

FTwealth

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Capital Crimes

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profiting from
porn, sex, tobacco and
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Trail of destruction

*How villagers in southern Lebanon lost millions
in the country's biggest suspected investment fraud*

by Ferry Biedermann

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WHO LOST AN ESTIMATE
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Insight

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Building blocks

Edwin Heathcote sees signs of the British country house re-emerging as a platform for innovative architecture

IF THERE IS ONE BRITISH building type that is internationally admired and even envied, it is the country house – the definitive symbol of British history, culture and taste.

Yet for roughly a century, it has been regarded as an artefact: an object of middle-class, Middle England pilgrimage. Where are the grand country houses of today – an age that has, until recently, been one of extraordinary wealth, consumption, design fetishism and status seeking? To understand its decline and its chances of revival, we need to look briefly at what the country house has meant.

Emerging from the status and language of the castle, the country house was the physical and aesthetic manifestation, not so much of the will of an individual, but of the urge to establish a *line*. It rooted family in the landscape and expressed ownership and hierarchy.

Yet in its own, curiously English manner, it also established a merito-

cratic tradition. It enabled the wealth of 18th-century merchants to be immortalised and, right up to the Edwardian era, businessmen turned to the finest architects – Edwin Lutyens, Norman Shaw and Baillie Scott – for houses with an aesthetic tradition that gave the impression of lasting wealth and established taste.

While the rest of Europe endured revolution and war, Britain's estates remained intact, as the nation's unusual primogeniture, in which inheritance passed to the eldest son. On the continent, estates were split between children and ultimately decimated.

The British country house is, however, a blend of European influences: French folly and grandeur, Italian Renaissance, Dutch pragmatism and landscapes inspired by the artists Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin – everything except, it seems, modernism.

The strange death of a tradition that has defined British architecture has caused concern in recent years. Britain

may be arguably the most successful and diverse exporter of architecture in the world, yet if there is one building type that the nation is now conspicuously not known for, it is the house.

Elsewhere in the world, compelling new houses are being built in significant numbers. Some are radically contemporary; others build on local tradition to create intriguing hybrids. Yet Britain, home of the country house, languishes at the bottom of the league.

Some of the reasons for this extraordinary decline are known; others remain obscure. The fanatical protection of the green belt and the idea that virgin countryside must, at all costs, be protected is at the top of the list. This notion, engrained in planning law since the last outlines established by the Attlee government in 1947, itself embodies a curious mixture of snobbery and class complexes. Snobbery, because the regulations stem largely from a fear of green England disappearing under a sea of tarmac, mock-Tudor homes and gravel drives; class complexes, because the country house had been associated with the landed gentry.

Such legislation prevailed until it was suddenly punctured by John Gummer, a Conservative environment secretary, in 1997. He introduced a clause that would allow the building of new country houses of "outstanding"



*The Wilderness project,
a modern country house
in Suffolk, England,
designed by
Paul + O Architects*

quality, even if that permission broke with local planning policy. This was a radical shift yet, incredibly, it produced only a handful of new houses. The problem was that it set architects in opposition to councils – which rarely wanted to break with long-held policies – and with neighbours, who were almost inevitably hostile.

NEVERTHELESS, SOME houses were granted permission. Paul + O Architects' Wilderness project, a restrained, European-looking modernist house in Darsham, Suffolk, is one of the best, while the house of architect Richard Hawkes – an impeccably green, brick-vaulted dwelling in Staplehurst, Kent – is another. But these developments remain rare. The default position for those building a house in the country is traditional.

Quinlan and Francis Terry Architects' long list of completed country houses, for example, reveals a conservative taste, with seemingly little inclination to move away from the neoclassical model of the British country house. The favoured architectural practice of the Prince of Wales, it recently drew up an alternative – and controversial – classical vision of the Chelsea Barracks site in London, a project from which the practice

Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners was recently ejected.

The architect Robert Adam is another who has made a career building classical houses and a reputation for winning permission to build on virgin sites. His most remarkable coup was with Grafton Hall, a story that embodies the many conflicts of the contemporary country house.

In 2001, the Royal Institute of British Architects launched an architectural competition to design Grafton Hall in Cheshire as a contemporary country house. The winner, Ushida Findlay Architects, produced a sci-fi starfish design that was self-consciously radical and organic. But in spite of the victory, nothing happened. No buyer was found and the house never materialised.

The landowner made another attempt, this time approaching Robert Adam who, after an appeal, won permission for a neoclassical design, which was far more conspicuous than Ushida Findlay's low-lying proposal.

What this saga demonstrates is perhaps the single, most important cultural change in the perception of the country house. Grafton Hall was conceived as a speculative development, and radically different from a house founded to exemplify a hereditary line. It also introduced the concept of market value. As the taste for country

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houses is, broadly speaking, traditional, a classical house will ensure a higher resale value. Modernism barely stands a chance.

But classicism does not always prevail. London architects 6a won a stunning victory earlier this year with its appeal to

build a house at Mines Park in Cambridgeshire. The property, designed for a farmer, combined both the exposed and decorative frames of Tudor country houses and the non-aesthetic of industrial architecture.

The country house seems unlikely to regain its status as the prime generator of British architectural invention. The motivation of those who build them has changed. Taste and wealth in contemporary society are expressed through ownership of art, clothes, sponsorship, charity and conspicuous consumption, but rarely through the bespoke. The country house is the ultimate in bespoke – the equivalent to an expensive Savile Row suit. It is rarely expressed in the landscape, and our age is the poorer for it. But a few architects are demonstrating how the country house can still surprise and delight and that it remains, in spite (or perhaps because) of its rarity, the ultimate statement of wealth, taste and intent. ■