

Right: the SIS Building or M16 Building at Vauxhall Cross by Terry Farrell & Partners. Overleaf top: Adam Architecture country house on a disused railway embankment in Warwickshire and, below, Bigbury Hollow by Richard Hawkes

What is the Queen's architectural legacy?

Victorian, Georgian and Elizabethan buildings are easily recognisable, but what about those constructed during Elizabeth II's reign?

Words: Eleanor Doughty

Looking over Westminster from Albert Embankment, a Victorian transported to the 21st century might be confused by the city before them. A host of tall, shiny towers clutter the South Bank; a great revolving wheel looks like a fair-ground attraction; and in the distance, a peculiar shard of metal emerges out of the mist.

These buildings make up the city of London. And each, in their own way, represents the legacy of Queen Elizabeth II. The Georgians had their grand proportions, and the Victorians their industry. But what will we think of as the Elizabeth II style in 200 years – and indeed, what will we call it?

Over the last 65 years, the Queen has watched the birth of an extraordinary host of architectural styles. Her journey moves through brutalism and the Trellick Tower to postmodernism and the SIS building, via the rise and fall of the country house and “blobitecture”, such as the Selfridges building in Birmingham. Along the way she has endured her own architectural crisis: the fire at Windsor Castle in 1992.

Buckingham Palace says that no list exists of the buildings that the Queen has opened, but in 2015 alone she undertook 341 engagements of varying kinds. The number of structures named in her honour is ever growing: the Elizabeth Tower (previously St Stephen's Tower) was renamed in 2012, the same year as the park in Stratford that bears her name opened, to host the Olympic Games. The new Crossrail line – though not strictly made of bricks and mortar – will

also memorialise her when it opens in December 2018.

Her experience is unique. “If you were to do a photographic album of all the plaques on the buildings she's opened, it would be a history of English 20th century architecture,” architect David Walker points out. “She's probably seen more buildings than any architecture critic alive, plus she's toured them and been told about them by the commissioners.”

The length of her reign makes pinpointing the archetypal ‘Elizabethan’ house near-impossible. Instead, her legacy takes several different forms. One of these, says classical architect Robbie Kerr of Adam Architecture, is globalisation and its relationship with how we build. “Speed of communication has transformed the way we can see the world. You don't need to go on your grand tour to see what's going on. Within a few clicks on Instagram you can get a good idea,” he says. “The architecture that's been developed during the Queen's reign is of a globalised world – it's not, per se, a local legacy.”

Sean Ellis, chairman of St James, a pillar of the Berkeley Group, agrees. “Historically you probably would have commissioned the local architect for a project, and now they come from all over the world to build in the UK. There's a broader range of architecture because a broader range of architects work on the projects.”

The relationship between clients, architects and consumers has also changed. “Many architects are self-consciously seeking innovation in what they design,” says Nicholas Boys Smith, the founder of social enterprise Create Streets. “Why is it that Georgian houses look ▶







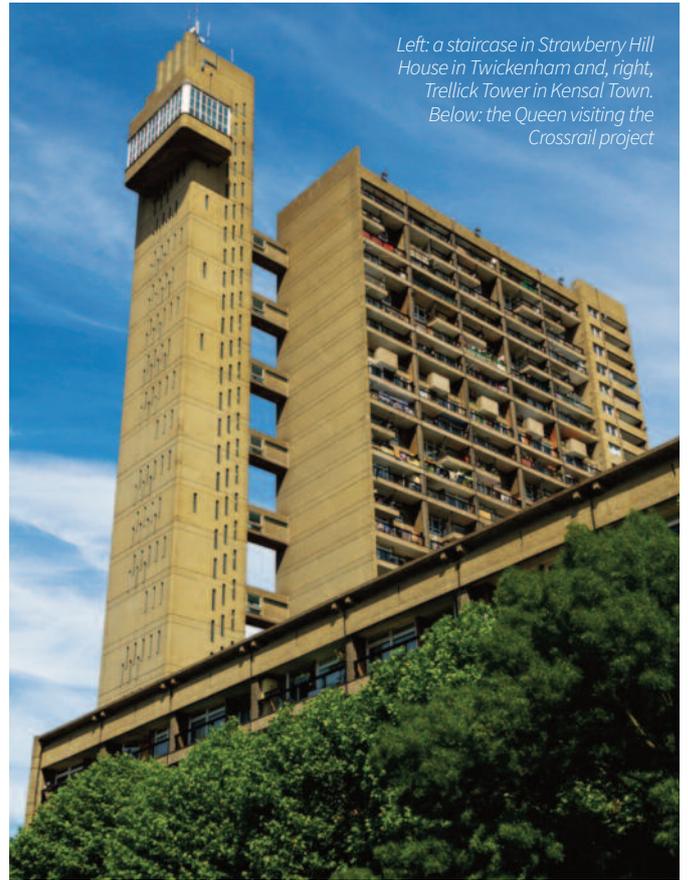
► comparable? There's a typology that we expect, and it isn't just because every architect spontaneously woke up and said 'aha! I will build that one.' Those houses were what regulations said they should build, and it's also because there was a series of pattern books." The framework for what we ought to build no longer exists, says Boys Smith. "It's almost impossible to get that degree of uniformity."

Architects have to be more in tune with the consumer, Ellis says. Nevertheless, the profession has seen exponential growth in stature over the last 60 years. "They have far more kudos now," says Ellis. "Increasingly, consumers are asking us who designed the property, and at the top end it's important. An architect's brand can be used to sell a residential property, particularly off-plan."

Outside of the city, architects can now be more creative than ever. The introduction of Gummer's Law by then-Conservative environment secretary John Gummer (now the Lord Deben) in 1997 prompted an upturn in the fate of the country house, many of which had

been lost through demolition, fire or sale in the mid-late 20th century. This law was an exception in the planning system that allowed new country houses to be built, provided their architecture and landscaping was of outstanding quality. It was not immediately popular. "I did it because I am interested in architecture," Lord Deben says. "It seemed that the planning system meant that one of our greatest artistic achievements, the country house, was going to die because people were not able to build new versions of them."

By 2012, Gummer's Law had morphed into Paragraph 55 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), and grants permission to houses that are "truly outstanding or innovative", "reflect the highest standards in architecture" and "significantly enhance its immediate setting." This has changed the face of country house building, says Willy Browne-Swinburne, head of business development at Rural Solutions, a rural planning specialist. "There is no such thing as a Queen Elizabeth II style country house. For the first time in ten generations, people have done what ►



Left: a staircase in Strawberry Hill House in Twickenham and, right, Trellick Tower in Kensal Town. Below: the Queen visiting the Crossrail project



► they like. The Queen's legacy is best demonstrated in the increased variation in the countryside. Because you've got more urban people coming into the countryside, there are different cultures and tastes emerging. Before it was always the tweedy gents."

The English country house tradition is a remarkable one, agrees Duncan Hartley, head of planning at Rural Solutions. "It was a tradition that was essentially stalled with the onset of the planning system, which existed primarily to stop unfettered development in open countryside. The consequence was that tradition of building country houses halted. Para 55 has resurrected it."

Para 55 houses are beginning to spring up in green pockets nationwide. In Warwickshire, a grand country house by Adam Architecture has been granted planning permission for its placement in the middle of a disused railway embankment. Others are less conventional: in 2011, Richard Hawkes, a former Grand Designs participant, was given permission for Bigbury

Hollow, a subterranean house set within an Iron Age scheduled ancient monument near Canterbury.

Whatever form they take, exceptional buildings are good for the profession, says Walker, who believes that architecture has simply become better during the Queen's reign. But it is her son whose legacy is most obvious. Princes Charles flipped debate in the architectural world on its head in 1984, when he famously described the extension of the National Gallery as "a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend".

In 1987, work began on Poundbury, the Duchy of Cornwall's town extension in Dorset, and its list of development projects grows longer by the year. With Britain entering a period of renewed scepticism about globalism following the Brexit vote, and the impending rule of a King with far more well-defined views on the relative merits of various architectural styles, perhaps it will, in fact, be Elizabeth II's son who plays a more defining role in the shape of British architecture. **B**