

Picaresque picturesque

Dudley Zoo by Tecton and Berthold Lubetkin

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Walking around Dudley zoo on a fresh spring morning; I was contemplating pleasing decay.

In 1825 Thomas Atkins and George Wombwell, *Wild Beast Merchants*, were both exhibiting their menagerie collections in London at Bartholomew fair. Wombwell had to travel from Newcastle, where he had been exhibiting prior to the fair. It took ten days of gruelling travel, which resulted in the unhappy event of Wombwell's prize exhibit, his elephant, dying of exhaustion on arrival. Atkins responded to this by advertising *the only living Elephant at the fair*. Wombwell countered – *the only dead Elephant at the fair!*, exhibited the dead monster, and did much better business than Atkins. The lifeless creature appeared to be a greater attraction than the living one. Decay is attractive (or even cathartic).

Pleasing decay is a part of the vocabulary of English romantic painting *Those people who have no eye for it say that it indicates a decay of the mind to dwell on it; those who have an eye for it say that a weathered building can symbolize the whole of man's relation to nature* (Piper 1947: 85). Those who can see it and celebrate it are romantic. Piper believed that a big factor of the picturesque movement was an *expression of the Romantic fuss* about pleasing decay (Piper 1947: 85-87). He sought, however, to draw a firm distinction between a ruin and pleasant decay. Not all decay can be pleasing. A description opposite to *pleasing* is *ridiculous*, which the Duchess of Marlborough used to describe John Vanburgh's (1664 – 1726) famous proposal to retain the old ruined manor as a feature in the landscape of the new Blenheim Palace.

Although the better-known Tecton pavilions are to be found in London and Whipsnade; Dudley Zoo is the most comprehensive scheme, and on this spring morning, both pleasing and ridiculous. It was open in the summer 1937. It seems to be a picturesque place in many respects. It is presently crumbling. The picturesque can also be found in landscape, architecture and accompanying narratives. *The problem set to the*

designers was of course as much one of circulation and town planning as one of building itself (The Architectural Review 1937: 178). The entire complex of thirteen buildings (originally) – modernist enclosures designed by Berthold Lubetkin - are scattered around mediaeval ruins on the top of a hill. The castle is of the 11th to the 15th centuries; and built around a central courtyard. The site for the zoological garden is the surrounding grounds, of about 30 acres. It slopes steeply down from the castle in all directions, forming terraces of different levels, which correspond to the successive orbital lines of defence of the mediaeval fortress.

It was important for Lubetkin to avoid the arrangement of a simple naïve succession of individual buildings. Each pavilion, built into the steep incline, is provided for with paths, roads and stairs at different levels. This forms what was contemporaneously called the *vertical circulation in the gardens* (The Architectural Review 1937: 180). It creates a circular *promenade architecturale* – a formalized route through changing spaces, that was Le Corbusier's concept derived from 19th century Romantic provenance. The sequence consists of the several experiences of arrival, entry, and subsequent animal exhibits. It is a controlled ceremony. The composition of the contrast between man made – the artificial, and the natural is to be beautiful, sublime; and it shows the possibilities that exists in and between these two rationally idealized states.

The picturesque and modernism have a lot in common. The both use painting as an explanation: either Claude Lorrain (c. 1600 –1682) or Amédée Ozenfant (1886 – 1966); they exploit the representations of purely abstract characteristics and the association of concepts which can be attached to them. They have a propensity to rationalism. Lubetkin *was a rationalist through and through* (Kehoe 2001: 40) and the Dudley follies were seen at the time as functional and rational.

The picturesque and modernism are full of contradictions and offer justification for a harmony between opposed ideas. Uvedale Price (1747 – 1829), defined picturesque as the concept between beautiful and sublime, Payne Knight (1750 –1824) recognized a dialectic between visual abstractions and association of ideas, and Pevsner (1902 – 1983)



**The Zoo is presently crumbling
Bear Ravine, current state**

identified its Englishness and the rationalist streak behind the will of wanting nature to become more natural.

Decay is natural. John Ruskin (1819–1900), praised pleasing decay, John Sell Cotman (1782–1842) was recording it and William Morris (1834–1896) was lamenting its disappearance and fighting for its conservation (Piper 1947: 85). They did not foresee, however, the effect of the age of modernist buildings and new technologies. At the opening of Dudley Zoo, the smooth forms impressed the public, with their innovative shapes and elegant finish. Now they are in a disastrous state of neglect after a number of abortive refurbishments.

Picturesque was seen as an expression of freedom. It is paradoxical that the gardens are a place of captivity. A single monkey in a desert-like enclosure with a grey, dirty, but elegantly shaped reinforced concrete screen wall backdrop, looked miserable. A single tiger did not want to jump between cantilevered slabs, as the architects imagined, and a single bear occupied in its own solitude, in the corner of the pit, was trying to desperately escape the gaze of the visitors. The difference between a zoo and a menagerie here is purely one of intent. The menageries were built with the attitude of displaying animals so that they could be admired by the viewers; they were more for the expediency of the spectators than of their inhabitants.

Walking around the zoo feels surreal, when grotesque reality is contemplated in the context of the sophistication, of the contradictory concepts at play, and their importance in history of British architecture. The Bear Ravine is empty. It is falling apart, exposing the structural reinforcements for the concrete on the bears' strolling terraces. The enclosures for tigers, lions and bears are now securely wrapped with high voltage electric wires. The middle Polar Bear Pit, with its concrete representation of an ice berg, is unused and hidden behind a plywood fence (upon which there is a painting of ugly tigers).

The parents with toddlers visiting the zoo, did not seem to especially mind the ugly tigers, stylistic inconsistencies or conspicuous design. The fact that the font on the buildings did not match the intended style; or that the restaurant has been painted differently the author's intentions; or that the edges of the forms are not sharp any more, and the peeling paint and



**Polar Bear Pit, mediaeval castle in the background
Since the helix promenades are closed for health and safety reasons this is the only level from which the empty enclosure can be viewed**

concrete cracks, did not unduly distract them. The Elephant enclosure is now covered with wooden planks making the blank façade more agreeable to the viewer.

Some of the visitors I saw were disappointed that the Dinosaur Dig was closed and they could not play in the sand. The roof was leaking. This sophisticated structure has a form of an inverted cone and is structurally separate from the outer walls, being connected only by double-glazed roof lights which bridge two parts of the building. The Dinosaur Dig was originally the aviary. It reminds one of Palladian pavilions. It sits on a steep hill. The cantilevered circular terrace would once have provided exciting views of animals underneath, and the urban landscapes in a distance, now it is closed for health and safety reasons.

The clients/commissioners: Earl of Dudley, a local meat producer and jam manufacturer from Oxford; wanted to exploit the ancestral castle hill in the first instance, and develop a commercial leisure attraction in an area short of open-air recreational facilities. The overriding priority was to open the complex for the 1937 summer season. It seems to be purely commercial venture. They decided to allow only 18 months to commission, design and construct the entire complex.

An interesting aspect of the works is the approval from the Office of Works (Ancient Monuments Department), which was concerned to preserve the integrity and setting of the Castle, a scheduled Ancient Monument. It took some persuading from the client that the ruins and zoo buildings would achieve a harmonious relationship with the existing ruins. The concept of harmony between the two styles is entertaining; both pleasing and ridiculous.

As a result of the negotiations, the buildings located near the castle: the Restaurant, Café No. 2, the Elephant House and the Sea Lion Pond, are low and inconspicuous. The Restaurant was faced in grey limestone to match the ruin, now painted baby blue. The Elephant House roof is flush with the above walking terrace and not visible from the castle at all.

The architect designed the zoo based upon three further fully rational priorities: the habits, hygiene and convenience of the animals, a strict economy and the requirements of display. Wild animals in their natural



Dinosaur Dig from outside and inside

surroundings are notoriously difficult to see. No effort has been made to imitate the natural surroundings of the animals. The enclosures have been designed in order to give the best possible view of the animals to the largest amount of people, *to get as many goods as possible into the shop window* (Allan 1992: 220). Natural features of the habitats have been translated into flamboyantly shaped slabs for lions and tigers to jump from and diving ramps for sea lions and polar bears.

All the enclosures were designed with hygiene in mind, so as to be easily cleaned they are covered with resilient cork composition floors. They were *giving the animals what they require* (ref. London Zoo, The Times 1934) and special care was taken in order to *prevent the passage of breath-carried germs to the animals* (ref. London Zoo, The Times 1936). The Penguins Enclosure consisted of [h]ygienic artificial slabs, ramps, steps and floating island are provided, the slabs being rubber covered to protect the penguins feet from soreness (AR 1937: 180). after the penguins moved out, the enclosure was used as a rubbish dump and demolished in 1979¹.

Tecton used the natural features of the site. The sun light, the transport of the materials to most parts of the site, and avoiding complex and expensive drainage system, were taken under consideration. Every enclosure was built out of reinforced concrete. All the advantages of this immensely popular modernist method in economical terms have been fully exploited. There are large spans, free curved forms and cantilevers and standardized details. The innovative technology helped to overcome difficulties with topography, including unknown ground conditions. Dudley Zoo is but a fragment of a great vision, a sample of Utopia.

Lubetkin in his lecture at the Architectural Association recalled Voltaire's saying that people who believe absurdities sooner or later condone cruelties (unpublished text, 1964, in Allan 1992: 561-563)

¹ Also the London penguins were moved to the more naturally looking enclosure. In the concrete desert they probably found courting and mating difficult. They normally make their nest by smoothing out a crater in the ground and filling it with rocks, feathers, and bones. Stone, or pebble, stealing is a favorite pastime of Adelines penguins (and they will often take stones from their neighbors' nests when they are not looking).

This resonates with rather sad conclusion by his daughter, Louise Kehoe. The zoo buildings are the only architectural pieces she recalls in Lubetkin's biography:

'Early zoo works remained unquestionably his personal favourites, for in them he was able to bring together many of the principles he held the most dear. His animal houses were designed unapologetically as theatres, circuses; they made no attempt to simulate the natural habitat of their intended occupants. Instead, by juxtaposing the cool, mathematical precision of pure geometric shapes – cylinders, spirals, ellipses, cast in thin sections of white reinforced concrete – with the lumbering gait and awkward, unrefined behaviour of the captive tenants, he made clowns and performers of them in spite of themselves. The animals became living monuments to rationalism, imprisoned not so much by bars or cages, but by their intellectual inferiority to humankind, whose kind hand had wrought the seamless, soaring concrete canopies that sheltered them. (Kehoe 2001: 41)

Geometry was a way in which Lubetkin was taking part in the contemporary Rationalism debate concerning an 'order', 'control' and a 'universal meaning'. Style derived from the Purist Movement that Lubetkin encountered in Paris and his personal connections with Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, Naum Gabo, Fernand Léger, Georges Braque, Ozenfant and Le Corbusier. Geometry was a system of artistic self-discipline and a symbol of human intelligence (Allen 1992: 142). It was not only about the shape but social context within which its idea occurred. Lubetkin explained:

Geometry – the bare eloquence of geometric regularities affirms man's ability to explain, predict and eventually control his surroundings. Geometry is not only seen, but validated, tested and proved as imposing unity upon complexity, disclosing order in what appears as mental wilderness. The sharp-edged regularities of crisp geometric formations have universal meaning independent of whims or moods, and, finding mathematical equivalents for all their relations, and rendered legible in the

light of reason. Geometry both states the case and proves it.

(Lubetkin, unpublished notebooks, c.1963, in Allan 1992: 142)

Lubetkin had a striking attraction to circular plans. It is practically and symbolically the most autonomous of building forms. In Dudley there are five circular and elliptical buildings. He developed a unique composition – diametry – symmetry across the diagonal axis. He did not see classicism as a style, but as an internal discipline of focusing on priorities and keeping subjectivism under control. He believed, as Albert Camus wrote, that because classicism was not a characteristic of our society, it was the most rebellious way of looking at it (Lubetkin in conversation with the author, November 1979, in Allan 1992: 144) it is a beautiful justification. Kehoe, on contrary, stated that Lubetkin was *an unregenerate intellectual snob, and intellectual snobbery in nothing more than plain old class snobbery masquerading as aestheticism and wearing a learned frown.* (Kehoe 2001: 68) a diet of blank walls, undecorated surfaces and functional shapes (Hancocks 1971: 126) was validated by a romantic belief in progress, *betterment* and Marxism.

Similarly to Piper who believed that the appreciation of pleasing decay is not only a sophisticated pleasure, but a matter of public importance (Piper 1947: 86), Lubetkin had no doubts about the importance of translating his agenda of building follies for animals into a social manifesto. He understood the irony. He used to joke, he had come to England to build homes for heroes, but had found himself designing pool for penguins (Allan 2008) and believed that behavioural problems, human or animal, can often find their own answers in good architecture. In Dudley Zoo the social dimension of this rather marginal form of architecture was fully realized^{II}

In 1947 Pevsner, who rediscovered and popularized the writing of Price and Knight, gave a lecture on the *Picturesque in Architecture* (RIBA

^{II} It was Lubetkin's reaction on apocalyptic image of environmental and social despair after the Industrial Revolution he saw in 1920s during his visit to the Black Country. (Allen 219)

Journal 1947). He included such a variety of buildings that John Summerson, in a personal response, proposed the word *picturesque* could be omitted. Picturesque architecture is simply architecture. The Zoo is picturesque; it is romantic mixture of the classical, the modern, the Palladian, the baroque, the constructivist and the rationalist. It contains all these varieties of concepts. With conspicuous precision the follies are classical in Heinrich Wölfflin's terms: their forms are linear, plane, closed, multiple and clear, which seems to be in parallel to Carroll L. V. Meeks term defining term *modern* characterised by: planarity, transparency, interpenetration and simplicity. The garden is a baroque: painterly, open, unclear unity as per Wölfflin, and eclectic: contains variety, movement, irregularity, intricacy and roughness. The beholder must make an effort to decipher the relationships; his interest could be increased by the temporary perplexity (Meeks 1957: 6). Zoo contains piquant, irritating, anachronisms and surprising 'curiosities' and 'novelties' as per Price's definition (Price 1796, in Meeks 1957). It is a formal representation of Tecton's social agenda as well as Ruskin's moral quality of memory, parasitical sublimity as well as intricacy. All the architecture is picturesque architecture. It sounds absurd, but it is all logical, it has a rationality.

Aesthetic experience is not a rational decision, but a matter of basic human instinct that evolved naturally. Edmund Burke in his 1756 *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* said the soft gentle curves appealed, he thought, to the male sexual desire, while the sublime horrors appealed to our desires for self-preservation. Dudley Zoo in the original state - and in its current state - suits all the various definitions of the picturesque; and remains a place of leisure and intellectual stimulation. Aesthetics is not purely a matter of beauty, the sublime or the picturesque as such, but the concept of the picturesque is a romantic way of justifying human preferences.

In 1993 two artists, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, conducted a curious project. They hired a professional polling organization to conduct a broad survey of art preferences of people living in ten countries around the world. In result they discovered that blue was the favourite colour worldwide, with green in second place. Respondents expressed a

preference for realistic representative paintings. Favoured elements included water, trees and other plants, human beings with a preference for women and children, and also for historical figures and animals, especially large mammals, both wild and domestic. Using the statistical preferences as a guide, Komar and Melamid produced a favourite painting for each country, each with 44% blue sky surface. Denis Dutton uses the above example to support an argument that the Savanna Principle can be used to explain of our aesthetic preferences for habitat. He points out cross-cultural uniformity of landscape calendar art which expresses a Pleistocene taste in outdoor scenes.

The Savanna Principle is a theory about the evolutionary roots of the human brain's habitat selection preferences, it asserts that the Pleistocene environment shaped the human brain; and that the way it works today has not changed much since then. We like savannas. We like the picturesque. we like landscapes with water; a diversity of open and wooded space (indicating places to hide and places for game to hide); trees which fork close to the ground (give escape possibilities) with fruiting potential a metre or two from the ground; vistas including a path or river that bends out of view but invites exploration; and the direct presence or implication of game animals. The savannah environment is simply food-rich environment which would be highly desirable for a hunter-gatherer.

Walking in circles around Dudley Zoo on a sunny morning in spring is a pleasure. Watching animals trying to display in spite of the human gaze and small enclosures is entertaining. Knowing and understanding the history of the place and the people involved in its creation, is exciting. But some of the facts are uneasy to reconcile. As all the buildings have been placed under a preservation order, the zoo has to retain the exhibits in a condition that in no way is suited to house animals. The boldness and imagination of the design never went beyond the consideration of architectural style. The elegant enclosures remain what they are – primitive pits, pools and cages. In reality they are expensive to maintain sculptures. Now many of the animals are not kept in the original places. It has been acknowledged that the enclosures are not sufficient. (If the animals cannot be subjected to the pure modernism, can people be?)

Dudley zoo was built in one campaign. It is modern and homogenous. It makes an impression of a finished project. It does not easily accept adjustments. As early as the 1937, the AR reviewer noticed that *it is to be regretted that the erection of various other structures and the addition of ornaments and fittings, of a character quite out of keeping with the buildings designed by the architects, tend to temper one's appreciation of the whole as a bravely carried out enterprise.* (1937: 180). If they were to be amended (some were) some will find it unacceptable due to stylistic inconsistencies (I did).

Throughout history man has tried to develop his environment to his own satisfaction, and thus to enhance the beauty of his possessions. Wild beasts were rare treasures to have, and it was in the end of 19th century when the fantasy zoological trend swept across Europe, after which ever large town had some sort of zoological collection. But do we still need them? The Dudley Zoo buildings have the status of icons, but economical reality does not sustain them. They are too far from London to be appreciated, and they are falling into disrepair.

Ultimately, a visit to Dudley Zoo becomes not so much a matter of contemplating picturesque decay, which might *indicate a decay of one's mind, symbolize the whole of man's relation to nature* or draw other multiple narratives, but a reflection on the moral issues concerned with sustainability and ethics, rationality, status of truth, beliefs, passions and displays of the species *Homo sapiens*.

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Illustrations

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