

The Architecture of Happiness:

Building Utopia in the Last Romances of William Morris

i. Architecture and Utopia

Over that downland we may wend a four days, and then the land will swell up high, and from the end of that high land we shall behold below us a fair land of tillage, well watered and wooded, and much builded; and in the midst thereof a great city with walls and towers, and a great white castle and a minster, and lovely houses a many.

(Morris, May, 1910-15, XX: 260-61)

In his 1881 lecture ‘Art and the Beauty of the Earth’, William Morris asserted that “those who are to make beautiful things must live in a beautiful place”, and in honour of these beautiful places the buildings people construct should be “ornaments to Nature, not disfigurements of it” (Morris, May, 1910-15, XXII: 170). The City of the Five Crafts in his romance *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1897), described in the opening extract, exemplifies this potential for a harmonious interaction between built and natural environment. Gerard’s description of the city engages both the protagonist Birdalone and the reader in an imaginative enactment of the journey there in which the sense of expectation engendered by climbing the high land resolves into a vision of intense aesthetic delight. It is a delight which proves no less potent for being anticipated, for on approaching the city several days later Birdalone “cried aloud with joy to see the lovely land before her, and the white walls and the towers of the great city” (idem, XX: 264). Her response articulates what Howard Parsons describes as “the excitement of visual experience and wide vistas: the pure wonder of just seeing and revelling in the colours

and forms of the world spread out before one” (Parsons, 1973: 197-98). Significantly, the colours and forms of this particular scene are a combination of the natural and the man-made, with towers and houses co-operating aesthetically with woods and river in the generation of visual pleasure. The builders of the City of the Five Crafts have attained Morris’s highest aspirations for architecture – they have made the earth “blossom with beautiful buildings” (Morris, May, 1910-15, XXII: 208).

Architecture functioned for Morris as the consummate expression of man’s triumph in artistic creation, and as Chris Miele notes, he tended to treat it “as a kind of shorthand for the totality of the man-made environment” (Miele, 1996: 4). It was the master-art whose success was integrally linked to those subordinate yet essential modes of artistic activity which were at their finest in painting and sculpture but which also included what might be denoted the crafts or the lesser arts. “It is this union of the arts, mutually helpful and harmoniously subordinated one to another, which I have learned to think of as Architecture”, Morris affirmed in his lecture ‘The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization’ (1881), and this is “a great subject truly”, he argued, “for it embraces the consideration of the whole external surroundings of the life of man” (Morris, May, 1910-15, XXII: 119). Architecture was thus fundamental to Morris’s aesthetic vision as an artist and a craftsman – but Morris’s aesthetic vision and his political vision as a revolutionary Socialist were, as his lectures and essays repeatedly demonstrate, inextricably linked. Architecture was, he emphasised, the art form that had the most immediate and widespread impact on people’s daily lives – “we cannot escape from it if we would”, he declared – and as such it inevitably acquired social and political relevance

(ibidem). Hence the vision of a post-revolutionary society which Morris regularly revisits and re-articulates in his lectures incorporates not only ideas of how a communist mode of social organization might operate, but considers how that society might shape its domestic and public spaces in a manner that reflects a new era of social cohesion and a new code of human values.

This article will consider the significance of architecture as utopian vision and practice in the work of William Morris, from his earliest writings and his association with the architect Philip Webb to his later years of Socialist propaganda. It will consider the importance of architecture as both social and aesthetic statement in Morris's lectures and his utopian romance *News from Nowhere* (1890) before considering in more detail the role of buildings in Morris's last romances – a series of extraordinary narratives he wrote from 1890 until his death in 1896. It will argue that the imaginative freedom offered by his last romances allowed Morris to explore most compellingly what it means to build both practically and beautifully and to recognize architecture as one of the most enduring celebrations of communal values and aspirations, concluding that Morris's final narratives might in fact be considered an architectural call to arms – an inspiration and motivation to strive for a new society with its own architecture of happiness.

ii. The Glories of Gothic

Morris's own powerfully emotive and imaginative response to buildings is evident in his earliest published work in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in 1856.

The awe and admiration he felt for Gothic architecture in particular is palpable in his article ‘The Churches of North France’, in which Morris explained:

I thought I should like to tell people of some of those things I felt when I was there among the mighty tombs of the long-dead ages. And I thought that even if I could say nothing else about these grand churches I could at least tell men how much I loved them; so that though they might laugh at me for my foolish and confused words, they might yet be moved to see what there was that made me speak my love, though I could give no reason for it (Morris, May, 1910-15, I: 349).

In attempting to articulate the nature of his passionate response to these buildings, Morris clearly anticipates the inadequacy of his vocabulary whilst trusting that the emotive power of his response might yet reveal itself amidst his potential linguistic failure. Undeterred by the challenge, he attempted to speak this love again over thirty years later in his lecture ‘Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century’ (1890), in which it is clear that Morris is still striving to communicate the tremendous visual and emotional impact of Gothic forms and structures. Evoking a deliberate contrast between the buildings of the Middle Ages and those of the nineteenth century, the lecture opens with a journey through the street of a contemporary provincial town with its “sickly yellow-white brick and blue slate” (idem, XXII: 376). Morris guides his audience through this oppressively unattractive environment, engaging them visually and emotionally in a walk that culminates suddenly and with an unexpected thrill of joy:

Then you take a step or two onward and raise your eyes, and stand transfixed with wonder, and a wave of pleasure and exultation sweeps away the memory of the squalidness of today and the shabby primness of yesterday [...] for there heaves itself up above the meanness of the street and its petty commercialism a mass of grey stone traceried and carved and moulded into a great triple portico beset with pinnacles and spires, so orderly in its intricacy, so elegant amidst its hugeness,

that even without any thought of its history or meaning it fills your whole soul with satisfaction (ibidem).

Whilst “thought of its history or meaning” could presumably only add to the wondrous effects of what is evidently a medieval church, these effects – “pleasure”, “exultation” and profound “satisfaction” – are generated potently enough by the physical realities of its structure. The building “heaves itself up” as if conscious of its role in demonstrating the astonishing capacity of man to express his desires and aspirations in concrete form, simultaneously admonishing the current generation of builders for the shabby and demoralized offerings that surround it. Indeed, the very act of raising the eyes signals to the observer that this is something above and beyond man’s ordinary achievement – that here is the structural embodiment of delight.

The particularly dramatic and affective influence of the great Gothic churches is a dominant motif across many of Morris’s lectures on art and architecture, but it is an influence which he expressed just as potently in the realms of fiction. In his early narrative for the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’ (1856), Morris was able to explore his recent experiences of the French cathedrals free from the self-consciousness evident in his more formal essay on the subject. His narrator, a master-mason of a large medieval church, recalls with increasing rapture the beauty of this large public edifice:

I see it in autumn-tide clearly now; yes, clearer, clearer, oh! so bright and glorious! yet it was beautiful too in spring, when the brown earth began to grow green: beautiful in summer, when the blue sky looked so much bluer, if you could hem a piece of it in between the new white carving; beautiful in the solemn starry nights, so solemn that it almost reached agony – the awe and joy one had in their great beauty (idem, I: 149).

Building and natural environment here combine in the generation of a pleasure so intense it grows almost unbearable. Through the detached perspective of a narrator who, the reader realizes with a gentle shock, has been dead for six hundred years, Morris is liberated to articulate his own imaginative and emotional engagement with the Gothic structures that had stirred him so profoundly in Amiens and Rouen and which, thirty years later, he could still claim had given him “the greatest pleasure I have ever had” (idem, XXIII: 85).

In addition to its aesthetic appeal, however, the Gothic mode of building acquired an increasingly social and political relevance for Morris after he joined the Socialist movement in the early 1880s. Essential to the achievement of the Gothic builders, Morris asserted, were the conducive social conditions of the era in which these buildings had been constructed. He thus concurred with Ruskin’s view that the Gothic cathedrals offered “signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being, such as no laws, no charters, no charities can secure” (Cook and Wedderburn, 1903-12, X: 193-94). And it was in this respect primarily that Morris acknowledged Ruskin’s chapter ‘On the Nature of Gothic’ in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53) as “one of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century”, because “the lesson which Ruskin here teaches us”, Morris asserted, “is that art is the expression of man’s pleasure in labour; that it is possible for man to rejoice in his work” (Morris, May, 1936, I: 292). Furthermore, as Margaret Grennan notes, through his combined aesthetic and political interpretation of Gothic buildings Morris came to regard architecture as “the surest social record, since building, a co-operative act,

revealed more than any other art the true state of society” (Grennan, 1945: 73). “If we did not know how to dye or to weave”, Morris claimed in his lecture ‘The Beauty of Life’ (1880),

if we had neither gold, nor silver, nor silk; and no pigments to paint with, but half a dozen ochres and umbers, we might yet frame a worthy art that would lead to everything, if we had but timber, stone, and lime, and a few cutting tools to make these common things not only shelter us from wind and weather, but also express the thoughts and aspirations that stir in us (Morris, May, 1910-15, XXII: 73-74).

Architecture as an essentially communal activity and a mode of expressing communal thoughts and aspirations thus captured for Morris what Pevsner describes as “the changing spirits of changing ages”, in which buildings become documents in which the whole ethos of an age might be traced (Pevsner, 1963: 17).

iii. Architect-tooral-looral Excrescences

The aesthetic disparity between nineteenth-century architecture and Gothic architecture was thus for Morris, as for Pugin earlier in the century, a clear reflection of the very different values and ambitions of each age. Writing in the last decades of a century in which, he claimed, people were “mostly compelled to live in houses which have become a by-word of contempt for their ugliness and inconvenience”, Morris readily associated what he perceived as a decline in the beauty of contemporary architecture with the rampant growth of nineteenth-century capitalism (Morris, May, 1910-15, XXII: 38). Modern buildings were “base in idea and ugly to look on” (Morris, May, 1936, II, 473), he complained, with the poor in particular condemned to inhabit “bare, sunless and grim bastilles, (...) embodied nightmares of the hopeless thrift of the wage-slave” (Morris, William, 1884a: 4). Accordingly, Morris interpreted the

architecture of the nineteenth century as one the most emphatic signals of social injustice. “Let us on this matter be sure of one thing”, he wrote in *Justice* in 1884, “that as long as there are *poor* people they will be poorly housed”; it was thus no surprise to find “huge masses of brick and mortar” filling the urban landscape in order “to compete for the workman’s scanty shillings” (*ibidem*). Morris was particularly unflinching in his condemnation of the cheap and aesthetically abhorrent buildings constructed to house London’s continually increasing workforce in the last decades of the nineteenth century; such buildings had resulted in “the sickening hideousness” of the metropolis, he complained, and were “a mark of disgrace” on the nation (Morris, William, 1888: 2). As C.C. Knowles and P.H. Pitt note in their account of building regulations in London across eight centuries, the nineteenth century had, by its close, produced much in the way of building “that could only be described as undesirable and frightful”, ranging from the early tenement structures “in which human beings were buried alive” to the “streets upon streets of monotonous dwellings”, each sending up “its quota of smoke and soot” in the developing suburbs of the latter half of the century (Knowles and Pitt, 1972: 95-96). But Morris also argued that buildings bereft of both beauty and aspiration were not only imposed on the less affluent. The ugliness of nineteenth-century London, Morris emphasised, was as much the consequence of “the shops and dwellings of the bourgeoisie” as it was the slums of Bethnal-Green (Morris, William, 1888: 1). And nor was this merely an urban phenomenon. Morris bemoaned the fact that there were equally dreadful attempts “to cockneyize the countryside”, with many a village “turned smart but dull by architect-tooral-looral excrescences and changes” (Morris, May 1936, II: 476). This combination of blatant ugliness and dubious quality served for Morris as a visual

and tangible manifestation of the corruption at the heart of nineteenth-century capitalism – it spoke of a society “which has worked out the sum of commercialism most completely” (Morris, William, 1888: 2).

It was essentially the desire to restore a dynamic and constructive relationship between a people and its buildings that motivated Morris’s repeated calls for a fundamental reassessment of the significance and value of architecture in his own age – and to achieve this would, he maintained, mean nothing less than the transformation of contemporary social and economic values. “No wonder our houses are cramped and ignoble when the lives lived in them are cramped and ignoble also” (Morris, May, 1910-15, XXIII: 200), he explained, emphasising that a new age of building would be dependent on a new way of life, a life that could only be achieved by “the supplanting of the present capitalist system by something better” and “changing the whole basis of society” (LeMire, 1969: 93). In many of his lectures on art and Socialism buildings thus function as crucial symbols not only of how people were currently forced to live, but how, in contrast, they might live. Social revolution thereby becomes synonymous with architectural revolution in Morris’s writings, in which the regeneration of society invariably betokens the regeneration of the art of building beautifully and co-operatively.

In his various visions of how human society might be organized after a Socialist revolution, buildings thus serve as structural affirmations of the values Morris believed would underpin a new era of social harmony and artistic achievement. When “sickened

by the stupidity of the mean idiotic rabbit-warrens that rich men build for themselves in Bayswater”, Morris admitted:

I console myself with visions of the noble communal hall of the future, unsparing of materials, generous in worthy ornament, alive with the noblest thoughts of our time, and the past, embodied in the best art which a free and manly people could produce; such an abode of man as no private enterprise could come anywhere near for beauty and fitness, because only collective thought and collective life could cherish the aspirations which would give birth to its beauty, or have the skill and leisure to carry them out (Morris, May, 1910-15, XXIII: 23).

This ideal of the home as both architectural delight and shared communal space was one that Morris had himself briefly enjoyed in the building and decorating of Red House. Red House was in fact an early manifestation of Morris’s comprehensive definition of architecture in practice – a building whose aesthetic effects exemplified a “mutually helpful” union of the arts (idem, XXII: 119). Designed for him by Philip Webb, and completed in 1859, it was a house, J.W. Mackail observes, whose “planning was as original as its material” with its distinctive L-shaped formation and its red brick reaction against the contemporary vogue for “stucco and slate” (Mackail, 1899, I: 141). It was also, as Fiona MacCarthy notes, a “personally expressive building” compiled of “highly emotive” visual effects (MacCarthy, 1994: 156). But just as significant as its overt visual and material statements was the fact that the building of Red House generated a fellowship of artistic endeavour – “a gathering together of all the arts”, as May Morris described it – which famously led to the formation of what was affectionately known as ‘The Firm’, the precursor to Morris and Company (Morris, May, 1936, I: 11). If the best buildings were, as W.R. Lethaby once proposed, “builded history and poetry” (Lethaby, 1935: 128) for Morris and Webb, then Red House was an important contribution to this architectural legacy – a contribution acknowledged by Rossetti who concluded that

Morris's home was "a most noble work in every way, and more a poem than a house" (Doughty and Wahl, 1965, II: 436).

But as Edward Hollamby notes, Red House always had something of "the appeal of the ivory tower" about it (Hollamby, 1996: no page numbers), and after his later commitment to Socialism Morris's ideas of communal dwelling necessarily expanded to accommodate a more inclusive vision than that of a small brotherhood of artists living in a splendid but inevitably exclusive "palace of Art" (Kelvin, 1984-96, I: 38). This renewed vision is glimpsed in his Socialist drama *The Tables Turned* (1887), in which one of the primary indicators of a newly revolutionized society is "the pretty new hall" the community builds for their parish, but it finds a more comprehensive expression in the post-revolutionary society depicted in Morris's 1890 utopian romance *News from Nowhere* (Morris, May, 1936, II: 558). Whilst the Nowherians tend to live in "separate households" with certain "house-mates" of a similar temperament, any house is effectively open "to any good-tempered person who is content to live as the other house-mates do" (Morris, May, 1910-15, XVI: 65). And importantly these houses have undergone an aesthetic as well as functional transformation: a major process of clearance and rebuilding has resulted in a "whole mass of architecture" which "was not only exquisitely beautiful in itself" but which "bore upon it the expression of such generosity and abundance of life" that the narrator Guest admits he is "exhilarated to a pitch that I had never yet reached" (idem, 24). The Nowherians have learned once more how to give structure and expression to happiness and aspiration in their buildings, and, just as importantly, they have retained their delight in the architectural achievements of the past.

The “many-gabled old house built by the simple country-folk of the long-past times” with which the narrative concludes is Morris’s own Kelmscott Manor, his beloved country house by the river Thames, which has now been transformed from a personal to a communal heaven on earth (idem, 201). Ellen gives “a sigh of pleased surprise and enjoyment” when she and Guest approach the house, for it is a building which, she affirms, “is lovely still amidst all the beauty which these latter days have created” (ibidem). Indeed, it seems as if the now ancient Manor only fully achieves its architectural purpose amidst a regenerated humanity – “as if”, Ellen says, “it had waited for these happy days, and held in it the gathered crumbs of happiness of the confused and turbulent past” (ibidem).

iv. The Architecture of Happiness

As the resurgence of Kelmscott Manor at the conclusion of *News from Nowhere* suggests, it was through revisiting the architectural past that Morris was ultimately able to envisage the architectural future – a process further inspired by his founding of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877. Indeed his vision of the “noble communal hall” of a post-revolutionary society, the model to which the communal halls of *Nowhere* adhere, was inspired by the dwellings of a much earlier era than that to which Kelmscott Manor belonged – an era which, for Morris, was representative of true social integration and communal dwelling. These were the buildings recalled in Morris’s admission to Yeats that he would like “a house like a big barn, where one ate in one corner, cooked in another corner, slept in the third corner, and in the fourth received

one's friends" (Yeats, 1926: 180) – buildings which, as Paul Meier notes, functioned as "a symbol of the human community" (Meier, 1978, II: 405). But whilst *News from Nowhere* certainly provides striking examples, I would argue that Morris's most comprehensive and affective vision of such buildings is developed across the narratives he wrote immediately after *News from Nowhere*. Known most commonly now as the Last Romances, Morris's final narratives are as utopian in spirit as *News from Nowhere*, for whilst they are set in a pseudo-medieval past rather than an imagined twentieth century, they embody all the aspirations for architecture expressed in Morris's aesthetic and political lectures and intensify the sense architectural exhilaration experienced by Guest in *Nowhere*. In doing so they serve as validly as *News from Nowhere* as indications of how Morris envisaged the role of buildings in the communist society of the future – buildings which function as significant social symbols and in which practical, aesthetic and communal elements interact harmoniously.

By setting his final narratives in the past, Morris was able to revisit in imaginative terms those great Gothic structures that had so affected him as a young man and which had impressed him once again on another visit to France in 1891. Morris's own sense of amazement at these structures clearly informs Ralph's response to the Abbey Church at Higham-on-the-Way in *The Well at the World's End* (1896) which he began writing early in 1892, only a few months after his return from France. Surveying the townscape from a vantage point at the end of a stretch of downland, Ralph observes:

From amidst its houses rose up three towers of churches above their leaden roofs, and high above all, long and great, the Abbey Church; and now was the low sun glittering on its gilded vanes and the wings of angels high upon the battlements (Morris, May, 1910-15, XVIII: 23).

Like the City of the Five Crafts in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, the Abbey is set within an aesthetically appropriate environment: Higham is “overlooked by a white castle on a knoll”, and has “a river lapping it about and winding on through its fair green meadows”; its market square is “very great and clean” and the houses that border it are “tall and fair” (idem, 23-24). Altogether, the location and general architecture of the town provide a worthy setting for its Abbey Church which showed “like dark gold (...) under the evening sun”, its “painted and gilded imagery” shining “like jewels upon it” (idem, 24). It is a building deliberately designed to provoke a particular response from the observer, as acknowledged by the monk who guides the awe-struck Ralph through the town: “‘Yea’, said the monk, as he noted Ralph’s wonder at this wonder; ‘a most goodly house it is, and happy shall they be that dwell there’” (ibidem). Ralph’s “wonder at this wonder” supports Philip Fisher’s claim that architecture, perhaps more than any other art form, can make a “pervasive appeal to the experience of wonder” (Fisher, 1998: 3) and, as the nineteenth-century historian James Fergusson noted, is often specifically designed to “excite feelings of admiration and awe” (Fergusson, 1874, I: 10). For Morris, the wonder and awe generated by such buildings made them potent statements of communal values and purpose and a spectacular demonstration of artistic endeavour – of the “habit of elevating and beautifying” the “material surroundings of our life” which he believed the nineteenth century had lost (Morris, May, 1910-15, XXII: 329).

This habit of elevating and beautifying the man-made environment could, Morris believed, be achieved as successfully in the humble as the grand edifice. In *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* (1895), for example, many of Christopher’s happiest

times of fellowship and love are spent at the house in Littledale, “a long frame-house thatched with reed”, which has “long and low windows goodly glazed” and “a green halling on the walls of Adam and Eve and the garden, and the good God walking therein” (idem, XVII: 181). It is a house of simple beauty and craftsman-like construction, proclaiming in its fabric, as in its halling of the Garden of Eden, a primeval innocence of spirit which is reflected in Joanna’s adorning of it “with boughs and blossoms” when Christopher first arrives (idem, 168). Free from all ostentation of design and decoration, it is a building of spontaneous and natural delight – qualities articulated in Goldilind’s comment to Christopher that “it seems joyous to me: and I shall tell thee that I have mostly dwelt in unmerry houses, though they were of greater cost than this” (idem, 182).

Morris understood that even the simplest of structures could, in this quiet and understated way, generate their own particular delight and make an essential contribution to the daily pleasures of life at both the individual and the social level. Indeed, in many of Morris’s final narratives buildings function as celebratory as well as practical structures and assume a dynamic role for the communities that inhabit them. This is demonstrated most notably in Morris’s 1891 romance *The Story of the Glittering Plain* in the communal hall on the Isle of Ravagers – a hall that stretches from “buttery to dais”, with a “flickering flame on the hearth” (idem, XIV: 230), the sun shining through “clerestory windows”, and a row of shut-beds over which “were many stories carven in the panelling” (idem, 234). It is a hall which happily accommodates both daily routine and communal festivity, a flexible and functional space which encompasses alike the needs

and aspirations of its people. On the day Hallblithe first arrives at the hall, he observes the women preparing it for that evening's feast:

Some swept the floor down, and when it was swept strawed thereon rushes and handfuls of wild thyme: some went into the buttery and bore forth the boards and the trestles: some went to the chests and brought out the rich hangings, the goodly bankers and dorsars, and did them on the walls: some bore in the stoups and horns and beakers, and some went their ways and came not back awhile for they were busy about the cooking (idem, 235-36).

In their preparations, the women of the Ravagers signify the profound reverence and respect with which the building is regarded. They honour and dignify its structure through a combination of simple maintenance and aesthetic adornment, acknowledging its essential role in the provision not only of shelter and security but also of a ritual and celebratory communal space. It is a combination of roles acknowledged and praised in the “music and minstrelsy” (idem, 239) with which that evening's feast concludes, the Ravagers' valedictory song proclaiming:

There safe in the hall
They bless the wall,
And the roof o'er head,
Of the valiant stead;
And the hands they praise
Of the olden days (idem, 240).

Far more than an architectural backdrop to the activities and history of the Ravagers, their communal building is integral to that history and those activities: it is, as Morris hoped buildings might once more be, a part of people's lives.

As an integral part of communal life, Morris believed that buildings should thus provide an organic link between the past and the future. Contemplating the building of a fourteenth-century labourer's house in his lecture ‘The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization’, Morris explained:

Though the new house would have looked young and trim beside the older houses and the ancient church – ancient even in those days – yet it would have a piece of history for the time to come, and its dear and dainty cream-white walls would have been a genuine link among the numberless links of that long chain, whose beginnings we know not of, but on whose mighty length even the many-pillared garth of Pallas, and the stately dome of the Eternal Wisdom, are but single links, wondrous and resplendent though they be (idem, XXII: 126) .

The buildings in Morris’s final narratives function in just such a way, becoming focal points in a complex web of human relationships that extends across time. In *The Sundering Flood* (1897) the Great Hall of Sir Mark’s castle is a wonder and a delight to the people of Brookside specifically because of its antiquity and the communal traditions that antiquity denotes. The narrator’s description of it thus prioritizes its age and symbolic resonance above any purely aesthetic considerations:

Long was the said hall and great, but not very high, and its pillars thick and big, and its arches beetling; and that the folk loved better than flower-fair building, for very ancient it was and of all honour. Ancient withal were its adornments, and its halling was of the story of Troy, and stern and solemn looked out from it the stark woven warriors and kings, as they wended betwixt sword and shield on the highway of Fate (idem, XXI: 220).

Despite its austere demeanour, the hall is celebrated as a space of social memory and a symbol of historical continuity, and its tapestries align the feats of the warriors of Brookside with one of the great mythical narratives of western civilization as testimony to its status as a vital and continuing link between past, present and future.

In order to forge such continuous communal connections across time Morris aspired to an architecture that was “conscious only of exultation in the present and hope for the future” (LeMire, 1969: 65) – an aspiration he fulfilled in his penultimate romance, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* in which the castle built for Birdalone and her reunited companions at the end of the narrative testifies to an appropriate and enduring conjunction of architecture and human society. Importantly, it is a communal decision by

“the chief men of the porte and the masters of the crafts” at Utterhay “to build a good and fair castle”, both for the general good of the town and in honour of “the glory and hope that there was in this lovely folk”, and indeed the building of the castle initiates a new period of social cohesion and communal happiness, for “from that time forward began the increase of Utterhay” (Morris, *May*, 1910-15, XX: 385-86). The castle in this way stands as the consummate expression of a vibrant, functional and aspirational architecture – a symbol of communal integrity and human fellowship which affirms the happiness of the present and contributes to the joy of the future.

v. Conclusion

In the romances of his final years, Morris thus returned to the archetypal buildings of his own country’s history as a means of re-visioning and regenerating the relationship between people and architecture. The churches, halls and cottages of Morris’s romances are each inspired by a particular vision of life which renders them vital and relevant for the societies that occupy and use them. Furthermore, they are crafted with consummate skill and care to ensure they remain a continuing source of interest and pleasure to successive generations of observers, dwellers and users. These buildings thus offer their own social and aesthetic comment on a late nineteenth-century capitalism which, Morris believed, had failed to offer a vision of life inclusive and generous enough to produce its own vital and relevant architecture or artistic enough to produce structures of enduring beauty.

Contemplating what he believed to be the current evolution of his own society towards revolution and consequent social transformation, Morris confidently declared: “Under such conditions architecture, as a part of the life of people in general, will again become possible, and I believe that when it is possible, it will have a real new birth” (idem, XXII: 330). In his political and aesthetic lectures Morris repeatedly anticipates the regeneration of architecture under a mode of social organization in which buildings can once more be a source of communal as well as personal delight, and in his final narratives he found the most persuasive context in which to conceive and articulate the nature of this new birth. In doing so, the buildings of Morris’s final narratives become social as well as architectural statements – symbols of how we might build, rather than how we build now. And whilst we still await the “new development of society” that the building of beauty and aspiration demands, they remain Morris’s most powerful vision of a day when architecture will once more “add so much to the pleasure of life that we shall wonder how people were ever able to live without it” (ibidem).

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