

The heritage-creation process and attempts to protect buildings of the recent past: the case of Birmingham Central Library.

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Abstract

The successful conservation of our built heritage relies upon multi-scalar negotiation between a wide array of stakeholders and agents in the planning process. This negotiation reflects both the values that we ascribe to particular structures and landscapes, and choices about what to retain in response to social, commercial and aesthetic opportunities, preferences and aspirations. We are particularly interested in how redevelopment and regeneration processes often result in the removal of buildings from the recent past – Brutalist buildings from the 1960s, in particular – even though coalitions are built which seek their active protection and conservation. Using the case of Birmingham Central Library (demolished 2015-16) we explore how conservation of the most recent past challenges us – how can buildings of the recent past be deemed heritage, how can they be meaningfully conserved and how are different interests mediated? This paper seeks to uncover the conflicts inherent within the conservation of such buildings, drawing conclusions about the heritage-creation process.

Keywords

heritage, modernism, brutalism, planning policy, planning, conservation.

Introduction

Throughout history, humans have responded to the needs and desires of society by creating, adapting and reshaping the environment around them. Indeed this environment ‘is continually rebuilt to reflect changing motives, attitudes and tastes as societies evolve politically, economically and technically’.¹ Over the past 150 years, however, the erasure of particular elements of the historic urban environment has encouraged both expert- and citizen-led movements to conserve, in some form, these ‘relics of the past’.² Conservation planning is a multi-dimensional, multi-objective forum for the management of change in the built, historic and natural environment that is both regulatory, in the sense that it is enshrined within a statutory system, and visionary, in the sense that future visions are promoted and implemented through it.³ It is within this context that selected buildings are protected from inappropriate change.

Given that redevelopment and economic growth in large cities often results in the eradication of relatively recent urban layers,⁴ it is generally accepted that the conservation of the historic environment should be an important goal of public policy.⁵ Politicians, the public and development professionals increasingly find themselves at a critical point in deciding how the heritage assets of the 20th century are to be identified, represented or conserved. Making these decisions often results in a series of conservation conflicts over the meaning and value of buildings of the recent past. Where the role of time and rarity as primary selectors is being challenged, the judgment onus gets placed on particular conceptual and policy debates. In the context of rapid socio-economic transformations and interest clashes within society, resolution of these debates often proves to be a challenge.

It is within this context that this paper examines a number of elements. First, we reflect upon the heritage-creation process drawing upon theory to establish a frame for considering post-

war heritage. Secondly, we explore the purpose and circumstances of protection (listing) in England in order to establish how different heritages are produced by the competent authorities. Thirdly, the potential tensions and complementarities⁶ between the politics of redevelopment and that of the conservation of recent buildings will be analysed using the case study of the attempts to list Birmingham's Central Library. Finally, we will reflect upon 20th century heritage conservation perspectives and then identify further research possibilities and recommendations.

The heritage-creation process

Decisions about what heritage survives, and why, often revolve around statutory protective regimes and the input advocacy groups bring into the process.⁷ In effect, the preservation movement originally perceived itself to be somewhat of a rescue operation,⁸ heroically and unselfishly salvaging architectural riches of the distant past, selected according to supposedly objective criteria, such as age or beauty, or a link a particular reading of the past.⁹ The emergence of conservation (as opposed to preservation) in the post-war period widened the object of attention to ensembles of buildings. Finally, a more recent shift reveals history as a product selected according to the criteria of consumer demand and managed through the intervention of the market. In effect, the concept of heritage embraces a consideration of the active use of what is conserved, that is 'the process of evaluation, selection and interpretation – perhaps even exploitation – of things of the past'.¹⁰

This final stage of the increasing commodification of the built heritage, or evolution of a 'heritage product', has seen the justification for heritage protection shift to a consumerist orientation where the relics of history become a product in the market to satisfy

consumption.¹¹ Much of the UK, for example, is ‘neatly packaged into heritage products, carefully denoted by the brown signs marking entrances to ‘Shakespeare’s Country’, ‘Lawrence’s Country’ and many more’.¹²

Conservation planning in general, and local conservation regimes in particular, reflect a number of common elements. First, conservation planning is a largely political and multi-scaled activity; it must gain legitimacy for its decisions at the local as well as national level.¹³ At the local level heritage governance is complex, characterized by the interconnection of a variety of organizations and interests.¹⁴ It is in the political and policy exchanges between these groups that decisions about development are reached. Secondly, conservation planning is a technical activity which uses a wide range of tools during the assessment of proposals to ‘ensure that decisions are taken in line with... prevailing rationalities’.¹⁵ These tools are also politicised in that they reflect the interconnectedness of organisations and interests in their content and are, therefore, rarely objective or value-neutral. Thirdly, it attempts to manage space through the selective protection of elements of the townscape. According to Hobson,¹⁶ it can only do this through harnessing other development processes that lie outside its core competencies. In this sense, conservation planning is dependent on a number of externalities that it has little direct control over.

Finally, one other crucial element in local conservation regimes is their criticism by what might be called ‘pro-development interests’. While¹⁷ argues that, whilst the principles of conservation planning are supported in general terms, it is periodically criticised by pro-development interests owing to the direct costs it imposes (which might include the repair and maintenance of protected buildings, and/or opportunity costs of alternative development).

One type of conservation planning has come to epitomize the problems of accommodating retention and change for various conservation organisations, municipal government and the development industry. Modernist buildings of the 1960s and 1970s in Britain promised a better, fairer future amid a scene of societal post-war optimism.¹⁸ Many British cities saw radical rebuilding programmes as part of the welfare state, often led by municipal authorities, which strove to improve quality of life for all through mass public housing programmes, education and community facilities, and the rise of office developments. Employing significant use of concrete, plate glass and systems building, Modernist architecture pushed the boundaries of technological achievement, but often created urban landscapes that appeared to be too ‘Brutalist’ or ‘raw’ for citizen appeal.¹⁹ Brutalist is derived from the French ‘béton brut’ meaning ‘raw concrete’. By the end of the twentieth-century, the Modernist ideals were perceived largely as having failed and the building stock condemned as inappropriate for contemporary needs. Many post-war buildings now face an uncertain future as redevelopment pressures mount for their demolition.

Post-war buildings provoke extreme opinions and recent debates regarding their future have been mired in controversy and conflict. Although the majority of people seem to dislike the buildings and brand them ‘concrete monoliths’,²⁰ there is a significant and growing minority who believe their conservation is important. Extensive debates have thus occurred over threatened structures as conflicting opinions and desires fight over the heritage-worth of the nation’s built environment. While many of the most obvious examples have already been granted listed status,²¹ the conservation agenda has recently focused on more contentious cases in an effort to determine exactly which buildings, and in what form, are worthy of protection. Recent examples include prominent debates concerning the future of Trinity Square Car Park, Gateshead (now demolished), the Tricorn Centre Portsmouth (also

demolished), and Preston Bus Station (conservation and development proposals pending). Before going on to highlight a case study of another development, Birmingham's Central Library, we turn attention to consideration of the formal conservation planning process in its treatment of Modernist buildings.

Conceptualising Conservation and Policy Approaches

At present, buildings possessing 'special architectural or historic interest' (Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990: c.1/1)²² are granted formal recognition through the statutory listing process which 'enables the planning system to protect them'.²³ Proposals for protection for all buildings are considered under a generic policy framework, with overall accountability for decisions attributed to the Secretary of State for Culture. Any building in England older than 30 years can be awarded Grade I, II* or II listed status if it possesses sufficient 'special' architectural or historic interest. To be of special architectural interest a building must be of 'importance in its design, decoration or craftsmanship',²⁴ such as particularly significant examples of building types or techniques, and significant plan forms. For buildings of the more recent past in particular, the 'functioning of the building (to the extent that this reflects on its original design and planned use, where known)²⁵ should also be a consideration. This criterion has usually been 'fairly straightforward'²⁶ in the sense that it is often the external appearance that people judge that special interest. To be of historic interest, a building must 'illustrate important aspects of the nation's history and / or have closely substantiated historical associations with nationally important individuals, groups or events'.²⁷ Significantly, the national listing framework suggests there should be 'some quality of interest in the *physical fabric* of the building itself to justify the statutory protection afforded in listing'.²⁸ However, special interest under either of these criterion may not always be reflected in visual or physical quality.²⁹ Indeed, buildings put forward for listing for

reasons of technological innovation, or illustrating particular points or characters in history, may have little visual or physical value.³⁰

The academic response to this framework in relation to post-war buildings has been notably varied. Although defended by a minority – Cherry deems it to be ‘an inherently flexible system’³¹ – opposing critiques questioning the appropriateness of an essentially artistic listing process are more numerous. Hubbard, for example, suggests that the assessment of architecture cannot be reduced to the same process as that applied to paintings as ‘the built environment is not merely art, but a setting for everyday life’³² and thus the consideration of functional elements is crucial to any full evaluation. This is particularly pertinent for post-war Modernist buildings, as it is the use of and relationship between space(s) which is as much a defining feature as the physical fabric of materials and craftsmanship.³³

This clash in listing ideology between substance and essence is commonly discussed³⁴ with a consensus that the former’s precedence in the statutory process creates barriers to the consideration of issues beyond the conventional art-history approach. Tait and While’s³⁵ ‘black box’ concept attempts to provide a theoretical depth to this critique, arguing that the traditional statutory procedure attempts to reduce buildings to a stable entity of clearly defined inputs (the architect) and outputs (the contribution to a particular style) that ignores the reality of myriad individuals and networks. While the ‘black box’ approach simplifies listing merits to ease decision-making, it also ‘den[ies] hybridity and compromise’ as an input, while ‘view[ing] buildings as static in value and form’ in output.³⁶ As a result, the existing statutory framework is theorised as being too simplistically formulaic in methodology, accommodating the conservation only of ‘star’ buildings which are then perpetually ‘locked’ with an output determined in an ‘elitist nature’.³⁷

A range of alternative conceptions and understandings of post-war conservation have also been proposed, which highlight the variety of often conflicting positions from which the academic field is operating. For instance, an economically grounded understanding of heritage's value as a commodity for popular consumption is proposed by Larkham.³⁸ Perhaps attributable as a precursor to the actor-network approach of Tait and While,³⁹ the author rejects any notion that the conservation process is equitable or necessarily based on historical accuracy, instead identifying the concept of 'heritage' not as history or place but instead as 'a process of selection and presentation of both, for popular consumption'.⁴⁰ This understanding is interesting in its encompassing of the realities of capitalism and relates to the operation of growth-machines (see below), but crucially also represents a diametrically opposing conceptualisation of the process compared to the traditional 'art-history' approach.

An alternative economic approach for post-war buildings relates to the more practical considerations of re-use and economic viability. Delafons recognises the need for any conservation framework to conserve the best of 'heritage' but 'without imposing unsupportable costs'.⁴¹ The economic reality of a duality between the state's desire for conservation and the willingness and ability of the private sector to pay for it is thus highlighted, although the implications of exactly what 'heritage' constitutes in this context remain tacit. Furthermore, while 'Sustainable conservation' is proposed as an idealised operational compromise to effect a 'rational balance between conservation and change',⁴² this approach fails to address the degree of ethical compromise that either currently occurs or should occur to achieve this.

While each of the conservation conceptions differ significantly, all possess an implicit assumption of the necessity of a statutory listing process and a physical conservation outcome. However, it has been suggested that neither of these approaches are necessarily required or justifiable for post-war buildings. Saint, for instance, discusses a Darwinian approach to conservation that encourages the survival only of the ‘fittest and luckiest’ without any state support of the ‘weaklings or obsolescent specimens that stand in the way of younger, thrusting new species’.⁴³ This approach is, after all, the one which has left civilisation with its most ancient buildings, albeit operating within socio-economic contexts of much slower cycles of (re)production.

If it is the essence of post-war Modernism that is deemed important to conserve, that being the ideology from which it was designed and the myriad socio-spatial relationships that then ensue in its operational form, then a purely conceptualist approach to conservation could be applied such that ‘a record of the idea is enough, whether in the form of pictures, drawings, models or ‘virtual reality’’.⁴⁴ In complete contrast to the present statutory approach, it could be that where sufficient archive material exists there is no longer a requirement to conserve any fabric whatsoever.⁴⁵

Distinctly separate academic strands have been developed regarding broader considerations of post-war conservation than simply the statutory and ethical debates. A significant strand worthy of consideration is that of the impact of growth-machines, which while not formally incorporated within any statutory framework are nonetheless intrinsic in shaping the built environment. The selectivity of ‘heritagisation’ relates to growth-machines, a coalition of partners who attempt to image city landscapes to attract investment and regeneration. This process can place particular pressures on the post-war landscape due to their weathered

concrete representing the ‘failures of utopian planning’⁴⁶ while their physical presence ‘restrict[s] development options or impose[s] extra costs on developers, renters and landowners’.⁴⁷

At one level the very idea of conservation is antithetical to capitalism, hence one of the founding principles of government intervention being ‘to oppose the blind onrush of commercially driven modernisation’.⁴⁸ However, conservation policies can also bring economic benefit⁴⁹ to a city where the heritage helps generate a desirable, marketable image. The significance of growth-machines is in perpetuating ‘authorised’⁵⁰ heritage discourses, as achieved through the ‘layering of policy statements, statutory protection, place marketing, press articles’.⁵¹ This can operate in a constructive sense, through strategies like *Plymouth: 20th Century City*, but in other instances unwanted heritage associations can be marginalised to suit the desires for perceived socio-economic prosperity.⁵² Although largely an economic issue, an ethical undercurrent is present as a particular heritagisation of a building or city may ‘overlap, conflict with, or even deny its cultural role’⁵³ and question the real motivation for conservation decisions.

Of course, the vision of a growth-machine does not necessarily mirror that of the wider public, with different layers of understandings and values throughout society.⁵⁴ While argues that whilst populist opposition to post-war conservation often emanates from ‘dirty concrete’, deeper associations of the failure of modernist ideals imposed by autocratic planners of the post-war era are also important considerations.⁵⁵ Alternatively, the desire for change could be viewed as a repetition of the city reconstruction processes following World War II, whereby successive waves of capital accumulation fuelled a desire for improved urban forms in a perpetual quest for modernity.⁵⁶ The mid-twentieth century saw the demolition of many fine

Victorian buildings, just as the Victorians had demolished Georgian masterpieces. It is therefore plausible that the current popular distaste for post-war architecture simply represents the present incarnation of a generational attack of the ‘nearly-new’ built environment.⁵⁷

A ‘U-shaped’ process of high popular satisfaction upon completion followed by a dip in which an architectural era is threatened by distaste, only to once again become appealing 30 plus years later as fashionable ‘heritage’, has been suggested by Saint.⁵⁸ It is this dilemma that underpins the kind of fractious listing cases that this research is based on, and yet surprisingly little attempt has been made to better understand the rationale that drives the perceptions of and relationships between the public, cultural elites, decision makers and the statutory process.

For instance, very little recognition is made of the different perceptions and associations existing within distinct cohorts of society, nor between the high-, middle- and low-level spatial scales of built environment communication identified by Rapoport.⁵⁹ A building might, for example, have a different resonance to an architectural historian interested in the contribution of a building or architect to a particular style (national, high-level) to a societal cohort who lived through the building’s construction and completion (mid-level) or an individual who has unique memories and experiences of a structure (local, low-level). For the latter, the concept of ontological security may be of relevance to local perceptions, as local, everyday surroundings play an under-acknowledged role in the creation of personal identities,⁶⁰ and the loss of particular structures can impact significantly on communities as myriad memories of heritage are lost. These differing perceptions of architectural heritage are now discussed in the next section through a case study analysis.

In order to investigate how heritage might be created, we utilise a combination of semi-structured interviews and analysis of policy documents, popular-press articles and social media archives; and a qualitative ‘thick description’ of the processes of listing relating to Birmingham Central Library was undertaken. The primary material informing this research is based upon grounded-theory, utilising semi-structured interviews with both sets of actors directly involved in the Central Library listing debate and others and undertaken in 2009-10 at a critical stage of the story. These included representatives of national, local, statutory and non-statutory heritage bodies and civic societies, conservation ‘guerrilla’ groups and Central Library management. Discussions with members of the public were conducted informally, predominantly taking place in the library, Chamberlain Square and Centenary Square (adjacent to Central Library).

Birmingham Central Library

A more detailed architectural history of Central Library is provided elsewhere,⁶¹ but an overview of its design, evolution and the listing efforts is useful to contextualise the following research. Designed from 1964-66 by the Birmingham-based John Madin Design Group and completed in 1974, Central Library consisted of a seven-storey cantilevered inverted ziggurat that housed a reference library and an adjoining curving three-storey wing accommodating a lending library (Figures 1 and 2). The library was an example of the Brutalist architectural aesthetic and represents the pinnacle of the post-war Modernist ideology as Birmingham progressively attempted a social and practical revolution of its core. It was the largest civic library in Europe upon completion,⁶² and was well patronised throughout its existence, attracting 1.35 million visits per year.⁶³ Furthermore, even though the scope and level of destruction during the bombing of the Second World War was

extensive, and the rebuilding was largely comprehensive and Modernist, there was, in fact, no official plan for the city, much less the city centre.⁶⁴

[insert figures 1 and 2]

At ground level, a public concourse provided the only pedestrian link between Chamberlain and Centenary Square. Later named 'Paradise Forum' and taking the form of a covered retail arcade, this was originally an open courtyard envisaged as a social node offering access to a planned municipal bus station below. The entire structure sat atop the A41 arterial route, significant at the time like so many urban transport schemes as part of an inner ring-road envisioned to facilitate a motor-dominated society.⁶⁵ While the bus station never came to fruition, the ideological impetus of the design is nonetheless representative of the planning thought-processes of the time. Furthermore, the library – unusually for the time – pioneered a system of displaying less popular books alongside reading rooms, rather than storing them in peripheral areas,⁶⁶ 'making for ready access and easy flexibility'⁶⁷ in the use of the library.

Budgetary constraints during construction resulted in the changing of certain design features. Of particular note was the use of pre-cast concrete as a cladding material, deemed substantially more affordable than the specified stone, and the non-materialisation of landscaped gardens intended to soften the building's aesthetic (Figure 3). The retail units adorning Paradise Forum were added in 1989 following the enclosure of the internal court with a glazed roof, but the building became increasingly dilapidated by the 1990s and 2000s with little investment provided for its upkeep or improvement. Large chunks of concrete were missing from numerous cladding panels, while various wings of the complex lay empty and abandoned.

[insert figure 3]

Birmingham as a city has a history of continual redevelopment – indeed, it was this process that saw the Victorian library building demolished in the 1970s for replacement by the subsequent structure – and Madin’s library was also deemed incompatible with attempts to re-image the city. Since the early 2000s many post-war buildings have been demolished, including the original Bull Ring shopping centre, and with a new Library of Birmingham completed in 2014, pressures for the redevelopment of the Madin library site grew since its acquisition by the developer Argent Group PLC in 2004.

The conservation debate over the building was launched in 2003 when an initial application for the building to be listed at Grade II status was endorsed by English Heritage (later Historic England) but rejected by the then Local Government Minister Kay Andrews. The conflict reached a new pinnacle in 2009 following the City Council’s request for a Certificate of Immunity from listing (CoI) and another Grade II listing recommendation by English Heritage. In November 2009 Margaret Hodge, then Minister for Culture, announced the issuing of a CoI and the building’s future seemed bleak. Madin’s Central Library closed in 2013 and was eventually demolished in 2015-16 (Figure 4).

[insert figure 4]

The Library Story: Heritage Bodies and Birmingham City Council

Any dominant rationale for conservation has the potential to influence the processes through which listing decisions are made. As such, it is useful to gain an appreciation of the

understandings employed by the numerous interest groups involved with Central Library in order to contextualise the decision-making framework. A notable variety in the conception of conservation was immediately apparent in Birmingham between the heritage bodies operating at the local and national scales. These often proved contradictory and inevitably fuelled contestation over the listing potential of Central Library.

Historic England's formal conceptualisation of conservation followed the present statutory guidance of assessment of architectural and historical significance. However, whereas the DCMS⁶⁸ requests a 'special' architectural or historic interest to define a building worthy of listing, in the Central Library case English Heritage specified consideration being made of 'whether it fulfilled its brief; whether it was a particularly good example of a public library; how well it survives; how it compares to other listed buildings of a similar type; and how influential the building has been'.⁶⁹ It is also important to note that, although English Heritage recommended Central Library for listing at Grade II, given the open-minded attitude to the reuse of post-war buildings elsewhere, under their 'constructive conservation' approach⁷⁰ – notably with Birmingham's Rotunda⁷¹ and Sheffield's Park Hill – in this case the organisation was less concerned with fabric than with the perpetuation of a building's physical and ideological presence. As such, deemed most significant was Central Library's 'boldly confident exterior [that] defines an era of Birmingham's recent history'.⁷²

The Twentieth Century Society took a subtly different stance, deeming Central Library 'historically and architecturally significant' and that 'it is capable of being adapted for the needs of 21st century Birmingham' but where its use as a library is maintained.⁷³ However, even the latter consideration was of secondary significance to the Society, who operated from a belief that listing decisions should be made 'purely on the basis of architectural or historic

interest'.⁷⁴ Consequently, the conception of conservation underpinning their campaign for Central Library's listing was significantly narrower than that of English Heritage.

Both Birmingham City Council and Birmingham Civic Society opposed the conservation of the library and actively supported an application for a Certificate of Immunity to facilitate demolition. The City Council had seemingly little regard for post-war heritage and instead actively opposed the conservation rationale that English Heritage based its listing recommendation upon. In a letter to the Minister Margaret Hodge, the leader of the council⁷⁵ criticised the detailed rationale provided by English Heritage in an undisclosed document, critiquing the architectural quality of the building and the significance of the building in Birmingham's history. Whilst a similar methodological approach is taken, a subjectively opposing stance was taken to that of English Heritage in which existing functional attributes were prioritised above architectural consideration to the extent that a Council spokesperson stated that, 'even if the Central Library is listed, we'll still knock it down'.⁷⁶

In its Unitary Development Plan 2005, the City Council's dominant rationale in the City Centre was to create space for (re)development given 'that the supply of vacant land available for immediate new development is severely limited'.⁷⁷ Any value, or not, that the library might exhibit is not explored in this document. The decision notice granting consent for the redevelopment (dated 8th February 2013) to Argent Group PLC makes no mention of the library or any desire to have the building recorded.⁷⁸ Indeed, 'the applicants are not required to consider the merits of retaining the library in any redevelopment'.⁷⁹

Birmingham Civic Society operated from a more considered position in which Central Library might be deemed worthy of conservation 'in the absence of any other consideration',

but that in reality consideration of other socio-economic elements ‘outweigh’ the building’s architectural merit.⁸⁰ A rationale of a ‘degree of fit’ was employed, in which the aesthetics of the building were considered in relation to its surroundings, the quality of materials used in construction, public accessibility, and the potential benefits any redevelopment could bring. To this end it was conceded by one council member that ‘I would have been interested in retaining it if you could move it about half a mile away’, but that any conservation rationale based on viewing the building in isolation was insufficient.⁸¹

Despite sharing the same anti-listing sentiment, the ethical perspectives of key decision makers in the Council and Civic Society were contradictory. Whilst one Council employee stated that any approach to accommodate new uses within the building would be ‘more disrespectful than knocking it down’ because of an intrinsic need to view buildings holistically ‘with both the exterior and the interior complementing one another’⁸², an individual from the Civic Society stated ‘I don’t mind a bit of messing around on the inside because sometimes you have to do that simply to make the building useable’.⁸³ In developing a theoretical scenario, this suggests that if the economic realities were more favourable the Civic Society would have had no ethical objection to re-purposing of building, whilst the Council would have continued to resist any re-use.

Offering yet another conceptual perspective was the local action group, Friends of Central Library (FoCL), whose primary consideration was the continued use of a relatively young building for both economic and environmental reasons. Consequently, the conceptual positioning of FoCL was far more ethically liberal to the extent that one respondent stated: ‘I wouldn’t mind if they covered it in PV panels or whatever. I know that goes against the

Brutalist aesthetic, but so what?... I don't mind it being adapted if it continues to have a useful life'.⁸⁴

What is obvious from an analysis of only the key players in the formal debate surrounding Central Library is the wide array of conceptualisations, rationales and ethical stances in operation. The contradictory positions of the pro- and anti- conservation parties presented an obvious source of conflict which the processes of post-war listing must accommodate, but of equal significance were the more subtle variations within each camp. However, one similarity that transcended through all formal actors was the continued importance of a physical architectural record. A representative view was provided by an employee of the Council:⁸⁵

I think the sheer physicality of architecture and buildings means that we need to try and preserve the physical record. Whenever you see images – whether still or moving – of buildings that are not there anymore, somehow it doesn't do it any longer because you don't capture the sheer four-dimensional reality – including time – of the presence that they have in their environment.

A consensus rejecting the prospect of a comprehensive archival record, replacing the preservation of actual buildings as suggested by Saint,⁸⁶ thus provided the only stable grounding.

The Library Story: The Public

The general public are the 'end-users' of Birmingham city centre and their conceptions of Central Library's potential listing were equally varied. The topic solicited vociferous

responses in both support and antagonism to the building's conservation, although the majority of conservation conceptions were opposed to its listing. Clashing conceptions of what even represented 'heritage' were frequently apparent. For instance, while some recognised the significance of post-war buildings as part of England's national history, a diametrically opposing conception was proposed by many, as illustrated by one respondent's reaction:

'Listing should be for old manor houses with beautifully maintained grounds covered in ivy winding up the sides, not a concrete block which looks like it was taken straight out of the concrete mixer and dumped in the city'.⁸⁷

A prioritisation of aesthetics beyond any appreciation of architectural or historical merit was common. Another idiosyncrasy existed where several individuals acknowledged the library as a potential heritage asset, but supported its demolition based on a personal distaste for its appearance. Highly emotionalised descriptions of the building included 'concrete monstrosity', 'ghastly' and 'hideous', but one individual switched the conception around: 'it might look horrible, but it's important to keep a record of that era'.⁸⁸ The significance of conceptions of ontological security on conservation rationale was also recognisable, though again, in often contradictory forms that support Upton's⁸⁹ assertion of structures having multiple imaginings within the public. Anti-conservation sentiments were expressed by those who felt the library to be 'oppressive', 'dominating' and generally undesirable 'compared to traditional landscapes'⁹⁰ perhaps representative of a feeling of the Modernist townscape being 'unfaithful' in contrast to the more ontologically secure architectural vernacular of the neighbouring 1879 classical Council House.⁹¹ For others, however, conservation-worth was

grounded upon experiential associations of having grown up using the building and because it was now a familiar, if still largely unloved, part of the streetscape. Although numerous interviewees had concerns about a perceived negative image Central Library cast over the entire city, one individual viewed the building as an icon representing an era of civic pride.⁹²

Processes of Post-War Listing and the Statutory Conservation Framework

Determining listing outcomes are numerous operational inputs and influences that collectively represent the processes of listing. Their roles in the Central Library case are worth considering to gain an insight into the realities and suitability of the statutory conservation framework in accommodating the post-war listing debate. This can be achieved, it is suggested, through an evaluation using four themes: architectural-historical or fitness for purpose; image, growth and power; accountability and transparency; and participation and democracy.

Architectural-historical or fitness for purpose: The current DCMS framework stipulates only an architectural-historical perspective to warrant a building being listed. However, in reality much broader considerations appear to have influenced the Central Library case. While English Heritage stated that their recommendation for listing was based upon the building successfully meeting their architectural-history criteria,⁹³ the DCMS issued no formal statement on the criteria used in reaching their decision to announce the issuing of a CoI in November 2009. However, Margaret Hodge did make numerous comments to the media suggesting that criteria other than architectural-history had been considered, for example: ‘The escalators that I went up and down [are] pretty narrow and that might not have been the architect’s fault. But does that make it a fit-for-purpose building for the 21st Century?’⁹⁴

The fitness for purpose issue adds a new dimension to post-war listing not formally considered in the existing statutory framework, and yet one which Hodge went on to state as a significant consideration.⁹⁵ Birmingham City Council and the Civic Society both supported the inclusion of such criteria in the listing debate and based much of their anti-listing campaign on highlighting the building's functional shortcomings. Indeed, one interviewee insisted that 'the future of a building should not be determined simply according to a subjective view of its architecture'⁹⁶ before highlighting the failure of construction materials, a lack of accessibility to the library, and a constriction of pedestrian movement at ground level as reasons why the building should not receive listed status.

This unofficial expansion of listing considerations subsequently shaped the participation in the debate of pro-conservation groups. The FoCL admitted that the basis of their campaign became one not so much of arguing for the building's architectural or historic significance, but of 'knocking down all their reasons why the library is not fit for purpose':

'We know very well that many other things have got into the process underneath the official reasoning and we felt we couldn't just let it happen; we had to join the debate and review the arguments about fitness for purpose, the structure, the cost. We knew full well it wasn't supposed to be – we wrote letters to the Minister saying 'we know these things are not considered, but we know the City Council have been saying all these things in public'.⁹⁷

Throughout the listing debate FoCL were therefore highly active in presenting evidence to disprove the statements made by the Council and Civic Society about the building's lack of

fitness for purpose. Significantly and in contrast, the Twentieth Century Society's pro-listing campaign was specifically tailored to argue only on the architectural-historical route, with an unwillingness to support the fitness-for-purpose element of FoCLs campaign.⁹⁸ While pursuing the architectural-historical approach was legally the legitimate course, in reality it splintered the pro-listing campaign approach and left FoCL alone to fight against the Council-Civic Society partnership.

Image, growth and power: As a city, Birmingham has a historic tradition of perpetual redevelopment and, as a result, an 'assemblage of architecture and planning interventions over time'.⁹⁹ In this regard it appears that the growth-machine incorporating the Council and Civic Society may have been influential in determining a negative 'heritagisation' of the library, with these 'authorised' decision makers perpetuating associations of the building which purposely denigrated any wider desire for the building to be conserved. For instance, the then chairman of the Civic Society provided high-profile interviews in which he expressed opinions such as:

'It's an example of the worst kind of architecture. Brutalist architecture had its place perhaps in post-revolutionary Russia. It doesn't have its place in a Victorian square in Birmingham'.¹⁰⁰

The close 'critically constructive' partnership between the Council and the Civic Society, in which joint opinions were formed prior to formal action,¹⁰¹ disseminated and perpetuated an 'authorised' perspective that the building was inappropriate for the city, and even played on negative associations between Modernist aesthetics and failures of socialism.¹⁰² If viewed via a derivative of Tait and While's¹⁰³ 'black box' theory, an attempt was made to stabilise the

‘negative’ heritage-worth and deny the possibility of other more positive perceptions. Instead, the potential of the site for commercial redevelopment was highlighted and the great significance of this for the future economic prosperity of Birmingham:

‘That is the premier development site in the whole city, you might even argue in the country. There’s huge potential on that site to create a new magnet that will draw people to the city and improve the image of the city internationally’.¹⁰⁴

The importance of image is palpable to a Civic Society who desire ‘photogenic’ buildings that attract inward investment.¹⁰⁵ For those historic buildings not (yet) perceived picturesque, their economic heritage-worth is negligible or even negative and thus efforts are made to resist their safeguarding through listing. A present distaste for the Brutalist aesthetic in accord with Saint’s¹⁰⁶ U-shaped fashion trend model therefore left the Central Library vulnerable.

The pro-conservation groups were particularly critical of this element of the listing debate, with one interviewee feeling the Council had ‘bullied’ the decision-making Minister by overplaying the claimed ‘catastrophic’ implications that would ensue should the building have been listed, while exploiting the unpopularity of Brutalism and ‘using it as a kind of expletive’ to sway opinion.¹⁰⁷ For FoCL, a reluctant acceptance was made of the economic potential that a prime redevelopment site offers and so a perception that ‘however brilliant this library is or was would have made very little difference’ to any listing decision.¹⁰⁸ In respect of this, a conception of the listing process such as Glendinning’s¹⁰⁹ being in place to oppose purely commercially driven modernisation requires re-evaluating given the seemingly powerful influence the growth-machine played in supporting the processes of capitalism.

Accountability and transparency: When Margaret Hodge announced her intention to award a Certificate of Immunity to Central Library rather than confirm listed status, she announced on a regional news programme:

‘I had representations from nearly a hundred bodies and organisations. More felt it shouldn’t be listed than it should, and in the end I had to exercise my judgment’.¹¹⁰

In reaching this decision, the Minister had overturned a recommendation for listing from English Heritage as well as the support of the statutory consultee The Twentieth Century Society. There was a feeling among the pro-conservation groups that ministerial accountability had been severely compromised in the Central Library case, with an accusation that Hodge was ‘able to hoist her own prejudices onto the system’.¹¹¹ A dichotomy exists within the present system whereby listing decisions are theoretically based upon heritage expertise but within an inherently politicized climate. Consequently, one interviewee summarised the Central Library process as having ‘English Heritage, the experts, advising a Minister who decides to ignore their advice because she’s a politician who needs to get votes’.¹¹²

Despite the contrasting opinions and campaigns of the various actors involved with the case, a recurring theme of a lack of understanding of the decision-making process undertaken by the DCMS, or indeed a full rationale for its decision, was present among the Birmingham-based groups. Interviewees from FoCL and the Civic Society similarly conceded a total lack

of knowledge of what rationale the Minister employed in reaching her decision, having not been allowed access to the report produced by civil servants at the DCMS.

An ongoing failure of the DCMS to meet deadlines for decision making was also commonly highlighted among each of the local interest groups as a hindrance to transparency, with a drawn-out formal process spanning from November 2007 to November 2009. However, surprisingly unknown to the conservation groups, and certainly unpublished in the public domain, was the revelation from a City Council employee that the CoI had yet to be formally decided:

‘In November 2007 we submitted an application for immunity from listing. As at the present moment [11th August, 2010] there has been no official response to that. We had a visit from Margaret Hodge – the responsible Minister – and she wrote us a letter which stated it was her intention to grant us a CoI. But before she was able to do that a General Election was called and that certificate has never actually been issued, so we remain in a state of uncertainty’.¹¹³

Significantly, the CoI issue also illustrates a definite hierarchy of ‘transparency’ throughout the listing framework (see Figure 5). Although the positions of English Heritage and the Twentieth Century Society remain unknown in this respect – and indeed their lack of input into this research is in itself illustrative of a lack of transparency in the process – it would appear that the Council did not, unsurprisingly, share this development with opposing heritage groups, but seemingly neither with the Civic Society nor the general public either.

[insert figure 5]

Guerrilla groups like FoCL appeared to be at the bottom of the transparency hierarchy, resorting to Freedom of Information (FoI) requests to gain information from the Council. That much of the FoCL campaign required FoI requests in order to view documents the Council were basing their anti-listing campaign upon has transparency implications in itself, but there were also cases of the Council requesting a fee to enable the researching and release of information.¹¹⁴ Arguably, a ‘privatisation’ of the listing process occurred both in this regard, but also on occasions where the Council refused to disclose information to FoCL on the grounds of commercial confidentiality. While this position might be justifiable were the redevelopment of the site subject to ongoing developer negotiations, the reality here is of the developer Argent having had an exclusivity agreement since 2004 and hence no reason for non-disclosure.

Participation and democracy: The transparency issues illustrate the barriers to participation that faced various ‘formal’ Central Library interest groups, but this case also shows often the views of the public are often forgotten in listing debates. Every individual interviewed about the Central Library had strong opinions on the building and its heritage-worth, suggesting a definite public interest at some level in the future of the building. As part of the existing statutory listing process, individuals could write letters to the DCMS expressing their opinions, although it remains unknown to what extent these views were considered. The Library Services also held extensive consultation exercises with ‘over 10,000 people’¹¹⁵ (although primarily in regard to the building’s fitness for purpose as a library).

The attitudes towards public participation universally expressed by the ‘formal’ groups were interesting in their concern that a lack of applied architectural or historical knowledge among the public could result in inappropriate listing decisions being made. For instance, one pro-conservation interviewee stated: ‘you don’t want too many ordinary people having their say because look what they might decide’ given that ‘these particular buildings are not yet considered heritage in the general public’s mind’.¹¹⁶ Given this, it is important to note that the majority of public opinions – both for and against – were based purely on aesthetic or functional opinions rather than on any academic basis.¹¹⁷

While public opinions are in part related to ontological security, there is also an inevitable perception-forming relationship between the press and the public. Significantly, the language used in press coverage relating to Central Library – in both local and national, tabloid and broadsheet – was often sensationalised and typically presented shallow attacks on the aesthetics of Brutalism. Numerous articles¹¹⁸ gave great prominence to the infamous quote by Prince Charles in which Central Library was likened to being ‘a place where books are incinerated, not kept!’¹¹⁹ while others attacked its ‘brusque insensitivity’.¹²⁰ Although *The Independent’s* architectural critic defended Central Library and Brutalism as a genre,¹²¹ this supportive stance is rare and it is tempting to draw linkages between this and the knowledge-perspective predominant among the public.

Also significant is a lack of educational material on Central Library published either by English Heritage or the Twentieth Century Society. Exhaustive web and archival searches up to the decision to issue a CoI produced only two meaningful explanations of the building in specialist architectural publications and as such a superficiality of public knowledge is hardly surprising. Knowledge of the library’s architect, John Madin, was equally sparse at the time

despite his significant role in shaping post-war Birmingham and has only been addressed subsequently by a book reviewing his life and work.¹²²

Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated an obvious need for significant transparency improvements in the conservation listing process. While it is important for any state-led process to be visible to, and understood by, the population in the name of democracy and accountability, the listing decisions for post-war buildings are of particular significance to society given their impact on the lives of city-users. Transparency issues obviously also exist lower down the decision-influencing hierarchy, with particular interest groups – Birmingham City Council in this instance – having the power to withhold information on the legal status of particular buildings, even if they too are left in a state of uncertainty over the lack of definitive progress from government.

Perhaps requiring more thoughtful debate is the relationship between the DCMS, English Heritage (now Historic England) and planning. If listing is, as historically and legally has been the case, primarily an issue of conserving the best of the nation's built heritage, the future role of professional organisations in advising decision making is going to be problematic. With an apparent broadening of assessment criteria to incorporate 'fitness-for-purpose' and economic concerns, the judiciary boundaries of the process become blurred to incorporate topics conventionally considered by planners and architects. Larkham and Adams¹²³ suggest that a review of the way in which buildings are assessed for heritage purposes might be wise, as a result.

The actions of Historic England and, as a statutory consultee, the Twentieth Century Society must also be critically re-evaluated given the shift away from the architectural-historical designation approach. Historic England has a significant role to play in increasing the transparency of the listing processes through openly publishing the representations they make to the DCMS, but the potential also exists for both organisations to fulfil a far greater educational role. It is surprising that so little information is available either to built environment professionals or the general public on the very buildings that campaigns are trying to save from demolition. If it is accepted that ‘with education comes appreciation’¹²⁴ then heritage bodies may need to significantly increase their publication of accessible and appropriate educational material in order to reduce ignorance of post-war buildings and increase their likelihood of survival.

Overall, the conflicts dominating post-war listing debates can be traced back to an inherent unease of a process that attempts – seemingly incoherently – to apply a policy framework to what are ultimately a series of subjective ethical decisions. Such a policy framework is, of course, a compromise mechanism necessary to reach any sort of justifiable decision, but it is also important to note that the current statutory framework is based on the same basic ideals conceived in the nineteenth-century. Undeniably the post-war listing debate presents a different scenario to that for buildings of previous generations and it is only reasonable that the policy framework evolves to contemporary needs. Fundamentally though, there is a need for a more holistic, interdisciplinary process; countless opinions, objectives and influences collectively shape contentious listing cases, and consequently a more holistic understanding of heritage issues would prove highly beneficial to both future research and practice.

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