

Conservation of Modern Architecture

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Cover photograph: Joadja House, Australia, designed by Harry Seidler (see p. 113). (Eric Seirens)

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Docomomo-UK

Questions of Assessment

James Dunnett

Abstract

This paper outlines some cases in which I have campaigned for the conservation of works of modern architecture, primarily through Docomomo-UK (as co-chair since 2002), but also as casework committee member of the Twentieth Century Society. I hope to demonstrate that conservation issues in terms of design, whose significance would be readily recognized in the case of pre-modern listed buildings, are of equal significance in the case of modern buildings but have not always been recognized as such by the regulatory bodies. I also hope to pinpoint some areas of special significance in modern buildings. Though the number of post-war listed buildings has increased enormously, a consensus has yet to emerge in a still controversial field where public backing for conservation may be felt to be insecure.

Introduction

This paper focuses on cases where there has been need for a campaign – cases where there was a difference of opinion with the statutory authorities or protection was absent (and often where the works being opposed were officially promoted). The cases where statutory protection has been effective do not as a result get discussed, and this will perhaps give an unbalanced picture of the overall effectiveness of controls. But in focusing on the ‘problems’, I hope to demonstrate that conservation issues in terms of design, which would be readily recognized in the case of pre-modern listed buildings, are also of relevance to modern buildings, but are not always recognized as such even by statutory bodies such as English Heritage. I also seek to identify some issues of specific relevance to modern buildings.

Official involvement in this area is relatively new and has much expanded since I first became active in the field nearly twenty years ago in 1988, when I campaigned to win recognition and protection for Ernö Goldfinger's concrete office complex, Alexander Fleming House, at the Elephant and Castle, London, of 1959, the headquarters of the Ministry of Health. It was threatened first with overcladding, and then with demolition. Although granted immunity from listing, it was saved from either by a slump in the office market. I had previously curated two exhibitions on related themes – a comprehensive exhibition of the work of Goldfinger (for whom I had worked in the 1970s) at the Architectural Association in London in 1983 in association with Gavin Stamp, and an exhibition at the RIBA Drawings Collection in 1986 entitled 'London: Images from the Modern City', which matched post-war inner-London architecture in drawings and photographs to pre-war modern urban ideals. Though Alexander Fleming House remains unprotected to this day – it has been painted, crudely converted into housing, and renamed Metro Central – many other important modern works have since been listed, including much of Goldfinger's work (though not his important Player House in Kingston-on-Thames, which as a result was demolished in 1994). Docomomo was therefore relevant to my interests when it appeared in 1990. It promised to be as much concerned with the promotion of the ideas and values of the Modern Movement as with conserving its fabric, which mirrored my own feelings.

Docomomo International and Docomomo-UK

Docomomo was set up – on an international basis from the start – by Professor Hubert-Jan Henket of Eindhoven University in the Netherlands and his associate Wessel de Jonge, with two immediate motives: to bring world opinion to persuade the Soviet authorities to conserve the major architectural works of Constructivism (whose condition had alarmed Henket on a visit to Russia), and to encourage the Dutch Government to finance the conservation of the Sanatorium at Zonnerstraat of 1926–8 by Johannes Duiker. Henket and de Jonge had just completed the restoration of Duiker's nearby Gooiland Hotel at Hilversum. There was a parallel desire, almost unspoken, to re-assert the values of the Modern Movement at a time when post-Modernism was no longer so new. The model of CIAM (*Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*), which lasted from 1928 to 1959 as an international organization co-ordinating national member groups, such as the MARS (Modern Architectural Research Group) in the UK, was not far off.

Henket (who remained international chair of Docomomo until 2002) is not a historian, critic or conservator, but professor of architecture and head

of a successful modern practice of 'high tech' character. He had worked with the firm of Castle Park Dean Hook in London in the 1970s, in particular with Christopher Dean, the partner responsible for the Leicester University and Hull University Libraries. Dean (who died in 1998) was a theorist as well as a practitioner, and had been a pupil of Anthony Blunt at the Courtauld Institute in London and a colleague of the influential architects Peter and Alison Smithson. When the practice Castle Park Dean Hook split up, Dean turned increasingly to historical pursuits, for example putting on at the Architectural Association a very successful exhibition devoted to airship hangars. He was keen to take over the UK operations when Henket contacted him to suggest the establishment of Docomomo. Dean specifically endorsed the title (the international committee for the **documentation and conservation of buildings, sites and neighbourhoods of the modern movement**), whilst insisting that promoting and developing the Modern Movement was also embodied in the manifesto. The precedence given to documentation over conservation in the title was intended to reflect a 'technological' approach and openness to change in the spirit of the Modern Movement. But the critic Martin Pawley nevertheless attacked Docomomo as another conservation organization resistant to change when invited to speak at the first International Conference at Eindhoven in September 1990 (where the manifesto, subsequently referred to as the 'Eindhoven Statement', was formulated).

Docomomo-UK, whose first meeting was at the RIBA in March 1990, was thus launched at more or less the same time as Docomomo International. Dean persuaded Lord (Peter) Palumbo, then Chairman of the Arts Council and a well-known enthusiast for modern architecture, personally to fund Docomomo-UK for the first three years, with Dean in the role of salaried co-ordinator, John Allan (of Avanti Architects, who had just been responsible for the restoration of Lubetkin's Penguin Pool with funding from Palumbo) as first Hon. Chairman, and myself as first Hon. Secretary. Palumbo gave the keynote address at the Eindhoven conference with the title 'Preserving the Future', in which he urged Docomomo not to 'become just a pressure group for conservationists or club for scholars ... Docomomo is about the future, if it is about anything ...' He added:

We need to find a way of celebrating an architecture of the present. How can awareness of the Modern Movement help this process? The answer is by re-examining the ideas which once underpinned the Modern Movement, and by applying the best of them to today's problems, for these ideas are by no means dead.

This was the brief, the enthusiasm of Docomomo. The Thirties Society (later the Twentieth Century Society) had already been in existence in the UK since 1979 as a derivative of the Victorian Society, with the remit of

defending works of architecture post 1914. But being ideologically non-specific about 'style' (and even ambivalent about 'modern' – for example refusing at first to defend Goldfinger's Alexander Fleming House), it had declined to associate with Docomomo International because of its exclusively Modern Movement orientation. So it was felt there was room for a Docomomo-UK. But in general, where Docomomo has been active in a particular case, it has been in parallel with or supporting the Twentieth Century Society, or even formally representing it, as in the case of Royal College of Art, and it has proved to be a fruitful relationship.

Mendelsohn's Cohen House

The first case tackled by Dean in 1991–2 as co-ordinator of Docomomo-UK was Wells Coates' Lawn Road flats of 1934, then in a very sad state of dilapidation under the care of Camden Council, a case referred to Docomomo by the recently renamed Twentieth Century Society. Dean was leader for a time in moving along the process that eventually led to transfer of the flats to other ownership, and to their thorough restoration by Avanti. About the importance of this there was no dispute. Erich Mendelsohn's Cohen House in Chelsea Old Church Street of 1935, however, though listed Grade II* and considered one of the most important Modern Movement houses in the country, was judged by English Heritage in 1992 not to be of Mendelsohn's very best (Expressionist) 1920s phase,



Figure 1 Erich Mendelsohn and Serge Chermayeff's Cohen House in Chelsea Old Church Street, London, of 1935, following the addition of Norman Foster's conservatory in 1992. (James Dunnett)

and proposals by Norman Foster were approved that fundamentally altered its composition. The house was in nearly original condition apart from a later timber conservatory attached to the south elevation. The garden (east) elevation was the best known; it contrasted long horizontal bands of window for which Mendelsohn was famous, with areas of windowless wall – specifically the side of the squash court. Mendelsohn's struggle to incorporate this squash court (which also doubled as a domestic cinema openable into the dining room) meaningfully into the plan of the house has been documented. The owner, publisher Paul Hamlyn, wished to turn it into a library, and for this purpose he wanted to introduce windows into the side of it. He also wished to rebuild the non-original south conservatory on a larger scale and with more permanent materials (steel), breaking through into the interior of the house, and to mirror it at the north end, to provide more staff accommodation there. These proposals removed the relationships of tension and contrast on which the composition was based. The original co-architect, Serge Chermayeff, objected – as did the well-known writer about Mendelsohn, Bruno Zevi. A joint Docomomo-Twentieth Century Society event was held in the Chelsea Arts Club opposite the house to object. Nevertheless, the work was granted permission with English Heritage's support and was carried out, except to the north end of the house. The decision to oppose Norman Foster's scheme had caused much internal dispute – after all he was an architect whose work was in general much admired within Docomomo (he was a friend of Henket's) and seen as continuing the spirit of the Modern Movement. But it is unlikely, for example, that permission would be granted for windows to be inserted in the blank exterior walls of Soane's Bank of England, whatever the benefits.

Queen Elizabeth Square, Glasgow

Another early case, in 1993, was in Glasgow, where stood Basil Spence's towering Queen Elizabeth Square flats of 1957, also known as Hutchesontown 'C', next to (but not strictly in) the Gorbals. Though Spence's exactly contemporary Falmer House, the core of Sussex University, spaciouly laid out on Sussex downland, was already listed Grade I, Historic Scotland declined to recommend the flats for listing at any grade. They were, however, undoubtedly one of Spence's most dramatic and personal designs. The alternating pattern of inward and outward sloping pilotis, worked out structurally by the brilliant young engineer Povl Ahm (subsequently Chairman of Arups), and the composition comprising a series of towers linked on alternate floors by double-height shared balconies or 'drying greens', were highly effective and original features. The concrete had come to require attention and the site's location near the



Figure 2 Basil Spence's Queen Elizabeth Square flats, Glasgow, of 1957, immediately prior to their demolition in 1993. (James Dunnett)

centre of the city had encouraged drug culture, but the primary objection to the flats was that they did not fit the new 'four-storey walk-up' pattern that was being promoted for the area. The City Council judged the estate 'unsuccessful, most specifically in terms of its unpleasant and dominant appearance, and in terms of its inadequate design and layout'. Despite Docomomo's vigorous campaign – which included identifying a potential new tenant for the whole structure – and a last-minute call for reprieve from Palumbo, the flats were demolished with explosives, causing the loss of life of an onlooker.

The Swiss Cottage Pool

The fate of another fine Spence building for which Docomomo campaigned shortly after – the Swiss Cottage Swimming Pool in London – was sealed in part by English Heritage's decision to put it forward for listing as a separate structure from the same architect's contiguous Swiss Cottage Library, though the two were part of a single composition, and built together. This left it open to the Government to accept the one for listing – the Library, which was subsequently restored – while rejecting the other – the Pool, which was demolished. Architecturally, the two – one with horizontal concrete louvres, the other with vertical concrete fins – had formed an effective complementary group based on contrast. The Pool was dignified and



Figure 3 Swiss Cottage Library, London (left) and Swimming Pool (right), by Basil Spence (1962–4). The Library has been restored by John McAslan & Partners; the Pool has been demolished. (James Dunnett)

spatially interesting, its louvres a feature of exceptional refinement, and the demolition was fiercely opposed by local groups. An alternative interpretation could perhaps be put on this – that ‘one half at least was saved’: but would a similar attitude be adopted in the case of an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century composition of comparable national importance?

The Barbican Arts Centre

The foyer of Chamberlin Powell and Bon’s Grade II listed Barbican Arts Centre of 1982 in London has recently undergone substantial alteration to designs by Alford Hall Monaghan and Morris (AHMM). This had been opposed by the Twentieth Century Society (and by myself acting in this case on their behalf), but supported by English Heritage and the City Planning Department. It had long been acknowledged that circulation within and access to the complex was problematic – indeed when Docomomo-UK was canvassed for its opinion on the proposed listing in 2001, the then chair, Dr Catherine Cooke, had barely felt able to support it. But she rightly drew attention to the importance of Gillian Wise’s murals on the walls of the stair leading to the cinema, which were unmentioned in the draft listing description. This was fortunate, since AHMM subsequently proposed to remove them. The listing was confirmed, and the foyer spaces with their massive bush-hammered square concrete piers and stairs



Figure 4 The foyer of the Barbican Arts Centre, London, by Chamberlin Powell and Bon (completed 1982), before the insertion of an additional floor by architects AHMM in 2005. (James Dunnett)

of Piranesian grandeur are undoubtedly a high point of the design. Their focus was a quadruple-height top-lit space where four stairs converged, defined by four of the piers and originally emphasized by a massive sculpture suspended above. This is precisely the space which the AHMM scheme has subdivided. The problem was always that of getting suitable access from the 'inland' Silk Street entrance across to the 'lake' side of the foyer without having to descend to this focal space and then re-ascend. A new floor has now been inserted to make it possible. The assumption behind the original design seems to have been that access would mostly be from the side facing the lake, where lies the principal façade. The ideal solution would have been one that turned this assumption into fact. Theo Crosby had already made one attempt to solve the problem in the 1980s by making minor internal interventions, an approach followed more drastically by AHMM – but their solution was surely incompatible with the Arts Centre's listed status.

The Royal Festival Hall

Another of London's principal cultural venues to have very recently undergone radical overhaul and alteration with the approval of English Heritage is the Royal Festival Hall, the only surviving element of the 1951 Festival of Britain on London's South Bank, under architects Allies & Morrison. It is Grade I listed and this would imply the highest level of protection, akin for example to the eighteenth-century Theatre Royal in Richmond, which has recently been painstakingly restored in every detail. Significant changes to the exterior of the Festival Hall had already been made in the mid-1960s, when the river frontage was moved forward so as to provide additional restaurant space, and much of the 1950s exterior detailing, considered over-fussy, was removed. But most of the famous foyers and the auditorium remained intact. There had, however, long been dissatisfaction with the acoustic performance of the auditorium. Though this had been much studied when designed, the curved ceiling as built appears to have been of lighter construction than specified (money was perhaps saved by reducing the thickness of the plaster), and in any case the Hall was too large (with 3,000 seats) for perfect acoustics for orchestral concerts. The distances become too long with halls of this size, and the overhanging balcony is a further problem at the Festival Hall: 2,000 seats, as in the much-applauded Musikverein in Vienna, is considered the ideal. It had been a

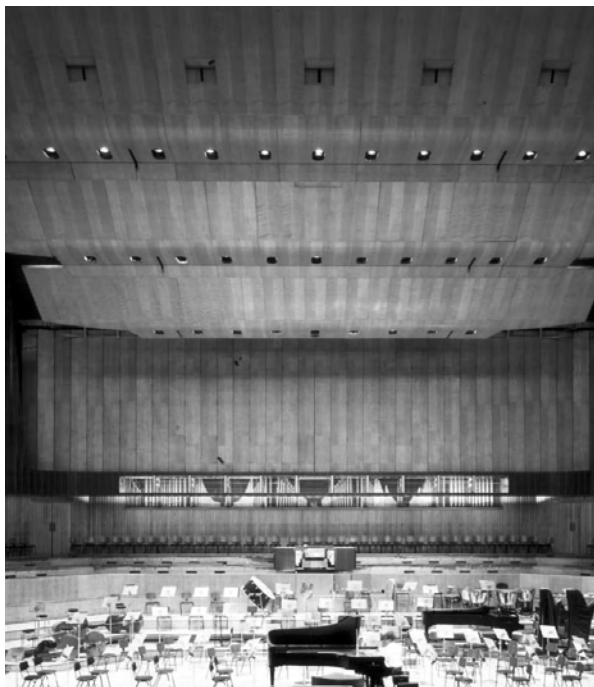


Figure 5 The stage of the Royal Festival Hall (1948–51), showing the plywood canopy which have been removed as part of the current works. (Charlotte Wood)

political decision to build effectively a multi-functional 'Palace for the People' rather than very specifically an orchestral concert hall. The solutions proposed by Arup Acoustics, based on assisted resonance, which were architecturally conservationist and were supported by Docomomo-UK and the Twentieth Century Society, were rejected in favour of those of the American acoustic consultancy Kierkegaards. The latter involved wholly remodelling the stage end of the auditorium, removing its most distinctive characteristics – the sweeping plywood canopy and angled timber-clad walls. English Heritage approved this; listed building consent was granted in 2004, and the work has now been carried out. One of the original architects, Trevor Dannatt, now a trustee of Docomomo-UK and president of the Twentieth Century Society, questioned whether the Grade I listed status would any longer be justified. In a concert hall, the visual impact surely needs consideration in measure almost equal to the acoustic.

The Royal College of Art

The Royal College of Art (RCA), situated alongside the Royal Albert Hall in Kensington, is the most important work of its architect H. T. 'Jim' Cadbury-Brown (b. 1913), and it was awarded the RIBA Bronze Medal, the most prestigious award for architecture in London of its time (1961). But, owing reputedly to the dislike for it of a later RCA Rector, Jocelyn Stephens, who went on to become head of English Heritage, it was not listed until 2002.

By then, plans had already taken shape to demolish the RCA's two-storey Gulbenkian Wing (containing the original Hall, Main Entrance, and Exhibition Gallery), and build in its place a seven-storey 'elliptical' wing designed by Nicholas Grimshaw (now President of the Royal Academy). This wing, though with qualities of its own, would have severely compromised Cadbury-Brown's design (already damaged by earlier alterations by John Miller), and would have significantly affected the setting of the Albert Hall. The original design comprised the nine-storey rectangular Darwin block containing studios and workshops facing Kensington Park to the north, with the two-storey polygonal Gulbenkian Wing and the Common Room and Library blocks enclosing a courtyard to the south. The low Gulbenkian wing was designed to expose to public view and bring into play the Royal College of Organists adjacent with the notable sgraffito murals on its flank wall. The four elements – Darwin Block, Royal College of Organists, Albert Hall, and spire-like Albert Memorial in the Kensington Gardens – form a dialogue of contrasting forms across space, a fine example of Modern Movement urbanism.

The Grimshaw wing would have blocked this dialogue completely, and would have masked and largely destroyed the principal east façade of the



Figure 6 The Royal College of Art, Kensington Gore, London, by H. T. Cadbury-Brown (1959). (James Dunnett)



Figure 7 The Royal College of Art Darwin Block (right), Gulbenkian Wing (centre), and the Royal College of Organists and Royal Albert Hall (left), seen from the Albert Memorial. The Gulbenkian Wing was to be replaced with a seven-storey 'elliptical' block masking the Darwin Block and the Royal College of Organists. (James Dunnett)

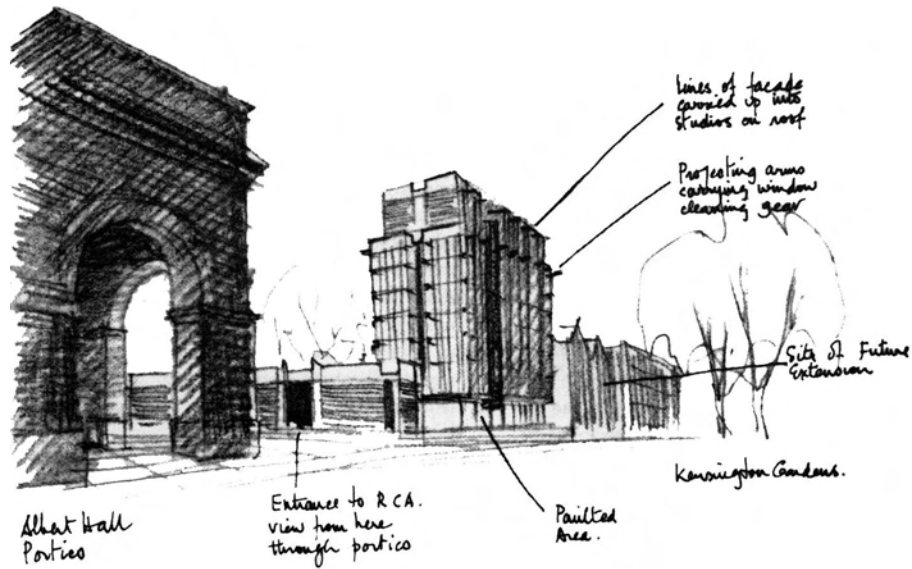


Figure 8 Contemporary sketch by Cadbury-Brown showing his intended relationship between the Royal College of Art and the Albert Hall.

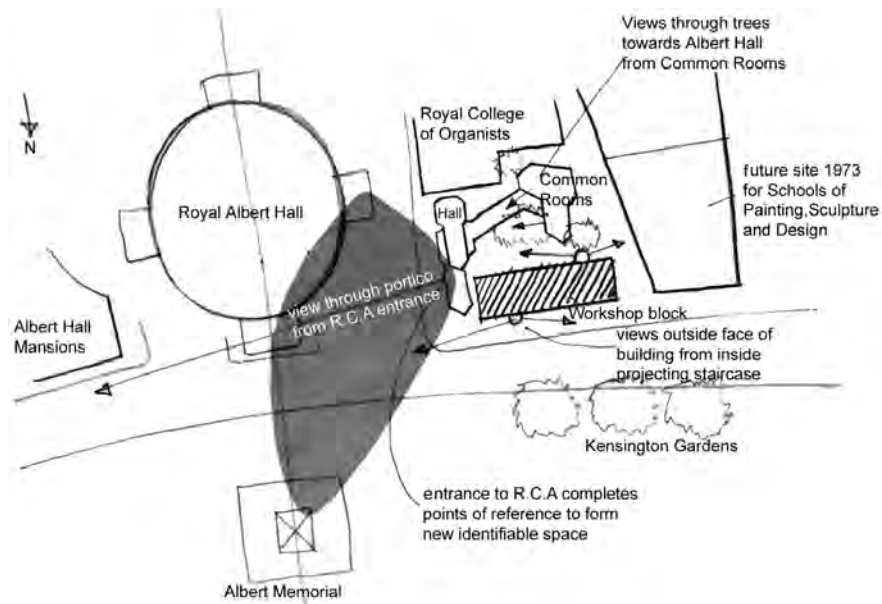


Figure 9 A sketch by Cadbury-Brown indicating with arrows the views that he considered important, using tone for the zone of spatial relationship (the text has been typeset for legibility). (ARK, no. 29 summer 1961)

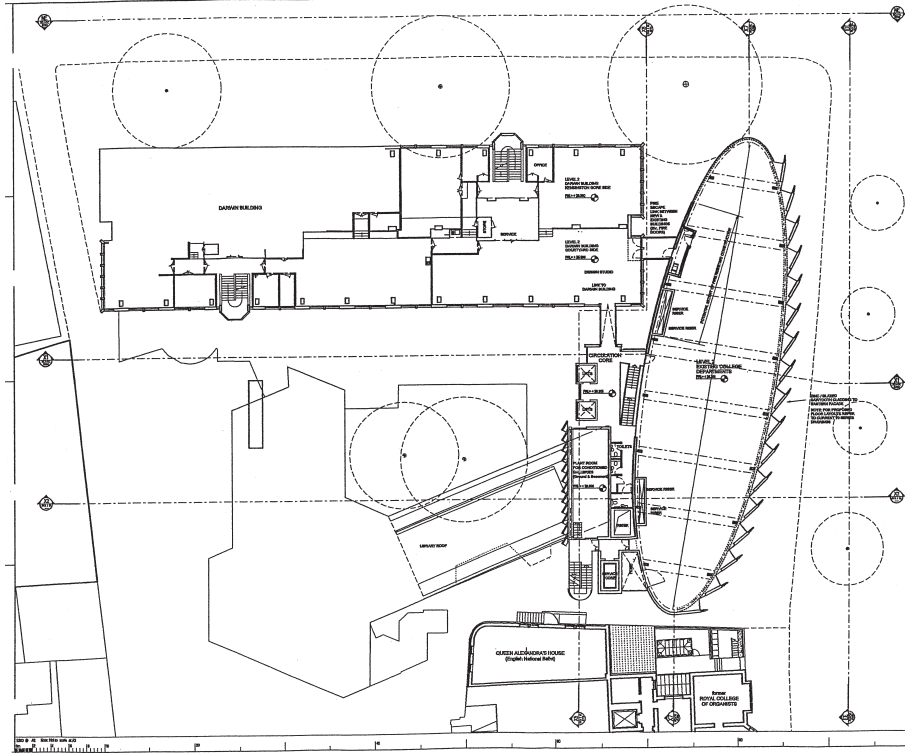


Figure 10 Plan of proposed 'elliptical' wing for the Royal College of Art by Nicholas Grimshaw, 2001.

Darwin block whilst curtailing important views of the Albert Hall from the west. The Albert Hall lodged an objection to this plan but was preoccupied by works it was itself carrying out, and the application was approved in principle by Westminster Council with the support of English Heritage (but with critical comments from Cobe – the official Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment). Docomomo-UK, with the support of the Twentieth Century Society, was instrumental in arousing the opposition of the public and of the Albert Hall, with the result that the application was called in by the Government Office for London before final approval. The RCA, faced with the expense of a public inquiry at which Cadbury-Brown (by now 92) undertook to give evidence against their proposal, withdrew the application late in 2005.

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Trellick Tower

Another recent case in which English Heritage's attitude appeared inconsistent with PPG 15 – the relevant official Planning Policy Guidance note – was in respect of Trellick Tower, Ernö Goldfinger's 31-storey social housing project in North Kensington. Built for the Greater London Council



Figure 11 Trellick Tower, London, by Ernö Goldfinger (1969). The 'cornice' defining the skyline was subsequently removed, and it had been hoped that this critical element would be reinstated as part of the proposed refurbishment.



Figure 12 Trellick Tower, detail of sliding window on balcony, designed by Ernő Goldfinger. (Nigel Cowell)

(GLC) in 1968–72 and listed Grade II*, it is now managed by the Kensington and Chelsea Tenants Management Organisation (TMO). After 35 years, it undoubtedly needs renovation – and indeed restoration, because the ‘cornice’, an architecturally and spatially vital feature, is missing. This open parapet with its projecting cornice-like upper beam was removed from the main block in 1985 when the building passed into the hands of the local council on the abolition of the GLC. Little maintenance has been carried out over the years – apart from the replacement of the original oil-fired heating system supplied from the dramatic roof-level cantilevered boiler-house by an all-electric system involving an extensive network of surface-run cable-trunking, complementing an accretion of antennae and aerials. An application for Heritage Lottery funding by the TMO was unsuccessful, but the TMO proceeded with planning the proposed renovation nonetheless. This was to include – in addition to reinstating the cornice but retaining the electric heating system – the replacement of every window. In the renovation of ‘tower blocks’, replacement of the original windows is almost automatic, especially when they are softwood as here (steel in public areas). But in this case, the timber windows were all specially made to Goldfinger’s design and detail, were double-glazed from the start, and were assessed to be 90% in sound or good condition (probably because most are sheltered by projecting balconies or overhangs).

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They comprise a large part of the elevations. Docomomo-UK found contractors able to replace the windows where necessary with a closer match than proposed by the TMO, and to renovate with good guarantees the remainder (at much lower cost than renewal). Wholesale replacement of such an important feature would scarcely be tolerated in an older structure such as, say, the Chelsea Hospital or Hampton Court, at least not without a detailed technical study. What might be expected were the building in question a Prairie house by Frank Lloyd Wright? But English Heritage approved the replacement, and listed building consent was granted in 2005. It now seems that, to save money, only the windows on two narrow end façades are in the first instance to be replaced. But this will unfortunately set the pattern ultimately for the rest. It also remains to be seen whether the all-important cornice, whose restoration was not made a condition of the other consents, will in fact be reinstated.

Bear Lane, Oxford

A current case involves Powell and Moya's much-admired Grade II* listed Bear Lane student housing at Christchurch, Oxford. Here it was recently reported to the Twentieth Century Society Casework Committee that English Heritage had approved in principle a current application for major alterations, including building over of roof terraces, removal of ground-form modelling, revision of façades – and renewal of windows. Would the same be accepted in Peckwater Quad next door?

Conclusion

Both practitioners and regulators at conferences concerned with the conservation of modern buildings frequently emphasize the need to accept change. This often sounds reasonable until the details of the proposed changes emerge. Modern buildings are at least as sensitive to apparently minor changes as those of earlier periods, indeed arguably more so. The design of windows, for example, often is the architecture. There may not be a strong, overriding and independent architectural language – such as a Classical order – within which such changes can occur. Aspects that may be incidental in a Classical building may be central in a modern building. The loss of the original frameless glass windows of Goldfinger's Player House (an important feature, but one which could quite simply have been replaced to match) was adduced as a reason for its rejection for listing. It is now recognized that the replacement of the original curtain wall on Owen Williams' Grade I listed Boots Factory, applauded ten years ago, has been detrimental to its value. This sensitivity clearly places a greater onus

on conservators, but it has to be recognized if the original value of these buildings – even a few of them – is indeed to be conserved.

A further factor of specific importance to modern buildings, but by no means always recognized, is space – situations where there is no fabric to conserve, only its absence. It is something to which current architectural culture seems blind. In the case of the RCA, for example, the important point is the void, which allows the spatial dialogue to take place – unrecognized in our leading postgraduate college of design. In the Barbican Arts Centre foyer, it is the space that has been destroyed. Goldfinger's Trellick and Balfron Towers are listed, but not the spaces in front and around them, which are the point of their design. The spaces around modern buildings are increasingly vulnerable to encroachment, as for example recently in Lubetkin and Tecton's Priory Green Estate. English Heritage's policy on tall buildings embraces the Picturesque principle of 'clustering' rather than the spatial approach of the Modern Movement.

An alteration to a work of architecture all too often means its degradation, and that we are bound to oppose. Where the alteration itself is a creation, particularly one reflecting the ideas and values of the Modern Movement, then the value of what is being created can be weighted against what is being lost.

English Heritage has done admirable work in persuading the government to list many important modern buildings, including some such as Goldfinger's Balfron Tower – 27-storeys of bush-hammered concrete near the mouth of the Blackwall Tunnel – which in 1994 might well have sparked controversy. What is more open to doubt is whether in all cases the local and regional officers and planning officials responsible for administering the protection do so consistently in the case of post-war listed buildings. This may be because they are less sympathetic to them, or less aware of what are significant design matters. Docomomo has a significant continuing task ahead of it.

Biography

James Dunnett MA, Dip.Arch (Cantab), RIBA

James Dunnett studied architecture at Cambridge and sculpture at St Martin's School of Art. He was one of the last to work for Ernö Goldfinger, and then joined Camden Council's Department of Architecture, setting up in his own practice in 1983. He has taught on a regular basis at Canterbury College of Art and Oxford Brookes University, as well as lecturing widely and contributing to the *Architects' Journal*, *Architectural Review* and other journals. His translation of Le Corbusier's book *The Decorative Art of Today* appeared in 1987 (Architectural Press/MIT Press).