

Making an entrance

Richard Porch reveals his fascination with front doors

I KNOW A CHAP WHO SAYS that the happiest sound in the world is the sound of his front door slamming behind him when he comes home of an evening. He also thinks the unhappiest sound in the world is that of it opening again the following morning. His front door is a barrier that secures his private realm and keeps the outer world at bay.

That's certainly one way of looking at the front door. There has been some awful nonsense written about them along the lines of: "if the windows are the 'eyes' of a house then the door is its 'mouth'", *etc.*

Front doors are culturally significant. Although at their most basic front doors simply control who comes in over the threshold of a building the type of building behind the door conditions what that front door looks like and the context within which it exists. Homes have different doors from public buildings. Personal wealth and status will be important factors.

Here's an image from 1930s Swansea. The front doors of the terraced houses in Aberdyberthi Street, Hafod, were constructed to keep out the dust from a copper slag tip.

The tip had been growing since the 1830s. Houses had been built up against it to house key workers employed in the nearby copper works. The houses are still there, but the tip went in the seventies. The original doors have gone, too, but if you look closely at the photograph you'll note the lack of letter boxes. Swansea people were not keen on these!



top Victoria Works, Dolgellau
below Aberdyberthi Street, Swansea (West Glamorgan Archive Service)

I look at front doors as first and foremost an aesthetic experience. Impact need not necessarily reside in grandeur or expense; some of the most attractive front doors I have ever seen have been nothing more than a humble timber or metal door set in a sea of rendered walling.

In places like Spain and Italy with their warm, benevolent

Mediterranean climates you will see plenty of very simple doors. They are often painted in warm, ochre colours and set into walls made from local volcanic tufa or brick and rendered in ways that the bright Mediterranean sunlight transforms into something picturesque.

Try that a few hundred miles north in the watery sunlight of a British winter and the result will just look downright shabby. Big, muscular statements tend to work better in Northern Europe.

There are doors in Aalborg and Aarhus in Denmark that demonstrate this. Sometimes, they feature whacking great decorative fanlights above a heavily carved door. At other times they emerge from a sort of rusticated ground-floor course of water-washed boulders that are both decorative and impart the required sense of solidity and security. The Danske Bank in Aalborg uses them to great effect. Such an approach contributes enormously to place-making too.

The actual front door can often be of rudimentary construction, second-hand and secured by the crudest of bolts. It may not even have a great paint finish; in the right climate it will still look prettily distressed.

If you go to places like Chipping Camden in the Cotswolds (*echt* William Morris territory) you'll see lots of old front doors emerging from the local warm fossiliferous stone. Frequently they look as though they belong on sheds not the fronts of houses. They have the dreaded "olde worlde" charm that is so deeply embedded in British culture.

What goes on behind the front door changes over time, too. What were once grand



left from top, Aalborg (Mir Jam Sibanc), Aarhus (Judith Porch), Aarhus (Judith Porch) Dublin (David Turner)
top Chipping Camden
above Sorrento, Rome, Edinburgh

private premises in the Georgian period have now become inscrutable corporate headquarters.

At Fitzwilliam Square in Dublin there are immaculately maintained front doors contained within classical door-cases made of timber and stone. Above them curve bat-wing fanlights whose glass is held in place with the thinnest of glazing bars. The doors are finished in a rich gloss paint; they have brass, classically-derived ironmongery. Behind them shelter solicitors, property developers, and the like.

Front doors like these exude an aura of respectability and

represent a quiet display of wealth and position, appropriate to a Georgian façade. Having said that, I've seen very modest late-Georgian terraces in North London, whose correspondingly modest front doors that still achieve a quiet dignity and grandeur at odds with the scale of the building behind. Aberaeron is good at this too. And in Tewkesbury there's a short terrace with narrow front doors. One house has a crude little canopy and the other does not. Both exude a jauntiness that belies their age and condition.

Other front doors control access to private gardens and



semi-public space. In Edinburgh's Old Town there are examples where impressively constructed doors are ornamented with metal studs and vision panels. The latter allow the owner to scrutinise callers and enable the visitor to see a controlled view inside. Although too small for anything but a particularly athletic cat to climb through, such panels are often barred – a nice Gothic touch. In addition, viewing panels are often set at a height which is just too high for a per-

top left Tewkesbury
right uPVC in Dolgellau
below left uPVC, Skewen
right Ruthin old town

son of average height to see in comfortably without standing on tip-toe. This draws attention to the caller in a busy street.

In context, such doors work as fortified entrances to a private kingdom beyond. They normally sit within the context of a high masonry wall and are frequently framed by nothing more than a simple stone moulding.

In Dolgellau I found a front door, which although of very humble construction, was perfectly suited to the building

behind it. It was in the old part of town, where the housing appears to have grown up organically around ancient paths and walkways. As I walked past a house named 'Victoria Works,' I saw a pale gray door and surround that appeared to emerge from the wall into which they were set. Six square window panels, each subdivided into rectangles of coloured glass, admitted light, and gave the door a sense of playfulness. Two rather chunky steps rise to the threshold of the door and



bring one to stand beneath a dauntingly heavy-looking lintel stone. As is typical in this part of Dolgellau, the stonework of the house is massive, as if built by giants.

Any look at front doors would not be complete without showing some of the uPVC variety. It's not a bit of good jibbing about these things; they are so numerous, they must be

above pavilion, Barcelona, designed by Mies van der Rohe
below entrance gate, Ruthin Craft Centre

represented. My examples are from Skewen, near Neath in South Wales. The photograph shows two varieties of uPVC door. The one on the left-hand side is marginally the less offensive.

In Skewen the predominant house-type is the terrace built from local Pennant sandstone. Many houses still have their original wrought-iron gates and railings, or what's left of them. These are often of a quite arresting, sub-Masonic looking, design. Although stone pavements have disappeared to be replaced by more easily removable tarmac, the short walk up to the front door is often still finished in decent quarry tiling. The quiet impact of the stonework, tiling and railings is completely shattered by the uPVC doors, whose remorseless modernity is graceless in the extreme. Even Dolgellau has not escaped them; I saw

one example (plus windows) sitting beneath a sequence of lintel stones of truly Brobdignagian scale which horrified me.

But the modern need not be equated with the garish or unsuitable. Front doors on very modern houses tend not to be celebrated. Perhaps the grammar of ornament which modernist houses reject does not require them to be anything other than a quietly signalled entrance that does not detract from the "edge-condition" (architectural jargon for the finish) of the façade. Such front doors might be signalled by nothing more than the black silicon gasketry around the edge where the door is secured to the rest of the glazed walling. They are often finished off by some discreet plastic or metal door handle of simple and understated design. The doors on much modern architecture are correspondingly neutralised in favour of overall impact.

However, the "front door" at Ruthin's new Craft Centre was commissioned as a piece of public art, the work of Brian Podschies, a jewellery designer. The result is a folding two-part mesh screen that responds cleverly to the challenge posed by the wide front entrance to the building. The structure allows maximum visual permeability into the internal courtyard while securing the building from intruders. It's inspired.

Ruthin has an old town, too, and it's a discovery. Aficionados of front doors will not be disappointed. The Old Town has a fine selection of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century classical front doors (and some earlier than that again) with superb door cases to go with them. I spent a blissful half-day last summer walking around Ruthin and would recommend a walk around the town and its castle to anyone.

photography by Richard Porch except where stated