

# A Sense of the Organic

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The more I thought about this house, the more I realized that it gathered into it a number of different, possibly contradictory, characteristics. The initial impression, having walked round and through it, was that the clue to understanding it might be through recognizing the relationship between part and whole, as the architects intended. There is no doubt that it is a didactic piece – it serves the purpose of illustrating their theory of space and its construction.

There are a number of suggested sources – Scharoun, the Smithsons, Venturi and, more immediately, the work of Florian Beigel and Tony Fretton. The German connection proved fruitful by working back from Scharoun to Hugo Haring and his idea of 'new building' as opposed to 'architecture'. This direction of enquiry acknowledged the nature of the organic. 'In nature form is the result of the organization of many distinct parts in space in such a way that life can unfold, fulfilling all its effects both in terms of the single part and in terms of the integrated whole; whereas in the geometrical cultures, form is derived from the laws of geometry.'<sup>1</sup> And of course, Haring's position was a development of the Gothic versus Classic debate of the early- nineteenth century from Goethe via Pugin, Ruskin, Lethaby to Muthesius's *Das Englische Haus*, which was published in 1904 when Haring was 22.

The character of the house, both in the differing nature of its four sides or faces and in the experience of being loosely held by slowly unfolding surfaces, is consistent with Haring's view that 'the part should have an identity of its own which is yet contained within the whole'.<sup>2</sup> And it is that experience which is most pleasurable in this house. From the living room one has views both over the meadow to the north, with the horizon of the Fens, and back to the line of trees at the edge of the village. And the house has been positioned just far enough away from these trees to allow the sun into the kitchen and dining room and along the timber deck stretched across the south face.

This choice of view contributes to an understanding of the central space - the living room - as active in creating, or bringing together, a variety of experience. It is a gathering space within the house, not only in programmatic terms, but also in the sense that it gathers in different experiences - experiences resulting from the relative independence of the parts -whether they are the large picture window, the sliding doors to the deck, the long, low window situated just at sofa height or the window to the bedroom above. Each thing or element is given its own expression and figurative place on the constantly unfolding surfaces bounding the space. It is both painterly and sculptural inasmuch as it transcends the necessity of a too-insistent tectonic. The block walls are honestly expressed but never dominate the overall sense of the enveloping surfaces. Perhaps the doors to the guest bedrooms should have been separated to allow the surface to speak rather than show the thickness of the block. This one grouping seems to introduce an echo of the New Brutalism of the 1950s which was, of course, concerned with Haring's sense of the organic but also the 'meaning versus beauty' debate in the relationship of part to whole, that is, where the whole does not control the part. But as Banham argued, it was more ethic than aesthetic and the innate morality of much Brutalist building militated against elegance. Caruso St John's sensibility has been informed by 30 years of Minimalist art, and its love of flushness and smooth surfaces subdues any moralistic tectonic tendency.

The assured abstract detailing means that the space controls the details. The grouping of switches and socket outlets on flush panels forms another kind of folding surface and does not allow the particular to subvert the generalised nature of the space.

There is another reading of the interior as a representation of the Fen landscape, with the powerfloated concrete floor as the polished earth and the vault of the ceiling as the sky, or perhaps a great cloud, that allows light into the interior through little pockets. The decision not to break the vault with natural light maintains the enfolding sense of the interior space. The outside is kept outside. The inside

contemplates the outside. It is a space for thinking and reflection.

The constantly changing views allied with the shifting surfaces are furthered by the way in which the plan is set down. It is rather as if the house as a collection, or gathering, of spaces was conceived in the mind's eye and only set down on paper to allow the space to be built. There is a feeling of a new sense of space, of an 'architecture' freed from the tyranny of the plan; a feeling of a way of describing complex organic space through folding surfaces round and over living space, 'in such a way that life can unfold,' as Haring put it.

If I have concentrated on attempting to describe the character of the interior space it is because I consider that to be the real ambition of any good house. This extraordinary interior is held within a beautifully detailed brick envelope positioned just at the edge of the village; the carport acts as a portico shielding the strange house from the curious gaze of the villagers. The black stained wooden fence demarcates the threshold of the garden. The positioning of the house is an assured piece of place-making. Lewerentz's savage metaphysical detailing has been domesticated - the large sheets of glass are held tautly within minimal galvanised frames - the opening windows generously framed in dense black-stained softwood to give the handles room to work. The flush pointing to the Sussex bricks demonstrates the idea of the wall (with a generous cavity to avoid any ingress of moisture into the interior skin). The flushness of the north and west facades reinforces the presence of the brick house set between the barn and the church, between the agricultural and the spiritual, between work and prayer; somewhere to live.

## References

1 H Haring, *Wege zur Form*, 1925

2 Ibid



