Saving the Twentieth Century
Transcript

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For some, twentieth-century buildings are not heritage, but for an increasing number, they are the most threatened buildings in Britain. Post war modernism is now at the centre of the hardest fought and most controversial conservation debates. Which buildings, if any, should be listed and what should the criteria be? How far can experimental buildings of the 1960s and ’70s be altered for new uses? Should there be new rules for a new era of conservation?

This evening I want to talk about the most controversial and difficult area of modern conservation practice and debate – saving the late twentieth century. Deciding to preserve, in some way, the architecture of the previous generation has always been difficult and unpopular. The Victorians hated Regency buildings and, Victorian buildings, in their turn, were hated after the Second World War. So, simply in terms of the swing of the generational pendulum of taste, we would be on an uphill struggle to list and conserve post war architecture.

But in terms of the late twentieth century we are facing a problem at once more complex and more subtle than that. Modernist architecture and its more aggressive subset brutalist architecture are styles that came about through circumstances quite different from any that came before in England. This is because the roots of the style were not native roots. I say this not in a xenophobic sense but in the sense that the ideas and aspirations that lay behind modernism were not shared by the majority of people who saw it being built. Architects of the period 1950 to 1970 had successfully persuaded the power elites of the time that they had the solution to social and economic problems and they were given free reign to conduct an experiment on a population who initially were tentatively optimistic about what they saw but quickly came to be suspicious then outright hostile. As political support collapsed we were left with a large quantity of buildings that had only ever had very shallow roots in society.

This is I believe a unique situation and the passing of time has only made very shallow inroads into it. Although there are many educated people in their 20s and 30s who now appreciate and admire modernist design, including modernist and brutalist buildings, we are probably at a high water of support and admiration; because the popular imagination has not been captured and probably never will be. This is why when modernist buildings are listed or worse when public money is spent on conserving them there is a storm of protest.

I remember the rage directed at English Heritage when I authorised a huge re-direction of effort to kick-start the restoration of the Park Hill Flats in Sheffield. The bile and anger directed at us and me personally quite took me aback. Post war modernism is quite simply ‘ghastly modern architecture’ to most people today.

So we are dealing with something unusual and interesting, and challenging to say the least. Tonight I want to ask whether we are going about it in the right way and if not what improvements we can make to the way we deal with conserving the legacy of British Modernism.

I want to start by talking about a listed building consent case that English Heritage considered in 2004-5. This was an application for listed building and conservation area consent for the demolition and redevelopment of the grade II listed Southside Hall of Residence built for Imperial College by Sheppard Robson Architects between 1960 – 1968. It was listed because of the way they introduced the style of Le Corbusier to university architecture, fusing the principles of Oxbridge planning with great slab blocks of reinforced concrete. Imperial College, the owners, argued that the student accommodation had from the start demonstrated serious design, technical and functional flaws to such an extent that retaining them in their present form or even heavily remodelled would be questionable, both functionally and economically. Interestingly this was a point of view that was ultimately accepted by English Heritage.

This was an extraordinary decision on the face of it. For EH to support a Listed building consent application for the demolition of a grade II building that everyone agreed was actually possible to repair – although at a £40m cost. On the economic side this is a problem faced by hundreds of highly graded buildings each year - the fact that the repair costs are greater than the eventual value of a building. What about a grade I listed medieval church in the middle of nowhere? It has a £1m repair bill; even if permission could be granted for its conversion to a house it would only be worth £100,000 at most. So do we say well, let’s demolish it? Do we say that functionally it is useless? Liturgical practice has changed so much since the thirteenth century that its design is now flawed beyond adaptation? No, of course we don’t. So why could we contemplate such a conclusion for Southside? Are there special factors at work here? Does modernism need its own philosophy of conservation?

These questions were some of a wider group of problems that stimulated EH to start a project to codify its conservation philosophy into a set of understandable principles. These principles are based on a basic premise that places should be managed to sustain significance, now a familiar and widely accepted concept.

To understand the significance of any place, whether it is a building like Southside, an archaeological landscape,
or an urban conservation area, it is necessary to establish its value to society. That value comprises both the relative value of its individual components and the value of the whole in relation to other places. This exercise requires us to measure its significance against a set of values that we as a society hold generally valid. If we can do this we can overcome the individualistic, stylistic and dogmatic attitudes that tend to dominate and confuse arguments about conservation.

So EH adopted four values as the basis for evaluating the historic significance of a place: Evidential value; Historical value; Aesthetic value and Communal value. Now these are clearly not the only the values that can be used to assess the significance of places, but they are the ones that encapsulate heritage value. Other values such as utility, economy and environmental sustainability are also sometimes employed and may, at some stage in the planning process, have to be weighed against heritage value. But the four heritage values can be applied to any development, of any age, and help us make a judgement on how significant it is. They can then help us to decide what to keep, what to adapt, whether to repair, and if so, how authentically.

Just to clarify what we mean by these values I will give you a few examples in relation to well-known modernist buildings. So there may be evidential value in, for instance, the physical record of innovative construction and materials in buildings such as Peter Jones Sloane Square.

There may be historic value in a building being the first of its kind such as the Boots Factory, Nottingham. Or its historic value may lie in that fact that it is illustrative of a pivotal point in history. Buildings may be associated with particular events, institutions, activities or people like the Cold War installations at Upper Heyford, or the optimism behind the foundation of the Commonwealth at the Commonwealth Institute.

The aesthetic value, of places like Centre Point in London with its rigorous design values, or the fortuitous or cumulative aesthetic value of places such as the ziggurat buildings at UEA.

The communal values of places could be for post war town centre layouts of Coventry or Plymouth promoting the social value of pedestrian shopping areas and integrated parking or the campuses of new universities like UEA, Sussex and Kent, heralding an era of greater access to higher education; or perhaps the spiritual value of places of worship such as Coventry Cathedral.

So how can these values help us make decisions about buildings like Southside Halls of Residence? Well the crucial thing is that they raise the debate about conservation above the Victorian philosophy of Ruskin and Morris for whom everything was based on the retention of the original fabric of a building. Almost all Conservation philosophy since foundation of the SPAB in 1871 has been based on the acceptance of the fact that the retention of the original fabric is the primary objective and, in fact, modern conservation legislation takes the same starting point. But this assumption must be questioned when we are dealing with a building like Southside Halls.

The origins of this dilemma about the primacy of original fabric are found in the structures of the industrial revolution, just like the philosophy of modernism itself. Take the former grade I listed West Pier at Brighton for example. The individual iron components of the Pier, all mass produced, and many one of hundreds of identical components just must have a lesser significance than an individually carved stone roof boss on the nave of a medieval cathedral. The pier’s components were to an extent sacrificial. They could be unbolted and replaced if they corroded, deflected or suffered some damage. Their replacement by a new component did not in any way diminish the authenticity or significance of the pier. In other words the design of the pier - its aesthetic value was more important than its evidential value. The same goes for the high level bridge in Newcastle, an important engineering feat but above all of overwhelming Community value. For years iron components have been replaced by steel ones eroding its evidential value almost completely while retaining its position as one of the great symbols of Newcastle upon Tyne.

So does this mean that modernist buildings inherently have low evidential value as a group? We would be rushing on if, on the basis of what I have said so far, that was our conclusion. What I want to do is start by asking a much wider question which is ‘is there something inherent in the design of British modernist buildings that makes them different when we consider their conservation?’

Until the late nineteenth century there were few highly specialised buildings. There were places where people lived, places where people worshipped, places where business was transacted and places where things were made. Some of these spaces had special features, but essentially the variation in building types was very limited. From the 1880s there were more and more specialised building types, more buildings that were made for a specific functions and were really very unsuitable for any other use.

After the Second War such buildings multiplied and as architects became more and more responsive to very specific functions so buildings became social and technological machines. At one end of this spectrum you have industrial buildings such as building R133 at Farnborough in the former Royal aircraft establishment. This houses, or I should say is, a transonic wind tunnel containing a chamber only 8ft by 6ft where scale models of aircraft could be subjected to wind speeds greater than the speed of sound. This is a building that is a machine - utterly inflexible in every way. At the other end of the scale is St. Peter’s Roman Catholic Seminary at Cardross in Argyle and Bute a modernist mega-structure with a huge church in its centre and surrounded by the cells of the seminarians, brilliantly designed for one purpose and now without any purpose.
In this way post war buildings are inherently less flexible and adaptable than earlier buildings which were more
generic in function. This, of course was an important part of the argument about Southside Halls of Residence. 
The case for demolition was not put in terms of the value of the fabric but in terms of the effectiveness and 
suitability of its function and the performance of the design.

Let’s look at another London case the Grade II* Crystal Palace National Sports Centre, originally proposed 
demolition by the London Development agency as a building that was functionally defunct. The wet and dry
sports areas were not adequately separated giving serious environmental problems. The pool was too short to 
comply with the Olympic regulations and a host of other functional and performance issues. The cost of fixing 
the problem was going to be at least £40m and a £1m a year running cost bill thereafter. The difficulty with such 
bUILDINGS is their incredibly specific function that makes adaptation difficult.

There are two further linked problems to this: Many of the most interesting and innovative early modernist 
buildings were built quickly and on the cheap. Many during the 1950s, like the Peter and Alison Smythson’s 
famous school at Hunstanton which had to justify every inch of steel used. As a result they were engineered 
sparingly, with materials that sometimes have not had long life spans. The original economical construction of 
these structures has often been compounded by the almost total lack of proper planned maintenance which has 
exacerbated the original design faults.

Take the Geoffrey Chaucer School; Grade II in Harper Street SE1 another controversial listing building 
consent case of an important modernist building that I had to deal with. Here there is an extraordinary 
pentagonal assembly hall and a highly innovative gymnasium. They were built pushing the technical capabilities of 
the materials to their limits, to a design never before contemplated for a school. These structures were 
experimental and legitimately it can be argued that they have failed. Like the cladding on the metropolitan 
cathedral of Christ the King in Liverpool or the rainwater drainage systems on the roof of the central pavilion 
at the Commonwealth Institute in Kensington.

It would be possible to argue that in the past buildings economically designed of innovative structure that have 
failed, and buildings with design faults have been allowed to be tossed into the waste paper basket of 
architectural history. Just think of the catastrophic failures of Victorian architecture that stood and fell, like 
Millbank Penitentiary; our predecessors let these go and we now look back with a sense of relief. Thank 
goodness that we don’t have to spend our time and money keeping that one standing!

But here we come to an important point. When we are dealing with buildings of the Victorian era or earlier we are 
looking at a building stock that has already been rid of architectural flops. In a process of natural selection the 
many thousands of buildings that were built or designed poorly have already fallen down or being modified and 
the faults rectified. So James Wyatt’s gothic masterpiece Fonthill Abbey a building of unquestioned brilliance, 
historical importance and even genius started to fall apart and then collapsed in 1825 long before listing or 
preservation was ever contemplated. In February 1322 the central tower of Ely Cathedral collapsed and when it 
came to reconstructing it, it was decided to build a stone octagon with a much lighter timber structure on top
– a work of genius but not the original intended crowning feature. So the cathedral we have today has been long 
rid of its design faults.

But when we are dealing with buildings which are only fifty or sixty years old we are often confronting design 
flaws or poor workmanship that are only just coming to light or are in the process of being rectified. This again 
challenges our perception of authenticity. Most historic buildings (by which I mean buildings a hundred years or 
more old) have been adapted and modified to iron out design and construction flaws and so their so-called 
original state is, in fact, an altered state in which they perform well, in fact often better than when they were first 
completed. Late twentieth century buildings are still going through this Darwinian process of natural selection 
that will decide whether they will survive having been adapted or whether they will die as being unsuited to their 
function. So criticising them for their design flaws may be seen as unfair.

Most of the modern buildings that I have given as examples so far are public buildings or private commissions 
that were built as monuments but either because of experimental materials or buildings techniques or because 
of untested structural ambition were imperfect. There are two other categories we need to consider. The first of 
these are late twentieth century buildings which were built for a specific allotted lifespan or design life.

There were several motivations why this might have been so. In the immediate aftermath of the war to solve the 
housing crisis prefabricated homes were constructed which local authorities, as clients, as well as designers and 
manufacturers accepted had only a ten year life. This is one of the most famous images of the end of the war 
the arrival home of Gunner Hector Murdoch — on his birthday, after three years in a Japanese prisoner of War 
camp. His wife, Rosina, and his son hurtle down the garden path to welcome him and in the background is their 
house in the Excalibur Estate in Catford, South London one of 156,622 such prefabs built after the 1944 
housing act. In 2009 six of the houses at Excalibur were listed. The ones that were accepted (out of a much 
larger number proposed) were those which retained original features internally and had not had replacement 
windows and doors. So ministers who were responsible for accepting the recommendations applied the 
nineteenth century criteria to a prefabricated house that they would have done to a Georgian mansion – how 
much original fabric was retained.

I would ask whether this is remotely appropriate. At the time we at English heritage argued that the estate
should be made a conservation area. This would have allowed the houses to be modernised and improved – the original fabric to be replaced where necessary – while retaining the overall appearance of a post war prefabricated estate. Because arguably that is what is important.

Let’s just look at my third category of late twentieth century building which are those that did not even have a designed lifespan because they were genuinely temporary. Many Second World War buildings fall into this category: structures that were erected at a time of national emergency with no thought that they would be standing in ten years let alone seventy. This is Harperley Prisoner of War Camp in County Durham now the most complete prisoner of war camp remaining in England - out of an original 100 or so purpose built camps.

You will see that it is in very poor condition, as you would expect from a camp that was built in a hurry in 1943 by Italian POWs in a period when only poor building materials were available. Two of the huts have interesting interiors: the theatre which you see here and the canteen. The others are utterly functional and have been used as a chicken farm amongst other uses. The authenticity of this group of buildings, like the Excalibur estate, is mainly for its landscape value (i.e. as a grouping). The feeling and the atmosphere it gives of a prisoner of war camp is fantastic. The huts have reinforced concrete frames and it would not matter in my opinion if the cladding were replaced with modern materials in places where necessary.

This is actually what happened at Bletchley Park, the home of the codebreakers during the Second World War. These huts unlike those at Harperley are all timber and the rotten wood, in some cases, could not be repaired. Reclaimed and new timberwork was added, steel strengthening introduced and new paintwork distressed down (newly painted cleanings, for instance, were painted to make them looked tobacco stained).

So late twentieth century buildings are normally functionally inflexible; may have not completed their Darwinian process of natural selection that allowed adaptation and improvement; they may have been designed for a fixed life span; they may have been completely temporary or, in a fifth, important but rare category, they were philosophically designed to self-destruct. Post War modernism at its most utopian built in obsolescence to their structures. Some architects believed that past generations had encumbered society with ideas and buildings now outmoded that were holding the world back. Therefore their buildings were to be designed to serve a generation and then be replaced.

Whilst this theoretical stand of modernism is not one that is easy to draw out, the very fact that modernist buildings have a strong theoretical content brings its own problems. Architectural teaching, and indeed art historical study has become increasingly fascinated by theoretical aspects. This is a particularly beguiling aspect to late twentieth century architecture as unlike previous periods, almost any building of significance, built by a successful architect, we know something about their philosophical approach. In fact in many cases we know quite a lot more than we might want to know about their philosophy. As a consequence in considering conservation issues the philosophy behind the building can end up being as important as the building itself. This is a complete reversal of the nineteenth century notion of conservation, for here people are arguing that it is not the structure that is important it is the ideas behind it.

Here we come to a case that brought with it more vitriol than any other I had to contend with: Robin Hood Gardens, Poplar, London. Robin Hood Gardens is two large blocks of flats arranged on seven and ten storeys with deck access and is regarded by many to be the embodiment of British Brutalism. It was designed by Peter and Alison Smithson.

The Smithsons belonged to a generation of architects who acknowledged the influence of the original masters of modernism, such as Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe but subjected their work to intense critical evaluation in the search for new directions. The Smithsons’ critical writings were in fact more important than their actual buildings. Their early success in the competition for Hunstanton School, Norfolk, was followed by a string of competition failures – Coventry Cathedral, Golden Lane Housing, Sheffield University and Sydney Opera House to name the most important. But virtually every history of post-war British architecture features the Smithsons’ competition schemes for Golden Lane and Sheffield University with pages of favourable coverage while not even mentioning or illustrating the projects that actually won these competitions and were built. Remarkably they achieved all the recognition that goes to winners without having the responsibility of turning their concepts into real buildings and finding out if they work. In fact their own books are dominated by drawings of unrealised projects, embellished by photographs of themselves. The result of this very unusual situation has been to give the Smithson’s cult status amongst the architectural cognoscenti.

At Robin Hood Gardens this cult couple finally secured a real commission, a massive public housing scheme. This was fifteen years after their theoretical writings had advocated ‘streets in the sky’ principles for public housing in their competition entry for a scheme at Golden Lane in the City of London. By the time they designed Robin Hood Gardens both architects and critics had moved on. The principles they had once advocated had been built at Park Hill, Sheffield, and now ‘streets in the air’ were now a discredited concept. In terms of the theory and practice of progressive urban housing, Robin Hood Gardens was obsolete even before its first tenants moved in.

In 2008 in response to a mounting threat to redevelop the site an application for listing was put in and was rejected by English Heritage and by the government. The reasons for this were that the building was not only not innovative for the time, an important criteria for listing, but that it was actually a poor design. There were other
deck access housing schemes of much higher quality and earlier date and these were listed. However a campaign was mounted to list the building because it embodied the ideas of the Smythsons. The building still stands but with its certificate of immunity from listing will soon be demolished and replaced with new housing.

The listing criteria for Modernist buildings are infinitely tougher than for any building built before 1800. For buildings put up before 1800 if they are in anything like their original state and of average quality they qualify for listing. For modernist building they have to demonstrate that their significance is unusually high. This means that listed modernist buildings are generally the exceptional and not just the ordinary products of their age. This brings us right back to my original dilemma: Southside halls of residence.

In terms of really high quality modernist buildings that are basically no longer fit for purpose you have two main avenues to go down. The first is the one that demands that a building performs well before it is listed. In other words you take the view that if a building is not performing well either structurally or functionally, or in some cases neither, it is a poor building and it has not made the high bar to be a building of special significance and should not be listed. QED. There is no problem and you simply get rid of it. The other avenue is list it for its importance and then deal with the issues of performance through the planning system when the issues arises.

Both these solutions have been faced and I’m going to give you examples of both that I have had to contend with. First the case of **Pimlico School** designed in 1964 in the Architects’ Department of the Greater London Council under the leadership of John Bancroft; it opened six years later, in September 1970, and won various awards for its architectural quality. From the outside it has been compared to a battleship or an aircraft carrier, inside it was an incredibly ingeniously planned building integrating classrooms, gymasia and even a swimming pool.

Against English Heritage advice it was granted immunity from listing by the then heritage minister Lord Mackintosh in 2003. I was there when Andrew Mackintosh visited the building, which he was pre-disposed to dislike on stylistic grounds. After his visit he declared that the building had catastrophic design flaws and was functionally unfit to be a school. On this basis he argued that the building could not be of special interest because a central component of successful architecture was its performance and the performance of this building was flawed both structurally and functionally. His decision was challenged in the courts by the building’s supporters and it was ruled that he was entitled to take into account design flaws in deciding whether to list or not.

So in this example the building’s flaws, and there were unquestionably flaws, meant that it was not protected and it has now been demolished and replaced. My second example is of the **Commonwealth Institute** in Kensington built in 1960-62 to the design of RMJM architects. It was recognised from the start as being an exceptionally interesting and important building and was listed in the first tranche of post war buildings in 1988 at grade II*.

By the 1990s the Commonwealth Institute wanted to change its focus and change its building. Nearly 20 years of debate and false starts followed before the trustees decided that they wanted to get out of the site, sell it and use the cash to run educational projects across the commonwealth. The trustees understandably wanted to make the most amount of money possible for their new charity and believed they would get less money from the site if it were listed, because it would be difficult to adapt the building.

They lodged an application for de-listing the whole site in 2005 and we advised the government that this was unacceptable and that, after the Royal Festival Hall, this was the most important listed building of its age. Tessa Jowell accepted the advice and rejected the application in July 2005. She then faced the full wrath of the Commonwealth Institute Trustees, a group of extremely well-placed people led by an absolutely determined chair, whose wrath I also faced on a number of occasions. They managed to persuade the Cabinet Office, and No.10 to look at the issue and, in May 2006, less than a year after Tessa Jowell had upheld its II* status she agreed to pass an act of parliament to over-rule EH advice and de-list the building.

Luckily the trustees agreed to pursue a dual track: both looking for a buyer and pressing for legislation. I suspect they did not trust themselves entirely to political a promise to bring forward legislation – which could have taken months or even years, particularly with EH and the entire conservation world up in arms and many MPS and Peers horrified by the implications. So at the same time as their bill was being considered they commissioned a master plan for the site from Foster and Partners and put the site on the market.

In April 2007 it was sold to a development consortium who knew what they were doing with such a building. **Their scheme** was not without its critics but by surrounding the main building with new residential blocks it brilliantly produced enough profit for the developer as well as enough cash to pass on to historic building allowing the Design Museum to take it on. The new museum will open there next month.

The lesson of this grubby case was that it was never necessary to worry about de-listing because the planning system is the place where the adaptation of a listed building is democratically discussed and determined. In the end it was possible for the charity to have their cash and for a really good and appropriate use to be found for the building, admittedly while it was altered for the purpose.
So I now need to draw together all the strands and come to some conclusions. The principal question raised by my survey of recent cases must be are post war modernist buildings in some way different from other historic buildings? And my answer to this is yes they are. If that is the case do you apply different conservation principles when you consider how to change them?

I think you do. To make many modernist buildings suitable for contemporary use you need to justify greater intervention than you might in other types of historic building and in those interventions the value placed on original fabric is proportionately lower. Until you accept this, the arguments about twentieth century buildings will continue to be intractable. And until you accept this it will be almost impossible to get of the starting blocks to make the argument for listing. The cases of both the Commonwealth Institute and Pimlico School show what happens when politicians and decision-makers imagine that listing stops buildings from being altered.

I am going to end with three slides which hopefully make my point. Here are the Park Hill Flats built between 1957 and 1961; most of you will know the building and may know of the huge controversy listing them caused. Here are the flats in the process of refurbishment and conversion into viable, fashionable dwellings for the 21st century and here they are now. On one hand there was a huge loss of fabric but on the other I think a visit there today shows that there is very little loss of meaning.

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