

## **Into the closet: the spread of consumption and fitted furniture in the 1940s, with particular reference to the houses of Bernard Johns and the first Group house**

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**ABSTRACT:** The houses of Bernard Johns are characterised by a delight in cupboards, from the very small and quirky to fully fitted kitchens and bedrooms. The increasing use of fitted cupboards and other furniture in the twentieth century produced an interior that was controlled by the architect. National economies after WWII were propped up by encouraging increased consumption of material goods, and this in turn produced a demand for more storage inside the home. This period saw the cupboard move from a separate piece of furniture or a simple storage space created to the side of the chimney breast to become part of the architecture of most houses. These themes will be explored with reference to the particular characteristics of cupboards in Johns' houses of the period contrasted with the use of fitted cupboards in the first (1949) house of the Group.

### **A brief history of the cupboard**

The history of the cupboard is *de facto* the history of consumption. In his book of 1898 describing the evolution of the house in England, Addy makes reference to using left-over spaces in the construction of simple cottages for storage, such as the triangle left between the vertical side wall and the roof plane on the crucks of "Teapot Hall" at Srivelsby, Lincolnshire,<sup>1</sup> which was a very simple one room cottage with sleeping loft reached by a ladder. In discussion of larger UK houses and their contents he describes the inventory for the 1464 manor house of Beaufort, near Durham. The inner bed chamber, accessed from the women's sitting room or outer chamber, was furnished with "three chests, an old chair, and a stool near the

bed (*juxta lectum*)."<sup>2</sup> The implication is that the wealthy had something worth storing carefully and furniture (the chests) was dedicated to this. Boumphrey shows an image of a thirteenth-century chest stating that it "was the earliest piece of furniture and from it most other pieces—from the throne to the dresser—were evolved."<sup>3</sup> According to Boumphrey the cupboard was a separate development originating from the boards or shelves on which drinking cups were kept. The importance of the household was judged by the number of such shelves, with the king topping the list with three.<sup>4</sup> Such boards could also be used for display of silverware and other precious items. Later the lower shelves were enclosed by doors to make something akin to the modern dresser cupboard.

However, for many years possessions were few and the furniture needed to store them also limited. Bertram describes a Sussex farmer of 1577 owning, in his main room or hall, a table, bench, a cupboard, a round table, a chair, six stools, a banker, or chair seat covering, and three cushions with coloured cloths, the whole valued at 20 shillings.<sup>5</sup> Fitted cupboards were also known, created in panelled rooms in the spaces either side of the chimney breast. However, the characteristic of all this early storage was that it was meagre in scale because people did not have much to store. Mainly what storage was for things that were used everyday or consumables, such as food. This is a long way from Jerome K Jerome's much later description of cupboards and their use.

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<sup>1</sup> Addy *The Evolution of the English House* pp 19-22.

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<sup>2</sup> Addy *The Evolution of the English House* p 147.

<sup>3</sup> Boumphrey *Your House and Mine* Fig.20 facing p 153.

<sup>4</sup> Boumphrey *Your House and Mine* p 154.

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<sup>5</sup> Bertram *The House* p 55.

It is unexplainable, the average woman's passion for cupboards ... I knew a woman once who was happy - for a woman. She lived in a house with twenty-nine cupboards ... When that woman was out, nobody in the house ever knew where anything was: and when she came home she herself only knew where it ought to have been.<sup>6</sup>

The cupboard here is being used as a metaphor for memory - the more cupboards a person has the more they are able to file away the artefacts of their life in ways that make them more (or less) accessible. This moves from a view of life being constructed through memory alone, which happened or maybe still happens in houses where cupboards are only used for storage of things used everyday like food, to a life where things are used seldom and stored, or stored because they were deliberately bought as souvenirs to prove or validate life memories. As Jerome observes, the person who does the filing is also far more likely to be in charge of the collective memories of the household. However, the question remains why possessions, and cupboards to keep them in, have increased and why the fitted cupboard was particularly prevalent in the vocabulary of some architects, such as Johns.

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<sup>6</sup> Jerome *They and I* p 21.

### **The cupboard as part of the building - the Arts and Crafts approach**

As noted above, the fitted cupboard evolved out of the smoothing of recesses around such things as chimney breasts in panelled rooms. An early instance of deliberately stepping walls to create recesses is found in the 1851 Model Cottages designed by Henry Roberts for Prince Albert. These houses, which contain four flats, have space for linen closet in the parents' bedroom in a recess formed by a stepped wall, which also gives a storage recess in one of the two smaller bedrooms. In addition there is a cupboard in the chimney recess of the living room, probably for storing dry foods as it was warmed by the chimney breast and the other smaller bedroom has storage in a recess partially created by the chimney breast. A separate ventilated meat safe was provided in the scullery for fresh food but this was not placed in a niche created by the building fabric. However, at this stage the occupants of such houses would still have few possessions to store.

A contrasting precedent for the fitted cupboard can be found in the tenement dwellings of Scotland which are very small and fitted out in the manner of a boat. Lumsden's Model Dwellings of 1847 erected

in Glasgow were designed by James Wylson. This dwelling with its three bed recesses, water closet, kitchen recess with coal box, and living area with window to the outside is virtually a series of internal fittings in a single space rather than a series of separate rooms to make a dwelling.

The change seems to come with the later desire for architects to be in control of the whole design of relatively small dwellings. Barry Parker in 1901 talks about a designer's vision of fittings within the house.

I would mention secondly complete unity and absolute harmony between all the parts, such as can only be obtained when a house, its decorations and furniture, are all designed by one man—or at least under the entire supervision of one man.<sup>7</sup>

Parker's argument is that if the architect designs not just the house to suit the client but also the fittings and furniture then the client's taste and individuality can be accounted for far better than by having to buy the pieces of furniture available in the shops. Parker and Unwin applied this not only to the design of middle class housing but also of cottages. In a cottage designed for a client who "wanted to

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<sup>7</sup> Parker & Unwin *The Art of Building a Home* p 69.

live a quiet simple life, yet on a scale that would allow of his enjoying the more necessary comforts and refinements" on a site in Derbyshire, a variety of cupboards and shelves were provided in the kitchen and larder. The single living room was subdivided into areas for dining, with a fitted bench, working and recreation, with desk and a piano, a low window seat and further seat in the large inglenook fireplace. The latter also contained a purpose made dresser with a plate rack and a fixed bowl for the washing of glass and china.

It is obvious that the living-room of this cottage could with much less trouble have been made a four-square room with a fire at one end and a door at the other; and might have been furnished with a mixture of kitchen and parlour furniture. But...life would be immensely more comfortable and dignified in a room ... where each requirement has been considered and provided for, and which has just the shape and arrangement given to it that seemed best to meet those requirements; where moreover, all the furniture has been designed in keeping with its place and its purpose, so that there is no incongruity between the desk and the dresser, the piano and the plate rack.<sup>8</sup>

Upstairs in this same cottage there is a wall of two cupboards separating the two main bedrooms, the other two bedrooms having the

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<sup>8</sup> Parker & Unwin *The Art of Building a Home* p 132.

bathroom in between them. Shallow cupboards are also found in the chimney breasts in two bedrooms. Here, however, there is far less control of the whole by the architect than downstairs in terms of the level of purpose designed fitted furniture.

Other architects, such as Mackintosh and Baillie-Scott, used this approach of total control over the interior, such as the architect-designed bedroom at Hill House (1902-3) by Mackintosh and the White Drawing Room at Blackwell (1898-1900) by Baillie-Scott. This degree of design and fitted furniture was only possible if the client owned the house, and at this time many large houses were still rented.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the architect-designed fitted interior remained a desirable asset and firms like Waring and Gillow and Heals, both in London, would also fit out bedrooms in an appropriate "Liberty" style. The hygienic advantages of having fitted furniture were also noted at the time.

The fitted bedroom has become increasingly popular during the last few years ... There are several advantages in this method of treating a bedroom. It may be commended on hygienic grounds as giving fewer facilities for the accumulation of dust. It economises

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<sup>9</sup> Jennings *Our homes and how to beautify them* p 226.

space. It greatly enlarges the field of decorative possibilities.<sup>10</sup>

Despite these architectural endorsements fitted furnishings and cupboards were for the wealthy. The 1918 Tudor Walters Report recommended houses provided through state funds should have cupboards formed in recesses only, to save on materials, open shelves in the scullery and a fitted dresser of lower cupboards, two drawers and shelves above fitted with glazed doors in the living room.<sup>11</sup> However, often this meagre level was not reached. Three bedroom houses designed circa 1920 for the Ministry of Health in the UK show no cupboards on either floor, apart from a larder and coal store under the stairs accessed off a back lobby open to the outside.<sup>12</sup> The assumption was that those with lower incomes will have fewer possessions in need of storage.

### **The cupboard as part of the building—the Modernist approach**

The Modernists had also promoted built-in

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<sup>10</sup> Jennings *Our homes and how to beautify them* pp 226-227.

<sup>11</sup> Local Government Boards for England and Wales and Scotland *Report of Committee to Consider Questions of Building Construction* p 92.

<sup>12</sup> Burnett *A social history of housing* p 229.

furniture but the intent here seems to be to streamline the design of small spaces, especially the new European apartment. In his history of modern furniture, Joel claims fitted furniture in the small flat in the UK was an import from the continent as Marcel Breuer, a cabinet making instructor at the Bauhaus, co-operated with Crofton E Gane of Bristol "where the idea of "Unit" furniture was, it is believed, first successfully developed in this country. Mr Gane was early in the field as a supporter of the Modern Movement."<sup>13</sup> What Breuer and Gane had pioneered in the UK was not so much the idea of fitted furniture but that of modular furniture, something which Abercrombie traces back to sectional bookcases offered in the 1908 Sears Roebuck catalogue and the standard modular cabinets of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret shown in the 1925 Pavillon de l'esprit nouveau.<sup>14</sup> This standardisation was to bring the best of design to everyone because of the reduction in price that came from mass production. Gropius had also discussed the idea of fitted and standardised furniture as part of the modern industrialised house and the advantages of incorporating these in houses.

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<sup>13</sup> Joel *The adventure of British furniture* p 108.

<sup>14</sup> Abercrombie *George Nelson: the design of modern design* p 93.

All parts (internal equipment) fit exactly, as they are made by machine to the same standard dimensions. For the same reason they are all interchangeable ... Furniture, light fittings, rugs, textiles of all kinds, linen, ceramics, cutlery etc., are to be made to a variety of tested designs and can be supplied quickly and inexpensively.<sup>15</sup>

These ideas were put into effect in his Dessau-Tortene Estate of 316 workers' houses, built in 1926-28. The houses were not industrialised but costs were kept down through the use of rationalised site work and economy in the use of materials. Nevertheless, the houses were well equipped, having central heating and double glazing, and fitted cupboards including a storage wall dividing the living room from the entrance.<sup>16</sup> This idea of using purpose-made storage to divide space, rather than just as wardrobes between bedrooms, was found well before WWII on the continent. At Drancy la Muette, built in the early 1930s, Denby noted that "the entire partition between the scullery and the living-room is formed by a cupboard-unit of which the upper cupboard opens into the living-room and the lower one into the scullery, while the

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<sup>15</sup> Gropius "Gropius at Twenty-six" p 50.

<sup>16</sup> Naylor *The Bauhaus reassessed* p 140.

drawers open into both rooms."<sup>17</sup> A similar pattern can be found in the USA where, unlike the UK, the attic had been rejected as a convenient place to store unwanted items.

In the usual small house, of course, ample storage space is a major requirement. Both attic and basement have been vastly over-rated for this purpose. Although spacious enough for all reasonable purposes, these rooms are too difficult to reach with heavy loads and awkwardly shaped objects to function well as storage space. How sensible to plan an extra-large garage and special built-in storage room on the ground floor where trunks, brooms, toys, old furniture, screens, garden tools, bicycles and all sorts of miscellany can be kept.<sup>18</sup>

George Nelson, writing just after WWII, described the simple step of moving from storage cabinets and furniture attached to the wall to making the walls of this same equipment, a device he termed the "storage wall."<sup>19</sup> In New Zealand this was to become part of the architectural vocabulary of some designers, such as the Group from their First House in 1949 onwards, where space was divided by such storage walls, often not extending up to the ceiling.

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<sup>17</sup> Denby *Europe re-housed* p 243.

<sup>18</sup> Dean & Breines *The book of houses* p 72.

<sup>19</sup> Nelson & Wright *Tomorrow's House* p 149.

However, in houses in the UK, and to an extent in State Houses in New Zealand, built-in cupboards went with bedrooms and kitchens and other things were left to be stored where they could.<sup>20</sup> Only for flats in the UK was there a recommendation for designed storage and this was normally associated with flats for the moderately wealthy. As a 1937 guide to flat planning stated, "Ample and suitable storage space is essential in every type of flat, but especially in those of higher rental."<sup>21</sup> In the middle class flat in the UK, purpose-made fitted furniture not only became the norm but was also made fun of by Heath Robinson in *How to live in a flat*, such as his design "for a combined bed-wardrobe-cradle-bed-dressing-table-chest-of-drawers."<sup>22</sup>

### **The cupboard, consumerism, and modern living**

In 1948 the UK architect Frederick Gibberd wrote a small book on fitted furniture and

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<sup>20</sup> Plan of 1906 dwelling for the Windle settlement, Dunedin, shows one cupboard in chimney breast recess in kitchen, and a cupboard off the passage to the bathroom see Schrader *We call it home* p 85, whereas 1946 two bedroom State house in Northland, Wellington, has a wall of fitted cupboards between the two bedrooms, plus built-in cupboard in the hall (authors' own house).

<sup>21</sup> E & OE *Planning: an annual notebook* p 59.

<sup>22</sup> Robinson & Browne *How to live in a flat* pp 37-39.

summed up its position at that time.

Before the First World War it was unusual to find anything but a few cupboards provided as part of the structure. Before the second it was common practice to provide built-in kitchen fittings, and at least some built-in wardrobes, in the average "speculative house"; whilst in the dwellings of the upper middle class built-in furniture of all kinds had become a vogue.<sup>23</sup>

As discussed above this really mirrors the wealth of people and the likelihood they would have possessions to store over and above the necessities of everyday living. One of the problems facing governments after WWII was how to maintain full employment for those returning from the conflict, as Beveridge had promised,<sup>24</sup> when the industrial economy had been geared up for making what was needed for war rather than what was needed for peace. In 1940 Beveridge, then Master of University College Oxford, had been appointed by Ernest Bevin, Minister of Labour, to investigate the state of social service provision in the UK. A year later Beveridge was in charge of producing a report for government on how Britain might be reconstructed, which had pointed to unemployment (termed "idleness") as one of

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<sup>23</sup> Gibberd *Built-in furniture in Great Britain* p 2.

<sup>24</sup> Beveridge *Social insurance and allied services*.

the five great evils of the time.<sup>25</sup> The response to evil of "idleness" was to turn the factories to making consumer goods for people to buy, the war having provided an impetus for the development of mass production and mass distribution techniques. Despite this aim, as Maguire and Woodham point out, in 1946 the overriding situation in Britain was not one of consumption based on affluence but an ethos of scarcity and restraint.<sup>26</sup> However, this year also saw the "Britain can make it" exhibition showcasing good design as the fundamental for the successful manufacture of consumer goods, with the Americans being seen as the key competitors in the "burgeoning consumer goods sector."<sup>27</sup> In the US incomes in the war had not been taxed as heavily as in the UK and people had been earning without having much to spend their money on. In the US, and somewhat later in the UK, the years after the war and beyond were a time of economic growth, consumer affluence, more possessions and a greater need for places to store these, and hence cupboards in houses. New

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<sup>25</sup> The other four were "want, disease, ignorance, and squalor."

<sup>26</sup> Maguire & Woodham *Design and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* p 9.

<sup>27</sup> Maguire & Woodham *Design and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* p 10.

Zealanders also felt the effects of this move to consumerism and in 1946 were already asking for built-in storage in house interiors. A contemporary report based on asking 12 people about their preferences for the design of the interior of a house concluded that light and space were important. The final comment was on attitudes to furniture.

Furniture was most favoured as being essentially plain, simple and comfortable, having a utilitarian rather than a decorative value. A further aspect of this simplicity and plainness was the desire for built-in cupboards, wardrobes, alcoves and other fitments.<sup>28</sup>

Architects responded by incorporating more storage into their designs. How this was done can be very broadly categorised into two approaches. The first was the Arts and Crafts approach to the design of the whole internal environment, as discussed by Parker above. The second is the Modernist approach of using furniture to divide space. This latter aspect of the changing attitude to the cupboard was noted in a New Zealand review of Gibberd's book mentioned above.

Of particular interest is the use of fittings in openly planned houses to define the different areas such as

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<sup>28</sup> Stewart "The man in the street chooses a houseful of rooms" p 31.

sitting, dining, study etc.<sup>29</sup>

Both approaches can be found in New Zealand houses of the 1940s, as briefly discussed below.

### **Cupboards; the houses of Bernard Johns and the first Group House**

The one thing not mentioned in the obituaries of Bernard Johns<sup>30</sup> is his delight in cupboards. Visit one of his houses and cupboards, built-in seats just where you might want to sit down and remove your outdoor shoes, external access for a log storage space beside the fireplace, built-in shelves for the display of possessions—all have been thought about in careful detail to make a house easy to live in. The quirky are also catered for, such as the very narrow cupboard 100mm wide between two studs in the kitchen of Rona Street, or the small cupboard incorporated into the bath panel at the Hannah beach house in Eastbourne. It is as if the houses have been carefully designed to match all needs of the client and his or her way of life. This is very much design as Barry Parker has described it,

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<sup>29</sup> "Modern built-in furniture" p 31.

<sup>30</sup> "Bernard Johns, architect, dies" p 16; "Architects dies" p 3; "Bernard W. Johns, Architect 1902-1982" pp 16-25. Maurice Patience authored part of this last obituary.

which puts Johns clearly in the Arts and Crafts approach to total design. This is supported by comments of Maurice Patience, who was part of the Johns' office in Wellington and who apart from Lutyens (see below) also linked the houses of Johns to Webb, Voysey, Baillie-Scott and Beresford.

Bernard and Bob [Meldrum] were both Eclectics. At the time the firm of Johns and Meldrum began [at the end of WWII], I had just come under the philosophy of the modern movement and many were the arguments raised against repeating the old forms in modern times—Bob would bring in Lutyens whom both he and Bernard had great admiration for, and I would bring in Mies' (sic) with which I had grown familiar through the British Arts Magazine "The Studio."<sup>31</sup>

In fact Johns' own architectural heritage is mixed. His father was an architect and Johns was first articulated in New Zealand but then travelled to England where he worked for two firms linked to Modernism and also qualified by attending the London University School, returning to New Zealand in 1929.<sup>32</sup> He worked for Slater and Moberly, names that were later associated with Modern design through the curtain-walled Peter Jones store (1932-36) when the firm was Slater, Crabtree

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<sup>31</sup> "Bernard W. Johns, Architect 1902-1982" p 20.

<sup>32</sup> "Bernard W. Johns, Architect 1902-1982" p 16.

and Moberly, with Crabtree given credit for the design and the 1939 John Lewis store in Oxford Street designed by Slater, Moberly and Uren with Singer. Elsewhere the works of Slater and Moberly have also been described as nodding to the Home Counties vernacular, hence linking back to Lutyens and his contemporaries.<sup>33</sup> Johns' second job was for the Modernist architect Joseph Emberton, who designed the 1929 Corinthian Yacht Club, Burnham on Crouch. What may have been more influential on Johns is AH Moberly's work as a neo-Georgian house designer, seen in the 1903 house at 7 Linton Road in north Oxford<sup>34</sup> and his own 1927 house in Hampstead Garden Suburb. Nevertheless, Johns' work, it is argued here, can be linked to the Arts and Crafts movement through the way his interior fitted furnishings are an integral part of the whole work. This, in turn, is based on an exact knowledge of how buildings are put together and where spaces exist in the interstices of construction to put such things as cupboards. This can be seen in Johns' cupboards placed high up in chimney breasts in the Hannah House, making use of space created as the flue narrows as it rises

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<sup>33</sup> Pollard, Pevsner & Sharples *Lancashire* p 99.

<sup>34</sup> Oxfordshire County Council "North Oxford: House Styles 1880-1930 (cont)" n.p.

up. Knowledge of construction based on the evolved use of tried and trusted materials was fundamental in the Arts and Crafts approach to design.

This approach can be contrasted with the use the Group Architects made of fitted storage to divide space. The first Group house at 20 Northboro Road, Takapuna, was designed in 1949 and built by a group of architectural students from the Auckland School who had come together that summer to design and construct the first of two houses in Takapuna under the name of Group Construction. They wanted to test and prove their ideas of what a good house for a New Zealand family could be like. The design was a prototype for a New Zealand house and was to be simple and suited to local conditions. The form, based on post and beam construction, was a shallow pitched roof over a single space. The plan and section<sup>35</sup> show how the living room has been separated from the play area not just by a change in level but by a storage unit accessed from both sides that does not go all the way up to the ceiling, allowing the simple space to be read as a whole. The dining space is also

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<sup>35</sup> Architecture Archive (University of Auckland) "First House Plan" n.p.

divided from the kitchen space by low level cupboards, and full height cupboards form the wall between the two smaller bedrooms and between the main bedroom and the playroom/circulation route. In addition beds are built into the smaller bedroom and a divan into the living room. A similar approach is taken in the Second Takapuna House where a wall of cupboards separates the circulation route to the bedroom from the living room. The kitchen is also only separated from the living area by low cupboards, the whole house fighting all the time to be read as a single space, with only bedrooms and bathroom separate from this. This time the form and materials are simple and less technical knowledge of how the building is constructed is required. The house is designed as a single, simple space within which the storage partitioning is placed, all a Modernist approach that can be compared to the house part of the Pavillon de l'esprit nouveau (see above). The Group manifesto claims that they are Modernists.

[Architecture] can arise only out of the daily life of Everyman, and without Everyman there can be no architecture. Building nice houses for nice people is not architecture.

To design buildings, cups or motor cars in the modern

idiom while denying the validity of these concepts is surely to perpetuate eclecticism and hypocrisy. For if our logic ends with the "style" we use we are merely substituting the copy-book of steel and glass for that of column and cornice. The spirit of modern architecture must permeate the whole life of him who practises its skills. He cannot leave it in his drawing board.<sup>36</sup>

Thus cupboards here are symbolic of a modern way of living where space is viewed differently, and the ability to comprehend the whole space is vital in the design. Rooms, furniture and cupboards must not be allowed to interrupt this more than is vitally necessary.

### **Conclusion**

It is doubtful that deep conclusions can be drawn from a brief look at how cupboards were used differently by two architectural firms in the years immediately after WWII. Nevertheless, this paper has argued that something as prosaic as a cupboard can be used to signify architectural intent by examining its place in the overall scheme for a house.

In the hands of architects like Johns, who did build "nice houses for nice people," the cupboard and built-in furniture were handled in an Arts and Crafts way. The whole

building, both inside and out, was part of a single design intention and also closely followed the way the client lived out his or her life. This approach was based on sound constructional knowledge of making houses in traditional ways that were known to last and give good service over many years. Materials and methods of construction were used to give form to the houses and interstitial spaces created in this process could be used for fitted storage. In contrast the Modernists used their construction knowledge to make an envelope that enclosed space, often viewing space as a single entity. They then used cupboards to divide the single standardised space of the modern house into different functional zones without ever destroying it. What that also did to acoustics, privacy and thermal comfort within the space is beyond the scope of this paper.

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<sup>36</sup> The Group "On the necessity for architecture" pp 3-4.



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