‘The core’

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'The Indescribable Core': the 'Centre-Idea' in Twentieth-Century British Architecture and Planning

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117x56mm (72 x 72 DPI)
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788x1065mm (72 x 72 DPI)
Structure—R.C. cantilevering slab and post construction. Floor to ceiling heights constant at 8 ft. 9 in. with a view to the later use of flexible panelling.

Screening—Externally, a glass skin. Internally, breeze block walls which can be readily built and dismantled and panels of plywood, metal and glass.

Roof—over the swimming pool, glass supported on light RSJs at 45 deg. pitch.

Ceiling finishes—1 in. cork tiles used as permanent shuttering and for insulation and noise reduction.

Floor finishes—Cork tiles on unscreed concrete except in the gymnasium and theatre floors where a rubber tubing sub-floor was used.

Service layout—Water and electricity conduits running up through the three floors in the interior supporting columns, making it easy to tap these sources of supply at will as the use of the different spaces change.

Heating—A thermal storage system using electricity at off-peak periods used for heating the swimming bath as well as the rest of the building. (In practice this has been found uneconomical as all parts of the building are not in equal use throughout the day. A system based on a series of local sources of heat, quickly raised, would have been better suited to this type of organisation.)

Air conditioning—Extract fans in the swimming bath roof to draw the vapour-laden air from the swimming pool, maintaining a healthy atmosphere for strenuous activity. In addition, this prevents condensation on the glass surround which would otherwise obscure vision.

Colour—Deliberately neutral to provide a quiet background (rather than a stimulus) to human activity.

Fig 4: Section of the Pioneer Health Centre (Plan no 7, 1950, 24)

588x766mm (72 x 72 DPI)

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‘The Indescribable Core’: the ‘Centre-Idea’ in Twentieth-Century British Architecture and Planning
In 1951, reflecting on the recent meeting of CIAM (the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne), which had taken place in the Hertfordshire town of Hoddesdon, Sigfried Giedion wrote that ‘no-one at the eight congresses of CIAM was listened to with greater attention than Dr George Scott Williamson.’\(^1\) Similarly, H.T. Cadbury-Brown, one of the British delegates, made a particular note of Williamson’s speech in his account of the event. He reported how the doctor’s experience during the 1920s and 1930s in co-creating the Pioneer Health Centre in the inner London area of Peckham ‘related directly’ to the subject of that year’s congress, ‘the indescribable core.’\(^2\) In essence, the Pioneer Health Centre offered a model for post-war planning.

Entitled ‘The Individual and the Community’, the printed version of Williamson’s talk was included in the handsomely-produced post-Congress publication, The Heart of the City, alongside papers which consolidated the re-thinking of CIAM’s purpose and aims as it resumed its activities from 1947.\(^3\) This process had begun in wartime, primarily in the UK and the USA, and sought to augment the fundamentals of architecture, as embodied in the 1933 Athens Charter, through greater consideration of the formal and affective language of architecture, what Giedion called in 1944, ‘the reconquest of monumental expression.’\(^4\) Such shifts culminated in the re-statement of CIAM’s aims at the first post-war congress, held at Bridgwater, Somerset, in September 1947, as ‘to work for the creation of a physical environment that will satisfy man’s [sic] emotional and material needs and stimulate his spiritual growth.’\(^5\) The concerns summarised in this proclamation were worked into a more solid body of theory in CIAM’s subsequent meetings at Bergamo (1949) and Hoddesdon, and can be said to have underpinned both CIAM activity, and the praxis of modernism more generally, in the post-war era.

Given this, Giedion’s singling out of the unprecedented level of attention paid to Williamson’s speech is worthy of more thoroughgoing scrutiny than it has hitherto received. The doctor’s articulation of the relationship between the individual and the community in a modern urban context – what he described as ‘the power of the architect to fix the conditions in which life and living has to take place’ – spoke directly to an audience whose calling was to design for reconstruction and to re-define the city in human terms, both spatially and socially.\(^6\) Furthermore, it was the particular conceptual synthesis made at Peckham between bodies in space and the space itself that resonated so strongly with this gathering of modernist architects and planners [Figure One]. This symbiosis was embodied in the use of the term ‘Centre’ and had as its concomitant the understanding that such Centres were active environments that enabled or facilitated life in a modern, democratic state; it also embodied a specific vision of its citizenry. As Cadbury-Brown suggested, the Pioneer Health Centre provided a concrete example of what the urban ‘core’ (or, in CIAM’s term, the ‘heart’) of the city might be and what it might effect.

\(^1\) Giedion, ‘Humanisation of Urban Life’, 128.
\(^2\) Cadbury Brown, ‘CIAM 8, Report’, 68.
\(^3\) Williamson, ‘The Individual and the Community’, 30-35.
\(^4\) Giedion, ‘New Monumentality’, 27.
\(^5\) Giedion (ed.), Decade of New Architecture, 6.
The Pioneer Health Centre was home to what became known as the Peckham Experiment, and was led by the doctors Innes Pearse and George Scott Williamson. It ran (with some interruptions) from 1926 to 1950. Located deliberately in a run-down inner-urban part of London, the project sought to develop a prototypical environment - the Centre - which combined health and social facilities, in and through which the actual state of health of an artisanal working-class community could be assessed. As the results demonstrated how poor was their subjects’ general health, they then developed techniques to improve their well-being, especially as it related to reproductive health. The doctors published extensively in the hope that their focus on health and not disease would be widely emulated, along with the model of the Centre and the society it envisaged:

We hope to see this experiment spread from this Centre to other Centres, not only in London but in all England and perhaps . . . in time to the whole world. We hope, by this experiment, to re-establish England as a Grade A people, and as the enlightened leader of Nations in the matter of HEALTH [sic].

The doctors’ model of health care, preventive and funded by a weekly subscription, did not spread as they envisaged, and the post-1948 National Health Service was based on a very different model of curative medicine. Nevertheless, their concept of the interplay between environments and people, what will be called here the ‘centre-idea’, would, this paper argues, be a profound and formative influence on the shaping of the post-war built environment, from the individual building to the city as a whole. It was absorbed not just into the thinking of the western architectural avant-garde, as Williamson’s presence at CIAM 8 suggests, but also informed a broader progressive consensus about the purpose and nature of reconstruction which was evolving from the 1920s and cemented in both the wartime and post-war years.

At a time when suburban growth was associated by many reformers with anomie and isolation, the ‘centre-idea’ promised the re-centring of society and offered a revitalised model of urban citizenship when the opportunity to participate in the organs of democracy itself was being expanded. Thus the scheme was invoked by a wide range of contemporaries as (variously) a model of health care, a model community centre, and a focus for urban and regional renewal. It was the subject of a Central Office of Information film in 1948, and was much lamented when it closed its doors for the last time in 1950.

For young architecture students, as Clive Fenton notes, both before and after the war, its fusion of the social, the architectural and the technological (combined into a design of some bravura) was understood as representing the defining force of an evolving modernist architecture [Figure Two]. In these instances, the term ‘centre’ came to serve as a shorthand for a particular way of thinking about the social, the spatial and the architectural and, as rebuilding proper began in the 1950s, would be manifested in built form. An examination of the ‘centre-idea’ thus provides fundamental new insights into architectural and planning practice and ideas of social (and political) reform in Britain in the years around World War Two, and to the central role played by British modernist thinkers in the development of modernism as a theory.


8 The Centre, written and directed by JB Holmes, produced by Paul Rotha, A Central Office of Information film made for the Foreign Office by Films of Fact Ltd.

To date, the links between the Peckham Experiment and the social and spatial aspects of post-war architecture and planning have only rarely been made, and few have remarked upon Williamson’s presence at CIAM 8. One exception is Leonardo Marchi who, in his 2020 study of the legacy of the concept of the heart of the city, has rightly drawn attention to the doctor’s ‘architectural-scientific’ approach to urban re-planning and its embrace by CIAM members, concluding that ‘the centre mirrored and anticipated the need for urban centralisation as a unique healthy and civic anchor.’

David Kuchenbuch, in his 2019 study of the Pioneer Health Centre, began to make connections between the resonance of the thinking behind the Peckham Experiment (especially as it related to ideas of community building and urban planning) and CIAM’s concerns. He notes that it was Jaqueline Tyrwhitt who invited Williamson to CIAM 8 at the time when the Congress was ‘beginning to address “soft” anthropological and social psychological aspects of city planning’ and that its members were interested in developing ‘spatial settings conducive to processes of social integration.’ However, with their focus lying elsewhere, neither author was concerned with such overlaps and did not explore them in detail, nor interrogate the term ‘centre’.

Ellen Shoshkes did note the doctors’ connections with various progressive architecture and planning fora from the later 1930s through to the 1950s, including CIAM’s post-war congresses, as well as the personal collaborations between Tyrwhitt and Pearse in wartime. Nevertheless, like Marchi and Kuchenbuch, her focus on Tyrwhitt means that she too is less concerned to interrogate the conceptual idea of the “Centre”. Furthermore, while she acknowledges British theorising as core to modernism’s evolution, she downplays the significance of the Pioneer Health Centre in that process. On the concept of the centre more broadly, Christophe Grafe has argued that the new breed of ‘cultural centre’ which emerged after 1945 embodied (and enabled) new policies about the arts and society, the fulfilment of which required new architectural responses. He emphasises that such buildings were more than a simple gathering-together of diverse uses; rather they formed a new type of institution which would be transformative and multi-functional and ‘instrumental in constructing a new and more interested audience from all walks of life’.

The aim of the paper is, then, to make the case for the Pioneer Health Centre and the ideas that it embodied about space and society as a blueprint for the architectural and urban environment of the post-war Welfare State, and, indeed, a particular notion of the society that it would house. By tracing and foregrounding the journey of the centre-idea from its origins in the 1920s, this paper will show how the term had developed a set of connotations that made it central to the architectural avant-garde’s theorising by the early 1950s. Emphasis will be placed on the primary role that members of CIAM’s British chapter, the MARS Group, played in this process, something much informed by the particular conditions in which a native modernism emerged and the associational networks which fostered its evolution. Such a tracing, which bears in mind Ernő Goldfinger’s rejoinder - ‘Let’s get one thing clear: the

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10 Marchi, *The Heart of the City*, 35.
‘30s and the ‘40s are not separate things – they dovetail’\textsuperscript{14} – also has as a goal to posit that, rather than being an ersatz variation of continental European modernist theory, already in the 1930s there was evolving in England a distinctive way of thinking about what a modernist architecture might be. It was this tradition of thinking that allowed the MARS Group to assume the formative role it did in post-war CIAM and become, as Gidieon observed in 1947 ‘the best and most active group in congress today.’\textsuperscript{15}

The paper begins with a discussion of the Pioneer Health Centre itself and the creation of a particular set of social and spatial connotations linked to the term ‘centre’, and then proceeds outwards to consider how the concepts embodied in the ‘centre-idea’ may be found in other contemporary projects and discourses such that by 1939 it was well embedded in progressive reform debates. Discussion will then follow the centre-idea into wartime and its political and cultural acceptance in planning and reconstruction debates in the UK, as well as its resonances with North American architectural culture. Finally, the paper will consider several now state-backed building projects in order to show its incorporation into the landscape of a modern Britain. Informed primarily by archival research, and with reference to government reports and the publications of the Architectural Press and of CIAM, the aim is to offer a revised understanding of the forces that shaped (at the very least) British post-war architecture and planning; a discussion that also has implications for the wider study of urban society and the history of democratic participation.

Part One: The Emergence of the ‘Centre-Idea’

The Pioneer Health Centre and the Peckham Experiment

There is not space here to explore the origin, and often ideologically problematic nature, of the Peckham Experiment in detail.\textsuperscript{16} Rather the concern is to show the genesis of the distinctive ‘centre-idea’ that it formulated and which would go on to be embedded across progressive discourses both social and spatial. It is however important to note that what unfolded in Peckham was fundamentally eugenic, a stance which shaped how the project was conceived, where it was sited and the spaces in which it functioned. This ties the Experiment to a set of wider concerns as the British state sought to reconstruct itself after 1918, and address anxieties about the nation’s health, the development of a full democracy, evolving international relations and the problem of how to create a vigorous white working-class citizenry capable of keeping Britain at the forefront of an emerging post-imperial modernity.

Funded by a small group of private individuals with a particular concern about the health of the race, which they linked to the opening up of access to birth control for working-class people, and run by Pearse and Scott Williamson, the first phase of the experiment began in 1926. Their concept of a health-cum-social club was accommodated in a converted Victorian house at 142 Queen’s Road, Peckham. The focus on reproductive health meant that

\textsuperscript{14} Stamp, ‘Conversation with Ernö Goldfinger’, 23.
\textsuperscript{15} Cited in Mumford, \textit{The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism}, 201.
\textsuperscript{16} On this see (citation to be added if accepted for publication), plus: Kuchenbuch, \textit{Pioneering Health in London}; Pearse and Scott Williamson, \textit{Biologists in Search of Material}; Pearse and Crocker, \textit{The Peckham Experiment}.
membership was confined to families or married couples who were understood as a family in the making. The aim was twofold: to attract local residents to join (and remain members of) the Centre, and to gather a body of data from which the doctors could ascertain the state of health of a fairly representative working-class community (not too poor, not too affluent). When these initial aims were achieved, the first Centre closed and a fund-raising campaign was launched to enable the move to bigger, purpose-built premises. Designed by the architect-engineer Owen Williams, these opened in May 1935 on a site just around the corner in St Mary’s Road, Peckham.

From the start all involved were insistent that their activities were to be distinguished from contemporary medical practice and that the work had a spatial dimension. They were particularly critical of the focus on treatment in the welfare centres and clinics created by maternal and child welfare legislation in the immediate post-war years, because such centres did not differentiate between the healthy and the diseased. Their approach was to get to the newly-married couple before they contemplated children and hence:

With this simple but big thought in our minds, we intend to approach parents through a new, more complete and social type of welfare centre, with the objective of securing for them: peaceful homes, happy parenthood, healthy babies, useful citizenship.17

No clear statement of why the term ‘centre’ was chosen to describe their venture has been found. Certainly, it was already in use by the time discussions began about establishing what became the Centre. The OED cites the earliest use of the term in relation to health as 1916 while noting that “the first Health Center started under that name was begun by the New York Health Committee in 1913.”18 A little later, The Lancet reported that “With the removal of the medical officer of health from the jurisdiction of the borough council that official will need a new office in the town, with laboratories, museum, library, and lecture hall. This I call for want of a better title the future ‘Health Centre’ of the borough.”19

Its Peckham usage can be understood as a deliberate attempt to wrest the term from the welfare centres of which the founders so disapproved, to offer a corrective to their dysgenic tendencies and thereby to invest the term with a particular significance. Furthermore, there was the motive signalled by the linking of their work to the achievement of good citizenship and the reference to a ‘big’ though ‘simple thought.’ Such terminology connects their thinking to another existing, and again American, concept of the centre, that of the Civic Centre. This early twentieth-century planning device, influenced by the American ‘City Beautiful’ movement, brought together in one set of buildings the administrative and related aspects of local government and housed them in something of architectural significance both formally and spatially.20 As Charles Mulford Robertson, Professor of Civic Design, wrote, such agglomerations were a means to ‘strengthening pride in the city and awakening a sense of community with fellow urban dwellers.’21

19 The Lancet, 29 June 1918, 922/2.  
21 Ibid., 244.
For our Pioneers it was this idea of an environment invoking or creating a sense of community, belonging and citizenship that was the primary resonant idea. The principles of agglomeration of function signalled by the term ‘Centre’ and allied to a particular sense of the affective qualities of the resulting environment may be seen in their approach to the design of their Centre from its inception, whether in the converted premises at Queen’s Road, or later, in St Mary’s Road, in an appropriately remarkable building. In keeping with their positive eugenic project, they believed that putting people in a setting to which they could respond – if they had the potential – and take responsibility for their own health was the way forward.

The idea that the Centre might not just agglomerate functions but equally connote the drawing of people in and together also underpinned the conceptualization of the Centre, lending further significance to the founders’ use of this term. They linked what they called the ‘devitalization’ of the working classes to the anomie created by contemporary urban industrialised society: ‘…there is to-day, under urban conditions, no community life’.22 Peckham, which contained ‘a moderately good artisan population’, was chosen because it was just the sort of place where the urban fabric had broken down; if not a slum area, then one with houses divided into multiple occupation (their research showed most members, despite relative affluence, lived in two rooms), where it was hard to make a ‘home’ and where leisure was confined to the pub and the cinema – the two bogeymen of inter-war reformers.23 It was not conducive to building the networks that led, in their world view, to the formation of a functioning community. This was a matter of the gravest concern because, as its 1938 Annual Report observed: “the social and cultural disintegration of the nation runs parallel to the disintegration of the family … the family is the very smallest unit on which each and every item of social construction must be based.”24

A Centre like theirs was therefore a means to re-define the city so people would wish to remain there; it was a thoroughgoing pro-urbanist project. Throughout its existence, pamphlets and publications stressed that it was working ‘under existing urban conditions’ and against the ‘centrifugal’ tendency of the present-day urban population which they caused.25 As JM Richards, Assistant Editor at the Architectural Review, wrote, by creating ‘a focal point at which the town as a workshop coincides with the town as community’ and offering the possibility of a ‘full and energetic life’ it would replace the attractions of ‘a suburb or garden city where some illusion can be maintained of the more civilized gentleman’s existence … or … the cinema, and suchlike distractions from reality.’ In both its locations, it therefore answered the town planner’s question, ‘I know where people ought to live, but how can I make them live there?’26

Such concerns and principles led to the creation of a very particular form of environment, the fundamental principles of which were developed in the existing building at Queen’s Road, and then refined into a state-of-the-art expression at St Mary’s Road. The

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23 Pioneer Health Centre, Annual Report, 1926, p.4, SA/PHC.
24 Pioneer Health Centre, Annual Report, 1938, p.3, SA/PHC.
physical building was one of what the doctors called their ‘instruments of health.’ These also included some of the healthcare (primarily the provision of birth control), and more so, particular types of amenity within the Centre: variously sewing machines, gas coppers, irons, workshops and their equipment, and later, the swimming pool, gymnasium, and particular types of movable furniture. Crucially, however, there was no compulsion to do anything, for this eugenic and disinterested space was to be benefitted from only if its user had the potential to respond to these instruments; Pearse wrote ‘it is essentially a building designed to be furnished with people and with their actions.’

In the 1935 building, transparency became the particular device that would achieve this goal on the principle that ‘the sight of action is an incentive to action.’ From the street view passers-by could see in and be attracted to join, and once inside, from seeing others exercising, chatting and so forth people would coalesce into a group and thus form a community: ‘the potency of vision and propinquity [serve] as an effective invitation to access to people of all ages.’

It is evident that for the doctors, the building was a dynamic force. In their typically verbose prose, they described it as:

… an “interfacial membrane” in society; an active potent surface across which material can freely pass for utilisation on both sides … It is a locus in society from which the cultivation of the family – living cell or “unit” of society – can proceed, and from which the family sustained in its own growth and development, can spontaneously evolve as part of a larger whole – a live organismal society.

Central to this cultivation of the family (and hence society) was the disinterestedness of the doctors. They too might be understood as an instrument of health. They provided the regular medical, the so-called ‘periodic overhaul’, from which their data derived, directing members to medical services elsewhere for any treatment beyond the prescription of birth control (another instrument of health). Otherwise, their role was to stand and watch the way that members responded to the setting of the Centre and, if their technique worked, began to build or rebuild the family unit and join with others to form not an ‘aggregation of individuals but a zone of mutuality.’

The manipulation of space was central to the Peckham Experiment. The *Annual Report* of 1936 put it thus: ‘Just as the grouping of the family-member for health required a new technique, so the building was required to be of a character previously unknown.’ Although the authors of this comment (almost certainly the doctors) were referring to the St Mary’s Road building, we can understand the point as applying to both of the sites in which the Experiment was conducted. While more ad hoc at Queen’s Road, the transformation of a house into an instrument of health that incorporated consulting rooms as well as social spaces can be understood as a first exploration of what a new spatial technique might be. When this Centre was closed in 1929, it then took six years to raise sufficient funds to purchase and build the new environment that was tailor-made to the doctors’ needs.

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28 Ibid., 126.
29 Ibid., 126.
31 Ibid.
In getting to the point where they could achieve that goal the doctors were helped by a recent graduate of the Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA), a certain JM Richards. Purely by chance he was the person who was sent by the AA in response to the doctors’ approach for assistance (their home was in Gower Street, a stone’s throw from the School’s premises in Bedford Square). They needed someone who could translate their ideas about their new building into a set of preliminary drawings that could be presented to prospective designers. In his memoir Richards describes how his drawings helped the doctors see how one space might relate to another and what could be accommodated across the levels of the building. This, he recalled, was mechanical work but enjoyable because ‘they were delightful people, with unorthodox ideas which I was of an age to appreciate and an enthusiasm with which I was soon infected.’

It would be an infection with a long legacy.

It was from these plans that the commissioned designer, Williams, worked. His scheme exploited the properties of concrete frame construction to create a free plan in which all of the dividing walls, except those in private areas, were made from glass panels. In this way sight could inspire action. The plan was centred around a swimming pool, a key site of potential activity, and each floor nominally assigned to a specific form of culture [Figure Three]. Physical culture was on the ground floor (the pool, gymnasium and nursery school); social culture – the key interface in the building as it was in the doctors’ method – was on the first floor. Here, the main hall and the self-service cafeteria were key spaces for mingling and both overlooked the goings on in the pool. The top floor, for mental culture, contained workrooms (one for women to do needlework, one for men to do woodwork and shoe-mending; this was a highly gendered and profoundly heteronormative environment) as well as the consulting rooms and a further recreation space. The roof could also be used for exercise.

If the frame construction allowed clear lines of sight for the members to see and be seen, it was also the means through which Williams, otherwise constrained by a very tight budget, created his architectural effect. Materially, the building was literally outstanding on its St Mary’s Road site, flanked as it was by tall terraced houses, and set back from the street line on a two-acre plot of land, fronted by a large garden. Formal interplay was made by the contrast between the two load-bearing concrete wings and the central framed block with its open ground floor and two storeys of bowed cantilevered windows. Internally, the concrete was painted but not plastered, while the mushroom columns of the central block served as striking punctuation marks throughout the space [Figures Four and Five].

Here was a building of a character ‘previously unknown.’ Its opening was received positively, not least by the Architectural Review, which devoted 14 pages of its May 1935 issue, complemented by Dell and Wainwright photography, to the Centre (its sister paper, the weekly Architects’ Journal also published a significant article on it). Such extensive coverage usually signalled the Review’s particular approval of a project and that it represented a significant development in the modernism that it was keen to promote and promulgate. More particularly, from the point of view of this article, was the fact that the long essay ‘The Idea behind the Idea’ (and almost certainly the Editorial and other

explanatory text), that formed a key part of the coverage, was written by JM Richards, who had been working for the Architectural Press since July 1933. He was also more than likely the author of the coverage in the *Journal*. The chance encounter with their ideas, as already noted, infected Richards and now, through his position at arguably the most important channel for the mediation of progressive architectural thinking in the 1930s, he was able to spread that infection further.

For Richards, the Pioneer Health Centre was important partly because it offered a model of the role of the architect within a broader progressive scene: ‘the technician taking his place as the pioneer of social progress.’ Even more importantly, it represented to him a direction in which an evolving and (perhaps uniquely) English modernism might move, as the quotations already made from this text have suggested. Its determined urbanism, its promise to correct the ‘centrifugal tendency’ of contemporary life, its focus upon the ordinary woman and man (and their family), and concern to provide a focal point for the town were ideas that Richards went on to develop further as the 1930s progressed and, as we shall see, were formative to the ideas that the MARS Group, of which he went on to be a leading member, brought to the planning of the post-war CIAM congresses.

**A Progressive Orthodoxy: The Centre-idea Expanded**

Richards was one individual who took the concept of the centre-idea and grew it, but the ‘centre-idea’ may be found in other reformist initiatives and discourses in this period. All had implications for the design and planning of the built environment, and, it will be suggested, were informed by the project at Peckham, often because of overlaps in personnel or through associational networks. They may not always have incorporated the term Centre, but these too were interfacial membranes. ‘Active potent surfaces’, they created a dynamic interplay between the equivalent instruments of health that they housed and those who used or occupied them. The result was, in the Peckham doctors’ terminology, ‘a zone of mutuality’ but which we might term as a wider modernist culture and a progressive consensus which had at its heart a vision of a cultured and discerning citizenry, active in its own making and that of a modern Britain both socially and spatially.

**R.E.Sassoon House**

A constant theme in the literature produced by the Peckham doctors and their collaborators and advocates was the poor quality of housing in which the urban working classes dwelt. This led to two problems. If their member-families returned to overcrowded and unhealthy homes, it limited the amount of impact their work could have. Furthermore, the lack of good quality housing in the city was understood as a central reason for the flight to the suburbs and further sprawl. This, in turn, led to the breaking down of the distinction between town and countryside, a situation not helped by state housing policy which had focused on the development of cottage estates on the edge of towns and cities. A reformed model of housing in combination with other new building types (such as the Centre) would help resolve the challenge that JM Richards articulated in his 1935 articles (‘I know where people should live, how do I make them live there’). The doctors were therefore keen to link their venture with a

35 Ibid.
housing scheme. An initial attempt to work with other London boroughs was made in 1932, but this failed. It was another year before a genuine opportunity to forge such a relationship arose when the voluntary housing sector activist Elizabeth Denby introduced a potential benefactor to them.

Denby was a leading figure in the voluntary housing movement at this date and a keen advocate for the holistic model of housing which the sector had been developing since the early 1920s. This emphasised the need for housing to be both well-built and well-equipped and, in an echo of the doctors’ reasoning, to incorporate social amenities in order to facilitate community life. Denby had been friendly with the doctors for some time and was a supporter of their aims. Eager to develop an independent career as what she called a Housing Consultant, to ally voluntarist housing praxis with a venture as progressive as the Pioneer Health Centre was an opportunity for all concerned, and one which would explore how the dwelling could be designed as an interfacial membrane.

The outcome was R.E. Sassoon House [Figure Six]. Built on part of the two-acre site owned by the Centre’s executive committee, it was formally opened in November 1934. Denby’s proactive role in the scheme’s commissioning meant that its programme followed voluntarist housing praxis closely. The flats, intended for member-families, were carefully and tightly planned, and extended by a ‘family balcony’. [Figure Seven] Their interiors were well-equipped and the rents affordable. Amenities were (imminently) close at hand further up St Mary’s Road in the form of the Centre. With its completion, these two complementary environments offered an important early prototype of what Sassoon House’s co-designer, Max Fry, described as constituents of a ‘neighbourly and urban existence’.  

The collaboration of Fry with Denby was significant. Fry played a central role in the institutionalisation of Britain’s modern movement and at this date was working with CIAM to create a British chapter, the MARS Group. Together, Denby and he translated the voluntarists’ new vision of the domestic and social sphere into a correspondingly new language of architecture. Sassoon House, like the Centre, was of a character ‘previously unknown’: constructed from reinforced concrete and deploying the device of the existenz-minimum plan. It represented the formation of a zone of mutuality between progressives in the voluntary housing and health sectors with those in the architectural profession, a connection that became stronger as the decade unfolded.

An Urban Village

The partnership between Denby and Fry was not confined to Peckham. At the same time as they worked on Sassoon House, they were also developing the project which became Kensal House (Ladbroke Grove, west London, completed November 1936). This was originally commissioned as workers’ housing for the public utility society, the Gas, Light and Coke Company, but under its co-designers’ influence, the scheme quickly became an expansion of the ideas essayed in Peckham and a definitive pre-war statement of the domestic environment as interfacial membrane.

36 Reference to be added if accepted for publication, (pp.66-67).
38 Reference to be added if accepted for publication.
Described as an ‘urban village’ by Denby,\textsuperscript{39} Kensal House is notable for the way in which it integrated into a spatially cohesive whole what contemporary progressive reformers understood as the ‘instruments of health’ which would draw out the immanent potential of residents and create modern working-class citizens. So whereas at Peckham, Sassoon House and the Centre were a distance, albeit, short, from the other, in west London, buildings and amenities were all in one site, tightly bounded by the Great Western Railway to the south, the Grand Union Canal to the north, a gasholder to the west and the Grove to the east. Kensal House comprised two blocks of existenz-minimum flats (a more generous re-working of those at Sassoon House) each with a social club in the basement. Also on site was a purpose-built nursery school, a playground and allotments. [Figure Eight]

The improved material environment of the flats was understood as the first instrument that would mend the family broken by slum life. As it healed, residents’ experience of the estate’s other instruments of health, which, on the principle of ‘the sight of action is an incentive to action’ were integrated into the blocks or visible from them, enabled them to realise a collective identity. This was then augmented by perhaps the project’s most innovative feature. As Denby declared in 1937, ‘the spirit of the estate is that the tenants run it themselves.’\textsuperscript{40} They were given responsibility for the day-to-day management of the scheme; a strategy which situates the scheme both in the very immediate context of the rising tide of fascism in continental Europe and the slightly longer one of it being only eight years since women residents first achieved suffrage (and 18 after their husbands and adult sons). Kensal House was to be a democracy in microcosm; from child to adult it provided an active potent surface that enabled them to become active members of society. Urban - because the city needed workers - and also urbane. Another key feature of the estate was its furniture scheme which offered tenants access to affordable furniture of ‘good design’ through a shop that Denby had opened with another London housing association.\textsuperscript{41} The citizen-consumer would exercise their good taste to buy well-designed British products.

In its agglomeration of quite so many functions on one site - the only thing it lacked was a health centre - Kensal House was, as noted, perhaps the apogee of the concern to counteract the centrifugal tendencies of the day towards suburbia.\textsuperscript{42} It also consolidated a progressive alliance between modernist architects and social reformers. The latter did not, however, confine their concern about the impact of modernity to urban areas and we find similar anxieties expressed about rural Britain. In the case of the village college, the centre-idea, with its emphasis on new building forms that would agglomerate functions and generate new forms of association, underpinned the conceptualisation of schemes intended to bring all parts of the population into a particular vision of a modern democratic Britain.

\textit{The Village College}

\textsuperscript{39} Denby, ‘Kensal House, an Urban Village’, 61-64.
\textsuperscript{40} Denby in the film \textit{Kensal House}, director, Frank Sainsbury, producer, The Gas, Light and Coke Company, 1937.
\textsuperscript{41} Reference to be added if accepted for publication, (pp.146-149).
\textsuperscript{42} It should, however, be noted that the children were inspected daily by a nurse, and that not too far from Kensal House was the North Kensington Birth Control Clinic: an initiative to enable working-class women to access birth control.
For many reformers, the lure of suburbia was not just responsible for the malaise and anomie of the urban environment but equally affected the countryside. How to maintain ‘a worthy rural civilization’ was therefore a problem to be addressed and one to which the educationalist, Henry Morris, whose phrase this was, directed his considerable energies from the early 1920s onwards. In a Memorandum which he sent to members of Cambridge County Council in December 1924, he outlined both the problem and the solution. The decline of the countryside was, he declared, due to the failure to provide, at both urban and rural level, ‘on a wide and imaginative scale communal facilities for every kind of cultural and recreational pursuit.’ The solution was the village college. Focused round a reformed vision of the educational environment, this would act as a powerful counterpull to the delights of the suburbs and work in a factory on an arterial road.

Agglomeration was core to Morris’s vision. Recognising that the individual village could not compete he argued that the first step was for the village to identify itself as part of a rural region, ‘a cultural and social unit, parallel to that of the town.’ This new configuration would be consolidated by the building of a series of what he named the village college. Located in one village and serving both it and a cluster of encircling villages, it merged the educational - secondary education by day, and adult education by night - with the social and cultural. It thus would act as a focus for communal life and a means to create a new collective rural identity.

Morris’s Memorandum had strong overlaps with the terminology used at Peckham (and, indeed, elsewhere) both in its emphasis on multiple purpose buildings, and that his vision required something hitherto unknown. He wrote that it would be:

a building that will give the countryside a centre of reference arousing the affection and loyalty of the country child and country people and conferring a significance on their way of life. It would be a true social synthesis - it would take existing and live elements and bring them into a new and unique environment.

The village college was a new institution: ‘simple, but many-sided, for the countryside.’ Its programme, therefore, was concomitantly new. Teaching spaces were required of course but not just for the day-to-day teaching of children, but in addition more flexible spaces which could serve adult learners. To function as a cultural and social centre, a hall for public purposes was required, and spaces for socialising both within and outwith the building. Morris was also insistent that they be carefully furnished with well-designed equipment and works of art displayed.

Morris was able to persuade the education authorities and in all, three village colleges were built before the outbreak of war at Sawston, Linton and Impington.

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43 Morris, Village College, 29. See also a further rehearsal of these ideas in Anon (possibly Morris or JM Richards), ‘The Village College Idea,’ 225-226.
44 Ibid., p.225.
46 Morris, Village College, 26.
48 Other local authorities, notably Monmouthshire, adopted the idea after 1945: National Archives, HLG 91/599, ‘Proposed Community Buildings’.
Impington’s architecture, in particular, can be understood, like the purpose-built Pioneer Health Centre, as being of a character ‘previously unknown’, both in building type but also in the formal language with which this novelty of purpose was articulated. Commissioned from Fry (again), this time in partnership with Walter Gropius (and with Jack Howe as the project architect who brought the scheme to fruition), Impington is striking in its departure from the Fry office’s previous adherence to reinforced concrete. Instead its primary material was stock brick and the designers drew heavily on eighteenth-century architecture both in materials and motifs such as the bay windows and in the invocation of the assembly hall in the combination of the fan-shaped main hall and the complementary sheltered promenade.49  [Figure Nine]

Like Sassoon House and the Pioneer Health Centre and Kensal House, the admixture of the social and spatial in the village college, would, as Morris wrote, ‘not only be the training ground for the art of living, but the place in which life is lived, the environment of a genuine corporate life.’50 A further overlap, especially to Denby’s advocacy of intelligent consumption at Ladbroke Grove, was his emphasis on good design and art in the college interiors and through this the formation of a cultured citizenry. More broadly, Morris’s project also resonated with other expositions of the ‘centre-idea’ to which this paper now turns.

The Building Centre

A project that developed more or less concomitantly with the Pioneer Health Centre was the Building Centre, which was opened in 1932 in premises at 158 New Bond Street, London. This brought together on one site displays of building materials (some 1000-plus manufacturers were represented) and the services of the gas and electricity industries alongside technical expert advice. Its intended audience was builders, architects and their clients as well as a lay public. As Katie Lloyd Thomas and Neal Shasore posit, its creation can be situated within a broader reconfiguration of the construction industry which hinged around the growing domination of materials manufacturers, the consolidation of building firms into major concerns and, through the Registration Acts of the 1930s, the formal professionalisation of the practice of architecture.51 This required of the industry a more public-facing, professional and expert character and, perhaps, greater cooperation between industry and profession.

The Building Centre’s founding represented such a coming together. It emerged from a lunch convened by Vincent and Sidney Gluckstein, directors of Bovis Ltd, in the autumn of 1931. They had recently returned from New York, where they had seen the Architects’ Sample Bureau, a commercial information service about building materials, a concept that they thought might usefully be applied to the UK. They invited a number of ‘eminent builders’ to discuss the idea with a group of architects which included C.H. James, Richard

49 The changing formal expression of English modernism will be discussed later in the paper.
50 Morris, Village College, 26.
51 See Lloyd Thomas, ‘This Strange Interloper’ 110-135 and Shasore, The Profession and the Public (forthcoming). Our thanks to Dr Shasore for allowing us to read the manuscript prior to publication. We also draw here on the press cuttings files of the Building Centre, which are held in the archives of the Architectural Association School of Architecture.
Atkinson (of the Office of Works) and G. Grey Wornum, who suggested they also invited Francis Yerbury, Secretary of the AA.\textsuperscript{52} The latter had been behind a similar venture at the School when, in 1928 he had encouraged his colleague, J.K. Winser, to create a materials sample room on site; an understanding of proprietary materials being increasingly understood as part of a professional’s training.\textsuperscript{53} By 1931 this was outgrowing its designated space and Yerbury had begun to explore ways to expand the bureau and establish it as an independent enterprise. The invitation to meet with the Glucksteins was, therefore, propitious. The outcome was the decision to found what was later described as ‘a non-profit distributing educational enterprise to assist all concerned in the building industry.’\textsuperscript{54}

Financed by the Glucksteins, the venture was announced formally in March 1932 and opened in the New Bond Street premises in September of that year. The decision to name it the Building Centre was taken in December 1931. While Shasore suggests this can be explained as a way to distinguish it from its AA precedent, the agglomerative nature of the new enterprise as well as the way it was organised (and understood at the time) also signal strong overlaps with the idea of the Centre as it was developed at Peckham, and which suggest that in New Bond Street there was to be found a complementary ‘interfacial membrane.’ Like the Centre at Queen’s Road, an existing building (a former gallery) was converted into a setting rich in opportunity. Separate cubicles displayed different building materials (manufacturers paid to exhibit), there was a periodicals room, an information desk, an electric model kitchen and a gas industry display as well as a Technical Enquiry Department. Crucially, however, as its publicity material emphasised, ‘You cannot buy at the Building Centre, nor are you urged to buy, but you can there select what and where to buy without importuning of any kind.’\textsuperscript{55}

Thus, on arriving at the Centre, the visitor was given two guides which listed the type of exhibit and the exhibitor, and an alphabetical list of exhibitors with location codes. They also received a card on which to note products that interested them. The idea was that they, whether a client, a client with her architect, or a builder, could wander at will through the disinterested space of the Centre until something caught their eye (‘the sight of action is an incentive to action’). They would then make a note of the exhibit number or, if they wished, ask for advice from one of the Technical Assistants who were available but, like the doctors at Peckham, kept their distance until needed. At the end of the visit, the card was returned to the information desk and in due course a package of brochures pertaining to the selected products was dispatched. From these the visitor could then make an educated choice about the design of their project.

So, like the Pioneer Health Centre, the Building Centre offered an environment containing the constructional equivalent of instruments of health. And, as at Peckham, the interplay between these and the Centre’s visitors, in its founders’ minds and that of some commentators, resulted in both a local and a greater good. In \textit{The Listener} Paul Nash described it as a ‘social enterprise,’ with ‘its purpose to bring about a more sympathetic reach

\textsuperscript{52} The phrase ‘eminent builders’ is taken from the obituary for Francis Yerbury, \textit{The Times} 9 July 1970, 12 (who they were is not elucidated); on the meeting more generally, we draw on Shasore.

\textsuperscript{53} Reilly, rev. Gordon. ‘Yerbury’.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{55} Unattributed advertisement in Building Centre press cuttings book, AA archives. Authors’ italics.
between the organised forces of supply and the scattered and bewildered masses that represent demand.’ Francis Yerbury put it more elegantly: ‘this is the first occasion on which architects and manufacturers have got together to do something for the mutual benefit of themselves and the public.’\textsuperscript{56} Such framing seems not accidental. In it we see a construction industry remaking itself on technocratic lines and arguably justifying the conglomeration of capital in the appeal to the enhancement of public knowledge and, indeed, the creation of a particular type of public.

In this respect the choice of a retail thoroughfare in Mayfair as its site was deliberate: not tucked away in some back street, but a fashionable street with a high degree of passing trade, which could be attracted in by the elaborate window displays which formed part of its design. Combined with the disinterested manner of the Centre’s organisation, this, as an article in the Architectural Association’s \textit{Journal} noted, and is implied in Nash’s observation, would work to foster ‘building consciousness’ in the public.\textsuperscript{57} So just as at Peckham, Centre members came to understand the importance of health both to themselves and the nation, here in Mayfair, members of the public would, on the one hand be enabled to become informed consumers, playing their part in revivifying the national economy, and, on the other, come to understand how integral builders and professional architects were to the construction of a modern Britain: a zone of mutuality.\textsuperscript{58}

\textbf{The Housing Centre}

If the Building Centre was concerned to foster ‘building consciousness’ then another Centre, located not too far from New Bond Street, had as its aim to foster what we might call ‘housing consciousness.’ This was the Housing Centre, founded in 1934 as a central organisation concerned ‘to promote better housing conditions for the people of Great Britain, through organised Publicity, Information and Research’.\textsuperscript{59} Its creation represented the culmination of a decade of increasingly collective action by the voluntary housing sector which had begun with campaigns for local and central government to address the slum problem that had gone largely untouched by post-war Housing Acts (1919-1924); individual associations also built model housing to show authorities how the problem could best be resolved. When, from 1928, government policy began to shift, partly in response to such campaigns, but it became increasingly apparent that it was local authorities that would be given primary responsibility for the provision of new dwellings, their approach shifted. Collective campaigning action was consolidated and channelled into reconfiguring the sector as an advisory, expert body, an early form of ‘think tank’.

\textsuperscript{56} Clippings in Building Centre press cuttings book of Yerbury writing in \textit{The Listener} 5 October 1932 and Nash in \textit{The Listener} 24 September 1932, AA Archives. Nash spent some time in the article arguing for a Furniture Centre instead of, though run on similar lines to, the Building Centre.

\textsuperscript{57} Cited by Shasore, \textit{The Profession and the Public}, from the \textit{Architectural Association Journal}, September 1932.

\textsuperscript{58} It was also described as an experiment. The \textit{Evening Standard} reported ‘an experiment to help the public, architects and builders in the design and construction of a house by collecting under one roof every type of exhibit for the decoration, equipment, ventilation and structural engineering of the modern house.’ Building Centre press cuttings book, AA Archives.

\textsuperscript{59} This was the Centre’s ‘mission statement’ printed on its annual reports and other publications.
In conception and aim, the Housing Centre was a complement to the Building Centre and Pioneer Health Centre. This began with its nomenclature, which may have been informed by the fact that it was first housed in a pair of cottages which had been the winning entry in a competition sponsored by the Building Centre for working-class cottages, and stood on the site of Bush House on the Strand. Equally it may also have owed not a little to shared personnel between the Housing Centre and Peckham, in the figure of Elizabeth Denby. She had played a leading role in the collectivising impulses of the sector since 1928 and was working on Sassoon House with the doctors at the same time as the Housing Centre came to fruition.\textsuperscript{60} During 1934, permanent premises were found for the Centre at 13, Suffolk Street, just to the west of Trafalgar Square, and part of John Nash’s Regent Street development, this house had previously been adapted as a solicitor’s office. Margaret Baker, the Centre’s former Director and Vice-President, recalled how this was not considered a good address at the time, but that it was ‘nevertheless, good for us’, not only because this kept the rent low, and it was well served by public transport, but because the street lay ‘between Whitehall and the West End’.\textsuperscript{61} From this pivotal location it could act as a channel to policy makers for the weight of public opinion that it sought to create through its campaigns.

The Housing Centre was another ‘zone of mutuality’. It brought together individual housing societies on one site, and presented a progressive front of collective endeavour against the evil of the slums: a centralised and coordinated attack. In this way, it echoed Peckham’s function as a nucleus around which a community could gather. At the same time, in its primary emphasis on research and its dissemination, it developed a particular, and related sense, of the ‘centre-idea’. The centre is something from which things can emanate. It has a periphery to which the exemplary can be disseminated. Like Peckham’s publications, and the Building Centre’s system of coded displays and information packs posted out, the transmission of (in this context) a specific set of ideas about what was an appropriate way to plan the built environment was core to what the Centre did. This was something signalled both in where it was located, the spatial organization of its interior, and the media through which its ideas were communicated. Above all, it also depended (as at Peckham and Mayfair) on a very direct correlation between the functions of such centres in a modern democratic state.

Programmatically and spatially, the Centre was to be, as a later publication put it, ‘the kind of institution which can be set up in a democracy by people who want to spread what they think to be the truth.’ This was not to be done by ‘bully[ing] or blackmail’ which ‘democratic procedure’ would not allow. Rather democracy gave the right to air opinion and ‘to spread it by legitimate idea-machinery … speeches, exhibitions, radios, books.’ For ‘idea-machinery’ substitute ‘instruments of health’, and, as at Peckham, this was understood as concomitant with a certain level of potential within people: ‘the democratic principle doesn’t work for people who are without the impulse to think and learn and choose.’\textsuperscript{62} The information the Centre presented would resonate with this impulse, and create the public opinion that demanded that better housing conditions, on the voluntarist model outlined

\textsuperscript{60} On this see – reference to be added if accepted for publication (London Journal).

\textsuperscript{61} Baker, ‘Housing Centre Trust’, 161.

\textsuperscript{62} Housing Centre, Your Inheritance, n.p.
above and rehearsed contemporaneously at Sassoon House and Kensal House, were brought into existence.

The architect-planner, Jocelyn Adburgham, one of the founding committee alongside Denby, was responsible for the conversion of Suffolk Street, creating a set of spaces in which, again, ‘the sight of action was an incentive to action.’ On the ground floor was a large entrance hall, which incorporated a bookshop. There was also a committee room. On the first floor was a large meeting and exhibition room (its walls from dado level up tiled with cork to facilitate the hanging of displays). Opening off this room was a library. The rest of the space was offices. These were to be used either by its own staff or were rented to other similar organisations (including the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association and the Society of Women Housing Managers). In this way, the Centre instigated a continuous process of agglomeration with a purpose in order to build a progressive front (or zone of mutuality) of collective endeavour against bad housing. Alongside figures like Denby and Adburgham, it proved a gathering ground for many architects and planners who would form part of the dovetailing of the 1930s and 1940s that Goldfinger recalled: people such as Judith Ledeboer and Patrick Abercrombie. It also formed strong links with the construction industry: Adburgham relied on assistance in kind from assorted building firms for the conversion (Pilkington’s provided the glass shelving in the library). Moreover, by the end of the 1930s, the Centre had collaborated with the MARS Group and its offshoot ATO (the Architects and Technicians’ Organisation) on the anti-slum and pro-planning exhibitions called New Homes for Old that formed its contribution to the biennial Building Trades Exhibition between 1934 and 1938.

Exhibitions were the bread and butter of the Housing Centre’s ‘idea-machinery’. Alongside this, it published information leaflets, a bulletin and housing bibliographies as well as developing an index card system with comparative information on new housing schemes which was held in the library (this was the work of Eugen Kauffmann, who had come to England from working on Das Neue Frankfurt). It also encouraged and instigated research into wider planning issues, which, like the Housing Centre itself, represented in their broad range the agglomeration of a set of complementary ideas.

The Community Centre

Both the Housing Centre and the village college connect to a final pre-war example, the community centre: a space which offered a synthesis of the themes we have outlined to date. Indeed, in 1939, the Housing Centre commissioned an investigation into this nascent building type, which led in 1942 to a book.64 Morris, meanwhile, described the village college as ‘the community centre of the neighbourhood’, a place which would provide ‘for the whole man.’[sic]65 The campaign for the construction of community centres had common roots with the Housing Centre’s casting of housing as an active and affective social entity but, as with the village college, the community centre differed insofar as it was an actual building type rather than a prototype (unlike many of

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63 On this see – reference to be added if accepted for publication (London Journal).
64 Stephenson and Stephenson, Community Centres.
65 Morris, Village College, 28.
the examples discussed above). In this generalising impulse lay its significance. For it brought together the discrete concerns of the Centres devoted to health, construction and housing and scaled them up at both urban and rural level, making them part of a wider vision of the form a modernised environment could take, and a means to Morris’s ‘genuine corporate life.’

Although such centres drew on precedents including the communal buildings constructed on such reforming housing estates as New Earswick and Port Sunlight, as well as models such as the village hall and miners’ institute, the specific term, ‘community centre’, was nonetheless new (at least in Britain). Seemingly, it was adopted in the early 1930s and, like the centres outlined above, that term ‘centre’ promised modernity and efficiency, embodying ideas of a reformed, communal citizenship. It was also born of a shared critique of a perceived modern urban malaise which had its origins in concerns about the cottage estates inaugurated by the Housing Acts of 1919, 1923 and 1924, and later, although perhaps to a lesser extent, the suburban estates of the speculative developer. The Tudor Walters report, which underpinned post-war housing policy, had in 1918 called for new housing estates to include institutes and clubs, but these communal buildings had gone largely unbuilt and it was this lack in provision which motivated many reformers. The National Housing and Town Planning Council, for example, articulated a number of common beliefs (and in a language that echoed the rhetoric around the ‘centre-idea’):

> Unless the physical reconstruction of our towns is accompanied by measures for the reconstruction of community life within their boundaries, there is grave danger that much of the good that is effected by rehousing will be undone by the absence of that social machinery which alone can give life and meaning to these new communities.

In the face of these concerns, the community centre would enable residents not only to engage with their neighbours in ways which countered the potential isolation of the individual suburban home, but also to shape their own leisure in ways which were a training ground for democracy. Such thinking was given particular impetus, as already noted, in the wake of the extension of the franchise after 1918 and the rise of totalitarian fascism. A vocal contributor to the debates was the National Council of Social Service (NCSS, an umbrella body made from local voluntary social welfare groups). Founded in 1919, it saw engaged community as the foundation of democratic society, and sought to encourage the working class to offer civic leadership whilst also promoting the productive use of leisure time.

The political scientist Ernest Barker was a key figure in the organisation, and was chair of its New Estates Community Committee (renamed the Community Centres and Associations Committee in 1937). He spoke of the need for the community to:

> create a social and cultural life for itself … instead of relying solely on the wares of the commercial conveyor of amusements. This widening of the circle of creative

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66 Stephenson and Stephenson, *Community Centres*, iii.
68 Olechnowicz, *Working-Class Housing*, 8-10, 137-55.
interests constituted a new chapter in the history of English culture – it was developing a new organ of democracy.69 As was the case at the Pioneer Health Centre, links were made by the NCSS between rapid urbanisation and perceived community breakdown:

The aim of all the efforts with which the Council has been associated is to strengthen self-reliance and comradeship in a world whose economic and social forces are tending to depress the ordinary citizen to the level of an indistinguishable unit in a vast mass, to isolate him from his neighbours, and to deprive him of the opportunities for developing his powers of initiative and judgment.70

Indeed, Barker was particularly interested in what Pearse and Scott Williamson had achieved in Peckham. In his review of their 1938 publication, Biologists in Search of Material, he made clear parallels between their work and that of the emerging phenomenon of the community centre. He spoke positively of the Experiment because it would encourage ‘the development of a common life of recreation and happy amusement…’, and described the building as ‘a magnet which keeps the human material steadily attached to the Centre … and it is itself a way of health (the positive health which comes from very happy release and action, both of body and mind).’ He was particularly taken with the device of the periodic overhaul and supervision and speculated that it might be incorporated into ‘the general “community centres” which are now rising through the length and breadth of England.’ He added ‘If the Peckham Centre, beginning as a health centre, has also become a community centre with a common life of recreation, it may be argued that centres which have begun as community centres, for the sake of a common life of recreation (in the broadest sense of the word) should also become health centres. The present movement for the encouragement of natural fitness may well encourage this development.’71

Barker did make a distinction between the nature of the social aspect of the Centre, and that of community centres more generally.72 The latter, he noted, always had a community association ‘which plans and manages its activities, and thus ensures the democratic quality of such centres’ whereas at Peckham there was a reliance on ‘a spontaneous formation of specific activity groups - that is no general democratic association rather a number of small democratic groups - but possibly as the common life of the Centre develops and attains coherence a general democratic association may ultimately emerge.’ He concluded ‘Those who wish the Centre well will desire this consummation. In the general development of community centres (to which, after all, despite its peculiarities, the Peckham Centre belongs), the principle of democratic self-government in the general conduct of the common life is the vital and essential principle.’

The building itself might in addition offer an education in taste. In December 1938, this notion was reiterated in a special issue of the Architectural Review, dedicated to the design of buildings for leisure. The Pioneer Health Centre featured prominently in the issue, not as an example of a building for health, but rather as a prototypical ‘community centre’

69 ‘Social Interests on New Estates’, Times, 10 April 1937.
70 NRS, ED39/2, ‘A brief account of the work of the National Council of Social Service’ [1937].
72 Ibid.
(and a sign of its emerging significance as a building type for the modern architect-planner). Moreover, the Review was also at pains to emphasise the quality of its architecture in comparison to other forms of community centre, noting that it ‘sets a valuable standard for the planning of such buildings … as may be developed on official lines in the future.’ The architects Gordon and Flora Stephenson, authors of the Housing Centre report noted above, repeated the point in 1942:

In one or two cases, the Community Centre in its attempt to develop individuality has abandoned dignity. The buildings, particularly on the interior, look like flashy, modernistic cinemas. … they do nothing to raise the standards of architectural appreciation among those who use the buildings.

The creation of community centres should involve a range of individuals and organisations, as the NCSS wrote in 1937: ‘a successful Community Centre is established by a partnership between the statutory and the voluntary bodies’. It was in that year that the Physical Training and Recreation Act allowed local authorities and voluntary bodies in England, Wales and Scotland to create and manage centres for social purposes and exercise, and not only on estates built by the housing authority, as had previously been the case. By the end of the 1930s, a sign that statutory authorities were taking an increasingly interventionist role came when the London County Council enumerated centres established by voluntary initiative in 1938 before setting about establishing its own general policy for the provision of centres, spurred on by the efforts of Ruth Dalton and Herbert Morrison. In 1939 the Scotsman reported, in an article entitled ‘a social revolution that has come to stay’, that there were then nine such centres in Scotland, with thirty more planned. The previous year, the same newspaper reported that there were 271 schemes for similar centres in England.

Nevertheless, and despite the available legislation, the building of community centres before 1939 remained largely the result of voluntary initiative alone, or the outcome of philanthropic and local authority cooperation. The voluntary ethos was in keeping with the idea that the community centre was born from a genuine impulse towards collective activity and identity and while organisations such as the NCSS favoured the continuation of such models, they did so with a firm expectation that the centres that were built showed the viability and necessity of such amenities and that local and central government should commission them as a matter of course (and from voluntary groups). That government might be attentive to a practice of exemplary campaigning, which the Peckham Experiment also pursued, is suggested by the fact that in 1939 the Ministry of Health included a model community centre in the Social Services Exhibition of the British Pavilion at the 1939 World

73 ‘Community Centres’, Architectural Review 84 (December 1938), 277-78
74 Ibid., 278.
75 Stephenson and Stephenson, Community Centres, 57.
76 ‘A brief account of the work of the National Council of Social Service’ [1937], National Records of Scotland, ED39/2.
77 Ruth Dalton to Herbert Morrison, 28 December 1936, London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/CL/HSG/01/046 REQ.
78 Scotland and the Community Centre: a Social Revolution that has Come to Stay’, Scotsman, 18 January 1939.
Fair. Furthermore, in its choice of architect, Max Fry, we also see an early sign of what would become an emerging alignment of the state with the progressive-reformist wing of the British architectural profession.

Fry designed the model centre having taken advice from the NCSS. He described it as intended ‘to illustrate to visitors … this new movement in English life.’

Thus we might also read the commission as indicative of an emerging construct of national identity. Charting the genesis of his design, as well as the raison d’etre for such schemes, Fry noted that he worked on the premise that the local council had used the statutory powers permitting the ‘renucleation’ (a very Peckham term) of existing services such that the resulting building would agglomerate health and social amenities (as well as being built and partially maintained by local government).

Although Fry noted that there was little precedent for the architectural form of a community centre ‘since even its organisation is embryonic and widely variant’, his design was clearly an assimilation of both his own and others’ explorations of the ‘centre-idea’. Comprising two ranges of buildings linked at first floor level, Fry’s design was centrifugal and picturesque. As at Peckham, transparency was central to the design, with clear views into the building as one approached, and across and through the building as one made one’s way around its parts. On its eastern side, and again visible from the entrance, was a swimming pool; another echo of Peckham. Structurally too, this was intended as a framed structure; further enabling transparency. The overall effect, Fry declared, was ‘intimate in scale and the reverse of institutional in character.’

The scheme was a ‘state of the art’ demonstration of the community centre socially, programmatically and, in particular, architecturally. Noteworthy is Fry’s use of certain motifs (transparency, walkways, the fan-shaped hall), which, as we will see, became something of a lexicon for post-war planners. Similarly, his choice of materials also pointed to a shift in contemporary modernist sensibilities. He wrote how ‘recent school building’ (surely Impington) was the precedent for his imaginary specification, which was for brick and light steel for the hall and gymnasium, while the bridge between their respective entrances was to be painted timber over a light steel framework.

Such choices formed part of an ongoing shift in English modernist circles, which, informed by the socio-spatial ideas discussed above, sought a formal architectural language which was its correlate. His shift was, as will become apparent in later parts of this paper, central to the re-alignment of CIAM’s aims after 1945, and the architectural and urban forms of the post-war Welfare State.

[We suggest that this point would be the conclusion to the first part of the article; the remainder would be published in the subsequent issue]

PART TWO: The Centre-Idea in Wartime

80 Fry, ‘Community Centre’, 28.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid., 29.
83 Ibid., 29.
The first part of this paper explored projects which were anticipatory and mainly prototypical, exploring the ‘centre-idea’ and establishing its relevance to wider reforming impulses in architecture and planning. For the most part they were schemes generated by groups outside the mainstream and aimed at converting that mainstream. By the end of the 1930s, however, as Fry’s work for the Ministry of Health, and the LCC’s investigations into community centres signals, there were signs that the ‘centre-idea’ was beginning to be absorbed into the wider political discourse. Wartime also saw many of those who had been involved in experiments with the ‘centre-idea’ become directly involved in plans for reconstruction. They worked for local and central government in the preparation of new city and town plans, and sat on government committees that explored new standards for housing and new organisations to promote a national culture. The same period also saw a consolidation of impulses in progressive architectural circles in the UK, but also in the US, to develop a modernism that was a counterpoint to the strictures of the Athens Charter of 1933. This was manifested in moves to produce a formal language of modernism that was intended to be better understood by the ordinary woman and man than the sachlich forms of the 1920s and early 1930s. This more affective modernism was to have its spatial correlate in the understanding that it was the architect’s job (with others) to create environments that enabled people to realise and have represented their innate communal and democratic impulses. The second part of this paper will explore the way that the ‘centre-idea’ was incubated in wartime and the increasing connections between modernist architecture, modernist planning, and reconstruction, such that in peacetime it became embedded in the culture of rebuilding the post-war nation.

Planning the Future City: A Common Approach

It was after 1941 that concerted moves began to be made towards planning for reconstruction. These came in the wake of the Declaration of St James’s Palace (June 1941) and the Atlantic Charter (August 1941) which outlined the allies’ aims for peacetime and which looked to ‘a world in which, relieved of the menace of aggression, all may enjoy economic and social security’. The experience of war to date signalled to many that, as Charles Madge wrote in January 1943, ‘a social war’ was underway, ‘carrying into battle the great drive of our time towards a reconstruction of the social contract.’ Julian Huxley spoke of the beginning of a ‘planning revolution’ while the new social and spatial conditions created in wartime by the mass movement of troops and war work seemed to prove the pre-war anticipatory notion that a new citizen could be formed out of the dynamic interplay between people and space. It is not surprising (although largely unremarked hitherto), therefore, that aspects of the ‘centre-idea’ such as the creation of settings in which community life should be engendered, the deployment of terminology such as the ‘centre’ or ‘instruments’, an emphasis on agglomeration of function, alongside a conception of the citizen as cultured and engaged, permeated discussion about the state of nation from this time onwards. Central to this assimilation was the fact that many of the key figures involved with the genesis of the ‘centre-idea’...
idea’ in the 1930s were at the core of these debates. They created an expanding zone of mutuality with the most significant being that around Innes Pearse and the increasingly influential planner, Jaqueline Tyrwhitt. The latter would prove the connective tissue that linked this innovative strand of British socio-spatial thinking to CIAM and thence to broader re-castings of the nature and purpose of architectural modernism.\(^{87}\)

Tyrwhitt had been among the first students at E.A.A.Rowse’s School for Planning and Research in National Development (SPRND, an offshoot of the Architectural Association) and achieved its diploma in town planning in 1939. After a period of war service in the Women’s Land Army she took up the post of Director of the newly-founded research arm of the SPRND, the Association for Planning and Regional Reconstruction (APRR) in early 1941. This appointment placed her at the heart of the most progressive reform networks nationally and then internationally. Based initially in the Building Centre and later in the former offices of Judith Ledeboer (who was now working for the Ministry of Health) in Russell Square, the Association conducted research into diverse aspects of the re-planning of Britain (including industry, health, population and housing). Here she developed a systematic approach to what she described as the ‘cross-disciplinary survey techniques that could be put into practice for the physical re-planning of Britain’; an approach she saw as ‘a requisite for the realisation of the ideal human environment.’\(^{88}\)

Tyrwhitt linked the Association informally with the Housing Centre and the Town and Country Planning Association, and, later, with the NCSS also. Such connections undoubtedly affected how her approach to planning evolved but perhaps the most important collaboration in this respect was that with Innes Pearse. Ellen Shoskes notes that Tyrwhitt enjoyed the fact that Pearse was ‘full of biological concepts of planning’ and documents how closely the pair worked on the APRR Broadsheet on Health and the Future (published 1943, not long after Pearse’s book *The Peckham Experiment* appeared) as well as one on Education.\(^{89}\) The regular discussion meetings held at the Association became an important forum through which Pearse, in turn, was able to discuss and disseminate her ideas.

The Pioneer Health Centre became an important exemplar for Tyrwhitt, not just for the notion of an organic society that it modelled but also for the connections it made between communities and particular types of space in an urban context. Thus Shoskes notes that another important circle with which Tyrwhitt began to connect with was that of modernist architects. She had made links with the RIBA which, with the exception of its librarian, the very well-networked Bobby Carter, she found rather stuffy. But it seems likely that Carter (as well as Ledeboer) led to her an association with the MARS Group. She was interested in its 1942 Plan for London (published in the *Architectural Review* that June) and sought to connect the Association with the MARS Group; she also started to attend meetings of its Town Planning Committee. By 1945 she had joined the Group as a member.


\(^{89}\) Shoskes, *Jaqueline Tyrwhitt*, 52.
MARS’s 1942 Plan for London offered an early rehearsal of many of the tropes that would come to characterize wartime planning praxis.\(^90\) This typically revolved around the idea that towns and cities might be planned (or replanned) with coherent ‘neighbourhood units’, i.e., areas containing 6-10,000 people which would serve, on the one hand, as a practical unit of organisation (containing the number of households needed to support local schools and shops) and, on the other, as an intended source of identity at a level below the town or city as a whole.\(^91\) London was famously depicted by Patrick Abercrombie (Director of the Town and Country Planning Association) and JH Forshaw in the 1943 *County of London Plan* as a patchwork of idealised communities, shown in almost biological fashion like cells under a microscope; a parallel to the Peckham notion of the formation of a ‘live organismal society’.\(^92\)

These neighbourhoods were conceived as the antithesis to what reformers perceived as the unplanned, centrifugal sprawl of 1930s suburbia. Yet although they suggest a centrifugal approach in that they fragmented the city into separate units, each was to have what the Dudley Report in 1944 described as ‘some principal focal point, some definite “centre”’.\(^93\) That this was so owes much to the fact that the committee that produced the Report was either staffed by, or called as witnesses, many of those involved in generating the centre-idea before 1939 (including Denby, as well as representatives of several voluntary housing associations, the Housing Centre, the NCSS, the TCPA and the APRR; Ledeboer was its Secretary, and author of much of the final text).\(^94\) Such centres would form a neighbourhood focus, visually and conceptually, and would offer opportunities to develop productive and communal forms of recreation, appealing to bodily health as well as questions of education and citizenship. They were construed variously as one building, or a cluster that formed a focal point. The *Greater London Plan* of 1944 imagined these centres with halls, a gymnasium, and spaces for crafts, reading, and games.\(^95\) Stanley Gale’s *Modern Housing Estates* of 1949 similarly proposed a ‘civic centre’ at the heart of the neighbourhood which would comprise a health centre, swimming baths, library, theatre and shops.\(^96\) An illustration of just such a grouping, labelled as a ‘community centre’, appeared in Abercrombie and Paton Watson’s 1943 plan for Plymouth [Figure Twelve].\(^97\)

‘Civic’ did not automatically exclude non-commercial uses; one might perhaps see ‘public buildings, some welfare and recreational buildings’ as tempering the commercial imperatives otherwise present in the ‘centre’. In tones that had strong echoes of the Housing Centre’s rhetoric, the NCSS nonetheless continued to link the centre with governance and citizenship, hoping that centres might contain a room housing newspapers and even copies of *Hansard*, the parliamentary record. It would facilitate and embody:

\(^{91}\) Ibid, 143-4.
\(^{92}\) Forshaw and Abercrombie, *County of London Plan 1943*, coloured plate 1.
\(^{93}\) Central Housing Advisory Committee, *Design of Dwellings*, 62.
\(^{94}\) Ibid., 53.
\(^{95}\) Abercrombie, *Greater London Plan 1944*, 120.
\(^{97}\) Abercrombie and Watson, *Plan for Plymouth*, 78.
the ordering of our relationships as citizens...In the very life of the centre, in the range of its activities and its method of self-government, there is encouragement to initiative and the exercise of freedom (basic qualities of democratic civilisation) ...

There was on the one hand some recognition of diversity (‘the need for reconciling diverse interests’), yet also, in the ambition that the centre should transcend sectional interests, a sense that a model modern citizen might emerge from it. That citizen’s perspective would be rooted in the neighbourhood, hoped the Manchester and Salford Council of Social Service in 1947: ‘the bonds which unite them to each other and to the locality in which they live’.

An exemplar of such thinking, as well as of the zone of mutuality that underpinned the dissemination of the centre‐idea, can be found in the plan for Middlesbrough in Teesside [Figure Thirteen]. This was prepared by a carefully assembled team (an agglomeration of experts that parallels the agglomeration of functions in the centre concept) led by the architect‐planner Max Lock. He brought together architects including Justin Blanco White and Jessica Albery (both of whom had pre‐war links with the Housing Centre, Judith Ledeboer and Elizabeth Denby) and several sociologists, notably Ruth Glass. The team also drew on social surveys overseen by Tyrwhitt’s APRR. The resulting Middlesbrough plan (1945) proposed a number of ‘centres’, each functionally specific but together contributing to ‘the town centre replanned’, a form of words which both established its spatial centrality and also its conscious organisation.

Within a layout that mixed Beaux‐Arts avenues with deliberate asymmetries, these centres included a ‘civic centre’ and a ‘cultural centre’, in addition to an ‘omnibus centre’ and ‘shopping centre’. The civic centre was understood in narrower terms than some of the examples we have encountered: it was to contain the municipal offices, education department, and law courts. Opposite, the ‘cultural centre’ included a college, technical institute, central library, and art gallery: it was a place of active learning as well as passive reception. Nearby were other related functions, including a health centre, gas and electricity showrooms, and a ‘theatre and cinema centre’ with several auditoria. The town centre as a whole was thus a rationally planned setting for modern life and modern citizenship; a notion echoed in Lock’s address to Middlesbrough council in 1945 in which he made play of the borough motto Erimus: ‘we shall be.’

The Middlesbrough Plan’s inclusion of a theatre and cinema centre alongside a cultural centre were indicative of a further consolidation of the ‘centre‐idea’ in wartime: that of an informed and culturally literate citizenry. In January 1943, W.E. Williams (then Director of the Army Bureau of Current Affairs and Editor in Chief of Penguin Books) wrote an article for the Picture Post entitled ‘Are we building a new British culture?’ He noted the consequence of the agglomeration of people (military or civilian) into new and communal spatial contexts (the barracks or the factory): ‘In millions of men and women a new understanding and appreciation for the arts has grown up.’ In an issue that was devoted to a ‘Changing Britain’ he looked ahead and wrote:

98 National Council for Social Service, ‘Community Centres - Living Communities’ [1945].
99 Manchester and Salford Council of Social Service, Community Centres and Associations in Manchester, 7.
100 Max Lock (ed.), The County Borough of Middlesbrough Survey and Plan.
101 Ibid., 403.
102 Ibid., 20.
103 Williams, ‘Are we building a new British culture?’,
Let us so unify our popular culture that in every considerable town we have a centre where people may listen to good music, look at paintings, study any subject under the sun, join in a debate, enjoy a game of badminton - and get a mug of beer or cocoa before they go home.\textsuperscript{104}

Williams’s description of his centre suggests one building encompassing multiple functions (an echo of the Pioneer Health Centre’s admixture of medical overhaul, sports facilities, a cafeteria and library/workshops) and a vision of a resulting multi-faceted citizen. It also signalled how the ‘centre’ was increasingly understood as operating at several scales, with the term used interchangeably. Thus the centre could be a significant site which would be a focus of the town or city and/or a series of buildings called centres which together made up this focal point. These buildings could have various functions, as at Middlesbrough with civic, commercial or cultural functions; a commonality, however, was that, typically, they combined multiple functions (a theatre and a cinema). As much wartime effort went, therefore, into the elaboration of the ‘centre-idea’ not only at the level of the city, but also the building, the cultural building in particular.

In 1943 an amateur theatre company, the People’s Players in Manchester, conceived a ‘cultural centre’ dedicated to ‘artistic work of all kinds’.\textsuperscript{105} It represented voluntary initiative, but this period is notable for the introduction of state subsidies for the arts. The wartime Council (originally Committee) for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts was initially an initiative of the Pilgrim Trust but soon came within the government’s orbit and was transformed in 1945 into the Arts Council for Great Britain, offering subsidies for the arts.\textsuperscript{106} Although limited budgets and post-war building restrictions both meant that the newly formed Arts Council’s initial priority was artistic practice, the idea of a ‘centre’ also figured large in its early thinking, reflecting the views of Williams, who became its Secretary General, and paralleling the state’s growing interest in community centres. In 1945, the Council published plans for an ‘arts centre’, dedicated to music, theatre and the visual arts.\textsuperscript{107} These centres would be constructed in medium-sized towns, i.e., places too small to have separate theatres, concert halls and art galleries. In essence, they reflected ‘decentralisation’ (of the arts from major centres) whilst simultaneously being ‘centralised’ foci at the local level; like civic centres, they also were to be places of specialist expertise, efficiently providing for the arts through their dedicated spaces and equipment.

The term ‘arts centre’ - at least in the singular - can be traced back to the writer George Bernard Shaw, who in 1905 suggested that ‘all towns could have an “art centre”’.\textsuperscript{108} Plan for an Arts Centre, meanwhile, invoked as models a range of international examples as well as the community centres of the 1930s, not only as examples of buildings similarly for social and cultural purposes, but for the way in which they were increasingly supported financially by central and local government.\textsuperscript{109} The Arts Council’s prototype design echoed

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid, 30.
\textsuperscript{105} ‘A Cultural Centre’, Guardian, 28 June 1943.
\textsuperscript{106} Reference to be added if accepted for publication, 9-26.
\textsuperscript{107} Arts Council of Great Britain, Plans for an Arts Centre.
\textsuperscript{109} Arts Council of Great Britain, Plans for an Arts Centre, 5.
the disaggregated planning (and fan-shaped auditorium) of Impington Village College as well as the mixed programme and visual transparency of the Pioneer Health Centre. The brochure illustrates several possible designs, each a low-slung building with large windows, combining spaces for performance, display and refreshment [Figures Fourteen and Fifteen]. In its flat roofs, articulated volumes and expansive glazing, it was clearly ‘modern’ in form, yet its rubble-stone walls situated it within a contextual tendency which had grown up since the 1930s, in which ‘international’ ideas of modern architecture were given what were understood to be regional or national inflections. The arts centre’s walls thus potentially represented a ‘national’ modern architecture, embodying at least in abstract form the notional common culture the building was intended to contain. Inside, it was to be determinedly non-institutional: ‘a touch of colour; taste and exuberance in furnishings and fittings; and a general air of well-being and comfort … we must rid ourselves of the idea that art is a palliative for social evils or a branch of welfare work.’

As in the Pioneer Health Centre, clarity and transparency were stressed. The main entrance was to be ‘prominent’, while once inside the foyer ‘the layout of the plan is apparent’; this space was to be ‘well lit through glass domes in the roof’. Views into and from the building were emphasised. Large windows would ‘frame the picture of the street’, rooting the building in its community but also allowing views of the interior from the street which would be a spur to action. Within the building, spaces were to open one onto the next: the exhibition room, for example, could function as an extension of the foyer, meaning that those attending performances might be tempted also to view the displays during the interval. The auditorium, which was intended to be used in conjunction with any or all of the exhibition room, restaurant and adjacent open-air terrace, was to have a stage combining a degree of flexibility with a permanent proscenium arch and specialist stage technologies. It was to be a space for amateur performance as well as professional work, involving the community.

To some extent, the arts centre prototype, with its interest in participation rather than professional performance, has come to be seen as a route not taken. However, in important respects it can be seen as being as germinal a prototype as Fry’s community centre design of 1939, and part of a broader re-thinking of arts buildings in post-war Britain. This is not only because it embodied a relationship between the state, new forms of culture and the spaces in which they were housed but also because of its imagined architectural language. This represented, as noted, a distinct shift away from the internationalist abstraction of early modernism and suggests its authors were familiar with ongoing debates within English modernist circles about the nature of a new architecture on these shores. Again we can turn to Tyrwhitt as a figure who helpfully unpicked such themes. Her connection with MARS linked her to a re-thinking of modernism which its members had been developing since the mid-1930s and which, alongside the concomitant influence of Pearse, the Housing Centre and so

110 Ibid., 6.
111 Ibid., 9.
112 Ibid., 11.
113 Ibid., 11-13.
115 Reference to be added if accepted for publication, 52-57.
on, led to her conceptualisation of town planning as something that moved beyond the four functions that the Athens Charter had identified. Instead, it encompassed ‘the region, the neighbourhood, work, food, health, education, transport, leisure, holidays.’ This idea (and others) was to be rehearsed in an article on Town Planning published - undoubtedly through her MARS connections - in a new journal, the *Architects’ Year Book* (AYB), an important mouthpiece for the new consensus on how to shape a new Britain.

**Re-Thinking Modernism**

The very first issue of the AYB was edited by Jane Drew, who did much to keep the modernist home front live and active, and published by Lund Humphries. Tyrwhitt’s article invoked the ‘centre-idea’ throughout. She wrote of the need for ‘closely knit neighbourhood life; and this must be rich, abounding life…’, and identified this as breeding ‘social consciousness and civic responsibility.’ In a section devoted to Health, the Pioneer Health Centre was her only focus and she spoke approvingly of how it demonstrated that health was ‘the result of an active life in an environment rich in varied opportunities for mental and physical development and for free and friendly social intercourse.’ As in health, so in planning more generally, and she envisioned how ‘the three-storey building of the Peckham Health Centre may become a free grouping of single-storey buildings interwoven with the general community activities of the neighbourhood.’

Her overall conclusion echoed the Peckham doctors’ concern for an equilibrium between the individual and the community, so while the planning team’s purpose was to enable a place to see itself ‘as a perfectly integrated whole’, the parts could ‘be recognised, the place retain its individuality - it remains itself - but for the first time it realises the enjoyment of good health as it sees its inhabitants moving easily, freely, and joyously about their own business.’

By the time the *AYB* was published, Tyrwhitt had become well-established within a progressive axis that spanned modernist architecture, modernist planning and government organizations for reconstruction. Her standing in the latter was cemented when she was sent by the Ministry of Information early in 1945 to lecture in North America on town planning. She spent much of the next decade moving to and fro between the US and the UK, a transnational circumstance which, thanks to meeting Sigfried Giedion on her first visit, enabled her to become a key figure in the Anglo-American transformation of CIAM.

A degree of re-thinking of modernism was well underway as Tyrwhitt wrote on Town Planning. The shift in direction is clear from Drew’s dedication of the first volume of the *Yearbook* to ‘the modern, humanitarian architect’ and her observation of the balance the articles contained between ‘technical and aesthetic information and ... the sociology necessary’ ahead of the ‘joyous task of creation.’ This characterization of the architect, and architecture, and its emphasis on emotions, was significant. It represented the culmination of

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118 It is notable how many of the publications that were associated with progressive modernist thinking in planning and architecture were published by Lund Humphries. This goes back at least as far as *Focus*, whose editors approached the publisher as it was across the square from the AA in Bedford Square.
120 Ibid., 23.
121 Ibid., 29.
122 Drew, ‘Editor’s Foreword’, 5.
a process of re-thinking the nature and purpose of modernism that had begun in England in
the early 1930s (and somewhat later in the US) and presaged its consolidation and refinement
at both CIAM’s post-war congresses and in built form.

The deep connections between progressive social projects and progressive architects
shaped how modernism in England evolved, and we have seen in part one the building types
that emerged from this relationship. Although the desire for an architecture ‘of a character
previously unknown’ initially shaped the formal (as well as the spatial) language of projects
such as the Pioneer Health Centre and Kensal House, from the beginning of the decade there
had already been a questioning of the sachlich forms favoured by European modernists, a
desire for a more direct correlation between the affective spaces being designed and their
formal expression, as well as an insistence that modernism could and should be mutable and
an ongoing project. Auke van der Woud cites Fry’s 1931 observation: ‘I find much of this
new architecture of the “avant garde” too much a statement of a new discovery and too little
humanized.’123 He also references JM Richards, who wrote in 1935 in a similar vein:
‘Design, as with culture is becoming abstract rather than humanistic.’124

It was as part of these evolving debates that Impington (and the prototype community
centre) were designed. In both, materials (stock brick) and motif (bay windows, the assembly
hall) and programme, its architects invoked a Georgian imaginary of a balanced community
and a century that had created the sort of universal architectural language for which
contemporary modernists sought. Such devices formed part of what emerged as a wider
regional turn as both an older and the younger generation of modernists sought to develop a
language that they understood variously as more ‘English’ (in the examples here), more
responsive to the taste of ordinary people, and which resisted the notion that concrete was the
only ‘modern’ material.125

It was JM Richards who did most to theorise this turn and to connect it with the
international modernist community. His post at the AR, where he had become de facto Editor
by 1937, was a key platform from and through which he and others could articulate and
promulgate a ‘humanistic’ modernism (as we have seen above in the coverage of the Pioneer
Health Centre and the issue devoted to leisure). Jessica Kelly shows how, from 1935, his
writing ‘was characterised by his direct engagement with and empathy for the architectural
needs and values of ordinary people.’126 Such an approach stemmed in part from the
Communist politics which he espoused but arguably also from his connection with the
Peckham doctors and their concern for everyday life in an urban environment. On the one
hand, this manifested in a certain level of preoccupation with style, which derived from a
concern for the legibility of any new formal language to those beyond modernism’s inner
circle. On the other, and perhaps more fundamentally, it understood the affective nature of
architecture and that the spaces of architecture should not be done to people but with people,
only gaining their meaning and validity through this interchange.

123 Van Der Woud, CIAM, 83.
124 Ibid.
125 See reference to be added if accepted for publication.
126 Kelly, No More Giants, ch. 3. We are grateful to Dr Kelly for allowing us to read her book before its
publication.
Richards looked to a movement in the ‘common mind’ (or ‘zone of mutuality’) which could create a ‘live universal language’ which would resonate with both architect and layperson.\textsuperscript{127} Indeed, the \textit{Architectural Review} under his editorship can be understood as the ‘active potent surface’ which drew out this immanent consensus. Richards’s recollection of his determination that ‘his’ Review should appeal ‘to a wide circle of readers’ suggests this. He wrote that its contents would serve:

...as a bridge between the profession and those outside; to explain to the latter what architects were trying to do, and could do if given the opportunity, and to remind the former of their clients’ rather different criteria from their own, for example of the importance of the larger setting to which their buildings must contribute.\textsuperscript{128}

The long-form articles and special issues cited above formed were ‘instruments of health’ that would bring out this immanent consensus.

Richards’s and others’ theorising shows that from the mid-1930s at least in England challenges to the reductivist concerns articulated in the Athens Charter were being made, and that a reconceptualisation of modernism as affective and people-centred was emerging. In wartime, Richards took something of a backseat in these debates when he left the Review in early 1942 in order to take up a post at the Ministry of Information (first in London and then in Egypt; Nikolaus Pevsner was his successor). He did, however, offer a sort of full stop to his re-thinking of modernism as an indicator of the baton that he passed on to his MARS contemporaries who remained on the Home Front. In an article of May 1940 he wrote this provocation: ‘the revolutionary phrase of modern architecture is now over [and] can no longer claim exemption from criticism on aesthetic grounds.’\textsuperscript{129}

\textit{The most dangerous and difficult of steps.}\textsuperscript{130}

As the 1940s began, it was not only in England that such ideas were being rehearsed. Eric Mumford has charted how cultural geo-politics saw many of those most \textit{sachlich} of modernists move first to the UK and then to the US. Walter Gropius, Siegfried Giedion and Josep Luis Sert gathered at the Harvard School of Design, and formed a parallel centre of re-thinking. Their revisionism had two complementary aspects, which had very strong overlaps with the thinking of Richards et al. On the one hand they were concerned with moving modernism towards a richer and more expressive language, both spatially and formally. On the other, their attention turned to setting architecture in the wider setting of the city and the region. This reflected, as Mumford argues, how CIAM had increasingly absorbed ideas from the town-planning profession into the purview of modernist architects’ practice.\textsuperscript{131} Thus in the same way that the British progressive thinkers outlined above firmly located their concerns within an urban, rural and, increasingly, a regional context, so too did CIAM members posit themselves ‘as international experts who could, after thorough study of a city, or eventually, an entire

\begin{footnotes}
\item[127] Richards, ‘The condition of architecture’189.
\item[128] Richards, \textit{Memoirs}, 136.
\item[129] MacQuedy [pseud. JM Richards], ‘Criticism’, 183.
\item[130] Giedion, ‘New Monumentality’, 27.
\end{footnotes}
In so doing, he articulated concepts of the purpose and nature of architectural space which mapped very closely with the ‘centre-idea’ as articulated in the English 1930s. In effect, step three, ‘the reconquest of monumental expression’, was to mark the reconceptualization of architecture as the Peckham doctors’ ‘active potent surface’ and to echo their and Richards’s (among others) desire to reframe the city as a place of community association and active citizenship.

Giedion’s starting point was what he identified as the fundamental desire that people had for buildings ‘that represent their social, ceremonial and community life. They want these buildings to be more than a functional fulfillment. They seek the expression of their aspirations in monumentality, for joy and excitement.’\(^{135}\)

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132 Ibid., 392.
133 Ibid., 391.
134 Giedion, ‘New Monumentality’, 27.
135 Ibid., 28.
Richards, Giedion posited a true monumentality linked to periods of ‘real cultural life’ when it was possible ‘to project creatively their own image of society.’ He continued, ‘They [the people] were able to build up their community centers (agora, forum, medieval square) to this purpose.’ The familiar ills of the preceding century - Industrialisation, suburbanisation - had broken this correlation and had proved itself ‘incapable of creating anything to be compared to these institutions.’ Meanwhile, modern architects had been too preoccupied with reinventing the cell and the city to attend to these more sociological and affective concerns. Thus in the present day:

There are monuments, many monuments, but where are the community centers? Neither radio nor television can replace the personal contact which alone can develop community life.

To remedy this situation, Giedion looked for a renewed recognition that the emotional life of people mattered as much as social or economic circumstances when it came to planning cities. This would result in what he called ‘urban centers’ which would originate ‘when cities are not regarded as mere agglomerations of jobs and traffic lights.’ The terminology is significant: urban centre, community centre. Community and community life had been used as terms throughout the Nine Points, but not linked to centre, now their connection to and the use of the word centre tied them to a conceptualisation of architectural space as a generator of contemporary forms of association and as a centripetal force to keep ‘the people’ ‘from going further astray.’

Like the Peckham doctors, Giedion was working from the belief that certain behaviours were immanent in humanity. He wrote:

The problem ahead of us focuses on the question: Can the emotional apparatus of the average man be reached? Is he susceptible only to football games and horse races? We do not believe it. There are forces inherent in man, which come to the surface when one evokes them … his inherent, though unconscious, feeling may slowly be awakened by the original expression of a new community life.

He looked to ‘those who govern’ who ‘must know that spectacles, which will lead the people back to a neglected community life, must be reincorporated within urban centers … Not haphazard world fairs … but newly created urban centers should be the site for collective emotional events, where the people play as important a role as the spectacle itself, and where a unity of the architectural background, the people, and the symbols conveyed by the spectacle, will be achieved.’ Such sentiments could very easily be substituted with the Peckham doctors’ description of their new building ‘as furnished by people and their actions’ as they responded to the ‘potent, active surfaces’ that the instruments of health and its contents constituted.

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136 Ibid., 31
137 Ibid.
138 Ibid., 37.
139 Ibid., 31.
140 Ibid., 38.
141 Ibid., 39.
A slight divergence between English theories and those being developed in Harvard was in Giedion’s relative emphasis on the formal, as well as the spatial, expression of the New Monumentality. Not surprisingly, given the co-authorship of the Nine Points manifesto, Giedion looked in his 1944 paper to a revival of collaboration among architects, sculptors and painters to express a community’s emotional life. Indeed, in a section subtitled ‘Painting points the way’ he argued that artists such as Picasso, Arp, Miro and Leger had already begun to develop ‘the rebirth of the lost sense of monumentality.’ He identified ‘the urge for larger canvases’ and the use of brighter colours as well as ‘an impulse towards simplification’; a process which he identified as ‘the hallmark of any kind of symbolic expression.’ In creating ‘symbols out of the anonymous forces of our period’, he believed painters ‘may forecast the next development in architecture’. He looked, therefore for, ‘painting, sculpture and architecture [to] come together on a basis of common perception, aided by all the technical means which our period has to offer … The means for a more dignified life must be prepared before the demand arises.’

In the same year, Sert wrote ‘The Human Scale in City Planning’, which Eric Mumford describes as a companion essay to ‘The New Monumentality’ and one that made explicit links to an unfolding CIAM approach to urbanism. Not only did Sert stress the need to plan for human values and the deployment of the neighbourhood unit but he went further and advocated the creation of pedestrian civic centres: ‘the civic and cultural center constitutes the most important element … its brain and governing machine.’ This was where university buildings, concert halls and theatres, a stadium, central public library, admin buildings’ as well as places for public gatherings, the main monuments constituting landmarks in the region, and symbols on popular aspiration’ would be found.

The thinking of US and UK modernists had necessarily developed on parallel, if complementary, tracks during the war years, but the advent of peace and the first signals of definite plans for reconstruction meant that it was now possible for the various branches of CIAM to come together again and build on such re-thinkings. The final section of this paper now turns to the consolidation of this new approach to modernism and its mapping onto the reconstructed British landscape.

PART THREE: The Centre-idea Realised

In 1947, Max Fry outlined eight conditions which had changed the context for architectural production fundamentally since 1939. Among these were ‘[the] strong movement to make up deficiencies through planned re-building of new towns and regions under Government aegis,’ ‘increased awareness of the value of design in industry …’ and ‘state patronage of arts through agencies such as CEMA, CID, British Council etc. Growth of official architecture.’

142 Ibid., 36.
143 Mumford, CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 151.
144 Sert cited by Ibid., 151-152. The original paper was published in Paul Zucker (ed). New Architecture and City Planning (New York: Philosophical Library, 1944), 392-412.
His text formed part of the preparations for the first meeting of CIAM since the fifth Congress in Paris in 1937, a moment that marked the ascendancy of the Anglo-American alliance outlined above, and the embedding of the centre-idea as it reformulated the organisation’s aims and purpose in a post-war context.

CIAM 6 was held from 7th to 14th September 1947 in Bridgwater, Somerset. A small market town in the English countryside was not the typical setting for Congress and MARS member Mark Hartland Thomas explained that it was an explicit choice ‘to go into rustication away from the distraction of a great city.’\textsuperscript{146} An implicit reason may have been the fact that the converted Georgian building in which the delegates met exemplified the new context, outlined by Fry, in which modernist architects were now working. This housed the Bridgwater Arts Centre, one of the first projects to be funded by the new Arts Council of Great Britain. The epitome of the centre-idea it was the perfect setting to allow the Congress to achieve its goals. As Cornelis van Esteren observed in his opening address, ‘A CIAM congress can only succeed and achieve results if it works as a "community" - it can never succeed if each man follows his own independent line.’\textsuperscript{147}

The MARS Group had taken the lead in organising the Congress. In part this was a matter of practicality: it was too costly for most members to get to New York, the location first proposed, and was closer, as Hartland Thomas wrote, ‘to the centre of gravity.’\textsuperscript{148} Equally it reflected the continuity of thinking that had taken place in England from 1939 onwards and the growing gravitas of the MARS Group; Anthony Cox and Leo de Syllas recorded in \textit{Plan} that ‘to the surprise of many Continental and American delegates it was discovered that Great Britain was no longer an outsider in the international field, but had quietly achieved a position in the first rank …’.\textsuperscript{149} Richards (now back in the UK) and Arthur Ling attended the CIRPAC meetings that laid down the foundations for the Congress during 1946. It was eventually agreed that no theme would be adopted and that it would instead function primarily as a reunion and to lay the grounds for the resumption of collective work.\textsuperscript{150}

Despite the emphasis on regrouping and practicalities,\textsuperscript{151} it was clear that in spirit the Congress would end up being a working through of the ideas which had been proposed in those CIRPAC meetings: Richards had argued for a theme of architecture and the common man whereas Giedion favoured architecture and its relation to sculpture and painting. Such topics were, in many respects, sides of the same coin and Hartland Thomas reported ‘that it was realized on all sides of CIAM’ that the aesthetics of architecture were now irrevocably in their purview given that rationalised building and ‘its truthful expression’ were now ‘well-established in official and other institutions.’\textsuperscript{152} Le Corbusier put it more poetically: ‘Enfin l’imagination entre les CIAM.’\textsuperscript{153}

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\textsuperscript{146} Hartland Thomas, ‘Report of CIAM 6’, 11.
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\textsuperscript{147} ‘From the Opening Address of the President C.Van Esteren,’ in Giedion (ed). \textit{Decade of New Architecture}, 7.
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\textsuperscript{148} Hartland Thomas, ‘Report of CIAM 6’, 10.
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\textsuperscript{149} Cox and Desyllas, ‘CIAM Congress, 1947’, 16.
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\textsuperscript{151} Commissions were established to investigate different aspects of post-war architecture and planning, while a group convened under Le Corbusier, ASCORAL, was charged with laying down principles of new communication formats for individual commissions’ findings, what became the CIAM Grid.
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\textsuperscript{152} Hartland Thomas, ‘Report of CIAM 6’, 9.
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The week of Congress was a ‘moving experience’ for all who attended. Alongside reports from each of the national groups, when it was discovered that ‘the development of ideas in the several groups had been proceeding on parallel lines in spite of the scanty contacts,’ there were visits, including one to the Bristol Aeroplane factory which was now making prefab houses, and a number of receptions in both Bridgwater and Bristol. Delegates were hosted by members of the Arts Centre. The week culminated in a series of longer speeches. These included Richards on ‘Contemporary Architecture and the Common Man’, Giedion on ‘Our Attitudes towards Problems of Aesthetics’, while Gropius in his talk on ‘Urbanism’ insisted on the linking of schools to community centres, which he described as ‘a cultural breeding ground which enables the individual to attain his [sic] full stature within the community.’ Such a definition surely derived from his experience at Impington, which, as we have seen, was a key pre-war instance of the centre-idea. It is not, then, surprising that Congress concluded with the revised aims for CIAM, cited at the beginning of Part One of this pair of articles.

Two years later Congress met again for its seventh meeting, this time in Bergamo, Italy in July 1949. Mumford characterises this as concluding somewhat unresolved, which reflected, as Jos Bosman recalled, a primary emphasis on Le Corbusier’s project to develop a new form of Grid through which national surveys could be presented. He had proposed this at CIAM 6, but with a tellingly revised four functions: living, working, development of mind and body, communication. This might be understood as Le Corbusier’s attempt to retain his previous pre-eminence but it acted as a slightly uneasy bedfellow to the subject of the day four plenary, ‘Report on the Plastic Arts’, led by Richards and Giedion. This considered ‘how to clarify a synthesis of the arts’ derived from a collaboration between artists and architects might occur, and to consider whether the man in the street was able to appreciate such a synthesis. Moreover, as Bosman notes, it jarred with the location of the conference itself. Bergamo was a plaza-town, which ‘raised fundamentally different questions about the historical continuity of a town’s growth.’ Given this, Richards argued that attempting to answer these kinds of questions ‘could profitably be made part of CIAM’s future work.’

The Heart of the City
Thus it was that in November 1949 Wells Coates wrote formally to Giedion with the MARS Group’s proposal that civic design should be the theme of CIAM 8. It was Tyrwhitt, however, who led its organisation, continuing the pivotal role in post-war CIAM she assumed at Bridgwater where she had acted as intermediary between MARS and Giedion its organisation. By the time preparation began for CIAM 8 this role was firmly cemented, not least because she was now partly based in North America (at Yale and the University of Toronto). Tyrwhitt worked closely with the MARS Group to define the theme of the Congress. This was ‘the Core’, a concept so thoroughly imbued and articulated in Peckham

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156 Gropius cited by Mumford, CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 173.
157 Ibid., 179-98.
158 Bosman, ‘My association with CIAM gave me a new perspective’, 483.
159 Shoskes, Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, 130.
rhetoric that it is hardly surprising that George Scott Williamson should have been invited to, and lionised at, the Congress meeting.

The transcript of Sert’s opening remarks at CIAM 8 made this clear. He noted that the MARS Group had proposed the topic because of its interest but also its difficulty (since it had not been explored before). This was precisely why it ‘becomes a CIAM subject; CIAM has always pioneered this kind of [difficult] work.’ Before proceeding to MARS’s definition of the Core, Sert contextualised the topic in the context of contemporary planning concerns. He noted that in recent years this had been about ‘suburbanization’ which had reduced the city only to a place to work. He continued, ‘if we want to do something with our cities we have again to talk in civic and urban terms’ and he added ‘there is one advantage of living in a city, and that is to get man together with man [sic], and to get people to exchange ideas and to be able to discuss them freely.’ In the suburbs, however, people see only ‘what is shown and hears what one is told.’

Through its study of the Core, Congress’s concern was ‘to see how, by means of establishing a series of cores, we can work out the reverse process of what has been called decentralization; a process we call recentralization, to build up units and communities around centers that would bring them together.’ The desire was to create modern versions of the core or nuclei that towns and cities used to have and this he linked to a concept of democracy: ‘I believe people should be able to get together to exchange ideas and to discuss, to shake hands and look at each other directly and talk on all the things that are extremely important for our way of living if we are to keep a civic life which we can believe in.’ Such cores could exist at different scales but together - and this was a concept that Tyrwhitt herself would speak on at Congress - they would create ‘a constellation of communities…’ He continued, ‘I do not see how we can form new cities or redevelop the old cities if we do not start with the place where the people have to meet, where the people have to exchange ideas, where the people know what planning and other things mean to them.’

Such ideas can be seen in MARS’s definition of the Core as a fifth element to the Corbusian four: ‘the element which makes a community a community, and not merely an aggregate of individuals, and that an essential feature in any true organism (such as the community) is a physical heart or nucleus, which we call the Core.’ The Group added ‘a community of people is a self-conscious organism, and that the members are not only dependent on one another, but each one knows he [sic] is so dependent. It is expressed differently at different levels … but at each level a special environment is called for - both as a setting for the expression of this sense of community and an actual expression of it.’

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160 Sert, ‘The Themes of the Congress. The Core’ in Mumford. ed. The writings of J L Sert, 2. Mumford notes that the version published here is different from that included in The Heart of the City but was what Sert actually said.
161 Ibid., 2.
162 Ibid., 5.
163 Ibid., 2.
164 Ibid., 6.
165 Ibid., 6.
166 Ibid., 8.
167 Cadbury Brown, ‘CIAM 8, Report’, 64.
The Congress programme, which Tyrwhitt developed with Coates, invited members to study the Core at five scales: the housing group, the neighbourhood, town or city sector, city or metropolis. CIAM 8 itself took place over five days and comprised morning sessions with papers and general discussions around the Core. There were visiting speakers, with Scott Williamson’s paper, as Cadbury Brown noted, offering delegates the connection between the human and the architectural that they were seeking. A central theme in his paper was how evolution had allowed man [sic] to be free, and ‘no longer dominated by instinct.’ The spatial corollary of this was that ‘if you get the conditions right, [his] actions will be right; they will be selective’ - hence ‘the power of the architect to fix the conditions in which life and living has to take place,’ which, he added, was ‘tremendous - almost frightening.’ Such conditions should enable what he called ‘human autonomy’ to be maintained and sustained. Moreover, in an overlap with MARS’s outline of the Core, Williamson insisted that ‘all planning for the future must be based on the new functional unity, the human organism as a whole, i.e. “the Family-in-its-Home”’. It was ‘the Core for human development’. This was signalled not just in his title - ‘The Individual and the Community’, but also in his assertion that the ‘value of home and family is that it elicits an altruism, because each of the parts acts in awareness of the whole.’

Williamson’s talk was, as noted, included in the conference publication, The Heart of the City, published the following year. Subtitled ‘towards the humanisation of urban life’, it comprised transcripts of the many conversations and papers that had taken place and, at Part 3, included a summary of CIAM 8 by Giedion. ‘A Short Outline of the Core’ offered a precis of the new guiding principles that drove the reorientation of modernism that had begun with CIAM 6. This stressed the need to work at a human scale, and stated that ‘the most important role of the Core is to enable people to meet one another and to exchange ideas.’ Care should be taken that ‘both the relations of individuals with one another, and the relations of individuals with the community’ were taken into account while, in a phraseology that could have come straight from the pages of Pearse and Scott Williamson’s pre-war writings, the Core’s function was defined as ‘to provide opportunities - in an impartial way - for spontaneous manifestations of social life. It is the meeting place of the people and the enclosed stage for their manifestations.’ Drawing on Giedion’s concern for the synthesis of the arts with architecture it was noted that ‘Urbanism is the framework within which architecture and other plastic arts must be integrated to perform once more a social function.’ The section concluded with an instruction and encomium of sorts:

This animation of a spontaneous nature, made possible by a means - the Core - which members of CIAM can understand and include in their own plans, seems a heritage that our group, after twenty years’ work, can now hand on the the next generation. Our task has been to resolve the first cycle of the work of CIAM by finding a means to transform the passive individual in society into an active participant of social life.

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169 Tyrwhitt et al, Heart of the City, part 3, 159-68; this quotation at p.165, italics original.
170 Tyrwhitt et al, Heart of the City, part 3, 166-7; italics original, underlining by authors.
171 Tyrwhitt et al, Heart of the City, part 3, 168.
The overlaps between the centre-idea and the resolutions of CIAM 8 were not only to be read in the pages of *The Heart of the City*. They had already begun to be realised, and what is notable about that eighth meeting is that its site (and its timing) were as symbolic as the choice of the arts centre at Bridgwater had been. It was held at Hoddesdon, close to Harlow, one of the first New Towns that had been designated under the New Towns Act, 1946 and was scheduled to coincide with the Festival of Britain, which ran from May to October 1951. Harlow’s plan was in many ways a demonstration of the principles that CIAM was engaging with: it was organised with clear neighbourhood units, separated by landscape belts; each had a clear ‘centre’. As the following section will show, the fact of the centre-idea’s imbrication in reconstruction debates meant that delegates to CIAM 8 could see at first hand what the MARS Group called ‘the fifth element’.

**The Festival of Britain**

The Festival of Britain, staged across the country during 1951, was intended as a ‘tonic to the nation’ or, in Giedion’s characterisation, ‘a collective emotional event’, after years of wartime hardship and post-war austerity, a commemoration of the centenary of the 1851 Great Exhibition, and a glimpse of the new Britain that was beginning to take shape. Festival events took in the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, but this diverse geography had a clear focus in London, where the principal Festival site was located on the South Bank of the River Thames. Here, an area of run-down industrial buildings made way for a new contemporary landscape of pavilions, set around the Royal Festival Hall which, in the words of the architect Clough Williams-Ellis was both a ‘cultural centre’ and an ‘amenity centre’. The official guidebook made this ‘centring’ of activities clear, referring to the South Bank site as ‘the centrepiece’ of the Festival; furthermore, it was situated in ‘the heart of London’.

Co-ordinated by Hugh Casson and Misha Black, the site was planned as a totality, which in its synthesis of art, architecture and sculpture realised Giedion’s 1944 peroration and in the diversity of content offered multiple ‘instruments of health’ to visitors. The layout eschewed the axiality and centrality typical of previous great exhibitions and world’s fairs: there was no single ‘central’ building, rather the largest structures, the Festival Hall and Dome of Discovery, flanked the Hungerford railway bridge, with the two halves of the site being labelled as ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’, the flow of the Thames taking the place of ‘east’ and ‘west’. The pavilions themselves were laid out as a ‘narrative’, intended to suggest a particular view of Britain’s place in the world: its history, character, and contributions to contemporary science, as well as its position within the newly emerging Commonwealth. The Dome of Discovery - a display of key inventions - made this theme clear, reading as a kind of globe pervaded throughout by apparent British ingenuity in what was both a centring of Britishness and a display of its wide reach. Echoing the dispassionate conception of pre-war and wartime centres, the Festival was very definitely ‘not a trade show’, and even when furnished room sets were shown in the Homes and Gardens Pavilion, the prices of the items on show were deliberately not stated.

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173 Ibid., 6.
174 Ibid., 8.
175 Atkinson, *Festival of Britain*, 165 and 174.
The ‘centre-idea’ was directly addressed by the Festival in several ways. In the east end of London, the newly built Lansbury neighbourhood served as a ‘live architecture’ demonstration of the planning principles of the County of London Plan, containing, in addition to new homes and public buildings, several temporary pavilions. Of these, the ‘Town Planning Pavilion’ is the most notable. This was created by Tyrwhitt, who was invited to work on this section in January 1950 and was responsible for the script, selection and organisation of the display. She intended that it be a ‘tangible’ demonstration of ‘her argument that the purpose of planning is to promote the fuller development of the people.’ It thus included an exhibit entitled ‘the heart of the town’, which, echoing the wartime calls for planned centres as a counterbalance to decentralisation, showed ‘how a town centre might be remodelled, in order to make it once again the focus of social life’. Tyrwhitt invited the artist Tom Mellor to produce a diorama of ‘Avoncaster’ (based on Norwich) showing a new ‘civic centre’ as a ‘heart or centre in which its people can take a pride’ [Figure Seventeen]. As well as documenting the work in progress on 14 new towns, the guide to Lansbury described ‘the heart of the town’ as ‘the focus of social activities, an essential part of a healthy community.’

Perhaps the apogee of the centre-idea at the Festival was a building whose conception pre-dated the event’s organisation and which was one of the few to outlive the complex’s demolition when it closed in October 1951. This was the Royal Festival Hall, which, for the leader of the London County Council (LCC), Isaac Hayward, was the ‘vital focus’ of the Festival: the centre of the centre, as it were. The LCC had earmarked the South Bank for reconstruction during the war years, with plans for new cultural and office buildings figuring in the County of London Plan, which was predicated on the idea of London as an ultimate centre in a reconfigured world view. Its introduction announced: ‘This is a plan for London. A plan for one of the greatest cities the world has ever known; for the capital of an Empire, [...] the meeting place of a commonwealth of nations.’ The reconstructed South Bank site was to include a concert hall (described as a ‘culture centre’ in the plan) which was to replace the Queen’s Hall, bombed in 1941. In the face of stripped-classical designs by Charles Holden, and a Herbert Rowse-inspired proposal by a senior LCC designer, Edwin Williams, the LCC Architect, Robert Matthew, moved during 1948 to ensure that the new hall would be designed by a hand-picked team that self-consciously rehearsed the principles of the New Monumentality. The conceptual and architectural parallels with the Pioneer Health Centre (and the 1945 Arts Centre prototype) are even stronger. The official guidebook referred to ‘quite literally a transparency, whereby even the passer-by can perceive the whole inner shape and purpose of the whole great edifice.’ Extensive glazing gave views in, especially

176 Shoskes, *Jaqueline Tyrwhitt*, 132-3. Tyrwhitt’s involvement in the Festival’s planning and design was just one example of the overlap of centre-idea oriented personnel from pre- to post-war, which also included Judith Ledeboer, Max Fry and Jane Drew.

177 1951 Exhibition of Architecture - Poplar (guidebook), 9.

178 Ibid., 42.


180 Forshaw and Abercrombie, *County of London Plan 1943*, iii.

181 Ibid., 19.


at night, and allowed those within to situate themselves within the modernising cityscape beyond, while, within the building, a similar sense of connection was promoted by glass walls, open stairwells and views between different levels; all achieved through a framed structure the columns of which again served as punctuating marks that articulated the internal space. ‘Vista succeeds to vista’, proclaimed the guidebook: ‘as you move through the foyers and promenades, if you are aware of the excitement of its vistas and its continual unfolding of space, we shall not have failed’.184 As at Peckham, so in Lambeth’s riverside, ‘the sight of action’ was to be ‘an incentive to action’ in a building ‘designed to be furnished by people and their actions.’ [Figure Eighteen]

The multi-functionality of the building was also important. Alongside the main concert hall and restaurant, the original plans included an art gallery and exhibition hall, not unlike the 1945 prototype Arts Centre. The gallery was postponed early on in the design process, as was a planned second ‘small hall’, owing to a lack of materials and time. Nonetheless, an image of the intended space appeared in the official guide to the building, showing vases, sculptures and paintings on display.185 One wonders if ‘industrial design’ was to be shown alongside works of ‘art’, contributing (in an echo of Morris’s commitment to art and good design at Impington) to the wider education in taste supplied by the building. In addition, the foyers were conceived as multipurpose spaces, with room for socialising and dancing as well as eating and drinking. Here, again, are echoes of Peckham as well as the arts centre prototype, namely the idea that patrons might engage in a range of potentially ‘improving’ recreational activities. This ability simultaneously to accommodate a range of activities prompted the guidebook to proclaim that the Hall ‘surely is something which at last makes the rather vague title, a “cultural centre”, a fine reality.’186

A bold and optimistic vision of a modern Britain and its citizens the Festival of Britain may have been, but base politicking saw a newly incumbent Conservative government order the demolition of much of the South Bank site. Fortunately, the modernist thinking and the centre-idea that the Festival had rehearsed survived in a disaggregated form. This, as we shall see, offered renewed versions of pre-war prototypes.

The Design Centre and the South Bank Art Centre
Among the eight conditions that Fry outlined in 1947 was ‘state patronage of arts through agencies such as CEMA, CID, British Council etc. ‘ CEMA, as we have noted, became the Arts Council, whose patronage we have seen at Bridgwater and whose influence was strongly felt at the Festival of Britain. Equally important was what Fry abbreviated to CID, but which was more commonly referred to as the CoID, the Council of Industrial Design. Founded in 1944 ‘to promote by all practicable means the improvement of design in the products of the British manufacturing industry, it understood design as central to the process of the reinvigoration of the British economy after the war. It addressed two audiences – to persuade manufacturers of the integral role the designer should play in the production process – that is, not mere styling, but there from the start researching materials, consumer demand, working

184 Ibid., 15.
185 Ibid., 77-9.
186 Ibid., 21.
with engineers and others to create new goods. This would give British goods a distinctive mark both at home and abroad and help the export drive. A second audience was buyers and the consuming public, who should be encouraged to identify and demand such goods: a virtuous circle from which all benefited.\textsuperscript{187}

The foundation of the CoID emerged from a consolidation of the sort of pre-war thinking about the redemptive and reformist possibilities of design in relation to a modern citizenship (and economy) that were rehearsed at Kensal House and in ventures such as the Building Centre. A more immediate impetus was the belief, echoing the words of W.E. Williams in the \textit{Picture Post} cited above, that the war had effected a decisive shift in the people’s sensibilities. Writing in 1956, the industrial designer Milner Gray observed that ‘The impact of war on millions of young people has engendered a quite different, more casual, more experimental attitude to life.’\textsuperscript{188} These two influences fed into a set of Council practices which again centred around the creation of environments rich in opportunities: the presentation through forms of display and exhibition, examples of ‘good’ design.

For the first ten years of its existence, such a policy manifested itself primarily through publications (including its own magazine, \textit{Design}, first published in 1949) and, most emphatically, its 1946 exhibition ‘Britain can Make It’, held at a V&A Museum still empty having had its exhibits removed for safekeeping during the war. A series of displays introduced visitors to the idea of industrial design & the industrial designer, as well as showing them the sort of goods that could arise from collaboration between designers and industry, often using some of the material innovations that had come about in wartime. It was visited by 1.5 million visitors over 14 weeks.\textsuperscript{189} The Council also contributed extensively to pavilions and displays at the Festival of Britain such as that for Homes and Gardens.

Such work represented the conviction that, as yet, British industry had neither the well-designed goods nor number of progressive manufacturers to offer more than a sign of things to come. By 1956, however, it was felt that the time had arrived to move its expository work to a more permanent footing and that there were sufficient articles of ‘good design’ on the market to warrant a permanent display. Thus on April 26, 1956, at 28, Haymarket, London, just off Piccadilly Circus, the Council opened what it called the Design Centre. This served both as its headquarters and a space for display of contemporary British design & changing themed special displays (the first was on textiles).

It is hard not to see the choice of nomenclature as deliberate. Functionally and conceptually this was a purpose-built hybrid of the centre-idea as rehearsed in the pre-war Building Centre and Housing Centre, while spatially, as at the Pioneer Health Centre, its interior was marked by its openness and transparency. Arranged across a lower and upper ground floor, and a first floor, visitors were presented with design as information (or instruments of health). This was a disinterested, or in CIAM’s term ‘impartial’ space, signalled by the Centre’s slogan ‘Look before you shop’. Thus the objects were complemented with an information counter and later the Council’s Design Index: a system that documented products with a photograph, sample and relevant information.

\textsuperscript{187} See Whitworth, ‘Inscribing Design on the Nation’, 1-14.
\textsuperscript{188} ‘Retrospect to Prospect,’ \textit{Design}, 1956, 29.
\textsuperscript{189} See reference to be added if accepted for publication (VADS website).
Like the Building Centre and the Housing Centre (which was a stone’s throw away), the Design Centre was situated on a busy thoroughfare not far from the centre of government. Gordon Russell recalled that although it was housed within ‘a new and ugly building’, it was ‘on an almost perfect site, in the heart of the West End of London about 150 yards from Piccadilly Circus.’

Paul Reilly noted additionally that the site was chosen for the footfall it could guarantee as well as the fact that it had a bus stop directly outside. The elevation to the street (designed by Ward and Austin, the interiors were by Robert and Roger Nicholson, both employed by the Ministry of Works) had large plate glass windows and entrance doors, in order to attract the public inside. The Council’s Chair, W.J. Worboys, invoked the spirit of the Pioneer Health Centre in his characterisation of the new Centre not as ‘a museum …it is a living, active, moving thing’, while the managing director of William Perring & Co. Ltd commented at the opening that it would mean ‘the retailer will benefit from a design and quality conscious public.’ Such a sentiment also echoed Sert’s observation in 1951 that city planning should ‘... start with the place where the people have to meet, where the people have to exchange ideas, where the people know what planning and other things mean to them.’

Similarly ‘living’ and ‘active’ was the South Bank Arts Centre. As noted above, the 1943 County of London Plan had designated the South Bank as ‘the logical position for a great and modern expansion of the capital’, with the more specific function of being ‘a great cultural centre’, which would add to its ‘civic aspects as a capital.’ This was a complement to the many references throughout the Plan to other forms of centre (community, social,) as intrinsic to reconstruction. The Royal Festival Hall was but the first phase of this development and once the Festival of Britain was over, efforts resumed on completing what the Plan had described as a centre that included ‘...amongst other features, a modern theatre, a large concert hall, and the headquarters of various organisations.

The LCC’s Comprehensive Development Area plans for the area (1953) were ambitious and envisaged a national theatre, air terminal, exhibition centre, office buildings, an exhibition gallery linked physically to the Festival Hall, promenades and open spaces around the Hall as well as pedestrian links to Waterloo Station. These would ultimately be scaled down but in principle the plans were approved by the Ministry of Town and Country Planning in March 1955. As a project, however, the scheme had a particularly prolonged genesis, due, in part, to the complexity of negotiations between the LCC and the Arts Council. Building did not begin until the early 1960s, and what was called the South Bank Arts Centre (SBAC) was only completed in 1968 (by which time the LCC had been superseded by the Greater London Council, GLC). The Centre comprised the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Purcell Room (GLC Architect’s Department, 1967), respectively for

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190 Russell, Designer’s Trade, 262.  
191 Reilly, An Eye on Design, 77.  
192 ‘Opening of the Centre,’ Design, 1956, 47 and 52.  
193 Forshaw and Abercrombie, County of London Plan 1943, 19.  
194 Ibid., 131.  
196 Arts Council of Great Britain, Housing the Arts in Great Britain, vol 1, 54. (The joint secretary of the committee which produced this report was none other than WE Williams).  
197 Taylor, Art for the Nation, 213.
the performance of a wide classical repertoire and for chamber music, and the Hayward
Gallery (GLC Architect’s Department, 1968). The Hayward was built to house exhibitions
organised by the Arts Council from its own collection (as well as touring exhibitions) and
was designed in close association with the Council to meet this remit. It contains five
galleries of different sizes clustered around a central service core with three outdoor sculpture
galleries.

A constant aspect of the centre-idea was its relation to a periphery and the
dissemination and repetition of an ur-centre. We have seen how the Peckham doctors hoped
their original centre would be repeated and the way that both the Building Centre and
Housing Centre distributed information from a headquarters base. The Festival of Britain’s
South Bank was, as noted, the ‘heart’ of a national Festival while The Design Centre pursued
a practice of disseminating standards through its publications (and later the Design Council
approved label) and by the opening of Centres elsewhere: a Scottish Design Centre was
opened in 1957 at 46 West George Street, Glasgow while some English regions had
permanent design exhibitions run in conjunction with local Building Centres.

Underpinning the reconstruction of the South Bank site was, then, the idea that it was
a means to re-position London as the ultimate centre of a reconfigured and reconfiguring
nation and which had a cultured, vibrant citizenry at its heart; the scheme would ‘turn the
South Bank into a part of London that is alive both night and day - a centre of the arts
drawing diverse audiences and offering a choice of entertainments and attendant
amenities.’ The Arts Council report on the state of the arts in Britain published in 1959
described the LCC’s scheme as ‘bringing into existence an Arts Centre that is worthy of the
capital city of Great Britain and the British Commonwealth.’ The inclusion of national
cultural buildings (one for film, one for theatre, as well as a gallery for the national arts
organisation, the Arts Council) reiterate this idea, while the inclusion of the air terminal
(although unrealised) as well as other transport links signal an understanding of the site as
connected at a series of levels, from the local to the international.

Discussion of the SBAC has tended to focus on aspects other than its Centre-ness.
Brandon Taylor observes that the name South Bank was chosen for its echoes of the Parisian
‘Left Bank’. He also notes the ‘nationalist nomenclature’ of the individual buildings which
reiterates the idea of an English standard that would flow outwards to the nation and
Commonwealth. Taylor, and Christopher Grafe, both understand the architecture of the
Centre buildings as representative of a stylistic shift that signalled a more profound
distancing from what Taylor calls the ‘bourgeois public sphere’ of the Festival Hall. Grafe
argues for the complex as transitional and that typologically, stylistically and in terms of
programmatic organisation, the SBAC avoids direct lineage to RFH.

The suggestion here is otherwise and that the SBAC is as conceptually linked to the
Festival Hall (and previous iterations of the centre-idea) as it is physically by the walkways
around which it is built. Here is an agglomeration of functions, ‘completed’ a decade later by

198 ACGB, Housing the Arts in Great Britain, vol. 1, 54.
199 Ibid., 55.
200 Taylor, Art for the Nation, 215.
201 Ibid., 214.
202 Grafe, People’s Palaces, 30 and 193.
the National Theatre, that work as a cultural complement to the seat of democratic
government across the Thames at Westminster. They are a centre from which excellence
emanates. Spatially, we might understand the SBAC as a jazz riff on key centre-idea motifs
of foyers, promenades and settings which are designed to be furnished by people and their
actions; remove the exterior walls from the Festival Hall and there is the layered
interconnecting environment of the riverside site. Finally, although the so-called Brutalism of
the SBAC’s architecture can be read as a riposte to the New Monumentality of the Festival
Hall, its use of exposed concrete, and, in particular, the use of mushroom columns
throughout, is surely a continuation of architectural homages to the ur-centre, the Pioneer
Health Centre? [Figure 22]

Conclusion
This paper has charted the genesis and evolution between the 1930s and the 1960s of what we
have termed the ‘centre-idea’. This was an environment, typically bringing together a range
of functions, either within one building or a complex of buildings in an urban or rural space,
which created a setting for ‘people and their actions’ and which, through this interface, was
understood to effect new forms of human relationships and subjectivity suited to a democratic
and increasingly post-imperial modernity. We have seen that this idea had its roots in the
British voluntary sector and had its original formation in the activities of the Peckham
Experiment. The concept was disseminated through reformist networks which transcended
professional boundaries, and was embraced by the public sector during the Second World
War and its aftermath. As pre-war reformers became post-war legislators and practitioners,
the ‘centre-idea’ was embedded in modernist architectural practice and post-war British
planning.

We have also shown how an idea that originated in an English socio-medical context
was able, through associational networks (or ‘zones of mutuality’) to connect first with the
British modernist architectural community and thence to the European and North American
avant-garde that constituted CIAM. Evidenced by the invitation to George Scott Williamson
to speak at the organisation’s eighth Congress, we have suggested that the ‘centre-idea’ was
integral to the re-orientation of modernist praxis more widely from the mid-1940s onwards,
shaping not just post-war public architecture in Britain, but that of western democracies more
widely also. The idea was flexible, transcending institutional arrangements and funding
mechanisms but always rooted in a view of the collective, and the individual’s place within
that community. Ultimately, it would enable and transform its users, in terms of better bodily
health, expanded cultural horizons, or greater community-mindedness in place of
individualism. It was thus an expression not simply of wider concerns relating to the
contemporary city, but also the contemporary nation, being, ultimately, the embodiment of an
evolving contemporary democracy and a bulwark against the emergence of the Iron Curtain.

The ‘story of the centre-idea’ does not quite end here. On the South Bank site itself,
the final piece of the LCC’s 1953 vision was the construction of the National Theatre (a
project begun in 1963, although the Theatre was not opened until 1976); it formed the final
part of an architectural conversation among the SBAC, Festival Hall and the Pioneer Health
Centre, with its layered section, inside/outside foyers and béton brut linking back to that first
building on St Mary’s Road, Peckham, of 1935 [Figure 23]. In Europe, as Kenny Cupers has
shown, the cultural centre was a key post-war building type. We might also note that in many respects the theories developed by the architects who formed Team X, in their focus on the city as formed from a series of associations (and as a setting for them) connects directly to the centre-idea.

To some extent, however, the ‘centre-idea’ took on a rather different aspect from the 1960s, as society became more atomised, affluent, and commercially focused, while the idea that the built environment might ‘transform’ its users into a particular kind of citizen was challenged not only by the evidence of actual practice but also by a growing scepticism of state paternalism. Nonetheless, there are, for example, links with the new subsidised civic and repertory theatres which began to emerge from the end of the 1950s, and with the growing number of arts centres which sprang up during the following decades. There are resonances, too, with the new ‘leisure centres’ of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Billingham Forum, near Stockton-on-Tees, completed in 1968, was the vision of a wealthy local authority, which planned and funded it, seeing ‘leisure’ as something which was an essential part of their ‘design for living’. A focal point within Billingham’s modern town centre, at the head of its pedestrian precinct, the Forum combined facilities for sports and the arts: everything from a modest theatre to a full-size swimming pool and spaces for bowls, drinking, and dancing. The interior spaces opened one to the next, with vistas between the different areas. Similar centres followed. The Hertfordshire new town of Stevenage’s Arts and Leisure centre (1976) mixed sport and the arts; a walkway through the core of the building between the railway station and town centre provided deliberate glimpses of activity. Meanwhile Irvine, Ayrshire, new town’s Magnum Centre (1976) offered a very deliberate recapitulation of the ‘centre-idea’ that has been at the core of this article. Running between the sports halls, swimming pools, ice rink and theatre were ‘public concourses’, intended to connect back into the town centre megastructure and understood by the Development Corporation as ‘a large viewing gallery from which most of the activities can be seen.’ They concluded that this arrangement would result in ‘the full benefits of the leisure centre … a bringing together of all ages and interests.’ Now translated to 1970s Scotland, here, once more, we have the ‘interfacial membrane’ of the Pioneer Health Centre.

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