

Pioneers in Peckham: Bauhaus Legacies in London



The Pioneer Health Centre in London, completed by Sir Owen Williams in 1935 was, until 1950, home to the 'Peckham Experiment', a radical programme aimed at studying health and wellbeing as a form of preventative medical care. As well as featuring in recent exhibitions including *Living with Buildings* at the Wellcome Centre and *Beyond Bauhaus: Modernism in Britain, 1933-66* at RIBA, the relationship between the building and the investigation into social health and wellness that it facilitated was the focus of contemporary artist Ilona Sagar's moving image work *Correspondence 0*, shown alongside a curated selection of archival material at the South London Gallery in her 2017-18 solo exhibition of the same title.

Amongst the latest in Bauhaus Centenary exhibition offerings comes RIBA's 'Beyond Bauhaus: Modernism in Britain, 1933-66', an innovative installation of archival materials arranged inside temporary columns with geometric peep-holes cut at varying heights. Anchored in the 1930s, the exhibition presents a rich survey of avant-gardism in British architecture and design, augmented by international trends and the arrival of Bauhaus representatives Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and László Moholy-Nagy in Britain in 1933.^[1]

With low-lighting and an expanded colour palette including rich shades of jade, ochre and Boyesenberry designed to highlight the assimilation and adaptation of Bauhaus principles into the fabric of British architecture and design, the exhibition aims to push against the usual limitations of architectural survey in a more wide-angled take on the question of Bauhaus legacies in Britain. Unsurprisingly, significant early sections of 'Beyond Bauhaus' are preoccupied with the familiar features of modern domestic architecture and functional interior design, the photographic and archival materials presented upholding a sense of the domestic home as a radical space for experiments in modern living.^[2] Moving beyond the roll-call of impressive private commissions and building on the attention to innovation in design, material and compositional terms that earlier sections raise, the final chapter proves to be the most expansive, considering the areas of British society including health, housing and education where the wider application of Bauhaus principles has left the most enduring legacy.

Highlighting the dialogue between social reform and architectural avant-gardism, 'Beyond Bauhaus' for us to consider these buildings as architectural responses to ambitious programs for social housing, education and child welfare reform. Amongst the most striking of these in its synthesis of design and functionality is the Pioneer Health Centre in Peckham. Completed in 1935 by architect-engineer Owen Williams and described by Gropius as 'an oasis of glass in a desert of brick', the remarkable complex just off the busy Queens Road bears an obvious debt to the International Style, although its history also speaks to other, less tangible Bauhaus legacies to do with the porous relationships between bodies and technology, art and science.^[3]



Photograph reproduced with permission of Pioneer Health Foundation and Wellcome Collection

With wrap-around ribbon windows and an innovative concrete structure allowing for a certain amount of flexibility with the arrangement of internal space and an even distribution of weight without the need for solid load-bearing walls, the building is flooded with light and air. Echoing the waves of the large swimming pool floating under a triangular roof of panelled glass in the heart of the building, the running bow windows at the front of the Health Centre opened to maximise the flow of air, and to allow for the easy modification of the space from children's crèche to dance hall at will.

Purpose-built to house the 'Peckham Experiment' – a radical study into etiology and preventative healthcare amongst Peckham's working class families – the building's functionality and design went hand in hand. With specially designed furniture, cork floors and glass partitions throughout, members were encouraged to explore the Centre freely, enjoy the facilities and take part in the various social and educational events on offer – all under the careful gaze of experiment founders, the biologists Innes Hope Pearse and Scott Williamson.



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Liberated from the narrow corridors and smaller adjoining rooms of the Victorian terrace house on Queens Road that originally housed the experiment, the open and transparent spaces of the Pioneer Centre embodied the biologist's belief that in the right environment and with the right resources, the health of both the individual and community body would symbiotically improve – and yield observable results. While the principles of circulation and visibility engineered through design encouraged the promotion of wellbeing for individuals through salubrious conditions and dynamic interaction with other members, this 'laboratory for the study of health' also allowed biologists to 'observe without interference' as Robert Furneaux Jordan noted in 1949.^[4]



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Just as at the Bauhaus itself, a combination of physical, dietary and social activities was central to life at the Centre, and to the experiment's programme of improving social health through the promotion of wellness, rather than the treatment of disease. Film footage archived in the Wellcome Collection records the range of these goings-on, including 'Human Fish' competitions in the pool, children roller-skating on the roof, billiards, dances and community farming projects. That these were conducted as part of a social health experiment is made more clear in the 1948 documentary film *The Centre*, which explores both the community and research aspects of the project. It also underscores the centrality of the family unit in Pearse and Williamson's model of positive health. According to Pearse's research, women were particularly susceptible to poor health, exacerbated by the stresses of pregnancy, birth and postnatal issues, and the Centre provided a range of community projects, facilities, and education on dietary and family planning designed to combat this.



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As Guilia Smith has pointed out, healthier mothers meant 'healthier babies' – a motto embossed on the back of customised chequebooks.^[5] With this focus on the observation and reproduction of healthy families, the Centre was in fact only open to families who lived within walking distance of the complex, the only other conditions of membership being a weekly subscription fee of 1 shilling and an extensive annual medical assessment.

While the Peckham Experiment itself was disbanded in 1950 as the Centre's ethos was not compatible with the emergent model of the National Health Service, its legacy survives in the persistence of the building itself, the extensive archives held by the Wellcome Collection and RIBA, and in the work of contemporary artist Ilona Sagar, whose work combines archival research, film, performance and text. Presented alongside a curated selection of materials from the Wellcome Collection archive, Sagar's two-channel film *Correspondence 0* draws on the history of the building from public health experiment to private residences, and on a notion of the body itself as a site reworked by medical and technological forces within this shifting socio-historical landscape.^[6]

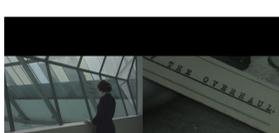
Exploring transferences between past and present, and the fluid exchanges between technology, bodies and buildings, the visual sequence rapidly cuts between archival footage and the clinical blues and coldly diffused light of Sagar's vision of the Centre. These split images and sharp cuts are smoothed and bound together by the metronomic rhythms of the artist's voiceover, detached and impassive as it intones arbitrary instructions and fragmented observations.



Still from *Correspondence 0*, Ilona Sagar 2017.

Visibility and observation are core themes in the work, mediated through a series of recurring motifs related to transparency: the refracted surface of the pool water, the glass partitions and windows, and various digital imaging technologies. We watch as bodies occupy different positions in the centre: pulling themselves up through the ropes and hoops of the (no longer extant) gymnasium, swimming in the pool, jumping and landing barefoot on cork boards. We watch the artist, styled in 1940s costume standing at the viewing window, preoccupied by her own observations and uncomfortably aligned by the voiceover to 'a certain type of disquiet manifest in our shared notion of a public servant'.

Of course, the artist / archivist already stands in an observational relation to history, making the dense archive material more transparent through their labour. But the body that gazes is not the same thing as the gaze itself, and it is here subjected to the same scrutiny as we watch her run, swim and undergo a series of medical examinations. The artist's body – like the building itself – is penetrable, transparent and observable, all 'mesh screens and translucent walls'.



Still from *Correspondence 0*, Ilona Sagar 2017.



Still from *Correspondence 0*, Ilona Sagar 2017.

This theme is repeated and developed as the technologies of glass, mirrors and like tools used in physical examinations give way to digital scanning technologies: like the internal glass partitions and open spaces of the centre allowed for the easy observation of activity within it, the MRI scanner makes visible the body that passes through it. Scanned by digital mapping tools, distinctions between fleshy bodies and glass buildings are flattened and redrawn on the same pictorial plane of the computer screen, made legible as valuable visual data.



Still from *Correspondence 0*, Ilona Sagar 2017.

In the current climate of an underfunded and overstretched NHS under threat of privatisation, the hollowing out of community resources, and the compelling conclusions to be drawn from the surge in popularity of monetised 'wellness' trends and apps to track everything from steps to sleep amongst certain, more affluent members of society alongside the sharp rise in cases of obesity and diabetes elsewhere, Sagar's work shows us that discourses around public health and social mobility are not historically fixed. While *Correspondence 0* and her earlier audio work *The Ballad of Peckham Eye* both draw on the legacy of the Peckham Experiment, and the Pioneer Health Centre itself, in its blend of science, technology and research-driven art, Sagar's film – and her work more broadly – puts a different spin on the question of Bauhaus legacies: rather than iconic buildings and perhaps we should be looking to the sites where art and science, technology, bodies and buildings all meet, and where collaboration and community effect change.

^[1]Beyond Bauhaus: Modernism in Britain 1933-66' at RIBA, 66 Portland Place, London (1 October 2019 – 1 Feb 2020)

^[2]Refreshingly in this respect, throughout the exhibition special attention is paid to the significant contribution to the legacy of Bauhaus in Britain made by historically overlooked women architects, designers and social reformers including Mary Crowley, Elizabeth Denby, Margaret Justin Blanco White and Elisabeth Benjamin.

^[3]Walter Gropius, quoted in Alison Stallibrass, *Being Me and Also Us: Lessons from the Peckham Experiment* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1989), p. 24.

^[4]Robert Furneaux Jordan, 'The Bulletin of the Pioneer Health Centre, Peckham', Vol 3 no 5 September 1949.

^[5]Guilia Smith, 'Desperate Housewives and Suburban Neurosis', Wellcome Collection, 30 January 2019.

^[6]Ilona Sagar, *Correspondence 0* at the South London Gallery, (13 Dec 2017 – 25 February 2018). Informed by her extensive research in the Pioneer Health Centre archives held by RIBA and the Wellcome Trust, and her work with the Behavioural and Clinical Neuroscience Institute at the University of Cambridge, Sagar's moving image installation explored changing attitudes to public health, technology and the body. Sagar was awarded the 2018 Arts and Humanities Research Council Film Award for *Correspondence 0*.

Words: Dr Caroline Knighton

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