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AR2A011 Architectural Theory Thesis

The Paradoxes of Castle Drogo

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Abstract

A project evoking every superlative, Castle Drogo symbolizes the design approaches of Sir Edwin Lutyens, and the shifts in our society's appreciation of them, better than any other of his works. A neo-medieval castle finished in 1930, it represents the end of an era while at the same time anticipating contemporary architectural principles and aesthetics. Through its strikingly modern design, it condensates 800 years of architectural elements into one convincing whole. Castle Drogo's relative obscurity, even within the architectural field, comes as a surprise to those who recognize the lessons it can teach designers today. Lutyens' skill at reinventing historical principles into new buildings seems prescient at a time when the tenets of modernism are increasingly invalidated. Indeed, the vernacular and the site-specific are more popular than ever. In this context, Lutyens' philosophy seems surprisingly current. Unfortunately, Castle Drogo's fanciful and anachronistic nature has limited its appeal to designers: a prestige project of unusual taste and limited use, it is often dismissed as a symbol of Edwardian excesses. Within this reality, however, lies an architectural *tour de force* that merits to be recognized as such, by both designers and society at large.

Introduction

In a seminal article on Sir Edwin Lutyens' legacy, author Gavin Stamp characterized it as a "rise and fall and rise", noting the fluctuating interest of society for the architect's work¹. Indeed, the decades that followed Lutyens' passing in 1944 were the high time of Britain's post-war Modernism, which shunned his Edwardian croquet lawns. Following the emergence of post-modernism and the reappraisal of Lutyens by figures like Robert Venturi, who analysed his work repeatedly in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, his legacy has somewhat recovered. Edwin Lutyens was both prolific and remarkably creative and came to represent a whole era of British architecture. Through his extensive work, ranging from country houses in Surrey to the masterplan of New Delhi, he proved his ability at easily reinterpreting architectural styles. Few of his works synthesize his philosophy and his contradictions better than Castle Drogo, the last Medieval castle to have been built in England. The exceptional nature of this project, both a 12th century fortress and a modern family home, will be explored answering a central question: "How successful is Lutyens' Castle Drogo, from an architectural and cultural perspective?". That is, how the castle is a valuable architectural production despite its flaws and how it is a legitimate part of Britain's culture in general and specifically, the local communities'. Castle Drogo's genesis, its limitations, its takeover by the National Trust and subsequent reappraisal will be studied, considering these twin angles.

¹ Stamp, Gavin. 'The Rise and Fall and Rise of Edwin Lutyens'. *Architectural Review*, no. November 1981 (n.d.): p311-317.

Christopher Hussey, in his 1950 account of Lutyens' life, describes the essence of Castle Drogo like this: "The ultimate justification of Drogo is that it does not pretend to be a castle. It is a castle, as a castle is built, of granite, on a mountain, in the twentieth century²".

Through this formula, Hussey underlines the contradictory nature of this building – that Drogo is not just a pastiche, but through its building techniques, materials and aesthetics it could qualify as a medieval building. This unique commission was made possible by one man, Julius Drewe. It was envisioned as a modern-day baronial seat designed to cement his newly found social status following the successful sale of his Home and Colonial Stores³. He had founded the chain of grocery stores just a few years prior and was able to retire a wealthy man at the age of thirty-three, in 1889. A few years later, a genealogist mandated by Drewe revealed a connection to both the aristocratic Drewe family and a mythical 12th century Norman baron called Drogo de Teigne. The link seems strenuous, with the National Trust guide of the property politely mentioning Drewe "assumed a relationship" with Drogo⁴. Nevertheless, Julius Drewe promptly added an "e" to his surname, having previously been "Drew". In 1910, he also bought a plot of 450 acres near the village of Drewsteignton with the aim of creating a family seat that might legitimize his claims of illustrious ancestry. Now married, with three sons and two daughters, the only missing piece in his quest of social establishment was the castle itself. This obsession for a fabricated, medieval past would have an immense impact on the design's direction. However, one could argue that within this speculative narrative, the castle's construction is legitimate as it represents the family's historical continuity; it also reflects the local history, the baronial style reflecting the living conditions the actual Drogo de Teigne might have experienced.

Castle Drogo's medieval aesthetics must be placed in the context of the British gothic revival. Perhaps more than any other nation, Britain embraced the rediscovery of gothic forms and applied them to building typologies. Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill House (1749) was one of the first manifestations of the phenomenon. However, it is through works of literature

² Hussey, Christopher. *The Life of Sir Edwin Lutyens*. 1st ed. London: Country Life Limited, 1950.

³ The Home and Colonial stores sold goods from the whole world, specifically tea from India, thus acquiring their name. They were a precursor to supermarket chains and offered exotic goods at lower prices than the competition. With the decolonization movement, the group changed names in 1961 to Allied Suppliers. Julius Drewe co-founded the business in 1883. Source: Brown, R. (2004). *Drewe [formerly Drew], Julius Charles (1856–1931), retailer and architectural patron*. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. <https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-46889>

⁴ The National Trust. *Castle Drogo Guidebook*. 6th Edition. London: The National Trust, 2007.

like *Ivanhoe* by Walter Scott (1819) that “first turned men’s minds in the direction of the Middle Ages⁵” (John Henry Newman) that gothic aesthetics entered the national psyche. The Medieval period and its components were rediscovered and combined into new forms, from Fonthill to the Albert Memorial, that set gothic revival as a respectable architectural style appreciated by the elites. This was due to a newly found appreciation for medieval piety and craftsmanship in the context of the industrial revolution, where both were under threat. This, in turn, is what motivated Julius Drewe to choose it for his home – Drogo’s austere lines emulate the ones of countless great public buildings and confer it legitimacy (Figure 1). Culturally speaking too, it places it in the continuity of this rediscovered period of history. What is striking, however, is that Drewe chose this style long after it had gotten out of fashion, roughly at the turn of the century. The castle’s construction was started practically exactly as the striking Stoclet Palace of Brussels (1905-11, Fig. 2), by Secessionist Joseph Hoffman, was finished. For these reasons the choice appears anachronistic, but somehow justified. The style having been set by the client, Lutyens would have to compose with this choice.



Figure 1. Castle Drogo (Dobson, 2019)



Figure 2. The Stoclet Palace (Wayne, 2012)

Castle Drogo presents itself as a monolithic stone structure placed at the very top of a granite outcrop amongst the rolling hills of Dartmoor. It dominates its surroundings and stands out due to its style and scale. It appears convincingly medieval from afar, presenting small windows, crenelations, a flat roof and bare stone masonry. Moving closer to the building, one

⁵ Chandler, Alice. “Sir Walter Scott and the Medieval Revival” in “Nineteenth Century Fiction”, Vol. 19, No. 4. University of California Press, Los Angeles. March 1965.

can differentiate three main parts (Fig. 3). Indeed, the castle is formed of a central dungeon, with two wings attached to it. The North Wing (A) serves as the private quarters of the Drewes, welcoming bedrooms and boudoirs on the upper levels. The South wing (B), roughly similar in surface, contains public spaces like the dining room and the drawing room. Subsequently, the Central massing can be seen as a continuation of the South wing, containing the library and billiard room, as well as the entrance. Therefore, Castle Drogo consists of three parts. It also contains four levels (Fig. 4): the basement is home to a Chapel and gun room, the lower ground floor welcomes the servants' quarters, the ground floor and its two mezzanines are reception spaces and the first floor consists of bedrooms for family and guests alike. The property in its entirety consists of the castle, its gardens, 600 acres of woodlands and a visitor's centre and café with their parking lot, built by the Trust.

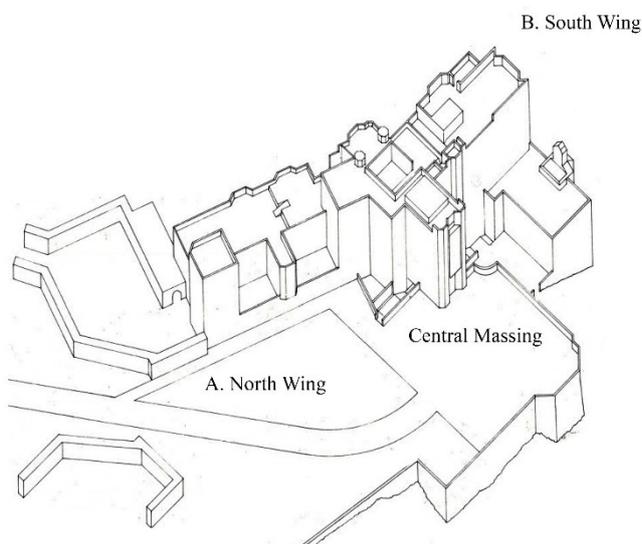


Figure 3. Isometric of Castle Drogo by Peter Inskip, with annotations by the author (Inskip, 1979)

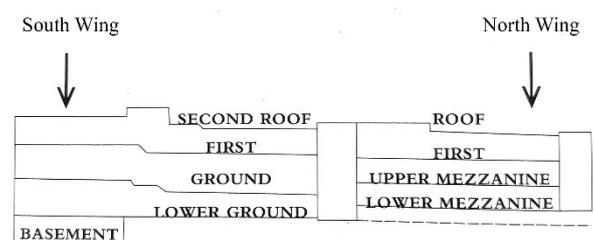


Figure 4. Schematic Section, with annotations from the author (National Trust, 2007)

The choice of Edwin Lutyens as architect was a rational one; with an already established reputation, including for large designs, in 1910 Lutyens was perhaps the most famous British designer of his day, at least for high-end residential projects. He was also in the process of finishing Lindisfarne Castle (1906-12), a house similar to Drogo: both are mock-medieval castles perched on top of a hill. Because of various twists of fate, the design of Castle Drogo bore striking similarities with historical fortresses. These are mainly due to the brief's vagueness and to its modifications over time. When first informed of the brief, Lutyens lamented to his wife "I do wish he did not want a castle – but a delicious lovely house with

plenty of good large rooms in it”⁶. This phrase shows how he was aware of both the anachronistic aspect of the commission and the design’s complexity, a point complicated by the relatively loose phrasing of the brief. He added, about the budget allocated to him: “I suppose 60’000 sounds like a lot to you – but I don’t know what it means”⁷, suggesting he was conscious of the exceptional scale of the project but also of its lack of clear boundaries. Indeed, as can be seen from the first design iterations visible at the RIBA library⁸, Lutyens first presented a rectangular scheme built around a courtyard, with a double height Great Hall and a very substantial number of rooms (Fig. 5). The Drewes realized this exceeded their needs and, after a few more variations, decided to delete half of the design. The resulting structure is an imperfect composition and contains a few quirks due to these developments;

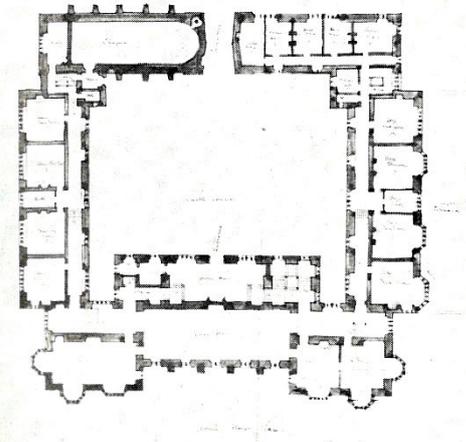


Figure 5. The Initial Rectangular Courtyard Scheme (Lutyens, 1910)

for example, the dining room is relatively small for a residence that size and the massing appears irregular in the absence of the second wing’s symmetry. Arguably, though, these quirks reinforce the illusion of a castle built over centuries with little overarching vision. Therefore, thanks to an unclear brief and design changes, Julius Drewe obtained a castle more medieval than he would have thought.

The construction of Castle Drogo was also remarkably like the one of medieval buildings. Indeed, the construction took twenty years to complete, and more than a hundred craftsmen worked on site during this period, forming a temporary community⁹. Mr Drewe’s agent, John Walker, was a constant presence and supervised the works over their entire duration; similarly, the head stone mason was at Drogo for twenty years; they both passed away soon after the project’s completion¹⁰. This is reminiscent of medieval builders who would collaborate on the same building over decades, if not generations. In addition to the human angle, the material aspect was as important in the building’s completion. For this, three local

⁶ Percy, Clayre, and Jane Ridley. *The Letters of Edwin Lutyens to His Wife Lady Emily*. London: Collins, 1985.

⁷ *Idem*

⁸ Lutyens, Edwin L. Personal Archives. London: RIBA Library Reference DR75/1. This reference contains all the plans sketches and other material produced for Castle Drogo.

⁹ Brown, Jane. *Lutyens and the Edwardians*. First Edition. London: Viking - The Penguin Group, 1996, p.335.

¹⁰ Brown, *Lutyens and the Edwardians*, p.334

quarries employing dozen more men provided the granite used on site¹¹. In this respect, Drogo is very much a product of its land, using the local material palette, in the same way that is done at Guedelon Castle in France. On this French project, which is an ongoing historical reconstruction of a Middle Ages fortress with the tools of its time, all craftsmen collaborate on site and use local materials¹². Every item used in the construction, from oak beams to the lime mortar is sourced nearby, as would have been the case in real life. The comparison with the archeologically rigorous Guedelon shows many common traits between the construction techniques of both castles. Of course, Drogo had the luxury of a crane and modern tools and transport modes, but in both cases share craftsmanship, large workforces, local materials and long construction times. This suggests a level of success at creating an authentic medieval castle, using so many of the same materials, technologies and social organization.

The process of designing a medieval castle in the 1910s is a fascinating one: Lutyens distilled the essence of Medieval buildings and recombined the resulting components. His search for the right form can be traced back to his initial sketches, found at the RIBA library¹³. These show a wide range of stylistic explorations. Indeed, Figure 6 shows the initial massing for the East elevation (1910), with gabled roofs and varied massing units, reminiscent of an oversized Little Thakenham (Figure 7), one of his Arts and Crafts homes.

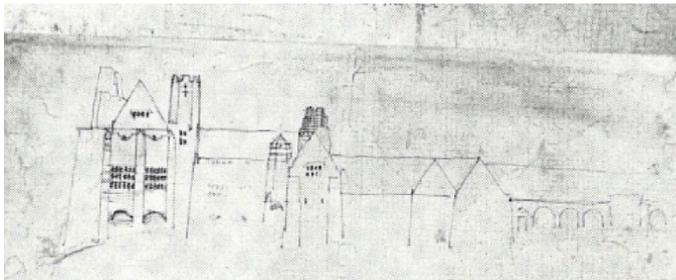


Figure 6. The Initial ideas for the East Elevation (Lutyens, 1910)



Figure 7. Lutyens' Little Thakeham (Weaver, 1913)

¹¹ The National Trust. *Castle Drogo Guidebook*, p. 44.

¹² Heron, Jean-Benoit. "Guedelon : *Nous Batissons un Château Fort*. 1rst edition. Paris, Editions Ouest France, 2022.

¹³ Lutyens, Edwin L. "Preliminary Designs for Castle Drogo, Drewsteignton, Devon, for Julius C. Drewe." Pencil sketches on paper. London: RIBA Library Reference DR75/1, 1910.

From this more contemporary start, the architect moved onto decidedly more historical styles; Figure 8 exudes Norman influences, with its drawbridge and embrasures. Next to this we find Tudor accents in the way of oriel windows, visible in the complete initial scheme; Lutyens even went to Hardwick Hall to copy the ironmongery as a source of inspiration, as his sketches, kept at Drogo show¹⁴. The double height Great Hall's façade contains elements of all these influences, consisting of three large gothic windows, framed by two protruding Tudor tower and their oriel windows (Fig. 9).

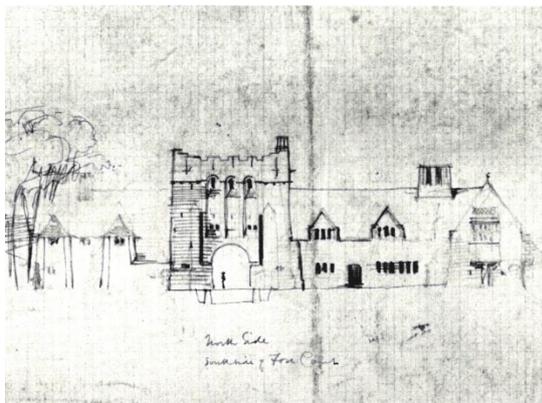


Figure 8. Initial Sketches for Drogo (Lutyens, 1910)

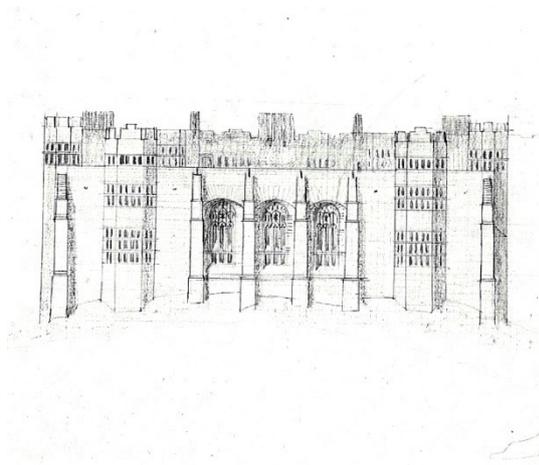


Figure 9. The Great Hall's South Facade (Lutyens, 1910)

It includes crenelations and tall buttresses, creating an eclectic whole that could just about exist. Overall, it a full, unashamed commitment to a medieval revival style with Tudor accents the massing proudly erected on its hillside. One of Lutyen's letters to his wife shows his appeal for such romantic statements: "The great buildings on the hilltops excite me fearfully. I see: high, high against the sky - and how the devil do they get to them, still more at them to build them¹⁵". Within this historicist appearance, however, lies a much more nuanced design.

¹⁴ Lutyens, Edwin Landseer. "Sketch of Antique Hinges etc (Hardwick Hall)". Pencil sketch on paper. Castle Drogo, Devon: National Trust, Reference 901607, 26 May 1926.

¹⁵ Percy, Clayre, and Jane Ridley, p.220.

It could be argued that some fragments of Castle Drogo are as innovative as anything that was being built at the same time in the West. The chapel is a symbol of this; if one consults its drawings in the National Trust archives in the castle's library, it reveals surprising elements. Indeed, Figure 10 shows a monolithic, angular massing cut at sharp angles and protruding from the main building's walls. Notice how in section, it almost looks like the bow of a ship, and how its plan reveals nothing about its originality. In a way, this is similar to what unfolds throughout the building, where the plan respects the conventions of country houses but the section is often highly complex.

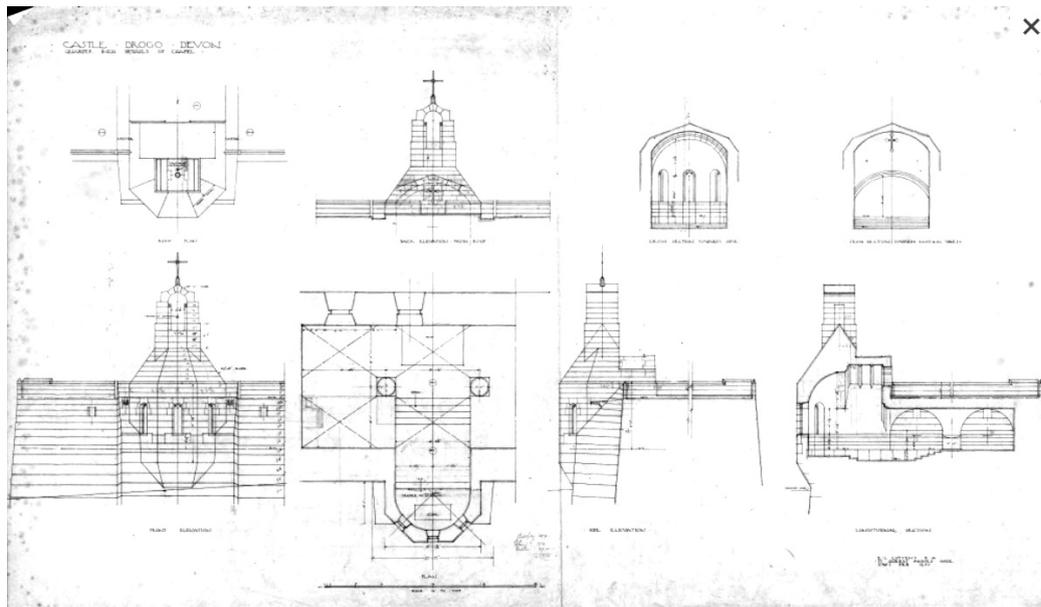


Figure 10. “Details of Chapel” (Lutyens, 1930)

The chapel, conceived in the 1920s, also bears similarities with an unbuilt Frank Lloyd Wright project, the Lake Tahoe Summer Colony (1923). Wright’s pavilions by the shores of the eponymous lake are sharply angular, envisioned as landships of sorts and rising proudly within the surrounding pine forest (Fig. 11 and 12). Both the chapel and the pavilions share these protrusions and expressive angles, showing how similar both architects’ languages were, within projects imagined at the same time. That Wright is seen as one of the most innovative architects of his era is a testament to Lutyens’s underrated modernity. It suggests a high level of conceptual ambition, within a commission whose boundaries were set by the client. It is a testament to the architect’s talent that he would create so many new forms within these relatively strict parameters, as opposed to Wright’s free rein. Unlike the American designer though, his innovations are too often recognized in fragments rather than in the whole.

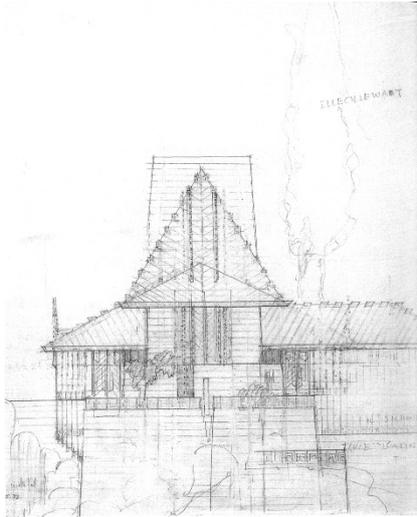


Figure 11, Left. “Cabin Lodge Type” for Lake Tahoe Summer Colony (Wright, 1924)



Figure 12, Right. Perspective of the “Cabin Lodge Type” (Wright, 1924)

Another aspect of Drogo’s design which is often overlooked is storytelling. Indeed, Lutyens employed it throughout the project to produce a coherent whole, to respond to the client’s expectations and to give a poetic dimension to the building. The result can be seen in small details peppered around the castle; for instance, in the building’s guide one notices a picture of the entrance’s portcullis (Fig.13), reinforcing the realism of the project. Going further, over the front door one finds the sculpture of a lion embedded in the façade, representing the Drewe’s fabricated coat of arms. The lion reappears at all scales within the house, even under the form of door hinges drawn by Lutyens (Fig. 14). This lends authenticity and consistency to the house. The storytelling continues with the extent of Lutyens’s commitment to

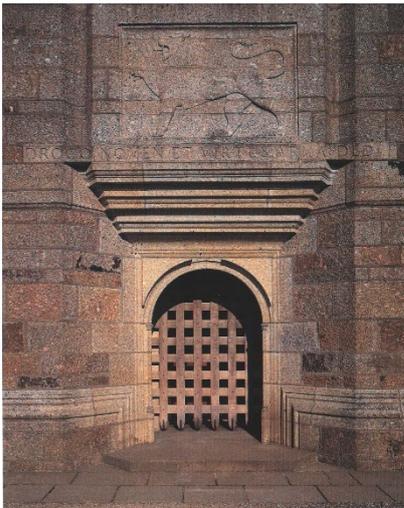


Figure 13. The Portcullis and the Drewe’s heraldic lion. (National Trust, 2007)

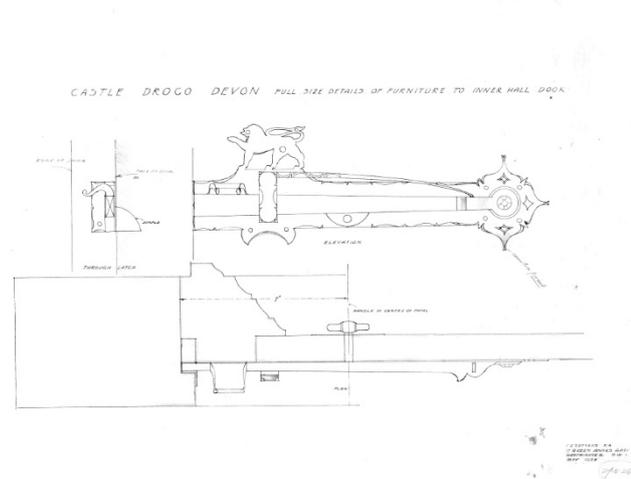


Figure 14. Door Hinge Design (Lutyens 1926)

monolithic gestures through the thickness of the walls, in the fashion of true medieval castles. On a more speculative tone, the many level differences, the use of barrel vaults throughout and the various nooks and internal windows produce a feeling of mystery (Figure 15). Like a stone labyrinth, it reinforces the impression of a building constructed organically over time and suggests Piranesi's *Carceri d'Invenzione* as a source of inspiration. Whether a conscious reference or not, it enriches the narrative layers of the project, especially in combination with the details mentioned earlier. Altogether, they show how architecture is used as a storytelling tool throughout, arguably with great skill, and how it enriches the user's experience.

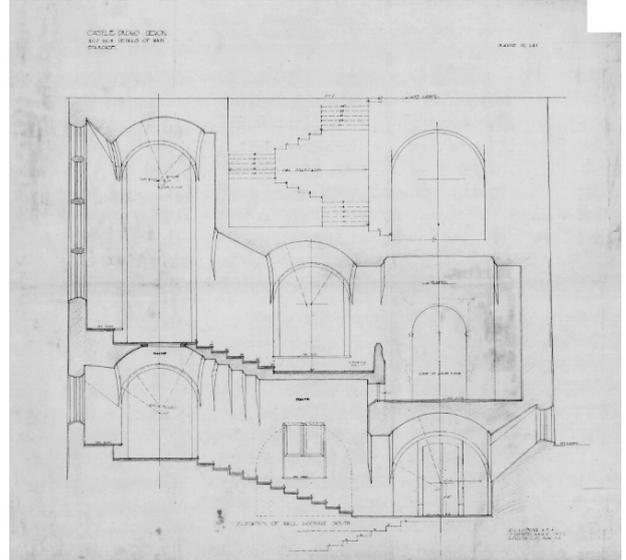


Figure 15. Main Staircase – Elevation of Wall Looking South (Lutyens 1914)

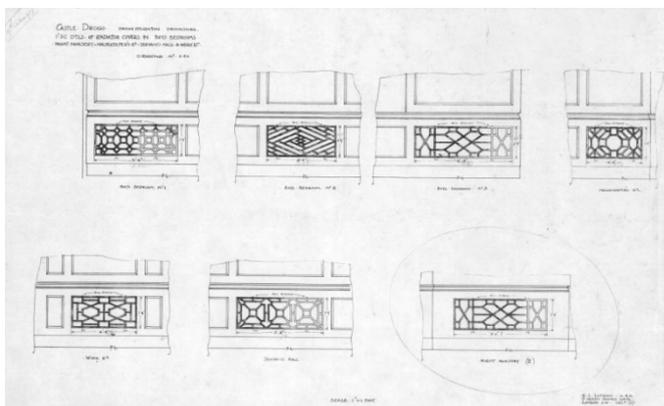
In addition to playing with storytelling in order to further the castle's narrative, Lutyens' interventions point to a wish to create a truly fantastical work, somewhat detaching it from its reality. Indeed, it starts with aspects such as the many rooms decorated in various historical styles other than the main gothic one, which serve the narrative of an ancient medieval castle that would have been adapted over the years to suit later generation's needs. For instance, the dining room is perfectly Georgian, contrasting wildly with the building's exterior. (FIG?) Going further, one wonders if these various rooms are like set designs, or almost like time capsules where the inhabitant could pretend to live in a different era moving from one room to another. Peter Inskip humorously mentions a bathroom with unexpected Tuscan order columns; according to Basil Drewe, these were envisioned by Lutyens as "a perfect object for him (Julius Drewe) to contemplate while in the bath"¹⁶. This reinforces the idea of a building devised to transport its users into fictitious scenarios. Adding to the fantastical dimension of Castle Drogo were self-vacuuming floorboards that would clean themselves and servant's quarters disposed in such a way that the guest would never see them, allowing tasks to be performed as per magic¹⁷. These elements point to a building that is successful in fulfilling its

¹⁶ Inskip, Peter. 'The Compromise of Castle Drogo'. *Architecture Review* 165, no. 986 April 1979 (1979): p.224.

¹⁷ The National Trust. *Castle Drogo Guidebook*. 6th Edition. London: The National Trust, 2007, p. 42

narrative aims – that is, to appear as a genuine castle adapted organically over the years. But it also suggests the architect went a step further, seeking to create a truly fantastical piece of architecture. To achieve this effect, he used even the smallest details.

Whether one agrees with the aesthetics of the castle or not, the sheer quality and quantity of what has been realized inspires some form of respect. Drogo was envisioned like a total work of art, at a time where increasing labour costs and the decline of craftsmanship made it more difficult to build such a design. It is perhaps one of the last great *Gesamtkunstwerk* to have been built in the UK, at this scale, and this makes it valuable. The constant commitment to a certain ideal, provides harmony to the whole and represents an incredible amount of effort on the part of the architect and his collaborators. To grasp the level of detail Lutyens went into, one can sift through the technical drawings contained in the castle’s archives. One in particular (Fig. 16) shows how radiator screens had individual designs throughout the house. This sheet is exclusively for the sons’ apartments only; one can only imagine the number of hours spent on such small details throughout, over the course of twenty years of construction. This is one of the reasons why Castle Drogo remains so awe-inspiring to this day: its success is related to the exceptional extent of the design’s creativity and craftsmanship. Even though



they might serve a project of unusual tastes, they are of undeniable quality. The interest in Drogo started from the very first years after the building’s completion, as we shall see.

Figure 16, Radiator Screen Designs for Castle Drogo (Lutyens, 1913)

One of the first publications to draw a portrait of Castle Drogo was *Country Life*, which did so in an article written by A.S.G. Butler in 1945. That the house appeared in one of the leading publications of its day, despite its unusual aesthetics, says a lot about the qualities contemporaries found in it. Butler approvingly described it as “this stark beautiful shimmering building” in the article (Figure 17), while also picking on the architect’s more

daring interventions like the South-facing wing and its razor-sharp 45-degree corners, adding “a kind of diabolic malevolence¹⁸” (see Figure 24). Incidentally the pictures in the article were taken by A.E. Henson in 1929, suggesting there had been interest for the castle even before its completion. In general, Edwin Lutyens’s work was much appreciated his contemporaries; Christopher Hussey wrote “In his lifetime (Lutyens) was widely held to be our greatest architect since Wren if not, as many maintained, his superior¹⁹”. If his use of traditional forms was sometimes criticized his talent was undisputed. Following his death in 1943, however, this would change quite quickly.

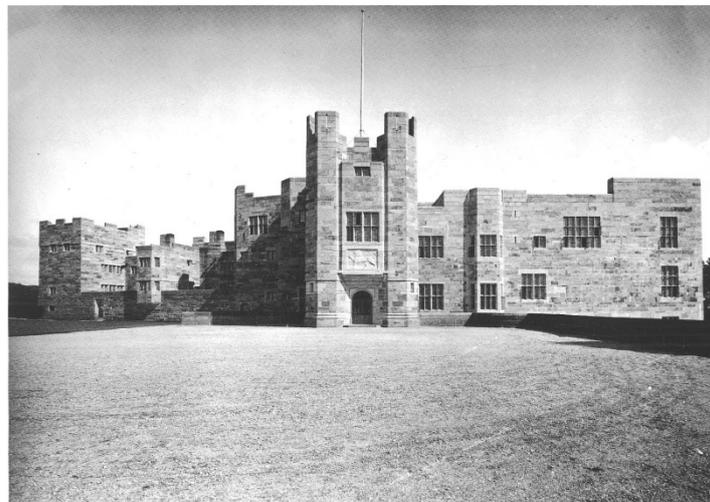


Figure 17. The Entrance (A.S.G. Butler 1927)

The slow decline of Lutyens’ recognition touched a low on the centenary of his birth in 1969, when the *RIBA Journal* dedicated just three articles to the occasion, two of which were written by modernist architects, Allison and Peter Smithson. Unsurprisingly, both took a highly critical approach of his work, Mrs Smithson taking the view in her piece “The Responsibility of Lutyens” that he “bear(ed) the responsibility of the look of housing in England from 1934 to 1965”²⁰. Her husband Peter went even further: “Lutyens was caught in the box of his time too tightly for it to be possible for my generation to think about his work without pain”²¹. These statements argued that Lutyens’ fondness of Classical forms and his

¹⁸ Butler, Arthur Stanley George. ‘Castle Drogo, Devonshire - I: The Home of Mrs J.C. Drewe’. *Country Life Magazine*. London, 3 August 1945.

¹⁹ Hussey, Christopher. *The Life of Sir Edwin Lutyens*. 1st ed. London: Country Life Limited, 1950.

²⁰ Smithson, Allison. ‘The Responsibility of Lutyens’. *RIBA Journal*, no. April 1969: p.310-312.

²¹ Smithson, Peter. ‘Viceroy’s House’. *RIBA Journal*, no. April 1969: p.313-315.

oversized influence had an undue impact on the taste of the day and stifled innovation. The Smithson's opinion was widely shared within the architectural community, and was reflected as well by the unusually small scale of commemorative exhibition that was organised for the leading architects of his day, at a price of 1'000 GBP instead of the planned 12'000²².

Coincidentally, Lutyens' fall from favor was mirrored in the evolution of Castle Drogo. As Julius Drewe passed away in 1931, his wife Frances and son Basil continued to reside in the house. After a brief spell in the Second World War as a nursery for young kids made homeless by the Blitz, one generation succeeded another, and Basil's son Anthony and his wife moved into the castle. All the while, construction issues would continually disturb its occupants, leading to increasing disrepair.

Castle Drogo was envisioned as a durable fortress; it is then ironic that structural flaws started appearing almost before its construction was finished. Indeed, the importance given to aesthetic aims led to irrational choices like building 6 foot thick (1.82m) granite walls and building windows without parapets²³. Water infiltrated the building due to the walls being devoid of cavities and the windows being unprotected in times of high rainfall. The flat roof also leaked and the kitchen was dark and poorly ventilated²⁴. Therefore, life in the house could be difficult for masters and servants alike and the Drewes were to struggle to remedy these issues for decades. It is only when the National Trust organised an incredibly ambitious renovation from 2013 to 2022 that these structural issues were finally resolved²⁵. These faults reveal a building that is flawed because of its nature – Drogo was first and foremost a statement of power rather than a convenient family home. The compromise between the message that was conveyed and the reality of everyday life can be seen as one of the project's great limitations. Arguably, Castle Drogo wouldn't have been a sustainable home without the renovations, which raises the question of how much merit there is to architecture that doesn't fulfil well its primary function as a shelter.

²² Stamp, p. 314.

²³ Hussey, p. 106.

²⁴ Inskip, p. 225. Also mentioned: "At Drogo the roof leaked, the larders, planned round an octagonal lightwell, were badly ventilated, and much of the steel concealed in the structure has now started to cause problems".

²⁵ BBC News. "Castle Drogo." BBC Inside Out. BBC, 2004. https://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/southwest/series6/castle_drogo.shtml.

Even if the castle had avoided structural issues, one would have to ponder its use as a family home in the early 1930s. Arguably, it was an impractical building, even by the standards of its time. Its layout was designed in an era when labour was cheap and readily available, leading to many absurd situations. For example, the dining room (B) was at the opposite end of the floor from the kitchen (A), meals having to travel throughout the house to get to the table



Figure 18. Ground Floor Plan with the path from the kitchen to the dining room (E.L. Lutyens 1916, with annotations from the author)

(Figure 18). The relative scarcity of bathrooms and the inclusion of spaces like the “gun room” or the “crypt” all increased the castle’s volume and were hardly ever used. These elements could also appear in country houses built at the same period, but each defect is reinforced by the building’s nature as a modern-day fortress.

Whereas Lutyens’ arts and crafts houses were made for social gatherings, with pleasant meeting spaces and gardens that were an extension of the house – “garden rooms” in every sense – Drogo was conceived and built as a fortified castle. Its gardens are some distance away from the building which rises straight from the hill, with no transition between the ground and its granite walls. Perhaps the most telling fact about the house is that it became the first property built in the 20th century to pass into the National Trust’s hands²⁶, the short lapse of time suggesting it struggled to function as a family home and raising questions about its successful architectural production.

The gardens of Castle Drogo also serve to illustrate the conflicts that existed between Julius Drewe and his architect and they reveal an imperfect design, as the product of many compromises. Lutyens, in his traditional Arts and Crafts methods, aimed for a smoother transition from the surroundings to the South. He frequently collaborated with the great

²⁶ BBC News. “Castle Drogo.” BBC Inside Out. BBC, 2004. https://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/southwest/series6/castle_drogo.shtml.

garden designer Gertrude Jekyll, and together they created homes where the architecture and the landscape created a coherent whole. Many of Lutyens' designs are so compelling due to their charming context of blooming mixed borders views that follow from a window down the whole garden, mirroring the interior's arrangement's logic. Jane Brown wrote a book on their collaboration, *Gardens of a Golden Afternoon* (1982); according to the writer, their credo was that "formality must flow from the house and fade as it meets the natural landscape"²⁷. This was in total opposition to Drewe, who saw himself as "a latter-day lord of the North, whose castle must look like a stronghold"²⁸. Lutyens designed a complex walled garden that stepped down from the castle in various levels; its drawings can be found in the Drogo's archives (Figure 19). They reveal a garden in continuation with his previous work. Unsurprisingly, the client did not approve, and chose a different scheme from George Dillistone – here the garden was far away from house, functioning as an independent part and being almost invisible for its windows. Figures 1 and 17, shown much earlier, shows Drogo's minimalistic immediate surroundings, where a view patches of grass and yew hedges are the only green features. This all had an impact on Drogo's success as a family home, the garden being such an important feature for social gatherings. By moving it far away, Dillistone also took some of the humanity and the warmth out of the castle to satisfy the client's narrative.

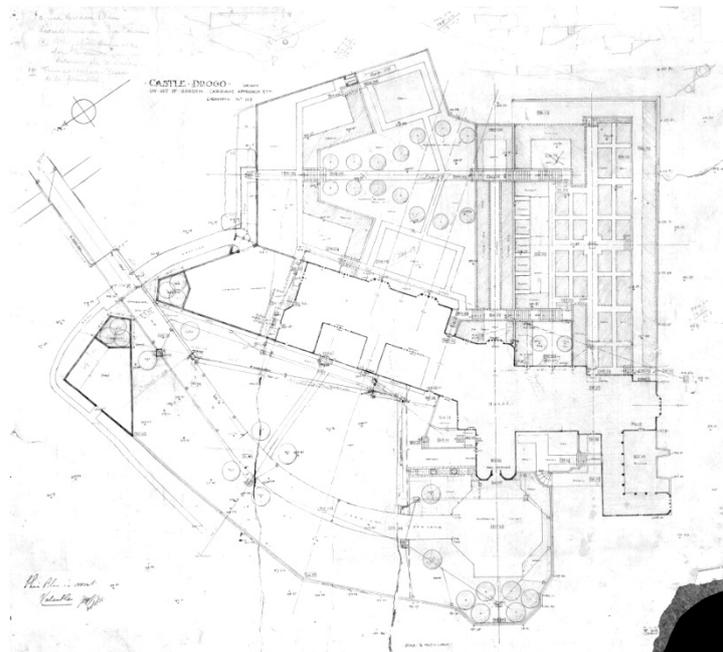


Figure 19. Lutyens' planned gardens. In the end, no gardens were placed near the castle. (Lutyens 1915)

²⁷ Brown, Jane. *Gardens of a golden afternoon: The story of a partnership, Edwin Lutyens & Gertrude Jekyll*. First Edition: London: Allen Brown, 1982, p.147.

²⁸ *Idem*, p.147.

The choice of a medieval style for the building was the reflection of the clients' wishes and the architect's decision to embrace them. However, it could be argued that such an austere, militaristic style was also the product of the geopolitical developments taking place at the time of its inception, in the years leading to the First World War. Among these were the aftermath of the Second Boer War (1899-02), the Fashoda Crisis of 1898 and the Anglo-German Naval Race started at the turn of the century. The first was a difficult war in South Africa, the second almost caused a war with France over ownership of Sudan and the third was arguably one of the causes of the Great War. Put together, these events paint a picture of instability in the Empire's heyday. Architectural critic Gavin Stamp mentions "the war in South Africa generated a mood of defensive, paranoid imperialism and exaggerated patriotism, which was certainly reflected in architecture²⁹". Going further, one could argue Fashoda and the Naval Race were also important in this shift in mood from the Victorian period. Within this context, the use of archetypal English forms like the Norman crenellations and the Tudor oriel windows take on new meanings. On one level, they are familiar and thus reassuring. On the other, their martial qualities can feel hostile and self-assured. Furthermore, perhaps the building's style can be seen as a conservative reaction to the modernity happening on the continent, specifically movements like the Jugendstil and the Viennese Secession. This was the view of Sir Laurence Weaver, when he proclaimed in 1921 that "even before the war the "New Art" which pleased Germany and Austria so vastly was "dead and damned" in Great Britain³⁰". For all these reasons, Drogo's style can appear nationalistic and outdated, limiting its appeal to tourists and locals alike and giving a darker facet to its aesthetics.

In addition to appearing as a reaction to the events unfolding on Continental Europe at the turn of the century, Castle Drogo could also be interpreted as a symbol of nostalgia. It was conceived in the dying days of the Edwardian Era (1901-10) and built during the Great War and its unstable aftermath. The early 1900s were the apex of Britain's power, when it presided over an Empire where the sun truly never set, but within this supremacy the first cracks were starting to appear. This era's abrupt end due to the world war resonated widely through society and possibly impacted the castle's design. First and foremost, it is a late Middle Ages structure in its massing and main exterior aesthetics. Perhaps not incidentally, this period also represented one of the great moments of prosperity in English history where, in the Norman

²⁹ Stamp, Gavin. *Edwin Lutyens Country Houses: From the Archives of Country Life*. 1st ed. London: Aurum Press Limited, 2001.

³⁰ Weaver, Sir Laurence. *Small Country Houses of Today*. 1st ed. London: Country Life Limited, 1921.

Conquest's aftermath, the country controlled large swathes of French territory³¹. Therefore, Drogo can paradoxically be seen as a longing for better days, built at a time when Britain was at its most powerful, controlling practically a quarter of the Earth's surface. Perhaps it is a fortress built to protect a certain ideal of Britishness – if so, it would be a reactionary longing for a time when Britain was both inward-looking and powerful. And continuing this line of thought, the reference to feudal architecture does not appear anodyne. It could serve as a reminder of the near absolute power the elites wielded in that age and might have appealed to people of means like Julius Drewe at a time when their privileges were starting to be challenged. Indeed, their status was being threatened by The People's Budget of 1909-10 under Herbert Asquith and its "radical plans to redistribute the burden of tax and finance social provisions³²". The portcullis and crenellations appear then more as a status quo reminder than mere ornamental elements, creating the impression of a reactionary political programme etched in Drogo's stones.

At the centre of Castle Drogo's conception lies a problematic reality: that it is a prestige project built on an epic scale for the enjoyment of a single family. The elitarian connotation and corresponding financial effort would inevitably draw criticism. The Edwardian era was rife with geopolitical instability and social unrest, even if from the trenches of the Western Front, many would remember it as a "golden and beneficial era of plenty, peace and prosperity"³³. A time of both striking prosperity and inequalities, very much like the Victorian Age, it created countless fortunes like the Drewes'. Although one could argue that this construction provided work for hundreds of individuals for over two decades, its aim wasn't altruistic. It stands in contrast to more socially engaged projects of its time like the libraries Andrew Carnegie was building throughout the English-speaking world at great cost, eventually erecting more than 1698³⁴. To put the costs of the castle in context, its initial estimation was of 60'000 GBP, as mentioned earlier; in 1905 the average annual salary of an industrial worker was

³¹ The short-lived 1390 Treaty of Brétigny could represent the apex of this power, with King Edward III taking control of "a third of France's territory and its subjects", according to historian Philippe Contamine. Source: Contamine, Philippe. "Traité de Brétigny - Archive de Collection Commemoration 2010." FranceArchives, 2010. https://francearchives.gouv.fr/fr/pages_histoire/40106.

³² Packer, Ian. "1909 People's Budget." *Journal of Liberal History*, 2015. <https://liberalhistory.org.uk/history/1909-peoples-budget/>.

³³ Carew Dudley. *The House is Gone: A Personal Retrospect*. 1st edition, London: Robert Hale Editions, 1949, p14.

³⁴ Stamberg, Susan. "How Andrew Carnegie Turned His Fortune into a Library Legacy." NPR. NPR, August 1, 2013. <https://www.npr.org/2013/08/01/207272849/how-andrew-carnegie-turned-his-fortune-into-a-library-legacy>.

61.45 GBP³⁵. The somewhat pretentious architecture of Castle Drogo and its era begs the question of whether such an approach deserves the praise it receives. In this vein, Robert. F. Jordan argues that Lutyens' was "an architecture where the high-pitched roofs, textured stone and tiny casements served mainly to conceal, ever so charmingly, the whole apparatus of conspicuous waste³⁶". In a less radical vein, one can also wonder whether a different building typology from the same period might be more deserving of study, since it might display design solutions that could be used in a wider range of projects. Therefore, Drogo's aims and symbolic value can constitute an obstacle to its critical appreciation. However, it would be a shame to deduce the debate to moralistic arguments as it would ignore the undeniable qualities of Drogo's design. Returning to the building's history, as the years passed, it seemed increasingly difficult for Drogo to remain private in the post-war context.

In March 1973 the National Trust received a one-sentence letter from Drogo's owner Anthony Drewe: "I write to enquire whether the National Trust would be interested in acquiring this house together with the Teign Gorge stretching over to Fingle Bridge?"³⁷. With this laconic missive a new chapter started for the castle, as it became a Trust property in 1974. It caused its reversal of fortunes since its rediscovery by the public allowed for greater interest to be generated and for funds to be collected for its renovation. The building was much in need of one, as the total cost of the comprehensive renovation of 2013-22 shows. Indeed, an impressive £15.5m were spent, with the work being described as "conservation work on a monumental scale³⁸". To understand the considerable financial efforts it represents, the Trust's annual investments across its 500 properties was worth 138,4 million in 2017-18³⁹. Therefore, it is surprising that it would have dedicated such an amount to this project in particular. This choice suggests both a necessity from serious structural damage

³⁵ Burhop, C., and S. Broadberry. "Real Wages and Labor Productivity in Britain and Germany, 1871–1938: A Unified Approach to the International Comparison of Living Standards." *Economic History Association* 2, no. 70 (2010): 400–427.

³⁶ Jordan, Robert Furneaux. *Victorian Architecture*. First Edition. London: Penguin Books, 1966, p.234-237.

³⁷ The National Trust. *Castle Drogo Guidebook*. 6th Edition. London: The National Trust, 2007, p. 48.

³⁸ BBC News. "Castle Drogo: England's 'Last Castle' Restored after Nine Years." BBC News. BBC, June 24, 2022.

³⁹ The National Trust. "The National Trust: Annual Report 2017 - 2018." Online Report, 2018. Accessed April 9, 2023. https://gat04-live-1517c8a4486c41609369c68f30c8-aa81074.divio-media.org/filer_public/ec/35/ec35c337-20b6-43f5-9204-d84dec7163a8/rvr-08-full.pdf.

and renewed public's interest for the site. The second, we will see, represents quite a change from just a few years prior.

In parallel to the Trust's takeover of Castle Drogo, another phenomenon was taking place, which would have an impact on the building's fortunes. Indeed, following the low point of his legacy in 1969 for the celebrations of the centenary of his birth, Lutyens was also starting to be rediscovered by a generation of architects and critics. One of the first to do so was Robert Venturi in his seminal 1966 *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, where more than six projects by the architect are mentioned, all in a relatively short book⁴⁰. As critic Charles Holland remarked on Venturi's analysis, he was bound to enjoy Lutyens' "rich allusions, spatial ambiguity, and playfulness"⁴¹ – all traits common to many post-modern projects constructed in the following years. Closer to Britain, the Hayward Gallery organized an exhibition of Lutyens' work in 1981, where many sketches of Drogo were presented; indeed Figure 6, seen much earlier, was presented then⁴². These events were symptomatic of a wider appreciation for Lutyens just as the tenets of modernism and their consequences were coming under greater criticism. Considering this, Castle Drogo became once more the work of an acclaimed architect, rather than the symbol of a bygone, wasteful era, thus cementing its rise as a beloved local landmark. This process started early for the castle and has continued to this day.

Surprisingly, as early as 1966 we can find postcards (Figure 19), proudly displaying the building, but it's in the wake of the Trust's takeover and subsequent opening to the public that Castle Drogo has left its mark on the collective culture of Devon.

⁴⁰ Venturi, Robert. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1966.

⁴¹ Holland, Charles. "Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944)." *Architectural Review* Rethinking the Rural, no. 1450 (April 2018).

⁴² The Hayward Gallery. *Lutyens, the Work of the English Architect Sir Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944)*. London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1981, p 67.



Figure 20. A 1966 postcard of Drogo.
(Unknown Author)



Figure 21. Local Souvenirs. (Sybilla Davis, 2023)

In fact, even if from an early stage, it stirred the interest of the locals, probably due to its exceptional nature. This early appeal only widened over time, the Castle now appearing on a myriad of objects. For instance, one can buy a 238 x 152 mm cross stitch design (Figure 20) displaying the structure from designer Sybilla Davis for 16.99 GBP; it is presented amongst a collection of local landmarks like Smeaton's Tower lighthouse and, interestingly, authentic medieval castles like Kingswear⁴³. Drogo seems to have slipped itself into the collection of genuine local landmarks, acquiring a sort of legitimacy and being proudly adopted by communities around it. Certainly, but not exclusively, a mercantile incentive is responsible, in large part due to the National Trust: most of its properties including Drogo contain a coffee shop and gift shop to help fund the operations on site. Nevertheless, the acquisition of all these goods by the Trust's patrons or clients of local shops points to substantial interest for the castle. Even on a national level, Castle Drogo has been legitimized as a landmark through its inclusion in a collection of locomotives for British rail companies. Based around the theme of "castles" the HST locomotive series includes a "No 43097 Castle Drogo", alongside better known, real medieval structures like Cardiff Castle⁴⁴. All this can be seen as evidence of the acceptance, in popular culture, of Castle Drogo as a legitimate piece of heritage worthy of being promoted and visited.

⁴³ Davis, Sybilla. "Devon Collection: Castle Drogo". Sybilla Davis Designs. Accessed March 17, 2023. <https://www.sybilladavisdesigns.co.uk/shop/devon-collection/castle-drogo-devon/>.

⁴⁴ Swain, Will. "Great Western Railway HST 43097 Castle Drogo." Flickr. Yahoo!, July 25, 2021. Accessed March 17, 2023. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/68628359@N04/51334655969>.

The property has shifted from a building designed to be enjoyed by a few individuals to one welcoming the wider public. Arguably, this has led to a greater appreciation of Drogo as a living landmark. As a National Trust property, a large variety of events are organized on site; in the last year only, one can mention an open-air production of Peter Pan, an Easter egg hunt and an open day event in the castle's restored turbine shed⁴⁵. These are all designed to attract ever greater quantities of visitors, and thus help finance operations on site. This seems to be working, as Drogo typically welcomes 150'000 visitors per year⁴⁶. Chatsworth House, one of the grandest country homes in the country, received 565'530 visitors in 2021⁴⁷, showing the remarkable appeal of Drogo relative to its young age and small scale. This positions it as an important cultural and social hub for the region. Arguably, its excessive nature and unusual features have boosted this appeal, thus transforming potential defects into qualities. The castle is also proving popular within the architectural community, reflecting its value to experts and the wider public alike. It is possible that storytelling is at the centre of this interest.

During its renovation phase, Drogo welcomed an architect in residence, Edward Crooks. He created an exhibition called "Holding Up" that included an installation and several highly intricate line drawings exploring facets of the building's identity. Crooks is part of a wider movement of architects recognizing the merits of the castle as an architectural realization; many of its key characteristics are part of the profession's current discourse. Indeed, increasingly one reads about the importance of storytelling, of ornamentation and the value of reinterpreting traditional building forms. In this context, Crooks' view of Castle Drogo as "a place deeply entrenched in myth, in storytelling, in theatricality"⁴⁸ seems particularly current. Few of Lutyens' buildings conjure so many stories as this one, from the unlikely tale of its creation to the narrative layers the architect embedded in the design. Already in his

⁴⁵ National Trust, "Events at Castle Drogo." National Trust, 2023. Accessed April 10, 2023. <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/devon/castle-drogo/events>.

⁴⁶ Harrison Sutton Partnership. "Castle Drogo Visitor Centre by Harrison Sutton Partnership." RIBA, 2017. Accessed April 10, 2023. <https://find-an-architect.architecture.com/harrison-sutton-partnership/totnes/castle-drogo-visitor-centre#:~:text=s%20key%20properties%20and%20receives%20over%20150,000%20visitors%20per%20year>.

⁴⁷ Chatsworth House Trust. "Chatsworth House Trust: 2021 Annual Report." Online Report, 2021. Accessed April 10, 2023. <https://www.chatsworth.org/media/qs1fw1hf/cht-annual-review-2021.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Tom Parsons. "'Holding Up' by Edward Crooks at Castle Drogo." YouTube, April 20, 2018. Video, 5:09. Accessed April 10, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBIdirgJdBI>.

1950 article on Lutyens, “Building with Wit”, Niklaus Pevsner saw Drogo’s purpose as being “...for sheer theatre, beating any set for Hamlet ever devised”⁴⁹. Therefore, the omnipresence of storytelling has facilitated the castle’s rediscovery as a successful piece of architecture. Along with narration, the notion of architectural folly is also experiencing a resurgence which is fuelling interest for the castle.

As many of our cities are confronted with dull designs, or as architect Peter Cook defined them disparagingly “biscuit architecture” due to their uniform beige color⁵⁰ and cookie-cutter uniformity, some practitioners challenge the status quo. One of the tools used is the architecture folly, a loose term describing a flamboyant piece of architecture that isn’t necessarily functional – somewhat between a sculpture and a building. Although more present in academic circles than in practice, some can be found in recent projects. For instance, in the new city of Poundbury, master planned by Leon Krier, where buildings are given characteristics that reflect a fictitious local history. Here, the 2014 Royal Pavilion building designed by Ben Pentreath abounds with “echoes of architecture of John Nash and Sir John Soane”⁵¹, all within an extravagant belltower in the middle of the English countryside (Figure 22). In a less classicist fashion, Studio Weave in London also designs follies like their highly ornamental 2018 Thames Walk Pavilion (Figure 23). Within their different styles, these two buildings show the enduring appeal of architectural follies. Drogo is perhaps the pinnacle of the genre, with Pevsner writing: “Sir Edwin Lutyens was without doubt the greatest folly builder England has ever seen. (...) Castle Drogo beats Fonthill”⁵². The writer saw this building as the pinnacle of a long British tradition of erecting buildings for their symbolic value and their eccentric qualities rather than necessarily for their functionality. It is significant that Pevsner compares Drogo favourably to Fonthill as it suggests that the former is some kind of hyper-folly, where one eccentric neo-gothic castle is superior to another. The layers of complexity that have been explored so far within the Drewe’s home suggest, indeed, considerable qualities. Within this context, Drogo’s appeal

⁴⁹ Pevsner, Nicolaus. ‘Building with Wit’. *Architectural Review* 109 (1951): p.217-25.

⁵⁰ Braidwood, Ella. "Peter Cook launches attack on 'biscuit boys' of British architecture." *The Architects' Journal*, July 2016. Accessed April 11, 2023. <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/peter-cook-launches-attack-on-biscuit-boys-of-british-architecture>.

⁵¹ Ben Pentreath Ltd. "Royal Pavilion - Ben Pentreath Ltd.", 2018. Accessed April 10, 2023. <https://www.benpentreath.com/masterplanning/larger-scale-masterplans/royal-pavilion/#:~:text=The%20building%20is%20designed%20with,brick%20with%20restrained%20classical%20detailing.>

⁵² Pevsner, p. 140

does not come as a surprise as it is part of an ongoing national passion for follies and Lutyens' considerable role in its development.



Above, Figure 23, Thames Walk Pavilion by Studio Weave (Ollie Himmick, 2018)

Left, Figure 22. Poundbury's folly (Ben Penreath Ltd, 2018)

In his 1969 analysis of the castle, Peter Inskip writes “while Drogo was under construction Lutyens’ architecture developed a ruthless elementalism”⁵³. He mentions the “rugged stonework of the battlemented north tower” and the “knife-sharp edges of the granite planes” of the South tower as examples. In this, Inskip highlights the modernity of the forms chosen by the architect – the building is an abstraction of medieval typologies, made to create a new architectural language. While avoiding the pastiche, Lutyens did choose to include medieval elements like crenelations and portcullis, but these were rearranged in a novel way. For instance, the South tower is unlike anything that existed before it (Figure 24), while remaining familiar enough for the visitor to link it to a specific historical period. The sharp edges of the walls and the thin slots of the windows are at the limit of abstraction, while still referencing ever so slightly a historical period, using barely sculpted window mullions reminiscent of Tudor manor houses. This somewhat minimalistic approach, at least in the external finishes, feels timeless. Indeed, Lutyens’s angular façade, austere window slots and accents on verticality can all be found in recent critically acclaimed projects. 2022 Stirling

⁵³ Inskip, p. 222

Prize winner Niall McLaughlin's International Rugby Experience building (Figure 25) is one of these. The vertical mullions confer a rigid verticality to the composition, while the sharp corners lighten its visual weight – in this respect, it is similar to Drogo, although the buildings couldn't have more different contexts of construction. This suggests Drogo's appeal is linked to both its abstract nature and the compromises it makes within the realm of historicism, providing just enough cultural cues to belong to an era. At the same time, its genuinely novel forms, already explored in analysis of the chapel and the south tower, distance it from the pastiche and place it in a category of its own.

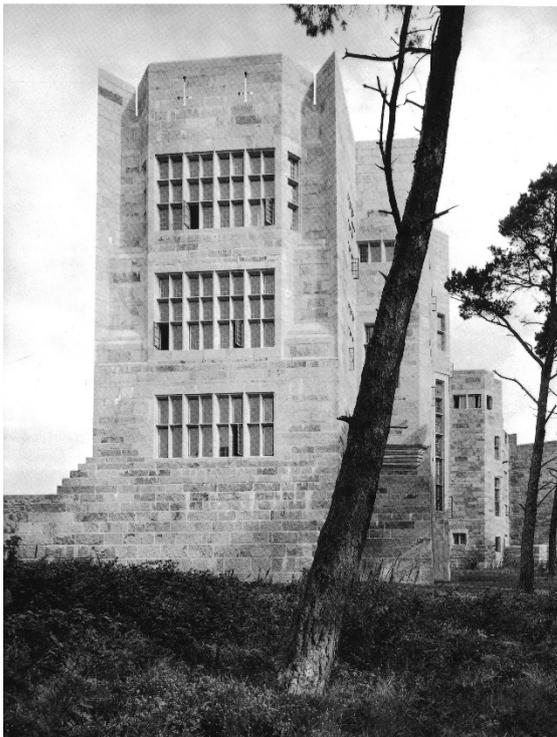


Figure 24, The South Tower (A.S.G. Butler, 1927)



Figure 25, the International Rugby Experience building (Nick Kane, 2022)

Conclusion

To decipher Castle Drogo, we have studied all the layers of complexity surrounding its design and realization. It is all too easy to consider it either as an excessive vanity project or a genuine success; reality lies somewhere in the middle. In order to capture its facets, we have delved into its origins and the main drivers behind its design. We then studied Lutyens's unique approach, envisioning Drogo as a total work of art and a storytelling exercise. The castle's initial success and publicity was then followed by a more troubled period, mirroring Lutyens's own fall from grace. The darker sides of the castle and its flaws were studied as well as those of its cultural context, the Edwardian era. Then, with the National Trust's takeover and the subsequent reassessment of Castle Drogo, we explored how the building is going through a renaissance of sorts, appealing to ever greater audiences, like its architect and becoming a successful part of the local culture. We have seen how the public as well as the architectural community are rediscovering the Drewe's home and the qualities or its underlying design principles. To conclude, it is a sound architectural realization that eschews modernity far less than what is thought. It might present unusual aesthetics and it is the product of its circumstances, but these must not overshadow the genuine accomplishment Castle Drogo represents. Within a somewhat absurd framework, Edwin Lutyens has produced a very multi-layered design that can claim to be a success, both from an architectural perspective as well as from a cultural one, attracting increasingly large numbers of visitors.

Word Count: 8272 words

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Figure 20. Unknown. Postcard dated August 25, 1966, unsigned. Ebay, 2023. Accessed March 17, 2023.

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Figure 22. Ben Penreath Ltd. "Royal Pavilion." Photograph. Royal Pavilion, Poundbury, 2018. Online image. Accessed April 11, 2023. <https://www.benpentreath.com/masterplanning/larger-scale-masterplans/royalpavilion/#:~:text=The%20building%20is%20designed%20with,brick%20with%20restrained%20classical%20detailing.>

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