

Writing the foreword to *Architecture Illustrated* in August 1931, Mrs Wilfrid Ashley was clear to let the magazine's readership know that: 'We must realise just what we want from our surroundings, what settings our possessions should have' [1]. Just how readers could imagine such surroundings was illustrated by Mrs Ashley with the interiors of her new Westminster residence, Gayfere House, London, which she designed in collaboration with the then highly fashionable architect Oliver Hill. Gayfere House and its photographed interiors would soon make regular appearances in a variety of magazines ranging from *Vogue* to the *Architectural Review*, and still lives on as one of Hill's most well-known interior designs.

As the wife of the minister of transport (Colonel Wilfrid Ashley), Mrs Ashley was no stranger to the public eye. Often referred to as one of the five best hostesses in London, her parties were frequently mentioned in the contemporary press, either in photo editorials or through the pen of the gossip columnist. Indeed, the regular appearances of Hill's clients in the press made them acutely aware of the significance of first impressions. As such, the owners of these houses played an equally important role in the staging of these images as a form of impression management. Just how tailor-made these interiors were is highlighted in a letter written by Hill to Mrs Ashley, where he tells her that the house 'represents your portrait in marble, glass and steel' [2].

Within Oliver Hill's oeuvre, impression management usually started with the inclusion of an image of the front door. The relationship between the interior and exterior, as seen through doors and windows, played a big part in how Hill's work was staged in photographs. As Hill's wife, Titania explained: '[He would] set things up to be stunning from the door' [3]. Images taken from the front door and the entrance hall, I argue, are similar to stage settings and are there to engage the viewers from the moment they first had visual contact with the building, as can be seen, for instance, in the image taken of the entrance of Hill's own property at Daneway, Sapperton (Fig. 1). In the words of Edwin Heathcote: 'The glimpses of the hallway from the front door, for example, become little moments of theatre. Flashes of colour and exotic materials all add to the drama of everyday life and the surreptitious thrill of appearing to see into someone else's life even though all you get is what has been deliberately revealed' [4].

Figure 1: Daneway House, Sapperton, Gloucestershire: A doorway into the house, 1960. Edwin Smith /RIBA Collections

Such careful choreography can be discerned in an image from *Vogue* showing Mrs Ashley at the front door of Gayfere House (Fig. 2), a depiction which can in turn be linked to John Berger's discussion on the publicity image. I suggest that such photographs appearing in the columns of magazines can be seen not only as adverts but equally as a business card. These images present us with the things and the people who are to be envied, which, according to Berger, is what constitutes glamour. Publicity, Berger continues, is about social relations, not objects. Its promise is not of pleasure, but of happiness: happiness as judged from the outside by others [5]. How people were observed in these magazines would have been hugely important to Hill's clients, who were keen to preserve their standing in society through the presentation of their class and taste.

Erving Goffman's argument for the self as a performance of social interaction is further helpful when reading these images. Developing his dramaturgical metaphor, Goffman states that people are actors and perform their identity through impressions portrayed to an audience in a stage setting. Goffman further suggests that the performance of identity takes place on different stages [6]. The different interiors, as shown in these magazines, can therefore be read as theatrical stages to support the performance of self.

Figure 2: Mrs Wilfrid Ashley, *Vogue*, December 13, 1931

One such interior which appeared more than any other in publications featuring Gayfere house was Mrs. Ashley's all glass bathroom (Fig.3). Although most of these images lack the presence of their owner, in a similar way to the staged space of a film their *mise en scène* supports her identity to those around her and also to the outside world of those for whom the purely architectural experience is absent. The published images of Mrs Ashley's 'Crystal Palace' can therefore be read as the bathroom of an up-to-date busy hostess. She is not only said to be the first woman in London to paint her nails red, but she also made it clear, herself, that the interiors of her new abode were the latest in interior decoration. As she herself highlighted: 'I have endeavoured to express my ideas of the house of today - perhaps of tomorrow'.

Figure 3: Gayfere House, Smith Square, London: Bathroom for Mrs Ashley, 1931, RIBA Collections.

Interiors such as those of Gayfere House offer a valuable example of the interior as a custom-made, crafted space which took its inhabitant as its starting point. Focussing solely on architectural

influences and material knowledge in the analysis of these domestic spaces would undermine the role of Hill's clients. Clients such as Mrs Wilfrid Ashley played an active role in the staging of their interiors, making them ready to be photographed. They were equally clear about the message they sought to be communicated. Each of these spaces were crafted resulting in an 'ideal' interior ready to be shown to the world through their publication in the press, which at that particular moment had very little to do with the 'lived-in' interiors they would become.

[1] Mrs Wilfrid Ashley, 'Foreword', *Architecture Illustrated* (August 1931), p. 36.

[2] RIBA ref. HiO 34/2 (2/2) Gayfere house, Smith Square - London SW1 1929 - 33. Letter from Hill to Mrs Ashley [10th April 1931]

[3] J. Holland, *An English Sensibility: The Architecture of Oliver Hill*, PhD Thesis, University of Portsmouth, 2011, p. 82.

[4] E. Heathcote, 'Milan's Grand Staircases', *Financial Times* (March 31, 2017)

[5] J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 133.

[6] E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1990)