

the iconic house

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Thames & Hudson

1961

BASIL SPENCE

SPENCE HOUSE BEAULIEU, HAMPSHIRE, ENGLAND

To some, Basil Spence was one of the most talented, innovative British architects of the 1960s and '70s, the author of a series of experimental and iconic buildings, including Coventry Cathedral and Hyde Park Cavalry Barracks. To others, he was a serial iconoclast, creating 'brutalist' buildings that alienated those he should have served, including the residents of his Gorbals tower blocks in Glasgow. There are few architects who provoke such division, such contrasting opinions, as Spence.

His admirers pronounce him deeply misunderstood and underrated, unjustly tainted by the failure of his Glasgow housing projects. They point not just to Coventry Cathedral, but also to more modest projects, such as Spence's own family house at Beaulieu. Here, the architect created an elegantly conceived, Scandinavian-influenced home in the Hampshire countryside, overlooking the Beaulieu river.

A keen boatsman, Spence was drawn to the site partly because of the easy access to the river and from there to the waters of the Solent. It is certainly a bucolic and seductive spot, surrounded by mature trees that seem to wish to envelop the house in a green canopy. On this site Spence designed what was essentially a raised timber box, supported by two brick walls, allowing the flat-roofed structure to cantilever over a section of the swimming-pool terrace at the front of the building.

Originally, the first-floor timber unit – which maximizes the views out across the landscape –

contained all the main accommodation, with bedrooms and bathrooms to the rear and living room to the front, dominated by a sculptural fireplace in stone and brick. Spence used the undercroft of the building for workshop spaces and as a storage zone for his boat, thus creating a house of sophisticated simplicity with a strong sense of connection to its riverside site.

Later, recognizing the need for more space, he converted the ground-floor workshops into a dining room and kitchen, while adding an extra bedroom on the upper level. He also designed a spiral staircase, encased in a timber cylinder, which was added to one side of the house to connect the two floors.

Inside, the house was Scandinavian in feel: the living room, for example, mixed timber floors, walls and ceilings with the row of glass windows opening out to the river beyond and overlooking the pool terrace below. The house at Beaulieu has been compared with the work of Alvar Aalto and Arne Jacobsen, and one sees in the building a sensitivity to natural materials and landscape that very much echoes the work of the Scandinavian masters, and seems in contrast to the grand monumentality of some of Spence's public projects and housing schemes.

With great modesty, the flamboyant, cigar-smoking, bow-tie-wearing Spence himself described his country escape – built at the height of his fame and a year after his knighthood – as a 'shack'. In the end, he and his family only used it for around five years, and in the 1970s the architect retired to Yaxley Hall in Suffolk, a country house dating back to the sixteenth century – a curious choice for a Modernist pioneer.

While Spence's 1960s high-rise housing schemes, such as the Gorbals towers, have been widely lambasted and discredited, the house at Beaulieu provokes a very different reaction. Its influence has made itself felt upon the work of a new generation of English architects – including John Pardey, who recently restored the Spence House and added a wing to it for a private client. Original houses by Pardey and others suggest a similar appreciation of context, site and materials, exemplified here by Spence while establishing a novel kind of contemporary English country house. Indeed, the timber 'shack' offers a prime example of sensitive, environmentally aware, rural architecture.



Biography

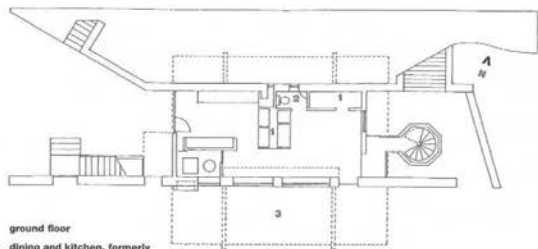
BASIL SPENCE (1907–1976)

Born in India, Spence studied in Edinburgh and London and worked in the office of Edwin Lutyens. He co-founded his first practice in Scotland – with early work influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement – before serving in the British Army during the Second World War. He founded Spence & Partners in the 1940s, working in a distinctly Modernist and sometimes 'brutalist' style. His crowning achievement was Coventry Cathedral, while later work took him on to an international stage.

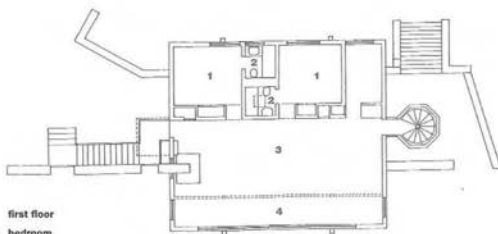
Key Buildings

Gribloch House Kippen, Stirling, Scotland, 1939
 Coventry Cathedral Coventry, England, 1962
 New Zealand Parliament Buildings Executive Wing/
 The Beehive Wellington, New Zealand, 1964
 Hyde Park Cavalry Barracks London, England, 1970
 British Embassy Rome, Italy, 1971





- ground floor**
- 1 dining and kitchen, formerly workshop and storage
 - 2 w.c.
 - 3 terrace



- first floor**
- 1 bedroom
 - 2 bathroom
 - 3 living area
 - 4 balcony

The emphasis on natural materials – especially timber – reinforces the Scandinavian flavour of the house. Spence's design also displays a particular sensitivity to site.

