

# The English House

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**Annotation:** **The English House** is a book of design and architectural history written by German architect Hermann Muthesius and published in 1904.<sup>[1]</sup> Its three volumes provide a record of the revival of English domestic architecture during the latter part of the nineteenth century.<sup>[2]</sup> The main themes he discusses are history, form and decor.

**Earlier architects** Muthesius argues that the Pre-Raphaelites' study of nature instigated the fall of the then dominant academic art. Critic John Ruskin introduced the synthesis of artistic creation, nature and construction, which became a guiding principle of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

William Morris translated Ruskin's ideas into practical craftsmanship.<sup>[8]</sup> Morris established communal craft workshops<sup>[9]</sup> and the formation of the Century Guild increased awareness of this movement. Growing support enabled the establishment of the Art Worker's Guild in 1884 which was the first visible sign of the 'new art'. The movement grew stronger as the number of artistic craftsmen who were graduates of the South Kensington Schools increased.

Domestic architecture of the late nineteenth century was a mix of classicism, renaissance and gothic styles and therefore needed redefinition. This meant abandoning ideas of fine architecture and designing with the focus on practical considerations.

Muthesius describes Norman Shaw as an architect whose style was constantly evolving and thus occasionally resulted in several styles influencing one design. He offers Leyes Woods as an example of Shaw's gothic and classical influence and Lowther Lodge as an example of baroque influence in his domestic designs. Through Bradford Park (sic) Shaw resolved the issues facing the small house in the late nineteenth century by combining the principles of aestheticism and practicality.<sup>[11]</sup>

**Development of the modern English house under younger architects.** The independent development of art and architecture in the nineteenth century relied on the architect's view of them as separate entities. Nevertheless, new artistic ideas of pragmatics and materiality did penetrate through a purist architectural approach, evident in the work of W.R. Lethaby and Ernest Newton. This development encouraged the division of architects with a common value of craftsmanship but in opposition on acceptance of traditional forms. Those abandoning traditional forms promoted the idea of a synthesis of the house and its contents with one designer for both. The Glasgow Movement pioneered by Charles Rennie Mackintosh expanded this idea, emphasizing design as colour, form and atmosphere.

In Part II Muthesius discusses geographical, legal, social and systematic influences upon the planning of the country house. He also introduces the different types of housing existing in England.

## Local determinants of the English house Geographical determinants

In England's temperate climate building structures are not so specialized as, for example, in Germany. The climate is humid, however, and needs the good ventilation available through the sash windows and flue.

Sandy soils are more suitable for building due to their better drainage. The widely distributed clay soils, although problematic as a foundation for houses, are processed for bricks, now a common building material. Different materials predominate in different regions; this is due to the historical lack of transport. Factors in social life Muthesius explains that the English (landowners) enjoy a comfortable life and therefore provision must be made for domestic quarters for servants such as a butler and housekeepers. He also notes that the isolated nature of a country house encourages visitors to stay overnight and that therefore houses must be able to cope with temporary increases in numbers.<sup>[15]</sup>

**Laws of land tenure** In England, leasehold tenure came into being because landowners were unwilling to sell land outright. Land was leased for a given period, an annual rent was paid and the leaseholder could construct a house within the specifications outlined by the owner. At the end of the lease the tenant had to return both land and house to the landowner.<sup>[16]</sup>

**Legal determinants** The Building Act of 1894 legislates on points of health and fire safety, yet virtually ignores issues of construction. Muthesius is critical of the fact that responsibility for construction is placed upon the individual and only involves authorities if the building is considered a "dangerous structure".

**Layout of the English house** Muthesius identifies privacy as a key reason for the clearly divided design of the house. The layout is separated into residential and servant's quarters to segregate the residents and employees.<sup>[18]</sup>

#### **Plan of the large country house**

Muthesius details the rooms in the residential quarter of the house:<sup>[19]</sup>

- Drawing room – Located with a south easterly-aspect due to the need for sunlight and for a view of the garden.
- Dining room – Placed with an easterly aspect due to the undesirability of light during the afternoon. It should be located opposite the drawing room, as residents will gather there before dinner.
- Library – Located on the east to catch the morning sunlight. It should be relatively isolated, often next to the dining room, and substantially ventilated.
- Morning room and breakfast room – Both rooms are to have an easterly aspect to receive morning light.
- Dressing rooms – Located adjacent to the master bedroom.
- Business room – Placed near the front door.
- Billiard room – Should open onto the garden for easy access by visitors without disturbing the household. The common preference is to place it as an annexe to the house.
- Hall – The entrance to the house which provides a connection to the interior. It is undesirable to use rooms as passageways. Adjacent to the hall are a cloakroom, washing place and lavatory to service visitors upon their arrival.
- Bedrooms – Placed on the first floor with a south-easterly aspect for light.
- Bathroom – The bathroom and lavatory must be in separate rooms, and the latter is discreetly placed for aesthetic reasons.
- Spare rooms – Located on the first floor and separated into male and female. Female guests are situated near the daughter's bedroom whilst male guests are located towards the back of the house so that they may come and go freely via the back door.
- Children's rooms – Located in a remote part of the house so that they will not disturb visitors. These rooms include night and day nurseries and a schoolroom.

The focus in the domestic quarters is on practicality and not decor. The kitchen is placed in relation to surrounding rooms such as the scullery, larders and storerooms. The employees are housed in these quarters, usually on upper floors. They are serviced by a separate staircase to ensure the separation of employees and residents.

#### **Surroundings of the house Muthesius argues for the revival of the formal, symmetrical garden.<sup>[21]</sup>**

He presents a thesis that the house and garden are inextricably linked. The new movement in garden design returns to a perfect, formal plan, with a clearly defined layout and with attention to the cultivation of indigenous plants and flowers. Every garden includes a terrace, flowerbeds and a lawn. The terrace offers a dignified entrance to the typically French garden, which usually includes a central graveled walkway and two to six garden beds. Flowerbeds are commonly divided into geometrical compartments and bordered with wood or terracotta. The English climate encourages the growing of lawns. The idea that lawn preservation requires people to "keep off the grass" is unknown to the English.<sup>[21]</sup>

### **Smaller country house**

The growing prosperity of the middle class, coupled with the enthusiasm for nature and rural life, resulted in a boom in smaller country house construction as 'weekend houses'. The small country house is a reduction of a large country house. Its basic form generally involves a hall, drawing room, dining-room, billiard room, and library. When room functions must be compromised due to spatial limitations the hall typically supplies the omitted services. In this house the domestic block is not large enough to be separate and therefore it is treated as one with the main house. However the family and staff quarters still remain segregated.<sup>[22]</sup>

### **Urban dwelling**

The plan of an urban dwelling is designed vertically whilst that of the country house is done horizontally. Muthesius lists the four types of urban dwellings as:

- larger freestanding house,
- urban terraced house,
- block of flats, and
- small suburban house.

In the large freestanding and the urban terraced houses, the domestic quarters are in the basement, the reception rooms on the ground floor and sometimes also on the upper floors with the bedrooms. Flats in a block are too small for domestic quarters. They compensate by having a communal dining room in the attic where food is served from a communal kitchen. Muthesius comments that the rooms of a flat are too small and likens it to hotel life.