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**Perfection or Pastiche? New Buildings in   
Old Places**

Professor Simon Thurley

*The blight of the concrete municipal buildings of the 1960s and 70s in the historic centres of our cathedral cities is all too familiar. Everyone wants to avoid the same mistakes being made again, but there is a fissure between those who wish to build in contemporary styles and materials and those who want to adopt a local historical vernacular. There is also a tension between developers who say they have to build big and residents who want a human scale. Can we reconcile old and new in our historic cities?*

Much of conservation philosophy and almost all of conservation legislation concentrates on individual buildings, their fabric and significance. However in practice many, or even most, of the complex issues faced in protecting and enhancing the historic environment are about new buildings and their impact on old places. In 2003, on my desk on my first day as chief executive of English Heritage was a proposal for the tall building at London Bridge in Southwark now universally known as the Shard. I inherited a strong view from staff and from our advisory committees that this would be a highly detrimental addition to London, a building that would destroy the historic setting of hundreds of listed buildings and conservation areas. No actual historic fabric was going to be lost but the meaning of buildings from St. Paul’s Cathedral to St. George’s hospital would be forever compromised.

This is what I want to talk about this evening. How we make judgements about the impact of new buildings on the setting of historic buildings: how we decide whether new and old together enhance the old or detract from it. But before we get into the detail I think we need to make some clear distinctions and definitions so we all know what we are talking about.

When I talk about setting I mean the relationship between an historic building and its surroundings in the present and the past, including the way that the place is perceived, experienced and valued by people today. So the setting of Salisbury cathedral is the physicality of the cathedral close in all its depth of period and space.

In parallel, the ‘context’ of an historic building encompasses any relationship between it and other places; this potentially has many aspects and could be cultural, intellectual, spatial or functional, and may be drawn widely – for example, the links between all of the buildings designed by one architect. So the context of the **Commonwealth Institute** in Kensington embraces not only its landscape but the weight of meaning attached to its place in the establishment of the Commonwealth of Nations, the way its materials came from all over the world and the way it symbolises the optimism of the post war years.

These wider associations of context, however, do not fall within the specific meaning of setting as established in terms of planning legislation. Nevertheless the context of a building is part of its setting – you cannot disassociate the Commonwealth Institute from the ideas that brought it about.

So when we are considering the impact of new buildings on the setting and context of old ones there are several layers of judgement that have to be made and in making those judgements there are very few tools to hand. So this evening I want to talk about how you might set out make such judgements.

Making aesthetic judgements about architecture is complex, and raises issues that evaluating music, painting or literature does not. The most important of these is the functionality of architecture: unlike other art forms it has a utility. Architecture cannot be understood in isolation from its function, and it is not possible to separate the aesthetic effect of a building from the function it fulfils. So when we judge a building we are likely to admire one as beautiful that works like a well-oiled lock, where people can go about their business in a smooth well-ordered manner. A building that is confusing and frustrating to use such as the **Barbican Centre** in the City of London may have claims to aesthetic merit but they are not through the beauty of smooth functionality whereas the **British Library** by Sandy St. John Wilson is universally agreed by its users to be a wonderful place to work in hugely adding to its aesthetic appeal.

Secondly, although new inventions are made in other art forms such as acrylic paint, or the electric guitar, and these can change the product, architecture and its effects are fundamentally fashioned by developing technical competence. The invention of the sash window, **plate glass**, structural cast iron, or reinforced concrete all opened new chapters in architectural aesthetics. Aesthetics and architectural technology and engineering develop hand in hand.

Thirdly the audience for architecture is different too. Architecture has a universal audience. Writers, composers or painters have to create a public for their work while Architects have a public by definition: architecture is a public art. It is inescapable and imposes itself on people whether they want it or not. This is, of course why people care so much about it.

So when we consider beauty in architecture we have to embrace functionality, technical competence and audience, all of which are factors that make buildings inherently different in terms of aesthetic criticism. But there is a fourth critical difference and that is locality. It is not possible to separate the locality of a building from its aesthetic impact. Other art forms are generally mobile, you can carry a painting around and hang it in different places to achieve contrasting juxtapositions and different meanings; you can play a piece of music in a church and in a railway station and get differing responses. A building is where it is and its aesthetic impact is static unless for some reason its surroundings change.

So **Chatsworth House** is beautiful as much for its landscape setting as for William Talman’s architecture. Denys Lasdun’s **Ziggurats** at UEA are likewise defined by their relationship to the land that surrounds them. Here is a view of **Lancaster Castle**, defined by its setting next to the abbey and other town churches. This is **St. Mary’s Taunton**, viewed down Hamett street - a Georgian street that is now as much part of the aesthetic impact of the church as its tower finished in 1508.

So all this is to say the obvious which is that the effect of a building is always enhanced or diminished by its surroundings. This point is of course fundamental to my topic this evening because inherent in aesthetic judgements about architecture are judgements about the way buildings compose with their surroundings. The aesthetic impact of a building and its setting cannot be disentangled.

One consequence of all these characteristics – functionality, competence, audience and locality, is that it is much more difficult to make judgements about architectural aesthetics than about a painting, a symphony, or a ballet. Indeed, there is a severely under-developed language and critical apparatus for this kind of criticism. Yet architectural aesthetics have a huge impact on society, personal happiness, well-being, and even health. Campaigns and societies spring up to stop a skyscraper, shopping centre, or waste incinerator being built. Other groups spring up to prevent a church, town hall, or a country house being demolished. Certainly the motivations of these are not all aesthetic – a waste destructor, for instance, may be emitting toxins into the air – but most campaigns have a significant aesthetic content.

Of course it is possible to dismiss these campaigns as merely manifestations of personal taste. Taste can be seen as random personal preference which need not be taken seriously, but architectural taste need not, in my view, be merely capricious: it can be the exercise of judgement, and springs from something deeper than caprice. Taste is influenced by thought and education, and expresses moral, religious and political outlooks and feelings. In this way it is as much part of our rational nature as scientific or moral judgement.

This means that taste can change – both the taste of individuals and the taste of societies. Prevailing taste is fashion, a word used damningly as expressing the most rapid, vapid changes in public likes and dislikes. Like discussions about taste, fashion can be used to dismiss the concerns of people who want to stop new buildings and preserve old ones. Yet fashion, through rational thought and intellectual refinement, can become established and may even be argued for on empirical terms.

This opens up one of the great debates about art generally and architecture in particular. Is architectural beauty absolute or relative? In other words, does it lie in the building and its setting, or in the eye of the beholder? Is it inherent or is it fashion? The earliest writer to address this issue that we know of was Vitruvius in the early years of the Roman Empire. He proposed that the most solid, useful and beautiful architecture derived from the proportions of the human body. This ideal, rediscovered in the late fifteenth century, led to **Leonardo da Vinci’s** Vitruvian Man, a diagram to demonstrate how ideal architectural proportions can be derived from the human body.

From around 1714 a series of English architectural books promoted a style of building based on these rules. Critics often call it **Palladianism**. In this, beauty could be achieved by following rules, and critics could consult the texts and judge for themselves how effectively the architect had applied them. The modern movement also made a case for the existence of an intrinsic beauty. This was not born of a set of rules but of a belief that the form of a building should follow and express its function without the intervention of imagery or symbolism. This functionalist ethic is sometimes called the machine aesthetic, and was likewise deemed susceptible to judgement against an established norm.

In *The Stones of Venice* John Ruskin wrote,

‘I had always … a clear conviction that there was a law in this matter: that good architecture might be indisputably discerned and divided from the bad; and that … we were all of us just as unwise in disputing about the matter without reference to principle, as we should be for debating about the genuineness of a coin without ringing it’.

Now, before the late nineteenth century it mattered only to a small group of patrons and connoisseurs whether buildings were beautiful or not. And even Ruskin, William Morris, and their fellow critics had the leisure of writing about architecture without any concrete responsibility for it. But in 1882 for the first time it started to matter whether buildings were good, bad, beautiful, or ugly in terms of law. In that year the first Ancient Monuments Protection Act was passed. This was the first piece of legislation to protect man-made structures in Britain, establishing the principle that the state, in the form of the Commissioners of the Board of Public Works, could take into their care any of an agreed list or schedule of what were called ‘ancient monuments’.

Of course the early inspectors of Ancient Monuments would have denied that they were making aesthetic judgements in the process of identifying what monuments should be saved but as the heritage protection system and the planning system grew the process by which government employees exercised aesthetic judgement became more and more entrenched.

So who were these early inspectors and planning officers who started to make judgements about a huge range of planning matters especially after the Town and Country Planning Act and the coming of modern listing the war? The answer is that they were generally architects – men (and a few women) highly trained in making architectural judgements and well versed in architectural history and a knowledge of vernacular building materials. The 300 original investigators who were drafted in after the Blitz to identify which buildings should be saved and which should be demolished were all architects. As well as following whatever skeletal criteria had been set by the Ministry of Works, these people exercised their architectural judgement in making their decisions. Their preferences were highly refined by an understanding of architectural history and development, of course, operating within the intellectual and aesthetic fashions of their day.

But as the generation of architects who had been employed on listing immediately after the war died off they were replaced by something else. The new generation of architects, steeped in enthusiasm for **the modern movement**, had little interest in a dead-end career criticising buildings whose styles they neither knew nor cared about, and so their roles in the planning system were replaced not by new architects but by historians… like me!

So a great divide occurred. By the 1960s new architecture ploughed one furrow, divorced from its historical roots and the government inspectors and investigators ploughed another, steeped in art history. Thus when, in 1981, recognising the inadequacy of the original historic building lists, Michael Heseltine set up a new survey of the entire country, to undertake the work he employed eighty fieldworkers, every single one of them archaeologists and historians. Few if any young architects would have been capable of doing the job.

I have been on a bit of a digression, but an important one. Because two crucial points need to be made and these are firstly that making judgements about new buildings in old places is highly complex and requires critical faculties that other cultural criticism does not and secondly while originally these judgements were made by architects they lost, first the desire to make them and then the right to make them during the 1960s and 70s.

By right I mean that, just as the art historians and archaeologists in the planning system made judgements about architectural aesthetics informed by the time depth of their surroundings, so did the public. Public taste never warmed to architecture built without an historical context, because historical context is the thing that informs and develops taste. Modernism in England was not condemned by critics but by the public – by people who were forced to live in tower blocks, queue in municipal offices, shop in supermarkets; people whose field of vision was dominated by stained concrete and monotonous, unrelieved facades; people who escaped death in the collapsing Ronan Point tower block in 1968. So the public did not trust architects to make judgements on the places where they lived, they saw them, and their fellows in the municipal planning departments, as not the creators of nice places to live, but the destroyers of them.

So what do we make of this? My fundamental contention is that architectural aesthetics cannot be judged on a set of simple criteria. Judgement must be much more complex. Architecture’s functionality, competence, audience and locality, mean that the critical apparatus needed to assess it is bulky and rich and it means that aesthetics alone is not enough. You cannot judge architecture only on the basis of aesthetic appeal; to capture the depth of significance in building you need to look more widely and that means having people who are highly attuned to the issues involved.

Before you think I am arguing for a corps of elite aesthetes who float around condemning the ugly and praising the beautiful I want to emphasise that we must also allow for the shock of the new, for the bold gesture. **Inigo Jones’s** banqueting house at Whitehall would almost certainly have failed miserably in a modern planning appeal. It was much bigger than the rest of Whitehall Palace, by at least two storeys, it was stone when the rest was brick; it was in a completely different style. In short it was a new building in an old place that stuck out like a sore thumb. It was also one of the most important, and now most revered, buildings ever constructed on English soil.

What about **Tower Bridge**? A building that completely dominates the Tower of London in almost every view. You might say that they tried to make it blend in stylistically, but did they? Where on the Tower of London are those steeply pitched roofs, where are the lancet windows and where is all that cast iron? Surely this grade 1 listed building is the destroyer of the much older and more important Tower of London next to it.

I could go on citing examples, from the Scott memorial in Edinburgh to Clifton Suspension Bridge in Bristol. These were new buildings in old places that were no respecters of scale, of materials, or of style. They brutally imposed themselves on the existing historic streetscapes and bullied their way into our affections. So how does a system for measuring the impact of a new building in an old place take account of this issue? Here we come to the crux of the problem. It is notoriously difﬁcult to judge an aggressively different new building: one that sets out to tear up the rules and start a new trend.

The fact is that historic cities must be allowed to continue to evolve. After the destruction by an IRA bomb of the Victorian Baltic Exchange in the Centre of the City of London there was a huge and protracted debate about what should happen to the site. Eventually, the owners, the City and English Heritage gave up on the shattered remains of the old building and a discussion began about its replacement. Through a protracted process that would take many hours to describe English heritage came to the point when it supported Norman Foster’s Swiss Re building now known as **the Gherkin** as a replacement on the site. The setting of the surrounding buildings was a fundamental issue, not so much close up as in the long view; and that judgement I think has stood the test of time, the shape of the building and its composition on the London skyline had proved to be an ornament to St. Paul’s and the other historic sites.

I cannot now go into what happened next; but the gherkin was the start of a process that saw tall buildings approved willy-nilly and in the end I’m, afraid without much thought of what they were doing to the historic environment. The worst was Raphael Vinoly’s **Fenchurch Street** tower the so-called walkie-talkie. But it need not have been so. Cities can take big and assertive buildings like the gherkin while enhancing their historic environment. I happen to think that **Liverpool City** managed to preserved both the setting and the context of its two cathedrals in the view across the Mersey while allowing two new buildings of great importance to the city.

In a tougher urban context more can be done and a more contemporary addition can be successful. Here is the Liverpool Institute’s extension in a contemporary style but reflecting the aesthetic of the Victorian building. It is of stone with a rusticated basement and a protruding roofline that continues the horizontality of the cornice. From the other end of the street it is really quite assertive with its curving glass corner, but the aesthetic of the original is still dominant.

The fact is that our big cities are different to our towns and villages. Cities have always been the places where architectural innovation has thrived. Manchester saw the invention of the Victorian warehouse, **Birmingham modernist** brutalism. Our cities must be allowed to be engines of architectural creativity; the largest cities can take architectural mistakes and either live with them or see them replaced by succeeding generations.

What is very different is the market towns and villages of England here we need to find some way to help councils keep the small-scale street pattern, materials and distinctive features of the place. That allows new building but only in as far as it subjugates itself to the wider artistic and historic whole that is the town itself. This is where the big battles lie, in my opinion.

Of course our great cities are important but the delicate balance that makes Newark, Pontefract and Taunton beautiful is far more vulnerable than the robustness of Sheffield or Newcastle, let alone London. Moreover, the skills that are likely to be found in the smaller towns are less well-developed. The cities have big planning departments filled with well-qualified people and NGOs keep their eyes on what they are up to. Profit margins are also higher and allow for more skilled (and costly) design teams theoretically producing better architecture.

So we urgently have to draw out a distinction between the way London and the half-dozen great cities have developed and the sweep of market and cathedral towns. As well as developing the techniques that enable us to argue for the future of our cities – tools that are now rapidly maturing – we must urgently develop a different and more subtle set of tools that can help local councillors and officers judge more effectively and objectively the impact of new buildings in smaller historic places, and thereby preserve the unique qualities that make their towns and villages so attractive.

So far I have been talking in abstract about style and taste but now I need to turn to a more concrete approach and we need to consider some actual cases and examples and I want to start in the 1970s to stop and look at some of the more imaginative attempts by modernist architects to blend in modern buildings with historic centres. I want to start in Chester where there has been a very long tradition of constructing new buildings respecting and reflecting the old. Here are the Chester Rows built from the thirteenth century onwards and here is first a seventeenth century attempt to blend in and also a **Victorian response** to replacement and addition. Now look at this infill from the 1970s – Refuge House a concrete framed building with bay windows in black and white. Here the architects have made a real effort to reflect the design, but obviously not the materials of the street.

This is a multi-story car park in Lowestoft designed with great care and constructed in local materials. No doubt the municipal architects in the 1970s gave a convincing presentation when it was on the drawing board outlining how the design and materials reflected the local context of building in Lowestoft. Sited in the dock area this it takes the theme of the warehouse to guide its design while the facing is constructed of knapped flints, a locally distinctive material.

These two examples are, I think quite complex as if you were to write a brief for the two sites I think you would emphasise the importance of traditional forms, proportions and materials and, in both examples, the architects have made interesting responses. Much better than, for instance, another building in Chester the **Crowne Plaza** Hotel. Here the architects (if there were any) must have argued that the building, with its half-timbering, was contextual although it was on a new ring road and adjacent buildings were not half timbered. No one would judge the building a success.

So since the birth of modernism architects have attempted to find a way to build modern but look traditional, and I would be interested in your views on how successful my two examples are. But what I want to argue for this evening is something deeply unfashionable which is a return to traditional building in our market towns and villages. This is a subject greeted with horror and derision by most architects. They leer at you and spit through clenched teeth the word ‘pastiche’.

Now I happen to think that this is a very silly world. It is a term that means a work of art, book, tune etc. composed in the style of a well-known artist. It was never originally a pejorative term but has become the ultimate insult an architect can throw at a building. This whole notion is of very new making. Architects have always drawn on the work of other architects and have always been happy to design in styles that reflect and imitate ones from the past.

Let me briefly take Westminster Abbey as an example. This is the royal Minster, still today a royal peculiar, a building upon which no expense was spared. In 1272 Henry III died and the nave of the abbey was left incomplete. **Almost 100 years** later it was decided to finally complete the abbey, and as the architects of the day set out to do this they decided to complete it in the original style. For 150 years through half a dozen stylistic fashions work continued on the nave arcades and when it was finished in the 1530s, in style it was indistinguishable from the work of the thirteenth century.

Again in the seventeenth century when the dean and chapter decided to finally complete the west towers **Nicholas Hawksmoor** rebuilt the west end in a style that matched the rest of the building. And this is Hawksmoor, one of the most innovative and inventive English architects of all time. OK you might say, these are examples from one building, but we only need to look across the road at the Middlesex guildhall. This remarkable building, now home to the Supreme Court was built in 1912-13. At this time major civic buildings were being built in classical styles and not in Gothic. But it was considered that the genius of the place needed a gothic style. And so we get the remarkable art nouveau version of gothic with an amazing historical frieze.

So architects have long been happy top blend in their work to existing styles – so why not now? In some instances I think it is entirely justifiable, indeed important to commission new buildings in a vernacular style. I think it is downright arrogant to introduce new materials and styles of an aggressively contrasting nature in historic towns. Here is one of my favourite aggressive interventions. This is a terrace of Regency houses outside the town hall in Lancaster. In an attempt not to be seen to be building a replica an architect has inserted a glass infill in the stucco terrace. Brighton has a very strong historic character with a homogenous historic building stock. The domestic language in the historic core is rendered or stuccoed brick. So these new interventions which seem to be good in scale, proportion and general design just do not work because they are in red brick.

In many smaller towns the historic character is captured in hundreds of years of harmonious development, the interruption of which is unjustifiable. **Marlborough High Street** is a very good example. This is a harmonious composition of historic buildings in more or less the same materials to similar scales and using similar proportions. It does not engage us by surprise and contrast it seduces us by familiarity and harmony. This was not un-planned for, as we know, nothing is unplanned in a town like Marlborough. Its appearance was the product of hundreds of conscious decisions many of which had the object of maintaining visual harmony at their core. But Marlborough is also a good example as it has an ill-conceived **modern intervention** which is over-scaled, poor in design and materials that detracts significantly from the whole and is the only blot on an otherwise almost perfect historic street. Unfortunately I do not have a perfect picture of it, but you will get the gist from this.

I will just give you some more examples of where I think it is important that new buildings sublimate their own identity for the benefit of the whole. Here is the market square in Devizes where a 1950s Woolworths has recently been replaced with a very well designed and built building in a vernacular style that reinforces the aesthetic significance of the square. A similar point can be made in Queen’s Square Bristol where the essential overall harmony of the ensemble is much more important than any individual building. In other words the significance of the place is its homogeneity of materials, scale, function and design. At both Devizes and Queen’s Square designing a new building in the style of the old ones is a very good solution.

But of course the key to both of these is that the detailing and quality is right. Where so many attempts to design ‘in the style of’ fall down horribly is in the execution. So here is **Queen’s Square**, well designed and executed and here is another attempt. It is in Great Yarmouth which has a very distinctive series of late nineteenth century terraces facing the sea front. The buildings have strong verticals with sashes piled up in tiers and big bold quoins. The roofs have eaves and fat dentils; the attic is defined by a string course. Permission was granted to build a new range in advance of these, but in close visual relationship. The result is disastrous. Although superficially the range is brick with corner quoins and hipped roofs with eaves, and the windows are portrait sashes, the buildings are illiterate and poorly detailed.

In Devises and Bristol, and indeed in Great Yarmouth, we are talking about modern buildings that are composed in vernacular historical styles in order to preserve the harmony but it is perfectly possible for the harmony to be maintained by the skilful intervention of a modern vernacular building in a contemporary style. I am not sure that the shops in Chester or the car park in Lowestoft succeeded if they were indeed trying to achieve this. **Leonard Manasseh’s** county court building in King’s Lynn did set out to achieve this and I think brilliant succeeded. The materials are brick, the heights and massing follow the neighbouring structures but the building is in a contemporary style.

This is the **American Embassy** in Grosvenor Square, London. The square is one of London’s largest Georgian squares although most of the buildings round it now are neo-Georgian replacements. When the Americans decided to build their embassy there in 1955 they chose the Finnish-American architect Eero Saarinen whose brief was to build something modern but at the same time acknowledge the history and visual traditions of London architecture. His brilliant response, in Portland stone, was a building with which in mass, cornice height, window format and silhouette accorded with the Georgian Square while at the same time being an accomplished work of contemporary design.

Such buildings are hard to pull off and it is no coincidence that the two examples I have given you are by architects of the first rank. Lesser architects have been more often successful in pulling off contemporary designs in industrial settings. Building with and next to industrial sites is often not a problem because of the prevailing technological aesthetic .This is a recent piece of casework from the BATA site in Tilbury. The original modernist Bata factory is being turned into flats and the developer wants to build a number of new blocks next to the original. In fact the intention had been for Bata to build more blocks and so the new residential blocks are in a sense completing the first design. On the right old and new together in elevation and on the left in perspective.

Warehouses likewise seem to be effective to reproduce. This is the riverfront at Lancaster with a series of new blocks of flats that echo the materials, roofline and scale of the previous industrial buildings on the site. The shot on the right gives the panorama from the other side of the river; on the left is a close up of the new build. Here are some new houses in **Skipton** in Yorkshire in an industrial vibe.

So now it is time to sum up. I suppose the fundamental point is that you cannot divorce a building from its setting and context so, when you list a building or create a conservation area, you are also making an assessment not only of it but also of its surroundings. Those surroundings can be robust and relatively impervious to change as is the case in many cities or they can be extremely delicate and fragile as in smaller historic settlements. Here you are dealing with a composite work of art with all the subtle interplay that involves between places and spaces. The National Planning Policy Framework recognises this but because it was hugely slimmed down and the government will not accept any supplementary guidance many planning authorities do not get the point and so not understand how to make judgements about new buildings in their historic cores. The people they employ are ill equipped to do anything other than to bow to economic pressures to grant permission and stimulate growth.

So there is a need to be brave, and unfashionable, and to talk about style, to talk about buildings that respect the scale, materials and proportions of those with which they are going to stand. Some architects will hurl abuse and talk about pastiche. They should look back through history and realise that all the most popular places to live, work and visit are places where changes have been made that preserve the essential harmony of the place. Many of the most reviled places are those in which architects of the last sixty years have turned their backs on the past. Finally we should also remember that sometimes, particularly in big robust urban areas it is possible, and it is right, to do something that stands out, that shocks and that that can be good too.

© Professor Simon Thurley, 2017

Gresham College

Barnard’s Inn Hall

Holborn

London

EC1N 2HH

[www.gresham.ac.uk](http://www.gresham.ac.uk)