



Picturesque Illusion: The Work of Clough-Williams Ellis

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Sir Bertram Clough Williams-Ellis (1883-1978) was a maverick architect with broad interests which included the revival of vernacular building techniques, rural social housing, and preservation of unspoilt areas through national parks. He was best-known for the holiday village of Portmeirion in North Wales (built 1926-78), where he gathered together fragments of historic buildings combined with his own work in a monumental folly, which has now been designated for its special architectural and historic interest. The picturesque visual ensemble of Portmeirion has obscured Clough's concern with the relationship between buildings and their environmental context. For all its casual appearance, Portmeirion was based upon artistic planning principles of the early 20th century, including the theories of Camillo Sitte and the work of Raymond Unwin, particularly through his seminal work, *Town Planning in Practice* (1909). Indeed, Clough acknowledged three mentors, a triumvirate of early 20th century British Planning: Edwin Lutyens, Raymond Unwin and Patrick Abercrombie. Concern over the poor standard of architecture and planning in the 1920s brought two polemics, *The Pleasures of Architecture* (1924) and *England and the Octopus* (1928) - the latter served as a manifesto for the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, founded by Patrick Abercrombie in 1926 (Clough was a founder member of its Welsh equivalent, and in the late 1940s he was involved with defining the boundaries of Snowdonia National Park.

A patrician Socialist, Clough supported the development of state-funded social housing, and in the 1940s was appointed the first Chairman of the Stevenage Borough Development Corporation, the first New Town to be designated, following the recommendation of Patrick Abercrombie's Greater London Plan (1944). Perhaps paradoxically, he was also architect for some of the latest country houses to be built in Britain.

Why should we remember Clough Williams-Ellis, who remained active until his death at the age of 95? His pioneer work on rural preservation and building in context lies in the present day concerns for environmental issues. His architectural language and the planning principles which guided Portmeirion are in harmony with New Urbanism, particularly the revival of traditional design values by the Duchy of Cornwall development at Poundbury (begun 1993) and elsewhere. This paper will provide an overview and evaluation of Clough Williams-Ellis's life and work.

KEY WORDS: Picturesque Design, New Urbanism.