The Enigma of Post-War Listing

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The progress of listing

It is perhaps ironic that the legislation that shaped British post-war planning and architecture was also the embryo for the system of "listing" that preserved buildings of "special architectural or historic interest". The Town and Country Planning Acts of 1944 and 1947 required that local authorities compile lists of suitable buildings for the approval of the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works. It was a natural reaction to the destruction that war had brought. At first, listing was restricted to buildings built before 1840 – taking the view of the generation brought up on Sir Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*[1] that the only good architecture was "old" architecture. By the 1970s, Victorian and Edwardian architecture was included, following the shift in architectural fashion that followed the "swinging sixties", and, in 1970, the "cut off" date was extended to 1939 thereby including Modern Movement buildings. In 1987, the idea of a "thirty year rule" was introduced which allowed for any building more than 30 years old to be considered for listing. Bracken House (1955-59) (Fig. 1), the office of the *Financial Times* in London, by Sir Albert Richardson was the first post-war building to be listed in 1987. Bracken House was listed Grade II*. There was always a hierarchical system – Grade I for those of "international stature", Grade II* for those defined as "outstanding" and Grade II for those of "special" interest and national significance. The original Grade III for those of "local significance" was dropped, although it is still possible for local authorities to compile their own "local lists" to highlight buildings which require special attention in the planning system. To date, about 600 post-war buildings are listed, the vast majority of them at Grade II.[2]

Any citizen can request a building to be listed and the application is considered centrally by the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS). The DCMS is advised by English Heritage who "promote England's spectacular historic environment" (there is separate legislation for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) but may call on their own, undeclared, experts or advisors like the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), "the government's advisor on architecture, urban design and public space". Local authorities, building owners or occupants may be consulted too, but the process is not democratic and, ultimately, the Secretary of State decides. There are numerous pressure groups that seek to influence the listing process. Most influential for the post-war period is the Twentieth Century Society which "safeguards the heritage of architecture and design in Britain from 1914 onwards". Founded in 1979 as the Thirties Society, it is a well-organised association of academics, architects and many others who take a non-doctrinaire view of the twentieth century. It publishes a serious academic journal and has done much to widen public appreciation of post-war architecture and leads campaigns to save post-war buildings.[3]

The culture of listing

The public outcry at the destruction of the 1930s Art Deco Firestone Factory in 1980, encouraged the minister to list a further 150 1930s buildings. A spate of academic and popular publishing on the period and numerous exhibitions

1. Sir Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* was first published in 1896 and was the standard textbook for schools of architecture and art up to the 1970s. It was especially strong on Gothic and English medieval architecture.
2. For accounts of the history of listing, see Peter Smith "Post-war listed buildings" in *Context* Journal of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation No.65 March 2000 and Elain Harwood (2003) *England: A Guide to Post-War Listed Buildings*. London: Batsford/English Heritage pp. 6-14. In 1987 a "ten year rule" was also introduced which allowed for buildings begun 10 years ago which were threatened with alteration or demolition and which were eligible for listing at Grade II* or Grade I to be considered.
3. For an account of the Society see Alan Powers and Gavin Stamp (2004) "The Twentieth Century Society: A Brief History" in *The Heroic Period of Architectural Conservation: Twentieth Century Architecture 7*. London: Twentieth Century Society pp. 158-160.

1. *Sir Albert Richardson: Bracken House, London (1955-59). Listed Grade II* in 1987. Addition by Michael Hopkins & Partners 1988-91. Photo: English Heritage*

and their catalogues[4] together with the authentic sets of television's stylish detective, Hercule Poirot, have all kept the Modern Movement fresh in the academic and popular imagination. Not so the post-war. Post-war listing has remained contentious with both English Heritage and the DCMS but especially with the public. In 1987, the Secretary of State rejected 52 of 70 buildings built between 1940 and 1957 recommended by English Heritage for listing. This highlighted the paucity of research on the cultural context of the buildings and English Heritage undertook a programme "to provide an academic background for listing recommendations and to enhance the public's understanding and enjoyment of the architecture of the post-war years".[5] In 1996, English Heritage organised a public exhibition and consultation, *Something Worth Keeping?* (Fig. 2), which presented the first 189 post-war listed buildings, stressed their cultural significance and asked the public for comments.

The 1950s and 1960s are coming back into vogue, in music, fashion, the decorative arts – and architecture. Members of the public are now asking for buildings of the era to be listed. This may surprise those whose impression of the post-war period is the one which has prevailed since about 1970, that all its buildings were big, belligerent and – by definition – bad. But this was not so. Because mistakes were made, particularly in the race to build new housing in the later 1960s, it is easy to dismiss the previous twenty years, when England embarked on a programme of social provision which is unparalleled in history.[6]

The buildings were presented thematically – schools, housing, churches, public buildings, offices and so on - avoiding questions of style except, significantly, for a section on the New Brutalism. At the same time, English Heritage set up a Post War Listing Steering Group consisting of academics, architectural historians, architects and engineers (some from the immediate post-war period) to advise on the research and to make further recommendations for English Heritage to submit to the minister.[7] However, the Group was disbanded in 2002, ostensibly on grounds of cost and an assertion that the work was well-established, but possibly mainly because the new director of English Heritage and the Ministry found the flood of recommendations too controversial. Meanwhile, there has been no *Fifties Exhibition*[8] and, while there is some academic activity, and generally favourable public support from the 1996 English Heritage consultation notwithstanding,

2. *Something Worth Keeping? Post War Architecture in England. English Heritage brochure, 1996*

3. *Jellicoe Ballantyne & Coleridge: Civic Centre, Plymouth (1957-62). Listed Grade II in 2007*

the period has failed to capture the public imagination. For example, the listing of the Civic Centre (1957-62) (Fig. 3) in Plymouth in 2007 was greeted locally with derision, a counter-campaign by the local newspaper, questions asked in the House by local Members of Parliament and hate mail to the Twentieth Century Society. Ernö Goldfinger's Trellick Tower flats (1968-72) and, bravely, Park Hill, Sheffield (1957-61) were both listed Grade II* in 1998 but, to date, neither English Heritage nor the DCMS will act on the impending demolition of Alison & Peter Smithson's seminal Robin Hood Gardens (1966-72). Although since 2002 further buildings have been added to the list, the thematic rigour seems to have been abandoned and post-war listing has reached stasis.

The counter-culture of listing

Many converging factors have influenced this. There is an in-built conservatism in British institutions which are governed by graduates of Oxbridge and the private schools whose view of history is essentially politically not socially, based. Since British post-war history is a history of social democracy, it is regarded, if at all, with suspicion. For that generation, there was little art education and, if the history of art and architecture was taught, it tended to follow Banister Fletcher and stop before 1914. As Elain Harwood noted, all post-war architecture has been regarded as "bad", tainted by the collapse of the Ronan Point flats in 1968 and by the general belief that it was all made of ugly concrete. The idea was given some intellectual basis by the publication in 1977 of the Oxford historian, David Watkin's *Morality and Architecture* which rejected the idea of *zeitgeist* in favour of a continuing, (supposedly) proven classical tradition. The reaction against "modern", meaning post-war, architecture was further boosted by Prince Charles in his notorious "monstrous carbuncle" speech of 1984 and popularised in his best-selling *A Vision of Britain* of 1989. This rightly railed against the destruction of British towns and cities (which the listing process was also intended to combat)

4. For example the *Thirties Exhibition* (1979) at the Hayward Gallery, *Modern Britain* exhibition (1999) at the Design Museum, the *Art Deco* exhibition (2003) and *Modernism: Designing a New World* (2006) at the Victoria and Albert Museum.
5. Elain Harwood (1996) *Something Worth Keeping? Post-War Architecture in England*. London: English Heritage p. 5.
6. Ibid p. 2.
7. The experts were Bridget Cherry, Ron Brunskill, Catherine Croft, Trevor Dannatt, Alan Powers, Martin Robertson, Andrew Saint, Gavin Stamp, James Sutherland and Geoffrey Wilson. The group was joined in 2002 by Peter Aldington, John Allan, Peter Beacham, Louise Campbell, Jeremy Gould, Neil Jackson, John Partridge and Peter Smith. Lists from Elain Harwood *England...*, op. cit p. 17.
8. There was a small exhibition entitled *A Tonic to the Nation* commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Festival of Britain at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1976. The V&A held the exhibition *Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970* in 2008 but this did not focus on Britain.

4. *Donald Gibson, City Architect: Upper Precinct, Coventry (1951-55). Altered in the 1980s to give escalator access to a new shopping mall*

5. *Donald Gibson/Arthur Ling, City Architect: Lower Precinct, Coventry (1954-59). Altered in the 1990s with a glass roof structure*

but underlying his *Vision* was the strong sense that the new social order of post-war Britain threatened his own position as its future King. This idea was given further credence by the designs of Poundbury, his ideal town near Dorchester, which seemed to mimic a social order and a style which had passed before the World War I. A third factor was the Blair government of 1997 which appeared to embrace popular culture, including new architecture. It started well with the foundation of CABE to advise on all architectural matters but, by the 2002 election, thoughts of an all-embracing modern culture had been cynically dropped, simply because there were no votes in culture. With it, one suspects, went a lack of will to celebrate the achievements of the post-war world that another Labour government had created. Comparisons were odious. With the Health Service, pensions, state education and public housing in crisis and speculative developers thriving, it was unlikely that the second Blair government would care much for the celebration of post-war listing.

The position of speculators and their relationship to local authorities was also very relevant.[9] An increasingly large proportion of the money supply depended upon private development and the retail trade, particularly in city centres. Those city centres were owned by local authorities that had compulsorily purchased them after the War (with public money) and the rateable income they produced was essential to sustain local finances when central government funds were dwindling. The maintenance of a "free market" in the development of city centres which maintained property values was thought essential. The presence of large listed buildings (by definition post-war) was thought to be a serious threat to income generating development. The period from 2000 is characterised by the wholesale redevelopment of many British city centres and the destruction of a lot of potentially list-able post-war buildings.

The case of the city centres

It is often forgotten that in the decade following the World War II Europe rebuilt itself. In Britain, London and many provincial cities were war-damaged – Exeter, Hull, Southampton, Canterbury, Bristol, Coventry and Plymouth. In the 1940s and early 1950s these cities were replanned and rebuilt. Their plans were influenced by the social democratic principles of the post-war Labour government and its fledgling Ministry of Town and Country Planning, the theories of community and culture put forward by Lewis Mumford in his *Culture of Cities* (1938) and the theories of Patrick Abercrombie, the most important town planner of his generation. Coventry and especially Plymouth, where the whole city centre was rebuilt, represent cities of the Welfare State - democratic, new, clean, regular and, above all, optimistic. Their architecture too was special. It was "modern", caught somewhere between the experiments of the English Modern Movement of the 1930s, the New Empiricism of Sweden and the end of classicism and the Beaux-Arts. It is a period that has been examined and re-examined by political and social historians but has been woefully neglected by architectural historians. Except for the pedestrianised precincts of Coventry, contemporary and recent architectural critics have largely dismissed the planning and architecture. It was not "modern" enough and the idea that the New Brutalism was the only significant post-war British architecture has overwhelmed serious reconsideration of the immediate post-war period.

The author's studies of Plymouth, Exeter, Bristol and Coventry have revealed a more complex and interesting story.[10] Common threads include the importance of Abercrombie and his former pupils, the idea of a "composed city" made of consistent materials, functional zoning and hitherto overlooked architecture by a "lost generation". That

6. *Patrick Abercrombie and James Paton Watson, City Engineer: Armada Way, Plymouth (1943-1951). Planting and street furniture obscuring the Beaux-Arts axis*

generation included nationally known architects like Louis de Soissons, Thomas Tait, William Curtis Green and Easton & Robertson, but there were also numerous uncelebrated local architects and significant work by the city architects' departments. The importance of some of the individual buildings has been recognised – Plymouth city centre has six post-war listed buildings and Coventry five - but the point about these cities is their plan forms, grand public spaces and the modest, consistent architecture. Most of that architecture is of insufficient quality for individual listing although, no doubt, there are more buildings which should be considered. Also over the last fifty years the city centres have changed, mostly to accommodate the constant revisions of the retail industry and the exponential increase of vehicles. These alterations have gradually eroded the original architecture. For example, the Upper Precinct (Fig. 4) at Coventry has been filled with a glazed-in escalator and the Lower Precinct (Fig. 5) roofed over with clumsy curved glass. In Plymouth, the open streets have been filled with all the worst accoutrements of pedestrianisation. Suburban planting, swirling paving and bins, bollards and benches of every type completely obscure the Beaux-Arts axes (Fig. 6). In both cities, closed-in shopping centres, copied from the American mall, have been added which turn their backs on the streets and steal once public land. As incremental changes have occurred, the original architecture becomes degraded and the public values it less. The local authority guardians, ever watchful of their rental income, always submit to the short-term demands of the retailers. Not only does listing become more difficult because buildings have changed, but the notion of declaring Conservation Areas becomes impossible. We may look jealously to 1950s Le Havre, the continental city that most resembles Plymouth, which was declared a World Heritage Site in 2005.

Managing change

Acutely conscious of these problems and of the difficulties that local authorities face in dealing with retailers and developers, English Heritage increasingly sees its role as negotiator, rather than dictator in heritage matters. Listing may be used as a catalyst for conservation rather than as an end in itself. For example, the recent listing of the City Market (Fig. 7) in Coventry, which was scheduled for demolition as part of a proposed comprehensive redevelopment of the

7. *Donald Gibson, City Architect: City Market, Coventry (1956-). Listed Grade II in 2009*

9. This subject is comprehensively discussed in Anna Minton (2009) *Ground Control: Fear and happiness in the twenty-first-century city.* London: Penguin Books.

10. All under the authorship of Jeremy & Caroline Gould Architects: the Plymouth study was commissioned by Plymouth City Council (2000), Exeter by English Heritage (1999) and Exeter City Council (2006), Bristol by English Heritage (2004) and Coventry by English Heritage (2009). The Plymouth study will be published as a book by English Heritage (2010).

8. *Curtis Green RA, Son & Lloyd: Barclays Bank, Plymouth (1949-52). Listed Grade II. Roof additions and alterations, 2006*

1950s city centre, may persuade the City into reviewing the whole plan. Increasingly, English Heritage is attempting to negotiate "heritage agreements" with local authorities to be written into local development frameworks as a way of managing historic areas. But it tends to be a one-sided argument since the local authorities are landowners, planning authorities and financial beneficiaries. Furthermore, cities have got used to regarding the retail industry as the only way to regenerate city centres, partly the result of the rigid zoning inherited from Abercrombie and the 1940s plans. The idea, regarded as normal in Europe, that city centres should be mixed use and include housing (and therefore schools and other community facilities), leisure and cultural uses and that these uses are equal contributors to the wealth of city centres, is still unusual in Britain. Recently, Princesshay, the 1950s plan of Exeter, has been erased for a new, shiny shopping centre and Broadmead shopping precinct in Bristol (never a great architectural success) has been altered beyond recognition. Coventry and Plymouth are the only 1950s cities remaining and their futures are very uncertain.

For individual post-war listed buildings the future is not assured either. All Grade II buildings, including post-war, are administered by local authorities which are responsible for "listed building consent" for alterations and demolitions. Only Grade II* and Grade I buildings are referred to English Heritage. Generally, the local authorities are ignorant of the significance of post-war heritage and have no expertise in its maintenance or repair methods. Equally, architectural practice has no particular expertise the analysis or repair of twentieth century buildings. The conservation industry in Britain has concentrated on pre-twentieth century technology, much influenced by the repair philosophies of William Morris's Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings founded in 1877. It is significant that the successful conservation projects on post-war buildings have been carried out by a very few architects.[11] There have been many unsuccessful projects. Curtis Green's beautiful stripped classical Barclays Bank (1949-52) (Fig. 8) in Plymouth has been converted to a number of bars and apartments. The bars have removed all the interior fittings and the apartments have added a clumsy glass extension to the roof which bears no relation to the elegant stonework below. At the Park Hill flats in Sheffield it was agreed with English Heritage that the most defining feature was the exposed concrete frame. This allowed the developers to remove all of the original brick infill panels and replace them with shiny, differently coloured panels to a different pattern (Fig. 9). The finances of the development collapsed, leaving the building stripped to its frame, exposed to the elements and derelict. The story would have been very different had it been a Victorian or Georgian Grade II* building. Owen Hatherley points out that the survival of Denys Lasdun's Keeling House (1957-59) (Fig. 10) cluster block was at the expense of privatising what had been social housing. The same was true for Goldfinger's Trellick Tower and for the Park Hill project. Hatherley sees this as a betrayal of the original tenants and the sinister accumulation by the middle classes of something that was "too good"[12]. Somehow it was possible to find the money for a private project but not for upholding a publicly owned asset. The act of post-war listing is also a process of gentrification.

The future

In 2003, the DCMS and English Heritage embarked on reforming the whole process of heritage protection, conscious that the system was convoluted and expensive to operate. The result was a new heritage protection White Paper (2007). Listing will now be known as "designation" and the responsibility for designation will rest solely with English Heritage, not the DCMS. English Heritage will have to consult building owners before designation and the owners will have the right of appeal against designation. The process of designation will be "de-mystified" by English Heritage who will publish its selection guides in advance. All new works to designated buildings – Grades I, II* and II - will require "historic asset consent" which will be administered by the local authorities with "formal advice where appropriate" given by English Heritage.

All this bodes ill for post-war buildings, especially those in city centres. There is no provision for adding to the skills of local authority planning officers or conservation officers who must now administer all designated buildings, including the post-war. It is unlikely that local authorities will prioritise training programmes on late twentieth century heritage. How will they even know when to ask English Heritage for advice? The conflicts of interest between ownership, designation and the administration of historic asset consent seem irresolvable without an impartial third party written in to the process. The pressures from wealthy city centre developer-owners to resist designation and to fight appeals with expensive lawyers will be impossible for local authorities to resist. It is unlikely that the public will see the cost of such appeals as a proper use of scarce public funds. In devolving the operation of the Heritage Protection Bill, central government seems to have neatly sidestepped the difficult debates on the conservation of modern heritage. The new Bill seems a very long way from the social democratic intent of the 1944 and 1947 Planning Acts. However, even though the new Bill was published in April 2008, its approval has been delayed. It is still not clear when, or if, it will become law. We academics may expect more research into post-war heritage, but we should not expect an avalanche of newly designated buildings.

9. *Sheffield City Architects' Department: Park Hill Flats, Sheffield (1957-61). Listed Grade II* in 1998. Project by Urban Splash. Photo: Urban Splash*

10. *Denys Lasdun: Keeling House, Bethnal Green London (1957-59). Listed Grade II* in 1993. Converted to luxury flats in 1999*

11. Avanti Architects of London, Julian Harrap, Allies & Morrison and Hawkins Brown have all carried out significantly well considered repairs to post-war buildings.

12. See Owen Hatherley (2008) *Militant Modernism*. London: Zero Books pp. 6-14.