Mary Crowley: Beginnings of the Career of a Pioneering Modern Movement Architect in Britain before 1945

Mary Crowley (1907–2005) was an exceptional Modern Movement architect yet her contribution is largely unrecognised and overlooked. This article looks at her pre-war background, training and early works. Mary grew up in the utopian Garden Cities at Letchworth and Welwyn when they were being established. She trained at the Architectural Association (AA) in 1927, just ten years after the school allowed women to join. After graduating in 1932 she became an associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in 1934. Her early works include a group of three houses for her family influenced by Scandinavian Modernist ideas. She worked with other Modernist architects including Erno Goldfinger and Maxwell Fry and was involved in the British Pavilion of the Exposition Internationale des Arts Techniques dans la Vie Moderne Paris 1937 designed by Oliver Hill. After 1945, she worked at the newly formed Hertfordshire Architects Department and at the Ministry of Education’s Architects and Building Branch.

Keywords: Mary Crowley, Medd, schools, Modern Movement, Sewell’s, Hertfordshire

Utopian Beginnings

Mary Crowley was born in Bradford in 1907 into a Quaker family rooted in the idealism and utopian experimentation of Quaker industrialists, Joseph and Seebom Rowntree and Ebenezer Howard, and their concept for garden cities. These ideas initially shaped the 150 acre site model village at New Earswick near York and then the Garden Cities in Letchworth and Welwyn where Mary grew up and lived. Parker and Unwin were commissioned to design New Earswick and two years later they started work in 1903 on the first Garden City at Letchworth.

Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City movement was a reaction to the overcrowding and industrial pollution of Victorian cities. He drew on Quaker precedents at Port Sunlight, Bournville and Robert Owen’s ‘Vision for a new society’, which envisioned ‘a happy home for many generations of children where they will be brought up amid surroundings that will benefit them spiritually, mentally and physically.’

Mary’s father, Ralph Crowley 'became one of the pioneers of the Garden City Movement and at the heart of this utopian idealism was the education and social welfare of children. Ralph Crowley believed that, as he wrote, 'a doctor cannot fulfil his more specific function of treating bodily diseases, if he is indifferent to the patient’s environmental conditions and his mental and moral welfare.' Following Ralph’s recruitment to the Board of Education in London in 1908, the family

4 Howard, To-morrow.
6 "Obituary, Ralph Crowley MD Lond FRCP", The Lancet, October 10, 1953, 785.
moved from Bradford to the newly founded Garden City in Letchworth, Hertfordshire and then in 1920 to the recently established second Garden City in Welwyn.7

When the family moved to Welwyn Garden City in 1921 Mary was sent to Bedales,8 a pioneering co-educational school founded by John Haden Bradley, which offered an alternative model to traditional English Public Schools. Mary found expression for her talents in drawing, music and art and spent many hours sketching in the (now Grade 1 Listed) Arts and Crafts Library with its double height timber structure dramatically top lit like a cathedral clerestory designed by Ernest Gimson.9 After she left Bedales she spent a few months with a Swiss family in Lausanne to improve her French in 1926 before enrolling at the Architectural Association (AA) in London in 1927.10

Education and Social Change

Mary was training for a profession at a time of great political and social change. It had only been 10 years since the suffragette Ruth Lowy persuaded AA Council to consider allowing women to be educated at the AA. Mary was not even eligible to vote until she entered her second year at the AA when Parliament passed the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act on 2 July 1928. In this same period, political tensions in Germany saw waves of émigré architects flocking into London, including architects and designers Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Erich Mendelsohn, Ernő Goldfinger, Arthur Korn and László Moholy-Nagy, and the Russian architects Serge Chermayeff and Berthold Lubetkin.11

AA records show that Mary was a highly conscientious student who managed to get consistently high marks. She took full part in student activities including a stunning role in the Finale of the 1929 AA Pantomime with the choreography by Carmen Dillon (Fig. 1).12 Mary was the only student to have won the AA’s Travelling Studentship four years running in her second, third, fourth and fifth years. She also had her work published in the AA Journals and won the fiercely competitive AA Travelling Studentships four years running in her second, third, fourth and fifth years. She also had her work published in the AA Journals and won the fiercely competitive

and much coveted final year prize in 1932. The 1930 issue of the AA Journal includes Mary’s third year project- a Modernistic rendering of an entrance to an office block (Fig. 2). The article shows a range of styles that were being explored from classical and much coveted final year prize in 1932. The 1930 issue of the AA Journal includes Mary’s third year project- a Modernistic rendering of an entrance to an office block (Fig. 2). The article shows a range of styles that were being explored from classical

15 Ibid.

Fig. 1. AA Pantomime 1929, Mary Crowley far right. Courtesy of Architectural Association Photo Library.

Fig. 2. Pottery Offices Entrance Illustrated in the AA Journal 46, no. 522 (August 1930), 88. Courtesy of Dennis Sharp Archive.
Hakan Ahlberg and a technical school by Eric Lallerstedt containing a fountain by Carl Milles. The main highlight of the tour was the newly completed Stockholm Town Hall and Asplund’s Paradiset Restaurant in the Stockholm Exhibition. The exhibition’s slogan was Acceptera!, or Accept!, literally a plea for acceptance of functionalism, standardization, and mass production as a cultural change. It also underlined the social and economic basis of the architecture designed, revealing the architect as ‘a worker in the service of the broad masses of the community’.16

After the 1930 trip Modernism could no longer be ignored and Goodhart-Rendel’s address to the AA General Meeting on 23 February 1931, when Mary was in her fourth year, gives an insight into the debates around stylistic attitudes:

I believe that much of our advanced architecture is in danger of being strangled by style-consciousness....I think that I recognise in most of the best recent architecture of France and

in some parts of Scandinavia and Germany a modern real style that has evolved naturally from changing practice in construction and changing fancies in ornament...In more backward countries the modern style is conceived of as a style of pure negation, its aesthetic weakness bolstered up by mechanical theory or unintelligible philosophy (Fig. 4).17

Mary’s fourth year project from 1931 for An Institute of Archaeology, published in the February issue of the AA Journal, (Fig 5) looks remarkably like the 1934 RIBA Headquarters which was influenced by Östberg’s Town Hall and Asplund’s City Library in Stockholm.18 In her final year, 1932, she had two of her projects published in the AA Journal: A British Centre for Arts and Sciences fifteen kilometres from Paris on the banks of the Seine, and her thesis subject which was An Educational Centre for a Town of 25,000 Inhabitant (Fig 6).19 The Educational Centre is remarkably futuristic with curtain walling along one elevation and Scandinavian style Modernist treatment on the other. In this final thesis she mentions the school system of Gary, Indiana that her father had visited in 1913 and the first of Henry Morris’ village colleges in Sawston (the precursor to Gropius's Impington). Mary left the AA at the top of her class, winning the highly coveted medal from the Société des Architects Diplômés par le Gouvernement, Paris, a prize for the best Diploma student of


18 "AA School Fourth Year Project," The AA Journal 46, no. 528 (February 31), 269–73.

19 Respectively in The AA Journal 48 no. 545 (July 1932), 52 and 55, and The AA Journal 48, no. 548 (October 1932), 103.
the session. She was also awarded the Henry Florence Travelling Studentship (£50). While studying at the AA Mary also gained seven months experience working in the office of the architect of Welwyn Garden City, Louis de Soissons (who retired from AA Council in 1929).

**Early Practice**

Mary left the AA at a time of the Great Depression (1929–33) when there was a serious economic downturn and work was sparse. Her family were amongst her first clients. In 1934 she started working independently on a group of three houses at Sewell’s Orchard, Tewin, for her parents, her sister Elfrida and brother-in-law - Elfrida had married architect Cecil Kemp, who became the Chief Architect at Kemp House.

---

20 The AA Journal 48, no. 545 (July 1932), 41–2.
21 RIBANPA_5426_Crowley_Mary_1934_1–5 (February 9, 1934), Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), London.
architect to the Miners Welfare Commission and was responsible for the innovative design of the pithead baths, and a third house for another Quaker family, the Mials (Fig. 7).23

The three houses in Tewin are radically different to anything else in the area. The mono-pitch buff brick structures look deceptively simple. The influence on the design was Scandinavian and drew on the seminal AA trip from 1930.24 Every detail was carefully thought through especially in relation to the services and the control of sun, light and air. The upper floor bathrooms are grouped together with a concrete floor to cope with any leaks or future failures; the ironmongery on the windows allow for the full extent of the windows to be opened without any dividing frames and all the rooms have natural controllable air vents. The internal arrangement on the ground floor with sliding doors creates a flexible space which can be used for intimate dining or open plan parties. The shared gardens maintained a sense of the open countryside and a pond was designed to store rainwater. A simple return on the south facing façade gives each house a sense of enclosure and privacy (Fig. 7).

Completed in 1936, the Sewell Orchard houses were included in an exhibition at the Building Centre, (London: Ashgate, 2013), 69. A Life in Education

In her interviews she also acknowledges the help of John Brandon-Jones and Cecil Kemp.27 She contributed to the Goldfinger terrace but Sewell Orchard was entirely under her control and a project by Maxwell Fry (Fig. 10). Kensal House was completed in 1937 and financed by the Gas Light and Coke Company for re-housing slum dwellers. The dramatic curve of the nursery school creates a dynamic geometry and sense of place. There are many similarities with the prototype she had designed a few years earlier for the Nursery Schools Association, particularly the use of top lights and sliding folding doors that merge inside and outside spaces. Mary was also involved in Goldfinger’s The Child Exhibit at the 1937 British Pavilion at the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne designed by Oliver Hill under Frank Pick. Hill was a contemporary AA student who had also gone on the AA trip to the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930.29

In the same period Mary worked with Ernö Goldfinger on several projects including his own house which was part of a terrace of three units in Willow Road, Hampstead (London NW3). Goldfinger had moved to London in 1934 after marrying an English artist he met in Paris, Ursulla Blackwell, (of the Crosse and Blackwell food group) and he had offices in Bedford Square near the AA.26

The two housing projects are very different. Goldfinger’s houses are a split level terrace of red brick faced town houses with a spiral staircase linking the multi levels whilst the Tewin houses are a group of modern villas in the countryside on one and a half acres of land. It is difficult to see what Mary contributed to the Goldfinger terrace but Sewell Orchard was entirely under her control and in her interviews she also acknowledges the help of John Brandon-Jones and Cecil Kemp.27 She collaborated on projects with Brandon-Jones and other students who studied with her at the AA, including Judith Ledeboer.28

School Building Design

Mary collaborated with Goldfinger on a series of projects for the French toy makers Abbats and a project for a prototype prefabricated expanding nursery school commissioned by the Nursery Schools Association in 1934. A sketch of the design is held by the RIBA Drawings and Archive Collections.29 She went on to design a nursery school at Kensal House, the innovative housing project by Maxwell Fry (Fig. 10). Kensal House was completed in 1937 and financed by the Gas Light and Coke Company for re-housing slum dwellers. The dramatic curve of the nursery school creates a dynamic geometry and sense of place. There are many similarities with the prototype she had designed a few years earlier for the Nursery Schools Association, particularly the use of top lights and sliding folding doors that merge inside and outside spaces. Mary was also involved in Goldfinger’s The Child Exhibit at the 1937 British Pavilion at the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne designed by Oliver Hill under Frank Pick. Hill was a contemporary AA student who had also gone on the AA trip to the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930.31 Between 1938–40 just before the onset of Second World War, Mary and another contemporary student, Anne Parker, worked with Goldfinger on designs for evacuation, school, and holiday camps.32 In 1940 she collaborated with Justin Blanco White (another ex-AA student) and Goldfinger on prefabricated industrial housing design run by the RIBA.32

27 Brodie, Part 3 of 11.
32 R.I.B.A, Industrial housing in wartime: Results of a competition organised by the Royal Institute of British Architects (London: RIBA, 1940).
Hertfordshire County Council

1941 was a turning point for Mary when John Newson, the Chief Education Officer at Hertfordshire, offered her a job to work in the Hertfordshire County Council’s Education Department. There was an urgent need to help schools make arrangements for the mandatory requirement to feed school children – something her father had campaigned for. She worked with Paul Mauger on the project which mainly focused on providing facilities for cooking in small village schools. This also gave Mary an opportunity to speak to teachers about education ideas. She kept up with the ideas of Henry Morris on the village schools in Cambridgeshire through John Newson and her father.34

The 1944 Education Act radically changed the education system for secondary school in England and made all schooling free for all pupils and raised the school leaving age to 15. The new Act made it a duty of local education authorities to secure the provision of primary and secondary schools:

and the schools available for an area shall not be deemed to be sufficient unless they are sufficient in number, character, and equipment to afford for all pupils opportunities for education offering such variety of instruction and training as may be desirable in view of their different ages, abilities, and aptitudes, and of the different periods for which they may be expected to remain at school, including practical instruction and training appropriate to their respective needs.35

The pressure to build new schools in a war-torn Britain where there was a shortage of materials required great ingenuity and creativity to deliver large numbers of buildings quickly and economically. In 1945 Hertfordshire County Council appointed its first ever County Architect, C.H. Aslin. Aslin established the Hertfordshire County Architect’s Department in 1946 with Stirrat Johnson-Marshall as his deputy and a team of architects including Mary and David Medd. When Mary joined the Hertfordshire Architect’s Department she was nearly forty years of age, single and the only professional female architect on the staff list. Her experience of pre-fabricated building construction and her in depth knowledge of education and school design internationally made her an invaluable member of the team that was already aspiring to build fifteen schools within two years of being established.36 The first three schools that were designed by the team that Mary and her future husband David Medd were part of were Essenden School (120 children), Cheshunt School (200 juniors) and Croxley Green School (320 children).37

Mary’s most significant work on schools, which was to have national and international impact, developed after she was 40 years of age and in partnership with her husband David Medd. The couple married in 1949 and both moved from Hertfordshire County Architect’s Department to the newly formed Architects and Building Branch (A&BB) headed up by Johnson-Marshall who was the deputy County Architect in Hertfordshire. The Medds wrote many of the Building Bulletins that became the standard references and set the standards for school design all over the world including the Ministry of Education Building Bulletin 1 which was issued in the first year (1949).38 The couple worked so closely together that it is difficult to single out Mary’s contribution.

From the very start of her professional career Mary was a Modernist focused on the welfare of children. Her Quaker upbringing and her father’s involvement in founding Letchworth and Welwyn Garden Cities meant that in her formative years, Mary was surrounded by people with vision and ideas about social justice and equality. Ideas about space, form and prefabrication evolved from what she saw and learnt on student trips especially the famous Architectural Association student trip to the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930. Mary developed her knowledge and hands-on expertise of prefabrication and school building as a member of the Hertfordshire Architects Department. This early experience enabled Mary to pursue an international and celebrated career in school design.

33 Brodie, Part 3 of 11.
34 Brodie, Part 5 of 11.
35 Great Britain, Education Act 1944 7&8 Geo Ch 31 (London: HMSO, 1944), 5.
37 Ibid.
Yasmin Shariff is director of Dennis Sharp Architects, a practice with close associations with DoCoMoMo. She has worked on many Modern Movement buildings including Mary Crowley’s Kemp house in Tewin. She was a senior lecturer at the University of Westminster for over 15 years and a trustee and Honorary Secretary of the RIBA and the Architectural Association. Currently she is chair of the steering group AA XX 100, set up to mark the centenary of women at the Architectural Association in 2017 and serve as a catalyst for a wider discussion of women in architecture.

E-mail: yshariff@sharparchitects.co.uk