

Finding William Morris in the Darlington Schoolhouse Project: Arts and Crafts Architecture, Historical Preservation and Ecosophy

In 1890, when Dudley Newton and his team of local craftsmen began building the Darlington Schoolhouse, they were working in the tradition of Arts and Crafts architecture which owed its inception and appeal largely to the work and writings of William Morris (1834-1896). Poet, novelist, designer, green-spaces advocate, and conservator of ancient buildings, Morris was the leading member of the Arts and Crafts Movement in England, and his vicarious connection to the historic Darlington Schoolhouse and its modern repurposing seems remarkably serendipitous.

Like many men of letters of his time, William Morris longed for a change that would bring a better life for the working poor living in the polluted cities of the industrial revolution. As a boy, Morris came to appreciate the beauty of the medieval landscape that lay before him in the castles and cathedrals scattered throughout the English countryside, and he developed a strong belief that life in the Middle Ages was in many ways better than it was in the nineteenth century. In his utopian fantasy novel of 1890, *News from Nowhere*, he describes a future England in the year 2152. Remarkably, although there are modern machines using clean energy, much about the place resembles the 14th century: there are no factories, people work with pleasure at hand-crafts and on farms, the rivers are clean, the air is without smoke and pollution and the architecture is both simple and beautiful, embracing historic designs, but “without copying of any one of these styles.” In 1859 Morris built a house to apply his architectural philosophy in practice. His friend, architect Philip Webb, designed the Red House, so-called because of the color of brick used in its design. Though it incorporates some recognizable medieval elements like pointed arches and high gabled roof lines, it was not simply an imitation of a gothic building. Vernacular in spirit with recognizable historical qualities, it was actually a total abandonment of past styles, and, like a medieval building, true to purpose, showing its interior plan with the structure of the outside walls. It achieved what Morris suggested when describing the goal of Architecture: “it will remember the history of the past, make history in the present, and teach history in the future.” Red House marked the advent of the “styleless movement” in architecture during the second half of the nineteenth century, what we today recognize as Arts and Crafts design, and it influenced architects in England, the Continent and the United States, including Dudley Newton.

In 1871, eighteen years before he began the Darlington Schoolhouse, Newton, designed a private home in Middletown, Rhode Island. For the young architect who had begun his own firm in 1866, the Jacob Cram house was his first important residential commission, and while it clearly shows itself connected to the vernacular “stick style” of the period, it achieves something original and imaginative, emphasizing structure over style. Noted architectural historian Vincent Scully observes: “As an expression of technique and social purpose it represents in wood an application of principles of Philip Webb and William Morris as exhibited in brick in the Red House of 1859.” The Darlington Schoolhouse took Dudley Newton farther down the Arts and Crafts path that he first blazed two decades earlier. First, the building has great fidelity to place: applying both local stone and shingle in his design, the Schoolhouse achieved the goal that Morris described as a people-built structure who used “the materials that were all around them in the fields and woods amidst them passed their lives.” Though it contains recognizable historical design motifs, Darlington is a building without style: the combination of the great stone base with its deep-set Romanesque

arches and wooden second-story with high-pitched gothic-gable gives the feeling that the building grew organically in stages over many years. The design of the Schoolhouse is also true to its purpose, and like a gothic building, the interior of the building can be discerned simply by looking at it from outside. The stair towers, for instance, are not disguised but are allowed as projections on the sides of the building without pretense. Finally, the Schoolhouse was built by a team of artisans. Part of a medieval building's greatness for Morris was the collective effort in its making and decoration. The medieval architect was not a professional trained to design in various styles, but the master of the guild, a worker-artist who designed with imagination and an understanding of the building materials to suit the purpose of the building. The craftsmen who worked along-side him were his equals, applying their own skills and art with freedom and pleasure in their labor. This was the hope for Arts and Crafts Architecture expressed by Morris: "It is this union of the arts, mutually helpful and harmoniously subordinated one to another, which I have learned to think of as Architecture." At the Darlington Schoolhouse, that philosophy seems to have prevailed. The dedication stone in the entrance hall identifies not only architect but the masons and carpenters who worked with him.

Today, we can look to the history of the Darlington Schoolhouse and its exemplary connection to William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement with a sense of pride and admiration for what was accomplished by those who came before us. But, Morris also speaks to us directly in our preservation and repurposing of this wonderful building. The Trail Conference has worked in conjunction with the New Jersey Historic Trust and Bergen County Historic Preservation Advisory Board to carefully ensure the integrity of the original building in the restoration. The new addition, though harmonious with the original structure, does not attempt to be an exact copy, rightly allowing the historic building its individual distinction. Morris would enthusiastically applaud this effort. In 1877 architects and artists joined with William Morris and John Ruskin to organize the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildingsⁱ to prevent the haphazard and historically insensitive "restoration" of buildings from England's past. Their argument helped to highlight the important role played by the old in the development of the new for Arts and Crafts architecture: "the untouched surface of ancient architecture bears witness to the development of man's ideas, to the continuity of history, and, so doing, affords never-ceasing instruction, nay education, to the passing generations, not only telling us what were the aspirations of men passed away, but also what we may hope for in the time to come." Morris would also cheer the repurposing of the Schoolhouse as the headquarters of an organization whose motto exemplifies the need for humans to connect with nature. Nature, for Morris, was the source and measure of all human art: "everything made by man's hands has a form, which must be either beautiful or ugly; beautiful if it is in accord with Nature, and helps her; ugly if it is discordant with Nature and thwarts her." The need to protect the environment from the pollution and development of the industrial enterprise was among his strongest arguments against the machine age and those who ran it against the greater interests of human society:

Until we have clear sky above our heads and green grass beneath our feet; until the great drama of the seasons can touch our workmen with other feelings than the misery of winter and weariness of summer; till all this happens our museums and art schools will be but amusements of the rich; and they will soon cease to be of any use to them also, unless they make up their minds that they will do their best to give us back the fairness of the Earth.

William Morris, were he alive today, would assuredly be a supporter of Trail Conference.



William Morris (1834-1896), the founding member of the Arts and Crafts Movement was an inspiration for Darlington Schoolhouse architect, Dudley Newton.



Dudley Newton, Jacob Cram House, Middletown, Rhode Island, (1872). "Styleless" Arts and Crafts, and the "stick" equivalent of Webb's Red House.



Philip Webb, Red House, Bexleyheath, U.K. (1859). Gothic flavor and spirit without any discernable style; historical, yet structurally modern.

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¹ The Society continues to support the principles expounded by Morris and to actively protect and restore buildings in the U.K.