Showing a New World in 1942: The Gentle Modernity of Puffin Picture Books

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In Evelyn Waugh's first novel, *Decline and Fall,* published in 1928, the society hostess and dope fiend Margot Beste-Chetwynde demolishes King's Thursday, "the finest piece of domestic Tudor in England" and in its place commissions "something clean and square" from her architect Otto Friedrich Silenus, a man who had "first attracted her attention with the rejected design for a chewing-gum factory which had been reproduced in a progressive Hungarian quarterly." "The problem of architecture as I see it," Silenus told a journalist visiting the King's Thursday site to report on the progress of his surprising creation of ferro-concrete and aluminum, "is the problem of all art—the elimination of the human element from the consideration of form. The only perfect building must be the factory, because that is built to house machines not men." One of Waugh's characters then speaks enthusiastically of this caricatured husk of modernism: "'I saw some of Otto Silenus's work at Munich,' said Potts. 'I think that he's a man worth watching. He was in Moscow at one time, and in the Bauhaus at Dessau. He can't be more than twenty-five now.'"

Waugh was certainly up to date: the Bauhaus had moved from Weimar to Dessau in 1926, just two years before his book's publication. And although he exhibits an extreme species of the well-known British antipathy to modernism, he cannot be accused of the ignorance which some radical British designers attributed to their contemporaries in later generations. Their testimony is in striking contrast to Waugh's early intervention in the politics of design. Anthony Froshaug, writing of his studentship in the London County Council's Central School of Arts and Crafts between 1937 and '39, recalled "only one person—a student—who had heard of the Bauhaus."[1] This was a recurring motif: he already had written that "In 1944 ... few had heard the magic 'bauhaus' word, of transient Gropius and Moholy."[2] And Froshaug's close friend and collaborator, Norman Potter, writing almost a generation later, was equally clear that "Very few people had heard of the Bauhaus, even. (It was amazing to see thousands of them, including many teachers, boning up on what was obviously a new experience in the Royal Academy exhibition of 1968.)"[3] Perhaps that benighted generation had never read Evelyn Waugh, or even—as we shall see—noticed popular children's books of their time.

1 Froshaug's words, of April 1977, appear in his appreciation of "Jesse Collins" in *Anthony Froshaug: Documents of a Life,* Robin Kinross, ed. (London: Hyphen Press, 2000), 99–103.

2 In Froshaug's fourth review (1967) of J. Tschichold's *Asymmetric Typography,* which was first published in *Anthony Froshaug: Typography and Texts,* Robin Kinross, ed. (London: Hyphen Press, 2000), 194–5.

3 Norman Potter, *Models and Constructs* (London: Hyphen Press, 1990), 67.

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As familiar as stock British horror at the modernist canon is the enthusiasts' observation that it took a short sharp continental shock to breathe life into insular architecture and design between the wars. In the mid-1930s, Serge Chermayeff, Eric Mendelsohn, Marcel Breuer, Walter Gropius, and László Moholy-Nagy all passed through London; the last three even lived briefly in the same apartment block at Lawn Road, Hampstead. By contrast with these émigrés, British—by which usually is meant English—designers were slow, naïve, at best pragmatic, but still reflexively doffing their hats to authority, and all unnerved by the seriousness, the sheer bloody toughness, of the European moderns. Although a few stayed—including Berthold Lubetkin and Ernö Goldfinger—before long, most of them moved on to better prospects in America or hopes in Palestine.

The cost of their loss to British design may have been considerable; or it may be simply not measurable. One émigré who stayed, historian Nikolaus Pevsner, tried a measure in his 1937 report that: "When I say that 90 per cent of British industrial art is devoid of any aesthetic merit, I am not exaggerating ... the aim of any campaign for better design can only be to reduce the percentage of objectionable goods, from 90 to 80 or perhaps seventy-five per cent."[4]

So far, so conventional. In Britain, this is an often-told story. In what follows I will show, against this familiar tale, that modern design was not at all an arcane topic available only to a contemporary elite connoisseurship. I also will suggest that modernity as a social project should be distinguished from the look and feel of modernism, the style. I end with a few words on the virtue of gentleness in design.

The long-anticipated war came in September 1939. In its third full year, 1942, architecture itself became a target of the airborne attrition against the life of cities: in March, Air Marshal "Bomber" Harris's experimental fire raid on Lübeck—half of that fine Hansa city was destroyed—brought quick springtime retaliation in the so-called "Baedeker raids" on Exeter, Bath, Norwich, York, and Canterbury, small cities with historic centers of architectural merit. That bleak year ended with two lights of optimism. Churchill's "end of the beginning speech" in November summarized hope on the war front. At home, Sir William Beveridge's "Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services," proposing a universal scheme of social security and health care, was published on December 1,[5] laying the foundation for what would be called the "welfare state."

The war did not halt book publishing: despite paper rationing, imposed in March 1940, and the limits on formats imposed by their War Economy Agreement of 1942, publishers stretched to meet an unprecedented demand for stuff to read. The newcomer Penguin Books was more fortunate than most publishers in its large allocation of paper, based upon its sales of nine million books in the

4 Nikolas Pevsner, *An Inquiry into Industrial Art in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937).

5 The Beveridge report and its shorter summary version together sold 635,000 copies.

year leading up to war. So during 1942, ten new titles appeared in its recently launched series of illustrated factual books for children, Puffin Picture Books. They were envisaged for readers aged from seven to fourteen, and offered an encyclopedic range of topics—the War, natural history, human social life, science and technology, transport, and crafts.

At first glance, nothing in the appearance of these Puffin Picture Books suggested modernism in design. On the contrary, their look epitomized the handmade, the rough provisionality of brush, pen, and chalk, and what has been called "the English tradition of gentle illustration."[6]

This Puffin project did, however, have modern aims. Its founder and editor, Noel Carrington, had identified a need and so a potential market for "simply written and well illustrated books in which children could find for themselves what they wanted to know; to have them in their nursery or at bedtime, and the books so cheap that they could be easily replaced."[7] Allen Lane, Penguin's founder and boss, to whom Carrington proposed the project early in 1939, seized the chance: "If you can show me that you can produce such books in colour and which can be sold at sixpence, it's on." The outbreak of war only encouraged Lane, who reckoned that "evacuated children are going to need books more than ever."[8] The first Puffin Picture Books came out in 1940 at sixpence, the price at which Penguins had first appeared five years earlier to justify Allen Lane's hope that books would be bought "as easily and casually as a packet of cigarettes."[9]

In the plan for Puffin Picture Books can be heard an echo of Jan Tschichold's words of 1930, summarizing the aims of the new movement in typographic design which had grown up in central and northern Europe during the previous decade: "Standardization, instead of individualization. Cheap books, instead of private-press editions. Active literature, instead of passive leather bindings."[10] Color printing was expensive, so the venture depended on a very low unit cost of production. Authors received a royalty payment of just one farthing (a quarter-penny, the smallest denomination of currency) for each book sold. Puffins were priced in pennies, not guineas, and their production was driven by the imaginative use of an improving technology. At first, the author-artists worked by autolithography, drawing in reverse directly onto large zinc printing plates, one plate for each color, a tricky and laborious task of color separation and registration. Puffin authors Margaret and Alexander Potter described the task which lay behind the innocent rubric—"Drawn direct to the plate by the author"—which appeared as part of the colophon of many early Puffin Picture Books:

> The zinc plate reached the illustrator as one piece 38 by 33 [inches], a large area to stretch across: for each colour there would be a separate plate, usually blue, red, green and

6 Robin Kinross, "Emigré Graphic Designers: Their Reception and Contribution" in *Unjustified Texts: Perspectives on Typography* (London: Hyphen Press, 2002), 305.

7 Carrington had been impressed by the French *Père Castor* children's books and by a series of color lithographed educational books for children produced in the Soviet Union, shown to him by the artist Pearl Binder, a founder of the Artists International Association.

8 Allen Lane's words appear in Ian Rogerson's *Noel Carrington and His Puffin Picture Books* (exhibition catalogue) (Manchester: Manchester Polytechnic Library, 1992), xi–xii.

9 Six pence was roughly equivalent to £2.85 (U.S. $5.50) at today's prices or, according to Geoffrey Grigson in 1937, the price of a packet of ten Gold Flake.

10 Jan Tschichold, "Was ist und was will die neue Typografie?" in *Eine Stunde Druckgestaltung* (Stuttgart: Wedekind, 1930), 7 (published in English in modified form as "New Life in Print," *Commercial Art* 9:49 (July 1930): 2–20.

yellow, possibly grey for tone. Occasionally the illustrator would follow a poster-colour dummy. Also a pattern sheet from the printer would help the illustrator choose the particular tone and strength of lithographic colour most suitable for illustration. The plates, completely litho-chalked, were then returned for printing and in usual fashion attached to an offset machine.[11]

In 1946, this work was considerably eased by the innovation of transparent, grained plastic sheets, which allowed illustrators to see separation and registration, and which could be used as film positives. Later, when Lane and Carrington were more confident about both the unit costs of manufacture and likely sales, photolithography was more often used. Each book, including its covers, was made from one sheet of paper, printed color on one side, black on the other. When folded to make thirty-two pages, and imposed such that color and black-and-white spreads alternated, the landscape-oriented gathering measured the same depth as a Penguin but double its width; thus warehousing and packing bookshop orders were simplified. Each double-page opening allowed the artist a spread of eighteen inches (Figure 1). Carrington's recollection is that "print runs for each title were in the region of twenty thousand or more."[12] This seems too modest and, already in 1941, he had declared greater ambitions: "I count on the series having a big sale here and a big sale in America. By big, I mean millions, or fractions of a million, rather than thousands."[13]

Among these new Puffin Picture Books of 1942,[14] the author and illustrator of the sixteenth in the series, *Village and Town,* was Stanley Roy Badmin (1906–89), now remembered, if at all, as an

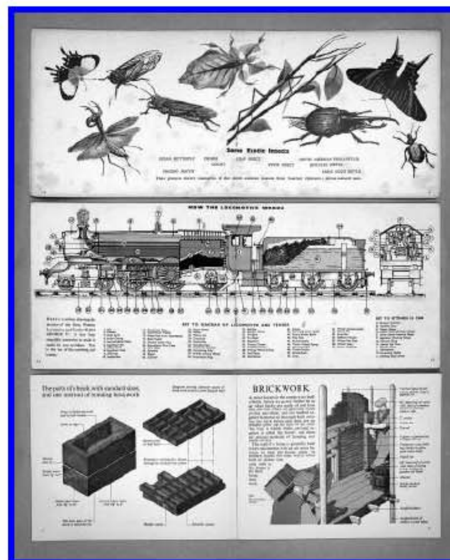


Figure 1
Openings from three Puffin Picture Books: *A Book of Insects* (no. 5, 1941); *A Book of Trains* (no. 10, 1941), and *Building a House (no. 60, 1949).*

11 Cited by Jeremy Aynsley, "Fifty Years of Penguin Design" in *Fifty Penguin Years* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1985), 111 n.

12 Cited in Rogerson, *Noel Carrington and his Puffin Picture Books*, xii.

13 In *News Review*, January 9, 1941; cited by Linda Lloyd Jones, "Fifty Years of Penguin Books" in *Fifty Penguin Years*, 40.

14 Among the first fifteen titles, starting in 1940, were: *War on Land, War at Sea, War in the Air, On the Farm, A Book of Insects, Flowers of the Field and Hedgerow, Animals of the Countryside, Great Deeds of the War, Pond and River Life, A Book of Trains, A Book of Ships, A Book of Rigmaroles or Jingle Rhymes,* and *Hamish: The Story of a Shetland Pony.* The twenty-third in the series was *USA: The Story of America.* Gordon Russell, later to be chair of the Council of Industrial Design, contributed the 50th volume, *The Story of Furniture.* Of the one hundred and twenty projected titles, a handful were never were published. The series came to an end in 1965.

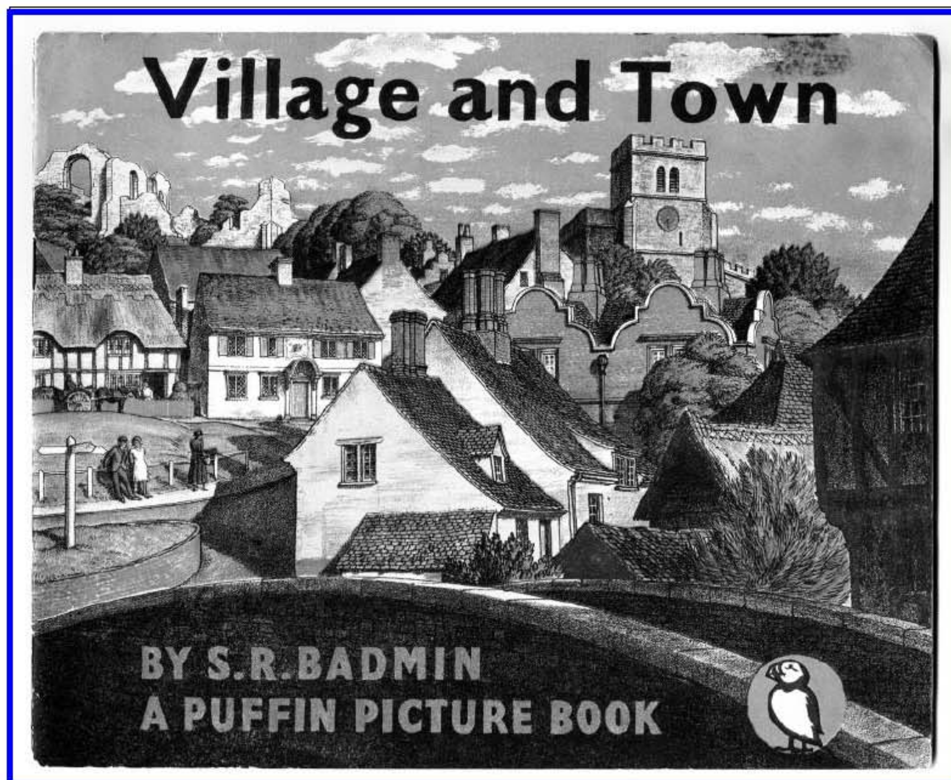


Figure 2
S. R. Badmin's *Village & Town* front cover (Puffin Picture Book No. 16, 1942).
The separations for the full-color illustration, like all the others in the book, were made by the author, by hand, in reverse, and "blind" (see p. 24–25 for explanation).

illustrator of trees, a ruralist, and visualizer of an idealized English country life and landscape.[15] The surface style of modernism was absent from the interior of Badmin's as from all Puffin Picture Books: no asymmetry, no sans-serif typefaces, no bold, no heavy rules, no red and black, and above all no photographs. Instead, handmade pictures and unreformed trade typesetting (Figure 2).

The book's content and underlying form tell a different story. Badmin's history of settlement in Britain is presented verbally and visually. Pictures are on the same page as the text, not separated as "plates." The pictures are not enclosed within rectangular boundaries. The argument is developed through topics—"The first houses," "What they built with," "The new style," and so on—assigned a page each, more or less. In this sense, the book plan is radical: design derives from the artifact rather than being led by conventional norms of serial text composition. In simple terms, topic boundaries coincide with page breaks and, in other titles in the series, with double-page spreads.[16] The plan is thus a precursor of today's popular illustrated encyclopedias. I think that this is one of Noel Carrington's innovations, and one possibly not fully appreciated even at high levels within Penguin Books. Here is Margaret Clark, working in Penguin's

15 Chris Beetles, *S. R. Badmin and the English Landscape* (London: Collins, 1985).

16 This kind of innovation still is almost completely ignored in public discussion of printed text design. The best introduction to the subject is restricted to an unpublished Ph.D. thesis: Robert Waller, "The Typographic Contribution to Language: Towards a Model of Typographic Genres and Their Underlying Structures" (University of Reading, 1987).

production department, writing to a Puffin author-illustrator, Paxton Chadwick, in April 1957: "Mr. Schmoller suggests that it would be best to get the text written first, so that you would know exactly how much space will be available for your drawings." Chadwick replied within a few days that "this is the type of subject and book where the text and drawings must be planned as one." Later that year, he reinforced the point: "This may seem a curious way of working, but I find it works better to do the text and drawings alongside each other as they are so closely inter-related."[17] Hans Schmoller, Penguin's typographer and later production director, was used to separate plates sections; he was not conversant with the design of what came to be called integrated books.

Badmin's pictures document a civilization—the growth of its built environment, its regional and local building materials, the village church, the cathedral ("magnificent feats of engineering in stone"), and the townscape of limestone country. His words tell the other side; a tale of barbarism. To be sure, his verbal text, fewer than 4,000 words, is not all social criticism. But of London's fine eighteenth-century squares in Bloomsbury and Islington: "The bad thing about these houses is the quarters for the servants. They worked in the basements and slept in the attics, and they had many stairs to run up and down." Of "The Other England," the nineteenth-century industrial towns, their legacy of squalor: "All the owners and builders thought of was how to manufacture things more cheaply and how to make more profit.... In England we still have too many of these houses and towns left. We now call them slums." Next, the swinish rich: "The men who made money in trade or manufacture did not live in these ugly cities. They built themselves houses outside.... It was the age of fancy dress building. England is full of fancy dress houses built in the last hundred years." The garden suburbs were an ineffectual response to these ills: "The trouble is they grow further and further from the centre where the offices are, so that men and women spend several hours a day travelling to and from work. Is that a good idea?"

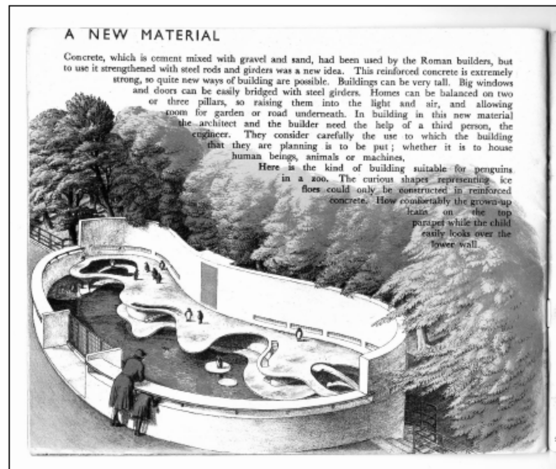
Stanley Badmin describes solutions to these social problems—new forms of building for the world after war—in his last five pages. They merit some detailed description (Figure 3).

Page 28 is given to "A new material," reinforced concrete. Because of its strength, "new ways of building are possible.... Homes can be balanced on... pillars, so raising them into the light and air. ... In building in this new material the architect and builder need the help of a third person, the engineer. They consider carefully the use to which the building they are planning is to be put."[18] Badmin illustrates the penguin pool not at Regent's Park, but at Dudley Zoo, 1937–38, both designed by the Tecton partnership, the principal of which was Berthold Lubetkin: "Here is the kind of building suit-

17 The three letters are dated, respectively, April 12, 1957; April 15, 1957; and October 19, 1957. They are given by Steve Hare in *The Life History of "Life Histories"* (Penguin Collectors' Society, 1995), 8.

18 On the penguin pool job at Regents' Park, Lubetkin had collaborated with two structural engineers who would revitalize their discipline: the Dane, Ove Arup, and Felix Samuely, a recent arrival from Berlin employed by the site contractor.

Figure 3
Village & Town "A New Material," p. 28. One of two penguin pools designed in concrete by the Tecton partnership. This one was built in 1937 for Dudley Zoo in the English Midlands. Badmin's text reads: "The curious shapes representing ice floes could only be constructed in reinforced concrete. How comfortably the grown-up leans on the top parapet, while the child easily looks over the lower wall."



A NEW MATERIAL

Concrete, which is cement mixed with gravel and sand, had been used by the Roman builders, but to use it strengthened with steel rods and girders was a new idea. This reinforced concrete is extremely strong, so quite new ways of building are possible. Buildings can be very tall. Big windows and doors can be easily bridged with steel girders. Homes can be balanced on two or three pillars, so raising them into the light and air, and allowing room for garden or road underneath. In building in this new material the architect and the builder need the help of a third person, the engineer. They consider carefully the use to which the building that they are planning is to be put; whether it is to house human beings, animals or machines.

Here is the kind of building suitable for penguins in a zoo. The curious shapes representing ice floes could only be constructed in reinforced concrete. How comfortably the grown-up leans on the top parapet while the child easily looks over the lower wall.

29

able for penguins in a zoo. The curious shapes representing ice floes could only be constructed in reinforced concrete. How comfortably the grown-up leans on the top parapet while the child easily looks over the lower wall."[19]

On the next page, "Concrete houses." Tall blocks of flats can prevent urban sprawl: "The best ones have been built to look beautiful and to be convenient to live in ... there is plenty of room for gardens and trees. The service lifts, central heating, communal restaurant, nursery, club-rooms, and sports facilities in them make daily life pleasanter and easier." (Figure 4)

Badmin pictures the city on a hill; a high-density block which probably is Highpoint 1 (London N6) of 1933–5, another Tecton-Lubetkin project. This was built for Sigmund Gestetner (head of the office equipment firm), but its apartments, on seven stories, in a double-cross plan, were never used by his employees as originally planned. Instead, it became, in the words of architectural historian Henry Russell Hitchcock, "one of the finest, if not absolutely the finest, middle-class housing projects in the world."

The new materials also could be used for rich men's houses: in front of Highpoint, Badmin places what must be "Miramonte," built 1936-7 in New Malden, Surrey, for the property developer Gerry Green. Its architect was Maxwell Fry, then in partnership with Walter Gropius until the latter left for America and a job at Harvard (Figure 5).

Badmin's closing words address "the future" and questions which will be answered by "design," "planning," and, by implication, political decisions.

> In rebuilding our houses and replanning our cities how can we use and develop our new, clean, thoughtful ways of building so that everyone will benefit? Do you know we could have much better houses than we have, if they were

19 Sir Peter Chalmers Mitchell, biologist, anarchist, and secretary of the London Zoological Society, had commissioned Lubetkin to design the London penguin pool. It opened in 1933. Two years later, after a meeting devoted mainly to finding a name for a new publishing venture, the pool was visited by Edward Young, hot from that meeting with sketchbook in hand. Chalmers Mitchell later would become an advisor to Allen Lane for the Pelican series. See Jeremy Lewis, *Penguin Special: The Life and Times of Allen Lane* (London: Penguin, 2005), 91 and 119.

CONCRETE HOUSES

Figure 4
Village & Town "Concrete Houses," p. 29. Badmin shows "Miramonte," a luxury house built in 1936-7 in Surrey for a property developer. Its architect, Maxwell Fry, was then in partnership with Walter Gropius. In the background is Highpoint 1 (London N6) of 1933-5, another Tecton-Lubetkin project.

Figure 5
Miramonte, a rich man's house in Surrey, designed by Maxwell Fry 1936–7, as shown in Lionel Brett's Houses (Penguin, 1947). Photograph of Miramonte © *The Architectural Review.*

> well designed and better use was made of standardised doors, windows, cupboards, and stoves? Do you know we could have towns which were clean and smokeless, which were easy to get about, which had plenty of playing grounds and no slums? And we could keep the country as real country for farming and holidays, instead of eating it up with bungalows. We could do all that and more if we made plans in advance, instead of muddling along as we do now, allowing people to build more or less where they fancy whether it is ugly or not. Is it possible for planning to be carried out when so many people own so many different pieces of land? Look at your own home town. Surely something better must be built next time?

Finally, on the back cover, Badmin presents another view of Highpoint 1, a simplified version of that shown earlier on page 29 (Figure 6).[20] In the right foreground, structural steelwork is being erected. In between, there is a London Underground station, here apparently given the name "St John's Wood" (Badmin had taught at the St John's Wood Art Schools) but, in fact, based on the Piccadilly Line stations built 1930–33: Acton Town, Park Royal, Sudbury Town, Southgate, and the elementally modernist Arnos Grove, all designed by Charles Holden and his collaborators (Figure 7a and b).

A bit more about Stanley Badmin. In 1936, encouraged by James Holland, he joined the Artists International Association. Around that time, meetings of the Left Book Club were held at his studio in Clapham, and fundraising for the Spanish republicans: "We got the money together for a magnificent yellow ambulance.... It was captured in one week by Franco's forces." In 1940, he participated in an AIA "Art for the People" scheme: "Everyman Prints" were printed by offset lithography, but from plates worked on directly by

20 Badmin does not identify any of the buildings which he illustrates, but his final words give a source for some of his pictures: "Some of the drawings in this book are from photographs in J. M. Richards's *Miniature History of the English House.*" He then recommends his young readers to find out more: "If you would like to read more about building here are two other good books for you—*Our Inheritance*–Architectural Press and *Living in Cities* by Ralph Tubbs, one shilling each."

Figure 6
Village & Town back cover. Badmin illustrates a simplified view of Highpoint, structural steel, and, in between, a London Underground station based on the Piccadilly Line stations built by Charles Holden in 1930–33; especially the elementally modernistic Arnos Grove.

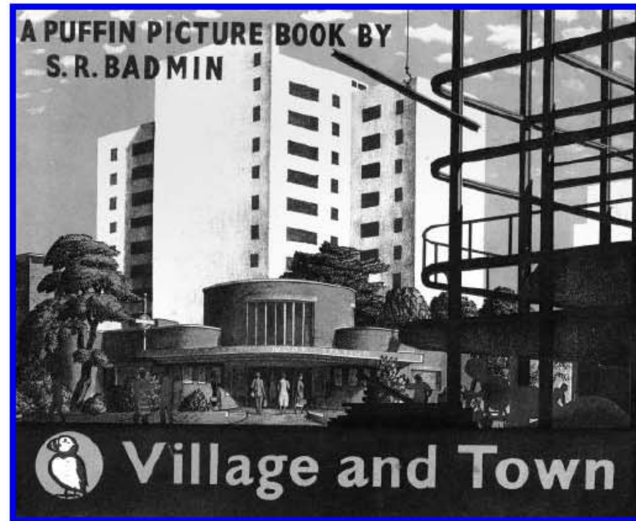
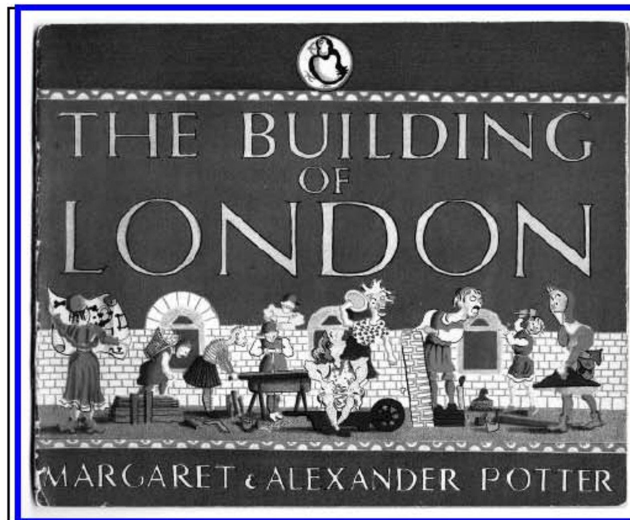


Figure 7a and b
Arnos Grove London Underground station and Highpoint, as shown in J. M. Richards's *An Introduction to Modern Architecture* (Penguin, 1940).

Figure 8
Margaret & Alexander Potter, *The Building of London* front cover (Puffin Picture Book 42, 1945).



the artists. His contributions included "Barrage Balloons on Clapham Common" and "Skating on Dulwich Park Pond"; one shilling in black-and-white, and one shilling and sixpence in two colors.[21] In 1941, while preparing his text and pictures for *Village and Town,* Badmin worked for the Ministry of Information (Misha Black had fixed this employment) on plans for traveling exhibitions. From 1942, called up by the RAF, he made operational models of the north coast of France, including huge models for the Normandy landings.

Badmin's *Village and Town,* which remained in print for at least twelve years, was followed in 1945 by another children's text of reconstruction, *The Building of London,* which came out as Puffin Picture Book 42. Like Badmin, the wife and husband team of Margaret and Alexander Potter end with a question, one then—in the year of Labour's landslide election win—being asked throughout the capital: "Shall we have the courage and patience to plan a better London which will be more convenient and healthy than the old London, and more beautiful?" (Figure 8).

The Potters already had pointed to the means—new materials and also industrial methods: "The buildings on this page are of new construction made possible with recently discovered materials. Such buildings are made up mostly of things mass produced in factories. They are designed for light, airy, smokeless cities, and for an age when war is made impossible. You can see how important it is that everything made in factories is of the right type, if thousands or millions of each type are to be used." Recent buildings in London shown in their sketches (Figure 9, top right, clockwise) include, as their example for "*Flats,*" Highpoint 1, which Badmin had shown us; and also, under "*Stations,*" Arnos Grove.

21 Among other artists to contribute to the scheme were Vanessa Bell, Helen Binyon, James Boswell, James Fitton, James Holland, Rowland Hilder, Henry Holzer, John Piper, and Carel Weight. "The proven demand for inexpensive books, picture magazines and gramophone records of high quality is the best guarantee that Everyman Prints will supply a real need in the modern home." (AIA, 1983): 56.

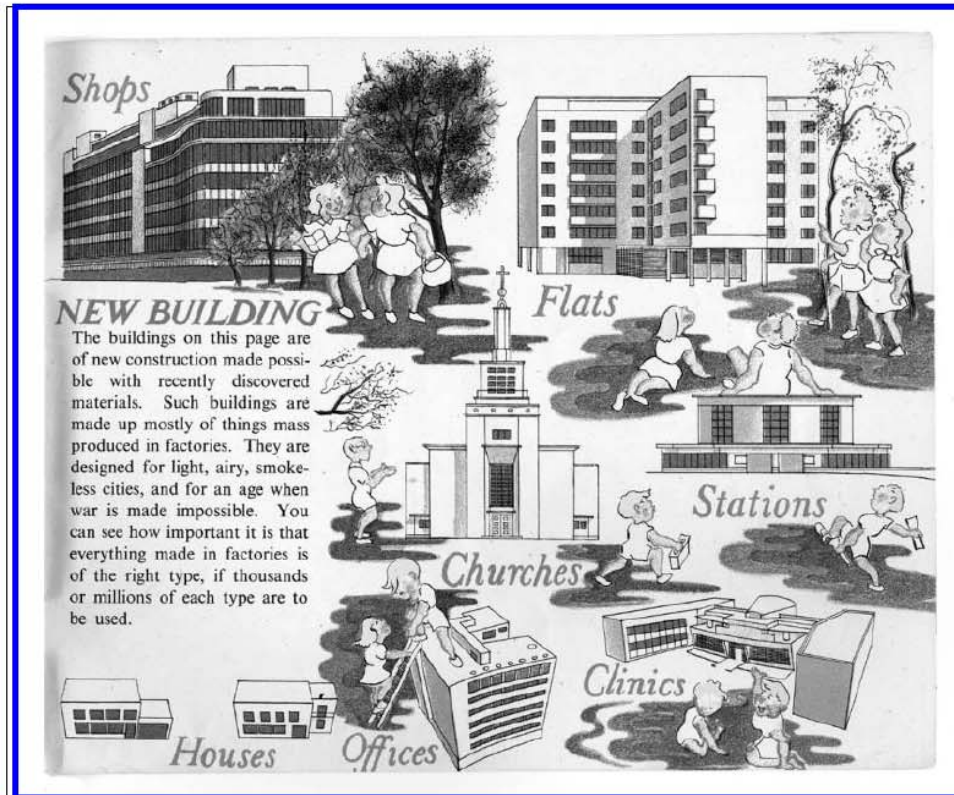


Figure 9

The Building of London p. 29, "New Building in London." From top right, reading clockwise: for "*Flats*," the Potters show Highpoint 1; and for "*Stations*," Arnos Grove. For "*Clinics*," the Finsbury Health Centre in what was one of London's poorest boroughs; a Lubetkin and Tecton project of 1938 (see Figure 10). For "*Offices*," probably Gilbey's offices and warehouse in Camden, designed in 1937 by Serge Chermayeff, with the engineer Felix Samuely. For "*Shops*," the Peter Jones department store in Sloane Square, SW1, of 1936–8, designed by William Crabtree (see Figure 11).

For "*Clinics*," here is the Health Center in Pine Street, EC1, in the then socialist borough of Finsbury, and the first local authority commission for a modernist architect: Lubetkin and Tecton, 1938, their last project in that optimistic vision of "the new architecture."

Under "*Offices*," these probably are Gilbey's offices and warehouse in Camden (Jamestown Road, NW1), designed in 1937 by Serge Chermayeff, collaborating with the consulting engineer Felix Samuely. For "*Shops*," the Potters show the Peter Jones department store in Sloane Square, SW1, of 1936–8, designed by William Crabtree, and probably inspired by Eric Mendelsohn's Schocken store in Berlin ten years earlier.

The Potters' back cover (Figure 12) shows the building of a prefabricated house which "may be a solution to some of London's problems." Winston Churchill lost the general election to Labour in June 1945 on the issue of housing above all; and Clement Atlee's administration, 1945–51, failed on that same issue. But prefabrication also would offer a solution to the urgent problem of school building, as was shown by the pioneering Hertfordshire program of 1946–50.

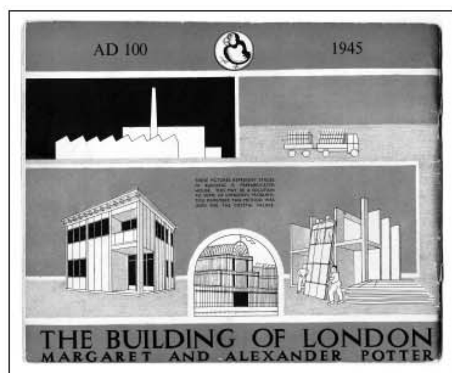
Figure 10
Finsbury Health Centre, front. Photograph © James Mosley, 2005.

Figure 11
Peter Jones department store, as shown in Ralph Tubbs's *The Englishman Builds* (Penguin, 1942).

I should clarify: this is not a call for a return to the verbal and visual styles of the 1940s. And I am not suggesting that the Puffin Picture Books series was a nursery of modernism, let alone socialism.[22] The standard of illustration of several Puffin Picture Books was not uniformly high, and some books in the series were unimpressive. The work of Stanley Badmin is one among an outstanding handful, although it might in passing be noted that his book was made without the benefit of Jan Tschichold's famous fussing.[23] The two books which I have picked out here from the series of almost 120 are part of a larger family of what one could call "reconstruction books"—for which a slogan might have been "publish for victory and beyond"—about planning, architecture, design, the education of vision, and the place of these things in a generous and encompassing view of democratic citizenship.

These books, all projecting the spirit of modernity to a near-bankrupt nation, share common and recurring themes of "learning to see." They affirmed that the civic world could be planned, designed, for the good all citizens, and that a prerequisite for this was a public educated in visual judgment. Penguin published a good handful of such books: *Living in Cities* (1942) and *The Englishman Builds* (1945), both by the architect Ralph Tubbs; *Town Planning* (1940) and *The Anatomy of the Village* (1946), both by the planner Thomas Sharp; and E. J. Carter and Ernö Goldfinger's concise version of the *County of London Plan* (1945). Penguin also published "The Things We See" series, supported by the Council of Industrial Design, which included Alan Jarvis's 1945 visual primer *Indoors and Out*,[24] Lionel Brett's *Houses*, and Christian Barman's *Public Transport* (1949). Penguin, however, was by no means the only participant in this notable moment of publishing history—at the intersection of publishing, design, planning, and politics—which certainly merits further investigation (Figure 13).

22 By the same token, Allen Lane, founder of Penguin Books, was neither a socialist nor a modernist, but a businessman who grasped the moment—an extraordinary public demand for good, cheap books—and rode his luck by hiring good people and giving them the reins. An incidental connection between Puffin Picture Books and modernism is worth exploring: the author of the tenth in the series (*A Book of Trains*), the nineteenth (*Marvellous Models and Models to Make*), and the thirty-second (*Waterways of the World*) was Wenman Bassett-Lowke, owner of a firm of engineering model-makers. In 1924, he commissioned Peter Behrens to design a house—"New Ways" in Northampton —now widely regarded as the first real example of the European modern movement in Britain (reported in *Architectural Review*, November 1926).



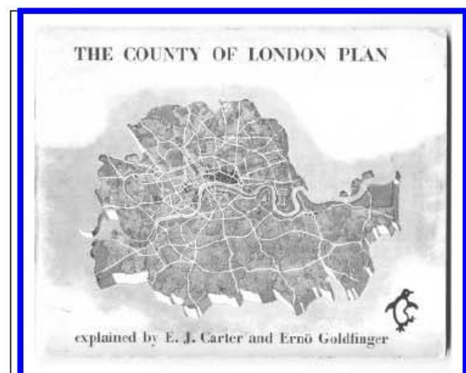


Figure 12
The Building of London back cover. The building of a prefabricated house, which "may be a solution to some of London's problems."

Figure 13
E. J. Carter & Ernö Goldfinger's *County of London Plan* (Penguin, 1945), front cover.

I now briefly return to an opening theme. My suggestion is that there is a widely held conceptual misfit between modernity as a social project—epitomized here by Puffin Picture Books—and the look and feel of graphic modernism, the surface style: san-serif type, decorative heavy rules, the clutter of geometric shapes, and so on. To elaborate, I'll offer just one example: combining pictorial images with verbal text.

It is widely held that combining typeset text with photographic images—what Laszlo Moholy-Nagy called "typo-photo"[25]—was the signal attribute of modern typography after 1925. So, for Ken Garland: "The integration of type and photo is one of the prime functions, perhaps the prime function, of the graphic designer."[26] And Robin Kinross sees this as "the enduring discovery of graphic modernism" which, in turn, "gave birth to what in the years after 1945 began to flourish as 'graphic design.'"[27] To an outside observer, this may seem an excessively modest achievement when compared with what might be taken to be the more pressing challenges of modern design practice such as: devising forms of graphic configuration appropriate to readers' probable needs, and the circumstances in which they will use the designed object; accurate, comprehensive, and usable specifications for manufacture; and effective project planning and management. However, in the literature of graphic design, it is nearly a commonplace that, while photography signifies "modern" and "contemporary," so handmade illustration stands for "old world," or "pre-modern."

The displacement of illustration by photography, of course, had begun before graphic modernism—in newspapers and the periodical press. And where the new designers had a say, it happened fastest in advertising; and then came slowly, when at all, in books. But there still always would be reasons for preferring handmade pictures. Thus, Herbert Read, writing in wartime about the "Recording Britain" scheme of 1940–3, tried—I think unconvincingly—to explain why paintings and drawings were preferable to photographs. This is his gist: "Photography can do much, but it

23 This episode in design history has been reported unconvincingly by Richard B. Doubleday in *Jan Tschichold, Designer: The Penguin Years* (New Castle, DE: Aldershot, Lund Humphries/Oak Knoll Press, 2006); the book has little of interest to say about Puffin Picture Books. In his autobiography *True to Type* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2000), 51–4, Ruari McLean recalled his time at Penguin as "production manager" for PPBs, with tight lips and a hint of sourness: adjacent to each of his few mentions of Noel Carrington are the words "wrong" and "faults." In his own various accounts, Carrington never mentioned McLean.

24 Jarvis's prefatory "Note to the Reader" makes the point: "This is not a book of words illustrated by pictures. It is a book of pictures with a verbal commentary. If the reader spends three-quarters of his time studying the pictures and one quarter reading the accompanying text, he will fulfill the author's intentions."

cannot give us the colour and atmosphere of a scene, the intangible *genius loci.*" In his next breath, he came close to echoing Badmin's and the Potters' expositions for children: "the real fight—against commercial vandalism and insensitive neglect—goes on all the time. There will be little point in saving England from the Nazis if we then deliver it over to the jerry-builders and the development corporations."[28]

In 1942, the brute economic facts of popular illustrated book production in Britain offered a simple choice: *either* black-and-white photography and photogravure printing, *or* handmade color pictures by lithography. For Puffin Picture Books, there was no contest. Photography's peerless documentation of human activity could not operate at the fine-grained levels of observation and focused selectivity required for explaining the world to children. Even if such ambition was technically feasible, there was not yet the accumulated body of design and editorial intelligence to realize it. And reaching for a moment beyond the local and temporal limits of this study, it is surely self-evident that in any well-founded approach to visual explanation, both positions—the ideologically photographic and the ineffably handdrawn—are unduly limiting. For example, it is inconceivable that popular science or statistics, geography or townscape, and engineering or architecture could be adequately illustrated without photographs *and* drawings *and* diagrams.

In Britain, these things began to be learned during the war by exhibition designers working for the Ministry of Information, as Badmin had done in 1941. And just such combinations of explanatory tools were explored after the war in books such as *Cave Painting to Comic Strip* and booklike periodicals such as *Future* and *Contact,* for which the models were as much American (*Fortune* and *Life*) as central European (the *Illustrated Presses* of Munich and Berlin). And if one thinks a few decades further back to the pioneers in modern visual explanation, the team of writers, editors, and designers gathered under the name "Isotype." What made its "Vienna method" so modern, before the war and after, was not the marvelous vocabulary of pictograms developed by Gerd Arntz, and still less the adoption of Paul Renner's dysfunctional typeface "Futura"; but its trial and error development of a mixture of prefabricated modular elements and language-like attributes: clearly-articulated rules for the combination of these elements, segmentation, and reduced iconicity—a reasoned pragmatics for communication planning. Much the same could be said of the emblematic public-sector information design project in post-war Britain, the planning by Jock Kinneir and his assistant, Margaret Calvert, of the national road signing system. Here modernity is projected not by a surface feature, the san-serif letterform,[29] but rather by the fact that what they designed was a system for designing. Kinneir's modular system of configuration for directional and other signs could be implemented by the thousand across the country, not by them—the designers—but by local traf-

25 In his contribution to "Elementare Typographie," the special issue of the printing trade periodical *Typographische Mitteilungen* (1925), edited by Jan Tschichold.

26 "Typophoto" *Typographica* 3 (NS) 1961; reprinted in *A Word in Your Eye* (Reading, UK: Department of Typography & Graphic Communication, University of Reading, 1996).

27 Robin Kinross, "The Bauhaus Again: In the Constellation of Typographic Modernism" in *Unjustified Texts: Perspectives on Typography* (London: Hyphen Press, 2002), 255.

28 Read's words on "the real fight" are cited by Gill Saunders in her "Introduction" to David Mellor, Gill Saunders, and Patrick Wright: *Recording Britain: A Pictorial Doomsday of Pre-war Britain* (Newton Abbot, UK: David & Charles, 1990), 7

29 The starting point for this is Ole Lund's article "The Public Debate on Jock Kinneir's Road Sign Alphabet," *Typography Papers* 5 (2003): 103–126.

fic authorities and sign manufacturers, simply by following their specifications. To emphasize the primacy of design process as the test for modernity in these cases does not minimize the importance of people's everyday visual experience, including the look of our urban fabric; the style and manner of those telegraphic statements which guide us from one end of the country to another.

And now, finally, a concluding note on gentleness in design. Stanley Badmin's work, like that of other Puffin artists, could be taken as one representative of "the English tradition of gentle illustration." "Gentle" seems right here, just as its slide into the sarcastic variant is wrong; for example, in Rick Poynor's dismissal of "genteel illustrations by graphic artists such as Barnett Freedman, Edward Bawden, and Lynton Lamb"[30] and, decades earlier, the art critic Richard Cork's of the "risibly genteel" film posters made in the 1940s by John Minton, James Boswell, Edward Bawden, Barnett Freedman, and others for Ealing Studios.[31] (Of the five set up here for ridicule, only Edward Bawden made book illustrations for Puffins and also film posters for Ealing Studios.) (Figure 14)

Why "wrong"? If one thinks of this field of human endeavor—designing factual books for children—less as the production of "graphics" and more as the purposeful shaping of communication, and likewise if one thinks of style less as a designer's personal thumbprint and more as an index of the publisher's view of their readers, then to be "gentle"—to be pleasant, kind, agreeable, without harshness or violence—may be thought to be a proper attribute, in mediated dialogue as in public life. It should not need arguing that gentleness is a positive virtue in books for children. And it is hardly a difficult next step to suggest that adults also might benefit from gentleness in their everyday encounters. The more interesting question then becomes: when and why—and in whose interest—did such a desirable attribute become a matter for sarcasm?

One banal answer could be that, for such critics, the priority is visual style, and that at any given time some styles are fashionable while others are not. The critics may even assume universal stylistic solutions to design problems: one style fits all. Another answer, perhaps more plausible, is that since their designing experience is limited, so they rely upon undeclared criteria, usually drawn from art criticism, which elevate marks of authorship and originality. Another is the romantic criterion that the products of art work should offer the opposite of gentleness, that they should unsettle, surprise, or shock their audiences. Such critics have not yet discovered that designers can rarely be confident about optimal solutions to the problems they face. By extension, they have not grasped the consequence, an emerging principle for decision-making in design: designers need to be sensitive to different circumstances of reading;

30 Rick Poynor, "The Spirit of Independence" in *Communicate: Independent British Graphic Design since the Sixties*, R. Poynor, ed. (London: Laurence King, 2004), 14.

31 In a review of "British and American Film Posters 1890–1976" (a Welsh Arts Council touring exhibition); *The Guardian* (September 6, 1977).

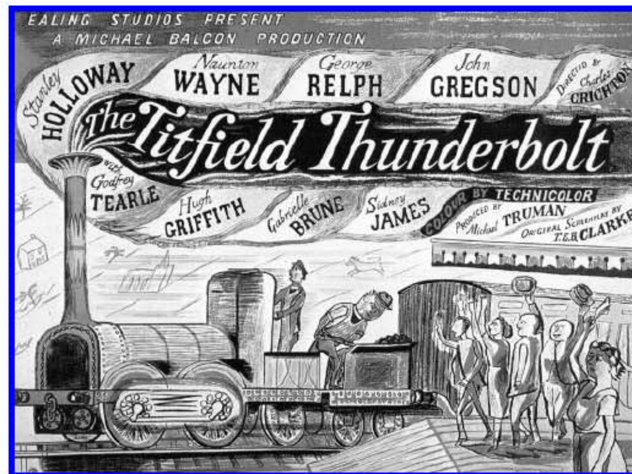


Figure 14
Edward Bawden's publicity poster for the Ealing comedy of 1953, *The Titfield Thunderbolt.* It is hard to imagine a photographic image that could better conjure up the film's whimsical, if defensive, eccentricity.
© Estate of Edward Bawden.

to readers' different aims and expectations, and to different kinds of readers. It is a fair bet that the challenge of designing factual, illustrated books for children would help them to understand these things.

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