Portmeirion, Perspective and Pleasure

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Abstract

The holiday village of Portmerion was created by Bertram Clough Williams-Ellis (1883 - 1978) over a period of fifty-one years, starting in 1926. It was grade II listed in 1971.

However, Portmerion has become a part of western popular culture rather than of mainstream architectural history. Its use as the setting for the cult 1967 television series “The Prisoner” ensures continued worldwide interest and a constant stream of visitors.

Williams Ellis’ design methods were empirical, initial designs being adjusted by eye on site in close collaboration with trusted builders.

This paper analyses the development of Portmerion as a gesamtkunstwerk; considering the experience of movement through the village as a dynamic composition of shifting vistas, focussing the visitor on a series of constructed views. Through this analysis, Portmerion is revealed as both a manifestation of the architecture of pleasure and an exercise in the pleasure of architecture.

Introduction

Williams-Ellis’ architectural training was curtailed after a mere three months so his development as an architect happened informally. He adopted his middle name, Clough, as a nom d’artiste by which he was commonly known, so that is used hereafter.

Clough was a keen sailor and his ad hoc education was augmented by travelling widely; a tour of northern Italy proving especially significant as it introduced him both to the coastal village of Portofino and to Geoffrey Scott, the author of ‘The Architecture of Humanism’ (Williams-Ellis, 1971, p.193). The former would inspire Clough aesthetically, whilst Scott’s psychological analysis of the Baroque would refine his approach to design. The village of Portmeirion can therefore be seen as a physical manifestation of both an empirical and psychoanalytical approach to architectural beauty.
Clough developed a parallel career as an essayist alongside his architectural and landscape practice. In the aftermath of the First World War, he became recognised as a vocal advocate for the countryside and a supporter of development control, confronting the contemporary building boom.

In his writings, he tried to educate the public about the importance of good proportions over rich detail, a possibly surprising stance in view of the works for which he is best known. The term ‘Clough-up’, coined by Sir John Summerson (Haslam, 1996, p.16) during the interwar period to describe the process of making-over a dull building with colour and additional details, was an early example of the public’s perception of Clough’s work.

During his travels Clough began to dream of creating a coastal settlement as an exemplar and his gradual professional success made it economically possible to consider this in earnest. Clough sailed round the coast of Britain during holidays looking for a possible site. However, the ideal location was eventually discovered within five miles of his home in North Wales. The Aber-Iâ peninsula estate had been occupied by a reclusive tenant. Clough visited it on her death, discovering that it offered the ideal combination of rural beauty and developmental autonomy for which he was searching.

**Methodology**

This paper first considers the village holistically, looking at the experience of movement through the composition and considering the pauses and vistas along the way. The horseshoe-shaped promenade around the valley affords a sequence of views to the buildings ranged along the cliff edge. These groupings of buildings are then considered in more detail.

Portmeirion is famous for its density of style, colour and detail, so the diagrams in this paper attempt to strip the compositions to their basic forms in an effort to reveal the formal juxtapositions.

Clough (1973 p.26) referred to the development of the village as being “dozens of competing ideas” bound by “certain basic principles in common.” The result is a curiosity; seemingly a late-flowering of nineteenth century eclecticism and exoticism, out of step with modernity. However, from our perspective, Portmeirion can be re-framed as a simulacra – a reproduction without an original – proto-typical of what became known in the 1980s as “narrative architecture”. The final section of this paper considers this reading in relation to Clough’s own theoretical writings.
Fig. 01 Portmeirion Village Plan
The Village

Portmeirion’s commercial origin as an eccentric seaside hotel is pertinent to the understanding of the village. New structures could only be justified by the demand for accommodation so the village grew with the success of the venture as a destination for staying guests.

Early Development

In the early years, the village began at the east side with the Toll House [7]. The horseshoe-shaped promenade along the existing access road that curves around the valley remained as he found it until one reached the original stable block [30] on the north side. The first modest new accommodation blocks, Angel [26] and Neptune [27], were placed between the access road on the west side of the valley and the existing fish pond and cottage to create the initial village setting. The access road continued down to The Hotel [37], converted from the original house, which was the focal point for both staying guests and day visitors before cafes and shops were established in the village.

Clough began to establish “the essential dominant structures on their respective pre-selected key sites” – referring to the Watch House [12], the Campanile [10] and the Chantry [18] occupying prominent, elevated positions along the cliff edge and the east side of the valley. These were completed during the initial phase of development prior to the outbreak of the Second World War.

Besides the cliff top grouping – described later in more detail – the other works of this period consisted of the alteration and redevelopment of the existing buildings.

The Town Hall [35], built at the end of this period, came about to make use of architectural salvage. Its location, at the junction of the east-west axis and the western leg of the ‘horseshoe’ leading south to The Hotel [37] suggests this site was earmarked for a significant structure. The perception on site, however, is of a façade, constituting a piece of opportune scene setting, reinforcing the ‘High Street’ theme. Despite the Town Hall’s actual bulk, its position low down on the west side of the valley and domestically-scaled surroundings restrict the views so it is not overbearing (fig. 02).
Fig. 02 The Town Hall, viewed from the east

Post World War II Development

Post-war, the village developed to the east. A dedicated car park was created north east of the valley and the approach to the village is punctuated by two houses that bridge the road before the Toll House [7] on Battery Square is reached. As well as defining the day visitors’ position as an outsider – a “silent ‘remember where you are’”, as the architect called it – this is a deliberately theatrical move.

Between 1954 and 1969, additions were made to the north and east sides of the valley, which can be recognised by a more severe, often classical, aesthetic, whilst architectural salvage added to the material palette and mixture of styles.
Fig. 03 The sequence of vistas along the promenade
Fig. 04 – The sequence of vistas around the horseshoe-shaped promenade viewed from the south
The sequence of vistas

The access road, extant when Clough acquired the site, was largely retained as found and forms the spine around which most of the buildings are arrayed. This road guides the visitors’ steps to the extent that it can be considered as the central organising force linking a sequence of key vistas (figs. 03 and 04).

Fig. 05 controlled vistas – view from the north

The old, inner wall around the north-eastern side of the valley basin hides the piazza until it is revealed, first through an arch at the north corner looking diagonally south (fig. 05 (A) ), then by encouraging visitors to enter the back of the Gloriette [21] at the head of the piazza (fig. 05 (B) ). Following these two theatrical set pieces, the obstructing wall is broken down around the north-west corner to give the impression that all can be seen, but this is illusory. The architect is still in control through the placement of trees and the hard landscaping guides where one stands. The views of the cliff-top massing from these three points tend to flatten the composition and dispel the impression of a greater settlement so trees and the eye-catching piazza complex in front work to make this less apparent.
The western leg of the ‘horseshoe’, forming a north-south axis along the access road passing in front the Town Hall [35] and leading to The Hotel [37], evolved to provide a series of linked pauses in the visitor’s promenade, rather than a set-piece view in itself. Jones (1996, p.131) notes that the refectory added later alongside the Hall is one of the less successful aspects of the composition, despite its undoubted functionality. The Town Hall’s standalone importance is undermined by this side wing and terrace; an instance where the crowding of the massing does not add delight and distraction. A glimpse of the Chantry [18] (fig. 06 (D) ), situated on the high ground of the east side of the valley, is possible across the piazza between the Trinity [28] and Neptune [27] buildings, reinforcing the Chantry’s importance in the overall visual composition.

The next pause comes opposite the Town Hall [35] entrance, looking back across the valley along the east-west axis (fig. 06 (E) ). With more recent additions, this is now a very formal composition framed by wrought ironwork and focused on the dome of the Pantheon [16], with statues and small structures placed at alternate steps along the way. As well as accentuating the height and grandeur of the dome, the composition works to counter the appearance of the rise in the ground level of over seven metres and reinforces the false-scale applied to the Government House [11] terrace above and to the right of the viewer.
Fig 07 The Dolphin, viewed from the east-west axis

Heading south from the Town Hall [35], the access road drops more steeply towards The Hotel [37] and the buildings step back, leading the visitor’s eye to the middle distance. The trees and the estuary assume prime importance, although the gable end of The Dolphin [13] looms above and on the left. Heightening the perceived scale of this building, the brightly-rendered, three storey block projects beyond the side of the promontory supported discreetly on elongated stone arches (fig. 03).

An a-priori illustration (fig. 08) reveals that the existing nineteenth century steps and axis were intended to be the focus of the landscaped descent to the estuary, but considerations of vehicular access to The Hotel [37] mean that the more direct access road has gradually assumed visual, as well as practical, importance. Clough’s application of a graded hierarchy of privacy and visibility throughout the village complex meant that the steps became something to be discovered rather than a route to other discoveries. The view over the balustrade to the east affords an at-arm’s-length view of the private lawn and swimming pool at the foot of the cliff.
On the hillside opposite there are glimpses of another path and tiny white structures that step from the Watch House [12] down to the water. Although the public can reach the bottom by another route, the pleasure of this sequenced descent is reserved for resident guests.

The Hotel [37] retains its original importance as the culmination of the promenade, despite an Observatory Tower camera obscura situated beyond it at the southernmost tip of the site. Viewed from The Hotel the cliff-top cluster is most convincing as the upper reaches of an Italian fishing village as the restless orientation and forced perspective combine with the elevation and natural features to suggest a more extensive settlement.

The Cliff Top Cluster

The cliff top cluster of buildings remain constantly visible as one promenades around the village and seem to form the key intervention on the peninsula. They define two of the main external spaces (one public – Battery Square – and one private – Battery Lawn) and three movement axes.
Fig. 09 Initial proposals for cliff top cluster 1925 (Haslam, 1996, p.88)

The drawing of the initial proposals for the cliff top cluster (fig. 09), illustrates a single building designed to appear as if an assemblage accreted over time. The prominence of this grouping, to be viewed from both sides, is evident here; thought is given to its appearance from The Hotel [37] and estuary, below, and from the village, to exploit the dramatic site. The proportions are clearly being manipulated to achieve the appearance of greater scale and distance, particularly as viewed from The Hotel [37].

Roof silhouettes are distinctly angled and the angular juxtapositions of the components either emphasise or mask the adjusted ridge lines, depending on the position of the viewer (fig.10). The Campanile walls are gently battered from the eaves line up before giving way to diminishing tiers of reduced scale that emphasise the height but, compared to the eventual realization, the initial proposal has a smaller footprint and a squatter elevation.
The wide arc around the peninsula from which this group is visible, presented both problems and opportunities to Clough. A “false perspective” has to be viewed within a particular range, and it will soon break down with variance of proximity and multiple viewpoints. To overcome this, Clough employed the restless re-orientation of the elevations to address the view from some locations and mask it from others. In doing this, the composition defines Battery Square on the north side and Battery Lawn on the south.

**A closer look**

In the following section, the relationships between the cliff-top cluster, the Chantry [18] and other “essential dominant structures” are examined in greater detail.
Battery Square

Compressed on three sides between buildings, with the access road to its fourth, Battery Square is distorted to a shallow arc. The perception from either end of the space is, however, quite different (fig. 11).

Clough exploited the eye’s instinctive tendency to “correct” at each end of Battery Square to affect the near view, whilst also using the multiple orientations of facades already described to address the distant views of these buildings throughout the village.
The use of clapboard on the Toll House [7] and Battery [8] facades means there is always a vertical scale held up to these buildings, making the apparent window and eaves heights difficult to manipulate. No attempt has been made to vary the gauge of the timber boarding; instead the Toll House facade is progressively stepped out with each rising storey while the Battery facade leans in towards the top (fig. 12). This is gently assisted by the overlap of the boards. The result is a gentle diminution of the perceived scale and the corner is easier to appraise within the constricted space. The Toll House [7] has a much modulated appearance with a first floor balcony hiding the play in scale.

Standing in the corner between Toll House [7] and Battery [8] looking west, the diminished perspective of the Prior’s Lodging [9] facade assists in ‘opening up’ the acute angle between it and the Round House [14], resulting in the external space appearing more regularly square (fig. 11).

Fig. 12 View of Toll House and Battery from the north-west
As the eye pans round to the south-west the reversal of the perspective is assisted by the battered western corner and small upper windows of Prior’s Lodging [9] (fig 13).

The original use of the ground floor storeys of the Battery [8] and Prior’s Lodging [9] as garages resulted in wide, arched openings. However, these serve to exaggerate the apparent width of the Lady’s Lodge [15] and Round House [14] facades.

The seat and statue, set centrally in the square, distract the eye as it sweeps across the facades and encourage the bystander to circulate for a better view, so the reversal of perspective is not at first apparent.

The addition of the Round House [14] in 1959 and the adjacent arch to the path to Government House [11] had a considerable effect on Battery Square due to the enclosure it gave to the west end. Prior to its construction, a distant view of Angel [26], Neptune [27] and The Mermaid [24] cottages was possible, so the apparently enlarged Campanile [10] and Prior’s Lodging [9] suggested a greater distance across the valley. The effect of the enclosure is to draw attention to the square itself and the opening at the west end is only revealed as one crosses the Square, when the disconnection of the wall becomes apparent. Clough used those additions to infer a wider and more regular ‘square’ than is actually the case.
The Campanile

The base of the Campanile [10] is masked from within Battery Square so the tapering, forced perspective of the visible upper portion makes it appear taller and further away, working in harmony with the view to the west within the square (fig. 14).

A similar effect is achieved when viewing the Campanile [10] from the north side of The Dolphin [13] and Government House [11]. Masking of the base again allows it to combine with the apparent perspective of these structures to increase the appearance of scale and distance.
Battery Lawn

From the private Battery Lawn, on the south side of the Campanile [10], one cannot retreat far enough to read the whole as one composition (fig. 15). The narrow, lancet windows to Prior’s Lodging [9] suggest an increased verticality and disguise the line of the first floor level. The lawn is raised and rounded above the surrounding path to emphasise the height of the Campanile [10] but hide the base of the buildings on the opposite side. Facade orientation and partial concealment are used to the same purpose as in the vista from the shore line, offering the suggestion of additional buildings just out of view.
The Chantry

The apparent scale of the Chantry [18] has been manipulated using the fenestration and the building’s connection with its rocky promontory (fig. 16). Half visible arches suggest a basement storey while the full-height lancet windows, similar to the south façade of the Prior’s Lodging [9], make the actual storey divisions unclear. These windows and the clock tower over the roof give the composition a vertical emphasis while the tiny dormers infer the presence of an extra storey beyond the actual two-plus-attic. The location and orientation of this building give it prominence from all round the village itself, but not from the east and south-west approaches. This appears to be a significant piece of stage-management by Clough, part of an expression of progressive degrees of privacy as one moves around the site.

The Perception of Buildings and Landscape

To a stationary observer, the buildings of Portmeirion can be perceived as either a matrix of solid objects or as the backdrops to larger external space. Clough’s writings indicate a leaning toward the latter reading, but not as a frozen tableau. “Treating mankind as a mere foreground to inanimate beauty, as just figures in the landscape, cannot...be intellectually defended.” (Williams-Ellis, 1937, p.91)
The relationship between people and architecture was explored by Clough several years earlier in ‘The Pleasures of Architecture’ (1924). In this he asserted his belief ‘that in the complex and often fragmentary process of identification we shall find the source of architectural pleasure’, and followed by quoting Scott’s argument that ‘Beauty of disposition in Architecture, like beauty of line, arises from our own physical experience of easy movement in space’ (Scott, 1924, p.224).

This emphasis on a kinetic dialogue with our surroundings encourages us to consider the vistas at Portmeirion as a contiguous architectural experience analogous to the historic example of the Panathenaic Way. Bacon (1975, pp. 64-67) recounts how the yearly Panathenaic procession elevated that linear route (fig. 14) to the setting for a collective event in the civic life of ancient Athens.

In Bernard Tschumi’s essay ‘The Pleasure of Architecture’ (1977) he uses garden design to explore the dynamic and reciprocal relationship we have with space.

Describing Stowe Landscape Gardens – Clough was commissioned to convert Stowe House to an independent school in 1922 – Tschumi suggests the various garden structures “are to be read less as elements of a picturesque composition than as the dismantled elements of order” (1994, p.85).
Tschumi applies a Freudian concept, the language of dreams, to the perception of architecture. The idea postulated by Tschumi is that one can only ever see fragments (walls, rooms, streets) at any one time but an understanding of the whole is extrapolated from memories and fantasies filling the gaps in perception. Tschumi’s name for this movement between fragments was “desire” (1994, p.96), deliberately comparing the process of seduction and pleasure to how architecture affects us. Tschumi later developed this theme when voicing his concern that architecture had become “a passive object of contemplation instead of the place that confronts spaces and actions” (1994, p.141).

**Conclusion**

Clough remained defiantly light-hearted when describing Portmeirion, seemingly in response to repeated disapproval and bewilderment. Perhaps, however, the constant emphasis on the joy and fun of architecture, what Haslam calls ‘the light opera approach’ (1996, p.14), is the key to a more mature understanding of the village. Clough’s adherence to Scott’s analysis of Baroque architecture shows an un-dogmatic sophistication that sits well with more recent architectural theory.

Portmeirion’s sugared presentation makes it accessible but this is only the populist introductory level to a deeper exploration of harmonious composition. Against expectations, at Portmeirion the visitor’s awareness of spatial disjunction and narrative artifice prevents the village being reduced to a “passive object of contemplation”. An evolving engagement between the visitor and their surroundings reveals further events to be experienced.
Bibliography


**Illustrations**

All figures are by Francis Ellis except:


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