

A Bumper Crop

When I think of the Essex landscape, the landscape I grew up in, I think of mud. Essex is predominantly flat and large parts of it are agricultural. Sugar beet, turnips and potatoes. Fields ploughed up year after year. All that makes for a lot of mud. The coast of Essex is estuarine and marshy and liable to flood and that makes for a lot of mud too.

This kind of landscape has its appeal for sure, but it is unlikely ground in which to grow exotic species. And yet Essex is also home to a surprising amount of artistic experimentation, flowerings of modernist architecture in the form of workers villages, holiday estates and garden suburbs. This book of details captures a number of such places: the art-deco houses built by the Crittall Window Company at Silver End, the white walled modernism of Oliver Hill's holiday village at Frinton-On-Sea and the vast industrial architecture of the Bata shoe factory in East Tilbury.

Alongside these ambitious projects there are one-off, individual masterpieces too: Joseph Emberton's Royal Corinthian Yacht Club at Burnham-on-Crouch, a reinforced concrete cruise-ship permanently moored on the flood plains of the Crouch estuary. Erno Goldfinger built here too, as did Wells Coates and Berthold Lubetkin's Tecton group, although the latter's house is in Romford, technically part of London now but still Essex in spirit.

An account of Essex modernism also includes the post-war new towns of Basildon and Harlow, experiments in the architecture of social democracy that – at least in Basildon's case – grew out of the more anarchic individualism of the plotland communities.. And then there is the plate-glass and concrete brutalism of Kenneth Capon's University of Essex, where the radicalism of the architecture was directly linked to the politics and student unrest of the late '60s.

Essex is not really a county for second-home owners or the bourgeoisie, so more recent domestic modernism is thinner on the ground. Notable exceptions include the house that Richard and Sue Rogers designed for Humphrey Spender in the village of Ulting, near Maldon. This house – a precursor to the more celebrated design for Rogers' parents in Wimbledon – is a still startling discovery, a bright yellow steel-framed tribute to the Los Angeles Case Study houses lurking amid the fruit trees and brambles of a mature orchard.

The current state of all these buildings is worth considering for what it says about our relationship to modernity today. When I first came across the houses at Silver End it was in a book of modernist architecture in my first year at university. The black and white photographs were almost shocking in their stark modernity. I had no idea such things existed in a landscape I knew so well. Visiting them

some years later, they appeared less startling. They had mellowed with time and grown all the accoutrements of English domestic life. Bird tables, wishing wells and gnomes, as well as children's toys, bicycles and trampolines filled the gardens. Some of the houses had been repainted in Essex-friendly pastel shades while others hid behind mature trees and high hedges.

Modernism has left its imprint on Essex, a surprisingly big one it turns out. For the first half of the 20th century, its muddy fields yielded a bumper crop of experimental architecture. But Essex has left its imprint on modernism too. Its remarkable legacy of modernist architecture still demonstrates what is possible. It is important to dream and modernism, at its core, was a dream of a completely different world. The experimental modernism of Essex is there to show that this dream is still open to us. The future can happen anywhere, even here. Especially here.