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Modern Futures

There has been a groundswell of interest in modernist architecture in recent years, particularly buildings that were conceived and constructed in the second half of the twentieth century. The status and value of such buildings has long been contentious, despite the fact that it has been possible, since the introduction of the 30-year rule in the 1980s, for such buildings to obtain statutory protection in the form of listing.

Statutory protection plays an important role in shaping the physical and visual appearance of our town and cityscapes, but this approach is increasingly being joined by other creative, critical and playful responses. Diverse individuals and groups are engaging with modernist architecture in the form of popular histories, documentaries and community projects, digital and social media, and the growing trend for ‘mid-century modern’ design products—from art prints to brutalist cushions. Alongside this growing popularity however, modernist architecture is increasingly under threat from demolition and regeneration. In light of these trends, *Modern Futures* asks: How are modernist buildings now valued and understood? What might conservation and heritage learn from creative responses to modernist sites? How might these influence planning and conservation in the future?

This book emerges from a desire to examine these divergent trends—of both increased popularity and of increased threat—to explore how they might be connected, and to consider how more popular and creative engagements might be used to inform the uncertain future of modernist buildings. Three overlapping themes run through the volume: *Documentation* (what methods are used to document modernist architecture and what values are uncovered in this process?); *Interventions* (how have different groups sought to celebrate or campaign for modernist buildings and what are the implications of these interventions?); and *Transformations* (what does regeneration and reuse mean for modernist architecture?).

Left: *St James Centre, Edinburgh.*

Documentation

The sheer volume of post-war construction and the rapid rate of demolition has resulted in the documentation and recording of modernist architecture being charged with a sense of urgency. This also raises interesting questions about how to focus attention. What should be documented—successes, failures or ‘iconic examples’? Within architectural conservation there are particular ways that architecture has traditionally been documented, through technical descriptions and black and white photography of deserted buildings. Buildings prioritised tend to be by famous architects and be experimental or innovative. This emphasis on the exceptional rather than the typical means that more widespread, non-spectacular building types are often overlooked, as are the everyday uses and experiences of buildings.

In order to open up different ways of describing and understanding architecture this volume features work that highlights broader methods and approaches to documenting modernist sites such as oral histories, art installations, archives and collections, digital media, as well as art photography. These different methods move beyond a focus on ‘special architectural or historic interest’ and highlight divergent values that are ascribed to modernist architecture. When documentation is carried out by a wider range of people, there is an opportunity to reveal broader understandings of architectural value that might feed into official policy. As discussed by Christine Wall, this could take the form of oral histories that illuminate the overlooked labour and skills of construction workers. Interviews with residents of estates, as highlighted by Esther Johnson, communicate the everyday experiences of living in an architecturally acclaimed space, where design and aesthetics serve as only a minor feature amongst more day-to-day priorities such as neighbourliness, home-making, and the harsh realities of housing policy.

In addition to methods that draw on memories, experiences and emotions, where the scale is often small and intimate, this volume also offers examples of national and regional surveys. Concerns here are with addressing widespread and taken-for-granted building typologies by looking beyond common misconceptions about the dominance of ‘ugly concrete’, and turning attention to places that might be easily overlooked. These include suburbs, as well individual buildings that fall outside the architectural canon, and those designed by lesser known architects or firms. Such buildings are at the heart of Richard Brook’s long-term project to document, photograph

and account for what he calls ‘mainstream modernism’. Whilst professional bodies such as the Royal Institute of British Architects, Historic England and Historic Environment Scotland all have extensive archive collections (both photographic and written records) their coverage is not exhaustive. As seen in Matthew Whitfield’s contribution, Historic England are currently attempting to broaden their knowledge of ignored English suburbs through “an intensive programme of new research and fieldwork”. Matthew Steele and Angela Connelly’s Sacred Suburbs project was also concerned to more fully document suburban architecture. They demonstrate the value of unofficial archives, such as those held by churches themselves, for understanding the contribution that buildings make to local communities.

There are also wider considerations that need to be given to the role of archives—from official to personal collections, both material and digital—in shaping future understandings of modernist architecture. As Andy Lock’s work in collaboration with Iain Anderson reveals, photographic representations and other forms of documentation “will in many cases outlive a modern movement building itself and play a decisive role in shaping its legacy”. Architectural photographs of modernist buildings work within a visual language that privileges utopian visions of stand-alone buildings, often detached from surrounding landscapes and communities. There is no doubt that photographs taken when buildings were new and pristine are integral elements in building histories and biographies. However, privileging such images runs the risk of resulting in records of fetishised artefacts, devoid of broader context and siting, and overlooking how buildings may have been adapted, transformed or inhabited.

Interventions

The volume also examines a range of different types of intervention into modernist landscapes: creative installations, public events, popular campaigns, personal projects. Although there is some emphasis here on attempts to protect buildings through conservation-planning (including through ‘listing’) a much stronger current in the different chapters is the desire to intervene in ways that exceed, or indeed reject, the idea of campaigning for architectural conservation. Many of the contributions instead speak of ‘celebrating’ modernist architecture creatively, and of attendant emotions and affective qualities: optimism, enthusiasm, positivity, playfulness, gentleness, beauty, as well as productive nostalgia. Often these ways of engaging

with modernist architecture arrived out of a frustration with traditional approaches. For Eddy Rhead, the formation of the Manchester Modernist Society provided an opportunity to move away from ‘negative and soul destroying’ conservation campaigning. And whilst Gate 81, discussed by Sally Stone, was conceived in order to campaign for Preston Bus Station, the project aimed to “celebrate and appreciate the building”, rather than to be about ‘demands, demonstration and protest’.

So what might these creative forms of engagement offer? They can offer friendship and fun. They also offer space for different kinds of skills and approaches. Beyond the architectural historian, conservation officer and town planner, others such as artists, writers, film makers, community historians, coders, bloggers and enthusiasts are contributing to creative interventions. These interventions might also provide new opportunities for engaging with communities often not involved in conservation-planning or the heritage industry (those living in modernist buildings, or displaced when they are demolished or ‘regenerated’ for example). Verity-Jane Keefe explains how The Mobile Museum and its perambulations around Barking and Dagenham were able to engage residents, shopkeepers and council staff through activities such as an archaeological dig and *Make Your Own Model Village*. Although many of those writing here stress that they are not campaigners, these forms of engagement might offer opportunities for campaigns and contribute to the building of broader coalitions of care behind architecture as sociability, creativity and playfulness can be harnessed to keep the work of activism going.

However, as has been well documented, creative interventions are not a panacea. Whilst they can broaden the constituency of those interested in modernist architecture, those involved (leading and participating in creative interventions and campaigns) often remain stubbornly homogenous. Despite growing popularity, the project and pastime of architectural modernism remains the committed pursuit of a select and sometimes elite group. As seen by Ian Waites, the ethics of community engagement work are complex, involving longstanding relationships, trust, and an openness to different regimes of value. They might also require a humility about what might be achieved, and an acceptance that goals in a minor key are also valuable: “maybe it’s enough to do things that make a nice change, rather than them having to *make* a change”.

Transformations

Because creative interventions can often also be part of processes of gentrification and regeneration which transform modernist architecture, creativity cannot be uncritically celebrated as a progressive force. Transformation of modernist buildings through regeneration, privatisation and demolition are key themes running through *Modern Futures*, whether implicitly—motivating interventions and documentation—or explicitly, in discussions of the relocation of public art in Harlow, the imminent demolition of St James Centre in Edinburgh, or the regeneration of Park Hill, Sheffield and the Balfron Tower, London. In discussions over the transformation of modernist architecture, from churches to shopping centres and housing, economic value is always a dominant force. Modernist architecture can (sometimes simplistically) be seen to stand for a starkly different politics to that of the contemporary world: more collectivist and more socially progressive. As such it can offer glimpses of past utopian ideas and possible alternatives for the future. Because these buildings are often aesthetically uncompromising, they are hard to ignore. Yet modernist buildings can be clad, covered with redevelopment banners, and built onto, even if they aren’t demolished; art and sculpture can be removed or relocated. In this context modernist architecture holds an ambivalent position in the contemporary town and city centre. In the case of the St James Centre, discussed by Michael Gallagher, and of Harlow, discussed by Natalie Bradbury, public and municipal space is increasingly privatised, and modernism is displaced. Though Harlow has been rebranded as a ‘sculpture town’, the William Mitchell artworks which were a key part of the new town’s civic architecture have been relocated and can now be found attached to the walls of a supermarket and a now defunct British Home Stores.

In these cases, economic value is linked to the value of the land on which they stand; in other examples, the ‘heritage premium’ attached to modernist architecture drives transformations to housing tenure. John Pendlebury and Aidan While are explicit about how listing and other forms of conservation-planning are now positioned as agents of change, rather than barriers to it. So whilst the heritagisation of modernist architecture offers some forms of protection to the built structures of modernism, this is partial. Substantial change to the fabric of buildings is tolerated to meet other social and economic goals, and even when the buildings are carefully refurbished, the architecture is often decoupled from the ideology of the Welfare State that produced it.

Despite the challenges of the political economic climate, contributions to this volume show that there are alternative futures for modernist buildings. Different forms of documentation and creative intervention offer opportunities to develop more capacious understandings of value for modernist architecture. This might be through small things: opportunities to discuss the value of modernist landscapes for the everyday lives of current and past residents; celebrations of locally loved or hated buildings; creating and preserving written, visual and oral archives of buildings that are demolished. Beyond these, the volume finishes with the argument from Pendlebury and While that there are other futures available which do not involve shifting away from the original form or function of modernist buildings. In Newcastle, a combination of strong community infrastructure, willing local government, and the specificities of the location (in the North East of England; nearer the edge of the city) have led to the successful regeneration of the Byker estate without any substantial change in its residency or tenure. Creative forms of documentation and intervention might contribute to such successes by challenging narratives of failure, involving and building new communities of care, documenting value beyond the economic and architectural, and persuading governments and policy makers to respond to these broader understandings. Or they might not. They might just offer a nice change, or a temporary shift in perspective. Whilst the political and economic climate offer challenges for modernist architecture and the ideological projects it was often associated with in the UK, the chapters in this book offer some examples of how it might be possible to imagine, discuss, and enact new *Modern Futures* at the micro and macro scale.

Hannah Neate & Ruth Craggs