

What's so good about British architecture?

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Published: August 31 2007 13:19 | Last updated: August 31 2007 13:19

We will probably never see another building boom like the one we are in now. The last time anything happened on this scale was in the aftermath of the Blitz, a huge programme of post-War reconstruction that, in most aspects and except for a few brilliant and heroic schemes, failed.

This time, though, we are sure everything will be better. Now we are the centre of the creative world. Everyone wants to be here; the whole world would emigrate here if they could. We have the finest, most iconic architecture, the busiest, most dynamic and expensive city, the highest property prices. Manhattan quivers in the shadow of London. The finest architects from around the world are bristling to work here. Britain exports its architecture with Lords Foster and Rogers leading the way, designing the world's airports, skyscrapers, convention centres and the new cities of the Middle East and China.

At least that is the rhetoric. The reality I see is different. British architecture, so often talked about as one of our biggest cultural success stories, is dull, corporate and profoundly uninspired. There are exceptions, Foster undoubtedly heads the slickest and most successful architectural business in the world. Other names from the visionary Zaha Hadid to the classically minimal David Chipperfield are building truly great things (albeit abroad). But the buildings you see rising, at speed, all around you in London and beyond, "regenerating" vast swathes of land from White City in the west to the interminable and incoherent Thames Gateway, promise nothing but bland commercial slickness.

The banks of the Thames, the river that has irrigated so much contemporary redevelopment, gives the true, depressing picture of contemporary British architectural culture. From the mean brick houses that litter its entire length past the faceless boxes that line its route through the City to the corporate glass cliffs rising from the morass of Southwark, this is the reality. It is surely the worst panorama of architecture in the centre of any European capital. Look at the primitivism of the new megastructures such as the horrible Palestra Building lurking in Southwark (now a forbidding home to the London Development Agency) or the nearby behemoths of Bankside now overshadowing Tate Modern. The aesthetic pollution has become most concentrated bang opposite Parliament, at Vauxhall. A stunningly inappropriate 50-storey tower has just been granted planning permission; look only as far as the incoherent piles of St George's Wharf by the tower's designers to see the future. Hideous.

And it is not just London. The centres of Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool are virtually unrecognisable from their gloomy emptiness of only five or six years ago. But their wonderfully characterful, huge Victorian architecture, the built expression of mercantile confidence and civic grandeur, has given way to bland superficiality.

Fading 1960s buildings have been flattened to make way for flash, glossy, glassy façades, as thin as paper and as intellectually deep. The architectural language is one of "contemporary" materials, transparency, light, big public plazas, chain coffee and sandwich stores. In parts of the City, in Manchester's Piccadilly, in Birmingham's Bullring, you could be in Toronto or Denver. Look beyond the clichés of those instant plazas, though, and you will see something more sinister. The fountains are filled with chlorine, the squares are patrolled by security guards, the sculptural light fittings are spiked with CCTV cameras, signs forbid skateboarding and rollerblading. Most of these spaces are public in appearance only. Potters' Fields in London, beside the mayor's own GLA Building (the whole shebang designed, naturally, by Foster) is all private property opened up by gracious corporations to the people of London, so long as they behave themselves. There is no right to protest or to loiter in these spaces. Or look at the sub-classical Paternoster Square, the direct result of the Prince of Wales' intervention into the architectural debate. It is the image of the dead city, the work of a culture frighteningly insecure about addressing its toughest historic building, St Paul's Cathedral.

St Paul's has governed the City's skyline for centuries, critical sightlines deciding the location of tall buildings. Now, though, the City is intent on developing its porcupine skyline with clusters of towers, and the great dome is "threatened", along with the Tower of London (according to Unesco), by shards and cheese graters, by gherkins and helter-skelters, by a deluge of developers each attempting to outdo each other in dim architectural one-liners. Skyscrapers are extremely hard to do well in London because, unlike Manhattan, there is no grid from which to extrude. Instead we have, uniquely for a capital's commercial centre, inherited a Roman/medieval streetplan that produces awkward plots with irregular floorplates. To build big enough, developers use what is known as Planning Gain, "donating" pseudo-public space to the city in an attempt to build bigger and higher. There is no real tradition in this country of the *passaggiata* plazas of Mediterranean cities instead of corporate front gardens in which we are allowed to consume pints, sandwiches, the fruits of the cloned retail culture. Architects have been dumbly complicit and unquestioning in their acceptance of these spurious urban gestures.

These sub-public spaces are surrounded by "contemporary" architecture. Contemporary architecture is what became of modernism once the politics, the social intent, the aesthetic rigour and the idealism were stripped out. This is an architecture of glass (because glass is supposedly transparent, transparency is a corporate ideal), steel (because steel expresses modernity and thrusting technology) and terracotta (because that can be used to blend in with brick without actually being anything as banal as brick). It is the architecture of emptiness, of the status quo. You will see it touted as "sustainable". Sustainable architecture is the big cliché of the era, a glib mantra that can be used to justify anything and which has decimated intelligent debate. Skyscrapers – sustainable because they increase density; dumb glass facades – sustainable because they allow in natural light; demolition of perfectly serviceable buildings dense with embodied energy – sustainable because it allows the chain stores that will inhabit

them to compete in a globalised economy. Architects have become too involved in their own rhetoric; they believe it. The profession, the trade journals and critics remain almost entirely silent about the depth of the problem. Architecture is in denial.

Modernism was a radical architecture, seemingly indivisible from its socialist utopian roots but it was, nevertheless, slyly co-opted by the corporations. Ideals of light, air and democratic space were adopted by big business for their HQ towers, occasionally extremely successfully. The best architects of the modern era designed some of the finest buildings of the 20th century for the corporations. The aesthetic agenda replaced the social. But, inevitably, this visionary corporate commissioning began to fade, and from the late 1960s big firms of commercial specialists were left in charge of the office market. They knew how to build efficiently and cheaply; they knew how to gain planning permission for city-centre towers. Intellectual modernists retreated during the recessions of the 1970s and 1980s into designing one-off houses and galleries or writing books – bespoke brilliance for the bourgeoisie.

Then in the 1990s, with the windfall of lottery money in Britain, some of these architects were given the chance to shine with a flood of commissions for grand projects. Instead of questioning the need for these often spurious projects, they grabbed the opportunities. The results showed occasional sparks of brilliance, often in entirely the wrong context. Caruso St John's Walsall Art Gallery is, for example, perhaps our finest contemporary public building. But it is in Walsall where the audience is severely limited and whenever I have visited it has been largely empty. Several schemes, from the Sheffield Centre for Popular Music (now a student bar) and the Baltic in Gateshead, were over-scaled and are now struggling. The result was a continuing British suspicion of radical or innovative architecture.

Today, as lottery projects give way to commercial colossi, the current architectural language is one developed in the virtual world, as flat as the flattest flat screen. Materials are dematerialised, abstracted to the point where they become ciphers. Look at any Victorian high street, these were commercial places built by unsophisticated developer/builders yet they embody an extraordinary diversity and depth of detail. Look at the old shopfronts, their mosaic thresholds, ironwork, look at the old fascia boards, the eccentric capitals of the posts that separate the shops from their neighbours, look higher up at the window surrounds, look at the pubs, the corner turrets, the doorways, the door handles and the engraved glass. They sparkle with detail as each builder attempted to differentiate his work from the neighbours. These are three-dimensional buildings that have survived the fourth dimension of time, occasionally naive, occasionally rather elegant but they still work as ensembles.

If, in the boom years of vulgar pastiche, the 1980s, I had been told our cities would in 25 years be filled with big determinedly modern buildings, I would have been delighted. But the results have made me think again. There is no attempt at meaning, at intellectual engagement, at cultural groundedness. There is no attention to the street, to the ordinary. The architecture of contemporary Britain appears satisfied with its efforts to be contemporary, as if that on its own were enough. These are the responses of a culture that has never felt at home with modernity.

In Switzerland, in Spain, in Belgium, in Portugal, in Holland, the streets are peppered with fine contemporary buildings that are able to engage with their neighbours, with local building culture – see panel, previous page – yet which are dazzlingly and unmistakably modern.

The problems with British architecture cannot necessarily be addressed through legislation. It is impossible to regulate intelligence in architecture. Some good has been done in recent years by Cabe (the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment), a broadly well-intentioned quango, but the problem is one of low ambition. It is easy to blame the corporations for their lack of aspiration but it is perhaps more effective to target the government. Through its reliance on the Public Finance Initiative process to deliver the biggest programme of school and hospital building in two generations, it has effectively abdicated architecture to the builders. In PFI, economy comes first, design comes nowhere. Contractors employ architects as emasculated subcontractors. The schools and hospitals we are building now and which our grandchildren will still be paying for are a cultural disgrace. These are buildings in which we spend our formative years, our most emotional moments, from birth through childhood to death. As an ageing society we will all be spending longer in hospital yet we have no alternative to the bargain-bin architecture foisted upon us. I have seen brand new PFI schools that would be impossible to differentiate from low-security prisons: dim corridors and classrooms that would make you weep. For anyone who enjoys architecture and hopes that things will improve for the future, it is heartbreaking.

Finally, and most depressingly, the housebuilders of Britain continue to spew their brick sprawl, those depressing children's archetypes, the toytown brick boxes. Where they attempt "contemporary" – usually for urban flats to be snapped up by buy-to-let investors – they employ the same disengaged modernist pastiche beloved of the commercial sector. This is modernism adapted as a lifestyle choice. Except for a few ambitious housing associations and developers who are employing bright young architects, the domestic architecture of Britain is an embarrassment.

Of course, there are still good things. There are fine young practices who think about both the bigger questions and the everyday, and there are outstanding small new buildings, attempts at making better schools, better houses.

But the overall scene remains profoundly depressing. The streets and squares of our cities find themselves reflected in the dumbest of corporate glass boxes, our rivers and resorts are being redeveloped as "destinations", our schools and hospitals are conditioning us for lives of aesthetic deprivation and much of the interesting and diverse fabric of our cities, from solid Victoriana to decent and light modernist buildings from the 1950s and 1960s is being flattened to make way for anonymous offices. This is how we are regenerating our cities. This boom is our big chance and if we screw it up the future will not forgive us.

Switzerland and Portugal show what can be done

We don't have to travel far to see how architecture can be a natural part of an intellectual, artistic, national and

urban culture. The finest example is, undoubtedly, Switzerland. Here, somehow, modernism was embraced into the broader culture and the country avoided both the stick-on pastiche that so affected English cities and the shallow glass emptiness of contemporary commerce.

While in Britain, industrial and retail architecture is crushed by the big tin shed, in Switzerland every building type is taken as an opportunity to express a set of cultural and business values. Herzog & de Meuron, architects of Tate Modern, made their names with a stunning copper-clad railway signal-box and an exquisite warehouse imprinted with pop-art patterns.

Peter Zumthor, whose small office nestles in an Alpine village, only accepts select commissions, such as a tea pavilion in the middle of a Zurich lake. His work displays a power and an intelligence and depth almost unthinkable in the UK.

And all that is before we get to housing. The depth and seriousness applied to Swiss apartments and houses is astonishing and the aesthetic and functional intelligence makes British housing look like something from another era, a time when people didn't care how they lived.

Christian Kerez, Gigon and Guyer, Peter Markli, Bearth & Deplazes, Diener and Diener, Valerio Olgiati ... no other country comes close to having such a sophisticated architectural culture and such an abundance of serious contemporary buildings through which can be read much about attitudes to dwelling, to the landscape, to material, light and life in general.

But Switzerland is a wealthy country, with a highly educated population. Of course it is easy for them.

Well, let's take Portugal then. Since the fall of Salazar's regime, Portugal has developed a highly local, coherent building culture, its architects among the most admired in the world. Alvaro Siza, known as the architect's architect, made his career with a series of striking, original and deceptively simple houses. Deceptively simple, elegant and self-effacing, these are buildings that experiment with local forms in subtle ways, that meld the vernacular into the avant garde, seamlessly and intelligently. The result is a rooted modernism, design with a sense of place and history.

Other Portuguese architects, notably the sublime Eduardo Souto de Moura, have managed to take the ethereal, often rather inhuman asceticism of minimalism and imbue it with a sense of material and topology. His football stadium in Braga, set into the rockface of an abandoned quarry, or his houses that seem to grow from the sides of stony hills are as powerful and moving as any buildings since the Romans.

It is harder to say exactly why these countries have developed such sophisticated architectural cultures and it is easy to forget that neither is perfect. The brilliant Swiss can easily be criticised for being a little po-faced, while the Portuguese avant garde has had little impact on the resorts or the kitsch commercial development of the big cities. But they do show what can be done. From stations to squares, provincial museums to agricultural buildings, the public and private landscapes are taken seriously, by individuals, communities and by local and national authorities.

A level of taste is being applied, of ambition and education. Whether in the cool climate of the Alps or the heat of a Lisbon *plaza*, streets, squares and benches and lamp-posts are all envisaged as part of a larger artistic and national culture. Both countries provide outstanding concrete examples of what can be achieved.

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