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# THE CITY AND THE COUNTRY: THE URBAN VERNACULAR IN LATE SEVENTEENTH AND EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY LONDON

Elizabeth McKellar

It may seem strange to include a paper on London in a collection of essays examining 'Georgian Vernacular', something which is generally associated with the rural rather than the urban environment. However, as I hope to demonstrate, in the London house of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century there was a symbiosis between vernacular and polite architecture. This paper will explore that relationship and it will propose that the new town house was as much a product of vernacular and other earlier architectural traditions as it was of the influences of classicism and European urban design.<sup>1</sup>

Our concept of the relationship between city and country, as two discrete and separate bodies in this period, is still largely shaped by Raymond Williams' pioneering work *The Country and the City* of 1973. Historians of the eighteenth century, and particularly eighteenth century culture, have for the most part followed the twin tracks of city and country that Williams established. This has certainly been the case, whether consciously or not, in architectural studies which have tended to focus on either the Georgian town, or the country house and park. Such a division leaves large numbers and levels of building types unexplored and disallows for any overlap between the two categories. This is despite the fact that one of the most striking features of eighteenth century polite architecture is that the same style, Palladianism, was adopted in town and country; even once a romanticising rural aesthetic had been firmly established in the form of the Picturesque.

It has been recognised that many non-classical or semi-classical buildings continued to be erected in the countryside. These tend to have been considered under the categories either of vernacular architecture or, following Howard Colvin's definitions, discussed in terms of Gothic survival and revival.<sup>2</sup> These terms are less useful in the urban context until we come to the later Georgian period when we find a self-conscious revivalist use of Gothic and other picturesque styles of architecture. It is not the deliberate ruralism of Regent's Park and the spread of picturesque suburbs containing informal villas and cottage orné that I will be discussing in this essay but a much earlier phase in which there was close contact between the rural and the urban, even in the metropolis itself.

One aspect of London's development in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century upon which all contemporary commentators were agreed was the emergence of 'the new house' or even 'the new London house' as a result of the London building boom of the 1660s to 1690s. As John Evelyn noted in his diary as early as 1664, '... to such a mad intemperance was the age come of building about a citty, by far too disproportionate already to nation: I having in my time seene it almost as large again as it was within my memory'.<sup>3</sup> The image which both contemporary illustrations and subsequent historians have presented is that of a newly orderly and regular city which was transformed virtually at a stroke from medieval chaos to a veritable paradigm of classical harmony, through the new developments such as those at St James's and Soho squares.

For most of us it is Summerson's *Georgian London* of 1945 which still provides our guide to the development of London in this period.<sup>4</sup> Summerson begins his account with the rebuilding of the City and the new developments in the West End after the Fire. The schematic illustration

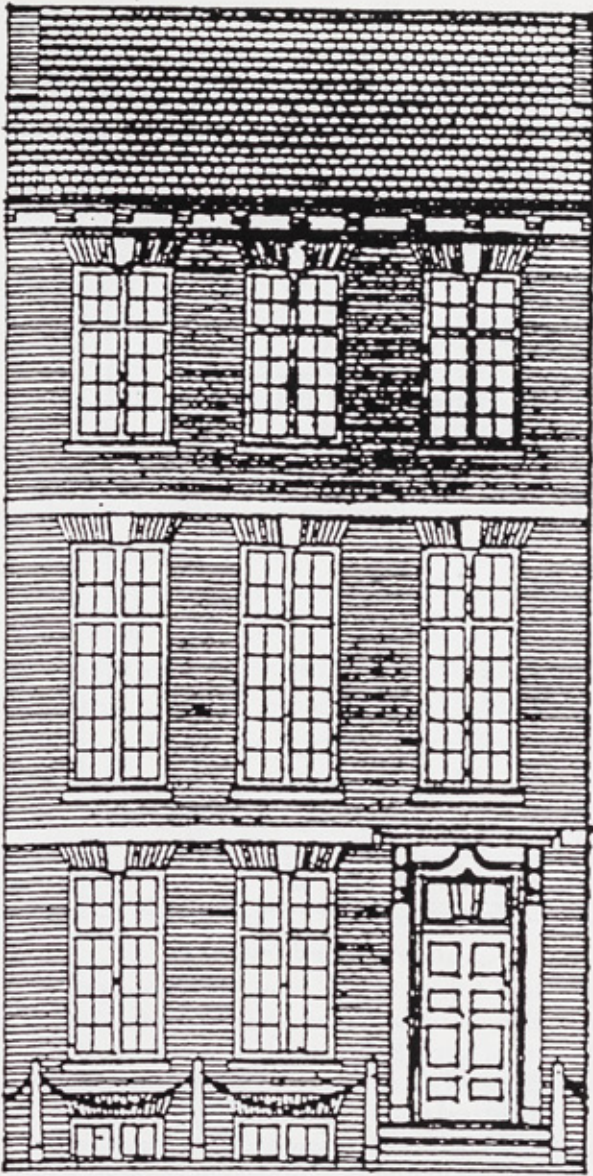


Fig. 1. 'A house of the type built by Nicholas Barbon between 1670 and 1700' from John Summerson, *Georgian London*, 1945.

that Summerson includes of 'A house of the type built by Nicholas Barbon between 1670 and 1700' provides the most commonly known image of the late seventeenth century London house. (Fig. 1). The drawing shows a representation of the type of speculative house put up by the most substantial and controversial developer of the time, the iconoclastic son of the Puritan hero Praisegod Barebones, Dr Nicholas Barbon. He was responsible for many of the major developments in London at the time such as the Essex and Exeter House redevelopments, Wellclose Square and Red Lion Square.

For Summerson this type of house represented the beginnings of the modern London house and the forerunner of the Georgian buildings with which he was principally concerned in his book. Such houses survive, for example at Bedford Row and Great Ormond Street, and Barbon's developments were notable for their innovative and pioneering use of mass-produced components made in large runs to standardized designs.

The type of structure the Summerson delineated demonstrates a recognisable and significant shift away from the timber-framed medieval house which preceded it. However, although new we might also wish to question the extent to which such buildings can be labelled classical. Summerson certainly did so and found them wanting for they were not classical in the way in which he understood the term. They took only a notion of regularity and some, but by no means all, of their detailing from the classical vocabulary.

They used neither the applied orders to express the classical system, as earlier houses at Great Queen Street and Lincoln's Inn Fields had done, nor did they follow the Palladian approach where the facade, although astylar, adopts a rational organizing principle through its use of strict proportioning and hierarchy. The problem with the late seventeenth century house for Summerson was that it did not fit his model for architectural development in the capital, which was a Palladian one.

Summerson's preference is made clear in *Georgian London* in which Palladianism is one of the two key organizing principles of the book; providing the 'taste' which formed the city along with the 'wealth' in Summerson's analysis. The earlier Jonesian-style developments come in the critical Chapter Two 'Foundation Stones: Taste', while the Georgian house is placed in Chapter Five 'The London House and its Builders'. Sandwiched in between in the chapters on 'Wealth' and 'The Mercantile Stronghold', the late seventeenth century house is to be found. This intermediate phase was an errant interloper in Summerson's eyes which disrupted the linear progression between Jones and his eighteenth century followers. As he wrote in his conclusion to his chapter on 'Taste':

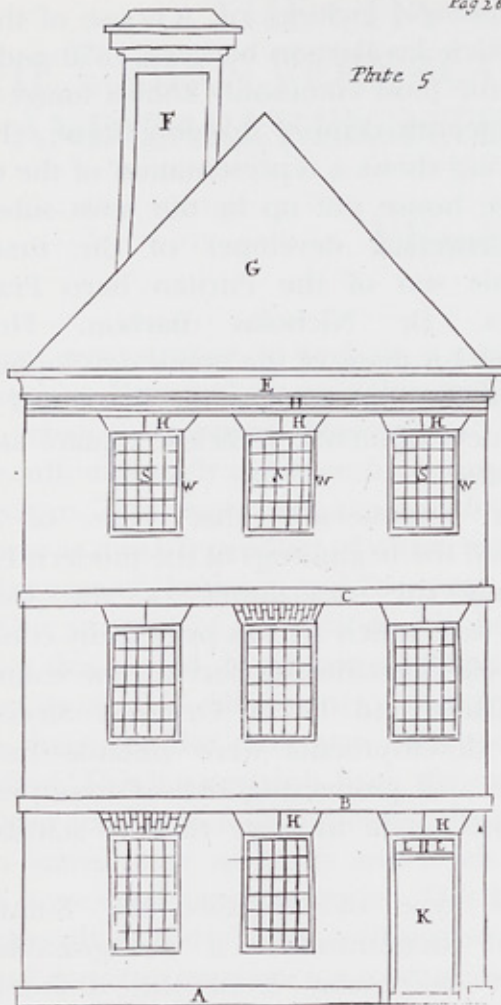


Fig. 2. 'Elevation of A brick House' from Joseph Moxon, *Mechanick Exercises or the Doctrine of Handy Works*, 1703. KEY: A. water table, B. first fascia, C. second fascia, D. 3 plain courses of bricks over the arches, E. cornice, F. chimnies, G. gable end, H. streight arches, W. shas frame, S. shas lights, K. door-case, L. window-light over door (spellings as original).

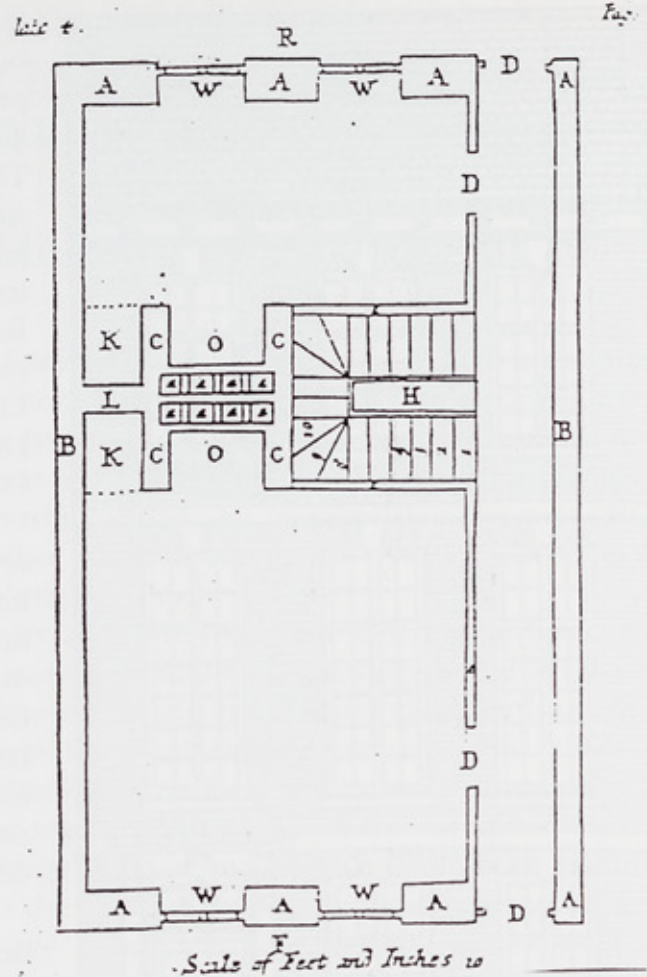


Fig. 3. 'Plan of A Brick House' from Joseph Moxon, *Mechanick Exercises or the Doctrine of Handy Works*, 1703. KEY: A. piers of brick, B. flank walls, C. jambs of chimneys, D. doorcase of timber, E. timber partitions, F. front, H. open nuel to give light to stairs, K. clossets, L. a brick and a half between clossets, O. chimneys, R. rear front, W. windows of timber, a. funnels of chimney 1,2,3,4 steps of stairs called fliers 8,9,10 steps of stairs called winders

'Palladian taste represents a norm to which classical architecture in this country has returned over and over again'.<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting to compare Summerson's notional elevation with a contemporary illustration of 1683, reissued in 1693 and 1703 from Joseph Moxon's *Mechanick Exercises* (Fig. 2). This gives a very different picture of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century house with its high gabled roof, prominent chimney stack and evenly proportioned storeys. Moxon's plan has a central chimney stack supporting a staircase on one side and allowing room for closets on the other. (Fig. 3). William Leybourn showed a version of this arrangement in his *A Platform for Purchasers* of 1668, with a centrally placed staircase and chimney stack to the rear. Moxon said of this 'draught of a ground plat':

'You may imagine this design to be the ground floor, having no cellar beneath it . . . and because we do suppose this building to have Houses adjoining it on each side, therefore we have drawn the staircase with an open nuel to give light to the Stairs' but if the House had stood by itself, without other houses adjoining, then we might have had light to the Stairs from the Flank wall'.<sup>6</sup>

If we compare the illustration that Summerson provides with Moxon's drawings we can see that Sir John presents an over-simplified and palladianized view. The house has been regularized using eighteenth century proportions to emphasise the *piano nobile*. A basement has also been included which was by no means standard at the time. Summerson's accompanying ground plan shows a version of what later became the accepted London layout, with the chimney stacks firmly anchored to one wall and the staircase on the opposite side adjacent to the rear room. Summerson's primary interest in the late seventeenth century house, as a precursor to the Georgian model, led him to focus on those aspects which were to be utilised in the following period and to ignore others which did not fit in with his conception of the development of classicism in this country.

But if the late seventeenth century London house was not entirely classical but was certainly new, how should we categorise it and interpret it? The more I examined the house of this period the more I came to the conclusion that it owed as much to the past as to the present and that for all its startlingly modernity it maintained strong links with previous housing types and traditions. However, the evidence for tracing the relationship between the various elements which contributed to its genesis is difficult to examine as it has been largely destroyed, is often piecemeal, and is therefore hard to interpret.

From the evidence I have gathered it seems that houses similar to the one that Moxon depicted, which I have labelled urban vernacular, may not have been uncommon in London at the time. The best known examples, of this type are the four houses of 1658 which still exist at 52-55 Newington Green (Fig. 4). They follow the pre-Restoration West End developments of Great Queen Street and Lincoln's Inn Fields in the use of giant pilasters. However, instead of a straight roof line the roof has been built in the familiar gabled shape of a timber-framed



Fig. 4. No's 52-55 Newington Green: English Heritage Reconstruction of the Original Appearance of the terrace in 1658, (Reproduced by kind permission of English Heritage)

building, although converted into the new building material, brick. The Newington Green houses have always been seen as an idiosyncratic aberration but have remarkable similarities with Moxon's illustrations particularly in the display of the notional gable ends and their prominent chimneys (now much less visible than they would have been originally).

The Newington Green houses also have a similar plan to that shown in Moxon with a centrally placed chimney stack and staircase. As Frank Kelsall has shown in his article *The London House Plan in the Later 17th Century* this plan and other transitional layouts were common in the period 1660-80. He demonstrates that the smaller London house (up to 25ft frontage) retained vernacular elements such as the central staircase until 1680. The arrangement which Summerson shows, which is more economical of space in a terrace house, did not become common until after an initial period of experimentation and development.<sup>7</sup>

Contemporary illustrations of the average London house at this time are extremely rare, so it is telling that one of the few elevations – besides Moxon – which is known shows a similar style of house. (Fig. 5)

The second drawing comes from a collection largely of ground plans in the Bodleian Library. They are mainly of ordinary houses, of a variety of types. Alison Maguire, who has examined the drawings, suggests that they were made in the years 1685-90.<sup>8</sup> The collection includes some townhouse plans which show a variety of positions for fireplaces, stacks and staircases, some of the latter are centrally placed and some at the end of the hall passage. Among these plans is one elevation which shows a pair of houses of a type similar to Moxon's. These houses are two bays wide instead of three and appear to contain shops probably with cellar storage below, as is indicated by the small windows at street level. They show, however, the same pitched roof form, this time with a dormer window and a heavy cornice beneath. The windows are casements rather than sashes.

It was not just the elevations and plan that continued to incorporate traditional features. Behind the brick facade the entire structure relied on traditional timber technology and this continued to be the case well into the eighteenth century. Some houses such as 30 Romford Road or 24 Hampstead High Street, both of the early eighteenth century, had a complete timber frame internal structure. The outer brickwork was very much a shell without interior masonry walls, and the internal timber wall and flooring system which was built into the brickwork helped to provide structural stability.<sup>9</sup>

The new house was in reality not a brick house, but a brick and wood house. There are two explanations for this. Firstly, it was cheaper and easier to construct the internal partitions and walls of timber than brick and as all these houses were let on short leases they were not built



Fig. 5. A late seventeenth century drawing of a town house, Bodleian Library, MS. Rawlinson, D.710.f.10 not dated. (Reproduced by kind permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford)

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Fig. 4. No's 52-55 Newington Green: English Heritage Reconstruction of the Original Appearance of the terrace in 1658, (Reproduced by kind permission of English Heritage)



Fig. 6. No. 237 Hoxton Street, early eighteenth century, prior to restoration

is a rare survivor of a housing type which may once have been common in the area (Fig. 6). The house as we see it today is a late seventeenth century building which was re-modelled in the early eighteenth century. The surviving structure maintains traces of the earlier building, which was itself built on an existing site. It is a single pile house, five bays wide. The proportions are lower and broader than those we traditionally associate with urban houses of the period. It originally had five windows at first floor level which were altered to three in the early eighteenth century. The plan consists of two rooms set either side of a central staircase, with chimney stacks against the side walls. The archaeological evidence suggests that the dormers are in their original positions set within the pantiled roof. The house has recently undergone restoration which has involved the replacement of the roof, dormers and exterior brickwork.<sup>13</sup>

The Survey of London and photographic evidence of demolished buildings in the Greater London photography library and Hackney Borough Archives suggest that there were other similar buildings in the area. The Survey details houses such as No's 46-48 Hoxton Street which is one of the same type and period as No. 237, although L-shaped in plan. No. 47 Charles Square is an early-mid eighteenth century survivor of a vernacular-type house with low proportions and floor heights. The wider plot frontages and hence lower building line of these Hoxton houses are typical of development outside the fashionable core. In these areas land prices were lower and plots were often developed individually or in small groups.<sup>14</sup> This was not estate development and a piecemeal system of building was one factor in maintaining a more generous layout and variety of ground plans.

However, this may not be the only explanation for the prevalence of an alternative



building tradition to that of the centre. Hoxton became known for several things in the eighteenth century: market gardens, asylums, schools, and non-conformism.<sup>15</sup> Non-conformists moved to Hoxton from the late seventeenth century onwards when a Dissenting Academy was established in Hoxton Square. They and the resident Anglicans endowed a large number of almshouses in the area. Alongside these a number of schools and asylums were established taking advantage of the area's tranquility and spaciousness, of which Robert Hook's Haberdashers' Company Aske's Hospital and School was the most architecturally distinguished. There were three asylums in Hoxton itself in the eighteenth century, and the famous Bedlam - or more correctly Bethlehem Hospital - lay just to the south in Moorefields.

Hoxton was an area whose strengths by this stage lay in being a backwater but a relatively genteel one, in which problematic activities such as housing the sick and insane could be accommodated without disturbing a large resident population. The area's rurality was maintained by the large number of nurseries and market gardens in the location which supplied fresh food and plants to the city until the late eighteenth century.

Hoxton is an area which is now decidedly inner-city and which is still overshadowed by its appalling nineteenth century reputation. But in the eighteenth century Hoxton had a number of distinctive and specialised functions which traded on its reputation for rurality; for those wishing to educate, convalesce or incarcerate their relations there. It may have been that this both contributed to and supported the maintenance of an alternative building tradition even on the very edge of the commercial centre itself, and ensured the continued survival of these buildings unmodernised throughout the eighteenth century.

This paper has argued that the late seventeenth century house was a traditional building which combined existing elements with new Renaissance ideas. This mixing of classical feature with regional building traditions and materials is a common phenomenon in the spread of classicism, both within Italy and outside. It occurred not just with the town house but also with the smaller Coleshill-style country house of the period which combined new and old in a similar fashion. It is only our eighteenth century-dominated understanding of classicism which has prevented us from recognising such building as a valid and distinctive phase in its own right in the history of architecture. When Sir John Summerson looked at such houses he found them wanting as they did not accord with the notion of classicism which he had so lucidly outlined in his book *The Classical Language of Architecture*. However, we are now recognising that the classical language has both polite forms and vernacular and regional dialects.

The late seventeenth and early eighteenth century London townscape was a more complicated and mixed environment than has previously been allowed. To conclude with a quote from Raymond Williams: 'Our real social experience is not only of the country and the city, in their most singular forms, but of many kinds of intermediate and new kinds of social and physical organisation.'<sup>16</sup> Rather than categorising the domestic town house of the period as vernacular or classical, or country or city, I would prefer to call them a regional variant of classicism, or a London urban vernacular.

## NOTES

1. This paper arises from part of my Ph.D. thesis; Elizabeth McKellar, 'Architectural Practice for Speculative Building in late Seventeenth Century London', Unpublished Ph.D., Royal College of Art, 1992
2. Howard Colvin, 'Gothic Survival and Gothick Revival', *Architectural Review*, March 1948, pp. 91-98
3. John Evelyn, *Diary*, 12 June 1664
4. The other standard works are: Norman Brett-James, *The Growth of Stuart London*, 1945; and T.F. Reddaway, *The Rebuilding of London After the Great Fire*, 1940
5. John Summerson, *Georgian London*, 1978, p. 36
6. Joseph Moxon, *Mechanick Exercises*, 1703, p. 265
7. Frank Kelsall, 'The London House Plan in the Later 17th Century', *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, Vol. 8, 1974, pp. 80-91

8. Alison Maguire (ed) with contributions by Howard Colvin, 'A Collection of Seventeenth-Century Architectural Plans', *Architectural History*, Vol. 35, 1992, pp. 140-82
9. For more on this see, David Yeomans, 'Structural Carpentry in London', in Hermione Hobhouse and Ann Saunders eds, *Good and Proper Materials: The Fabric of London since the Great Fire*, 1989, pp. 38-47
10. R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman*, 1747, p.159
11. Dan Cruickshank & Neil Burton, *Life in the Georgian City*, 1990, p. 108
12. Greater London Photograph Library: 27 Wellclose Square, Ref. 74/13959, 1911; 26 Wellclose Square, Ref. F1657, 1943, Ref. 75/1316, 1911
13. I am grateful to Julian Harrap Architects for information on No. 237 Hoxton Street
14. See for example; M. J. Power, 'East London Housing in the Seventeenth Century', in Peter Clark and Paul Slack (eds), *Crisis and Order in English Towns 1500-1700*, 1972, pp. 237-62
15. Information on Hoxton from: Survey of London, *St. Leonard, Shoreditch*, Vol. VIII, 1922; Tony Coombs, '*Tis a Mad World at Hogsdon*'. *A short History of Hoxton and the Surrounding Area*, 1974; Christopher Miele, *Hoxton: Architecture and History over five centuries*, 1993
16. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, 1973, p. 289