



Prince Charles' *A Vision of Britain* as Populist Retrotopia

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In 1989, Charles, Prince of Wales (from 8 September 2022 King Charles III of the United Kingdom), published *A Vision of Britain: A Personal View of Architecture* (hereafter referred to simply as VB), a book promoting traditional over modernist architecture, which he names 'the human' and 'the inhuman' respectively (VB, 73). He calls for an architecture which could please the more traditional taste of 'ordinary' people. Five years earlier, in a controversial speech on the 150th Anniversary of the Royal Institute of British Architects, Prince Charles had already challenged the hegemony of the Modern Movement in architecture and continued the discussion in a BBC documentary entitled *HRH The Prince of Wales:*

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A Vision of Britain in 1988. The documentary generated extensive positive feedback by the audience (VB, 9). Also, according to the poll made by Building Design magazine in 1988, two-thirds of British architects welcomed Prince Charles to the discussion on architecture (Jencks 1992).

Prince Charles is not an architect or urban planner, and he is the first to acknowledge his lack of academic credentials. Instead, his particular interest in the topic derives from his experiences of ‘the wanton destruction’ taken place in Britain since the 1960s (VB 7). Regardless, his ideas fuelled an architectural debate for several years, forcing many architects to re-evaluate and clarify their views on modernist architecture. This chapter examines three aspects intertwined in VB: first, the author’s attack on modernism in architecture; second, the populist arguments he uses to legitimise his attack; and third, the utopic tendencies of his proposal for a reversion to the architecture of the past. In the final section, we move away from the textual discussion to examine the experimental urban community of Poundbury, Prince Charles’ utopia realised on the outskirts of Dorchester, and consider if and how his nostalgic ideas have been successfully put in practice.

A NEW URBANIST’S MISSION AGAINST THE MODERN MOVEMENT

Modernist architecture started after the First World War as a utopian vision of society. It was built around the idea of socialist and fair human conditions, the potential of technological and scientific development, new aesthetic understanding emphasising the functionality of, and advocating, plain undecorated walls and simple rectilinear shapes and forms, and the complete abandonment of traditional architecture (see Le Corbusier 1977). Right from the outset, the Modern Movement in architecture (also known as the International Style), headed by Swiss architect and urbanist Le Corbusier, oriented intensely towards the future, while history was something to be deliberately left behind. Indeed, for the modernists, previous architectural styles were nothing but a lie (Le Corbusier 1977, 72–73). Paradoxically, while endeavouring to forget the history of architecture, the modernists defined their theories through it, in terms of *not* using the language of classical or traditional architecture. Thus, they were inevitably bound by history.

In *A History of Western Architecture*, David Watkin (1996) quotes architect Robert Adam's comparison of Marxism and Modernism. According to Adam, it was Marx who created the philosophical system that formed the basis of Communism and Modernism and 'combined a wholly technological view of society with a belief that history was rolling relentlessly towards a predestined end, and considered that only a revolutionary destruction of the old order could create a truly modern world unencumbered with its past. ... [T]his vision of a technological future lies at the centre of the Modern Movement' (Watkin 1996, 8).

Most architects in Western Europe fervently promoted the goals of the Modern Movement until the 1960s. By that time, the negative effects of modernism, such as social and environmental alienation caused by monotonous housing areas and large-scale public and commercial buildings dissonant with their surroundings, had become overwhelming. Arguably the success of modernity was over. Furthermore, the rejection of the history of architecture caused problems for modernist architects in their daily practice, because, especially within urban settings, they were nevertheless compelled to align their architectural designs with the existing building stock. In order to solve obvious problems, new architectural approaches were called for. Even if other theories, such as critical regionalism, deconstructivism and structuralism, were developed to solve the dilemma (see Jencks 2000), here we briefly present only two responses to the shortcomings of modernism: postmodernism as an ironic response, and New Urbanism as a tradition-based one. This is necessary because both approaches have had significant effects in the built environment and are related to Prince Charles' arguments.

If the Modern Movement's attitudes can be described as anti-historic, it is fair to say that Prince Charles is, at least in architectural terms, an anti-modernist. 'You will not find the fool's gold of the "International Style"', he writes (VB, 123). He accuses modernists, certainly with good reason, of abolishing historical references (VB, 111) and ensuring 'a deadening uniformity' (VB, 81). He is not the only critic of this movement: Watkin, for example, also challenged it in *Morality and Architecture* (2001) causing a lively debate in the late 1970s. His book tackled many of the same topics as Prince Charles would do in the late 1980s. Watkin, however, produced a scholarly text rather than one aimed at the wider public. In the preface of the renamed second edition of the book, he applauded Prince Charles for not hesitating to accuse British architects of doing more damage to the historical surroundings of London than the *Luftwaffe* (2001, vii).

Charles Jencks, considered the leading authority on postmodern theory and criticism in architecture, went as far as proclaiming the demolition of the modernist *Pruitt-Igoe* housing complex as the exact date of the death of modernism in 1972. He proposed postmodernism as its successor. The justification for postmodernism is in remedying the shortcomings of modernism, such as the lack of historical continuity and the sense of place. Jencks further defines postmodernism as being about double-coding a series of dualities. According to him, the primary dualism was between elitism and populism. For Jencks, postmodern architecture is double-coded, half-modern and half-conventional, when communicating with both the public and concerned architects (Jencks 1987, 6). In 1988, the architectural theoretician Heinrich Klotz accused the historicising architects of not making any clear distinction between historical and contemporary architecture—through irony or otherwise. In postmodern architecture, this historical alienation is achieved, according to him, by ‘risky’ combinations of the banal and high rhetoric (Klotz 1988, 51).

The double-coding in postmodern architecture often surfaces as an ironic approach to traditionalism and history, and even to modernist architecture. In the early 1980s, postmodernism became a widely known architectural movement among architects and the financial world (Farrell 2017, 30), and irony, as architects’ discipline-specified code, stuck to postmodernism for good. Despite its historical references, postmodernism is not at all appreciated by Prince Charles: ‘There is no longer a universal language of symbolism, and the gropings of some critics towards the imposition of “meaning” on what they call post-modern architecture has been fairly unfruitful’ (VB, 90; see also 66–67). In turn, Jencks deplored Prince Charles’ book and behaviour in the introduction of his revised 6th edition of *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, mainly for condemning some postmodern architectural works (1991, 15–17). However, the ironic approach indicated that, exactly as Prince Charles claimed, the architectural establishment did see itself as a superior profession with an aesthetic language of its own.

On the other hand, New Urbanism, as an architectural movement with many links to traditionalism, has several interests in common with Prince Charles’ vision. With over 4000 projects in the United States alone, New Urbanism is currently one of the main tendencies in architecture and urban planning, and has significantly impacted architecture since the early 1980s, manifesting ‘the revival of our lost art of place-making’ and ‘re-ordering of the built environment into the way communities have been

built for centuries’ (New Urbanism 2022). New Urbanism is a locally orientated approach to architecture and the built environment, promoting urban places ‘framed by architecture and landscape design that celebrate local history, climate, ecology, and building practice’ (CNU 2000), in contrast to a modernist architecture that stands for a universal architectural language, according to which ‘a house is a machine for living’ (*‘La maison est une machine à habiter’*, Le Corbusier 1977, 83) and ‘architecture acts on standards’ (*‘L’architecture agit sur les standards’*, *ibid.*, 103). New Urbanism strives for the resurrection of once forgotten architecture; whereas modernism’s brave new future is to be built from scratch. In contrast to postmodernism, New Urbanism lacks the irony that imbued post-modern architecture. It is serious in its desire to restore the key values of pre-modern urban environments.

The Charter of the New Urbanism (CNU 2000) includes highly political principles not just about urban planning but also about social and economic problems, environmental health, housing policies, community activism, participatory planning, and even agriculture. In fact, although new urbanist projects often manifest the imagery of historical architectural styles, the charter has little to say about architecture as such. Yet, what *is* said could have been penned directly by Prince Charles: how architectural projects should be linked to their surroundings (cf. VB 17, 119–121), how architectural design should grow from local climate, topography, history and building practice (cf. VB 78–79, 85, 88–89, 102), and how civic buildings should reinforce community identity (cf. VB 23–25, 97). There is just one major difference between the goals of New Urbanism and those of VB: walkability was not an issue for Prince Charles in 1989, even if he did oppose the triumph of the private car over people (VB, 33–34, 41). However, fifteen years later, in his contribution to *The Architectural Review*, he reintroduces ten important principles for planning. They are partly the same as those in VB, but now pedestrians are clearly acknowledged, and cars disregarded: ‘The pedestrian must be at the centre of the design process. Streets must be reclaimed from the car’ (Charles 2014).

THE ROYAL POPULIST

At present, populism is often connected to right-wing and left-wing political movements, although we are not referring to this specific phenomenon of the political arena here, nor does Prince Charles in his book. It is not our claim that VB can be accused of endorsing either version of populism,

which is argued to be societally pessimistic (Steenvoorden and Hartevelde 2018), whereas Prince Charles' book is fairly optimistic, expressing the confidence that 'our towns and cities *can* be restored to places where people matter once more' (VB, 15; italics in original) and demanding that people are 'involved willingly from the beginning in the improvement of their own surroundings' (VB, 96). Instead, we follow here Margaret Canovan, for whom populism in modern societies can be best understood as a revolt in the name of people 'against both the established structure and the dominant ideas and values of the society' (Canovan 1999).

The word populism is derived, of course, from the Latin word *populus*, people, which has at least three meanings in English: people as a nation, people as a group of individuals in general, and the people as opposed to the ruling elite (Canovan 2005, 2). In VB, Prince Charles writes several times about the idea of 'nation', but does not actually use the word 'people' in that sense. However, he frequently uses the word 'people' in the second sense, as individuals in general: 'People are not there to be planned for; they are to be worked with' (VB, 97; see also, 15, 33, 76, 96). Yet, it is very interesting to note how often he presents people in the third sense, as opposing the dominant architects: 'Well, the people of Britain *have* now begun to speak what kind of architecture they want' (VB, 13; italics in original). He demands that architects and developers ought to be more sensitive to the feelings of 'ordinary' people (VB, 12), probably because he undoubtedly considers architects a cultural elite leading the construction in and of the cities:

Why then, *have* I been levelling my fire at *architects*, in particular? It is because I believe that it *was* the architectural establishment, or a powerful group within it, which made the running in the 50s and 60s. It was they who set the cultural agenda. (VB, 9; italics in original)

As Prince Charles sees it, some improvements in the built environment have been made in Britain in the 1980s, but only because the people managed to rise up against the building machine (VB, 118). Many researchers argue that referring to the common sense or true desires and needs of ordinary people is a fundamental way to legitimise one's political claims in populist rhetoric (e.g., Canovan 1999; Betz and Johnson 2004; Moffitt 2016, 98; De Cleen et al. 2021). In this light, Prince Charles' arguments for justifying his vision are clearly populist ones. Like any true populist, he presents people as a harmonious and pure-minded entity, suffering because

of the deeds of an unsuccessful elite: 'I'm sure that the man in the street knows exactly what he wants, but he is frustrated by form-filling and the mystique that surrounds the professionals' (VB, 77). It could even be claimed that he represents a conspiratorial worldview based on a battle between the good people of Britain (with himself as their spokesman) and the evil architects. As Svetlana Boym (2007) remarks, for conspiracy adherents '*home* is forever under siege, requiring defence against the plotting enemy.'

More importantly, VB contains a profound political message, even if Prince Charles, as the heir of the crown, is not, and cannot be, an overt political actor. With his mostly aesthetic ten principles dealing with, for example, the hierarchy of buildings, human scale, harmonious streets, the feeling of well-designed spatial enclosure, the use of local materials, decoration and art, and creating a good community spirit (VB, 75–98; see also the case of Poundbury below), Prince Charles shows the paths towards what he thinks would be a better urban environment for the people. He is keen to make an ambitious and peaceful revolution in how the planning and building systems operate and to strengthen citizen participation in planning: 'I want to see laymen and professionals working together; developers, architects and craftsmen understanding each other. I want to demolish the barriers of bureaucracy, and discover that common ground we seem to have lost' (VB 77, see also VB, 96–101, 132–133).

Prince Charles is concerned not just about architectural practice as such, but also about architectural education. He stresses multiple times the significance of classical architecture in education (VB, 91, 134, 136, 155) and claims that leading modern architects convinced the people to abandon the past and discouraged the teaching of traditional architecture (VB, 134). Watkin (2001, viii) too notices that in 2001, and also during the last decades of the twentieth century, the practice of traditional or classical architecture was completely absent from the curriculum in British schools of architecture. It is no wonder that Prince Charles is keen to change the course of architectural and artistic education in both primary schools and in schools of architecture:

Nowadays, with the virtual demise of classical education and of any attempt to provide school-children with a perspective on our shared heritage of European civilization, I suppose it is little wonder that any reference in our buildings to that European heritage is considered old-fashioned and irrelevant to today's 'modern' conditions. (VB, 155, see also 134–136)

What makes the populist message of VB somewhat controversial is that while the text purports to defend the interests of ordinary people, the writer belongs to one of the most elitist social segments in Western society: the British royal family. It is therefore not surprising Charles has been accused, among other things, of abusing his power as Prince of Wales by intervening in matters that should have been left to professionals (VB, 9) and by disturbing public inquiries and democratic processes (Jencks 1992). Moreover, while opposing the project of modernisation and voicing somewhat reactionary opinions, Prince Charles actually represents the traditional views of the British aristocratic elite, the ‘establishment’ that started to decline in the years after the Second World War, and continued to do so along with the de-industrialisation of Britain in the 1980s (Savage et al. 2015, 303–308). In Prince Charles’ case, there are at least two possible explanations for this people/elite contradiction. On the one hand, VB can be seen as a paternalist intervention, where the (future) father of the nation defends his people against the abusing elite. According to John M. Meyer, paternalism ‘presumes a unitary conception of the people and their true interests’ (2008). Indeed, a unitary conception of the built environment is exactly what Prince Charles believes the ‘common’ people possess.

Everywhere I go, I get a very strong impression that most people know the sort of buildings they like. They are buildings that have grown out of our architectural tradition and that are in harmony with nature. These were the qualities that made our towns and cities such beautiful and civilized places in the past and, with God’s help and inspiration, they can do so again. (VB, 153; see also 77, 107, 151)

On the other hand, as Jencks suggests, there ‘is an inevitable disjunction between the elites who create the environment and the various publics that inhabit and use it’ (Jencks 1987, 6). From this point of view, Prince Charles may consider himself to belong to the royal elite and still feel entitled to oppose what he thinks is the cultural elite. However, as Jan-Werner Müller reminds us, advocacy for the ordinary people even when including criticism of elites, does not yet make a populist. What does so is speaking in the name of the people as a whole and claiming that this true people are authentically represented by the populist (Müller 2016, 16–17). In this respect, this is populist logic that is indeed followed in VB.

A NOSTALGIST'S RETROTOPIA FOR REINSTATING THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE PAST

The word *utopia* was coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516, when he used it as the title of his famous book. The word is of Greek origin for 'no-place'. Following More's example, utopias after him have been imbued with hope expressed on a social level, as a communal rather than individual form. VB represents a special kind of utopia: a *retrotopia*, which harks back to 'the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past' (Bauman 2017, 5). The term is derived from the Latin prefix *retro* meaning 'in past times' and the concept of *utopia*. It is a recent intervention in the taxonomy of utopian categories, apparently introduced by Rév István in his article "*Retrotopia: Critical Reason Turns Primitive*" (1998). However, the term gained a certain renown following the publication of Zygmunt Bauman's *Retrotopia*, published posthumously in 2017. As Bauman notes, 'it is the genuine or putative aspects of the past, believed to be successfully tested and unduly abandoned or recklessly allowed to erode, that serve as main orientation/reference points in drawing the roadmap to *Retrotopia*' (Bauman 2017, 9). While looking backwards and being 'true to the utopian spirit, *retrotopia* derives its stimulus from the hope of reconciling, at long last, *security* with *freedom*' (ibid., 8, italics in original). Thus, in contrast to traditional utopias, *retrotopia* promises to unite two dichotomous approaches to social utopias: freedom and order. According to the philosopher Ernst Bloch, freedom in utopias is based on the will to realise oneself in the realm of tolerance, democracy and independence, whereas order in utopias uses the perfect logic as its essence and embraces deliberate intolerance, centralised power and predetermination. As Bloch states, freedom and order are contracts in abstract utopias only; in concrete ones they support and fuse into one another (Bloch 1995/1959, 515–534).

However, as an attitude, *retrotopic* tendencies in architecture and in culture in general are not new at all. The Golden Age of the past was venerated in ancient Greek mythology, and the Renaissance promoted the rebirth of classical philosophy, literature, art and architecture. In the nineteenth century, architectural styles of centuries gone by were recovered one after another. For instance, the British architect and writer Augustus W. N. Pugin turned on a *retrotopic* approach when looking back to the original gothic architecture while seeking a solution to the topical crisis of ecclesiastical architecture (Pugin 1836, *passim*). Prince Charles is also well aware of these nostalgic tendencies in architecture (VB, 155). Actually,

there is no retrotopia without nostalgia, for which various definitions have been proposed in the term's 300-year history. Its meaning has developed from a pathological condition of home-sickness or melancholy into a non-medical container of cultural and political meanings that can sometimes be radically critical (Boym 2001, xiv; Jarvis and Bonnett 2013; Batcho 2013). Nostalgia is usually taken to be a desire for a golden but lost past, whereas utopia is oriented towards an improved future. Combining these two virtual opposites is nevertheless possible.

As Boym states, nostalgia as such is not necessarily the contrary to modernism; they are merely two coeval phenomena. For her, nostalgia is 'a result of a new understanding of time and space that makes the division into "local" and "universal" possible' (2001, xvi). Alastair Bonnett, for his part, claims that nostalgia 'complicates distinctions between modernity and non-modernity and between what is "authentic" and what is "invented"' (Bonnett 2015, 6). Continuing Boym's thinking, nostalgia renders the differentiation between New Urbanism and Modern Movement feasible, whereas following Bonnett's line of reasoning, nostalgia merely confounds their relationship. Either way, nostalgia plays a fundamental role when scrutinising the differences between the traditional and modern tendencies in architecture.

Before VB, nostalgia, as a powerful utopian force, had long been neglected in the architectural discussion. For many architects, it has been easy to criticise Prince Charles for his rather narrow emphasis on architectural styles and on his *aesthetics of pastness* (the term is from Kitson and McHugh 2015), so strongly underlining the importance of nostalgic values in the built environment. For example, he claims that the state of affairs in architecture and city building in Britain was, in terms of variety, harmony, material choices, details and city skylines, better before the Second World War than it ever was afterwards (VB 58, 119, 130, 134). Indeed, he deliberately and frequently presents traditional and nostalgic architecture, also that of the 1980s, as something to strive for: 'I feel that if architects are not thoroughly versed in an architectural tradition, no amount of community consultation can produce really good buildings' (VB 136). Somewhat surprisingly, he nevertheless denies the longing for pre-war times:

I am sometimes accused of wanting to return to the past, to encourage everyone to live in a kind of glorified Disneyland. That is not the case at all. But I do believe that if we are going to come up with an architecture we

might actually take pleasure in, we have to strip away some of the nonsensical dogma of the day and think about fundamental principles once again. (VB, 101; see also Charles 2014)

In an apparent contradiction to this notion, Prince Charles writes elsewhere in his book that ‘examples exist all around us of the ideal homes that people have loved for ages: it is simply a matter of learning to imitate the best. Discriminating observation of the past must be the inspiration for the future’ (VB, 87). To better understand his point here, we may follow Boym’s (2001, xiv) remark about nostalgia having a utopian dimension directed at neither past nor future but ‘rather sideways’, rebelling against the modern idea of a progressive time, even if she also claims that nostalgia depends on the modern conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time (*ibid.*, 13).

Smith and Campbell (2017) write about a progressive use of nostalgia, which, for them, does not mean just yearning for the past, but also appreciating its moral values and using the past to build a better future. In this sense, retrotopia is a dream of a future resembling the cherished past that can and should be reinstated. Prince Charles clearly shares this dream. He is convinced that Britain ‘can build new developments which echo the familiar, attractive features of our regional vernacular styles’ (VB, 15) and that ‘we can build cities, towns and villages which seem to have grown out of the historical fabric of Britain and which better reflect the true aspirations of its people’ (VB, 155–156).

THE CASE OF POUNDBURY: RETROTOPIA REALISED

As Boym (2001, xiii) writes, nostalgia ‘is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship.’ For Prince Charles, a long-distance relationship with his vision has not been enough, quite the contrary. He, as the Duke of Cornwall, has made it possible to realise, on lands that he owned in the outskirts of Dorchester, a built prototype of his retrotopia in the town of Poundbury. In this grand project, he co-operated with Leon Krier, an architect with a strong connection to New Urbanism. Utopias, not to mention retrotopias, are seldom realised. In fact, as Pierre Chabard remarks, for Bauman retrotopia is fundamentally despatialised (Chabard 2022). Thus, it is useful to discuss if, and how, Prince Charles’ retrotopic goals have changed when ‘made flesh.’

The Poundbury project has many predecessors. Prince Charles mentions in particular John Simpson's plan for the village of Upper Donnington in Berkshire, garden cities like Letchworth and Hampstead Garden Suburb, Bedford Park in West London, Seaside in Florida, and Krier's 'Atlantis' in the Canary Islands (VB, 139–146). Since the publication of VB, the Poundbury project and its realisation have been introduced by Krier with lavish images in several publications, such as a special number of *Architectural Design* (1989) titled 'Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate', *Building Classical: A Vision of Europe and America* (1993), and of course in his own book *The Architecture of Community* (2009). It is impossible to separate Prince Charles' and Krier's ideas in the general concept of Poundbury. Krier himself declared that Duchy of Cornwall's Poundbury Development was a realisation of Prince Charles' vision (Krier 2009, 421). Indeed, Poundbury has been planned and designed by Krier and built according to the ideas of New Urbanism, in harmony with Prince Charles' ideas as expressed in his book and speeches. The concepts of *Community Architecture* (Martin 1989, 9–11), a set of architectural principles, and the application of traditional and classical architecture, play key roles in Poundbury.

The project was already under planning when *A Vision of Britain* was written:

Now, perhaps, we really need to write a few things down in a code. [...] I'm talking about a sort of 'ten commandments' or 'ten principles', with sensible and widely-agreed rules, saying what people can and what they cannot do. I'm hoping to put some of these principles into practice in Dorchester. (VB, 137–138)

In a way, the citation above contradicts what Prince Charles has otherwise written in his book, for with these commandments, he takes a role of a superior planner telling people how to build. Claiming that this can be done because of sensible and widely agreed rules is hardly an excuse, since urban planning codification is always 'sensible' and 'widely agreed', at least from the planner's point of view. Nevertheless, the code Prince Charles is talking about is a set of detailed regulations concerning the distance between the houses, their colours and materials and so forth. He believes that by using the code anyone could design his or her own house (VB, 143).

In Poundbury, however, houses are designed by professional architects. In their work, they have followed Poundbury Design and Community Code, currently a 50-page document including various design instructions for building materials and details, such as lintels, rooflights, rainwater goods, chimneys, signage, doors and porches. Instructions for community purposes are however restricted to a few lines on business and commercial premises (The Duchy of Cornwall 2019a). The code is otherwise very detailed and occasionally almost painfully pedantic: ‘Wooden fences providing privacy shall be minimum 1650mm high and of vertically lapped 175 x 25mm feather edged boards on timber posts, with three horizontal rails’ (ibid., 29). It is quite understandable that urban design codes in private communities have evoked harsh criticism by scholars. Without going deeper in the discussion, the codification is claimed to be an instrument of territorial control to induce conformity and compliance, a form of cultural imperialism, and a reflection of upper-class aesthetics (see Grant 2006, 196–197).

Construction work started in Poundbury in October 1993. In 2019, the development was approximately two-thirds built with over 3800 inhabitants and generating over 2300 jobs. By that time, the development had increased the local GVA (Gross Value Added) by 98 million pounds per year (Duchy of Cornwall 2019b, 3–4). Affordable housing, reserved for rent, shared ownership or discounted to the open market, has been provided for 35% of the households and scattered throughout the town and built with the same standards as all other houses (Shields 2021). This is certainly appreciated, since Poundbury is otherwise a rather expensive town to buy property. For instance, most two-bedroom apartments cost between 250,000 and 350,000 pounds, three-bedroom apartment are in the range of 350,000 to 500,000, and most detached houses above 650,000, reaching almost a million pounds in some cases (Rightmove 2022). Poundbury, thus, is a commercial development on a private market, not a charity project.

Still, it is interesting to look at the built environment in Poundbury through the lenses of Prince Charles’ ‘ten principles we can build upon’ as outlined in VB (76–98). First: the *place* (VB, 78–79) in which the Poundbury project is located lies between Dorchester city in the east and roads A35 and A37 in the west. The area, in the south east of England, is marked by gentle hills. The views from the countryside towards Poundbury are in many places obscured by the sound barriers erected to muffle traffic noise from the roads. However, when approaching the town from the

west along the A35, a quite idyllic village-like view opens up, with buildings close to each other and a couple of towers rising in the centre. The line between the built and the non-built environment is clear.

Second, there is a *hierarchy* (VB, 80–81) between public and private buildings. The bigger the square, the bigger are the houses around it. However, squares are often used as car parks. It is easy to perceive which are the main streets and the main squares. The biggest square (Queen Mother Square) is probably rather too large for a town of this size. The hierarchy of the street network is understandable, although not necessarily easy to navigate at first. Third, the *scale* (VB, 82–83) of Poundbury's buildings is human. Most of the apartment buildings have two or three floors, rising to four or five in central areas, but never exceeding this number. The ground floor facades are usually of different colours or materials from the floors above. Unfortunately, most of the streets have been planned to allow for car parking on both sides instead of using the area for urban green, for instance. The scale in the smaller alleys, courts and walks is pleasant, although many of them are also used for parking. Fourth, a kind of *harmony* (VB, 84–85) is actually achieved through the retrotopic design of buildings used in facades throughout the town. Occasionally, these facades and the overall urban appearance are reminiscent of a stage set.

A sense of *enclosure* (fifth principle, VB 86–87) is achieved in many places, thanks to curved streets and the buildings constructed close to each other. At some crossroads, the urban space opens up in many directions causing a slight sense of perplexity and sometimes difficulties to orientate. This probably has something to do with the overwhelming use of asphalt on the ground, which is a quite strange material in this kind of town. Sixth, many other *materials* (VB, 88–89), such as yellow and red brick, stone and plaster, hark back to the local tradition. Whether or not they are constructed in a traditional manner is debatable. Prince Charles writes enthusiastically about *decoration* (VB, 90–91) and *art* (VB, 92–93). Of course, they can be found in Poundbury, but far less than one might presume. Besides, they are in most cases rather modest, at least in our opinion. In turn, *signs and lights* (VB, 94–95), as well as street furniture in general, are of high quality and blend nicely into the built environment. How Poundbury works as a *community* (VB, 96–97) would be a matter for a different type of study involving ethnographic research. An inquiry made in 2003, ten years after the construction work commenced, reveals however that homeowners were more convinced than tenants about the

feeling of community in Poundbury while 69% of respondents believed that Poundbury has a diversity of residents (Thompson-Fawcett 2003). Another study, published in 2015, claims that a lack of tenant participation is a concern in Poundbury (Markovich 2015).

All looking at it from the perspective of Prince Charles vision, the retrotopic goals of his vision for Britain are achieved rather successfully in Poundbury. There are certainly the same spatial and aesthetic qualities to be found there as in many older towns in Britain. As mentioned above, car parking consumes quite a lot of land, even if according to a recent study, where twenty new housing developments in England were scrutinised, Poundbury was one of the three exceptions where urban design did not encourage car dependency (Transport for Homes 2022). Still, it would probably have been a better solution, though more expensive, to build a few large parking garages and leave the streets and squares solely for pedestrians, cyclists and urban green. In any case, the size of the town, about 1 km², is perfect for walking and cycling, and these modes have been considered to be well catered for in Poundbury (Thompson-Fawcett 2003). Already in the planning of Poundbury, the area was divided into four roughly equal sized areas with local services in order to make it function better for pedestrians (Krier 1993, 43). Yet, a question that arises here is, as in so many new developments, is whether the services and public parks suffice.

CONCLUSIONS

Nostalgic fantasies are linked to present needs and they directly influence future realities (Boym 2001, xvi). We have argued above that nostalgia in architecture has been underrated as a genuine retrotopia seeking a better future with the help of the past. As Smith and Campbell (2017) state, ‘nostalgia is not necessarily or even substantially about returning to a “better past”’ but rather about ‘anchoring oneself to a sense of belonging and appreciation of social or geographical “place”, which enables both an affirmation and an assertion of contemporary social and political aspirations’. This is very true in VB: Prince Charles appears to be sincere in his opinions throughout the whole book and genuinely concerned about the state of affairs in architectural practice in Britain after the Second World War (e.g., VB, 7). Moreover, he presents himself as a defender of the ‘common’ people: ‘My chief object has been to [...] most importantly, challenge the

fashionable theories of a professional establishment which has made the layman feel he has no legitimate opinions' (VB, 153).

Even if Prince Charles' text is clearly informed by populist views, particularly when he argues against the Modern Movement and its architectural establishment, and even if he believes that he is working for the best of 'people', 'most of us' or 'the vast majority of tenants', *A Vision of Britain* is heavily based on his personal opinions about architecture, as the book's subtitle suggests, and on his background and experiences as a member of the aristocratic elite (see VB 105–116). Chabard states that Prince Charles manages to overcome this apparent paradox, because he is not abandoning any values of the conservative elite while promoting a narrative of English identity that matches with his vision (Chabard 2022). In order to avoid the paradox, Prince Charles casts 'the architectural establishment' as the elite that is opposing the people, whom he claims to defend. Nevertheless, he is probably right when writing about the loss of quality in the built environment. In Britain, as in any other country, the changes in the construction business and techniques after the Second World War have certainly generated less detailed and simpler buildings as well as a more inhuman urban scale in cities. At the same time, economic, political and societal changes, not to mention new technologies and the triumph of motorisation, have transformed the entire world. Thus, it is an oversimplification to attribute inhuman development in the built environment solely or even primarily to architects.

Prince Charles' devotion to the topic has, according to Chabard's estimation, helped to create 'a thriving milieu' for architects in Britain sharing his vision of reviving classical architecture, even if this milieu is more elitist than populist (Chabard 2022). When 'rebell[ing]' against modernism in architecture, Prince Charles drew on the ideas later linked with New Urbanism. In this respect, he is one of the pioneers paving the road for emerging New Urbanism. It is therefore quite regrettable that VB has enjoyed so little academic (or any other) discussion, while the shift to New Urbanism has become more and more accepted in recent years.

Conversely, Poundbury is still of interest for tourists and occasionally for critics and researchers as well. As argued above, the realisation of Poundbury has proved, at least to a certain extent, the retrotopical potential of VB. However, a fundamental problem in retrotopical architectural and urban visions persists: building old-looking houses with the help of new construction technology is a superficial act, or to put it more forcibly: it is a deceit, at least in the Ruskinian sense. Already in 1849, John Ruskin

named structural deceptions, surface deceptions and the use of machine-made ornaments as three major deceptions in architecture (Ruskin 1903, 60–61). Ruskin's ideas affected greatly on the Modernists' concept of truth in architecture. Furthermore, achieving the true aesthetics of the traditional architecture requires not only authentic building techniques and materials but also the patina and variations that emerge during hundreds of years. Not to mention that genuine architecture always reflects actual lifestyles and societal realities. Thus, Klotz's critique of postmodernism could also be applied as such to New Urbanism and *A Vision of Britain*: '[W]hen the historical element is used naively and unambiguously, in pure imitation rather than as a counterpoise to modern architecture, its value as a new insight is lost and all that remains is nostalgia' (Klotz 1988, 51). Additionally, there are wide-ranging examples of how human and pleasant environments can be achieved through the means of contemporary architecture. Tradition is present in most of these cases, but usually at a deeper level. Architecture, when alive, deals equally with past and future while exemplifying and modifying its own time.

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