

*News feature*

# Post-war university buildings under threat

Brutalist and Modernist buildings of the 1960s and 1970s, then considered the finest of their type, are increasingly at risk as universities embark on a new period of expansion, writes *Kate Youde*



Brutalism is experiencing some unaccustomed love at the moment. A petition to save Durham University's concrete students' union building, which is threatened with demolition, has attracted nearly 2,500 signatures in only a few weeks. And in the North West, heritage groups – and former Smiths guitarist Johnny Marr – recently attacked proposals to demolish 1960s buildings on the University of Manchester's north campus.

This public support comes at a time when, according to Catherine Croft, director of The Twentieth Century Society, Brutalist buildings are increasingly under threat as UK universities, home to many of the best examples of the style, expand and modernise.

Croft says the national picture is 'depressing'. She adds: 'What is more frustrating is that this is happening at a time when these buildings are becoming more and more popular among a younger, student-age audience.'

For many, the early 1960s marked a golden age of university building in the UK (see *The Architectural Review*, October 1963). Such enthusiasts for Brutalist buildings look to Historic England to intervene, and hope its expert voice will be heard by planners. The AJ can reveal the organisation is already in the early stages of a thematic study of post-war university buildings with a view to putting forward contenders for listing, a project it expects to complete within the next couple of years. At present just 61 post-war university buildings are listed, but Croft says 'far more' should be given statutory heritage protection.

'There's an enormous range of extremely good buildings from this period and listing only got as far as skimming off the

**'Basil Spence's university buildings and the work of city architect Leon Berger turned a blitzed wreck into one of the great successes of that time'**  
*Jonathan Meades*

outstanding ones,' she says.

So, what is the scale of threat to Brutalist university buildings and why is it happening now?

Earlier this month, The Twentieth Century Society revealed that it would appeal against culture secretary Karen Bradley's decision not to list Durham University's Brutalist Dunelm House, designed by Architects' Co-Partnership with Ove Arup and opened in 1966, after she went against Historic England's recommendation to grant it listed status.

The university, which estimates it would cost £14.7 million to redesign and repair Dunelm House (*pictured opposite*) to 'accommodate new uses', is planning to flatten the building. It says it intends eventually to hold an international architectural competition for its replacement.

Days later, the society was engaged in another battle to save post-war university architecture, this time joining the Manchester Modernist Society, which has Marr as its patron, in speaking out against Bennetts Associates' draft proposals to overhaul the campus created for the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST) in the 1960s.

These are not isolated cases. The Twentieth Century Society is preparing for a battle against an expected planning application for Cumberbatch North and South Buildings at the University of Oxford's Trinity College, designed by architects Robert Macquire and Keith Murray and opened in 1966. A Certificate of Immunity from Listing was issued for the student accommodation blocks in 2015. Indeed the society is so worried about the blocks' future it has named the buildings, along with Dunelm House, on its list of the top 10 buildings at risk for 2017.

The future of Basil Spence's 1963 Faraday Building on the University of Southampton's Highfield campus, for which Spence did the masterplan, also hangs in the balance as the university considers 'different options for the future of the building and the site', including demolition and redevelopment. A university spokesperson told the AJ that the Brutalist tower is



Dunelm House, Durham University, by Architects' Co-Partnership with Ove Arup

'partially occupied at the lower levels' but these will become vacant when the university's new research facility at its £140 million Grimshaw-designed Boldrewood Innovation Campus is completed in early 2019.

But are such buildings worth saving? Writer and film-maker Jonathan Meades thinks so. 'The Brutalist period is important because it was one of those rare periods when British architecture abandoned its habitual stance of offensively inoffensive "good manners", of strenuous politeness,' he says.

'In this it is akin to the Baroque era and to the work of c1855-1875, both of which are now valued, though not before the latter suffered the usual depredations. Judgments ought not to be made on the foundations of fashion. Fashion self-evidently changes.'

Meades suggests both Dunelm House, which, he says, 'comes as tonic surprise' in Durham, and the Faraday

building should be saved. 'Southampton's post-war renewal began dismally, but the second phase, which included Basil Spence's university buildings and the work of the city architect Leon Berger, turned a massively blitzed wreck into one of the great successes of that optimistic time,' he adds.

Croft believes that, rather than buildings from the era reaching the end of their life, they may have reached the point where their services are 'probably in need of renewal'.

'Once you start doing that, then people question the value of the building altogether,' she says, suggesting that it is easier for universities to raise funds for a new building than for the 'unsexy' alternative of a refurbishment.

One of the issues with 1960s university residential buildings is the lack of en-suite facilities, she adds. Universities, she says, particularly Oxford and

Cambridge, are 'desperately trying to get money from the conference market out of term [time]' and they can charge more for en-suite accommodation.

Croft thinks post-war buildings are coming under threat because universities are 'desperate' to increase the accommodation on their sites as a whole. While a lot of the original buildings were 'generous' in terms of public space encouraging people to interact, she believes now 'there is more and more pressure to create buildings that pack students in'.

Universities, previously reliant on government grants, are engaging in major capital programmes across the country. 'The advent of tuition fees has actually given so much more resource to universities and it's a very competitive market so they are putting money into real estate facilities,' says Julian Robinson, deputy chair of the Higher Education Design

Quality Forum and director of estates at the London School of Economics (LSE).

He says the approach universities take to 1960s buildings, which, he points out, vary in quality, depends on the building in question. After first looking at refurbishment, the LSE tore down a couple of 'very poor, incredibly inefficient' buildings from the period – Clare Market and St Clement's Phase 2 – as part of its Centre Buildings project, designed by Roger Stirk Harbour + Partners, which is due for completion in late 2018.

Taking a different approach, the University of Brighton contracted Fraser Brown MacKenna for a £29 million refurbishment of its 15,000m<sup>2</sup> 10-storey Cockcroft Building.

And the University of Strathclyde is inviting architects to tender for the design contract for a £41 million revamp of two 1960s buildings on its John Anderson Campus – the Colville Building and the former

Architecture Building. Its decision to move architecture students from their Brutalist home, designed by Frank Fielden & Associates in 1967, attracted criticism in 2013.

Historic England has sent its advice to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport after receiving an application to list the Sir Thomas White Building at St John's College, Oxford, construction on which began in 1972. The college is in 'early stage' discussions about refurbishment in the student accommodation building, designed by Philip Dowson at Arup, which retains original design features in the bedrooms, including window seats and latticed privacy screens.

Andrew Parker, principal bursar at St John's, says work is needed on internal electrics and pipework and that the college is thinking of how to adjust some of the provision of the building, which was designed at a time when the college only admitted men, so it is 'a bit more suitable for modern-day use'. Requests, yet to be agreed, have included en-suite accommodation. Parker says any refurbishment work will look to preserve the features designed by Arup and that the college does not wish to change the building's external appearance.

In July 2015, the culture secretary turned down Historic England's recommendation of a Grade II listing for another Dowson design, the university's Denys Wilkinson Building in Keble Road, which was built between 1963 and 1971 to house nuclear physics laboratories and features an unusual fan-shaped accelerator tower.

'I don't detect any general movement with the university sector to get rid of 60s buildings,' says Robinson, which he adds are 'like Marmite: it depends on the individual estate departments and the individuals within the university and how they perceive their building.'

But Eddy Rhead, founder and director of the Manchester Modernist Society, expects more proposals from universities to do away with post-war buildings as they progress expansion plans similar in scale to those seen in the 1960s. 'There has been a shift away from faculty-focused architecture,' he says. 'What

I mean by that is in the 1960s a faculty would commission a building and it would be built specifically for that purpose, for that faculty. There is a move away from that to more adaptable, long-term use.'

He acknowledges that some of the University of Manchester buildings under threat in Bennetts Associates' draft proposals are not fit for modern teaching nor do they meet students' – nor the faculties' – current needs. However, he says, whatever the quality of a building, demolition should be the last point of call from both a sustainability and heritage perspective. Buildings including Cruickshank & Seward's Renold and Barnes Wallis buildings are worth saving not only from an architectural point of view, he adds, but also because of their importance to the history of education in Britain.

A University of Manchester spokesperson insists 'no decisions have yet been made about particular buildings on this part of the campus' and says views raised in the public consultation on the strategic regeneration framework will inform future decisions.

Historic England says it has chosen post-war university buildings to study now because many have recently turned 30 – the age when a building can be considered for listing. Historic Environment Scotland has no plans to conduct a similar exercise, but it has reviewed four campuses, those of Glasgow, Strathclyde, Stirling and Edinburgh universities, and looked at individual proposals for St Andrews, Aberdeen and Dundee universities in the past five to eight years.

'The point about university buildings is that in the 1950s and the 1960s they were the cream of post-war building,' says Elaine Harwood, senior architectural investigator at Historic England, who believes many of the best buildings have already been listed. 'Public funding guaranteed them, so the best architects could be contracted.

'Government funding was cut very sharply from about 1968, so after that it was really only Oxford and Cambridge that could afford to carry on building buildings of quality.'

One 'rare' later example



Sir Thomas White Building (1976), St John's College, Oxford, by Arup



Detail view of Renold Building (1962) University of Manchester, by W Arthur Gibbon of Cruickshank & Seward



View of University of Manchester campus



The URS Building (1970), University of Reading, by Howell, Killick, Partridge and Amis – also known as the 'Lego' building



Cumberbatch Building (1966), Trinity College Oxford, by Macquire and Murray

outside Oxford and Cambridge, Harwood says, is Howell, Killick, Partridge and Amis's Brutalist URS Building – also known as the 'Lego' building – at the University of Reading's Whiteknights campus, which was built between 1970 and 1972 for the then Faculty of Urban and Regional Studies. The building was Grade II-listed last summer following a recommendation by Historic England as part of its review into the university's plans to develop the site. This led the university to withdraw its original plans by Hawkins\ Brown, for the refurbishment of the building to house a new architecture school. It is now working with Wokingham Borough Council and Historic England on revised plans.

That building may be safe for now but, like Rhead, Croft expects more buildings from the post-war era to come under threat. She may be heartened that millennial students are 'discerning consumers', interested in the history of the 60s and 70s. But she claims that universities are not effectively marketing their interesting and unique buildings. What is more, the most important decisions over university development are still being made by people in their 50s and 60s.

'In the last episode of [the BBC's 1969 series] *Civilisation*, Kenneth Clark pondered our capacity for destruction and evil, and then saw hope for the future in the new universities, and a walk round the library and campus of the University of East Anglia,' says architecture critic Owen Hatherley. 'The destruction mooted for places as serious, elegant and thoughtful as Dunelm House and the Faraday Building is a pretty minor example of our current capacity for barbarism, but it's sad and depressing nonetheless, and must be opposed.'

So – a warning. Architects should take careful note of the petition to save Dunelm House, and the growing appreciation of post-war buildings, before throwing their hats into the ring to design their replacements. Otherwise they may find themselves caught in a battle between the stalwarts of Brutalism and the pro-development university estates departments.



Dunelm House (1966), Durham University, by Architects' Co-Partnership with Ove Arup



Main staircase, Chandos Hall, University of Manchester, by Cruickshank & Seward