

THE CRYSTAL PALACE

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From the moment of its construction, London's Crystal Palace, the iron and glass structure designed by Joseph Paxton for the 1851 Great Exhibition in Hyde Park and subsequently moved to Sydenham Hill in South London, where it stood until its destruction by fire in 1936, was subject to intense international interest and viewed as a symbol of modernity. It also became the central image of Dostoevsky's critique of western rationalism, particularly of the radicals and their utopian aspirations. His appropriation of this symbol incorporated ideas about the Crystal Palace's all-encompassing and contradictory nature that characterized its history and reception.

From the original idea for the Great Exhibition in 1851 to its subsequent interpretation by historians, the meaning and use of the Crystal Palace has seen significant changes. The project, for the first world's fair, showcasing industry, manufactures and applied arts from Britain and the rest of the world, was initially conceived as a means of shaping the image of Britain and the British Empire for the Victorian era (and, equally, of defining the image of the non-Western "other"); of promoting free trade and internationalism (and, therefore, global peace); of proclaiming the superiority of British manufactures; of defining, celebrating, and educating people about industry, production processes and products; and of bringing together different classes and cultures. Beyond the immediate designs of the Royal Commission that established the Great Exhibition, the palace led to material changes in Britain's infrastructure and cultural life, as the success of the Great Exhibition resulted in the establishment in London of the Science, Natural History, and Victoria and Albert Museums, Imperial College, and the Royal Albert Hall. The palace also played a

crucial role not simply in representing, but in defining the very meaning of modernity, both in terms of its aesthetic form, and in relation to the changes in knowledge and behaviour that modernity introduced. In particular, the Crystal Palace has been associated with concepts of the “general public” and of consumerism as spectacle.

The function and aims of the reconstructed palace, which opened in Sydenham in 1854, were somewhat different. The educational focus switched from industry to the cultures of different civilizations, as visitors walked through architectural courts that took them on a trip around the world and through the ages. However, amusement also became part of the agenda, as the newly-formed Crystal Palace Company, largely driven by the need to turn a profit, targeted a lower-class audience, rather than the middle classes who had been the mainstay of the Great Exhibition. The profitability imperative proved persistently problematic and led to the palace’s varied uses over the years, from the edifying (the annual Handel festival) and the socially conscious (it became a popular venue for meetings of, among others, the co-operative movement, the temperance movement, the boy scout and girl guide movements, and various trades unions), to the novel (the first cat show was held there in 1871), and the crowd-pleasing (the funfair, regular firework displays, Blondin’s tightrope walking shows). During World War I, it was used as a naval training base; after the war, it acted as a demobilization centre, and subsequently it became the first home of the Imperial War Museum. As Walter Benjamin stated, “the Crystal Palace could be *used* for anything.”¹ Its transparent form positioned it simultaneously as inside and outside, incorporating elements of the greenhouse, the museum, the circus, the theatre, the factory floor, and the shop window.

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999): 162.

Its space was devoted equally to seeing and being seen, to education and recreation, to capitalist profit motives and campaigns for social change, to war as well as peace.

While the conflicting ideas behind the construction of the Crystal Palace led to this multiplicity of uses, responses to the palace in public and literary discourse have proved more unified. It inspired a number of recurring themes, with the palace's positive potential contrasted to the fears it provoked. Criticism ranged from that of the reactionary MP Colonel Sibthorp (who opposed everything from Catholic Emancipation to the Public Libraries Act) to the aesthetic critique of John Ruskin (who famously characterized the Crystal Palace as a "cucumber frame" in *Praetoria*). Yet the initial scepticism surrounding the project, which led *Punch* to coin the originally pejorative nickname the "Crystal Palace," was largely dissipated by the Exhibition's success. Particularly notable was the idea of the palace as fulfilling a long-held dream. Commenting on the Exhibition's opening, the journal *Notes and Queries* quoted a semi-translated version of Chaucer's 1380 poem *The House of Fame* as a prophecy of the Crystal Palace:

... But, as I slept, me mette I was
Within a temple ymade of glas,
In which there were mo images
Of gold, standing in sundry stages,
Sette in mo rich tabernacles,
And with perrie mo pinnacles,
And mo curious portraitures,
And queint manner of figures
Of gold worke, than I saw ever.

But all the men that been on live
Ne han the conning to describe
The beaute of that ilke place.²

Possibly the first literary reference to the idea of the Crystal Palace as the realization of a dream of beauty and harmony, a loose prose translation of this extract appeared in the August 1851 Miscellany section of the Russian literary journal *Sovremennik* (*The Contemporary*), in the fourth of six reports devoted to the Great Exhibition, brightening up a dutiful inventory of the delayed Russian exhibit that had finally been installed.

Twelve years later, the radical writer and journalist Nikolai Chernyshevsky wrote *What Is to Be Done?* (1863). This highly influential novel depicts a new generation of young people who adopt socialist ideals in the present as the first stage of the transformation of human nature in the future. As the young people form a co-operative, live communally, and arrange their lives on rational principles to achieve the emancipation of women and, ultimately, the whole of society, their revolutionary potential is emphasized by a plot-line featuring the clandestine activities of Rakhmetov, the first notable appearance of a professional revolutionary in Russian literature. The novel, which inspired subsequent generations of Russian revolutionaries, also features an oneiric evocation of the Crystal Palace that established the latter's role as an image of the socialist utopia in the Russian literary imagination. "Vera Pavlovna's Fourth Dream," the heroine's bucolic vision of future harmony and gender equality, merges the images of the Crystal Palace and Charles Fourier's Phalanstery to depict a communal home for those who work for the benefit of all, enabling them to enjoy a life of pleasure,

²*Notes and Queries*, vol. 3, no. 80 [10 May 1851]: 362-3.

freedom, and free love in: “a building, a large, enormous structure [...] there is one building that hints at it – the palace at Sydenham: cast iron and crystal, crystal and cast iron – nothing else.”³ Whether or not Chernyshevsky read the 1851 journal report that cited Chaucer’s poem, his heroine’s dream in *What Is to Be Done?* shares the sense of idealism engendered by the palace.

Chernyshevsky’s adoption of the Crystal Palace as the Russian radicals’ symbol of social reorganization in *What Is to Be Done?* played a significant role in provoking Dostoevsky’s rejection of the version of harmony it represented. But this was not the first time that either author had drawn attention to the palace. In Chernyshevsky’s unsigned July 1854 article on the reopening of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham in the journal *Otechestvennye zapiski (Fatherland Notes)*, his enthusiasm is already apparent. Chernyshevsky praises the iron and glass building itself as a “miracle of art, beauty and splendour,” claiming that, “there has not been a single voice that would be raised against the Palace itself, against its idea and its execution.”⁴ While Dostoevsky might have read Chernyshevsky’s 1854 review as part of his voracious reading following his release from prison that year, having served a four-year sentence for his participation in a political discussion circle, it is unknown whether he did. Nonetheless, the terms in which Dostoevsky first refers to the Crystal Palace are strikingly similar, as he also identifies it with universalism and idealism, albeit drawing the opposite conclusion regarding the desirability of this form of social reorganization. In *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* (1863), written after his first visit to Europe,

³ Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What is to be Done?*, trans. Michael R. Katz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989): 369-70.

⁴ *Otechestvennye zapiski*, 95 (July 1854), VII: Novosti nauk, literatury, iskusstv i promyshlennosti: 82, 94.

which included eight days spent in London, Dostoevsky conflates the Crystal Palace with the 1862 International Exhibition in Kensington – it is unclear which, if either, he visited – to emphasize the oppressive nature of the very unanswerability Chernyshevsky lauds: “A city with its millions and its world-wide trade, the Crystal Palace, the world Exhibition... Yes, the Exhibition is astounding. You feel a terrible force which has united all these numberless people here, from all over the world, into a single herd; you become aware of a colossal idea; [...] ‘Hasn’t the ideal already been achieved?’ you think, ‘isn’t this the end?’” (5:69; Ch 5).

Notes from Underground, published a year later, contained Dostoevsky’s harshest critique of the Crystal Palace. The narrator relates the palace’s universalism to Chernyshevsky’s notion of “rational egoism,” whereby advances in science will ultimately enable people to calculate their best course of action for their own and others’ advantage: “new economic relations will come into being, all ready-made and also calculated with mathematical precision, so that in a single instant all possible questions will disappear, precisely because all possible answers to them will have been provided. Then the crystal palace will be constructed” (5:113; Pt 1, Ch 7). Far from representing freedom, however, the Crystal Palace will, according to the Underground Man, destroy it, for the absolute consensus it commands does not permit difference, uncertainty, or dissent: “suffering is doubt, negation, and what sort of crystal palace would it be where doubt was allowed?” (5:119; Pt 1, Ch 9). The Crystal Palace’s supremely rational basis denies all that makes human beings free individuals and will not only be “terribly boring (because what will there be left to do when everything has been calculated by tables)” (5:113; Pt 1, Ch 7), but will ultimately lead to slavery, because it can only exist if people’s status is reduced to that of cogs in a machine. The Crystal Palace therefore represents the first version of Dostoevsky’s vision of social reorganization for the sake

of mankind that turns into enslavement and the destruction of individual personality. This idea, known as the “anthill theory” in Dostoevsky’s novels, culminates in Ivan Karamazov’s “poem” “The Grand Inquisitor” in *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which the eponymous inquisitor accuses the resurrected Christ of burdening mankind with freedom and claims to have “corrected” His error by replacing freedom with the security of “miracle, mystery, and authority,” leaving people happily unfree.

One of the Underground Man’s central arguments is that the radicals’ utilitarianism and materialism is incompatible with the idealism inherent in the Crystal Palace; they should be satisfied with the shelter of a “chicken coop,” rather than dreaming of the grandeur of a palace (5:120; Pt 1, Ch 10). But whatever the Underground Man contends, this idealism is only one facet of the Crystal Palace that appears in Dostoevsky’s work – a facet that taps into, and frequently anticipates, the polarized debates and depictions of the Crystal Palace that began as soon the building was proposed and continue to this day.

The outbreak of the Crimean War (1853-56), less than two years after the Great Exhibition’s opening, may have undermined its symbolic role as promoter of international peace, but a religious interpretation of the Crystal Palace as a New Jerusalem was already established by this stage. In pious works such as Susan Anne Ridley Sedgwick’s “The Crystal Palace: A Story for Boys and Girls” (1851), the palace appears as a metaphor for the body and soul of the good Christian, containing the capacity to reform unruly children. Likewise, in Catherine Marsh’s memoir about her evangelizing mission among the navvies rebuilding the Crystal Palace at Sydenham, *English Hearts and English Hands* (1860), the largely uneducated workmen, who are prone to alcohol abuse and drunken brawling, are viewed as lost children and prove amenable to transformation within the palace’s ambit. They attain not only sobriety and

religious faith, but a patriotic fervour that sees many of them, in an irony that seems lost on the author, volunteer for service as sappers during the Crimean War.

The palace's capacity to incorporate oppositions also connects its optimistic interpretation to the sense of its unattainability. The Exhibition was open to all, and, on so-called "shilling days," was within the reach of a significant proportion of the working classes. But it is also represented in fiction as a reward for the persistent and worthy, through the recurring motif of obstacles that must be overcome in order to visit it. The maxim that good things come to those who wait, evident in Sedgwick's story, becomes the central theme of Henry Mayhew's guileless novel *1851, or the Adventures of Mr and Mrs Sandboys, who came up to London to Enjoy Themselves, and to see the Great Exhibition* (1851), in which the eponymous provincial family endures a whole series of farcical misadventures, from getting on the wrong train to being forced to lodge in a coal cellar, that constantly prevent them fulfilling the seemingly straightforward goal of reaching London and visiting the Crystal Palace.

The text's optimism notwithstanding, the obstacles faced by the Sandboys family relate to the fears surrounding the Crystal Palace and its negative associations with criminality. This reflects real-life concerns about the influx of visitors, particularly with regard to foreigners and the lower classes, which dominated early criticism of the project, with predictions of riots and evocations of "King Mob." No such problems in fact ensued, the crowds at the Great Exhibition being notably well-behaved despite their unprecedented size. But the threat persists in literary form, as in George Gissing's *The Netherworld* (1889), where the wedding party visit to the palace in Sydenham descends into drunken brawling. Mayhew's novel primarily associates the Crystal Palace's crowd with a different aspect of the fear of crime, in his depiction of naïve country folk falling

foul of sharp urban practices, as they have their clothes and tickets stolen and are arrested for others' crimes.

The perils facing the Sandboys family, in numerous episodes revolving around mistaken identity, disguise, and imposture, including a thief dressed as a policeman stealing their belongings, also reveal a recurring motif of fakery associated with the palace. Thackeray's response to the most prized exhibit in one of the earliest descriptions of the palace exemplifies this trend:

I remarked in the gold cage, to which the ladies would go the first thing, and in which the Koh-i-noor reposes, a shining thing like a lambent oyster, which I admired greatly, and took to be the famous jewel. But on a second visit I was told that that was not the jewel that was only the case, and the real stone was that above, which I had taken to be an imitation in crystal.⁵

If the real here becomes fake, the reshaping of the contents for the 1854 re-opening further emphasized the idea of the Crystal Palace as a repository of imitation, as reproductions of art and architectural treasures from around the world took centre stage. While certain aspects of this fakery were celebrated – Owen Jones' Alhambra Court played a significant role in redefining Victorian taste, reinforced through the subsequent publication of his design classic *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856) – it was also criticized as a cheap simulacrum that more closely resembled a theme park than an artistic exhibit. Gissing's novel, which represents the Crystal Palace as a tawdry temple of amusement, subsequently features a subplot involving the palace brawlers in a

⁵William Makepeace Thackeray, "What I remarked at the Exhibition," *Punch*, 20 (3 May 1851): 189.

counterfeiting scheme; the connection between the two incidents positions the palace as both the source and the reproducer of the crushing social problems of the *Netherworld*, rather than as any potential solution to them.

Such associations indicate that the Crystal Palace figures not only as a symbol of the bright, harmonious future, but equally as a space of disorder, deception, and failure. This may support the Underground Man's suspicion of Chernyshevsky's positive response, but it also shows that his own interpretation suffers from the same fault: Dostoevsky's character considers only a single idea and fails to account for the palace's incorporation of contradictory meanings. Notably, while readers, aware of his capacity for paradox and exaggeration, are accustomed to viewing the Underground Man's rhetoric skeptically, his interpretation of the palace as a social totality has seldom been questioned by critics. But Dostoevsky's other references to the Crystal Palace present a somewhat different picture. Dostoevsky generally introduces the palace in chaotic and disreputable contexts that subvert its association with ideas of the rational reorganization of society. In *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, the middle-class hordes visiting the exhibition merge seamlessly into the drunken crowds from the lower orders in Whitechapel and the Haymarket; the celebration of empire, trade, and material culture epitomized by both the 1851 and 1862 exhibitions differs little from London's underbelly of prostitution and depravity. In *Crime and Punishment* (1866), Raskolnikov reads newspaper articles about the murders he committed and comes close to admitting his crime in his conversation with the police clerk Zamyotov at the Crystal Palace tavern. A real location in central St. Petersburg at that time, chosen by Dostoevsky to allude to the connection between Raskolnikov's murders and the radicals' utopian aspirations, the tavern itself is depicted as relatively respectable, certainly by comparison with others in the novel. However, on his way there,

Raskolnikov encounters several prostitutes, and the narrator draws attention to the drunks, taverns, and brothels he passes near the Haymarket, the most disreputable place in the city and the focal point of the novel. Both the narrator and Raskolnikov mentally connect the Crystal Palace and the vices associated with poverty, thereby subverting the radicals' equation of the palace with the solution to social problems.

In *Crime and Punishment* and *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, therefore, the Crystal Palace is juxtaposed with images of social breakdown and vice, so that the supposedly rational order represented by the palace and lauded by the radicals turns into a space of social *disorder*. In rejecting Chernyshevsky's optimistic vision, Dostoevsky does not substitute another, equally exclusive interpretation, but incorporates an additional image that complicates the argument. The Underground Man maintains that human irrationality makes the Crystal Palace neither desirable nor achievable. But the context of vice and disorder in which it appears affirms the necessity of social reorganization that the palace represents to the radicals – as the ultimate solution to the problems engendered by society's inequalities – while at the same time identifying the palace itself with those social problems. Thus the palace becomes both the symbol of the radicals' fallacious reasoning that the Underground Man perceives and a site of incompatibilities, as it represents both cause and solution, which connects it not to the rational, but to its opposite. Subsequent literary representations of totalitarianism influenced by the Underground Man's conception, including the transparent glass city in Evgeny Zamyatin's novel *We* (1921) and George Orwell's image of the surveillance state in *1984* (1949), indicate the persistence of this view of social reorganization as slavery and unfreedom. However, the idea of the Crystal Palace as the monolithic repository of a single meaning as propounded by the Underground Man is modified by the associations made with the building elsewhere in Dostoevsky's writing. And while

these associations do not imply acceptance of the radicals' utopian vision, they bring Dostoevsky's interpretation of the palace closer to the multiple – and frequently contradictory – functions and discourses surrounding the history of the building itself, and the literary images it has generated.