

What is the history of construction?

by John Summerson

I take it that the purpose of a Construction History Group would be to encourage the study of the history of construction. What precisely does this mean? It can mean two things: (a) the history of structural design and (b) the history of building practice. The Group would, no doubt, interest itself in both but I think it worthwhile to emphasise certain differences.

The *history of structural design* tends to resolve itself into the study of consecutive innovations and their impact on practice. You can study, for instance, the emergence of rational carpentry design in the seventeenth century, the entry of iron construction in the eighteenth or the adoption of reinforced concrete at the end of the nineteenth. These are episodes involving theoretical development which found their way into building from outside. They are usually concerned with one material.

The *history of building practice* is another thing. It involves the total process of getting a building up on the site, including everything from the recruitment of labour, selection of materials, transport of materials and equipment on the site, down to the supply of drawing materials for the office, the method of payment to builder and architect and so on and so on. It is the history of a complicated process always in a state of change which it is the historian's business to investigate and expound.

My thinking on this subject developed when I was trying to write a book on Victorian London as a sequel to my *Georgian London*. The book did not get written; it was too difficult. But bits of it broke off and got published. One bit was a paper called *The London Building World of the 1860s*, delivered as the 1973 Walter Neurath Lecture, and published by Thames and Hudson. I followed this with a paper *Charting the Victorian Building World* delivered to the Victorian Society at the South Bank Polytechnic in 1976 but not published.

These exercises I found very illuminating. They revealed to me a whole landscape of history which, so far as I could ascertain, had never been studied – what I called the 'building world'.

The nature of this 'building world' you can roughly guess, but to bring it into focus I shall refer to an editorial in the first volume of the *Builder*, published in 1842. The editor, Joseph Hansom, is discussing the circulation of his magazine and he lists all the people who, he believes, ought to be interested and who form what he calls the 'building class'. He lists no fewer than 102 types of reader.

I made an analysis of this list. A large number of the types fell into the following groups. Suppliers of builders' plant; of building materials; of building components; suppliers and installers of equipment and services; of drawing-office materials; artist-craftsmen. A whole lot of types escaped these headings: people associated with transport (railways, canals, carriers); estate-agents, book-sellers, mechanics' institutes; insurance companies; schools of design; loan societies; and patent agencies. It remains only to add architects, surveyors and building contractors.

What impressed me about the editor's list was the tremendous ramification of the 'building world' and its unique relationship to society. This ramification is one of the things which gives building history its fascination and perhaps its contemporary value. That is why I am inclined to recommend that, in the inauguration of a building history group, the sights should be set to survey the 'building world' and not merely to intensify the study of isolated areas of change.

You will note that I have avoided the term 'building industry'. I do not really know what the 'building industry' is, or when the expression first came into fashion. No doubt it signified a radical change of some kind and that is exactly the sort of question which

needs answering.

I have the impression that the younger generation of architectural historians is instinctively moving towards studies of this kind. For the past thirty-five years 'history of architecture' has meant history of style, patronage and theory. We now have a pretty fair command of these subjects. There is a tendency now to look more deeply into the social, economic and industrial hinterland. There is a tendency to look at what one may call the 'gross national product' of building instead of the sophisticated peaks where the play of style and patronage is the rewarding theme.

What sort of results may we anticipate from the encouragement of studies of this kind? If we glance at Hansom's list we can at once identify themes which could make excellent subjects for academic dissertations and, in many cases, attractive published works. Here is a whole new field for academic enquiry. Meanwhile, there is the task of ascertaining the extent and location of material and, where necessary, securing its protection and availability.

Sir John Soane's Museum