

JOSEPH EMBERTON: THE ARCHITECTURE OF DISPLAY

A collaborative exhibition with the University of Brighton Design Archives in the De'Longhi Print Room considers the work of British architect Joseph Emberton, overlooked in the history of modern architecture, yet revered by commentators of the time. Exhibition Curator Professor Catherine Moriarty introduces his work.

Unlikely though it may seem, a chemist's shop less than fifteen miles from Chichester was selected by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, for the 1937 exhibition *Modern Architecture in England*. The Southsea branch of Timothy Whites, the work of architect Joseph Emberton (1889–1956), which opened in 1934, featured a distinctive grid façade of white, rough-cast glass held by steel strips, over which were laid bands of lettering and the symbol of pharmacists – the carboy – reduced to essentials in bent steel tubing and neon.

The exhibition featured another of Emberton's buildings, the upmarket outfitters Simpson (Piccadilly) Ltd. Completed in 1936 and retaining a distinctive place in London's retail landscape, this structure proposed a far more sophisticated shopping experience but one in which the spectacle of display remained paramount. From the street, through the entrances and circulation areas, and within this multi-level expanse of curved counters, luxurious surfaces, and the imaginative display and lighting of stock, customers experienced a considered and sensuous unfolding of retail space.

Selected by those whose views shaped the definition and representation of modern architecture, and also its history, the MoMA exhibition had enormous influence. It assembled a compendium of buildings that together presented a cohesive visual story of 'good work' in England that, by way of exemplar, might help fend off the spectres of 'blatant revivalism, sickly traditionalism, and pseudo-

modernism.' While the names of many of the architects included went on to become widely known, Emberton's did not, yet several of his buildings possessed qualities that in the inter-war years ranked him in the first order.

In an essay that accompanied the 1937 exhibition, Henry-Russell Hitchcock discussed Berthold Lubetkin's penguin pool at London Zoo, arguing that in providing a setting for an activity it solved an 'essential functional problem'. This analysis provides a useful way of considering Emberton's buildings. He too, was particularly good at creating settings, often involving viewers and the observed. This skill at display, be it of commodities in a retail or exhibition context, of people shopping, promenading or eating, of activities related to spectacle, could perhaps sum up the qualities of Emberton's best structures.

The first of his buildings to attract international attention was his yacht club at Burnham-on-Crouch in 1931. The experience, in this relatively modest building, is of the space outside, of lightness and glass. The pontoon-like structure seems more part of the water than the land, both inside and out, with unobstructed views through the glass frontage. It is the highly effective creation of a setting for those yachting, and those observing from the clubrooms, the judge's box, or the roof and balconies with their purportedly 'unclimbable' balustrades. Featured in the architectural press nationally and internationally, it attracted the attention of Philip Johnson who, as director of MoMA's 1932 exhibition of modern architecture, requested



Above: Joseph Emberton, Timothy Whites chemists, Southsea, 1934, Architectural Press Archive / RIBA Library Photographs Collection
Opposite page: HMV (His Master's Voice) record store, Oxford Street, London, 1936/9, Joseph Emberton Archive, University of Brighton Design Archives

photographs for inclusion. While criticising the standardized wrought iron exterior spiral staircase, a Victorian hangover that rather marred the building, Johnson sympathized with Emberton's response that, due to budget and availability, he had had no alternative. The building also illustrated an article by the Dutch architect J J P Oud – whose work represented Holland in the 1932 exhibition – in which he claimed, 'Modern architecture can be outlined in a few words only: seeking clear forms for clearly expressed needs.'

However, the experience of this seeking and its resolution could be thwarted by a number of factors; the logistics of construction, building practices and regulations, the influence of clients or paymasters, and criticism or lack of support from the public and professional colleagues. A pragmatist rather than an idealist, Emberton was nonetheless prepared to make his opinions known when roused. In 1932 he described as 'flabby thinking' a condemnation of modern architecture expressed by the Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, William Inge. Emberton retorted, 'steel and concrete are the materials of a new age. They have vast possibilities and there is no justification whatever for imposing on the materials of today the limitations of another age.'

In 1929, the speed at which Emberton's exhibition hall at Olympia was being constructed attracted much comment in the press. A steel frame clad in concrete, the 'Empire's Largest Shop' was 330ft long, comprising four floors each with an exhibiting area of 60,000 square feet. Emberton's challenge was the safe circulation of thousands of people and the effective display of exhibits. Lifts were installed to take large items to upper floors, those for the public were fitted with loudspeakers that announced the displays on each floor, and signage and orientation were paid great attention. However, the exterior of artificial stone, like the stairs at Burnham, and adaptations to the supporting structure at Simpson's, was seen to sully its credentials as a work of modern architecture, criticism detractors were keen to repeat.

Having worked on exhibition stands for trade shows in Britain and in Europe, Emberton had experience of creating settings for events on a grand scale. He went on to deploy his knowledge of public circulation when he was commissioned to design elements of the Pleasure Beach at Blackpool in 1935, and four years later, its casino. Here, too, the creation of a setting for leisure and consumption on a mass scale resulted in inventive spaces for entertainment and refreshment, with form and lighting used to entice and delight. His HMV shop in Oxford Street (1939) demonstrated a similarly experiential approach, with the storage, distribution and presentation of stock addressed in minute detail, and everything arranged to best effect for both staff and customers. Fittings and furniture absorbed Emberton. He designed a great deal himself, often employing new materials such as Plymax, aluminium, tubing and veneers. Designers with the credentials of László Moholy-Nagy and Ashley Havinden were engaged by Alexander Simpson to create signage, displays and advertising to complement Emberton's architecture.

Despite designing various residential schemes – small blocks of flats in the East End before the war, the larger Stafford Cripps estate at Old Street in 1953, and devising an innovative steel house prototype (1946) that he hoped would help solve Britain's slum and reconstruction problems – Emberton is not known for his housing. Indeed the MARS (Modern Architectural Research) Group, a younger generation of architects and designers who saw themselves as protagonists in the transformation of a built environment fit for modern society, were positioning themselves as baton-carriers. Among the papers of one its founder members, Wells Coates, as Elizabeth Darling reveals





Above: Fun House at Blackpool Pleasure Beach, 1935
Opposite page: The Royal Corinthian Yacht Club, Burnham-on-Crouch, 1931
Joseph Emberton Archive, University of Brighton Design Archives.

in her research, is a list of those architects who were not to be invited to join the group and Emberton's name is on it. Perhaps because of his association with architects including Thomas Tait (1882–1954), seen as being proto-modern rather than pure modernists, because his best buildings were associated with leisure and pleasure, rather than housing, health or education, and perhaps because of his connection to advertising and some of the distinctly arts décoratifs projects of his earlier career, Emberton was – despite prestigious recognition on the other side of the Atlantic – sidelined from the story of modern architecture in England as it was to evolve: his early death in 1956 also meant that his work had to stand undefended for many years.

It is the press-cuttings, correspondence and photographs in Emberton's archive that reveal the highs and lows of his career, the debate that surrounded his work and the way it was received at particular times. From this largely paper-based body of material emerges an invitation to experience at first hand the buildings by Emberton that have survived. Indeed, exhibitions of material from particular archives present the same problem as exhibitions about architecture; both need to be appreciated as a whole,

as a set of relations between things in space that are best understood in situ. Certainly, despite dramatic changes in occupant or surroundings, the way that Emberton strove to introduce modern ideas to the British public's experience of space is still discernable. As well as yacht club members and purchasers of DAKS trousers these included hordes of trippers at Blackpool (recorded so evocatively in the 1937 Worktown images of Humphrey Spender) and thousands of exhibition visitors annually at Olympia. In a history of modern architecture in England defined by buildings, as MoMA constructed it, his best work certainly retains its place, but in one where the architects take centre stage, the unassuming and not always consistent Emberton was easy to overlook. His story, alongside but very different from that of his friend and fellow student Leon Underwood, is one of those that allow us to enjoy the complexity and contradictions that established art and design narratives tended to smooth over.

Joseph Emberton: The Architecture of Display runs in the De'Longhi Print Room at Pallant House Gallery from 18 February – 17 May 2015. A talk on *Modern Architecture in Britain* by Catherine Croft from the Twentieth Century Society takes place on Thursday 23 April at 6pm.

