Old Modernism, New Urbanism

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We of the postwar baby boom are said to be surprised –even indignant– to find old age creeping up on us. We may stay out of the clutches of *envejecimiento* for longer than previous generations, but there's no escaping it in the end. The buildings that grew up with us are also growing old and showing signs of wear and decay –but their life-cycle, unlike ours, allows for renewal and conservation from one human generation to the next–. So yesterday's *avant-garde* becomes today's heritage. Once *la ville du futur* stood in radical contradiction to the existing urban fabric, embodying revolutionary principles of light, space, circulation, rational layout, standardised construction. Today its legacy has been absorbed into collective memory alongside all the older traces in the urban palimpsest –ancient, Roman, Mediaeval, Renaissance, Baroque, Nineteenth Century–. Of course much of the twentieth century legacy will be replaced over time but significant buildings and landscapes deserve recognition as heritage, with all the challenges implicit in retaining instrinsic character while adapting to new uses and contexts.

All building uses change over time so –as Stewart Brand famously puts it (1994)– architecture must «learn» if it is to endure. Daniel Abramson's recent study of *Obsolescence* (2016) highlights its peculiar history within modern architecture. He shows how pre-modern architectural theory lacked any concept of obsolescence, judging buildings by the eternal Vitrivian criteria of *firmitatis*, *utilitatis* and *venustatis* –firmness, commodity and delight–. Obsolescence entered architecture from nineteenth century accounting practice. It applied to buildings the notion of depreciation hitherto reserved for machinery, allowing the dwindling value of capital assets to be written off against taxation. Led by the Chicago real estate boom on the early twentieth century, conventional assumptions of architectural permanence were overturned by life tables and tax allowances that put the «useful life» of a building at thirty years. After the Second World War the obsolescence concept was widened to underwrite death warrants for entire urban neighbourhoods that did not conform to the prescriptions of the Charter of Athens. The concept was a powerful destructive force in the Modernist pursuit of urban renewal.

But as Abramson's narrative shows, the classic architectural forms of the Twentieth Century were themselves becoming obsolete even before the end of the century. With their clean lines and strong materials, Modern Movement buildings sought to defy time, yet many have aged more rapidly than their nineteenth century predecessors. Today's owners pay the price for twentieth century experimentation with untried materials and innovative forms: corrosion of reinforced concrete beams through carbonation, water penetration through flat roofs, rusting and buckling of metal framed windows, the terrible dangers of widely-used asbestos in pipe lagging, floor tiles and roof insulation. One of the most dramatic examples is Gabriel Loire's Modernist reinvention of the stained glass window, the *dalle de verre*, those remarkable glazing slabs featured in so many mid-century churches and cathedrals, formed by shattering thick blocks of coloured glass into fragments then embedding them as glowing lights within a frame of concrete or epoxy resin reinforced with steel, copper, brass or fibreglass threads. A fabulous technique, but risky. For example, the *dalle de verre* lantern designed by Patrick Reytiens and John Piper is the crowning glory of Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral (designed by Sir Basil Spence, consecrated in 1967) but fifty years on, loose shards of coloured glass were at risk of falling onto the high altar. In 2016 the Getty Foundation funded a conservation study of the lantern under its world-wide programme for Modernist heritage management, *Keeping it Modern* (Getty, 2016).

The material process of ageing is of less account than contextual change. If it is to avoid obsolescence the Modernist legacy has to be reoriented to contemporary urban agendas: the growing awareness of resource stewardship, the changed life-style preferences of the X and Y generations, economic globalisation and the consequent shifts of manufacturing production from north to south, climate change. The phrase «new urbanism» may have different nuances on either side of the Atlantic (Hebbert, 2003) but there's a common ground that differs radically from the model of contemporary town planning as understood by the modern movement in the mid twentieth century (e.g. Ostrowski, 1970): today's emphasis is on street-based design, density, mixing of urban functions, environmental sustainability, city-centre living, and mitigation of the carbon footprint. Its archetypal image is the urban figure-ground map in which the shared voids of a city, its streets and squares, become as legible and meaningful as the individual buildings (Hebbert, 2016). Modernist structures, designed as freestanding objects oriented primarily to their car parks, have to be reimagined as elements in the tissue of streets and blocks, oriented primarily towards the foot-goer.

Let's consider this task in terms of three sets of actors, public, voluntary and private, drawing examples from various European experiences, but with a primary focus on the British case I know best. All three actors need to be in the picture. Much of the campaigning energy of voluntary groups such as DOCOMOMO, is spent on getting buildings inscribed onto public heritage lists, and defending designated buildings against inappropriate change. But much of our Modernist heritage isn't designated, so there is no legal obstacle to its demolition. Yet it has been refurbished or converted to new uses in a way that respects its original character, whether because the owner loves the look, or recognises its brand value: in other words, it has been valorised by commercial judgement. In this short paper we consider all three categories.

First, the public dimension. In the English case, heritage status was originally reserved for buildings dating from before the Second World War –the cut-off date for '«listing» (i.e. official designation as a building of special architectural or historic interest) was 1939–. Then in 1987 the listing process was extended to 1957 (Harwood, 2010). Since then the list has been regularly revised and extended through thematic surveys of postwar schools, universities, public housing estates, public sculpture, churches, factories, and so forth (Harwood & Davies, 2015). As anything over thirty years old might be a candidate for listing, we are now considering Post-Modern works of the late 1980s for heritage status. Each new list entry is based on a statement of significance, measured not just in terms of architectural or aesthetic quality, but also its meaning to the local community, and its value as a historical witness (Historic England, 2015b). Besides the national list maintained by Historic England, municipalities can prepare «local lists» to enhance the conservation of buildings deemed locally if not nationally significant. Both listing and subsequent conservation demand highly specialist expertise that has been lamentably eroded in the past ten years by government cost-cutting at national and local level. All the more important, therefore, is the role of actors in the voluntary and private sectors.

In Britain multiple organisations campaign for Modernist heritage. DOCOMOMO-UK and DOCOMOMO Scotland exist as separate chapters within the international network, both being non-profit organisations supported by membership subscriptions, dedicated to the documentation and conservation roles affirmed in the Eindhoven manifesto of DOCOMOMO's founding conference in 1990:

— To bring the significance of the modern movement to the attention of the public, the authorities, the professionals and the educational community concerned with the built environment.

— To identify and promote the recording of the works of the modern movement, including a register, drawings, photographs, archives and other documents.

— To foster the development of appropriate techniques and methods of conservation and disseminate this knowledge throughout the professions.

— To oppose destruction and disfigurement of significant works of the modern movement.

— To identify and attract funding for documentation and conservation.

— To explore and develop knowledge of the modern movement.

DOCOMOMO's leading partner organisation at a national level is the Twentieth Century Society. Its remit covers all styles and schools of architecture in the period from 1914 onwards, modernist but also revivalist, vernacular or post-modern. Like DOCOMOMO much of its work is documentary and educational, but it also has a special legal status as one of the six National Amenity Societies that must be informed, by law, about any application involving partial or total demolition of a listed building.[1] Consequently the Twentieth Century takes the lead in case-work, both defending instances of listed heritage under threat, and arguing the cause of unlisted buildings. Each year a widely-publicised press release from the Society announces the «top ten» buildings and works of art currently at risk. The catalogue for 2017 included a municipal library and swimming pool (in London and Coventry respectively), university halls of residence in Oxford and Durham, murals in bankrupt department stores (Stockport and Hull), a synagogue and police station in central Manchester, a church in St Leonards-on-Sea, private dwellings (Devon and London) and a public housing estate in South London.

A flotilla of voluntary groups support conservation within particular regions or cities. An interesting example is the Modernist Society, which was founded in 2009 as the Manchester Modernist Society but is now seeding groups in four other centres with significant clusters of Twentieth Century architecture: Sheffield, Liverpool, Birmingham and the London Borough of Croydon (Modernist Society 2017). The Society promotes talks and exhibitions and has an active programme of high-quality web and print publication celebrating Modernist style. For example it has kept up a brave and lonely campaign on behalf of unlisted university architecture such as the remarkable Renold Building (by Cruikshank and Seward, opened 1963), Britain's first multi-storey tea-

Figura 1. Renold Building, University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology,1963. Fotografía: Michael Hebbert

[1] The National Amenity Societies recognized by Historic England (2015a) are: Ancient Monuments Society –concerned with historic buildings of all ages and types; Council for British Archaeology– for the archaeology of subterranean and standing structures; Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) –for structures dating from before 1700, but also philosophical and technical aspects of conservation–; Georgian Group –architecture and architecture-related arts from 1700 to 1840–; Victorian Society –Victorian and Edwardian architecture and architecture-related arts between 1840 and 1914–; 20C Society –architecture from 1914 onwards–.

ching block. Its most important level of action is ideological –affirming the *Zeitgeist* of the Modern project in a context where– to quote the 20C Society's 2017 *Buildings at Risk* announcement –«some of Britain's most remarkable buildings are in danger of being lost for ever as development pressures, dwindling budgets and short termism fuel an *out with the old, in with the new* mentality–. We are witnessing the death of the idealism and public spiritedness which underpinned so much of the best architecture of the last century»–. (Twentieth Century Society, 2017; see also While, 2006)

This brings us to the third category of actors, those at the sharp end of management –building owners and promoters. There are neither set formula nor fixed policy rules for converting modernist structures to contemporary use. Successful translation has also needed owners who combine an entrepreneurial willingness to take risks with the design flair to recognise potential convertability. We can illustrate the point with two extreme instances of adaptation of single-use structures. North of Barcelona the giant hoppers, grading halls and bagging plant of the cement works at Sant Just Desvern caught the attention of the young Ricardo Bofil and were transformed by him into a personal residence, and the architectural office and design studios of his practice, Taller de Arquitectura. And in the inner suburbs of Oslo, the industrial landmark of the Grünnerløkka grain elevators was converted by HRTB Artkitektur into 226 student flats, triggering a wider transformation of the entire quarter of former manufacturing premises, saved from demolition to become a hub for creative industries.

Figura 2. Oslo - the Grünnerløkka SiO Silos and Vulcan Quarter. Fotografía: Vulkanoslo. http://www.vulkanoslo.no/en/about-us/ [Consulta: January 30th 2017].

Another matching pair of examples show structures originally designed around mid 20C concepts of mobility being successfully reoriented to their contemporary urban context. One is Canal House in Westminster, an Expressionist landmark beside the elevated Westway dual carriageway, built as a depot for railway vans, and since converted into open plan offices and rebranded as the «Battleship Building». The second example, from Manchester, also sits beside an elevated dual carriageway and was intended to incorporate an upper-level walkway system. Built in 1964 to house the National Computing Centre, it is now known as the Manchester Technology Centre. Crucially, the conversion glazed in the overhang of the upper storeys to create a stylish bar –since converted into retail units– bringing economic vitality to a busy street frontage that had offered nothing but blank walls and parking lots. (fig. 3)

Figura 3. Manchester, Bruntwood's refurbishment of the former National Computing Centre, 1964. Fotografía: Richard Brook. http://www.mainstreammodern.co.uk/ [Consulta: February 23rd 2017].

The Manchester Technology Centre is one of numerous 1960s buildings acquired and refurbished by a family-owned property business, the Bruntwood Group. Originally developers of industrial and warehousing sheds, Mike Ogleby and his son Chris began to invest in the city centre of Manchester at a time when much of the red-brick Victorian warehouse stock was derelict and the postwar white towers were regarded as shabby, low-value accommodation. Their most prominent acquisition was the Manchester Piccadilly Plaza, an office, hotel and retail complex of 1966, designed as a vast podium with three vertical elements to be a landmark in a fully motorised environment. Bruntwood's

Figura 4. Piccadilly Gardens, Manchester, 1966. Fotografía: Author's collection.

refurbishment in 2003 involved both a recladding of the Piccadilly tower to bring it up to contemporary standards of energy performance, and an entire redesign of the ground floor to facilitate pedestrian flow between the streets on either side of the building. Similar transformations can be seen all round the centre of Manchester, restoring active use to a former parcels depot, an eye hospital, redundant office blocks, and to the former Bank of England building where once again a blank street elevation was brought to life with a glazed infill.

The approach developed by Bruntwood in central Manchester has been applied in the many other British cities where office blocks erected in the boom of the mid 20C have been shunned by investors. In central Leeds the company purchased the office block that dominates the entrance to the main railway station, an unloved complex developed in the 1960s by a commercial architect, John Poulson, stigmatised by his subsequent imprisonment for corruption. Like most office blocks of its vintage it was structurally robust, with reinforced concrete frames, curtain walling, open plan interiors, and floor-plates that have lent themselves readily to adaptation. After some years of work the building has been transformed into a site of serviced offices and is due to reopen as «Platform 2017», a symbol of Leed's embrace of new urban life-styles. (fig.6)

With such examples we see Modernist heritage refurnished and repurposed for the contemporary city. Private owners and public agencies have played their part but the vital catalyst has been voluntary action by dedicated enthusiasts. In the radically different context of contemporary urbanism, the flame of the Modern Movement is still alight, still a source of surprise and delight.

Figura 5. Portland St Manchester: new retail units on previously blank facade. Fotografía: Michael Hebbert

Figura 6. Leeds - Bruntwood at work on «Platform 17». Fotografía: Selma Carson.

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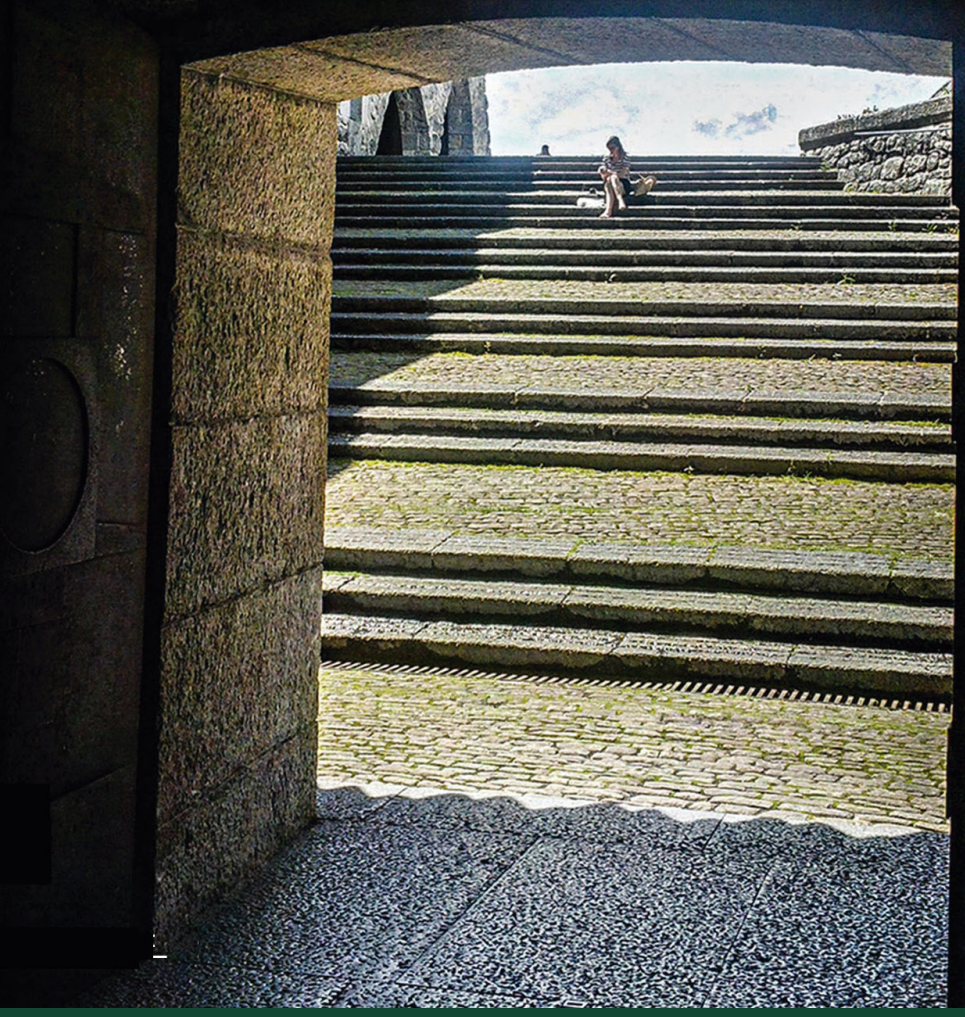

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