

CONSERVATION: WHAT IT SHOULD MEAN.

An address to the Art Workers Guild by Stephen Dykes Bower

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Conservation is so much a vogue word that I was beginning to regret that its architectural connotation happened to be in my thoughts when pressed, some time ago, to name a subject for this talk. The choice has since seemed more apt because what I saw, when in a relatively unfrequented part of Scotland earlier this month, prompted reflection on the need to clarify what Conservation means, or should mean: what it ought to be, but too often is not.

The district was of quiet pastoral charm, of no spectacular scenic quality and without conspicuous architectural interest. But any landscape is either enhanced or impaired by the buildings that are set in it, and here their indigenous character was clear enough both in one-storey cottages with thick stone walls and sash windows and, in the small towns and villages, many of two storeys, their first-floor rooms lighted by that type of dormer window with canted sides that is common throughout Scotland. It was the sight of what is happening to them that caused me to ponder Conservation afresh.

In its literal sense of keeping with us - retaining, preserving, guarding, protecting, whichever definition may be preferred - the word might embrace each of two processes that were evident. The old stone cottages were still there not destroyed, but deserted. Some two-storey ones were inhabited, but under going such alteration as to obscure their original form. The dormer windows removed to make way for flat boarded fronts containing large sheets of glass, the ground-floor windows enlarged to different proportions and similarly glazed, their aspect was being so robbed of all natural character that they looked neither old nor acceptably new. An interaction of conservation and change was producing architectural nullity.

But that, it will be protested, is not Conservation at all! Nor is it. To prolong the life of solidly built stone cottages by adding the extra accommodation and amenities to bring them up to required standards would represent its meaning: not to replace them by cheaply built substitutes with thin walls, indistinguishable from the thousands that can be seen anywhere. Where slate roofs of rather flat pitch do not yield first floor rooms of convenient shape, it would allow, even at the cost of sacrificing the dormer windows, of some remodelling. Had there, indeed, been demonstration that this is possible, a pattern would have existed for general adoption. Some change need not be incompatible with Conservation. What matters supremely is how it is carried out and my theme is insistence that this must not violate architectural propriety.

Thus because their fenestration was intact, which alone gave them almost an air of distinction, the buildings that most pleased my eye were the village schools - an unexpected eventuality, but one that explained itself when I discovered that they had ceased to be schools and, having been left alone, were all the better for it.

Least pleasing by contrast were a few new houses of that dread category - 'architect designed'. These edifices, flaunting the customary gimmicks, stood out a mile - consonant with nothing and devoid of any local fitness. Displaying all the vices and none of the virtues of what is no longer called architecture but the 'built environment', they qualified for planning permission.

Here let me say, if the parenthesis is necessary, that although Conservation, with which no doubt we are all in sympathy, covers much besides buildings, scenery, woodlands, natural resources, wild life and so-on, it is from the standpoint of an architect that I speak about it. Nevertheless as one who has for long been unable to subscribe to tenets which have caused the profession to perpetrate what usually seems to me quite horrible and to commend it in a jargon which I am unable to understand.

The notion of Conservation as something new, a form of enlightenment vouchsafed to our epoch for the first time, is an illusion. Its precepts were being advocated years ago when few would listen and the shame is that intelligence has taken so long to break through. In that context it may be pertinent to note a phenomenon discernible, I suppose, in all the arts the hiatus in recognition of good work on its merits. Is the eclipse through which this must pass before people rub their eyes sufficiently to see clearly accounted for by some inexorable time-lag? Is it that artists, who ought to be free from such inhibitions, are just as swayed by fashion as other mortals? Is it that the faculty of perception is cerebral, not spontaneous? That artists are too diffident to be independent, too reliant on what they read and are schooled to believe?

Whatever the reason it is not to their credit and tempts speculation on whether any remedy might be effective. If for example there could be even a temporary interdict on the purveying of information about dates and author ships, if architects were not allowed to sign their works or drawings, if what someone called 'blessed anonymity' were made statutory, so that people had to be objective in their judgments, should we be worse off or better? Being fallible, all of us would make mistakes; but our visual perception might become more acute for being unbiased.

Certainly it is gratifying when those who not so long ago were denigrating the Gothic Revival and all its works are now found hastening to be counted among its admirers. Yet how slowly is the work of Lutyens getting fresh notice after a period of oblivion.

I select those two cases for a reason. In his book 'Bosworth Field and the Wars of the Roses', Dr. A. L. Rowse remarks of Shakespeare- 'Shakespeare himself, like all the greatest creative writers, was a backward-looking man, inspired by the past'. Exemplifying the truth of that in architecture Lutyens, virtually self taught but observant of old work, was the most fertile designer of this century. To go forward, as any true artist would agree, it is at least helpful to look back: for the care of old buildings it is essential.

The many accomplished architects of the Gothic Revival, by restoring, also preserved. It is beginning to be understood that they sought to do so correctly and though many other tributes could be paid to them that is the point that for my purpose is relevant.

For in a general review of Conservation, while there is much to approve, perverse ideas can be detected that are not reassuring. That the movement has become a bandwagon on to which many have climbed is obvious - and, if it keeps them out of mischief, harmless enough. But not a few are on it to have the best of two worlds. The zeal they profess for Conservation is ambivalent. It takes the form of readiness to support the retention of old buildings, but that they may serve as raw material for being adapted and brought up-to-date in such a way that they express as much of our time as of their own. That is to legitimise grafting onto them the ephemeral clichés, the latest quirks that fascinate the architectural profession and hold it in fatal thrall. This, we are told, will make the buildings 'live' and give them new significance. Correctness, to do again what has been done before, is not permissive.

Having referred to Scotland let me cite as a model of what I regard as really good conservation, the work of the Scottish National Trust with which many of you may be familiar. Its purchase and restoration of the type of small house that proclaims unmistakably its national identity has produced results so convincingly right as to seem like an exercise in common sense. That is a high compliment just because such sense is not in fact common. Compare what is being done in some English counties where old buildings, after being subjected to Conservation, appear rather to have undergone mutilation and become caricatures so convincingly wrong that an architectural mind winces at the sight.

Why is this? Why such a display of solecisms? I think there are several reasons, each deriving from foolish theories leading to bad practices.

There is no need to enlarge on the aberration which in some circles has turned 'correct' into a word of reproach. The alternative - to be incorrect opens a way to ignorant amateurishness and is patently ridiculous.

A second reason is the supposition that to repeat what was there before will somehow diminish the authenticity of anything similar elsewhere, as though the past had acquired proprietary rights in certain crafts, techniques and modes of design which must on no account be infringed. This offence is called Devaluation. There must be no more leaded glazing, even where it existed. Sash windows must be made different by omission of any glazing bars. Better still make such modification in the shape of any windows as will allow the insertion of one empty square sheet of glass in an aluminium frame so that the building will show that it was conserved in the 1970's. Deprivation is what we should be concerned about - not Devaluation.

A third reason springs from a brand of obscurantism compounded of timidity and sentimentality. It extols untidiness almost as a virtue, as though there were not quite enough already without its being encouraged artificially. Thus fault will be found with a village that is clean and well kept for being too solicitous over its appearance. 'Pleasing decay', 'ordered disorder' and other such phrases are recommended as more in accord with Conservation without a thought for what damage the decay may be doing or how quickly disorder gets out of control. Such talk usually emanates from those who never come up against practical problems and do not want to know of them. Their infatuation renders them foes rather than friends of Conservation, the need for which today is largely due to allowing decay and neglect to proceed unchecked in the past.

Unfailingly the invocation of History will be heard - either as a sanction or as a bludgeon. What dilemmas this creates! Carte blanche for those who claim that since previous ages only worked in the style of the time, ours must do so too; a right of veto for those who denounce what for safety's sake is most easily opposed as the 'obliteration of history'. Ask them when history ended: you will get no answer. Ask them if it is architectural history that they are zealous for: you will get no rational answer either. For if architecture came into it they would be doing something – or so one would trust – to censure the shocking maltreatment no less of what is old than of what is comparatively recent. To see so much of the excellent domestic architecture that dates from the early part of this century, even well on into it, being subjected to alteration that ruins it, is appalling and before long will be execrated. Yet if architects neither raise their voices to defend their own art, nor educate the public to discern what is good and refrain from stultifying it, will any assistance be forthcoming from those whose interest is primarily in the fusion called Art-history? We wait a long time for that to catch up.

As the record of events that have actually occurred and cannot be reversed History is very properly an absorbing subject. But in proportion as it has so much to teach us, we should be ready to admit that, balancing all that was noble and inspiring, in large part it is a chronicle of human folly, baseness, perfidy, rapacity, cruelty and violence that were utterly disgraceful. Architecture, ostensibly the most lasting, is perhaps of all the arts the most vulnerable and its history has often been disgraceful too. To take only one example, what could have been more tragic than the loss of those monasteries, great and small, that now we can admire only as ruins?

There is a risk that history in retrospect may breed complacency: we read it as non-participants. So it should come as a shock to realise that it does repeat itself. A current exhibition of what this country has destroyed in the last hundred years proves that vandalism is still rampant, just as human nature is as capable of wickedness as it ever was. Let us beware therefore of making history – with a capital H – an idol to worship. Its sins were legion and, while they cannot be blotted out, it would be supine to pretend that they should be forgiven. Time may so heal injuries that they cease to be disfigurements and the vicissitudes through which countless old buildings have passed, whether in alterations or additions, may even intensify their charm. No-one of architectural sensibility would wish to deny that. On the other hand to deduce that history confers freedom, within the terms of Conservation, to alter and add yet more would be quite wrong. Conservation should pay strict regard to history; but it must not exalt it above architecture to the point of crediting whatever exists with a value to which it may not be entitled. That can only lead to sterile acceptance of the status quo and undermine, if not demean the canons of architecture as an art. If those are abrogated, architects will be enslaved to what is called historical development which may automatically affect new work, but to which the old should not be put in subjection. The distinction is important. Progressive change to old buildings would gradually make them unrecognisable and conservation would have belied its name.

There should be caution therefore about the continual, invariably pejorative use of the word 'conjectural'. What architect with any sense of responsibility would prefer conjecture to fact? More probably his anxiety will be that surviving evidence of original design does not perish before it can be used for strangely enough there is

often so little concern to forestall this that restoration, when at length unavoidable, has to be more conjectural than it need have been.

Four facets of this question should be remembered. First that conjecture is not necessarily wrong: it may in fact be right and later be proved so.

Second, that in science as in history, conjecture - the inspired guess may be a step forward in ascertaining truth. Without it there would be little advance.

Third, and conversely, that in history much may always be conjectural. That will be attested by anyone who studies accounts of the same events and sees how differently historians interpret them. If at times architecture admits of an element of conjecture, history does so in at least equal degree.

Fourth, if no restoration must ever be conjectural, will its validity be greater or smaller? Does the kind of pusillanimous repair that deliberately sets out to be incapable of being mistaken for what it replaces enlarge either our knowledge, interest or enjoyment?

These observations need to be voiced. My wish however is not to decry Conservation or withhold praise for a great deal that is to its credit, but to deprecate its being too readily harnessed to prevailing trends. Some of its best manifestations are not those that attract most notice or even the favour of the architectural profession. The kind of Infill which has been allowed in designated Conservation areas not infrequently represents the interpolation into some picturesque street or group of village buildings of what is discordant, not harmonious. People who have to live with the result are affronted and their sense of outrage in no way mollified if, as is all too probable, a medal or design award is conferred on the object of their contempt.

In the thuggery of an epoch which has savaged Bath, Oxford and Cambridge - three cities that pre-eminently should have been spared such indignity - the prospect for lesser places is ominous. We reap what we have sown. In my forty years of practice architecture has successively sought to be original, amusing, modern, functional, exciting, brutalist and much else. Even 'Contemporary', an appellation that seemed incontrovertibly safe, had to be dropped owing to the embarrassment caused by its susceptibility to sub classification. Thus we distinguish Pre-contemporary, Post-contemporary, Quasi-contemporary, Pseudo-contemporary, Grub Street Contemporary, Dons' Contemporary and - of course - Neo-contemporary. The search for fresh epithets continues: 'imaginative' as a synonym for the grossly unsuitable; 'sensitive' for bestowal on extreme polarities - the feeble and the brutal.

Let me remind you of words of Picasso in 'Decouvertes' published in 1973:

"In art, people no longer seek consolation and exaltation ... they seek after whatever is new, odd, original, extravagant, or scandalous. And since cubism and what followed, it is masters and critics such as these I have sought to please with whatever bizarre extravagances entered my head, and the less they understood, the more they admired me. By dint of amusing myself with such fun and games, and meaningless head-splitting riddles, I became a celebrity in no time. And fame for a painter means sales, gains, a fortune, riches ... Today, as you know, I am both famous and rich. But when I am alone, alone with myself, I haven't the courage to consider myself an artist in the former grand sense of the term. Giotto, Titian, Rembrandt,

Goya: these were great painters I am only a public clown who has understood his period and has exploited as best he could the imbecility, the vanity and cupidity of his contemporaries."

That the passage I have quoted began with the words 'In art' is worth noting. The Art Workers Guild may seem an old-fashioned title, almost to have a period flavour. But embedded in it is the truth that what unites us is the desire to produce what is beautiful: unless, indeed, as artists that is our constant aim we are nothing. In all the welter of words spoken or written about the arts, Beauty is the one that occurs most rarely and if the public dislikes current architecture - a fact that can hardly be questioned - surely the reason is that so little beauty is found in it.

Now that Conservation is pledged to safeguarding all that is comprised in the phrase 'Our architectural heritage', with other countries participating in what is a European enterprise, realisation of what some of them have already accomplished should jolt the insularity that tends to prevail in this country. Much that they have carried out is, by our standards, astonishing, totally outclassing our puny efforts. It has gone far beyond restoration on an extensive scale. Whole areas of towns have been rebuilt to their original form to ensure that evidence of their history shall not be obliterated, that future generations may thus be aware of the traditions it embodied and find pleasure in what is beautiful. It has been done with no false scruples about correctness, about repeating what was there before, and with no scaremongering about this being impossible either because architects and craftsmen of the requisite capacity are no longer available or the right materials unobtainable.

Since full measured drawings of all the buildings restored or rebuilt could not have existed much of the work must have been conjectural, based on study of whatever material trained architectural intelligence was able to put to use. Was this wrong? Or is it sensible to affirm that conjecture based on knowledge of the past, of style, can be both informed and skilful. If we are to spend our time pleading uncertainty, searching for absolute proof that is likely always to elude us, we shall end up by doing nothing. Making a virtue of that is one pointer to our architectural bankruptcy.

Nevertheless it stands rebuked. Satisfaction in having recreated what barbarous enemy warfare had almost effaced must be rightly stimulating to a sense of national pride and achievement: deservedly, too, it elicits supra-national admiration from those who are delighted to see that not all civilisation need go beyond recall. Yet imagine the outcry that would ensue in this country were anything comparable so much as suggested: the faces that would instantly turn purple, the fits of apoplexy that would follow. Paradoxically destruction here is being wrought, not by external foes, but by ourselves; and still we refuse to make good any losses by rebuilding of what was there before on the specious excuse that, however good, it could not be a true reflection of our time. This is the mentality of the antique dealer, interested only to vouch for the 'genuine' and maintain its financial value. If it is the date, not their design and quality, in which the interest of buildings consists that criterion is in the future likely to operate with particular harshness on a great deal of the work of our period. Its date will suffice to condemn it.

Complacency may induce belief in the rightness of the accepted approach to Conservation; but despite any amount of goodwill its working, by contrast with performance in countries with less resources, tends to be ineffectual. The all-

pervading slide to ugliness goes relentlessly on and resistance to it, in high sounding sentiment about the need, the rightness, the urgency of Conservation, is not doing much to slow it.

There are, however, signs of a realisation that saving whatever can still be saved is not enough: a change of outlook is required. Thus Vernacular is a word that is now coming back into currency. Earlier in the century it had real significance: the ideal of a vernacular architecture exercised a most beneficial influence in stimulating use of local materials, regional ways of building, a desire to correlate new work with old and enable it to fit into its setting unobtrusively. Architects were the more respected for not being brashly assertive.

But a new vernacular cannot be born out of nothing: it could even be held that there is already an existing vernacular, in the nondescript sameness of that 'built environment' (not architecture) which is ubiquitous. Nevertheless some planning authorities are attempting to create and codify a vernacular through which the architecture of the district within their control can be regulated. This even envisages a standard house that will be approved anywhere - town or country - irrespective of special conditions arising out of the site or neighbouring buildings. The construction of any new dormer window is forbidden: a skylight in the roof must be substituted. Any addition to an old house must not have a pitched roof: the roof must be flat. Since no new window must be capable of being mistaken for an old one, it should be a hole in the wall proportioned to take some standard fitting from a glazier's catalogue.

That the end product is indescribably banal goes without saying. But it may be faintly cheering that, as I can testify from personal knowledge, detestation is the unanimous verdict even of people who would not normally express a view at all but are actually shocked into doing so.

Planning is necessary and can be of great good. Trouble comes where planners are misled by what architects produce into dispensing architectural law themselves.

Picasso, in the quotation I read, denounced not just vanity and cupidity but Imbecility. That covers more than sheer silliness. In terms of the technique of architecture it is what may be called Illiteracy - ignorance of elementary principles that underlie design. If a musician does not learn to play the right notes he gets nowhere. Every art must have some basis of grammar and every student ought to be taught it. The problems with which architects have to contend are many and great; the art of architecture is itself exacting, difficult and humbling. But the greatest need is that its study should, in the most professional sense, be taken seriously. Calling black white, defending the indefensible, all the special pleading about how well the new and incompetent fits in with the old when people can see for themselves that it does not, is self deception. Not less but more attention to style and all that it implies in such matters as fenestration and scale is needed if Conservation is to have the success we would wish for it. Let us beware of the vain repetition of shibboleths. If old buildings are worth keeping, it is not solely because we rightly value them as visible links in the continuity of history, but because we perceive in them how artists and craftsmen in the past went about what is still our business - making what is

beautiful. Our primary duty is to honour their intention and enable their work to make architectural sense.

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