

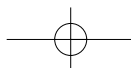
# Introduction

*Bob Kindred*

Over the past two decades, interest in the conservation of modern buildings has increased considerably in professional circles. Unfortunately this interest appears not to have been mirrored by a wider public constituency – indeed in some countries indifference at best and almost open hostility at worst can be detected towards many post-war buildings of merit. These probably deserve the wider formal recognition their proponents advocate, but usually have not received it and continue to be mistreated or demolished. This antipathy is evident in several of the cases cited in the papers in this publication.

In many respects, the conservation of modern buildings provides more challenges for practitioners than for those of earlier eras. Such challenges are also remarkably wide-ranging, embracing issues of appropriate repair, adaptation and alteration of modern, sometimes experimental, materials, with their associated technical and philosophical problems. Conserving these buildings for the future has often required a high degree of technical specialism, together with the development of innovative solutions where recourse to the tried-and-tested methods of earlier, traditionally constructed buildings would usually be inappropriate or impractical. Increasingly too, there are concerns about the sustainability of twentieth-century construction and the application of more stringent energy conservation criteria for buildings built in an era of cheap energy supply, often without an awareness of or serious regard to the resources consumed.

In addition to the technical issues, there are often challenging legislative and policy questions, which are conditioned by the prevailing socio-political climate of the era in which they are established. This raises questions of which and how many buildings and structures should be preserved from the recent past; what levels of legislative protection to afford them; how to resource their future repair and maintenance; and who should best undertake it. These issues also vary from culture to culture and according to differing political systems. The survival of important buildings from



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formerly totalitarian regimes in newly democratized nations, for example, or structures related to Cold-War military operations,<sup>1</sup> pose particular problems of whether they command sufficient political sympathy or public support for their retention.

Selection is heavily influenced by expert opinion, but is also affected by levels of public interest and perceptions (whether enlightened or otherwise). Political priorities are generally based on a reading of both. Recognition and protection is therefore usually successful where there is effective promotion and understanding of modern architecture for both its architectural and social purposes, which can then inform a healthy public debate about its cultural value. This is something largely lacking in the United Kingdom beyond the specialist press, but is more commonly experienced in Europe. Discussion in the UK is usually limited to the specific abuses or failures of modern architecture,<sup>2</sup> as exemplified by recent proposals for the 'X' listing of buildings (i.e. those recommended to be demolished) or occasional vox-pop surveys of perceived eyesores. It is rarely a sophisticated debate. Interestingly, in the forthcoming changes to heritage protection in England, the government has derided what it has identified as an 'experts talking to experts' approach.<sup>3</sup> It proposes wider (hopefully informed) public consultation on future proposals for protecting heritage assets, especially those of the modern era where their cultural value may be seen as more open to question. Whoever is eventually involved in the process of selection, it is essential that the technical and historical character of modern buildings be fully understood. In this, we are assisted not only by better graphic and documentary representation of the construction of buildings and structures than in the past (although sometimes not their subsequent alteration), but also in many cases the testimonies of the original architects, engineers and builders (some for buildings as far back as the interwar period) who are miraculously still with us.<sup>4</sup>

As we approach the present day there are more specialized building types, in a wider range of styles and materials than in any other epoch. Ever greater numbers of buildings and structures therefore await evaluation for their cultural significance and potential protection, but this tends to encourage far greater selectivity – and of 'iconic' rather than more prosaic unaltered buildings. In the UK, buildings more than 30 years old can be formally protected (and in very exceptional circumstances even when only ten years old, if considered outstanding but threatened). Elsewhere it is uncommon for buildings less than 50 years old to be protected; and in countries where the process of identification, evaluation and designation is extremely rigorous, as in Japan, hardly any buildings of the twentieth century have yet been protected. Buildings of the post-war era are 'no longer the height of fashion, and even well respected examples may lack topical allure'.<sup>5</sup> They are therefore vulnerable to unthinking alteration, changes of

use, or neglect of their surrounds that diminishes their perceived preservation value.

English Heritage embarked upon a programme of thematic surveys of post-war buildings in the mid-1990s, but two strands of thinking are evident from this period, which perhaps have been less fully debated than aspects of architectural and historical significance or the problems of specialist repair. Firstly there was a concern, which still persists in some quarters, that protection should not proceed too far ahead of the public taste. Hence it was felt that controversial buildings in terms of style, function or association should not be protected if the public – rather than the experts – would not support it (and by implication avoid the protection system generally from falling into disrepute). This is despite the fact that there is no current mechanism for testing what the public would or would not support. Secondly, there appears to have been a distinct reluctance on the part of responsible government ministers to approve the designation of modern buildings (despite there being, in the UK at least, a clear legislative duty to do so) where a key implication of such recognition might be the need for greater support from public funds. This reluctance has been amplified to the point where such buildings are in public ownership (especially at local level) and would require significant additional resources for their proper maintenance or repair (such as educational buildings or public housing). In many cases, recommendations that these buildings should be protected have been accompanied by lengthy ministerial delays, sometimes running on for years. This may also explain some of the reasoning for ministers wishing to pass on the responsibility for such difficult decisions to English Heritage under the proposed heritage protection reforms. The cultural, philosophical, technical, environmental and political aspects of the conservation and management of modern ‘historic’ buildings can therefore be seen to be closely intertwined, and the papers in this issue focus on these many aspects, either singly or collectively.

John Allan’s very fine opening paper reflects on his experiences as a highly respected practitioner involved with the repair over the past twenty years of many of the iconic Modernist buildings of the interwar and post-war eras, and recurring themes to have emerged from that work. In calling his paper ‘Points of Balance’, he emphasizes that for these buildings to continue to function in an appropriate way while still being true to the ideals of their original designers, a balance must be struck. This should hold not only between preservation and change, but also through what he calls ‘a sustainable consensus of the stakeholders’ with the statutory authorities on one side and the owners, occupiers and their professional advisers on the other, which should operate for a sustained period. Some of the projects he identifies require, as he puts it, ‘a balancing of seemingly irreconcilable extremes’, and it is a tribute to his remarkable successes that in identifying

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a working pattern of five types of projects, he can now demonstrate how the differing challenges of each can achieve this equilibrium. Such accomplishments require a sound intellectual basis, and Allan argues that it also requires, where necessary, a brave departure from the traditional precepts and protocols of conservation philosophy. He tellingly observes of his practice that in embarking on such work 20 years ago, they started out 'like novice skaters who shuffle round the edge of the ice rink clinging on to the barrier for support', and that when taken with the constraints imposed by formal designation, this may not always serve the ends of conservation.

The ability of buildings to evolve to meet new regulatory requirements and new environmental concerns is developed by John Hudson in his explanation of the adaptation of one of Britain's tallest commercial post-war commercial buildings to meet the challenges of climate change and sustainability in its re-cladding. The Cooperative Insurance Society (CIS) Tower in Manchester is part of an office and conference facility of 1959–62, and was listed Grade II in 1995.<sup>6</sup> It has recently seen the completion of a major project to overclad the concrete service tower with what is believed to be the largest vertical array of photovoltaic cells in Europe.

While the scheme was, at least in part, a response to the failure of the original mosaic cladding, the project has been very contentious. Again we can see the need to resolve issues of the appropriate philosophy of approach, and where a balance should be struck between arguments in favour of greater environmental sustainability and the principle of the reversibility of the over-cladding. Detractors claimed the scheme had gone beyond the accepted conservation principle of minimum intervention, and that the green credentials of the completed project had been exaggerated. The CIS Tower can also be seen as an early example of a potential battleground between the preservation of architectural conservation values and the pressing political and social (as well as environmental) need to address the climate change agenda.

Concerns about poor environmental performance are not new, of course, and in the case of modern cultural buildings, particularly art galleries and museums, this may impact adversely not just on the buildings and their occupants, but potentially also their collections and exhibition capabilities. When these problems are compounded by past insensitive alterations – either to counteract the building performance problems or other operational reasons – a building can become insidiously seriously degraded. Problems of these kinds occurred at the Yale University Art Gallery's Kahn Building, designed by visionary architect Louis I. Kahn and completed in 1953.

The architect responsible for overseeing the 2006 restoration, Lloyd DesBrisay, describes the tensions involved in the quest for modern material

authenticity in the replacement of the original steel frame windows – a striking part of the original design – and replacement with a thermally broken aluminium window wall system which respected Kahn’s original design intentions while removing some inappropriate later changes. This enabled the integration of new museum-standard technical systems to improve exhibitions and displays, thereby increasing the efficiency of the museum and the preservation of its collections, and has led to increased visitor numbers. Again, the issue of striking the right balance between authenticity and practical efficiency is clearly evident.

Reference has already been made to the value of documentation and instances where complete authenticity may be the primary consideration for conservation. When new information becomes available, there may be a new impetus to preserve an uncovered scheme or reinstate the original design. In the case of the Billiet house in Bruges, Professor Ann Verdonck explains this approach from both philosophical and practical perspectives.

The building was designed in 1927 by Huib Hoste, one of Belgium’s leading early twentieth-century architects, and was officially protected in 1995. Hoste’s client, Jules Billiet, had been a successful diamond industry entrepreneur. Only after formal protection of the house was in place was a Hoste drawing discovered that showed a complete design for the walls and ceiling of the living room, consisting of an impressive ensemble of abstract paintings. The paper explains that this discovery prompted historical and colour research involving colour stratification and laboratory analysis, which proved that the paintings in the Billiet house had indeed been carried out: they were in fact intact, but covered by layers of more recent paint. The colour research enabled a reconstruction of the architect’s original design, which when combined with the incorporation of original furniture now gives an impression of the original splendour of this decorative masterpiece.

The existence of documentation of the designs of architects and engineers can be vital for others in forming an understanding of their work and informing repair and restoration. Even more so, the testimonies of the original designers, especially those who may have reviewed their past work in a way that permits their work to be placed within the perspective of the recent past, can guide their preservation. Their opinions on the evolution of their own ideas and designs and their interaction with the society within which they have operated can give a refreshingly direct insight into their completed designs.

One such architect was Harry Seidler, who is widely recognized as Australia’s most important twentieth-century architect. He was acknowledged internationally by a number of awards and accolades received over his 50-year career, including Australia’s highest honour, the Companion of the Order of Australia, and the RIBA Royal Gold Medal in 1996.

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Seidler arrived in Australia from his native Vienna in 1948 to design and construct a house for his parents, but went on to make an illustrious career with buildings ranging from the modest but groundbreaking residential buildings of his early professional life to major public buildings, embassies, commercial office buildings and industrial structures. Appreciation of his work continues to grow, and many of his buildings are now becoming increasingly recognized as worthy of formal protection. His Rose Seidler house of 1950 was bequeathed to the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, and is now a house museum.

Seidler did not consider himself (and was not considered by others) in any way to be a conservation architect. It was the significance of his work that has given it historic and cultural significance. He was vocal about the 'heritage industry', and so his opinions about the potential recognition and protection of his own buildings are of particular interest. Although Seidler died in 2006 at the age of 82, it is fortunate that Susan Macdonald has been able to conduct an insightful interview with his wife and business partner Penelope Seidler, also an architect, who has reflected on her husband's views of how we manage our heritage and the interface between contemporary architecture and its conservation.

Not all such designs have been the subject of such enlightened appreciation; nor have all fared so well, and two further papers give examples of the relative failure of the legislative process either to prevent the destruction of important historic buildings, or to protect them from unsympathetic alteration in the face of official indifference.

Several papers have referred to the infamous and well-documented demolition in 2003 by its owner of Greenside, a listed 1936 Modernist house overlooking the famous Wentworth championship golf course in Surrey. This criminal act was described by Simon Thurley, Chief Executive of English Heritage at the time as 'an outrageous act of cultural vandalism'.

The owner of Greenside was successfully prosecuted by English Heritage with support from the Twentieth Century Society and others (although not with support of the local planning authority). Although the fine levied was a relatively modest £15,000, the subsequent decision by the government not to allow the owner to rebuild on the site because it is protected 'Green Belt' (open) land has been far more punitive in its effect, depriving the owner of the redevelopment value of the site.

Dennis Sharp, who gave evidence to the Inquiry into the demolition, brings the story up to date and also demonstrates why the architectural output of Connell, Ward & Lucas was important in England in the 1930s. He provides a valuable context for what was considered to be a particularly good example of their work.

Sharp highlights what he sees as the tenuous nature of both the listing process and subsequent protection, where the financial rewards for

destruction can often be greater than those for preservation – a theme also picked up in other papers. Fortunately, the consequences of the owner's actions at Greenside raised its political profile. Two Members of Parliament became concerned about the adequacy of existing sanctions and whether these needed to be increased, so asked questions of government ministers in 2002. Consequently, the government gave assurances that it would investigate. It commissioned research on the frequency and effectiveness of local authority prosecution action and identified a distinct lack of activity. It concluded that good practice guidance for local authorities was required. This valuable documentation was published in December 2006.<sup>7</sup>

If anything positive could be said to have emerged from the Greenside debacle, it is that if political pressure is exerted in the right quarter it can occasionally effect some positive action. Local authorities now have at their disposal a greater degree of expertise (and less excuse for inactivity) when flagrant breaches of listed building legislation are committed.

The role of legislation and its interpretation in the courts does not always lead to such positive outcomes, as a recent example from Australia demonstrates. Only when legislation is applied in practice is it sometimes found wanting (and the will to correct it or to effectively challenge it by case law is made clear). This is when questions of public and political perceptions of the value of, in this case, relatively modest but significant modern buildings collide – usually at the expense of the integrity of the building.

The paper by Scott Robertson demonstrates that even with the involvement of a wide range of bodies and individuals – the local community, conservationists, architects, lawyers and wide media coverage together with an unprecedented court decision to disallow the demolition of a significant 1964 demonstration house – the government at state level would not step in to prevent demolition. The publicity generated by this case shows the weakness in the New South Wales heritage system (and the complexity of state, regional and local levels). However, the case has also become one of the *causes célèbres* of the heritage movement in trying to save Australia's mid-twentieth-century modern architecture and landscapes.

In debates about relative significance, expert opinion is invaluable (and must surely start with 'experts-talking-to-experts?'), but as remarked earlier, this will only take protection so far without the political will to legislate and generate public support. In leading the international debate on the conservation of modern buildings, both ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) and Docomomo (international committee for the documentation and conservation of buildings, sites and neighbourhoods of the modern movement) have been crucial in identifying and promoting the cause for the appropriate designation and appropriate repair and adaptation of modern buildings, and for the latter organization, those specifically

representing the Modern Movement. By comparison with professional institutions such as IHBC (Institute of Historic Building Conservation) or organizations like APT (Association for Preservation Technology International), both bodies are comparatively small when considered in a worldwide context. ICOMOS and Docomomo often rely on an international network of voluntary co-operation, but both punch well above their weight in terms of influence in the countries in which they operate. For the former, Sheridan Burke describes the work of the recently formed ICOMOS International Scientific Committee, which has focused on the conservation, management and interpretation issues confronting the heritage structures, sites and places of the twentieth century.

For the latter, Anne-Laure Guillet of Docomomo International explains development of its International Specialists Committee on Registers. Since 1992, this has sought to create an international register of the most important buildings of the Modern Movement, based on a standardized inventory process. The aim has been to select historic assets of outstanding and universal value. This process has also helped put other national and international surveys into a wider context while promoting the cause of protecting modern historic architecture to wider audiences and identifying the threats to its continued survival in places where cultural and legal mechanisms and public interest are less well developed. Over the last 15 years, the scope of criteria of the Registers has widened geographically and chronologically to include 'significant examples of modern urbanism, landscapes and gardens sites and neighbourhoods, infrastructures, civil engineering works, and industrial complexes, but also alteration to existing buildings, interiors, furniture, and architectural industrialized elements' – a very major undertaking.

A key figure in Docomomo-UK, James Dunnett, explores the, at times, difficult relationship between his adopted organization, and English Heritage, the government's statutory advisory body on highly graded historic buildings. In a number of major cases, Docomomo-UK (and others such as the Twentieth Century Society) have found themselves vigorously campaigning in opposition to the experts within English Heritage over where the appropriate balance should be struck when undertaking adaptations or changes in function to major listed Modern Movement buildings such as Eric Mendelsohn's Cohen House in Chelsea, Trellick Tower by Ernö Goldfinger,<sup>8</sup> the Royal Festival Hall and the Royal College of Art. In many cases, Dunnett finds English Heritage's attitude inexplicable, which prompts a further consideration of John Allan's remark that the constraints of formal designation may not always serve the ends of conservation.

The final paper gives what might be described as a candid users' perspective of the Brunswick Centre in central London. This is a seven-storey reinforced concrete structure containing nearly 400 flats above shops, a

cinema and two levels of underground parking, designed with a distinctive stepping back of the residential terraces. The paper therefore reflects one further important element often missing from discussions on the conservation of modern buildings – a social perspective, or how they are experienced by those who use them every day.<sup>9</sup>

Stuart Tappin reviews the key original design decisions and the implications for the people living there rather than evaluating the Centre as a ‘heroic’ piece of architecture. Construction commenced in the late 1960s and continued until 1972, but the building has recently been refurbished. Tappin explains some of the social issues in relation to the impact on the residents of the original construction, and draws some lessons that might be applicable for other large, post-war residential buildings. He makes the important point about the need to understand not only aspects of the original design as mentioned above, but also the implications for users of a number of fundamental changes that occurred during the extended construction period because of the ways in which such alterations affected and continue to significantly influence the lives of the residents.

Tappin believes that a definitive view can still not be taken about the social success of this bold piece of modern architecture and it may require another decade to see how successful the Brunswick is as a whole. He contends the majority of problems with the building come less from the architect’s original concept and more from either initial cost-cutting or complexities of tenure, and therefore maintenance. He also makes a plea for genuine resident participation (not token consultation) in decision-making in large schemes of social housing – a crucial factor in, for example, the care and maintenance of non-traditional construction – if important buildings like the Brunswick are to succeed. This surely would take us well beyond the alleged problem of the experts-talking-to-experts, and more into the political aspects of architectural management – an area of policy and involving expertise generally not dealt with by conservation specialists.

In conclusion, while there can be little doubt among conservation practitioners that there have been significant advances over the last two decades in the identification, evaluation, understanding, management and repair of modern buildings, there can equally be little doubt about a significant degree of antipathy or indifference among politicians and the general public.

Where formal designation has already been undertaken (on a modest number of significant buildings), there seems to have been public acceptance that this has been appropriate. In England, it was helpful that the initial thematic post-war programme by English Heritage was an exemplary exercise notable for its clarity of presentation. This it did by its selection of candidates for conservation in light of their architectural and social contexts; however a vast number of modern buildings have potential for

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formal designation but remain unprotected and vulnerable to unsympathetic alteration or demolition. The challenge for the heritage sector is to make a more persuasive case for a more representative selection of buildings and structures to be protected. This will require a widened, perhaps more populist debate than has been the case hitherto.

An issue that has captured the public imagination and forced politicians to act has been action on climate change. As pressures to address this rapidly increase and the demands to require buildings to be more energy efficient become more urgent, the inevitable consequence will be the sorts of changes (such as those for the CIS Tower) that may alter their perceived architectural and historic interest and may in future preclude further protection. This is an aspect of heritage policy that now needs to be urgently addressed and debated by conservation professionals, politicians and the public.

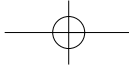
**Biography**

*Bob Kindred MBE BA IHBC MRTPI*

Bob has headed the Conservation Service in Ipswich since 1987. He was formerly editor of *Context*, the professional journal of IHBC for a decade, and is a member of the Institute's Council and Policy Committee. He also Special Adviser to the House of Commons Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, and a member of the UNESCO UK Culture Committee. He pioneered the concept of Management Guidelines for managing change to large complex modern listed buildings in 1991 with Norman Foster's Grade I listed Willis Faber building. This was the forerunner of Management Agreements currently being promoted under the DCMS Heritage Protection reforms.

**Notes**

- 1 This is particularly problematic for these often inaccessible, highly specialist, quickly redundant building types which rely heavily on expert opinion about their suitability for protection.
- 2 The notorious structural collapse following a gas explosion in May 1968 of the newly completed 23-storey Ronan Point public housing tower block in Newham, East London – where four people were killed and seventeen injured – still resonates after almost 40 years.
- 3 Speech to 'Capturing the Public Value of the Heritage' Conference, Royal Geographical Society, London, 25–26 January 2006, Proceedings, p. 7.
- 4 On how many occasions in the future might the views of the original architect be invoked, having been brought out of retirement to support the current conservation professional's views of proposed repairs in defiance of the statutory bodies? This was famously the case with the 86-year-old Berthold Lubetkin's support of John Allen's proposed 1987 restoration of Lubetkin's 1934 Penguin Pool at London Zoo.



- 5 Cherry, B., 'Foreword', *Preserving Post-War Heritage: The Care and Conservation of Mid-Twentieth-Century Architecture*, ed. Macdonald, S., Donhead, Shaftesbury (2001), p. xix.
- 6 The CIS Tower was considered by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner to be the best commercial building in Manchester. Hartwell C., Hyde M. and Pevsner N., *Pevsner's Buildings of England Series, Lancashire: Manchester and South East*, Yale University Press, New Haven (2005), pp. 94 and 264.
- 7 *Best Practice Guidance on Listed Building Prosecutions*, Department of Communities and Local Government, HMSO, London (2006).
- 8 This is a 32-storey late masterpiece of social housing in North Kensington, London.
- 9 One of the few publications to thoroughly explore ordinary users' practical experiences of modern architecture is Stuart Brand's *How Buildings Learn: What happens after they're built*, Phoenix/Orion, London (1997), first published by Viking, UK and Viking-Penguin, US (1994).

