



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Review - Basil Spence: Buildings and Projects

Citation for published version:

Fair, A 2012, 'Review - Basil Spence: Buildings and Projects' Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain Newsletter, vol 107, pp. 15-16.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher final version (usually the publisher pdf)

Published In:

Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain Newsletter

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Fair, A. (2012). Review - Basil Spence: Buildings and Projects. Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain Newsletter, 107, 15-16

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



work: the finely crafted north transept extension was completed to his designs, and a successful bid to the Millennium Commission enabled the crossing tower to be erected at the same time. Pethers prepared new designs for the upper stages of the tower, drawing on precedents from Long Melford (1903), Cattistock, Dorset (1876), and Wastell's Bell Harry tower at Canterbury (1490–1515). Despite machinations (some particularly poisonous), the mighty tower was completed (2005) under the direction of the Gothic Design Practice founded by Pethers with Hugh Mathew (SEDB's professional partner from 1969). However, the Fabric Advisory Committee and certain members of the Chapter remained hostile, so when a new Dean was appointed in 2006, despite the fact that comparatively little was left to be done, including the completion of the cloister and the furnishings, hanging pyx, and screens for the Chapel of the Apostles, all to designs by Pethers, he was discharged, even though his achievements were regarded as triumphs by those who know something about scholarly architecture and traditional construction. Symondson records the cavalier ways in which both SEDB and Pethers were treated with telling understatement: subsequent works at Bury compare unfavourably with their carefully considered designs.

Harwood's monograph deals with the *œuvre* of the firm established by Peter Hugh Girard Chamberlin (1919–78), Geoffrey Charles Hamilton Powell (1920–99), and Christof Rudolf Bon (1921–99). When Powell won the competition for the Golden Lane housing scheme in the City of London (built 1953–57), Chamberlin, Powell, & Bon was established, and shortly afterwards the City invited it to submit ideas for some 35 acres of land which led to the commission to design the huge Barbican development (1955–82), arguably the best example in the British Isles of a high-density urban scheme incorporating cultural, residential, and educational uses, influenced by the theories of 'Le Corbusier' (1887–1965). Other works included Bousfield Primary School, The Boltons, South Kensington (1952–56), where coloured panels in the cladding were supposed to have a didactic purpose, but the excessive amounts of glass caused problems with solar heat gain and glare (a common problem at that time); The Processing Building, Cooper Taber Seed Factory, Witham, Essex (1954–56, demolished); the Rosedale House, 30a Hendon Avenue, Finchley (1955–58); the Clutson & Kemp Showroom, Oxford Street, London (1957–8, destroyed); the Cullum Welch and Crescent blocks at Golden Lane (designed 1954–55); Two Saints School, near the Elephant and Castle, London (1958–60: only the pentagonal block survives); Shipley Salt School, Higher Coach Road, Shipley, West Riding of Yorkshire (1959–65: replaced in 2005 because of endemic problems of solar heat gain and inadequate sound insulation); Cheltenham Grammar School (1960–65: demolished from 1990 after high alumina cement was found to have been used in its construction); New Hall (now Murray Edwards College), Cambridge (1958–68: in which a new monumental formalism is found, especially in the domed hall, though Pevsner found the 'sliced orange-peel details of the hall dome' odd, and the 'historic allusions' a 'sign of weakness'); and buildings for Leeds University (1960–78: which involved the destruction of the Leeds General Cemetery at the insistence of the university authorities). The firm also produced sundry master plans, including a scheme to replace the series of varied individual buildings (dating from the sixteenth to

the nineteenth century) on King's Parade, Cambridge, with a flat-roofed Modernist block, failing to take into account the fact that the existing fabric consisted of small-scale *vertical* elements with a broken skyline. One can only utter a heartfelt *Laus Deo* that it was never realised.

Symondson's book has a sensible Foreword by Alan Powers, but Harwood's has a superfluous one by Piers Gough, in which the Barbican is categorised as 'baroque', a misuse of the word if ever there was one. One aspect of the contrasting approaches described in these necessary books needs to be emphasised: SEDB used traditional materials intelligently, and they have stood the test of time; CP&B's (as the firm is referred to in Harwood's text) buildings, on the other hand, which may have looked well in photographs for the architectural press, often failed to perform satisfactorily, resulting in early demolition, not an uncommon fate of overrated, conspicuously wasteful Modernist buildings.

JAMES STEVENS CURL

LOUISE CAMPBELL, MILES GLENDINNING and JANE THOMAS (eds): *Basil Spence: Buildings and Projects* (RIBA Publishing, 2012, 372 pp, numerous illus., £45.00, ISBN: 9781859463093)

Several years ago, when my parents moved from Glasgow to Yorkshire, I was delegated to supervise the removal men as they packed up the house. Over morning coffee, upon learning that I was an architectural historian, the removers volunteered their views on Glasgow buildings past and present. The best architect ever to have worked in the city, they suggested, was Alexander Thomson. The worst, they opined, was Basil Spence, his name followed by a string of colourful expletives in broad Glaswegian. Their critique was the result of Spence's work for Glasgow Corporation in the reconstruction of the inner-city Gorbals district in the early 1960s. Spence's 'Hutchie C' flats reinterpreted Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation, their double-height balconies likened by their designer to hanging gardens in which washing hung out to dry would give the impression of 'a great ship in full sail'. But poor management, as much as anything else, meant that 'the Queenies' had by the 1980s fallen into disrepair; they were dynamited in 1993.

Whereas Spence may be remembered on Clydeside as a villain, he has become something of a marginal figure in the broader historical record. That this is so is perhaps surprising. Spence was the best-known architect amongst the public in the 1950s and 1960s. Following his much-publicised win in the competition to design Coventry Cathedral in 1951, his fame was secured by numerous press and television appearances (explaining, perhaps, the removers' attribution of the Gorbals *in toto* to him). However, for those who sought to 'purify' the Modern Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, Spence's approach, steeped in his Arts and Crafts training at Edinburgh College of Art and with Lutyens, seemed dangerously romantic in its pursuit of meaning through formal mechanisms. This attitude has infused previous histories. Peter Kidson, Peter Murray and Paul Thompson's Pelican volume on English architecture (1965) suggests that it is 'unfortunate' that so much attention has been given to Spence's cathedral design as 'a Gothic revival structure with Baroque tricks and modernistic detail'. Kenneth Frampton's classic history of Modern architecture (1980)

omits Spence altogether in heading straight for Alison and Peter Smithson. William Curtis (1996) sees good in Spence's intentions, but calls Coventry an 'expressive failure'. More recently, Spence has been given a fairer hearing by Nick Bullock (2002) and John R. Gold (2007), but even then, Bullock also highlights the unplaced Coventry submissions by Colin St John Wilson and Peter Carter, and by the Smithsons.

The task of *Basil Spence: Buildings and Projects*, therefore, is to make afresh the case for its subject. Drawing productively on the extensive archive that is now housed in Edinburgh, the book's focus is entirely apposite. Unlike the generation that came to prominence in the 1950s, Spence was not much prone to abstract theorising. His output thus stands as the clearest expression of his ideas, and the account of it that we are given makes a fascinating and much-needed contribution to British architectural history. We begin with his pre-war houses in Scotland, veering from the vernacular to 'contemporary Hollywood'. Various exhibition jobs in the late 1930s and 1940s led Spence to the Festival of Britain, where his Sea and Ships Pavilion anticipated the framed 'plug in' structures proposed in the 1960s by Cedric Price. Coventry Cathedral, won in 1951 and completed in 1962, cemented Spence's international reputation, and was followed by several major projects: the new Sussex University (1958-73); Hyde Park Cavalry Barracks (1959-70), and the Rome Embassy (1961-71), before in the 1970s the practice became mired in various controversies and then Spence's final illness.

The accounts in *Buildings and Projects* of individual jobs succinctly present the design history of each and contextualise Spence's decision-making. The text is accompanied by numerous original drawings and photographs (though not always correctly: what claims to be an image of the delightful Crookfur Cottage Homes in Newton Mearns actually shows a rather less delightful housing scheme in Derby). There are several standout chapters. I enjoyed Clive Fenton and David Walker's discussion of Spence's churches in England and Scotland, where enclosure and serenity were created by a careful and increasingly sophisticated handling of light and space. The unexecuted St Ninian's, Whithorn (1950), acted as a dry run for Coventry in a manner that recalls the relationship between Wren's St Stephen Walbrook and St Paul's Cathedral. Miles Glendinning, meanwhile, deftly unpicks the complex Rome and Hyde Park projects, revealing how Spence navigated his way through the minefield of officialdom and red tape. Louise Campbell summarises the history of Coventry Cathedral, from 1940s national memorial to symbol of international post-war reconciliation, expressed subtly as a 'total work of art'. Another standout is her account of the University of Sussex, where the language of the Roman Colosseum and Greek stoa generated an instant monumentality that was somewhat at odds with the innovative curriculum being developed by Asa Briggs.

What emerges from the book is the sheer variety of Spence's practice, and of the paradoxes that shaped it. Here was a man who spoke extensively to the public yet was notoriously shy and maddened by criticism. He was drawn to the ideal of the atelier within his home, seeking close engagement with his projects, yet he headed a complex series of essentially independent offices spread across London and Edinburgh, almost a franchise operation. He was an establishment figure – his 'lead' practice in Canonbury revelled in the name 'Sir Basil Spence OM RA' – yet he was fiercely criticised in the wake of cost over-runs and functional problems at Hyde Park. His early housing comprised sensitive insertions into existing environments in best Geddesian tradition, yet the Gorbals was an exercise in full-blown Corbusian Brutalism. This same tension is evident elsewhere. For example, the Rome Embassy responded carefully to the adjacent Porta Pia, but other projects, such as his offices in Queen Anne's Gate (1976), displayed Spence in less than contextual mood.

While diversity and paradox may be key to an understanding of Spence's work, I was occasionally left hoping for some more over-arching assessment of his output. Campbell's introduction sets out her subject's ambiguous position: was Spence an exponent of the Arts and Crafts, a follower of the Modern Movement, developer of a Scottish regionalism, or a pioneer of High Tech? Her answer, that Spence occupied the middle ground between traditionalists and the avant-garde is important, and usefully reminds us of the value of a pluralistic model of architectural history. Yet I was more intrigued by her suggestion that, were Spence American and thus working in a context where Modernism was more a style than a fusion of design theory with a particular social-ethical stance, his work might seem less problematic. Throughout the book, there are tantalising hints of ways of reading Spence's work other than as the fusion of continuity and change that has hitherto been highlighted by critics and historians. Glendinning, for example, suggests that the Rome Embassy demonstrates Spence moving straight from the pre-Modern tradition to Postmodernism without ever fully embracing mechanical functionalism. Brian Edwards, meanwhile, argues that the sculptural forms, concealed construction and multiple metaphors of the Expo '67 pavilion in Montreal anticipate the recent work of Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid.

Perhaps a telling comparison might be made with Nicholas Hawksmoor. Though Hawksmoor's work scaled greater heights than Spence's, like Spence his buildings were shaped by ideas of decorum, and of selecting forms that would connote meanings appropriate to their use and context. Like Spence, Hawksmoor fell from fashion in his later years, grumbling about those 'ready to knock you down'. In recent years, Hawksmoor studies have been reinvigorated by historians building on Kerry Downes' seminal 1959 book. One hopes that the solid foundations of *Basil Spence: Buildings and Projects* will similarly provoke responses and elaborations from its authors and others.

ALISTAIR FAIR