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Britain's ugliest buildings

Britain's building boom is creating some monsters. Our architecture critic trembles in the presence of the ten most hideous



Tom Dyckhoff

The announcement of the Stirling Prize shortlist is normally a time for back-slapping. This year, however, with four of the six buildings abroad, and one of the architects not even British, the headlines were not good. "Dreary buildings 'foreshadow bleak future for Britain' "; "Shortlisted architect hits out at timid British building culture"; "Fear of risks and aversion to spending shackle UK architects".

"In Britain no one wants to take any risks," thundered David Chipperfield, the aforementioned shortlisted architect. Richard Rogers agreed: "There should be more exciting buildings in this country."

But it was the president of the Royal Institute of British Architects, Jack Pringle, who hit the nail on the head: "[In Britain] it's all about making the business case... Everything has to be justified in a terribly Presbyterian way."

The business case is all-conquering. Fearful of a repeat of Wembley Stadium or the Scottish Parliament, the Government, Private Finance Initiative contractors and developers are interested in only four words: on time, on budget. Design is just the cherry on top.

With all the money being creamed off the building boom, we should be living amid glories to rival Medici's Florence. Good architecture is being built. So much building is going on, however, that these few gems are swamped under a mass of shoddy, banal structures, as in that other economically booming but now architecturally maligned decade, the 1960s. Like then, we are sleepwalking through a jerry-built makeover of Britain. But there's one big difference: instead of concrete brutalism, these days we have bling brutalism - dreary, unimaginative slabs wall-papered with bright colours, iconic shapes and tinsel.

So, while the Stirling judges deliberate between now and October, we're on the search for the opposite: the worst new building in Britain. These ten have caught my eye, and, in some cases, yanked it from its socket and left it bleeding.

Tell us the one you really hate, or find out how to send us your photos of new British buildings that offend you at the foot of this article

201 Broadgate and the Bishopsgate Tower, Central London

British Land
SOM

Where did this come from? There we all were, so busy watching London's skyline for the Walkie Talkie, the Curly Wurly, the Shard and the Cheese Grater that we hardly noticed the Filing Cabinet being built. That's because this dreary slab of low-rent Americana, churned off the production line by SOM (architects of Ground Zero's Freedom Tower) dates back to the mid-1990s: it was the City's boom that finally got it built. Thirty-five storeys, athletic cross-bracing – but it still looks stumpy.

The Crescent, Bristol

Crest Nicholson
Edward Cullinan Architects

Bristol may be booming, but it's impossible to find new architecture here that reaches beyond mediocre. The city is squandering its fine geography and wonderful architectural heritage with Flash Harry apartment developments such as this - not the worst, just the latest, and a disappointment for so good a firm as Cullinan's. There were once grand plans for Bristol's waterfront. Now it is being sold off to make room for half-hearted slabs with surface tinsel. It gets half a Brownie point for being faintly green.

Wembley Stadium, Northwest London

Wembley National Stadium Ltd
Foster and Partners and HOK Sport

Perhaps controversial, but it's in this list not for the construction debacle. It actually functions well as a football stadium - plenty of space, food not the utter pits. It's just that this is Norman Foster, one of the world's best architects. And this is Wembley, the world's most famous stadium. Couldn't the marriage have produced a more inspirational offspring than a bloated middle-aged office block with a pitch attached? A big fat disappointment.

Norwich Market refurbishment

Norwich City Council
LSI Architects

Norwich market, there since Saxon times, used to be all that you imagine a market to be: a tumbledown shambles of stalls and old characters yelling and selling bacon butties and bowls of bananas for thruppence ha'penny under candy-striped awnings. All this has gone, replaced with a market as reimagined as an anaemic shopping mall for health and safety inspectors: straight lines, wipe-clean boxy cubicles, all life and love drained out. Rickety chaos is the very point of a market, you dumbos.

GSK House, Brentford, West London

GlaxoSmithKline
RHWL

What more appropriate a gateway could there be for New Britain, where the brand is king, than this - GlaxoSmithKline's HQ, a glitzy building-as-brand, all 13-storey blades of glass and posey curves it seems to think are sexy? It's the kind of building that looks as if it's permanently checking itself in the mirror, seemingly airlifted from Dallas or Phoenix, plonked on the M4 between Heathrow and Central London, but so airbrushed that it looks as if it's been plucked from a virtual world.

St George's Wharf, Vauxhall, South London

St George
Broadway Malyan

Does this ever stop growing? Like some mad architectural genetic experiment, Britain's finest exponent of bling brutalism - a mammoth Miami-style luxury apartment complex on the Thames beside the M16 headquarters - keeps piling on floors and growing new heads, each more hideous than the last.

Its greatest crime, though, is to ruin one of the most important vistas in London, south from Westminster Bridge. Let's hope today's Wordsworths are facing north.

Drake Circus shopping centre, Plymouth

P&O Developments
Chapman Taylor

Remember this? We reported on this nadir of "retail-led regeneration" in January, calling it a "monocultural lump . . . enclosing and privatising entire chunks of the city centre", with "an exterior so surreally grotesque that Salvador Dalí might be spinning in his grave with envy". Six months later, we haven't changed our minds. The façade - the "two mammoth terracotta sheets, set at a jaunty, postearthquake angle, Libeskind-style, to prove that Plymouth is architecturally with it" - is almost comical.

Every Matalan, Lidl, Netto, Toys 'R' Us, drive-through KFC and McDonald's, and retail park in the land

Architect: Are you kidding?

An easy target, for sure. But far worse than the architectural awfulness of all of the above is the insidious drip, drip, drip effect of big-box retail development on our towns and cities. It's bad enough dropping these monolithic sheds - designed by computer in some business park in Kansas - on the edge of town. It's worse still when they're wedged into town centres in the vain hope that selling cut-price knickers will yank depressed communities from the jaws of economic doom.

Opal Court, Leicester

Opal Student Accommodation, for Leicester University
Stephen George and Partners

Building student housing has become a huge business, not for the universities themselves - once patrons of the best modern British architecture - but outsourced to developers. I can think of few visions more depressing for a fresher than clapping your eyes on this shelving system for human beings as you weep your goodbyes to mum and dad. It's another vast bulky box with no concessions to humans, thinly draped with bright colours to disguise its resemblance to a gulag.

The Orion Building, Birmingham

Crosby Homes
BBLB Architects and the fashion designer John Rocha

"City living reinvented" the hoardings said - reinvented, it seems, as high-rise luxury prison hulks flogging urban renaissance to hapless professionals. When it isn't floodlit and glowing like a spaceship, it's a dun-coloured, shockingly dreary skyscraper - an upended 26-storey box, with just a butterfly roof to pass for "design". Iconic high-rises are going up all over Britain. But it's the drones such as the Orion, coming in their wake, that we should really worry about.

Send us your snaps of Britain's ugliest buildings

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