Staging Nationalism at the Crystal Palace: Prince Albert's "Model Dwelling House"

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STAGING NATIONALISM AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE: PRINCE ALBERT’S “MODEL DWELLING HOUSE”
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**Abstract**

At the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, British nationalism was staged both inside and outside the walls of the Crystal Palace. Inside, industrial products from around the world were put on display to celebrate the wonders of modern industry. Perhaps a more important purpose of the exhibition, however, was to establish British national pride through comparison to other nations. Britishness inside the Crystal Palace was defined by the nation’s primacy in industry—an identity that hinged on the exhibition of the commodity. Outside the Crystal Palace, a subset of this British identity was also being demonstrated. Near the southeast corner of the building, a model working-class house was constructed. This house, designed by Henry Roberts and exhibited by the Society for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes in the name of Prince Albert, was a full-scale model that viewers could enter and walk through. An example of mid-nineteenth century British national efforts into housing reform, the model house could not only be seen and touched, but also at least temporarily “lived,” as working-class visitors were encouraged to imagine the better life such a home would surely bring them. However, the house and its message of housing reform was still linked by proximity and purpose to the commodity nationalism being staged just next door in the Crystal Palace. This architectural model, then, raises the question of how housing—especially worker’s housing—was problematized as a national issue in mid-nineteenth century Britain. In this paper, I examine how this issue is represented in an exhibitionary context through the “Model Dwelling House.” What did it mean to display a full-scale model of a proposed solution to the question of housing reform? Although architecture has been magnified here from a mere drawing or illustration into a full-scale model, because of its viewing context in the Great Exhibition, architecture in this model has actually been reduced to a stage set. The building itself in the “Model Dwelling House,” much like the Crystal Palace, functioned as a frame for the nationalistic promotion and commodification encouraged by the exhibition’s organizers. Ultimately, the “Model Dwelling House” became a stage set for a certain collection of working class values and accompanying social behaviors that nineteenth century British political leaders believed would stabilize the nation—a set of meanings that were set into motion by the model home’s position as a commodity within the context of the Great Exhibition.
At the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, British nationalism was staged both inside and outside the walls of the Crystal Palace. Inside, industrial products from around the world were put on display in a celebration of the progress and achievements made possible by modern industry. Perhaps a more important purpose of the exhibition, however, was to establish British superiority and national pride through comparison to other nations. Britishness inside the Crystal Palace was defined by the nation’s primacy in industry and progress—an identity that hinged on the exhibition of the commodity. Outside the Crystal Palace, a subset of this British identity was also being demonstrated. Near the southeast corner of the building, a model working-class house was constructed. This house, designed by Henry Roberts and exhibited by the Society for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes in the name of Prince Albert, was a full-scale model that could be viewed not just from the exterior, but also experienced by walking through the interior (Figure 1). “Prince Albert’s Model Dwelling House” reflected the Society’s commitment to convey their reform recommendations through “actual examples,” which they believed could be “easily understood and imitated.”¹ An example of mid-nineteenth century British national efforts into housing reform, the house could not only be seen and touched, but also at least temporarily and fleetingly ‘lived,’ as working-class visitors were encouraged to imagine the better life such a home would surely bring them. In order to spread this didactic message of the benefits of housing reform to as wide an audience as possible, the Society and Prince Albert constructed the house outside the main exhibition hall where it was free and open to the public. However, the house and its

message of housing reform was still linked by proximity and purpose to the commodity nationalism being staged just next door in the Crystal Palace.

This architectural model, then, raises the question of how housing—especially worker’s housing—was problematized as a national issue in mid-nineteenth century Britain. In this paper, I examine how this issue is represented in an exhibitionary context through the “Model Dwelling House.” What did it mean to display a full-scale model of a proposed solution to the question of housing reform? Although architecture has been magnified here from a mere drawing or illustration into a full-scale model, because of its viewing context in the Great Exhibition, architecture in this model has in actuality been reduced to a stage set. The building itself in the “Model Dwelling House,” much like the Crystal Palace, functioned as a frame for the nationalistic promotion and commodification encouraged by the exhibition’s organizers. Just as the commodities on view inside the Crystal Palace stood as an image of Britishness—an abstract representation once removed from the actual qualities of British national identity they were meant to embody—the “Model Dwelling House” functioned in a similarly spectacular manner. It served as a mock-up of a real home. Constructed as a simulation and an example of real worker’s housing, the model home became an empty receptacle to be filled with various kinds of desires. It held the hopes and dreams not just of workers seeking better living conditions, but also of the potential proprietors for such housing looking to turn a profit, as well as the emerging public health bureaucracies trying to tidy up the city. Ultimately, domestic architecture in this exhibitionary context worked as a container for the working class values and behaviors nineteenth century political leaders believed would bolster and stabilize the British nation.
By mid-century, this re-fortification was certainly needed, as British national identity had become a source of some anxiety by 1851. Although the years leading up to the Great Exhibition were essentially peaceful, with no major international wars transpiring, they were by no means untroubled from the British point of view. With the large influx of Irish immigrants into Britain after 1845, the revolutions of the 1840s, and fears of ‘Papal Aggression’ and a Catholic re-conquest of England, the Great Exhibition of 1851 became an ideal forum for the nation to reaffirm British identity. Here, “freedom, industry, progress, and Protestantism” were asserted as the integral elements of British national identity.2 This identity was visualized and constructed referentially at the exhibition, as Britishness was expressed here not only through the British industrial products on display, but also through their comparison to products of other nations. If the Great Exhibition was explicitly meant to be a celebration of modern industry, the organization of the exhibition space implicitly asserted that Great Britain more than any other nation was leading the way in this forward march of industry. Over half of the exhibition space in the Crystal Palace was dedicated to British manufactured goods. This British spatial dominance was only enhanced by the foreign products on display, which the Official Catalogue of the Exhibition described as something of a mutilated copy of their English counterparts.3 Not unlike the British national identity that had been forged through the eighteenth-century, the Crystal Palace continued a British tradition of defining itself in opposition to an “Other.” However, unlike the Britishness of the eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries which historian Linda Colley has regarded as

deriving out of hostile conflict with this Other, either through war or the acquisition of empire, at the Great Exhibition Britishness was intimated through a more tacit comparison with the Other. It was through the commodity that British difference was established and a British national identity staged inside the Crystal Palace.

It would perhaps be more accurate to say that there were multiple British identities played out at the Great Exhibition, rather than a single, unified vision of Britishness. As Ernest Gellner points out, the construction of national identity is always a highly contested process, as individuals “often have to choose between several competing nationalisms.” Such was certainly the case at the Great Exhibition, where even though the event was constructed so as to disseminate a collective notion of British nationalism, visitors were free to interpret this national identity and their individual place within it in many different ways. As such, the exhibition was “a protean event with numerous possible meanings,” as historian Jeffrey Auerbach has interpreted it. The British used the Great Exhibition to define themselves as a nation, and its success as a nation-building event was due at least in part to this protean quality. Prince Albert’s “Model Dwelling House” outside the Crystal Palace represented one facet of this nationalism, as it was an example of national intervention into housing reform and signified the state’s humanistic

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4 Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005). Colley’s widely influential book asserts that British national identity was invented, and that this invention had three major determining factors: war, Protestantism, and acquisition of empire. Her thesis is that Britain defined its identity in opposition to a hostile “Other,” which was often France. Whether it was the dangerous Other of France threatening invasion, or the French Catholic Other, Colley holds that British wars with France throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries represented a confrontation with a hostile Other against which Britons were encouraged to collectively define themselves.


6 Auerbach, 5.
and benevolent public works. However, this model house and the housing reform issues it referenced were also designed to hold multiple meanings depending on the viewing subject. The house signified different things to working class, bourgeois, and bureaucratic viewers, just as these same viewers were left to interpret the larger British national identity underwriting this exhibit in many possible ways.

As an exhibit, the “Model Dwelling House” was very much a protean entity—it was both an object on view and an inhabitable space. Both of these manifestations were displayed so as to hold multiple possible meanings depending on the viewer. This multidimensionality accounts at least in part for the popularity of the model home, as it drew more than 250,000 visitors by the end of the exhibition. Many of these visitors were likely the working classes for whom this model house was intended to benefit, as the house was free and open to the public since it was outside the Crystal Palace walls. In this way, the house’s exhibitor, the Society for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes, invested the dwelling with a didactic function. At a time when several government enquiries had made public the abysmal living conditions of the urban poor, government officials and groups like the Society sought to address this problem at least in part by educating the working classes on proper hygiene and living arrangements through such means as the “Model Dwelling House.” The British newspaper *The Times* recognized this didactic purpose at the time of the exhibition, proclaiming, “It is the humbler classes themselves who chiefly require to be educated in more correct notions of what cleanliness and domestic comfort render necessary.” For these “humbler” viewers, the exhibition was intended to demonstrate how dismal their present living conditions

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7 Auerbach, 112.
8 *The Times*, 13 June 1851, cited in Auerbach, *A Nation on Display*: 111.
really were, while also inviting them to imagine what it would be like to inhabit a “better” home like this model dwelling. It was hoped that upon viewing the home, the working classes would subsequently make stronger demands for housing reform. Ultimately, it was not so much the building that was on display to these viewers, but rather the re-organized and hygienic spaces inside, where the well-ventilated, sanitary, gender-segregated, and functionally divided living units were meant to inspire a mental picture in these viewers of the possibility of a more healthy, comfortable, and moral lifestyle. The model dwelling as a viewable object was invested with a didactic message, but in conveying that message, the importance of the actual structure as built was minimized. Ultimately, the prototype building acted merely as a stage set for a larger set of lifestyle parameters that the working class viewer especially was intended to conjure and imagine.

If for the working class viewer the didactic function of the “Model Dwelling House” actually downplayed the built structure, for another viewing group, the building and construction methods took center stage. Along with the built prototype, the Society for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes also published several publicity brochures which were likely intended for potential investors building new workers’ housing. These brochures were highly technical, including many plans, drawings, and

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9 These three terms, “health, comfort, and morality,” were the catchwords of housing reform literature of the mid-nineteenth century in Britain, popping up again and again not just in the pamphlets produced by the Society for the exhibition, but also in other contemporary writings on working class housing. It was thought that if these three conditions were satisfied, then the laboring classes could work more efficiently and not be so easily incited to social unrest or revolt.

10 While the Society produced several brochures, the most widely distributed seems to have been Plans and Suggestions for Dwellings Adapted to the Working Classes, including the model house for families built by command of His Royal Highness the
detailed construction recommendations (Figures 2 and 3). While the justifications for these specific dwellings were often made on the grounds of their proclivity for health, comfort and morality, the pamphlets more stridently advocated these designs for their ability to turn a profit. In giving extremely specific building recommendations, the underlying goal of the pamphlets was to show how economy of construction could lead to a “sufficiently remunerative return on the outlay of capital.” For the potential investor, then, the “Model Dwelling House” signified not just the ability of capitalism to perform a much-needed social service, but also the possibility of a substantial monetary return on that investment. While the Society contended that practical, built examples were the best method for inspiring housing reform, the printed pamphlet was perhaps more effective than the model home in persuading those who actually had the capital to carry out this reform and construct new dwellings. It was in the pamphlet that the economic and social justification for housing reform was made and a proposed solution articulated. The model home, then, became an autonomous object whose symbolic value in the minds of the various viewers could flourish while its economic value was displaced into the accompanying written pamphlet.

This symbolic value was only enhanced by the model home’s proximity to the Crystal Palace, where the spectacle of the Great Exhibition effectively made the objects on display into commodities with significance that far surpassed their initial economic or material value. As Walter Benjamin succinctly put it, “World exhibitions propagate the


As discussed previously, British national identity was perhaps the most salient meaning overlaid onto these commodities by the spectacle of the exhibition. Not only did the exhibited objects come to signify national identity, but this British nationalism reciprocally became a new selling point for those products. As historian Thomas Richards notes, “From the Exhibition advertisers learned that the best way to sell people commodities was to sell them the ideology of England.”

The Great Exhibition exalted consumption and British national pride simultaneously, effectively establishing consumerism as the latest means of expressing and building nationalism.

The Crystal Palace invested a new level of social power in consumer culture, animating the commodity with an overflow of signification. Here, the commodity came alive. In an illustrated book on the Great Exhibition called *The House That Paxton Built* published in 1851, George Augustus Sala humorously caricatures these newly enlivened commodities—rum bottles grow arms and legs and smoke pipes, while pocket watches mount horses for a hunt (Figures 3 and 4). The architecture of the Crystal Palace seems to fall away in Sala’s book, as commodities burst out of their respective exhibits as autonomous objects with a life of their own (Figure 5). Afloat in this sea of commodities, the “Model Dwelling House” likewise teemed with signification as it drifted between the realms of the real and the unreal, the palpable and the imagined, the animate and the inanimate. In this model home, like the Crystal Palace itself, the architectural form became reduced, overshadowed as it was by the profusion of meanings and signification it had come to contain.

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13 Richards, 5.
For the potential dweller, the “Model Dwelling House” represented an example of nationalist pride through housing reform. For the potential investor, the house existed as a commodity with the potential to turn a profit. But for the majority of bourgeois viewers at the Great Exhibition, these two meanings came together in the “Model Dwelling House” as an example of the merits of a capitalist system. The house represented capitalism’s ability to perform a critical humanitarian service, while also securing a substantial monetary return for investors in such a project. Because of its display in the context of the Great Exhibition, where consumer culture was the overarching organizational and representational system, this model house and the housing reform it signaled were justified not so much by their philanthropic purposes, but rather by the capitalist system and the bourgeois class whose interests it served. Indeed, housing reform arguably became a national issue in mid-nineteenth century Britain not just because of a growing sense of moral responsibility to provide for those who could not help themselves, but also because policy-makers recognized the economic and political benefits of having a well-housed labor force. The “Model Dwelling House” and other architectural experiments into workers’ housing reform represented a response to the tumultuous decade of the 1840s and the bourgeois fear that poor housing could incite riot and revolution. Ultimately, as historian S. Martin Gaskell concludes, in Britain “model housing offered a direct means of social control.”

The “Model Dwelling House” thus falls in line with British public works projects in the mid-nineteenth century which equated a tidy city and hygienic living conditions with a politically stable and ordered society. Poor housing, it was thought, led to disease

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and degraded moral values among the working classes, which for middle-class observers was an alarming prospect. Disease, poor health, and the immorality and social unrest they could create were linked by a straight line leading, it was thought, directly towards revolution. Through such nineteenth century enquiries into the living conditions of the urban poor as Edwin Chadwick’s “Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain” of 1842, Friedrich Engels’ *The Condition of the Working Class in England* of 1845, and Henry Mayhew’s 1851 *London Labour and the London Poor*, bourgeois readers were encouraged to make the connection between the physical decay of the urban infrastructure and the growing alienation and unrest of the laboring class. For those emerging bureaucratic public works commissions in the nineteenth century, the “Model Dwelling House” at the Great Exhibition represented an attempt at improving the moral and physical well-being of the urban poor. Ultimately, however, this benevolent pretense was in the service of a larger goal to maintain social order, working to quell bourgeois anxieties over the possibility of a massive workers’ uprising.

At the Great Exhibition of 1851, the commodity held center stage. It was here that capitalism established commodity culture as the dominant form of representation. In this representational system, “Prince Albert’s Model Dwelling House” and the issue of housing reform it signified ultimately served as a form of social control under the rubric of nationalism. The humanitarian benefits enumerated in the printed materials accompanying the model house masked the larger purposes of the dwelling and others like it—housing reform was ultimately employed as a national issue in nineteenth century Britain as a means of upholding social order and middle-class interests. This duality of signification was reflected in the model house itself, which conjured different meanings
depending on the viewing subject. Ultimately, the “Model Dwelling House” became a stage set for a certain collection of working class values and accompanying social behaviors that nineteenth century British political leaders believed would stabilize the nation—a set of meanings that were set into motion by the model home’s position as a commodity within the context of the Great Exhibition.
Figure 1  “Model Workers’ Dwelling House,” designed by Henry Roberts, exhibited by the Society for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes in the name of Prince Albert. The Great Exhibition, London, Great Britain, 1851.
Figure 2  Page from pamphlet produced to accompany the "Model Dwelling House" exhibit, titled *Plans and Suggestions for Dwellings Adapted to the Working Classes*, showing detailed floor plans for the dwelling on exhibit, as well as how the unit could be duplicated to produce larger tenement buildings.
Figure 3  Detail from *Plans and Suggestions for Dwellings Adapted to the Working Classes* showing the recommendation of specific construction methods and building materials.

Figure 4  Detail from *The House that Paxton Built*, George Augustus Sala, 1851.
Figure 5  Detail from *The House that Paxton Built*, George Augustus Sala, 1851.

Figure 6  Detail from *The House that Paxton Built*, George Augustus Sala, 1851.
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