**‘To Fan the Ardour of the Layman’: *The Architectural Review*, The MARS Group and the Cultivation of Middle Class Audiences for Modernism in Britain, 1933-1940**

In March 1935 *The Architectural Review* (AR) included a new column entitled “Criticism” written by Professor C.H. Reilly. This new column had the express purpose of addressing an interested and engaged middleclass readership. As Reilly explained:

The articles are aimed not so much to elevate the understanding of the architect as to fan the ardour of the layman, who is to-day increasingly tempted to follow the current trends of architectural thought.[[1]](#endnote-1)

This interest in addressing a ‘layman’ readership had been a consistent feature of the magazine’s editorial policy since it’s founding in 1896. In 1901 the AR was described as ‘the only magazine in the British Empire dealing with the artistic, as distinguished from the business side of architecture’.[[2]](#endnote-2) The ‘business side’ was the preserve of the AR’s sister publication *The Architect’s Journal* (AJ), a weekly magazine that covered technical and professional themes for architects. From the late 1920s the AR’s interests in the broader artistic and cultural contexts of architecture and on readers outside of the profession were paired with a focus on modernism in architecture. In 1927 Hubert de Cronin Hastings took over the editorship of the AR and began to populate it’s pages with images and writing about the ‘New Architecture’ in Europe and Britain. Throughout the 1930s the AR acted as a site for the debate, definition and dissemination of changing ideas about what architecture was and what it could do. As such, the magazine participated in the shifting relationships between architects, the architectural press and the ‘layman’ readership in Britain.

Existing histories that consider the role of the architectural media in interwar British architecture focus on the form and content of the AR.[[3]](#endnote-3) They discuss what was written about and photographed and by whom. For instance, Andrew Higgott argues that the pages of the magazine edited, framed and presented architecture in such a way that they were not simply ‘representing the reality’ but were constructing a reality of architecture.[[4]](#endnote-4) Building on this analysis of the constructive role of the architectural media, this article will shift the focus from what was written and by whom, to consider instead the imagined reader for whom it was written.

Actual evidence of the magazine’s circulation and readership during the 1930s is elusive. Between 1935 and 1940 the AR only sporadically published correspondence and in each of the rare instances that a letter was published it was always from a named architect rather than a ‘layman’. In late 1932 the AR and the AJ were involved in the campaign to oppose the demolition of Carlton House Terrace. The editors sent a letter to various public figures to gauge their opinions. The different respondents published in each magazine, reflected the differences in their projected readerships and specifically, articulated the AR’s focus on the cultural and artistic elite. The AR included a range of people from different professions, such Osbert Sitwell and Max Beerbohm, Kenneth Clark and Siegfried Sassoon. It also published responses from prominent modernists in the worlds of art and literature including Aldous Huxley, Clive Bell, Eric Gill and Hilaire Belloc. The AJ on the other hand only included responses from architects and Members of Parliament.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The archival records of the AR, which may have included records of subscribers and circulation, were lost during the various changes of ownership since the early 1980s. In 1970 Brian Hanson began researching the history of the AR and complied a chronological index of note cards that contain anecdotes and quotes about the history of the magazine from a series of interviews with past and current staff. This is the closest thing to an archive for the magazine that survives. Susan Lasdun has also conducted extensive interviews of the staff of the AR. In one interview, J.M. Richards, editor of the AR from 1935 to 1971, states that the AR’s circulation was between 14,000 and 16,000 when he joined the magazine.[[6]](#endnote-6) Whether this readership consisted of ‘layman’ or the more likely situation that it was made up largely of architects, does not lessen the significance of the magazine’s references to the ‘layman’ as their intended audience throughout the 1930s – articulated most explicitly in the case of the Criticism column.

The evidence that does survive, on which this research is based, is the printed magazine and the traces of the network of people that worked at the AR and their wider personal and professional interactions – in letters and the administrative archives of other organisations, particularly the Modern Architectural Research Group (MARS). Many members of MARS wrote for and worked at the AR, not least the magazine’s editors Hubert de Cronin Hastings and J.M. Richards. These traces situate the AR within a landscape of media concerned with cultivating a sympathetic and appreciative audience for modernism among a specific echelon of the British public. This article is not an attempt to provide a definitive map of discussions of modern architecture in the British media, but an exploration of the imagined or projected audience shared by the AR, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Penguin publishers and the MARS group. There is much existing research into the overlaps between the audiences of the BBC and Penguin books. This article aims to insert the AR and MARS into this existing picture and to contextualise their interest in the ‘layman’ audience as part of a broader shift in the relationship between culture and social class during the period.

Rather than seeking to interrogate the ‘real’ audiences for these media, this article is more concerned with the internal discussions of audience within these organisations. These reflections on who they should be addressing and why reveal the shared concern for cultivating a middle class audience to recognise and support the work of these organisations. I will call this imagined audience ‘The General Reader’. The BBC’s ‘middlebrow’, the ‘Penguin Public’ and the AR’s ‘layman’ were all manifestations of The General Reader. This facet of the middle class public was educated but not an expert, interested but not specialist, capable of thoughtful appreciation if not in-depth knowledge, of a subject. Through the cultivation of this audience, these media outlets aimed to raise the level of cultural awareness among the British public and gain legitimacy and cultural relevance for themselves and specifically in the case of the AR and MARS, for modernism in architecture.

J.M. Richards will form a central figure in this discussion. Richards was a member of the MARS group from 1934 and editor of the AR from 1935. He was a contributor to the publication *Circle* (an international review of the ‘constructive arts’ in 1937) and he appeared on BBC television and Radio from 1937 onwards.[[7]](#endnote-7) In 1937 Richards was commissioned by Allan Lane to write An *Introduction to Modern Architecture*, for the Pelican imprint of Penguin Books (see Fig. 1). This book, published in 1940, included an extended discussion of why it was necessary to cultivate a public audience for modernism in Britain.

Richards’ career was emblematic of the changing role of the media in architectural culture and of the preoccupation with developing an audience that would engage with and appreciate modernism in Britain. The emphasis was squarely on developing appreciation, not knowledge, which remained the preserve of architects. The role of The General Reader was to recognize and appreciate the specialist knowledge of the architectural profession. This article presents the promotion of modernism to The General Reader, as a facet of other cultural activities and changes in Britain.

**The role of the media in architectural culture (historiography)**

The discussion of AR’s place in the cultivation of a ‘General Reader’ in the 1930s builds on the work of architectural and cultural historians that have developed interdisciplinary approaches to architectural history and who argume that the architectural press does not *represent* architecture but rather, it *is* architecture. As Kestor Rattenbury has explained, ‘architecture’ is understood as ‘a construction’, which is ‘not just conveyed but actually defined’ by the ‘complex system of media representations’.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Andrew Higgott explores the notion of writing as a form of architectural production in its own right, as an equivalent to building, when he argues that ‘the qualities’ of J.M. Richards’ writing in the AR ‘were those of the world they attempted to bring into being: clarity, order, technical advancement’.[[9]](#endnote-9) Higgott concludes that under Richards’ editorship the magazine ‘had an enormous effect in formulating what Modernism was taken to be and taken to mean in Britain’.[[10]](#endnote-10) In a similar vein, Elizabeth Darling integrates an analysis of the content of magazines with reflection on the social and cultural context of the press. Darling describes the architectural press as ‘weapons’, used by ‘a small band of editors and journalists… in a campaign to modernise British architecture’.[[11]](#endnote-11) The AR in particular is often discussed in these terms - being referred to as a ‘mouthpiece of modernism’.[[12]](#endnote-12)

This conception of writing, editing and publishing as the practice of making modern architecture is pivotal to understanding the AR’s place in British culture during the 1930s. Importantly, the magazine was not just promoting a particular style of architecture, it was cultivating a role for architects, as experts, who would direct the public’s engagement with architecture. In this sense, modernism was not a style but a relationship between architects and the public

Sarah Williams Goldhagen argues that rather than thinking of modernism as a collection of formal characteristics, it should be understood as a discourse that allowed for variations and contradictions to coexist within it. Goldhagen defines a discourse as:

An extended expression of thoughts on a subject or related collection of subjects, conducted by a self selected group of people within a discrete set of identifiable social institutions, and lasting over a bounded… period of time.[[13]](#endnote-13)

This definition of a discourse, when applied to modernism, allows for the AR’s cultivation of a ‘layman’ readership to be included as a facet of the modernist project in British architecture. Eric Mumford has applied a similar idea to the work of Congres International d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM). He argued that rather than promoting a singular style, CIAM consistently sought a ‘new… socially transformative role for architects and architecture’.[[14]](#endnote-14) Mumford argued that modernism was not something that was simply accepted or rejected; rather it was an on-going discussion about ‘the relation of architecture to society’.[[15]](#endnote-15) Conceiving of modernism as a prolonged discussion of the architect’s relationship with the public outside of the profession explains the AR’s preoccupation with the ‘layman’ readership, even if the magazine continued to be consumed predominantly by architects.

The relationship between modern architecture and forms of mass media and communication that developed from the late nineteenth century is dealt with by

Beatriz Colomina, Shundana Yusaf and Hyungmin Pai. Colomina’s study of architecture and mass media focuses on architecture’s relationship with ‘the new means of communication… and the consumer age’.[[16]](#endnote-16) She argues that architecture as a discipline and profession in the first half of the twentieth century must be understood as a product of mass culture.[[17]](#endnote-17) Yusaf explores the physical and the abstract links between architecture and BBC radio.[[18]](#endnote-18) She argues that the non-visual medium of radio created a form of intangible architecture by separating architecture from its conventional qualities of materiality and visuality.[[19]](#endnote-19) Yusaf also considers how the BBC’s educational agenda impact on the discussion of architecture, often pairing it with gardening and Do–It-Yourself in order to make it accessible and appealing to their audience. Similarly, Pai discusses the changes in architectural media and representation in America within the context of the ‘radical change’ in the production and distribution of printed material.[[20]](#endnote-20) Pai argues that the new forms of books, magazines and catalogues that discussed ‘domestic and architectural matters’ and drew an audience from the growing Middle Class in the nineteenth century, were the beginning of a ‘mass culture of architecture’.[[21]](#endnote-21)

This context of a mass, middle class reading public engaging in issues of architecture was also present in Britain and formed the background to the AR’s activities in the 1930s. Pai’s discussion of the magazine *American Architect* (AA), offers a model for thinking about the AR. In 1929 AA was bought by Randolf Heart’s International publications, making it part of a ‘conglomerate of mass circulation magazines’, including *Good Housekeeping* and *Harpers Bazaar*.[[22]](#endnote-22) This formerly ‘professional’ publication was now competing with other magazines in the discussion of architectural themes for a middle class audience. In response, AA adopted the motto ‘selling architecture to the man on the street’.[[23]](#endnote-23) Pai argues that rather than selling architecture, they were selling the services of architects to the new audience of potential middle class patrons. This need to redefine and reassert the role of the architect in the context of a mass culture of architecture in America was articulated explicitly in the magazine *Pencil Points* in 1930, when they wrote: ‘the architect is like the layer or the physician, a professional man… his knowledge make him an expert in his field and makes his assistance of value to you’.[[24]](#endnote-24) The magazine was presenting the architect as a professional expert with a unique and valuable role within American society. At the same time in Britain, the AR’s interest in the layman readership was also a response to the shifting status of architecture and architects. Exploring the links between the audiences for the AR, MARs, the BBC and Penguin books, reveals the larger context of shifting relationships between culture and social class during the period.

The historians Ross McKibbin and James Hinton both argue that the interwar period in Britain saw a move away from acknowledging the ‘material underpinnings of class’[[25]](#endnote-25) - meaning distinctions based on wealth or income - to focus instead on the ‘the socially innocent language of likes and dislikes’.[[26]](#endnote-26) McKibbon argued that a new element developed within the middle classes; one which was ‘self consciously modern’ and defined itself in terms of specific cultural interests and civic responsibilities.[[27]](#endnote-27) McKibbin called this element the ‘model middle class’.[[28]](#endnote-28)

Hinton’s work in particular, offers a useful model for thinking about the relationship between ideas of culture and class in the work of Richards and his colleagues.[[29]](#endnote-29) He argues that the BBC, Penguin Books and other organizations, like the Left Book Club (and I suggest the AR and MARS) provided unprecedented access to high culture for a new group of people with education and leisure to appreciate it – this was a new kind of middle class, one not drawn from the traditional professions or defined by levels of income, but one which defined itself solely in terms of culture. Using responses to the 1939 Mass Observation survey about class, Hinton explains that many respondents used culture not to reinforce their class identity but to attempt to escape it or transform it in some way.[[30]](#endnote-30) These respondents rejected the structural correlation between culture and class and instead ‘saw class and cultural distinction as independent variables in the making of their identities’.[[31]](#endnote-31) Rather than following a strict division of high culture for the upper classes and mass culture for the lower classes, Hinton argues that British society was more fluid in its perception of the relationship between culture and class.[[32]](#endnote-32) Culture could be used to construct alternative identities to those prescribed by economic or social class. Hinton explains that many people claimed ‘intelligence’ as the only criteria for distinguishing people; he quotes a housewife from Portsmouth who said ‘the only barrier I recognise…is that between the intelligent and the ignorant’.[[33]](#endnote-33) Of course this was a denial of the social and structural divisions in the access to education and leisure time that this loosely defined category of ‘intelligence’ depended upon.

**Mapping the media landscape of The General Reader**

One of the clearest statements of the conflation of class and culture during this period was in the categories used by the BBC to classify different audience types. In a memo issued by the BBC Talks Department in 1938 these categories were described: Group A, were ‘intelligent and well-informed’, Group B *‘*the intelligent and not so well-informed’ and Group C ‘not so intelligent and most uninformed’*.*[[34]](#endnote-34) The memo characterised people in Group B having a university education, buying Pelican and Left Book Club books and reading the Picture Post.[[35]](#endnote-35) There was no reference to particular types of employment or income when describing these categories, they relied instead on cultural choices to articulate class distinction.

Contemporary commentators recognized the links between the audience of the BBC and of Penguin publishers throughout the 1930s. *The Times Literary Supplement* for instance described Penguin paperbacks as the ‘publishing equivalent of the BBC’ because of the similarity in their conception of and approach to their audience.[[36]](#endnote-36) Penguin publishers and its’ non-fiction branch Pelican were founded on the belief that there was ‘a vast reading public for intelligent books at a low price’ in Britain.[[37]](#endnote-37) A Mass Observation survey in 1946-47 characterized this ‘vast reading public’- which they termed ‘The Penguin Public’- as under 40, university educated, belonging to a local library, interested in books and politically conscious.’[[38]](#endnote-38) In turn J.C. Stobart, head of the BBC’s Education Department said in 1930 that there would be‘no distinctions between brows, high or low, because I believe that both extremes are abhorrent to the clientele I envisage’.[[39]](#endnote-39) This clientele existed between the traditional divisions of High and Low culture. The BBC were catering for and thus cultivating a middle ground – or a middlebrow.

The AR insisted on its own place among these organisations. In 1947, looking back at fifty years of the magazine, the editors wrote:

The Review has been alone in supplying undiluted ‘Third Programme’ for half a century, without asking for or without getting a single round of applause (like that given to BBC after just 13 weeks)[[40]](#endnote-40)

The editors emphasized the magazine’s long history of targeting a ‘layman’ audience. Yet the AR’s involvement in the cultivation of ‘The General Reader’ really began with the appointment of Hubert De Cronin Hastings as executive editor in 1927. John Gloag said of Hastings that ‘he was the first really to introduce modern journalism into trade papers’.[[41]](#endnote-41) Under Hasting’s direction, and latterly with J.M. Richards as editor, the AR began actively cultivating a one-way communication between architects and an imagined middle class audience.

The Criticism column was perhaps the most explicit example of the AR’s preoccupation with addressing the ‘layman’, but there were also overlaps between the content of the magazine and material produced by other publishers intended for a layman readership. For instance, in 1934 Philip Morton Shand wrote a series of articles for the AR titled ‘A Scenario for Human Drama’. The series sought to contextualise modernism through the history of architecture. Dividing the history into three phases - ‘From Gropius to Behrens, from Behrens to Ruskin and from Ruskin to Soane’ - Shand traced the development of modernism over time, arguing that it was the inevitable evolution of architecture in response to changing social and cultural values.[[42]](#endnote-42) Two years later in 1936 Faber and Faber published Nikolas Pevsner’s *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius*. In his forward to the first edition, Pevsner acknowledged the considerable overlaps with the ideas in Shand’s ‘Scenario for Human Drama’ articles:

I did not know of P. Morton Shand’s excellent articles… until I had almost finished my research. The fact that his conclusions coincide in so many ways with mine is a gratifying confirmation of the views put forward in this book.[[43]](#endnote-43)

The AR’s focus on the General Reader intensified from 1935 with the arrival of J.M. Richards (he had worked at the AJ since 1933). In his first full article for the magazine titled ‘Towards a Rational Aesthetic’, Richards argued that ‘these creative activities’ meaning the work of modern architects, ‘cannot be considered as the temporary mood of an artistic sect, but are, on the contrary, an essential part of the cultural development of our time’.[[44]](#endnote-44) Richards’ interpreted the task of journalists and editors, to be one of interpreting the principles of modernism for a public readership, in order to cultivate an appreciative audience among the British public.

Richards was consistently preoccupied with the issue of audiences. For instance, he was involved in the publication *Circle* (a review of ‘Constructive Art’ edited by Leslie Martin, Naum Gabo and Barbara Hepworth) and in September 1936 he wrote to Martin enquiring about the imagined readership of the publication. Richards queried ‘do you intend to appeal to the general public, or to a limited especially well informed (aesthetically and architecturally) public? Do you want to be specialized or general? How elementary?’[[45]](#endnote-45) Among the numerous letters in Martin’s archive relating to *Circle*, Richards was the only contributor to ask such detailed questions about the audience and the consequent tone and content of the writing. Martin then picked up on his theme of the public audience for modernism in his essay in *Circle*. He insisted that it was essential modern architecture became popular because:

It is only through common acceptance – conscious or unconscious – on the part of the public, that architecture and the arts can again become an integral part – a formative influence – in the life of society.[[46]](#endnote-46)

The cultivation of the General Reader was not simply a matter of promoting a particular style of modern architecture, but of establishing a section of the public that would support the expertise and authority of modern architects and allow them to continue in their work.

In 1937, when Richards was commissioned by Allen Lane to write *An Introduction to Modern Architecture* for the Pelican imprint of Penguin books, he took up this issue again. Richards explained that he and his colleagues sought a ‘layman’ readership because unlike other artists who could make art in their studios ‘whether the world welcomes it or no’, the architect was dependent on the society around them for the opportunity to make their art.[[47]](#endnote-47) ‘The future of architecture lies eventually’ Richards said ‘in what kind of buildings people demand’.[[48]](#endnote-48)

This bore some relationship to discussions in the 1930s about standards in British design and manufacturing, particularly the Design and Industries Association (DIA). The DIA organised publications and exhibitions aimed at improving the judgment and taste of the British public for fear that British manufacturing was lagging behind the rest of Europe due to lack of ‘good’ designers and the poor taste of the British consumer. However, unlike the DIA, which focused on commercial motivations, Richards’ architectural criticism emphasized the broader intellectual motivation of creating authentic architecture for the time.[[49]](#endnote-49) Richards’ point was that the public’s appreciation of modern architecture was central to the quality and validity of Britain’s architectural culture. He argued that it was the critic’s role to explain modernism to people so that they could engage with and appreciate it. This was not simply a case of presenting the public with the right and wrong aesthetic; it was a process of developing an appreciative sensibility among particular groups in British society.

The obstructions posed by a lack of appreciation for modernism in Britain had been highlighted by the ‘Ruislip incident’ in 1933-34. The ‘Ruislip incident’ was a clash between architects Connell, Ward and Lucas and the local planning authority in Ruislip. Connell, Ward and Lucas had their design for two houses rejected by the planning committee of the local authority for being ‘consciously modern’ and ‘deliberately odd’.[[50]](#endnote-50) The MARS group, which was founded that same year, interpreted this ‘incident’ as a rejection of the principles of modernism from public building contracts. They declared ‘ignorance’, ‘pure conservatism’ and ‘legislative obstruction’ as ‘hindrances to the application of modern building techniques’ and resolved to tackle them via a programme of ‘exhibition and press discussion’[[51]](#endnote-51)

When it was founded the MARS group’s aims had been orientated towards the architectural profession and establishing new practices of design. The group was set up by Sigfried Gideon, Philip Morton Shand and Wells Coates to act as the British arm of CIAM. An announcement of the aims and principles of the group was published in *The Listener* in July 1933 in which the group was described as being ‘united by a common realisation of the necessity for a new conception of architecture and its relation to the structure of society today.’[[52]](#endnote-52) The choice of the BBC’s publication *The Listener* as the site of the announcement and the articulation of their interest in the relationship between architects and the public, firmly place MARS within the media landscape of The General Reader. The Ruislip incident and another disagreement over a block of flats designed by Grey Wornum in 1936, intensified group’s attention to audiences outside of the architectural profession.

Throughout the 1930s the MARs group became increasingly active in the areas of

publicity and what they termed propaganda. A month after the Ruislip result, the group published a report on policy and a programme for the coming year’s work, which set out their approach to propaganda in five areas: (i) letters and articles in the press, (ii) exhibitions (which would include photographs, drawings and models), (iii) lectures both within the group and for the public.[[53]](#endnote-53) Then in 1936 the group established a dedicated press committee, consisting of John Summerson, Philip Morton Shand and J.M. Richards. The committee’s duties were set out as follows:

1. Keep technical press informed of MARS activities
2. Take part in controversies
3. Keep in touch with the BBC
4. Make as many personal contacts as possible[[54]](#endnote-54)

MARS was coming to see the promotion and propaganda as one of its principle tasks and it was actively aligning itself again with the BBC and the architectural press. This shift in focus complemented MARS’s definition of modernism as ‘a new conception of architecture and its relation to the structure of society’; promotion and propaganda were the tools for realigning architecture and society through the process of cultivating an appreciative audience.[[55]](#endnote-55)

This was not simply a matter of appealing to an existing audience; it involved constructing and cultivating a new cultural identity for a specific facet of the British middle class. James Hinton work is again useful here for interpreting the active cultivation of the General Reader by these various media organisations. Hinton uses Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of culture and social class to argue that descriptions of cultural distinctions in Britain at this time were not simply reflections of existing class positions, but evidence of the active cultivation of class identity based on culture.[[56]](#endnote-56) This idea that culture not only reflected but cultivated class identity is central to understanding the work of architects and architectural journalists in the media during this period. Thus when the BBC described the target audience for the Talks Department as ‘Group B… the intelligent and not so well-informed’, it was not simply describing an existing group but actively engaging in the cultivation of a class-based cultural group.

The deliberate cultivation of this specific cultural identity through the media relied on a particular understanding of how culture functioned. This was explained in Maxwell Fry’s description of the arguments among MARS members over the format of the group’s exhibition (planned throughout the 1930s and eventually opened in 1938). He described the members’ different ideas about the level at which the exhibition should have been pitched:

Some of the group wanted a popular exhibition and thought in terms of the Daily Mail (Ideal Homes Exhibitions) and so on. I was violently opposed to that and so was Tolek (Lubetkin)… we argued that if you wanted to disseminate information, you had to disseminate it at the highest level and let it disseminate downwards through the schools. To go direct to the public would have been a pure disaster.[[57]](#endnote-57)

Fry and Lubetkin’s position with regard to the exhibition was based on a model of culture in which a minority cultural elite at the ‘highest level’ decided which ideas were culturally valuable and relevant, these were then disseminated down through the rest of society in various ways, including promotional material such as the MARS exhibition. This elite was responsible for the maintenance of standards therefore, Fry and Lubetkin argued, if modernism were to gain legitimacy and relevance, it had to first convince the cultural elite. This again marks a difference from the DIA, which held exhibitions in Charing Cross station and was therefore presenting material to a much broader spectrum of the public.

The model of culture described by Fry and Lubetkin was common among intellectuals during this period. For example, in an article for the AR in 1933, titled ‘What is Wrong with Architecture’, the poet W.H. Auden emphasised the particular responsibilities of some sections of society. Auden acknowledged that architecture impacted equally in ‘the drawing room and the servant’s hall’, but he insisted that the educated classes had a particular responsibility to engage with architecture, characterizing this class as people who: ‘had a suburban home, had been educated at boarding schools and universities, spent holidays in lodgings by the sea and visited old churches on a bicycle’.[[58]](#endnote-58) Again a language of lifestyles and cultural choices was used to articulate class identity and a place within a cultural hierarchy.

Richards subscribed to this model of meritocracy, however, he believed that a culture of ‘expertise’ would overcome social class as the basis of British culture. He would have agreed with the point T.S. Eliot made in his 1948 essay, *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*, that ‘all positions on society should be occupied by those who are best fitted to exercise the functions of the positions’.[[59]](#endnote-59) The AR and MARS were presenting architects as experts who were ‘best fitted’ to guide the layman audience. This careful preservation of the difference between appreciation and knowledge constructed The General Reader as a figure that would appreciate the knowledge of the architect.

Richards was particularly interested in the second phase of this cultural structure – the dissemination of the ideas from the expert to the cultural elite and then to the rest of society. He argued that the MARS exhibition had to be clear and accessible to the layman audience, which meant avoiding things that ‘though quite clear and ordinary to us “cranks” may sound a little highbrow to the people whose interest we want to catch.’[[60]](#endnote-60) This meant that architects had to present modernism in a way that was accessible in order to cultivate a middle class audience that could appreciate it. Richards was anxious for modernism in architecture to make the transition from the *‘*adolescent stage as the conscious cult of an intelligentsia’ to the mature stage of being‘the unconscious expression of culture’.[[61]](#endnote-61) He explained that the work of MARS, of the AR and other organizations was based on the idea that:

A wide acceptance in the first place demands a wide understanding; so one of the necessary tasks of the modern school of architects, when they join together in collective activity, is the simple one of propaganda.[[62]](#endnote-62)

In this ‘simple’ task of propaganda the cultural elite employed visual and material culture as props or signs that could be used to construct and signify the identity of the General Reader.

**The Isokon Penguin Donkey and the MARS Exhibition: the material culture of The General Reader**

As McKibbon argued, the ‘Model Middle Class’ actively defined itself in terms of cultural activities. The BBC, Penguin, the AR and MARS - were aware that people used culture in the ‘making of their identities’ and consciously offered themselves as tools for the cultivation of the class specific cultural identity.[[63]](#endnote-63) This cultivation is evident in this image of a magazine rack and its contents, which appeared in the ‘Bulletin of Standard Design’ to the AR in January 1940 (see, Fig. 2). The rack encapsulates the cultural identity being offered by the various organizations and publications that are pictured. The AR, *The Times* newspaper, *The New Statesman and Nation*, Penguin paperback books and what looks like (but can’t be confirmed as) a copy of the BBC’s magazine *The Listener*, are all crammed together in the rack, made by the Isokon company in 1939. This presents a picture of the cultural life of a particular type of person that these media sought to cultivate amongst the British middle class. The image itself was cut tight in on the object, showing no specific context or domestic surround. This leave the image blank for the reader to insert the object, as a signifier of this cultural and class identity, into their own individual context. The Donkey (as the rack was called), illustrated a lifestyle that, the image suggests, could be adopted by anyone who was willing and intellectually able. The photograph of the magazine rack aligned the publications with the modernism of the Isokon company and vice versa: it was an act of mutual promotion for the manufacturer and the publications.

The activities of the individual publications also contributed to the material culture of the General Reader. For instance, Penguin books were not expensive enough to be precious but they were designed to be desirable. Their design, especially their colour-coded covers, made them immediately identifiable and conducive to display. The 1947 Mass Observation survey, which coined the term Penguin Public, also found that many readers collected, displayed and swapped their Penguin paperbacks.[[64]](#endnote-64) A Penguin paperback came to signify the identity of the General Reader – modern but not avant-garde, intellectual but not academic, cultured but not elite. Penguin books were sold on railway station platforms and they fitted easily into a suit pocket, a brief case or a handbag, to be read during the daily commute. The inter-war period saw a rapid expansion of suburban living and the twice-daily commute created new leisure time for a particular class of suburban resident, which Penguin books were targeted to fill.

Penguin collaborated with the BBC to create new cultural habits for the General Reader.[[65]](#endnote-65) In 1937 they broadcast a series called ‘Design in Everyday Things’, which consisted of discussions between experts, the series was accompanied by Penguin publications that contained questions and talking points for the audience. Audiences were intended to listen to the broadcasts in groups and then discuss and debate the issues raised by the experts. Again this rests on the structure of culture in which experts guide the interested and appreciative middle class public. The BBC Third Programme and Penguin paperbacks provided the tools with which members of the audience could form a cultural identity. These activities and the identity of the General Reader were focused on the home – books displayed in bookshelves in the living room, the Isokon Penguin Donkey next to your armchair, the radio in the corner – this was a middle class, domestic lifestyle that was being aligned with modernism.

In their 1938 exhibition the MARS groups created an environment to promote the cultural identity of The General Reader. In particular, the model living room in the final room of the exhibition was a manifestation of this alignment of modernism and middle class domesticity (See Fig. 4).

The exhibition consisted of two large rooms, linked by a corridor with a small garden installation in the centre.[[66]](#endnote-66) The exhibition was titled ‘The New Architecture’ and held in the New Burlington Galleries in January 1938. The rooms and corridor were organized around the themes of ‘Commodite, Firmeness and Delight’ – a phrase taken from Henry Woolton’s translation of Vitruvius. The first room of the exhibition was dedicated to Commodite, defined as ‘convenience and fluency in design’ – it referred to the principles of modern architecture. In this room MARS demonstrated the principles of modern architecture by exploring work in housing, work, leisure, service to the community and town-planning. Firmeness, defined as ‘strength with economy and precision’ referred to the vocabulary and techniques of modern architecture and was dealt with in the corridor of the exhibition, where dioramas on concrete construction, explained the language of modern architecture. Finally, Delight was the topic of the second room. It was defined as ‘pleasure in space, surface, rhythm’ and referred to the aesthetics of modern architecture and included a model living room.

The MARS exhibition was designed to promote the principles of modernism as integrated into middle class culture. The small garden section with a pergola, garden furniture and a small piece of lawn, contrasted with the perception that modern architecture was the opposite of the British ideal of a house and garden – the message was that modernism could have gardens as well (see Fig. 3). It was showing the coexistence of modernism with existing cultural values. On the wall surrounding the model living room was a description of the space as ‘not a machine; not a space for conforming to fixed routine but a harbour for relaxation and a background’. This was a direct reference to Le Corbusier’s description in ‘Vers Une Architecture’ of the house as a machine for living. MARS sought to counter the misrepresentation that modernism rejected the domestic interior, they presented an image of modernism that embraced ‘differentiated needs’, history and individuality within the home.[[67]](#endnote-67) It was again reconciling the principles of modernism with middle class lifestyles. The model living room contained ‘electric fire, radio and television sets, bookshelves and a gramophone’ and could be the setting for ‘some modern abstract painting and sculpture and for an antique Siamese head’.[[68]](#endnote-68) This was an interior for the particular culture and lifestyle of the General Reader, now also associated with an appreciation of modernism in architecture.

The books, the writing desk, the modern media, modern furniture and eclectic art all combined to form setting or a ‘background’, on to which the visitor could project themselves; the living room was a space that the visitor could imagine themselves living in, an identity they could adopt. By creating this interior space, the MARS group was creating an identity that the visitor could use to become someone who appreciated modern architecture. As the MARS members themselves explained in the catalogue, the form of the exhibition, as much as its’ content, was intended as a persuasive tool ‘in this exhibition we have tried to put modern architecture before you in the form of a consistent, self explanatory statement, in a setting sympathetic to the spirit of the movement’.[[69]](#endnote-69) Le Corbusier reviewed the exhibition for the AR and commented on its’ persuasive effect:

What strikes one particularly in this exhibition is the elegance, the intimate eloquence of its sequence of presentations, none of which could possibly alarm anybody. The visitor is led by the hand and almost imperceptibly finds himself convinced by one after another.[[70]](#endnote-70)

This could be read a somewhat back handed compliment from Le Corbusier, perhaps he was suggesting that the exhibition was too tame, when he said it could not ‘possibly alarm anyone’. However, if he had been criticizing the exhibition, the intimacy of its design and the subtle persuasiveness were both intended to appeal specifically to the General Reader, not to the architectural profession. The exhibition was creating an environment with which to cultivate The General Reader and to persuade them of the value of modernism in architecture.

In the last room of the MARS exhibition there were photographs of anonymous men and women, accompanied by the words:

You – Businessmen, Housewives, Week-Enders, Doctors, Teachers, Industrial Workers – we claim your loyalty for an architecture worthy of this age and worthy of the future.[[71]](#endnote-71)

This final section presented the idea that the class identities denoted by these different occupations could be overridden by the cultural identity of someone who appreciated modernism in architecture. This further aligned MARS and the AR with the BBC and Penguin books in the conception of their audience in terms of a cultural identity, presented independently from the economic determinants of social class.

**Conclusion**

The cultivation of The General Reader, to act as an appreciative audience for modernism, was central to British architectural culture in the 1930s. The emphasis on ‘appreciation’ preserved the authority of experts and the role of the media as a bridge between expert and layman. Architectural media was not simply recording and reflecting the reality of architecture, it was not auxiliary; it was actively defining and promoting modernism in Britain. As the image of the Isokon magazine rack filled with books and magazines attests, the architectural media were actively cultivating an identity for a specific facet of the British middle class, which was based on cultural determinants rather than material conditions. Considering the AR and MARS in relation to these broader trends in culture and media suggests that modernism was defined as much by what was published, broadcast and exhibited about architecture, *and for whom*, as it was by what was built.

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2. Unattributed quote in *The Card Index*, compiled by Brian Hanson, (1970), courtesy of Susan Lasdun, p.13 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See for example Richard Hollis, ‘Building a Graphic Language’, in *Eye*, 7, (Summer, 1998), p. 40-46 and Robert Williams, ‘Representing Architecture: The British Architectural Press in the 1960s’, in *Journal of Design History*, 9, 4, (1996), pp. 285-296. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Andrew Higgott, *Mediating Modernisms: Architectural Cultures in Britain*, (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. ‘Chaos in Carlton Gardens’, in *The Architect’s Journal*, (21st December, 1932), p. 796 and ‘A Partner with the Enemy’, in *The Architectural Review*, (January, 1933), p. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. J.M. Richards, Interview, (1990), Tape Recording Courtesy of Susan Lasdun. The Audit Bureau of Circulation does not hold records for the AR before 1959. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. J.M. Richards, *Memoirs of an Unjust Fella,* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980),p.120 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Kestor Rattenbury, ed. *The is Not Architecture: media Constructions*, (Routledge, 2002), p. xxii [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Higgott, *Mediating Modernisms*, p. 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Higgott, *Mediating Modernisms* p. 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Elizabeth Darling, *Reforming Britain: Narratives of Modernity Before Reconstruction*, (Abingdon: Taylor Francis, 2007), p. 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Peter Draper, ed., *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Goldhagen, ‘Something to talk about: Modernism, Discourse, Style’, in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 64, 2, (June, 2005), p. 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourses of Urbanism, 1928-1960*, (MIT Press, 2000), p.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Mumford, *CIAM Discourses*, p.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*, (MIT Press: 1996), p. 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity*. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Shundana Yusuf, *Broadcasting Buildings: Architecture on the Wireless, 1927-1945*, (MIT Press: 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Yusuf, *Broadcasting Buildings*. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Hyungmin Pai, *The Portfolio and The Diagram*, (MIT Press: 2004), p. 9 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Pai, *The Portfolio and The Diagram*, p. 16 [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Pai, *The Portfolio and The Diagram*, p.143 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Pai, *The Portfolio and The Diagram,* p.146 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. ‘The Value of the Architect’s Service’ Pencil Points, (January, 1930), p. I, in Pai, *The Portfolio and The Diagram*, p. 146 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. J. Hinton, ‘The “Class” Complex’: Mass Observation and Cultural Distinction in Pre-War Britain’, *Past and Present,* 199, (May, 2008), p. 213. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Hinton, ‘The “Class: Complex’, p. 211. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
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28. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p. 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Hinton, ‘The “Class” Complex’, p. 226 [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Hinton, ‘The “Class” Complex’, p.227. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. N. Luker, ‘Talks Department Memo’, 1938, in, Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcastings: Volume One 1922-1939 Serving the Nation*, (Basil Blackwell, Oxford: 1991), p. 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. <http://www.penguinbooks75.com/original10.html>, Accessed, 16/8/13. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. A. Lane, *The New Left Review*, May 1938, in Jeremy Lewis, *Penguin Special: The Life and Times of Allen Lane*, (Viking: 2005), p.122. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
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47. J.M. Richards, *An Introduction to Modern Architecture*, (Penguin: 1940), p. 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. See S. Hayward, ‘Good Design is a Matter of Common Sense: Questioning the Meaning and Ownership of a Twentieth century Orthodoxy’, *Journal of Design History*, 11, 3, (1998), pp. 217-233. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
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60. Letter from J.M. Richards to MARS group, 26 November 1936, in, *Godfrey Samuel Papers*, RIBA Archive, London, SaG/91/1. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. J.M. Richards, ‘Architecture and The Public’, *The Architectural Review,* (May 1937), p.203. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Richards, ‘Architecture and Public’, p. 203. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Hinton, ‘The “Class” Complex”, p .226. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Courage, ‘Mass Observing Penguin 1946-47’. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. R. Johnson, ‘Penguins for the Masses’, Research Paper at *75 Years of Penguin Books Conference, Bristol University*, 29th June 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. The exhibition was designed by Misha Black. In 1934 Black had written an article in the AR about exhibition design in which he stressed the importance of unity of design and message in the design of an exhibition. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. ‘MARS Exhibition: the Pictoral Record’, *The Architectural Review*, (March, 1938), p.109. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. ‘MARS Exhibition: the Pictoral Record’, p. 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. *MARS Catalogue*, 1938, p.6. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Le Corbusier in ‘MARS Exhibition: Pictoral Record’, p.110. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. ‘MARS the Pictoral Record’, p.113. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)