

Brutalist buildings: a new frontier for conservation?

When we think of historic buildings, we're pretty comfortable with the idea that old mansions, the grand Georgian terraces, old stately homes or important cathedrals are protected by the state – from demolition and inappropriate extension or change. But what about buildings from the more recent past? As more and more modernist buildings are protected by the state, this article examines the protection of the most controversial element of that recent past; Brutalist buildings. Brutalism - a type of Modernist architecture that emerged in the postwar period - has uncertain origins. What it does define, however, is an uncompromisingly modern form of architecture which has stimulated polarised opinions since its inception. This type of architecture is characterised by the use of quintessentially modern materials - concrete, glass, steel - in monumental buildings. The style is muscular and unforgiving with an almost aggressive attitude towards its context. It is a form of architecture which is almost universally loathed yet there are an increasing number of admirers.

Image of Tricorn Centre, Portsmouth (now demolished)

We are currently witnessing a period where this form of architecture is being actively replaced as part of regeneration strategies with the arguments for removal partly informed by the predominant attitude of hatred. Yet there is a growing movement for the protection of the best examples of Brutalism through listing, although this remains controversial. High profile examples of buildings which have disappeared include the Tricorn Centre, Portsmouth, and the Gateshead Car Park made famous in Get Carter whilst other buildings under threat include the famous Birmingham Central Library. This library (built in 1974) has been celebrated by architects for a number of years, yet the government have turned down its protection and the building's future is uncertain. Surely this architectural icon – which was a popular and well used facility before the building of the city's new library – should be protected from demolition due its unique design, relationship to context, role in the rebuilding of Birmingham in the postwar period, and innovative use of materials? The 'Keep the Ziggurat' campaign is actively promoting its protection and reuse as a key monumental building of world significance. Indeed the World Monuments Fund has placed this building on its monuments watch database as a building of international significance subject to threat.

Image of Birmingham Central Library – turned down for listing and under threat of demolition.

Brutalist buildings appear to be at the vanguard of architectural fashion – we're witnessing the increasing use of these buildings for fashion shoots and product placements yet the public is overwhelmingly against the retention of these architectural icons. As they disappear from our cities there are those who are promoting their protection as historical and cultural monuments, such as the 20th Century Society. They represent a time of confidence and optimism in our future, and the best examples are well constructed, brash and aggressively non-conformist. At a time when architects are being criticised for their timidity, now is the time to recognise the role of these buildings in the development of our cities, and protect the best examples before they are entirely erased. As William Morris - the late 19th Century father of the conservation movement - said, '*the past is not dead, it is living in us, and will be alive in the future which we are now helping to make*'.

Image of Hayward Gallery, London's South Bank Centre

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