

'Knowing how far to go too far'  
By Alan Powers

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Broadly speaking, architecture does two things. It makes physical spaces out of tangible materials, and through them it makes statements. Thomas Croft's architectural personality was formed in the early days of Postmodernism, a movement that brought statement-making back out of the shadows and gave architects permission to enjoy this aspect of their work again.

Postmodernism is nonetheless a term shunned by most practitioners since the 1990s when the mood swung against its apparent hedonism and shallowness. A different way of looking at it is to say that Postmodernism is not so much a style as a broader 'condition', which nobody can escape. A Minimalist interior by John Pawson, for whom Croft worked in the mid 1990s, is just as much part of the response to the previous generation's understanding of Modernism as a piece of contextual urbanism by Terry Farrell, with theatrical classical details and architectural jokes.

The recent Postmodernism show at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London has been the first real test of our contemporary capacity to empathise with the spiritual necessities of 1981. That was the year in which Croft completed his RIBA Part 1 at the Bartlett School, still predominantly representative of 'old Modern', and began a rather different post-graduate training at the RCA. This, therefore, seems a good moment to view his body of work through the lens of a style label that is now receiving its own rehabilitation.

There are three themes in Croft's work that relate to the revaluation of Postmodernism, and represent values that have never actually gone away in the intervening years, and which have interwoven with apparently opposite trends such as Minimalism.

The first is his skill in working within or next to existing structures, often buildings of historic significance that his clients want to modify for contemporary living and use. The second is his pattern of making what could be called convivial spaces, whether in houses or buildings where people come together for a common purpose. The third is his command of craftsmanship and materials.

Croft's tutors at the Royal College of Art, James Gowan and John Miller, are architects who have worked creatively with ideas from history and responded to a sense of place. Gowan has become famous as an architect who called for 'a style for the job' in the 1950s when he was working with James Stirling, rather than a standardised solution. By the 1960s, modern architecture had lived long enough to have its own history, and this was added to the toy box of earlier exemplars, with the result that the sense of absolute division between Modernism and the past was reduced to a negotiable distance. Gowan has written with insight about applying the idea of the castle in his own work.

An architect in Croft's position – historically aware, with private clients – might easily have been absorbed into the classical revival of the 1980s, but he has chosen a more interesting way in which his own work, for example at the Royal Yacht Squadron, gets the essence of a 'period' building appropriate to the site without overdoing the details. His own barn renovation in Kent is a model of two dissimilar ways of building interlaced, dancing without treading on each others' toes. These schemes work well largely because the architect has given priority to the needs of the building's users while respecting the buildings and their surroundings.

The substantial remodelling of the C&PP House shows how an imperfect building can keep its character while being gently straightened out and internally re-planned, creating a new unity of house and garden that looks more 'meant' than what was there before, partly because there is an underlying geometrical grid.

Behind an intuitive response to historic buildings there is a more specialised form of analytical thinking. 'Typology', the process of boiling down the essence of a particular use and plan form, such as 'barn', 'house' or 'party room', helped architects of the Postmodern period regroup themselves in a reality more universal and far-sighted than a circulation diagram or an area calculation, as some of the less imaginative Modernists had come to do. This thinking is evident in Croft's student projects.

Part of Croft's secret of success is his ability to make these typologies come to life. The Royal Yacht Squadron's old HQ in Cowes Castle is a charming historic building but very small. Croft's new Pavilion building, disguised as a marquee on the lawn, keeps sufficient distance to allow it a different sense of scale, and it has been subtly worked into the narrow site without any sense of over-compression.

At the S&YP Contemporary Art Collection, by contrast, ingenious ways have been found to recreate the character of a domestic interior of palatial scale and make sense of it in contemporary terms while playing to its strengths.

The quality of space and light is a vital ingredient of convivial spaces which seem to occur in every Croft project, whether institutional or domestic. As Norman Foster showed at the Willis Faber building in Ipswich in the 1970s, indeterminate social space is more useful than compartmented 'functional' space. The same insight can inform houses, where vistas through generous openings in the C&PP House and 'room within a room' cupboards and closets in the S&YP Contemporary Art Collection create a stimulating background for social interaction.

The use of materials and craftsmanship is a more down-to-earth quality, and one that few architects would neglect if their clients could afford to pay for the best. However, the skill of designing for elegant living does not simply come from money. At the Barn, old timbers are set off against smooth white surfaces. In the C&PP House, classicism emanates from the spirit of the original house to inform the new chimney pieces and stone floors.

At the S&YP Contemporary Art Collection, however, amid memories of Victorian exuberance, the spirit of the place is baroque, and the 'style for the job' has turned out to be a renaissance of the last truly original luxury style, French Art Deco from the 1920s, as practised by designers such as Jean Michel Frank, with beautifully figured surfaces, multiplying reflections and a general sense that one is in a mysterious episode from a film by Jean Cocteau.

As the great poet-cinéaste – himself surely a major precursor of Postmodernism's pleasing paradoxes – once said, 'tact is knowing how far to go too far.'

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