IV
HEAVEN'S VERNACULAR

It has been asserted that a Protestant or puritan aesthetic was of importance in the North American colonies. The settlers possessed, we are told, *'a philosophy that was austere and a practical ethic that would not permit indulgence in luxury and the fine arts.'* The outcome was a 'functionalist' approach to design.

> *The principle of beauty as the natural by-product of functional requirement was given additional meaning by the Spartan circumstances of the colonial environment . . . the colonist was obliged to avoid the devotion to rich detail and elaborate adornment . . . aesthetic reward had to be found in the economy of means and purification of form to purpose, and from the soundness of proportion and the clarity of symbolic form that inevitably result.*[1]

Unfortunately for this argument, the colonist was already, before he or she arrived, a person likely to be avoiding the devotion to rich detail and elaborate adornment, and actively seeking out a perspicuous clarity of symbolic form. It was a major aspect of the immigrant's *habitus*, which their new situation reinforced, partly through necessity and partly through choice.

In this chapter I propose to examine the course of the Plain Style in the American colonies; this will be done under two main categorisations. The first will be the manners of design employed by what I shall call the radical Reformation, in which a strong current of utopian intention impelled the participants to push the plainness principle as hard and as far as it would go. The second will be the prolongation of the puritan *habitus* in the New World, as an aspect of a more general approach to design that is usually described under the heading of 'colonial' or 'federal' style. These basic categories, however, are not distinct entities; they are more like different directions that might be taken from the common starting point, which was the general demand for plainness and

perspicuity. I shall take four differing examples of radical or independent dissent, and one of 'colonial style' to compare and contrast with these different directions. It should go without saying that we are here concerned with a major qualifying factor in transatlantic design, rather than a single or unifying cause.

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I have so far used the idea of 'radical Reformation' and the 'leftward' tendency in reform in a loose way, because it was not necessary to make hard and fast distinctions between the different anti-Episcopalian and Congregationalist groups that existed outside or beyond established churches. But a good deal turns on these differences, especially where concepts of the state were concerned, and the kinds and degrees of individual self-responsibility that accompanied and defined the different kinds of radicalism.

Kenneth Davis has explored these distinctions with particular respect to the Anabaptist tradition, and cogently advances the idea of an 'independent' rather than 'radical' Reformation. The independence is defined as against what he terms the 'Magisterial Reformation' identified with Lutheran, and Calvinist traditions. Yet he is forced to conclude that

> *It is apparent that as yet there is no satisfactory precise generic term or single set of criteria that can successfully unite the independent dissenters – except in the negative sense of being independent, that is, not being Lutheran or Reformed . . . the differences between the principal groups within the Radical Reformation considerably outweigh any generalised similarities.*[2]

If this is so, for my general thesis to stand, I shall need to show that in some measure the theological differences appear in concrete forms and practices (in buildings, artefacts, clothing etc.),and in how these forms and practices changed or remained the same. The generalised similarities, of course, will persist, but whether they are outweighed by the specific differences depends partly upon one's stance. From outside independent dissent, all independent dissenters are likely to appear more or less the same, but from within, the differences between the groups may well be very sharp. Whether or not we tie our coats with tapes or fasten them with buttons seems a Lilliputian quarrel in the greater world, but it was a large matter amongst the

Mennonites, because buttons had come to stand for too great an attachment to the 'worldly', and from this much followed. During the eighteenth century buttons were frequently a marker of fashion and status. Likewise the slow departure from extreme plainness into an accommodation with the 'world', characteristic of the Quakers, needs some commentary. Significant differences also appear in such issues as gender and how it is perceived theologically, and in attitudes to such worldly matters as trade and the problems raised by technological advances.

It will also be necessary to set a distance between the deliberate and self-conscious vernacular styling of the independent dissenters, and the general use of vernacular models common to all the immigrants and colonisers, be they English, Scotch, Irish, Dutch, German or whatsoever, who built the way they did because they knew no other way, and adapted their knowledge to local circumstance and materials. This has a bearing on the study of folk culture. Henry Glassie, for example, has made a lucid analysis of different kinds of farmhouses and barns built by the settlers; from the point of view of the independent dissenters, however, these classifications served as a repertoire of possible models, rather than norms.[3] Some groups, like the Ephrata religious community, deliberately chose a retrospective, European model for their formal buildings, but others, like the Amish, were happy to go along with the general evolution of North American farm building, reserving their differences for other matters.

Moreover, the 'generalised similarities' can be both real and useful. It is possible to list several to which nearly all the independent dissenters would agree. These would include the stress on biblical authority, an ideal of the church as a voluntary fellowship of believers, a baptismal confession of an adult (rather than infant) kind, strong congregationally controlled discipline, a 'Sermon on the Mount' ideal of Christian conduct, and non-violent principles.[4] These were often conjoined with an initial expectation of the millennium, and belief that they were living in the Latter Days. To which I should want to add an absence of central authority structure in favour of decentralised 'meetings'. Whilst Anabaptists, Quakers and others had important leaders in their earlier days, in such figures as Menno Simons, George Fox, Conrad Beissel and Ann Lee, the mature communities had usually little formally structured centralised leadership.[5] This was generally replaced by a hierarchy of levels – some Shakers were more Shaker than others, and there were

recognised degrees of commitment. The Ephrata community divided itself into Solitaries, who were celibate and devoted themselves to religious contemplation and sacralised work, and the 'Householders' who surrounded and supported and worshipped with the central 'core' members. Amish youth are often encouraged to go out into the 'world' for a time; but once they are baptised, they are within the community for good.

What they also shared, of course, was the requirement of 'plainness'. They were all 'plain people' – a phrase that is still in use. They were all 'separated'; though not always in quite the same ways. But, as I hope to show below, all groups found ways in which beauty, visual display and delight in colour could thrive.

The location of authority is, as we have seen, a central issue, for it defined the standing of the 'intentional community'[6] toward the state and the state's requirements for conformity. To build and to make and to dress differently embodied a political intention that was founded on a religious conviction. We should think of independent dissent as being concerned with *Gemeinschaft* – community feeling created by consensus, folk tradition and religion, rather than *Gesellschaft* – order resting upon the rational will and convention and safeguarded by legislation embodied in the state.[7] The communities were attempts to retain, maintain and promote the first in the face of the growing force of the latter. This has been a difficult stance to maintain in the face of modernity; the Amish, in particular, have fought a subtle and sustained campaign to protect their community; this they call 'negotiating with Caesar'. The Amish defence of intra-community values has been studied extensively, like that of the Quakers before them, since it raises matters crucial to individual and group liberty in modern conditions.[8]

There is a further similarity amongst the independent dissenters which is well worth noticing; they did not (and do not) take so harsh a view of human sinfulness and fallen nature as did the more orthodox Reformers. In particular, they tended to reject predestination for a much more merciful and loving conception of the Divine; this did not make them less strict in their congregational discipline, but it seems to have made them less anxious. In this respect, this 'independent' Reformation' (and the imperfection of the term is granted) had a deal in common with some late medieval movements of reform which remained theologically more orthodox. Writers on this topic refer to the Waldensian background of some movements, to the 'Brethren

of the Common Life' and to the devotional tendency known as the *Devotio Moderna* whose remaining monument is Thomas a Kempis *The Imitation of Christ* (c.1420). This is especially the case with the Ephrata Community. A thorough examination of this matter must, however, remain outside this little book.

I propose to take three principal strands in the tradition of independent dissent and to look at them in their general similarity and specific differences, as it applied to artefacts and buildings. These will be Anabaptist, Quaker, and Shaker. All three of these developed first in the Old World before migrating across the Atlantic; all three had a definite attitude to building, personal appearance and group discipline. I shall also be comparing the Shakers to the followers of Conrad Beissel, at Ephrata, who became the Seventh Day Baptists.

I hope it will be sufficiently clear that I am not attempting more than a cursory history of these peoples, nor any kind of detailed social analysis. My concern has been throughout on the wider issues of plainness and perspicuity, and the contribution that the Plain Style has made to forming the broader practice of societies.

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The Anabaptists

Anabaptism as an organised body of believers has an obscure origin, amongst the followers of Huldrich Zwingli who brought about the reformation of the church in Zurich and later throughout much of Switzerland.

Some of his followers believed their chief was too willing to make accommodation with the temporal powers. The main question was whether or not pious believers might not set up their own church organisation without respect to the civic authorities; should the reformed worship be 'separated' or inclusive? By 1524 this had led to the foundation of the 'Swiss Brethren' and the declaration that only those who had come to Christ through the reform of their own souls could be said to be baptised '*into a newness of life*'.[9]

The Swiss Brethren were able to make common cause, over the next decades, with like minded groups, notably the Hutterite movements in Bohemia and Austria and a substantial number of Dutch congregations, led by Menno Simons from whom the term

Mennonite was derived. These Dutch in turn had English connections.

Their new life would manifest itself in new, pious behaviour – not only in faith, as Luther had been teaching. This required a turning of the whole will and intention of the soul toward virtue which was hard to square with doctrines of election and predestination. Thus the practice of adult baptism became tied into the principles of free will and of 'separation'. This in turn undermined the structure of civic or state authority by making membership of the 'true' church intentional. On 21 January, 1525, by rebaptising themselves, this group of reforming preachers recreated themselves as an organised separatist church. By such an act, as Davis summarises, they signified the end of a morally mixed society called Christian but obviously not truly Christian, and the creation of a spiritual entity separated institutionally from 'worldly' control whether papal or civil. This separated church could be identified by the conduct of its members as well as by its professions of faith, and that conduct included a rejection of the 'world'. Since this 'world' pre-eminently included civil authority it is not to be wondered that Anabaptism became, in the sixteenth century, a synonym for anarchy, and that Anabaptists were persecuted as a matter of routine, by all and every established church and state.[10] The demand that separation be visible and external as well as internal made Anabaptism *prominent*. Believers had to show in their outward conduct that they were inwardly different. This was true of all of the groups we are to consider.

How far distinctiveness should be pressed was the issue behind the division of the broad Anabaptist movement into its subsequent parts, and the emergence of the Amish sect in particular. The emerging Amish (followers of Jacob Amman) held out for a strong interpretation which included uniformity in dress. The crucial argument was about the scope and force of the *meidung* – the practice of shunning those who went against congregational authority.

Material differences in appearance, clothing and such were never as obvious within Europe as they became later in America, whither large numbers of the now quarrelling Anabaptists migrated in the early eighteenth century.[11] As John Hostetler makes clear, the differences were connected with essentially negative doctrines that stated what the Amish tendency was

against, and the actual practices were important symbolically, as signs of the emerging distinctions. In particular, dress, grooming and personal appearance were the visible and explicit signs of correct belief and social unity.

Such signs had to be maintained, as signs, because the signifier and the signified were one and the same. Without one you could not be the other. This extreme literalism has maintained Amish society with astonishing success, preserving aspects of the dress and folk arts of the Palatine States into the present day, and holding the people together through thick and thin. In Europe the followers of Jacob Amann were mainly reintegrated back into the larger Mennonite community, but in the American Colonies, especially Pennsylvania, they thrived.

They thrived because of their exclusiveness and self-reliance, which were an outcome of their theology. The principle of separation colours the Amish view of reality. The world is divided into two mutually antagonistic spheres – that of 'the world' and that of 'the people'. Because work is seen as a spiritual discipline, 'the people' are obliged to be very industrious.

At their baptism, Amish youth promise to obey the *Regel und Ordung* of the church community; these rules and regulations are not generally written down, nor are they uniform or always unchanging, but they have the character of taboos which are binding on everyone. They are arrived at and emended through a long process of earnest discussion. In detail they may appear absurd – no hats with less than a three inch brim, restrictions on outside pockets, no air-filled rubber tyres, no photographs etc. But considered in their totality they construct, in negative form, something very impressive, stable and dignified. The *ordnungen* have the effect of discouraging competitive pride, slowing down and consolidating social interchanges, and managing the very difficult interface with 'the world' (or, as Old Order Amish are wont to say, with 'the English'). They also regulate the acceptance or refusal of modern technologies, such as telephones, motor vehicles and, most lately, computers. The refusal of many modern conveniences is invariably on the grounds that they break up the web of *Gemeinschaft.*

That there should be no patterned wallpaper, statues or pictures for decorations, nor part-singing, fancy yard-fences, fashionable clothing, nor cosmetics, ensures that aesthetic pleasure is channelled and intensified into those practises that

are permitted – embroidery, communal singing, personal appearance, and building; i.e. all those practises that reinforce or signal group cohesion. All the major pleasures and artistic activities of Amish life are shared. Classically, these include communal embroidery 'bees' for the women, singing for young people, shared building enterprises (most famously, the barn-raising ceremonies), and group appearance. Each of these provides opportunity for individual achievement and leadership within the group.

Needless to say, photography is rejected; not as a technology but as an incitement to vanity. Amish may be photographed, but they may not normally pose to be photographed.

[This raised a problem for the Author. Having spent some time studying these people through history, I gained respect for them and found myself reluctant to take photographs of them and of their possessions. I have come to feel very strongly that their feelings should be respected, lest we turn a living community into a tourist commodity, a process already underway throughout Lancaster County.]

The visual habitus and material culture of the Amish has to be viewed, not as a survival of the past, but as the product of a process of self-definition in difficult circumstances.

Most, but not all, of their distinctive visual culture derives from and shows clearly their Germanic and eighteenth century origins, with the exception of their architecture. The Amish have been content to go along with the general pattern of Pennsylvanian farmhouse building, but treating the interiors in a very sparing manner. Their lack of architectural distinctiveness probably stems from their avoidance of special buildings. They have no churches or meeting houses since they have taken St. Paul's injunction literally. They themselves, in congregation are 'the church', and their homes are little churches in themselves. Communal acts of worship take place in the domestic setting – the *domus ecclesia* is identical with the *domus familia*.

Only by careful scrutiny can the Amish farmstead be distinguished from its neighbours.

Some Amish artistic practices have achieved fame, notably their richly coloured patchwork quilts. Owing to the exigencies of academic publishing we are not able to show these in colour, but in fact this is less of a disadvantage than it appears. Photography tends to render the quilts as if they were the flat

Amish Farmhouse and field. The splendid large barns, often with ingenious moveable walls for drying tobacco crops, the dairy building, cowhouses and silos, with the neat farmhouse and immaculate garden are hardly to be distinguished from those of their non-Amish neighbours. But no motor-vehicles, telephone wires or electricity cables. Set in the geometry of the field patterns together they produce a landscape very similar to what we might find in lowland Switzerland or Holland; in which everything is in use. Nor should this surprise us, since the cultural project of the Amish is to maintain as best they can the *gemeinschaft* principles of eighteenth century rural life.

abstract paintings to which they are frequently compared. In reality, they are useful objects, thick and textured. The surface pattern of coloured patches is often at variance, or in play with the stitching pattern; this cannot be demonstrated effectively by a flat image, but has to be witnessed and handled.

Even in the matter of personal appearance, the very uniformity of dress accentuates individual difference. A group of Amish men walking together down a lane is an impressive sight, because the dark suits, the wide-brimmed straw hats and boots encourage a kind of swaggering gait, each in his own way. A group of Amish women in their aprons and blouses may look initially the same, but personal chic shows through; the neat caps, whose function is to enclose the hair, displace attention onto the nape of the neck, making the carriage of the head more noticeable. Neatness and natural beauty takes on exaggerated power in the midst of apparent sameness.

It would be easy to take these practices separately, but very mistakenly because they constitute an *ensemble* or visual *habitus* in which everything has a part**.** This is rich and varied enough to provide a bulwark against the encroachment of modernising *Gesellschaft.*

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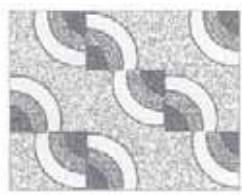
The Amish Quilt

Scholars of the quilt agree that the practice of quilt-making was borrowed from the surrounding 'English' after the Amish had settled in North America; the patterns and techniques are all, we are told, based upon British methods. Within Amish practice, however, they acquired a distinctive character. Linda Welters and others have analysed Amish patterns and using the geometric concepts of symmetry and the deep cultural symbolisms of symmetry. The Amish concept of *Gelassenheit*, in which the individual surrenders his or her self-assertion to God and the community, finds its objective correlative in the disciplines of strict symmetry.[1] The patterns of the quilts, as indeed is common in most folk cultures, are based around a selection from the 7 possible on dimensional symmetries (as in borders and hems) and the 17 possible two dimensional symmetries (across the plane): to which it is necessary to add the infinite number of possible finite symmetry designs that are based around a single point. Thus:

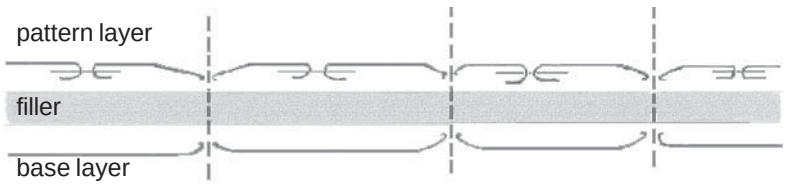
1 of 7 possible 

1 of 17 possible 

finite or point symmetry 

Taking only the manageable combination of 7 or 17, the addition of colour adds a further range. Two colours, spread symmetrically across 17 plane patterns increase he range of possibility to 42. More colours introduce further complications. But this is merely to treat the quilt as a plane

surface, like a painted canvas; it is, in reality, a three dimensional, pliable thing, with thickness, even bulk. The patterned front or top plane of the quilt is held to the backing or lower plane by stitch-structures which are independent of the upper plane's pattern. Thus:



Vertical constructional stitching and horizontal pattern stitching in Amish quilt

Making a large quilt is a feat of organisation; and it is no wonder that it is best done at a communal gathering or 'bee'. There is no structural reason why the stitching together of the two layers has to coincide with the pattern on the top layer; thus we find that a quilt usually has two forms of symmetry working in relation. The constructional stitching has its own pattern. Thus:

The complete pattern of an Amish quilt is formed by the interaction of the colour-pattern layer (l.) with the constructional base layer (r.) and it pattern of stitching.

When the colour-pattern layer is in straight lines, the constructional layer is frequently curvilinear in pattern, or vice-versa. Consequently, the interplay across the surface can be very complicated. The constructional stitching may also have its own colour, so the range of possible patterns

is prodigious: the mathematics I leave to the reader. Indeed a restriction to known patterns and their names – 'log-cabin', 'Tulip', 'Stars' etc. – become established because of their *Gestalt* qualities of recognisability. To depart from the recognisable sector of the immense (infinite?) repertoire would be too 'proud' it would be a refusal of *Gelassenheit*.

The problem of design is not unlike that found in traditional music. The four symmetry motions of pattern composition – translation, rotation, reflection and glide – are like the four transformations of the musical element – theme, inversion, retrograde and inversion of the retrograde. For a music to be 'traditional' it has to work within a selection of the possibilities that are readily comprehensible: this is clearly seen in hymn tunes and folk songs. We can thus liken the quilt, and the making of the quilt, to something like the practice of communal singing; with this important difference. In Amish communities, singing follows the original Protestant injunction of 'for every note a word', and the taking or parts and 'repeatings' is not encouraged, because it is too 'proud': but the Amish quilt can be, and often is, an object of virtuoso colour 'polyphony'.

The polyphony is comprehensible because of its symmetry, but the peculiar glory of the Amish quilt is that the symmetry is so often interrupted or modified by variations of colour – either knowing or incidental, when a piece of patterned or faded cloth has been used. The dialectic between the complex disciplines of symmetry and the quirks and improvisations of material make the quilts into emblems of 'plain' living. They are then, literally, em*bed*ded into family life.

In their making and their design, the quilts have a dionysiac function comparable to Shaker dancing or Ephrata's singing.

Amish culture is not by any means confined to quilts and clothing. There are examples of painted and decorated chairs in a manner very similar to that which can be found in

Southern German and Alpine folk styles to this day, made very sturdy with painted motifs of flowers (stylised roses and tulips). Chests, tables and dressers are less 'ethnic' in character.

Two birds in a fruit-bearing tree dated 1844, a common theme in the art of Fraktur, here meaning, perhaps the friendship between the two women whose names appear below it; but in Ephrata, two souls perching in the fruitful tree of life (?)

Tulip motif, from a bookmark dated 1845. This somewhat frenzied example if closely linked to the art of Ephrata and the erotic mysticism of the Song of Solomon. Made for the bible of Bishop David Beiler.

D and K McCauley, in their *Decorative Arts of the Amish of Lancaster County* (Intercourse, 1988) illustrate a range of toys which include miniature quilts for dolls; these dolls are without facial features 'in keeping with the Amish taboo against graven images'.

There is also an extensive range of graphic emblems drawn in the 'Fraktur' style adapted from German folk arts and widely used by the Amish and their 'Pennsylvania Dutch' neighbours. These are formally very similar to the graphic arts of the Ephrata community discussed below, with the very important distinction, that they do not seem to have had precise religious significance, and were treated as 'decorative'.

Drawings of this kind are intermediate between visual decoration and the specific religious emblem.

1. In Smucker, J., Crews, P.C., and Welters, L., *Amish Crib Quilts from the Mid-West: The Sara Miller Collection*, Intercourse, Pa (2003)