

# Architectural History from Eye-level: Nikolaus Pevsner's 'Treasure Hunts' in the *Architectural Review*, 1942

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## **Abstract**

In 1942, Nikolaus Pevsner published a series of articles in the *Architectural Review* that he called 'Treasure Hunts'. Discussing mostly obscure, and often unpopular, buildings of the last hundred years, Pevsner jovially invited readers to join him in a game to 'Date your District'. Instantly recognisable through bubble-shaped detail photographs and with a mixture of cheerful language and dense art-historical analysis, these articles present a unique opportunity within Pevsner's often-examined oeuvre to explore word-image relationships and their appeal to the lay public. The present article analyses the use of typography, layout and photography in the Treasure Hunts and relates them to two specific modes of writing, analysis and 'pictorial criticism', a term coined by James M. Richards. Both verbal and graphic elements of the Treasure Hunts work by contrasting overviews to close-ups, imitating human vision and intellectual cognition and, by doing so, facilitate the education of the lay public in visually reading - and enjoying - buildings, their proclaimed aim. Thus, Pevsner established an architectural history from eye-level that relied on natural vision paired with art-historical method, bred and shaped through his German training, applied in a distinctly English context, and refined later in his *Buildings of England*.

## **Keywords**

Word-image studies; publishing; architecture; Pevsner; criticism; Second World War; Blitz; Modern; Victorian; historiography; taste; lay person; photography; typography; layout; architectural history; Architectural Review;

## Introduction

looking at houses can be entertainment as well as an object lesson, a family game (Date your District) as well as a treasure hunt<sup>1</sup>

Writing in face of the destruction caused by the *Blitz*, the continuous bombing of Britain by Nazi Germany, Pevsner's 'Treasure Hunt' articles appear surprisingly calm and cheerful as they encouraged readers to explore their everyday surroundings with fresh eyes. Guiding reader around London through hectic inner city streets as well as leafy suburban avenues, Pevsner taught his readership by means of text and image to appreciate buildings from natural eye-level. While the Treasure Hunts were also a product of the general policies followed by the *Architectural Review* at the time, they stand out within the magazine through a range of characteristics, which will be explored in this article: first, they focus mostly on at best unremarkable, at worst outright inferior, or low, architecture; second, they are presented rather differently than other parts of the *Review*, mainly due to their layout and illustrations; and, finally, the articles address not necessarily the expert, the architect or architectural historian, but rather the lay person. Their author, Nikolaus Pevsner (1902-83), had studied art history under Heinrich Wölfflin, Wilhelm Pinder and others, before taking up a teaching post at the University of Göttingen. Because of his Jewish background he had to step down from this in 1933, and shortly afterwards moved to England. At the time when he wrote the Treasure Hunts in 1942 he had already published four major English-language books: *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius* (1936), *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England* (1937), *Academies of Art, Past and Present* (1940) as well as *An Outline of European Architecture* (1942). Shortly after the end of the war, he would embark on his lifetime work, the guidebook series *The Buildings of England* (1951 onwards).

It was during Pevsner's early years in England, when he was desperate for any type of work and keen to build up a network in academic and press circles, that he first came into contact with the *Architectural Review*. The *Review* in the first half of the twentieth century followed two main objectives: while the magazine with its international readership is now generally acknowledged for a leading role in championing the Modern Movement as early as the 1920s, it also pursued, at the same time, preservationist aims criticising much of the urban design being implemented across England.<sup>2</sup> Both these paradigms lead the *Review* to proclaim the necessity for a new way of looking. Considering the magazine's future in the often-quoted 'Second Half Century' issue of 1947, after the war had ended, its editors declared '*visual re-education*' as the *Review's* primary task: 'To re-educate the eye - that is the special need of the next decade.'<sup>3</sup>

Together with a range of contributors, James Maude Richards, editor of the *Review* since 1937, and its owner Hubert de Cronin Hastings strived to change the public's perceptual behaviour by enabling them to judge and appreciate buildings and cities for their aesthetic as well as functional

merits. Richards remains the longest-serving editor of the *Review* overseeing its production from 1937 to 1971, only interrupted in 1941 when he went to Cairo for war service. In Richards's absence, Pevsner was installed as assistant editor, not least also because he was, as a foreigner, safe from being called up.<sup>4</sup> However, many of the editorial and design aspects during this time were steered by Hastings. The defender of a 'neo-romantic social ideal', as Erdem Erten has written, and the motor behind the post-war Townscape campaign, Hastings had introduced major graphic changes to the *Review* when he took over in 1927, choosing new typefaces, commissioning colophons and, in collaboration with John Piper and John Betjeman, boldly combining modern with Victorian typefaces.<sup>5</sup>

## Context

The Treasure Hunts appeared in the longer-running 'Criticism' series envisaged originally by Hastings and at first written by C.H. Reilly, the former head of Liverpool School of Architecture, in 1935. They targeted readers beyond the profession with a kind of subjective-professional criticism that Britain had previously seen little of. It seems that this popular scope was driven by the editors who stated that the series' purpose was 'not so much to elevate the understanding of the architect as to fan the ardour of the layman, who is to-day increasingly tempted to follow the current trends of architectural thought'.<sup>6</sup> Reilly's Criticism series ran only over eight issues that year but was taken up again in January 1940 by Richards writing under the pseudonym of James MacQuedy. Pevsner, taking over in the following summer, chose the pen name Peter F.R. Donner, which means thunder in German ascribing to the articles written under this alias with a certain urgency but perhaps also a freedom to be more spontaneous and unstructured.<sup>7</sup> Pevsner revealed the true identity behind Donner only more than 20 years later. One must therefore assume that the Treasure Hunts were, until the 1960s, never linked to his oeuvre and, more importantly, did not form part of what Pevsner himself wanted to be regarded as his legacy at the time. Perhaps it is precisely this circumstance that makes the Treasure Hunts such valuable evidence in investigating the origins of Pevsner's later writings, notably *The Buildings of England*.

Both Reilly's and Richards's Criticism pieces had discussed mostly 'high' architecture, that is, buildings of some significance, in a critical and historiographical sense. Buildings, thus, which were of interest to contemporary architects looking for precedents and inspiration for their own work. When Pevsner took over the series in August 1941, he at first continued in this vein, discussing Frank Lloyd Wright's definition of the 'Classic' and the 'Organic', Sir Herbert Baker's rebuilding of the Bank of England, the relationship between Ledoux and Le Corbusier, houses by Robert Atkinson and the St. Marylebone Town Hall as well as German architecture under the Nazis.<sup>8</sup> However, once Pevsner changed the articles in January 1942 to take the form of what he called a 'Treasure Hunt', if still under the Criticism heading, he began to shift the focus to much less significant buildings, or

'low' architecture. He took readers on excursions around central as well as suburban London pointing out mostly mundane examples dating from the nineteenth century up to the 1930s: after a trip to Bishopsgate outside Liverpool Station in January, he went to the detached and semi-detached 'upper middle-class' houses of the Eton College and Belsize Estates in February, contrasted by a tour of the Gothic Revival buildings in the more famous Parliament Square in March. May and June saw a return to the suburbs in South Wimbledon and Belsize Park, while the July article introduced tenement houses in Westminster, including the Peabody Estate. August and September again ventured out of Central London to Wimbledon Common and Golders Green but in October Pevsner headed to the Army and Navy Stores in Victoria Street. November presented vernacular buildings of the more recent 1930s between Morden and Cheam and only in the final article of December Pevsner suddenly tackled buildings by more famous architects, such as Tite and Cockerell around the Bank of England.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, these locations add up to what might have been Pevsner's own everyday architecture, buildings that he would encounter on his daily routes: he lived in Hampstead, not far from the Eton and Belsize Estate, the *Review's* offices were in Cheam at the time while the central sites were all close to transport hubs and he might have had acquaintances in the other suburbs described.

### **The image: overview and close-up**

Intriguingly, and unprecedented in the otherwise rigorous layout of Hastings's *Review*, Pevsner shows his 'treasures' in bubble-shaped photographs - as far as I can see, there is no other example of such treatment to illustrations in the *Review* at the time (figs 1, 2). Even if there was an, often noted, emphasis on details ever since Hastings took up the editorship, photographs overwhelmingly maintained the rectangular shape of the photographic print.<sup>10</sup> Of course Pevsner was, at the time, a novice in the more technical aspects of publishing - indeed, before leaving the *Review* in his hands and departing for war service, Richards had cautiously obtained Hastings's 'promise to come up from the country and supervise Pevsner's performance of the task'. He had made sure that Pevsner knew what would be expected of him, but seems to have been most concerned about the graphic appearance of the *Review* under Pevsner's editorship believing that the 'mysteries of layout', the handling of photographs and the preparations for the print process would perhaps prove difficult to handle for the young German art historian.<sup>11</sup> Even so, the *Review's* layout did not change noticeably when Pevsner took over - except, that is, for the Treasure Hunts. Typefaces remained assigned to specific types of articles; broadly, serif fonts were used for titles of historical articles and sans-serif for titles on contemporary architecture with a special outline font for a series on current architecture. The body text was printed throughout in serif form with different sizes and often bold or italic letters for captions that, in turn, usually were quite discursive, so that they could hardly be distinguished, in a visual way, from the main text, a tool also employed in later Treasure Hunt articles (figs 1, 2, 4).

Initially, Pevsner's Treasure Hunts adapted the layout and typesetting of the earlier Criticism articles from Richards's editorship in 1940 and 1941. Throughout the series, an almost identical introductory text in bold type, and spilling over the column width of the main body text, opened the article lamenting public ignorance of architecture. Cross-references in form of bold printed numbers linked from the body text to detail shots enabling the reader to scan the article along the photographs themselves, referring back to the text as required. Captions to photographs became increasingly extensive, repeating or summing up the argument of the article. To illustrate his reasoning, Pevsner often included historical illustrations, often sourced from nineteenth and early twentieth-century magazines such as *The Builder* as well as easily available textbooks such as Charles L. Eastlake's *A History of the Gothic Revival* (1872), with its long gazetteer of buildings, or John C. Loudon's *Encyclopaedia of cottage, farm, and villa architecture and furniture* (1833), a sort of type catalogue.<sup>12</sup>

The way in which his built examples were organised on the page evolved considerably over the course of the series and it is here that the bubble-shaped photographs become interesting. Pevsner seems to have experimented purposefully with graphic and textual means to best present his 'lessons' in architectural history. The January feature on Bishopsgate already showed enlarged detail shots in the characteristic bubble shape photographs contrasting with a panoramic overview running along the top of the page spread with a simplified legend containing reference numbers, which refer to the text as well as the bubbles. The text however, was still running through over three pages. This changed in February, when Pevsner presented separate houses of the Eton College Estate by naming them 'House A', 'House B' and so on, envisaging the strategy employed from June onwards, when he began to name single 'specimen' emphasising their status as samples. It was also in the June article that the layout became much clearer with more empty white on the pages. Under the 'Treasure Hunt' title in serif typeface, the introductory paragraph spans the page width that is then divided in two parts separated by a black vertical line. Each part consists of a text column on the right and a column for images and captions, printed in large and widely spaced type, on the left. The text is subdivided into sections on 'Specimen No. 1', 'Specimen No. 2' and so on, subheadings which are now printed in the sans serif of previous articles on contemporary architecture. This format becomes then established and will be used for the rest of the year until the end of the series (figs 1, 2). Specimens are generally ordered chronologically tracing a development of certain types, styles or features over the period in question. Rather than referring to one building each, a specimen is normally a single feature of a design, a 'motif' such as 'heavy brackets', a 'thin' Jacobean gable, a porch with 'a severe entablature', an 'undogmatic cornice' or even a 'monkey-puzzle, or araucaria, the pet of the Victorian gardener' - many of which could probably be found in any British town, emphasising the exemplary nature of the specimens.<sup>13</sup>

Even if the Treasure Hunts' layout, with all its changes over the year, resembled the one of earlier Criticism articles, there is one glaring difference: Pevsner employed a form of photograph that is puzzling as it is completely unique in the *Review* of this decade. He seems to have cut out the

architectural 'motifs' he wanted to focus on from larger photographs in curved, often awkward, bubble shapes (fig. 4). These initially sat uncomfortably close to the text and seemed rather amateurishly placed on the double-page spreads. The only apparent reason for the odd shape of these pictures is the way in which this differentiates them as details from the also given rectangular overviews of whole buildings (fig. 3). Usually, the 'bubbles' presented enlargements from the same photograph - the motifs, or specimen in close-up. Several scraps of graph paper preserved in Pevsner's papers indicate that the bubble layout was intentional and probably his own idea - or at least devised in his presence. The layout of several Treasure Hunt articles, complete with bubble-like close-ups, is clearly visible on some of these sheets.<sup>14</sup>

The *Review* had, under the leadership of Hastings, pioneered the use of photography employing Mark Oliver Dell and H.L. Wainwright as official photographers of the magazine, who produced striking photographs, starkly different from the material commonly available at the time.<sup>15</sup> Comparing the unusual angles from which they presented buildings to the photographs illustrating Pevsner's Treasure Hunts, the latter seem rather plain and without any strong perspectives. Taken mostly from natural eye-level, they generally show buildings from a slight angle, giving a feel of a quick snapshot taken without too much preparation. Who took them? It is impossible to say for certain, but it might it might have been Pevsner himself as he was roaming London - just as he wanted his readers to do. Pevsner has never written extensively on architectural photography, but he once claimed that a good photograph had to show 'a legitimate presentation of the architect's or sculptor's intentions'.<sup>16</sup> Any 'good' photograph thus had to express the underlying idea, the very essence, of the represented object - certainly not an easy demand. Capturing a building in a photograph required, accordingly, formal knowledge and training in the subject matter. The photographer needed to know where to look, what to see and how - which is exactly what Pevsner's bubble close-ups do. Interestingly, Pevsner also pointed to the fact that good photography could 'bring out a detail so forcefully that it carries more conviction on the plate than in the original' - a capacity that resonated directly with his use of images in the Treasure Hunts. The photographer thus became a 'mentor', a 'conductor interpreting a score' who 'can stop you to concentrate on something which the eye roving over the whole of a wall or a statue may miss completely'.<sup>17</sup> With this attitude towards photography, Pevsner remained firmly in the empathetic tradition of the relationship between the artwork and photography, following his predecessors Jacob Burckhardt, who had also relied heavily on the fixing power of photographs in his scholarship, as well as, to a certain extent, Heinrich Wölfflin.<sup>18</sup> It was the latter who had remarked, in an article of 1896, that classical sculpture had to be photographed from the front, rather than, as was common at the time, from the side in the 'picturesque manner'.<sup>19</sup> The photograph was to be informative as an aide in understanding the object, in a way substituting the teacher, or mentor, on site.

Before Pevsner had taken over the editorship, Richards had in the very first of his Criticism articles demanded to begin 'judging buildings largely according to their appeal to the eye'. The reason

for this was simple: 'For the man in the street it is the only approach open to him.'<sup>20</sup> It is in this context, which will be expanded on below, that the imaging of the Treasure Hunts must be regarded. The photographs throughout Pevsner's series mimicked exactly the viewpoint of the passer-by on the street, emphasising its ordinariness. The bubble therefore acts as a fragment of the human view - a close-up, or that part of the whole of the visual field that is in focus, opposed to the blurred periphery. Naturally, readers would never see the whole of a building in focus since the larger part of their visual field is indistinct, only compensated for by the continuous movements of the eye. In this way the bubble acknowledged the difference between photograph and human vision, its irregular curved form responding to the uncertain line that separates focus from blur in the natural field of vision. It focused the gaze of the viewing reader onto the detail, the motif that gave away the 'clue' to the whole as Pevsner had written photography should - but here he aided this focalising function along by literally cutting away the blur. Both the gaze through the camera as well as that of the more casually interested 'man in the street' had to be fixed enabling the intellectual faculty retrieving forms and contexts of the period in question.

Pevsner's attitude to architectural photography would have fallen on fertile ground - or indeed have been significantly influenced - while editing the *Review* under Hastings supervision. Hastings himself had introduced the strategy to print detail shots of buildings larger than general views so that the way in which readers read text and images expressed the same focal points of interest. It is clearly the focusing capacity of photography that interested the art historian in Pevsner - and that corresponded to the increasing interest in 'pictorial' analysis among the editors of the *Review*.

### **The text: picture and analysis**

When Richards had opened the Criticism series with the demand to consider 'buildings largely according to their appeal to the eye', he meant also that they should be 'looked at rather than analysed, in the belief that visual perception is the next quality we have to concentrate on developing'. He continues that,

now we have reached a stage when we can take most of what modern architecture stands for for granted. It should no longer be necessary to explain the functional basis on which the modern architect works; and as maturity develops it becomes essential that we restore the practice of pictorial criticism<sup>21</sup>

The alternative to analysis here is what he calls 'pictorial criticism' which was meant to judge and comment on the character and associated qualities of a building and its adherence to (or divergence from) a specific stylistic vocabulary from the vantage point of the onsite viewer. It contained an emphasis on visual impressions, looking rather than analysing, that foreshadows the *Review*'s later post-war project of 'visual re-education' and the resulting Townscape campaign which sought to humanise modern town planning through a reassessment of the Picturesque.<sup>22</sup> The term 'pictorial



criticism' is interesting as it emphasises a two-dimensional, or graphic, description and analysis. Rather than exploring the spatial properties of a structure by moving through it, often recognized as the essential way to experience and understand Modern architecture, Richards indicates that it is Pevsner's approach, ordinary views of buildings flattened onto the page of the *Review*, that could provide more valuable criticism than an analysis focused on function and plan. So how was this approach represented in Pevsner's writing?

Mainly, the text of the Treasure Hunts provided the 'story' to the images with Pevsner turning into the almost grandfatherly narrator. Throughout, he presented buildings through 'pictorial' spectacles rather than through a functional analysis. The obvious reason for this was the same stated by Richards earlier - they were clearly targeted at the 'man in the street' and the means available to him or her. However, Pevsner dedicated his Treasure Hunts not to the new, the Modern, but rather to the recent past, buildings that were at best ignored and at worst loathed.<sup>23</sup> While Victorian and Edwardian architecture featured frequently in magazines such as the *Review*, usually the focus was on outstanding buildings and their architects, not the endless rows of houses, built by often anonymous builders, that shaped London and other cities in Britain. Writing in hindsight in 1968, Richards confirms that, during the war, a general interest in Victorian architecture resurfaced as the 'battle of the styles' between Modernists and Traditionalists became irrelevant in face of the on-going destruction.<sup>24</sup> The previously irreconcilable differences between what Richards calls the 'ornamental vocabulary of tradition' and the 'modernists' test of functionalism or fitness for purpose' - decoration versus utility - seem to have smoothed over in face of the war, which had come very close indeed during the relentless attacks during the *Blitz*.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps it was this state of stylistic reconciliation that encouraged Pevsner to take stock of the ordinary architecture surrounding British women and men just at that moment when parts of it were being destroyed. The visual 're-education' of the public, and with it the renewal of modernism, called for by the *Review's* editors later, would require both: the Modernist, 'analytical' criticism focusing on function and plan as well as the perhaps more traditional aesthetic appreciation of buildings. Crucially, the latter opened up architectural enjoyment to any woman and man as it relied on the way they saw buildings from eye-level while wandering the streets.

Pevsner's first Treasure Hunt took readers to Bishopsgate close to Liverpool Street Station; a street that in 1941, as today, 1000s of commuters passed daily on their way to and from work. Claiming that 'Ninety-nine out of a hundred people nowadays do not look at buildings at all unless by special effort', Pevsner lamented that, 'while people admire a cathedral or a country house, as they go to a concert, there is nothing in their relations to buildings that could be compared with the unreflective, matter-of-course acceptance of everyday music'.<sup>26</sup> This introductory paragraph was repeated in many Treasure Hunt articles as Pevsner attempted to rouse readers' interest with engaging language. But even if the idea of a treasure hunt itself suggested a spirit of leisure rather than scholarly activities and in spite of this casual tone, Pevsner's method of engaging readers was to teach them in 'reading' buildings stylistically:

In opening his eyes to every one of the buildings on his right and his left, the workaday passer-by would discover something of dignified proportions here, of bold treatment there, of blatant prosperity at the next corner, and of fanciful decoration further on.<sup>27</sup>

In a way, Pevsner was trying to entice the lay person to adopt art historical rather than functionalist analysis - which was, in the end, not considerably more open to the uneducated, as demanded by Richards, but certainly more easily conducted without entering the buildings.

However, this emphasis on formal analysis is apparent throughout. Pevsner's main aim was to enable his readers to date buildings by recognising particular style elements and placing them into the appropriate context: 'to get all this out of seemingly humdrum city and suburban architecture, one needs clues', as he wrote in the first issue.<sup>28</sup> He usually dated buildings from either stylistic elements visible on the building or circumstantial evidence, such as a road being named after Queen Adelaide indicating that buildings might have been built while, or just after, she was queen in the 1830s.<sup>29</sup> More commonly, a 'specimen', or 'motif', gave the 'clue' to solve the date riddle: in September, Pevsner traced an overhanging tiled gable back to Ernest Newton who 'has it in his earliest works of before 1890'. However, as the brackets underneath were 'of so distressingly feeble a shape that they give away our specimen as a mere builder's job' and 'taking into consideration the usual time-lag between the creative architect's conception and the suburban builder's use', he then dated the house in Golders Green to after 1905.<sup>30</sup>

Often, and corresponding directly to the use of images in the articles, Pevsner began with an overall impression, followed by a close-up on the motif that gave the clue to the whole. In February, in the Eton College Estate in Belsize Park, he describes 'House A' (not yet employing the specimen term) as 'a house of distinct Regency character [...] sensitively proportioned and very sparingly decorated'. Then:

The motifs are familiar: the unmoulded string courses, the windows with thin cornices above, on the ground floor supported by pilasters in very low relief [...] on the first floor resting only on the slightly projecting framing of the windows, 1, and the porch on Roman Doric pillars, 2.'

The numbers referred to two bubble-shaped close-ups to the left of the text while the overall description directly mirrored the rectangular general view above. The two omissions in these quotes contain references to 'high' architecture illustrated in the reference column to the right of the text. This is Pevsner method: words and images equally moved from the whole to the parts as a general overview is followed by close-ups explaining the whole and historical references tracing 'creative', as Pevsner calls it, precedents of the vernacular specimen (or architect versus builder-designed).

A manuscript for a lecture, which Pevsner was working on while writing the early *Treasure Hunts*, confirms this technicality of Pevsner's approach. Proposed to Birkbeck College in February 1942 and entitled 'The Enjoyment of Architecture', the lecture essentially represents an introduction

to architectural empathy. He opened it, as in the first Treasure Hunt, lamenting that people are not capable of appreciating architecture in the same way as they do painting and then explains that,

arch[itecture] is the abstract amongst the visual arts, as music is the abstract amongst acoustic arts. In drama your intellect is kept busy, in painting too. But in arch[itecture] and music it is left to ramble unless you can by instinct or effort keep it silent and let other spiritual faculties be on the alert. Therefore musical as well as arch[itectural] enjoyment seems to escape definition, whereas the enjoyment of a picture or a drama lend themselves easily to explanations. [...] It is my aim to-day to put into words - very sketchily of course - what it is we feel in looking at arch.<sup>31</sup>

This reference to the 'feelings' triggered by an architectural experience very clearly resonated with Pevsner's academic background in German art history, the concept of empathy, formulated by Robert Vischer and Theodor Lipps, as well as Heinrich Wölfflin's leitmotif to describe only what the eye can see.<sup>32</sup>

Pevsner argued here that in order to enjoy architecture - to 'feel' it - one needed to be capable of analysing it while appreciating what he called its 'picture'. Introducing students to a range of buildings, he divided the experience of them into 'picture' and 'architectural values', the latter to be 'the least easy to follow' as 'there are many concomitants which may help or divert your minds'.<sup>33</sup> In a way, his claim is that to know about architecture and its history provides the required focus to avoid such 'diversions'. Salisbury Cathedral is described thus:

The loveliness of the *picture* first  
the peace of the close  
the succulent grass  
the mellow stone  
But *architecturally*: How different the effect  
Quickening of rhythm  
Articulated into many clearly separ[ate] parts  
Buttresses, pinnacles, tripartite windows pointing upwards  
Walls open and consequently lighter  
And culminating in the spire, slender - a supreme expression of Goth. Excelsior. [my emphasis]<sup>34</sup>

Notable here is the syntactical change in Pevsner's own writing; while the first four lines on the 'picture' proceed calmly with equal rhythm of article, sensual adjective and noun, the later lines represent the 'quickening' linguistically in the arrangement of longer sentence fragments and technical terms. With this and other examples, Pevsner very carefully guided students through an inspection of a first impression, the 'loveliness of the picture', variably serene, delicious or startling. The analysis of the 'architectural values' targeted more detailed elements in an intellectual appreciation of the structure: rhythm, parts, form and patterns employed as building blocks to reconstruct each building element by element, motif by motif, specimen by specimen - this is architectural description as he would later perfect it in his *Buildings of England*. The idea behind this is that these motifs, or specimen, are the building blocks of architecture - and of its historiography. To

know them is to see them and thus being able to avoid ‘diversion’ - in short, to have a focused gaze that knows what to look at and how to construct its history.

We find the same approach, to the letter if not as enthusiastic, in the Treasure Hunts. In July, Pevsner wrote that brick tenements houses in Westminster, ‘to us [...] appear grim and raw’ and , moreover, ‘looking at them in the spirit of the æsthetical treasure hunter, there does not seem much to gratify curiosity’. This ‘picture’, received by the viewer (‘us’) visually (‘looking at them’), would be disappointing, if it was not for its ‘architectural values’. There was, Pevsner rejoiced, ‘enough to date them pretty accurately’: ‘striped lower floors’ modestly reference ‘Ruskin’s propaganda for Italian Gothic’ and ‘heavy window surrounds and the weight of so much massive unrelieved wall confirm this date’.<sup>35</sup> Again, stylistic motifs are both seen (the stripes) as well as empathetically felt (the weight of the unrelieved wall).

Over the course of the Treasure Hunts, Pevsner tended to come much quicker to the point - to that part, detail or specimen in the building that explained the whole, dated it and thus made it part of architectural history. Gables, porches, tiling, oriel windows, tracery, brackets and other motifs were tackled head on, at cost of the ‘loveliness of the picture’, the general view, it seems. The text, increasingly, served as focaliser rather than conveyor of the first impression - readers perhaps could be left to this by their own devices. Pevsner’s pictorial criticism then was not so much to do with the picture of a house as a whole, but rather with the details making up that picture, which were, however, looked at - and analysed - as pictures, close-ups as represented by the bubble photographs.

The intellectual character of Pevsner’s method became even clearer in his claim, made also in his Birkbeck lecture, that all architectural quality could be traced to two geometrical terms: direction and dimension.<sup>36</sup> Discussing the Tudor chapel in the Tower of London, he explained that, generally, an intuitive impression of heaviness in architecture could be explained through an emphasis on the horizontal. Conversely, the nave of Canterbury Cathedral appeared at first ‘Breath taking rapid’ as it was ‘all vert[ical]’.<sup>37</sup> Inigo Jones’s Queen’s House, in turn, was described by seemingly pure analysis, but with a twist at the end:

Simple block  
Stressed horizontals  
Divided up into simple compartments  
No overlapping, no transgression  
Windows comfortable in their allotted parts  
Colonnade of Loggia - just right proportion<sup>38</sup>

The description of how ‘comfortably’ the windows sat in their place as well as the expression ‘just right proportion’ relied on Pevsner’s intuition, schooled by having studied many classical buildings and therefore capable of ‘feeling’ at one glance how a building conforms to the style’s rules of harmony. As an expert, he felt confident to rely on his intuition, but he was also conscious of his training and by spelling out the process of analysis for his students - and for the readers of the Treasure Hunts - he wanted to enable them in this feat, too.

## **The reader: educating popular taste**

Pevsner's rousing style presented architectural explorations as a 'family game' played on a fine Sunday. Focusing on the buildings' outer appearance, he referred to characteristics of styles and building types thus making his aesthetic judgements intelligible and clear to follow. He was very careful to keep up this leisurely spirit, emphasising that the Treasure Hunts were no matter of academic effort but the 'pleasures of the antiquarian in disentangling the building history' - an activity that, as Pevsner invitingly assured his readers, 'can be enjoyed at home'.<sup>39</sup> He often addressed his audience directly, praising in the November issue that there could be 'nothing new here to faithful readers of the Treasure Hunts' in this month's 'specimen', five vernacular 1930s houses.<sup>40</sup> Frequently, Pevsner created a story line drawing the reader into his movements around London. In January he told readers that, 'supposing your bus northward does not come at once, walk on for a couple of hundred yards and have a look at the houses opposite'.<sup>41</sup> In October, he even made up a fictitious position at the famous Army and Navy Stores:

Supposing you had a job with the Army and Navy Stores, how many phases of the Coburg Style (and the Windsor Style that followed it) would you see every day? Certainly five, if not more. And if you found it worth your while to look carefully at the various facades of which the store is composed, to compare them with each other, with other buildings in the neighbourhood, or with illustrations in books and periodicals, could you not work out with comparatively little trouble, quite a neat and certainly an unassailable building history? You could probably even check your approximate dates by referring to records available on the premises.<sup>42</sup>

As, in reality, readers might not have gone to quite such lengths, he reassured them that the 'author of the Treasure Hunts has done all this in order to show what might be done by any reader who happens to be working in one of the many firms or Government departments housed in a similar agglomeration of buildings of divers dates'.<sup>43</sup> *You* can do this, and will enjoy it, too - this is what he was constantly trying to say. This was not to be an academic architectural history, there was no degree required for such architectural treasure hunting - even if, in the end, he often used vocabulary that might have made it difficult for all sales assistants to follow him. There is thus a curious contrast between the scholarly architectural descriptions and the often rather charming storylines created around the former. In a way, it is art history for everyone - and of everything, highbrow and lowbrow. In this regard, there are two aspects of Pevsner's treatment of his readership in the Treasure Hunts that are worthwhile further exploration: first, this is the targeting of the 'man in the street', the commuting man or woman, the suburban dweller, the clerk in the government office or the maid in the North London home; second, there is a pedagogical element throughout the articles that actively aimed at educating this readership in particular. Both these aspects resonate very closely with contemporaneous writings by Pevsner himself as well as with the general context of the 1940s. Taken together, it

transpires that the ultimate aim of articles such as the Treasure Hunts was, also, to educate the public in matters of ‘good taste’.

However, it is important to remember that, in spite of such popular tendencies in the Treasure Hunt articles, the *Architectural Review* of the first half of the twentieth century was far from a common-interest popular magazine - it had developed as a more sober alternative to art periodicals such as *The Studio* in the 1890s. Lynne Walker has argued that it was ‘the lack of widespread, systematic teaching in university art-history departments’ that made Pevsner turn to the lay public as a readership.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, he had in 1939 prepared a draft for a special issue of the *Review* on ‘The Elements of Contemporary Architecture in Britain - Historicism and Traditionalism’ that specifically targeted the lay public. Never published due to the outbreak of the war, the issue would have been aimed at emphasising style over technology and function: ‘This number is an attempt to produce something no less ambitious than a complete survey of architecture as practiced in this country to-day, solely from the point of view of style.’<sup>45</sup> While this opening sentence might hint at a rather scholarly study, the importance given to architectural styles has its origins in the exact opposite, a need ‘to take stock of the architectural landscape as it presents itself at the present time *to the public*; that is to say as regards the appearance of buildings’ (emphasis original).<sup>46</sup> It was again important that architecture should be looked at from street-level, from the viewpoint of the anonymous passer-by; interestingly, this perspective lead Pevsner directly to questions of style, where he would have felt most comfortable due to his art-historical training. Echoing both the Treasure Hunts as well as ‘The enjoyment of architecture’, Pevsner attested a state of ‘apathy’ among the public in regards to architecture that was, he argued, due to ‘the confusion which the conflicting styles of the buildings he sees produce in his mind’. Pevsner intended to rectify such apathy and confusion ‘by explaining how the contemporary styles can be identified and where their differences originate’ - a thoroughly academic approach in popular disguise.<sup>47</sup>

The idea that such an ability to identify and distinguish styles was related directly to what came to be referred to as ‘popular taste’ permeated many of Pevsner’s (and others’) writings in the 1940s and beyond. His first research project after arriving to England, funded by Birmingham University and resulting in the publication of his *Enquiry Into Industrial Art In England* in 1937, included an investigation of the role of popular taste in design. While working on the project, he published the results of a survey conducted at the Midland Industrial Art Exhibition in 1934 from which he had hoped to receive ‘some direct expression of the popular taste’. He concluded, somewhat frustrated, ‘that many of the public have not yet realized that electrical appliances and hardware should have an aesthetic value just as much as furniture or an elaborate dinner set’. The reason for this was straightforward:

The popular taste supports the best modern type of pottery, because enough has been produced and shown to accustom the public to it. But because the more obtrusive floral patterns have been pushed at the same time, many people have been lured by them as

well. The general consequence is evident: If enough good modern things are offered they will capture the market. But if only bad things are to be seen the public will take to them; which brings home very clearly the responsibility of the manufacturer.<sup>48</sup>

This exposure to good design could, according to Pevsner, not start too early in life: if school children worked ‘in lighter and more cheerful, healthier and honest school buildings [...] they may one day insist on better designed and better made furniture, on better fabrics and rugs, better pottery and glass, and perhaps even on better houses than the jerry builder provides for them to-day’.<sup>49</sup> He thus firmly believed that designers - and critics - had two main moral duties: the first was to insist on quality in the goods they produced and reviewed, but the second, possibly more important one, was to teach anyone, from childhood, to recognise and demand this standard in even the humblest everyday object.

It might now be surprising that, returning to the Treasure Hunts, one finds that many of the buildings presented here did not present examples of ‘good’ architecture. Indeed, Pevsner outright despised some, such as a specimen in Golders Green, which was ‘most depressing’ and without ‘sense’ with its ‘scrappy half-timbering’ and a Tudor arch ‘so slavishly taken over from the past as no self-respecting domestic architect of that date would have done - at least not in such a context.’ But, Pevsner concedes, ‘no other style is so frequently met around all the cities of England. This is why it deserves careful analysis.’<sup>50</sup> Even if not all Pevsner’s specimens deserve such harsh words, the overwhelming number of his ‘treasures’ did not represent models of ‘good’ taste. He did, in this sense, not follow the rule to teach by ‘good’ precedent. Very obviously, it was, in this instance, not his main aim to persuade his readers of the quality of Victorian architecture; rather, he deemed the task of establishing a *method* of architectural enjoyment and instilling this in ‘the man in the street’ a pressing prerequisite for improving popular taste. He was here concerned with educating readers in a visual form of architectural history - from street-level - and believed that taste would be a natural consequence of this. To be academically methodical as well as accessible to the lay person was a feat that was facilitated by the combination of words with images; indeed, Pevsner achieved, over the course of the year in which the Treasure Hunts were published, a balance between graphic and verbal argument, between caption and body text and between overview and close-up that opened up his writings to everyone.

Whether the *Architectural Review* was the right medium for such an endeavour, or not, is another question. It is, however, worth mentioning, as a postscriptum, that *The Buildings of England*, Pevsner’s ‘great sort of monument of post-war democracy’, as Patrick Wright has called them, were illustrated only by means of a few plates placed centrally in the book, entirely disconnected from the verbal descriptions (which indeed often resemble those in the Treasure Hunts, especially in the perambulations, walking tours around neighbourhoods that contain reviews of less significant buildings).<sup>51</sup> The reason for this might be simple: the Treasure Hunt buildings, or rather their parts, are specimen, standing in for a multitude of similar buildings around Britain and serving as a tool to

explain and teach a method, while *The Buildings of England* feature specific and unique buildings that are, for the most part, not exchangeable.

As this article has shown, the Treasure Hunts reveal the methods and aims underlying much of Nikolaus Pevsner's writing and teaching during the decades to come. *The Buildings of England* in particular must be seen as following up on this humble, and at times puzzling, series of eleven articles that demonstrate how Pevsner's approaches to architectural history and his interests in public education were formed by his journalistic and editorial duties - not a profession he would have chosen had it not been for necessity. While the writing of the Treasure Hunts often reminds one of *The Buildings of England*, the imaging is unique. It is only in the earlier Treasure Hunts, that the visual impression is frozen and flattened in *both* word and image in order to be examined in scrutinizing detail in both image and word - a circumstance which lets one conclude that he required this imaging technique to develop his writing style. Essentially, the Treasure Hunts form an architectural history constructed by nondescript, but meticulously described, specimen that are explored purely from eye-level and, often, in passing. For this, the guidebook style must have appeared as the suitable format for the 'pictorial criticism' that Richards had prescribed for all Criticism articles in 1940. In a way, this return of history could only be reconciled with Modernist analysis and functionalism through such an explicit emphasis on the everyday, on visual experience as well as on a lay audience. And, this type of art-historical method relied on the urban as a context, the ordinary, the lowbrow and the public nature of its samples. Ultimately, the Treasure Hunts presented a way of writing the history of architecture that relied on freezing the impression of the building, obtained often fleetingly from the outside while passing by. Only through a combination of words and images, both in overviews and close-ups reproducing both the whole and its parts, was it possible for Pevsner to turn architectural history into a hunt for treasures, 'a family game' to be played on a fine Sunday.

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### **Notes and references**



- <sup>1</sup> Peter F.R. Donner, 'Treasure Hunt: Bishopsgate', *Architectural Review*, 91 (1942), p. 23.
- <sup>2</sup> See Andrew Higgott, *Mediating Modernism: Architectural Cultures in Britain* (London, Routledge, 2007), p. 37-41. Also Robert Elwall, "'How to Like Everything": Townscape and Photography', *The Journal of Architecture*, 17 (2012), pp. 671-72.
- <sup>3</sup> J.M. Richards and others, 'The Second Half Century', *Architectural Review*, 101 (1947), pp. 23-25. On the period that followed, see Erdem Erten, 'Shaping "The Second Half Century": "The Architectural Review", 1947-1971' (unpublished PhD, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2004).
- <sup>4</sup> Susie Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life* (London, Chatto & Windus, 2011), p. 307, 327.
- <sup>5</sup> Erdem Erten, 'Thomas Sharp's Collaboration with H. de C. Hastings: The Formulation of Townscape as Urban Design Pedagogy', *Planning Perspectives: An International Journal of History, Planning and the Environment*, 24 (2009), p. 31. Mathew Aitchison and John Macarthur, 'Pevsner's Townscape', in *Visual Planning and the Picturesque*, by Nikolaus Pevsner (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2010), pp. 16-18. Also Higgott, pp. 42-46.
- <sup>6</sup> Editorial to C.H. Reilly, 'Criticism', *Architectural Review*, 77 (1935), p. 113. See also J.M. Richards, 'Architectural Criticism in the Nineteen-Thirties', in *Concerning Architecture: Essays on Architectural Writers and Writing Presented to Nikolaus Pevsner*, ed. by John Summerson (London: Allen Lane, 1968), p. 255.
- <sup>7</sup> Pevsner once also used this pseudonym to respond to one of his articles written under his real name. See Harries, p. 305.
- <sup>8</sup> Peter F.R. Donner, 'Criticism: Frank Lloyd Wright: An Organic Architecture, the Architecture of Democracy. The Sir George Watson Lectures for 1939', 'Criticism: Sir Herbert Baker's Extensions to the Bank of England', 'Criticism: Ledoux and Le Corbusier', 'Criticism: Houses by Robert Atkinson and the St. Marylebone Town Hall', 'Criticism: Architecture in Germany under the Nazis', *Architectural Review*, 90 (1941), pp. 68-70, 91-92, 124-126, 151-152, 177-178.
- <sup>9</sup> Peter F.R. Donner, 'Treasure Hunt: Bishopsgate', 'Treasure Hunt: Eton College Estate', 'Treasure Hunt: Parliament Square', 'Treasure Hunt: South Wimbledon', 'Treasure Hunt: Eton Avenue', *Architectural Review*, 91 (1942), pp. 23-25, 47-49, 75-77, 123-24, 151-53; Peter F.R. Donner, 'Treasure Hunt: Tenement Houses, Westminster', 'Treasure Hunt: Wimbledon Commons', 'Treasure Hunt: Golders Green', 'Treasure Hunt: Army and Navy Stores', 'Treasure Hunt: Surrey', 'Treasure Hunt: Insurance Offices in the City', *Architectural Review*, 92 (1942), pp. 19-21, 49-51, 75-76, 97-99, 125-26, 151-53.
- <sup>10</sup> For an analysis of the *Review's* layout in the period, see Higgott, p. 45.
- <sup>11</sup> James M. Richards, *Memoirs of an Unjust Fella* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), p. 158.
- <sup>12</sup> The thorough and systematic extracting from historical magazines was an important element of Pevsner's work. His papers contain a large amount of meticulous notes in the folder 'Extracts from Architectural Magazines', Nikolaus Pevsner Papers, box 102, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
- <sup>13</sup> Donner, 'Treasure Hunt: Tenement Houses, Westminster', pp. 19-21, and 'Treasure Hunt: Wimbledon Commons', pp. 49-51.
- <sup>14</sup> Pevsner certainly did not deem these sketches worthwhile preserving since they are only contained in his papers today because he tore them up and re-used their backsides as notepaper. Nikolaus Pevsner Papers, box 102, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
- <sup>15</sup> Robert Elwall, *Photography Takes Command: The Camera and British Architecture, 1890-1939* (London, RIBA Heinz Gallery, 1994), p. 66-67.

- <sup>16</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, 'Foreword', in *Focus on Architecture and Sculpture: An Original Approach to the Photography of Architecture and Sculpture*, ed. by Helmut Gernsheim (London, Fountain Press, 1949), p. 12.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 12.
- <sup>18</sup> See Anne Hultsch, *Architecture, Travellers and Writers: Constructing Histories of Perception 1640-1950* (Oxford: Legenda, 2014), pp. 177–99.
- <sup>19</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, 'Wie Man Skulpturen Aufnehmen Soll: Teil 1', *Zeitschrift für Bildende Kunst*, 31 (N.F. 7) (1896), p. 225. Wölfflin here expresses the strong opinion that photography should never attempt to interpret a work of art. The possibility of photography not being an interpretation of the represented object is of course an idea that would be contested over much of the twentieth century.
- <sup>20</sup> James MacQuedy, 'Criticism', *Architectural Review*, 87 (1940), p. 25.
- <sup>21</sup> MacQuedy, p. 25.
- <sup>22</sup> Mathew Aitchison, 'Townscape: Scope, Scale and Extent', *The Journal of Architecture*, 17 (2012), pp. 621–642.
- <sup>23</sup> For Pevsner's attitude to Victorian architecture, see Lynne Walker, "'The Greatest Century": Pevsner, Victorian Architecture and the Lay Public', in *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner*, ed. by Peter Draper (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 129–47.
- <sup>24</sup> Richards, 'Architectural Criticism in the Nineteen-Thirties', p. 257.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 253.
- <sup>26</sup> Donner, 'Treasure Hunt: Bishopsgate', p. 23.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Donner, 'Treasure Hunt: Eton College Estate', p. 48.
- <sup>30</sup> Donner, 'Treasure Hunt: Golders Green', p. 75.
- <sup>31</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, 'The Enjoyment of Architecture', 1940, p. 1, Nikolaus Pevsner Papers, box 54, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
- <sup>32</sup> See Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou, eds., *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893* (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994).
- <sup>33</sup> Pevsner, 'The Enjoyment of Architecture', p. 3.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid. Note the similarity between the staccato rhythm of these lecture notes - which appear here almost poetic - and that of Pevsner's style of writing in *The Buildings of England*. See Adrian Forty, 'Pevsner the Writer', in *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner*, ed. by Peter Draper (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 87–94.
- <sup>35</sup> Donner, 'Treasure Hunt: Tenement Houses, Westminster', p. 19.
- <sup>36</sup> Pevsner, 'The Enjoyment of Architecture', p. 3. Again, this idea stands in the tradition of his own German training echoing texts such as August Schmarsow's *Grundbegriffe der Kunstwissenschaft* (1905), which contained analyses of buildings in terms of their tectonics, deconstructing them into grid-like systems. See Ute Engel, 'The Formation of Pevsner's Art History: Nikolaus Pevsner in Germany 1902-1935', in *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner*, ed. by Peter Draper (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004), pp. 29–55.
- <sup>37</sup> Pevsner, 'The Enjoyment of Architecture', p. 4B.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 5.
- <sup>39</sup> Donner, 'Treasure Hunt: Army and Navy Stores', p. 97.
- <sup>40</sup> Donner, 'Treasure Hunt: Surrey', p. 125.
- <sup>41</sup> Donner, 'Treasure Hunt: Bishopsgate', p. 23.
- <sup>42</sup> Donner, 'Treasure Hunt: Army and Navy Stores', p. 97.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Walker, p. 132.

<sup>45</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, 'The Elements of Contemporary Architecture in Britain – Historicism and Traditionalism', n.p., 1939, Nikolaus Pevsner Papers, box 18, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, 'A Questionnaire on Industrial Art', *Design for Today*, April 1935, p. 145.

<sup>49</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, 'On the Furnishing of Girls' Schools', *School and College Management*, 3 (1938), p. 280. Pevsner also wrote a little booklet for the Council for Visual Education containing instructions for teachers how 'to arouse that sense of beauty, to instil it into our educational system and our planning authorities'. See Nikolaus Pevsner, *Visual Pleasures from Everyday Things: An Attempt to Establish Criteria by Which the Aesthetic Qualities of Design Can Be Judged*, published for the Council for Visual Education, C.V.E Booklet No. 4 (London, B.T. Batsford, 1946), p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Donner, 'Treasure Hunt: Golders Green', p. 76.

<sup>51</sup> Patrick Wright in *Travels with Pevsner: Dorset*, dir. by Roger Parsons (BBC Television, 1997). For an analysis of Pevsner's descriptions in *The Buildings of England*, see Hultzsch, pp. 14–29.

## Captions

Figs 1 and 2: Pevsner's Treasure Hunt for June 1942 exploring buildings in Eton Avenue (no. 13, 15 and 26). *Architectural Review*, 91 (1942), 151–153.

Fig. 3: Detail of Pevsner's Treasure Hunt for November 1942 with overview photographs on the top showing five buildings on Epsom Road between Morden and Cheam. *Architectural Review*, 92 (1942), p. 125.

Fig. 4: Detail of Pevsner's Treasure Hunt for November 1942 with a 'specimen' shown in close-up while using the same photograph as in the overview in fig. 3. *Architectural Review*, 92 (1942), p. 126.