting Corporation, from its establishment in 1927 to the end of World War II in 1945. During this interval, the BBC aired more than three hundred programs on architecture-related topics, involving at least 120 speakers. These programs provided a platform for the articulation of views about issues such as town planning, housing, civic responsibility, architectural history, modern life, archeology, and art appreciation, giving voice to the extreme poles of the field. Presenters included established authorities (Sir Reginald Blomfield, Sir Gilbert Scott, H.S. Goodhart-Rendel); individuals recently admitted into the architectural profession (Amyas Connell, Serge Chermayeff); professional educators (Howard Robertson); historians (Sir Banister Fletcher); critics (John Summerson); municipal architects (Fredrick Towndrow); journalists (James Richards); and external champions of design (Frank Pick, Lord Gorell). This endorsement of faith from the BBC came at a time of immense crisis for the practice of architecture. A decline in country-house commissions after 1914 and an import embargo on steel in the 1920s were followed by the world economic crisis of the 1930s. The BBC's patronage, indifferent to the reality of this situation and governed by the necessities of broadcasting as seen by its staff, lifted British architecture from the pits and put it at the heart of the national debate on democracy, culture and education.

In certain respects, this investigation bears great affinity to the problematic of hyper-tradition. Hyper-traditional environments, produced by the logic of global trade and simulated media imagery, involve the subjugation of traditional modes of knowledge to modern modes of production, reproduction and diffusion. They involve practices, buildings and settlements that do not grow organically from local traditions, but are imposed from without. No differently, I examine here the transformation faced by an established form of communal knowledge, discourse, and artistic expression when confronted for the first time with the possibility of an untested mode of mass production and diffusion. More specifically, I consider the effects of simulated "wireless sites" on the discipline of architecture.

This article limits its examination to the properties and possibilities of the BBC's wireless sites, particularly their independence from the physical sites to which they referred. While it may be difficult to empirically substantiate the kind of hyper-tradition these sites produced, the investigation nevertheless enables reflection on the historical and social existence of simulacra and the hyper-reality generated in their wake. Most importantly, this historical account enables a rethinking of the perceptual category we call "tradition."

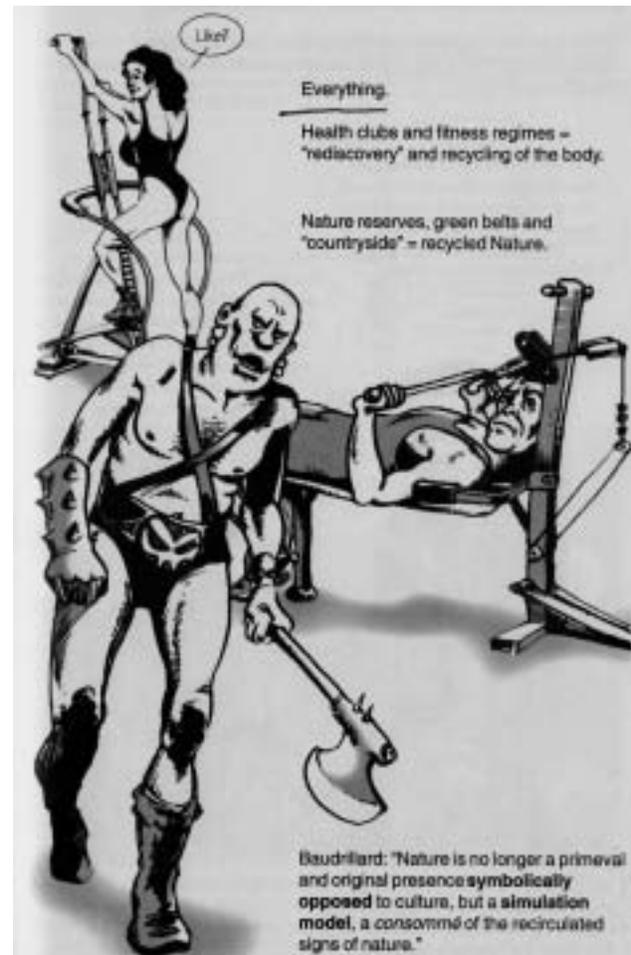


FIGURE 1. *Hyper-reality: reproducing our bodies after an image.*  
Drawing by Chris Horrocks and Zoran Jevtic.

Today, nothing lies outside the condition of hyper-reality (and here the term can be used synonymously with hyper-tradition). Whether we work out at a gym, practice architecture in an office filled with magazines, or are active in the environmental movement, we all contribute to its perpetuation (FIG. 1). Our activities obliterate the opposition between nature and culture and collapse the real with the imaginary, the true with the false. The erosion of these categories is fundamental to Baudrillard's model of social existence, an existence that has reached new heights in the postmodern stage of electronic media.<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard believes it is impossible to resist these sovereign images, because it is impossible to recognize them. The result is the end of political and social meaning, the end of history. All we are left with, as Baudrillard has pointed out, is the *passive* consumption of images and their faithful reproduction in ourselves and our surroundings.

Baudrillard expressed this view most succinctly in *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*:

*The medium is the message signifies not only the end of the message, but also the end of the medium. There are no longer media in the literal sense of the term (I am talking above all about the electronic mass media) — that is to say, a power mediating between one reality and another, between one state of the real and another — neither in content nor in form. Strictly speaking this is what implosion signifies: the absorption of one pole into another, the short-circuit between poles of every differential system of meaning, the effacement of terms and of distinct oppositions, and thus that of the medium and the real. Hence the impossibility of any mediation, of any dialectical intervention between the two or from one to the other, [in the] circularity of all media effects. Hence the impossibility of a sense (meaning), in the literal sense of a unilateral vector which leads from one pole to another. This critical — but original — situation must be thought through to the very end; it is the only one we are left with. It is useless to dream of a revolution through content or through form, since the medium and the real are now in a single nebulous state whose truth is undecipherable.<sup>2</sup>*

As an idea, the critical power of hyper-reality, and of hyper-tradition, rests in its break with common-sense perception. Thus, Baudrillard's structuralist reading has dealt a blow to what some call the "illusion of the transparency" of facts and representations when studying the built environment.<sup>3</sup> In this regard — as many presentations at the tenth IASTE conference showed — it has done much to improve our vigilance.

In the spirit of such critiques, my assessment of wireless sites begins with a consideration of the structural specificity of the medium of radio and what this, at a generic level, meant for the representation and diffusion of a traditional mode of knowledge-making like architecture. *Prima facie*, the collaboration of radio and architecture is a curious one; radio is the preeminent nonvisual medium, meaning that a "wireless site" cannot possess such constitutive elements of architectural identity as materiality, visibility, spatiality and locality. How does one evaluate this loss?

The greatest danger with the concept of hyper-reality, however, is that it grasps society merely from the outside. It cannot account for varied, personal appropriations of simulated space. Its premise on a single-dimensional world thus holds up only by suppressing the questions addressed today across disciplines about the "interests" and "competence" of social beings.<sup>4</sup> It makes sense, for example, only if we agree that a farmer in Afghanistan and a professor in the United States read image-governed environments identically (i.e., that they have the same cultural competence to decipher the images). Furthermore, it presupposes that all parties have the same interest in the images — which is mandatory for a faithful upholding and re/production of the hyper-reality.

Calling the social agents put "on vacation" by Baudrillard back to work (to use an expression by Dennis Wrong<sup>5</sup>), the

second half of the essay thus considers how the properties of broadcasting were perceived by the BBC leadership and its architectural speakers. Here, I first look at the institutional mandate in which architecture programming was enframed, and then evaluate the content of the programs and the costs and benefits of the collaboration to both parties. In this regard, I argue that wireless sites made a unique contribution to architecture's historic struggle to come into its own as a discipline.

In the end, Baudrillard's view that media of mass communication can only engage in the "fabrication of non-communication," because they do not maintain the "reciprocal space for speech and response," is indefensibly narrow. Signs communicate — whether traditionally representative or simulated, whether entailing face-to-face reciprocity or not.

## RADIOPHONIC SIMULATION

Radio overcomes distance through a unique mechanical process that involves detaching audition from the rest of the body. It first *transports* the sense of hearing to places where the body of the receiver is not, and then returns it by *setting* it immediately before the listener. Technology in this case does not constitute an extension of the body, as Marshall McLuhan held.<sup>6</sup> As Samuel Weber demonstrated, it is a surrogate of the body.<sup>7</sup> It does not merely heighten the naturally limited power of hearing; it displaces the body while maintaining the *presentness* associated with sense perception. Though radio (like any aesthetic medium) involves artifice, technique and technology, this uncanny combination of presentness and displacement distinguishes it — and the other forms of electronic communication that have followed — from the older mediums used to represent works of architecture.

Inscription, drawing, models, photographs, and even film, according to Weber, maintain the traditional notion of representation by keeping *in place* the time difference between something that has happened and its reproduction in images capable of recalling it to mind. In other words, these older media presuppose a radical distinction between what is doing the representation and what is being represented — the original and the copy, before and after. By contrast, live broadcasting (given the poor recording facilities of the interwar years) took place simultaneously in at least three different locales: the recording site, the reception site, and the space in between. This meant that it *overcame distance by splitting the unity of place*.

Like other subjects, what can be heard about architecture on the radio, thus, does not involve previously accomplished work, but the quasi-simultaneity of *another audition* produced here and now. Radio shatters the temporal relation between past and present, original and subsequent copy. The minimal difference necessary to tell apart the reproduced and reproduction, model from copy, the repeated from repetition, is reduced tendentiously to the imperceptible. Radio renders the logic and ontology that governs the mimet-

ic relationship between signifier and signified meaningless, while the immediacy of hearing conceals its doing so. Radio broadcasts, therefore, cannot be considered as representing oral images, but as transmitting *the semblance of presentation as such*. It is radio's power to disrupt the reality principle while maintaining reality effects that makes it one of the most privileged sites for the production of simulation.

Theodor Adorno was probably the first to point out that electronic mass media produce sounds and images of the world according to the structural logic of their technology and the institutions that control them, not the logic of their original existence.<sup>8</sup> This is what allows it to disrupt the existing hierarchies and orders of things.

As Weber has also noted, radio, like television, "sets only by unsettling." It "brings the most remote things together only to disperse them again."

"The more technology seeks to put things in their proper places, the less proper those places turn out to be, the more displaceable everything becomes and the more frenetic becomes the effort to reassert the propriety of the place as such."<sup>9</sup>

#### THE BBC'S VIEW OF THE NEW ORDER OF THINGS

Turning from reflection on the generic properties of radiophonic simulation, I will now consider the properties that became important to the actors most closely involved in establishing the BBC's architecture series. Here, what Weber would describe as "upsetting the set up" (and what I call "the disorder") of interwar British radio in the hands of the BBC held the seed of a new order.

Considered historically, the pre-World War II and wartime BBC was not just another radio station; it was the preeminent mass media institution in the world. In Britain, it was an autonomous but government-regulated monopoly, established at a cultural moment when notions of aristocracy and democracy, nationalism and imperial responsibility, public responsibility and market freedom were all at issue. At this time, there was also a general acceptance of the importance of cultural education for building democracy. The inculcation of a common ethos in the political community was seen as a means both of overcoming inherited inequalities and freeing public opinion from the vulgarizing values of the marketplace, as they stood at the time, without educational and cultural merit.

The BBC turned radio into *the* authoritative instrument for the realization and implementation of such views. Broadcasting would improve knowledge, taste and manners, and such acculturation would transform its mass audience into better citizens, modernize class relations, strengthen nationalism, and create a participatory democracy. Yet, while the BBC's monopoly freed it from competition and the need to pander to popular demands and gave it the liberty to take up a pedagogic challenge, the Corporation still had to capture and maintain the attention of its audience. Powerful leader-

ship in the person of the BBC's founding Director General, John Reith, translated this vision (and the challenges implied by it) into a coherent yet diverse output of programs.

Historian Asa Briggs has shown that for Reith, political education was the most vital element of his pedagogic mandate.<sup>10</sup> But there was also resistance to Reith's ambition. The National Press Association, political parties, and bureaucrats all used the Corporation's monopoly and semi-official status to legislate limits to its freedom to broadcast political news and commentary, forcing it to channel its resources into cultural programming. Perhaps in compensation, in the span of only two decades, its cultural programming came to enjoy an authority unrivaled by all other forms of cultural production, and was unparalleled elsewhere in the world.

The BBC celebrated broadcasting for its ability to "overcome distance." By taking the voice where the constraints of the body had previously limited its reach, it provided an opportunity to surmount the separation between the mental worlds of "educated" and "ignorant" classes. According to Reith, radio could take

*... an event, be it speech, or music, or play, or ceremony" to the "very room [of the listener]. . . . It is carried to him among all the accustomed and congenial circumstances and surroundings of his own home, and in his leisure hours . . . it comes in such a way that enjoyment on the one hand, and assimilation on the other, is induced with comparatively little effort . . . and great effect."<sup>11</sup>*

For Reith, the transmission of programs to an unprecedented number of people simultaneously gave radio a new power to command *at a distance*. The pioneering work of broadcasting, for him, consisted of overcoming the "opposition [that] comes . . . from the indifference or ignorance or hostility of man." "The roads to be laid are not merely for passages of transport wagons or railways, but for influences and developments which shall be permanent and good and widespread, in the sphere of the things to remain" (FIG. 2).<sup>12</sup>

The BBC's service on arts (music, art, gardening, literature, film and drama) in the period belonged to an intellectual tradition that bore the imprint of Mathew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Its purpose was nothing less than the socialization of the working classes through the inculcation of the cultural values and tastes of the educated. In the unsettled and



FIGURE 2. The BBC's view of enlightened listening at home. Courtesy of the BBC Picture Archives.

xenophobic years of the 1920s and 30s, the BBC imagined that its programs could guarantee a more peaceful and settled society, and it accepted this role as a public duty in the name of the nation-state. All the imagined products of the process — bureaucratically produced men, things, values and relationships — were active in the institution's understanding of its social role. Its cultural programming would change the very psychological and spiritual make-up of the masses.<sup>13</sup>

Within this framework of liberal intervention, art education through radio owed much to conventional Kantian beliefs about taste and the imagined interrelation between aesthetic, social and moral judgments. In Britain there was a longstanding tradition of such thought among the cultured classes, including literature on aesthetic appreciation going back to Joseph Addison, David Hume, and Edmund Burke. It was only natural that BBC policy-makers would consider the cultivation of a taste for the fine arts an important vessel for social and political education. Change in aesthetic judgment would bring about change in the other two. Taste, the most passive faculty of the body, yet the one responsible for orienting human perception and appreciation, would painlessly deliver a community of judges to constitute what Reith called the “nation into one man.”

The BBC'S policies thus epitomized the fusion of humane sentiment extending from a Victorian liberalism enthused at the possibility of democracy with strategies to forestall the dangers of that same democracy. Under the leadership of Reith, a number of BBC area directors, including J.S. Stobart (Education), Hilda Matheson (Talks and News Dept.), Richard Lambert (*The Listener*), Charles Siepmann (Adult Education and Talks Dept.), and Kenneth Clark (Music), worked to make the BBC *the* modern patron of the arts. Such pioneering broadcasters saw themselves as preserving the artistic achievements historically supported by wealthier classes. After 1919 these traditional arts had been threatened by a reconfiguration of these classes and the recasting of social relations between minority and majority culture, accelerated by the development of laboring classes into consumers with very different cultural values.<sup>14</sup> Many of those concerned saw democratization not only as the moral thing to do, but the only plausible means of preserving the arts.

By taking up this mission as the basis for its program policy, the BBC embarked on a process aimed at institutionalizing the culture of some as the historical heritage of all. It was in this framework of cultural politics that architecture came to the radio.

#### COSTS AND PROFITS OF COLLABORATION

The collaboration of architects and the Corporation had costs and benefits for both parties, in some ways akin to the tacitly accepted unequal relationship between architects and clients. Their responses were governed by the logic of their

respective worlds (architecture for the speakers, journalism for the BBC producers) and what was likely to be positively sanctioned in them. These responses were “moves,” organized as strategies, but as Pierre Bourdieu has stressed, “without being a product of a genuine strategic intention.”<sup>15</sup>

In the early years of broadcasting, producing a program was a tedious, drawn-out affair — even in its simplest form with only a single speaker. Preparations included meetings, correspondence (written and telephonic), rehearsals, and training for the actual presentation. There were contractual negotiations, the back-and-forth of editorial comments, and rehearsals. And the contract did not end with the airing of the program; it mandated that speakers respond to select audience letters, some of which were then prepared for publication in the BBC'S weekly journal *The Listener*. For the speakers, this meant having to rewrite, abridge and furnish texts of broadcasts with pictures and credits (FIG. 3). On average, the whole process lasted six months. Maxwell Fry and Harry S. Goodhart-Rendel, who maintained busy practices and other professional commit-



FIGURE 3. Noel Carrington, “Architecture as History,” a book review, adapted from a broadcast, in *The Listener*, Vol. 7 No. 159 (Jan. 27, 1932), p. 136. Courtesy of the BBC.

ments in the late 1930s, for example, protested that their work for radio talks was taking a toll on their office work.<sup>16</sup>

When the BBC commissioned architects and critics it was staking energy and money without any guarantee of satisfactory programming. To get a sense of the gamble involved, one only has to consider the frustration inherent in presenting a visual medium through a nonvisual one. There was also the challenge of addressing an audience on the whole less culturally informed than that which architects were used to. Yet Hilda Matheson (the first Director of Talks) didn't worry. She insisted that architects provided a good pool of "ready-made speakers" and eager participants.

Another risk related to the BBC's preference for architectural modernism — hitherto an unproven idiom. It exposed the Corporation to criticism that it was biased against established styles — in effect, most contemporary design practice. But the BBC executives saw this as a chance worth taking. In their estimation, modern architects had a greater capacity to contribute to the legitimization of radio as a medium of communication. The fresh definition of work and the role of the architect signaled by modernists gave them confidence in this opinion.

There were great costs for the presenters (architects, critics, curators, historians, etc.) too. The shows demanded time and effort that was unmatched by the pay. And afterwards a successful show did not guarantee further commissions. Unlike conditions after 1945, when Nikolaus Pevsner, James Richards, John Summerson, and John Betjeman became radio regulars, in its early years this new patron of architecture was more interested in featuring a variety of topics and voices rather than grooming specific personalities.

Historians Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff have observed that established writers and poets of the time largely ignored radio, partly because the monetary rewards were "meager in the extreme."<sup>17</sup> Yet, architects, who do not enjoy the same control as writers over the realization of their work, repeatedly accepted invitations — in fact, even sought them out. Harry S. Goodhart-Rendel, when president of the Royal Institute of British Architects, an institution established to protect the profession, advised all architects "who had the interest of architecture at heart to pursue the patronage of BBC."<sup>18</sup>

Rendell's economically nonsensical advice only made sense within the particular value system of the "space of architecture." As a field, architecture has historically demanded that its members distinguish themselves and their work from others. This demand, as arbitrary as it may be, has made "personal" and "original" expression a necessity for survival in a "universe where to exist is to be different."<sup>19</sup> Such a condition, however, presupposes educated consumers and a continuing emphasis on education by the producers to ensure cognition and competent evaluation of their production. This means that education is an accompanying necessity of self-expression.

Furthermore, architecture is among the most weakly organized professions. H  l  ne Lipstadt has written that

"Architects cannot claim to have . . . exterminated their rivals, as the medical profession did the charlatan."<sup>20</sup> Indeed, they competed for services like imagination, design and construction with nonarchitects. For architects — who were the most literate group in the building sector until World War II — this meant that speech and writing were powerful tools to attract clients from a common pool shared with builders and other nonarchitects. It was precisely this connection of buildings and words (to use Adrian Forty's book title<sup>21</sup>) that explains why radio was more attractive to architects than to other professionals. The BBC gave architects — who were not public figures (like bureaucrats, politicians or lawyers) or popular celebrities (like singers and actors) — a wireless classroom to expand their public reach beyond the narrow confines of the cultured classes.

#### ESTABLISHED MODES OF COMMUNICATING ARCHITECTURE

When radio appeared on the scene, British architecture already had a vibrant culture of word. Its members were involved with different means of outreach: they participated in preservation societies; spoke at public conferences; organized debates and exhibitions; wrote for popular and quasi-literary press; led walks and guided tours; and circulated pamphlets, posters, articles and books on all sorts of burning issues. Innovation in book publication, especially the 6p pocket-size paperbacks introduced by Penguins in 1937, and changes in the format and content of the architectural press made architecture even more open to lay readers (FIG. 4).

Such changes in publishing were significant. After 1919, *Builders' Journal* reinvented itself as the more attractive and trendy *Architects' Journal*. *The Architect* and *Building News* also joined forces and changed their editorial style. In general, writing moved away from the technical and the formidably factual to become more literary, reflective and historical. These modifications attracted new middle-class writers and readers beyond the immediate world of the construction industry, facilitated new and multiple ways of thinking about design, and allowed both those architects with and without an opportunity to build to rethink the principles of the profession.<sup>22</sup> This placed professional journals, previously on the sidelines of professional practice, right at the heart of it.<sup>23</sup>

Preservation, after the economic reshuffling of 1914–1919, had begun to emerge as a pressing issue to architects and critics. In 1926, at the behest of the Royal Institute of British Architects, planner Patrick Abercrombie and architect Clough Williams-Ellis registered the Council for Preservation of Rural England. In 1937, *AR* editor James Richards and writer Robert Byron, with two other friends, set up the Georgian Group. They fought for preservation amidst much public aversion and political skepticism to the idea. Though to little effect at the time, the purpose of the preservationists



**FIGURE 4.** Existing forms of communication. Anthony Bertram, Design (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1938).

was to gain recognition for cultural value of buildings and landscapes as something over and above their material and entertainment value.

There was also an increase in the number of design exhibitions during the interwar years in Britain.<sup>24</sup> The annual "Ideal Home Exhibition," the 1933 "Exhibition of British Industrial Art in Relation to Home," and the two Modern Architectural Research (MARS) Group exhibitions in 1934 and 1938 characterized these years (FIG. 5). Such events addressed a public beyond the circles of architecture's traditional audience and attracted visitors from outside the sphere of influence of magazines and societies. Their popularity and success made old-world venues like J.C. Squire's Architect's Club appear to be "inward looking coterie affairs with little effect on outside public opinion," which preached mainly to the "soft public," "the already saved," and the "illuminated."<sup>25</sup>



**FIGURE 5.** Extracurricularists: preparing the MARS Bethnal Green Exhibit. Robert Townsend, by courtesy of John Allan.

#### ENTERS RADIO AND WIRELESS SITES

To these existing sources for arousing interest in the built environment, the BBC added the wireless — a colossal classroom with invisible walls, potentially open to the entire country. However, committed to high cultural standards, the Corporation did not invite just any practitioner to the microphone. The BBC encouraged only the "extracurricularists" to turn the audience created by radio into a public for architecture. And for this group of nontraditional practitioners there was a reciprocal benefit. BBC radio provided "soft" advertising that would allow them to compete for attention with commercial architects and builders, who had access to market-based publicity. Radio was also a legitimate means of self-promotion, because it did not compromise their claim to "internally determined," as opposed to "externally imposed," production.

Radio was not the first institution to introduce oral representations of architecture into the English tradition of cultural pedagogy. Lectures with lantern slides and guided tours had been used for decades by municipal museums, preservationists, and the Workers Education Association (FIG. 6). What radio did was reproduce these representations in radically different classroom conditions, and transform the inti-

**FIGURE 6.** *An 1894 walking tour of a fourteenth-century clergy house in Sussex. Courtesy of the British National Trust.*



mate sociability of a traditional classrooms by opening such learning to an amorphous, faceless group of students. In the process, it separated the site of utterance and audition and collapsed special educational events into the everyday.

For the visual arts, radio translated the scale, material, space and locality of works entirely to audition. Yet, while architecture in the space of radio lost its structural specificity, this loss had several unexpected positive effects. To begin, the conditions of architectural practice — the need for clients, capital investment, the scale of works, and their existence in public space — have historically subjugated architects to economic and political interests, making their work an instrument of domination. However, radio freed representation from the constraints attendant upon the materiality of building. This enabled the producers to relocate the discourse of the built environment within the field of political power. Buildings were no longer simply a tool of subjugation, but were framed as a force of democratization. Second, unlike a lecture in a classroom with slides or a site visit, a lecture on radio detached the senses of hearing and seeing. This limited radio's capacity to explain the physical properties of places and put the burden of understanding entirely on imagination and on imaginative completion in the mind. It heightened the speakers' power to reproduce the identity of works and the discipline afresh. Third, since all visual arts suffered from the disembodiment of material form when put on air, the space of radio created a unique equality between architects and more autonomous culture producers like artists and writers.

The interest of the BBC in the built environment was generated by the fit of the topic with the Corporation's search for topics that could combine maximum outreach with the mandate of "uplift." John Reith valued broadcasters who were "engaged in advancing the boundaries of knowledge," and hoped "to select from among the highest authorities in the universities and elsewhere those who ha[d] already exhibited the most conspicuous powers as popular interpreters of their subject." The ideal presenter was one who could "stimulate the interest of those who have no previous interest or acquaintance with the topic yet are able to provide material for their fellow experts."<sup>26</sup>

Simple and lively presentations that could grab and sustain the attention of the interested and uninterested alike were preferred over dense ones. The operative word in the

halls of Broadcasting House was "topicality." In particular, the producers favored social topics. Research into listener preferences indicated that social topics made better subjects of discussion, as they involved the immediate quality of life on which everyone had an opinion. This led administrators in all branches of BBC programming to believe that if abstract topics like art and philosophy could be tied to the concrete social concerns of listeners, they could continue to give them "advanced" (as opposed to "more popular") treatment and still be trusted to spark broad interest.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, speakers were asked to demonstrate the relevance of their topic to the immediate concerns of different groups of listeners.

Architecture was subject to these general programming requirements. It was also subject to demands made on all art programs. While speakers were given great freedom in what they chose to talk about, they were asked to demonstrate that art affected social conditions and social outlook. Charles Siepmann, Director of BBC Adult Education, in particular, wanted visual arts presentations to be inquiries "into the factors of change and the forces of transformation that can be traced within the lifetime of an ordinary man."<sup>28</sup> Presentations were to lay down the criteria for evaluating works that could lead to the "improvement of taste, understanding, extend privilege and influence." Siepmann favored architecture as a topic of presentation because it was at once an art and a rapidly industrializing component of the economy that he believed could bridge highbrow and lowbrow differences in taste.<sup>29</sup>

Within the discussion of the purer visual arts, the demand of relating, say, a Picasso or a Gainsborough to the everyday concerns of listeners was a tall order (FIG. 7). But the more adventurous critics accommodated this demand. Herbert Read called for the reinvention of artists as designers.<sup>30</sup> Eric Newton asked for accessible and enjoyable public art.<sup>31</sup> "Before you make any judgment of a work of art," went the advice of archeologist Stanley Casson, "look very closely at it indeed, and ask yourself what was the intention of the artist, what did he think and want when he did it."<sup>32</sup> Yet, despite such overtures, when it came to the "concrete" value of art, most artists and critics inevitably turned to spiritual or psychological explanations.

For program producers, great buildings also rose above their worldly entanglements and had as much cultural worth as art and literature. Indeed, the public existence of buildings gave them a much greater power of cultural education and enlightenment than other arts. As A.E. Richardson insisted, "Each person who has the cause of education at heart will realize the enormous influence a really good station [a public building] could exercise on the mass mind."<sup>33</sup> The experience of domestic work and public places (churches, schools, hospitals, shops), the BBC producers estimated, gave the listeners, who did not have a regular contact with "works," the necessary preparation to be interested in the topic. Architecture's involvement in questions of shelter, safety and health also endowed cultural topics with a political

**FIGURE 7.**

Promoting good taste over the radio. An illustration of the tradition of “sound” English design. Serge Chermayeff and Chippendale chairs, in G. Boumphrey, “What’s Wrong with Design,” *The Listener*, Vol. 9 No. 223 (Apr. 19, 1933), p. 608. Courtesy of the BBC.



edge otherwise prohibited in BBC programming. All in all, these properties made architecture a better fit than the fine arts in terms of the Corporation’s search for topics that promised outreach without sacrificing the mandate of “uplift.” Its appreciation stood as the gateway to the appreciation of more esoteric cultural enterprises.

The BBC’s interest in topical broadcasting drew out the socially modern elements in architectural thinkers of all stripes, including Arts and Crafts vernacularists, Edwardians, and proto-Continental modernists. But it was particularly compatible with the modernist impetus, because the exaltation of “fitness for purpose” by the moderns made their works more open to the new public constituted by radio. Purpose here embraced a wide array of aspects — use, health, safety, firmness, ease of maintenance, suitability of material, and financial logic. With the exception of the Arts and Crafts movement, the nineteenth century had shed many of these conceptions. But their return had the effect of validating the appreciation of those who were uninitiated in the ways of critical and informed appreciation but who consumed works naively and from the perspective of practicality.

In 1924 Clough Williams-Ellis and Amabel Strachey published a book, *Pleasures of Architecture*, in which they argued that it was perfectly okay for laymen to have opinions about architecture. Starting with questions of purposiveness and structural efficiency which did not require familiarity and regular contact with works in the past, everyone could be confident of the soundness of their appreciation. It is precisely such inclusiveness that attracted the BBC. *Pleasures of Architecture* made its authors the first speakers the BBC recruited for its series on architecture, in the very first week of 1927, showcasing BBC’S vision. Follow-up transmissions on this theme included a Banister Fletcher talk based on the “Romance of Architecture” (1929) and a Fredric Towndrow one for school children entitled “Adventures in Architecture” (1929).

During these years the collective labor of young architects transformed housing, industrial design, and planning into aesthetic challenges and made the man-in-the-street a stakeholder

in an aesthetic domain. This gave modernists an edge over the neo-Georgianism and neo-Tudorism of their senior contemporaries. For example, “The House of the Future,” an Ideal Home exhibition (1928), provided the first use of modernism for English for worker housing.<sup>34</sup> Two years later, the BBC asked its co-designer, R.A. Duncan, then teaching at the Architectural Association, to explain the importance of shifts in architectural thinking for working-class living.

The BBC’s director of talks in 1932 also commissioned J.E. Barton, a keen observer of recent concepts in French urbanism, to weigh its merits and address for listeners the question “Will the New City make New Men?” Later, during the war, when Britain started making long-term plans for the metamorphosis of its economy from that of an empire to that of a welfare state, the BBC asked another publicist of modernism, F.S. Yerbury, to compare the situation at home with discoveries on “Housing and Social Conditions in Sweden” (1944). F.R.S. Yorke’s books also described modernism as a return to the beauty of essentials. They presented the movement as a socially responsible reply by artists to the economic pressures and the transformed political reality of the day. In particular, prefabrication, when it became widely available, would democratize architecture.

In this case the supply of discourse and its proof in the emerging works of younger speakers on urban, industrial and architectural design and Reith’s demand that BBC productions realize the democratic potential of the medium made a great fit. Speakers experienced this coincidental accord in the form of unprecedented leeway and freedom of maneuver in bringing topics, agendas and colleagues important to them to the microphone and setting the tone for the radio debates (FIG. 8).

The commitment of the BBC to modernist views signaled a general acceptance of its power to transform class relations. Moreover, the Corporation gave its architectural presenters the backing of an institution that by 1939 had established a reputation for greater objectivity than the press. BBC radio was also able to procure the participation of prestigious personalities in every domain of human activity.<sup>35</sup> This established the conditions for a certain efficacy of words, enabling speakers to assert their views as representing a rational and common good. The consistent invitation of sympathetic voices was the greatest



**FIGURE 8.** John Summerson’s rendition of a house not as property but as a cultural production included an eye-witness account of Blenheim Palace in *Radio Times*, 1937. Photo courtesy of the BBC.

protection the BBC afforded young architects, and it implied acceptance of the validity of their challenge to professional practice. The BBC boosted this challenge by recognizing the claim that the functions of a building could be aesthetically expressed; by acknowledging that the latest innovation in artistic principles was valuable to the communal needs of a democracy; and by giving young architects a public-service platform.

The demands the BBC administration placed on its speakers also favored the extracurricularists, who could indulge in self-serving propaganda — assuming it demonstrated a generalizable interest. The economically irrational practice of this group indicated a sense of the long-term value of disinterestedness over the “economy” of the “commercial,” and over “economic” profit in the short term. Together with increased autonomy and disinterestedness, a stake in generalizable interest, exhibited by and in collaboration with the BBC, augmented the authority of architects.

Accepting an invitation to enter the space of radio also meant a willingness to face up to its explicit and implicit challenges. Speakers accepted that this space favored expressive ideas over visual evidence, and engaged those with or without material examples to back them up in a zero-sum game. They competed under new conditions and different criteria without a traditional client to finance their designs.

The BBC'S interest in a variety of programs created an occasion to demonstrate the variety of activities in which architects were and, if given a chance, could be involved. They talked about “Painted Furniture” (1929) and “Art in Industry” (1930); gave tips on “Garden Design” (1930) and “Damp in the House” (1932); and introduced “The Town and Country Planning Bill” (1936). To these, with the onset of World War II, were introduced new concerns like “An Archive for Architecture” (1944) and “Reconstruction: Plymouth Rebuilding Plans” (1944).

They were asked to give advice to new home buyers, (which Howard Robertson used to correct the demands of home builders), and provide guidance on the minutiae of domestic design, consumption and style. Stanley Casson counseled “On Using Our Eyes” (1931); Margaret Bulley, a student of Heinrich Wölfflin, gave “A Test in Taste” (1933); and Peter Carter explained “Good Manners in Architecture” (1945). The BBC accepted these young campaigners for design reform as arbitrators of taste, and encouraged them to make a new public for their new goods.

The listener-conscious focus led speakers to show how design touched on extra-formal issues of paramount importance. The roster of speakers also included prominent public personalities — members of Parliament, social scientists, health officials, urban psychologists, anthropologists — who checked innovation in design against “external” considerations. In 1933, John Gloag, an architect-turned-critic, and Frank Pick, the celebrated director of London Transportation, discussed simplicity in function-respecting household things. In 1935, in a debate moderated by Patrick Abercrombie, critic G.M. Boumphrey weighed the merits of flats for the regener-

ation of cities against the dissenting view of Sir E.D. Simon, a Labor MP, known for modernizing housing in Manchester. These transmissions demonstrated that extra-formal objectives could be given adequate formal responses.

By taking up an issue, presenters put themselves in a situation where they had to illustrate competence as to architecture's social, historical, and recent technical developments. And they had to publicly address the reactions, especially of informed opinion, to their positions both on and off (in *The Listener*) air. The public scrutiny to which this exposed them offered a chance to show how their education had prepared them to take up social responsibilities.

Explanation and defense gave them opportunities to reinvent themselves — from being simply cogs in the machine, to being “thinkers” on social housing and town planning. This helped radio shape itself into a mechanism for transforming the conditions of patronage, creating possibilities for architects to provide not just for private clients but also for communal needs. Returning to the realm of ideas, architecture in the space of radio no longer appeared in its usual form as a means to aggrandize wealthy clients. It enframed architects both as “experts” and “caretakers” of design.

Radio serviced speaking and “less outspoken” architects alike. Publication announcements, book reviews, exhibition information from RIBA and MARS, RIBA'S Presidential Speech, historic properties on the occasion of their sales — all these events became occasions for programs. They represented architecture not just as a technical activity, but as a literate profession, and design not just as pattern-making, but as an intellectual activity.

Architects and critics used radio to create a need for themselves by identifying “needs” they could fulfill and the “problems” that had arisen when the public did not employ them. They used radio to create projects and propose design solutions, a practice first and most powerfully put into action by C.R. Ashbee. In 1929 Ashbee addressed listeners in the capacity of an “informed and trained” architect and planner, not as a mere user or city official. He posed a problem (that the English countryside was being visually destroyed); he pointed to the novelty of his reading (that until recently this decline had not been treated as an aesthetic issue); and he made a proposal (“What we reformers want to do is to check all this in the public interest”). He identified stakeholders (“local community and tourists”); and he formulated a client (“the local municipal councils”). Finally, he made a three-stage design proposal, discussed the policy change required to implement it, and left listeners with a clear sense of their role in the process.

Ashbee's talk exemplified the transformation of the wireless classroom into a studio-like environment — a place where architects and critics, not clients, defined the building program, and where peers, not an indifferent public, would judge design proposals. The new order of things put in place by the wireless classroom both complied with its properties

and transcended the limits of a studio. And this was not only because it was charged with making listeners see the stakes for them in matters that mattered to architects. It was mainly because speakers used it to expand the horizons of professional practice and extend the involvement of the members of its community with new design tasks they could create for themselves through extra-practice activities.<sup>36</sup>

#### IN CONCLUSION: TRADITION AFTER BAUDRILLARD

The BBC provided architects and those with an interest in architecture a new site with entirely different conditions for the production and communication of what architecture could be. In this space, the properties of radio combined with a number of more programmatic concerns to allow speakers essentially to practice architecture without a practice. Among these concerns were the challenge to speakers to think outside the traditional dependence of architects on private patrons, a new insistence on exploring the variety of ways design could have social impacts, and the chance for architects to present and defend their conceptual positions outside the protective shelter of the space of architecture.

The BBC did this in ways that exhibitions, professional press, photography, drawing, built structures, and other older forms of representation could not. Wireless sites were pure simulacra, which allowed a relative autonomy and authority for the producers of architecture. Since architecture represented a marginal intervention into culture compared to other fields (art, literature, music, philosophy), this was something its physical existence and the “reality” of its practice at the time did not offer.

Architects gained this relative autonomy not just by being able to act as artists, but because of the difference of their artistry from those of other producers of culture. Moreover, the analysis I have given here is a production-centered one, and it speaks only to the possibilities of radiophonic simulation for the material existence of buildings. If it also contributed to the transformation of the identity of the built environment, then it had a broader social effect.

Presenters at the 2006 IASTE conference demonstrated that Baudrillard has convinced his academic peers that hyper-tradition is a system which pretends to be representational, though, in reality, it is not. Presentation upon presentation showed how societies disregard this revelation and incorporate and accept simulacra at face value. Today both popular and academic views mull over whether the physical environ-

ment — tangible, experiential space — falls within the realm of “reality” or “representation.” But beyond this dissonance, lies an unspoken consensus that, unlike hyper-tradition, a traditional environment is what it seems to be. Tradition does not “collapse the real with the imaginary, the true with the false.” Traditional settlements belong to an early phase of history in which reality and representation knew their place.

Is it not ironic that Baudrillard has had such great impact within a contemporary intellectual world that has broken with the view of reality as something that can be pre-given? Today, following Loïc Wacquant (sociology), Roger Chartier (history), Hélène Lipstadt (architecture), Paul Rabinow (anthropology), Hubert Dreyfus (philosophy), and most prominently Pierre Bourdieu (sociology), we believe that reality is socially constituted by a dynamic struggle between competing representations (definitions). By the same token, traditional environments can themselves be interpreted as never self-evident. Physical spaces objectively exist as repositories and products of tradition only insofar as their status as *tradition* is accorded credit by the public to whom tradition’s presenters turn for validation.<sup>37</sup> Reality and “tradition” are nothing but a function of accepted representations.

What is important to realize here is that it did not become this way in an age of hyper-traditions. Nevertheless, it has taken hyper-traditions for us to clearly see that it has always been so. The question, then, is: Is the function of hyper-traditions in our history any less legitimate, any more apocalyptic, than the traditions we leave unhyphenated?

The role of “wireless sites” in the history of British architecture (a traditional mode of knowledge) illuminates this critical aspect of what we call “traditional environments.” Yet to speak to the BBC’s role in “maintaining” or “inventing” traditions — and, of course, transforming our understanding of tradition — requires that we keep the concept of hyper-tradition, but break with both the conclusions and intellectualist bias of the scholar to whom we owe its cognition.

Unlike Baudrillard, we must not interpret our scholastic relation to the objects of analysis, the distanced relation that makes our observation possible, as the basis for the practices analyzed. The methodological error here is to construe the relation of users and producers of simulations and hyper-reality as spectacle, as a set of significations for the benefit of the analyst only. Only when we observe the participation of simulation in concrete problems to be solved practically by historically constituted actors can we refine our traditional notion of tradition in the aftermath of the metaphysical-world-of-representation-turned-upside-down.

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