

Preserving the Recent Past

Securing British Postmodern Heritage

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This is a talk about how the Twentieth Century Society managed to create a change in attitude, nationally, towards post-modern architecture, and how this resulted in the protection of nearly 20 of the best examples of their kind.

Let me say explain of all first of all what the Society is. Because this is a talk about process, mostly, I'm going to have to explain the organisations and how they work. But there are only two, and they're easy to grasp. The Twentieth Century Society is a charity – a not-for-profit national organisation – which campaigns for the safeguarding of Britain's twentieth-century architecture, sculpture, landscape and townscape. It has a professional director – that's Catherine Croft – and a team of caseworkers assisted by volunteers, and some administrative and media back-up staff. It is governed by a group of trustees – I'm one of these – which oversees financial and legal compliance. A couple of these trustees are architectural historians and a couple are architects, but the majority are volunteers of all kinds of backgrounds who are prepared to give time to the Society and its projects.

The other organisation is called Historic England, and it's a national state agency. It is managed and directed by staff with a background in architectural history and – especially – archaeology, and it is answerable to a government department. It is Historic England that makes recommendations about whether buildings can be listed, that is, protected by law, and these decisions are then signed off or rejected by the government minister responsible within the department. Changes to listed buildings, or their demolition, require consent from a local planning authority, and that authority is required to consult before making a

decision. The Twentieth Century Society is a statutory consultee. That means that we need to be consulted if any substantial changes to a listed building built after 1914 are proposed.

Now you can see right away that because a government department sits at the top of the pyramid, political considerations can sometimes override all others. You know what those political considerations are likely to be: the need for new homes; the need to avoid disincentivising business by making it impossible to change the architecture of a workplace. At that then leads me to the main point I'd like to make this afternoon.

That is the fact that amenity societies must create a broad public atmosphere for change if we are to have any effect on listing policy. And that isn't easy. Postmodernism never had a good press in England. The reason for that was, mostly, the politicised nature of architectural debate when it first appeared around 1980. The coincidence of the arrival of postmodernism with the government of Margaret Thatcher has been an albatross around its neck ever since,

I've begun with this image of the less familiar southern front of James Stirling's No 1, Poultry, in the city of London, for a reason: it somehow doesn't look very English, and to prove it that it really is in London, I'm showing the same view with a London bus that I took a few moments later. We are going to return to that building in a moment, but in the meantime I'd like to demonstrate something of this 'alien' nature that the reputation of postmodernism seems to have been afflicted by. This building – which sadly is long gone, is a flower shop designed in the Covent Garden piazza in London by Terry Farrell. He wrote to his client enclosing a copy of this – Charles Jencks' Postmodern Classicism edition of *AD* magazine. He told his client that this was the thing that students were now taking an interest in. It looked American, although Terry will tell you that he drew his inspiration from the late neo-classical buildings around the piazza, as if trying to create a piece of townscape in one small building. In 1981 a competition was held for an extension to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square that ended badly because the judges fell out with the Gallery trustees. The drawn-out process which resulted in the building of the Venturi Scott-Brown design was a very acrimonious one, and the since the pros and the antis aimed to antagonise each other as far as possible, the impression was given that this was a battle

about the soul of English architecture in which peculiar, foreign interlopers motivated by money were trying to force something on the public.

What is astonishing is that is that this argument still comes up today, about 40 years later. Back in 2016 the Stirling building was under threat. The proposal was made by the building's owners to enclose the arcade that runs along Poultry, on the north side, to create spaces for shops – this would have badly damaged the perceived depth of the façade, an important part of its design. Two well known young critics went to Twitter to let everyone know that for conservationists to fuss about this kind of thing was proof of their triviality – that all that they cared about was dainty aesthetics, whereas 'real men', as it were, fought for the brutalist housing blocks of the people. This is an astonishing argument to make, but it has been pretty much the prevalent one.

So the society's aim was focus on changing public opinion. This is how a national amenity society does it. First of all, we aim to bring people together on events that as many people as possible can share in the enjoyment of. We organise tours and sometimes longish trips so that members – average age about 55, incidentally – can get together just for the enjoyment of visiting buildings in the company of experts – who volunteer to for it for nothing. The Twentieth Century Society doesn't support any particular style – anything that was built since 1914 is interesting to us, and far from the image of a group of designer-people with an obsession with mid-century modernism or British brutalism, our members include enthusiasts for interwar gothic churches and Tudor-style houses. These trips and tours, and slide evenings, are tremendously important to us, and they also make a major contribution to our finances.

We also publish a lot. We produce a magazine about three times a year, and we publish a peer-reviewed journal every two years – we do that so that scholars can participate. We also publish commercial books on different themes – the top 100 best twentieth century houses, or churches, for example, and these too bring in come money as well as attracting review on national newspapers. And we have a series of monographs on twentieth-century British architects which in the past we have run in partnership with Historic England's predecessor organisation and the Royal Institute of British Architects.

These things attract attention. Together with specific campaigns to protect noteworthy buildings they get us into the press and they often get Catherine onto the television and radio. And that stirs interest at Historic England, because they have some duty to respond to public interest.

That tells you everything you need to know about the principal players in the postmodern story. The next thing is to explain what we did to get the monuments of postmodern architects listed and protected. Both staff and trustees had noticed that postmodern buildings were under threat. We had also noticed, because some of us teach, that there was a growing interest in these buildings from young people, especially design students and architects. The first thing that I remember was that back in 2015 we planned one of our walks around postmodern buildings and discovered that Terry Farrell's office building in Queen Street in the City of London had just been demolished. In fact a number of Terry's buildings were being threatened at much the same time – he keeps a watch over them and he discovered, for example, that the decorative panels on his bank at the corner of Leadenhall St and Fenchurch Street were being removed. Later the same year a threat emerged to Comyn Ching, Farrell's tiny urban development near Covent Garden. We wrote to Historic England to support the listing of both of these since they were demonstrably under threat, one of the criteria for buildings under 30 years old. Terry likes to say that the only building of his that appeared safe was this one – Vauxhall Cross – because it is being perpetually exploded in James Bond films and has thus become a kind of national icon. In December 2015 the government decided not to list No 1 Poultry, in spite of historic England's advice, because they didn't accept the reality of the threat.

You can see that because of the 30 years rule, these buildings from the '80s were now likely to come up thick and fast. We decided to hold a conference in May 2016 which would involve Terry, and Charles Jencks, John Outram and many others. It was held in the University of Westminster. Some participants told me that they felt embarrassed going in, as if they were going to an illicit club of some kind. It was however also attended by senior representatives of Historic England, at least two of whom also volunteered for the Society.

Whilst this was going on there were other developments that we were involved with. The first was that RIBA Publishing had consulted us on subjects for thematic books. We suggested one on Postmodernism, and that Terry Farrell should write it with Adam Nathaniel Furman, who had been a student of mine. This was under way by late 2015. Secondly, Historic England has a series of specialist sub-committees attended by historians and listing staff. One of these is their Twentieth Century Heritage Network, which Catherine attends. During the course of 2016, the year of our conference, the attitude of historic England towards postmodernism changed decisively. Comyn Ching was listed since it was now demonstrably under threat – a developer had removed the distinctive windows on one of its narrow ‘prows’; this happened in November 2016. Then the following month No 1, Poultry, was listed, following a legal challenge by the Society, made with the assistance of *pro bono* legal advice paid for by Lord Palumbo, the original developer.

Historic England had noted the Society’s activity and interest in the subject from elsewhere, for example a special season planned for the RIBA that related to an anniversary in the controversial history of the building of No 1 Poultry in the first place: that included two events in which I spoke in early 2017, one with high profile participants including Charles Jencks (and Robert Stern in the audience). They also had heard about the emergence of Terry and Adam’s book. Their two leading twentieth-century architectural historians, Elaine Harwood and Geraint Franklin, then agreed with Historic England that they would prepare descriptions of postmodern buildings for possible future listing, and that they would develop these into a book of their own. This was written in early 2017 and it emerged in the same month as the Farrell / Furman one, in November 2017, and with Twentieth Century Society branding. That year I twice gave a talk about Postmodernism for the Society – it was sold out on both occasions and have had several thousand views on YouTube. At the same time we drew attention to as yet unappreciated postmodernists, such as John Melvin: a tour we organised to see his buildings sold out immediately. There was a strong sense in the media that something was going on, and that the interest in for example Comyn Ching and No 1 Poultry was not some fringe, aesthetic response.

Thus you can see that when things started to happen, they happened fast. On 10 May 2018 Historic England announced that it would be listing 17 post-modern buildings / Catherine /

Guardian. These included a wide range of building types: a university department; Charles Jencks' own Thematic house, and housing blocks, notably the ones by CZWG in the docklands – an area planned under Mrs Thatcher; John Outram's Judge Institute in Cambridge; St Mark's Road, by Dixon Jones; one of the very first, the Katherine Stephen rare books library of Newnham College, Cambridge, by van Heyningen and Haward; and the Venturi Scott-Brown wing at the National Gallery.

In summary, I'd say this: Britain has an effective and well staffed public agency that deals with the historic environment, and we are lucky to have sophisticated, well-run architectural amenity societies for each historical period. But these societies can only be effective when they reach out to a wide audience and they treat all the different styles and themes within their remit with the same degree of enthusiasm. They need to be attuned to what is going on in design schools, and in the corners of architectural history research, and they need to be able to communicate all this in a variety of ways, in magazines and news stories as well as journals. It was this combination that has secured England's postmodern heritage.