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The Great Debate: Campaigns and Conflicts in London in the 1980s

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Abstract

In 1984 HM King Charles III, then HRH The Prince of Wales, gave the infamous speech to the RIBA in which he was critical of a proposed new extension to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square. The fervour unleashed in the press signified a unique moment when architecture, conservation, planning and development became a much – and still – talked about part of the public discourse in Britain. Conservation theory had dictated since its early guidelines of practice that new additions to historic works should be clearly distinguished from their original host or the existing environment. Historicism, imitating the existing architecture within an urban setting was taboo, a notion that went back to Ruskin and the anti-scrape lobby of Morris. Unravelling the events of the 1980s, however, reveals that the desire to copy past forms as a means of retaining the past maintained an ongoing and strong legacy. It had become a method of seeking refuge from the failures of modernism and the divergence between traditional and modern forms, language and techniques. Openly acknowledged that modernism was anti-historic and anti-urban, classicism and medieval towns and forms offered the example of outdoor rooms and a predominance of solids over voids. For the then Prince and his many followers, including vast members of the public, the use of a traditional architectural style as infill in a classically inspired building setting was “good” design practice. At this point, ironically, the retreat to historicism also comprised not only mimicking traditional details but also their playful reinterpretation through an esoteric postmodernism. But the topic of new into old had become confused: the critical issue was one of urban design and not the language of infill architecture. Three case studies within the historic core of the City of London, the basis of criticism in Charles’ speeches of 1984 and 1987, will be explored through the popular press in order to understand their lessons and relevance to the complexity of current contemporary conflicts in historic urban areas.

Introduction

In conjunction with an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington, the so-called “Great Debate on British Architecture” was held on Thursday 2 November 1989. The exhibition disseminated the views of HM King Charles III, then HRH The Prince of Wales, whose “A Vision of Britain”, a documentary commissioned by the BBC, had aired to audiences of over 6 million people in October the previous year. The purpose of the evening event was to debate the merits of the Prince’s attacks on modern architecture and the principles he had put forward to encourage more traditional building. Although Prince Charles did not attend, the debate was sold out. Charles Jencks, the well-known American advocate for postmodernism in the 1980s, acted as moderator, with the most sparring words exchanged between the arch classicist, Léon Krier, and Martin Pawley, architectural critic for *The Guardian*.

The event was part of a much wider discussion about British architecture in the decade of the 1980s. Questions concerning urban development were focused on what seemed the irreconcilability of traditionalism and modernism. The controversy widened from a professional arena to the press and populace at large. Government endorsement and imposition of a local brand of British Brutalism in the majority of post-war public and social housing schemes of the 1950s and 1960s had exacerbated the scale of the public’s reaction. Conservation theory, internationally endorsed in the Venice Charter of 1964, had dictated that new additions into historic works should be clearly distinguished from their original host or the existing environment. Historicism, imitating the existing architecture within an urban setting was taboo, a notion that went back to Ruskin and the anti-scrape lobby of Morris.

HM King Charles III, then HRH The Prince of Wales, was at the centre of the debate. Two royal speeches, given in 1984 to the RIBA and in 1987 to the City of London planning group, contained one-line derogatory descriptions in relation to three particular proposed developments in the historic core of the city. For the then Prince and his many followers, including vast members of the public, the use of a traditional architectural style as infill in a classically inspired building setting was “good” design practice. Classicism and medieval towns and forms had offered the example of outdoor rooms and a predominance of solids over voids. At this point ironically, the retreat to historicism also comprised not only mimicking traditional details but also their playful reinterpretation through an esoteric postmodernism. But the topic of new into old had become confused: the issue was one of urban design and not the language of infill architecture. This paper

examines these events in more detail to better understand their implications for the issue of new into old in the context of urban development and its relevance in planning and design today.

Context

Margaret Thatcher began as Britain's first female prime minister in 1979 and remained as leader of the Conservative Party until 1990. Dubbed the "Iron Lady", she brought about a revolution in the British economy, embracing tactics such as the abandonment of onerous exchange controls and the creation of a low waged, flexible and decreasingly unionised workforce. The Corporation of London, the City's historic government, encouraged a huge boom in office building in response to the new enterprise economy. In the mid-1980s, New York had two times the office space and Tokyo two and a half times the office space of London. By 1987 London had increased its square metreage by twenty times that of 1982, and office rents had soared from £35/£40 per square metre in 1985 to £60 per square metre in 1988. Foreign multi-nationals were attracted to invest in the British economy and increasingly financed this development boom, altering the local landscape.¹

The then Prince of Wales was 31 in 1979 and his position on architecture overlapped with his wider environmental and social interests. A belief in environmental stewardship covered a range of convictions, including the need to reconnect with nature, the adoption of sustainable farming and agricultural practices, as well as environmental conservation. Committed to the maintenance of a sense of community, the Prince believed that the best human environments would evolve through social engineering, a human-scaled city and the active participation of a community in urban regeneration projects. Alongside these, classicism as a style guaranteed harmony and he upheld an equal commitment to building conservation and respect for the vernacular, the local and the historic.

29 May 1984 Speech

Seeking the architectural advice of both Rodney Hackney and Quinlan Terry prior to writing his address, Charles delivered his infamous speech to the RIBA on 29 May 1984. The occasion marked the 150th anniversary of the RIBA and was held at Hampton Court in Sir Christopher Wren's Fountain Court. The dinner formed part of the Institute's Festival of Architecture, a larger promotional exercise designed to arouse enthusiasm for contemporary architecture which was perceived to be deeply unpopular. A copy of the speech had been released to Fleet Street 24 hours prior to the event, and, despite

being aware of its contents, there was little that the then President, Michael Manser, could do to change it.

In addition to his disparaging remarks about the status of the architectural profession and its neglect of the wishes of “ordinary” people, and reiterating his commitment to community architecture, Charles singled out two contemporary projects in London for criticism. The first was the Mansion House Square project and the second, the extension to the National Gallery London at Trafalgar Square. Of the former he said, “It would be a tragedy if the character of our skyline and capital city were to be further ruined and St Paul’s dwarfed by yet another glass stump, better suited to downtown Chicago than the City of London.”² His comments about the National Gallery extension were equally blunt:

Instead of designing an extension to the elegant façade... it looks as if we may be presented with a kind of municipal fire station, complete with the sort of tower that contains the siren.... what is proposed is like a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much loved and elegant friend.³

Both projects were at the public enquiry stage of the planning process at the time. The Secretary of State for the Environment, Patrick Jenkin, was in the audience and reportedly quipped after the speech, “Well, that’s two decisions I don’t have to make.”⁴ Charles’ words would be cited *ad nauseam* in the press for the next decade and continue to hold an allure to the present day.

The public debate sharpened after the speech, casting the Prince as the David of traditionalism, versus the Goliaths of modernism. The American press commented, “the Prince was applauded by the press and by many ordinary Britons who have come to hate the bleak housing projects and the wind swept open spaces built here by modern architects since World War II.”⁵

Mansion House Square Campaign

The Mansion House Square project began with a dream of the British aristocratic developer, Peter Palumbo. Educated at Eton and Oxford, Palumbo was also a trustee of the Tate Gallery, London. In 1962 he commissioned Mies van der Rohe to design a skyscraper at Mansion House Square. He was a keen admirer of Mies’ work and had purchased and restored the Farnsworth House, south west of Chicago, designed and constructed from 1945 to 1951.



Figure 1. Mansion House in Mansion House Street at the junction of Queen Victoria Street and Poultry, City of London 1930 (© London Metropolitan Archives, City of London, record no. 47771, London County Council Collection).

At the historic heart of London's mercantile elite, Mansion House Square was in the middle of the City of London, the ancient square mile that constituted its financial district. The Square received its name from the grand classical building, designed by George Dance the Elder in the mid-eighteenth century, which was home to the City's Lord Mayor. Wren's St Stephen Walbrook (1672-79) sat directly behind. Other historic buildings that fronted the Square included Sir John Soane's Bank of England. The last street frontage completed in Threadneedle Street continued the pattern of high windowless stonewalls in a syncretic Greco-Roman style, a visual and physical defence against fire and attack. Directly opposite was the Royal Exchange building by Sir William Tite built in the 1840s, while Edwin Lutyens' headquarters for the Midland Bank, designed in 1924, fronted Poultry.



Figure 2. Mies van der Rohe's Mansion House Square tower proposal (RIBA 28878, John Donat / RIBA Collections).

Mies van der Rohe designed a 290 feet, 21 storey tower that offered underground shopping and its own public space, in addition to offices. The building was given conditional approval in 1969 that was subject to Palumbo being able to consolidate the title of the 6-acre site. A complex and drawn out process of title acquisition delayed the submission of a second planning application until 1982. Between 1969 and 1982, however, a significant shift had occurred in the public assessment of the historic value of the City's financial core. Eight of the buildings originally proposed for demolition had been listed, and the site had become part of the Bank conservation area in 1981. Prominent on the corner was the former headquarters of the jewellers, Mappin & Webb, then recognised as an elaborate high Victorian building. The second application was refused, following which Palumbo lodged an appeal in 1984.



Figure 3. Mappin & Webb at the corner of Poultry and Queen Victoria Street, City of London, 1985 (© London Metropolitan Archives, City of London, record no. 48857, London County Council Collection).

The appeal, a two-month public enquiry, gathered all manner of architectural experts to argue both for and against the proposal. Interestingly the pro-Mies camp included Berthold Lubetkin and Sir John Summerson, while H. R. Hitchcock, a former colleague of Mies from New York, argued against Mies' proposed design. It was reported that Mies' former archive curator was promptly sent from New York to try and persuade Hitchcock to change his mind. Somewhat confused, the press pointed out that both sides in the proceedings had quoted the evidence of Philip Johnson. Taking a proactive advocacy initiative, the British group, SAVE, commissioned Terry Farrell to prepare an alternative scheme for the site. Shortly afterwards the press observed that:

Conservationists, led by the Greater London Council, the Victorian Society and Save Britain's Heritage, argued not so much that the listed buildings were superb, but that the tower would be out of character with its setting, and that it was already dated, having been designed in 1962.⁶

The inspector's report found against the proposal, a decision that just needed the endorsement of the Secretary of State for the Environment: this was supplied after hearing the Prince's speech at the RIBA's anniversary dinner.

In 1986 Palumbo presented two new plans for the triangular site fronting Mansion House Square by the architect, Sir James Stirling. Stirling's distinct postmodernist design roused particular criticism from Martin Pawley:

Stirling's honey-coloured stone facades, enormous masonry arches, quixotic windows, immense curved cornices and open corners are all applied architectural "features" legitimized by the curious mixture of conservationist squeamishness about technology and dogged architectural hubris that is the essence of Post-Modernism. [T]hey are faddish emblems destined to look out of date before one tenth of the planned life of the building has expired.⁷

It led to a second public enquiry for the site in 1988 initiated by the conservation lobby: SAVE Britain, English Heritage and the City of London Corporation maintained their opposition to the proposal, as it would entail the demolition of eight listed buildings.



Figure 4. James Stirling, No.1 Poultry, designed 1985, completed 1997 (Photograph by Robyn Christie, 2022).

A final scheme to replace the Victorian buildings was submitted by James Stirling, together with Michael Wilford and Associates. Now identified as No. 1 Poultry, the application was given official approval in June 1989 by the then Environment Secretary, Nicholas Ridley, following the praises of the Inspector, Brian Bagot. Bagot's report on

the design was submitted prior to the Prince's derogatory description of Stirling's design as "an old 1930s wireless" that featured in the 1988 BBC television programme. And, despite the wide currency given to the Prince's metaphor, Ridley chose not to override the approval.

Trafalgar Square Campaign

The competition for an addition to the National Gallery in London at Trafalgar Square began in 1981 when Lord Annan, a trustee, proposed a combination of offices and galleries as a means of financing the extension. Costing £18 million, a 51,000 square foot office block over three floors, with seventeen top-lit galleries above, would house the gallery's coveted collection of Early Renaissance art and provide new public facilities. With a government set on privatisation, the developers were Trafalgar House, a property and construction and shipping conglomerate: *The Observer's* architecture critic stormed that "[t]he proposed combination of art and commerce is frankly disgusting."⁸

The site, at the north-west corner of Trafalgar Square, had been vacant for 44 years. Originally a furniture store that had been bombed during the Second World War, it abutted the original neoclassical gallery building by William Wilkins, constructed in 1838. Although the diminished size of the dome in Wilkins' classical composition had come under criticism, the Square contained other important classical buildings. On the western side Canada House, the High Commission from 1924, was a Greek Revival structure originally designed by Sir Robert Smirke 100 earlier. At the eastern, far end of the Square was St Martin-in-the-Field, the work of James Gibbs in 1726, and renowned as a neoclassical church due to the addition of a steeple.



Figure 5. St Martin in the Fields and The National Gallery, Trafalgar Square, Westminster, 1896. A Victorian building demolished in World War II is evident on the left-hand side (© London Metropolitan Archives, City of London, record no. 141174, London County Council Collection).

The competition drew 79 entries, including one submitted by Richard Rogers. Interestingly when a public referendum was held, the press commentary noted that it was Rogers' "wildly modernist design" that had captured the most public votes as first choice, but also the most votes for the least favourable. Rogers' entry was reputedly eliminated after Owen Luder, then RIBA president, referred to it as "a fine piece of 'sod you' architecture,"⁹ but Rogers maintained that he was asked to resign from the competition.

Peter Ahrends submitted the winning entry from a young architectural practice, Ahrends, Burton and Koralek (now ABK) based in London. At the behest of the gallery trustees he subsequently added the offending tower that had sparked the special quip in the Prince's 1984 speech. In support of the royal position, *The Observer* commented:

There is no clearer illustration of this failure to maintain this vital thread of continuity (between the past and present) than that demonstrated by the design of the extension to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square, both inside and outside....

... the new building's position in life, although important is of a humbler status than that of the National Gallery, and this should be recognised in the design....

... the line of argument which arises from [the Prince's] remarkable and well informed speech is not about styles, is not about whether architects should be copying the past; it is about good and bad design, and the influence of both on society.¹⁰



Figure 6. Model of the final revised ABK design for the National Gallery Extension, 1983 (RIBA 3839, RIBA Collections).

In October 1984 Patrick Jenkin turned down the proposal, despite the Inspector deciding in favour of Ahrends' design at the enquiry.

The National Gallery trustees announced a new competition in April 1985, noting "the new building should relate sympathetically to the present building and be complementary to Trafalgar Square".¹¹ A generous gift of £25 million from the supermarket magnates, Sir John, Timothy and Simon Sainsbury, rendered the provision of office space required to finance the scheme redundant. The extension now had to house only the National Gallery's galleries and new public areas.

In January the following year Lord Rothschild, Chairman of the Trustees, announced the winner to be the postmodern American architect, Robert Venturi. Five other architects had been invited to submit entries, including Henry Cobb from I. M. Pei, Sir James Stirling and Michael Wilford & Associates. Paul Goldberger, the architectural critic for the *New York Times*, waxed lyrical about the success of the American design:

The architectural dilemma... was to create a building that would be many things at once. It would have to have sufficient presence to be an element of its own in Trafalgar Square, yet it would also have to contribute something toward pulling the mix of buildings on the Square together. And it would have to relate comfortably to the original National Gallery building without dominating it or being dominated by it.

The Venturi design appears to succeed at striking this difficult and tremendously subtle balance. It is different on all of its sides, to inflect toward the different buildings that surround it, yet it is also a coherent whole. The building is a case of classicism transformed, a design that is clearly of the late 20th century and not of any other period. But this is the late 20th century trying not so much to abandon classicism as seeking to make its own comment on it.¹²

Understandably Venturi had his own interpretation of good neighbourliness. Invited to present the Thomas Cubitt lecture to the Royal Society of Arts in 1987, he observed in the question session that followed:

Our extension, complementary in position but not in form with the church [St Martin-in-the-Fields], becomes truly an extension of the National Gallery, at once a continuation of it and, in its rhythmic configuration, an ending to it, at once a kind of coda and a diminuendo, we hope.

I think you should always try to be a good neighbour in a city or a town, although sometimes being a good neighbour is not necessarily being analogous to your neighbour. Sometimes you really need to be different, if still a good, neighbour....¹³



Figure 7. View of National Gallery and the Robert Venturi & Denise Scott Brown-designed Sainsbury Wing (designed 1987) from across Trafalgar Square (Photograph by Robyn Christie, 2022).

Alongside the American praise, Elizabeth Farrelly, a then relatively recent graduate of the University of Auckland, contributed a damning critique to the *Architectural Review*. She described the style of Venturi’s addition as a “1930s Parking Garage Mannerist Modern.” Whilst working with classicism, Venturi had not worked within its rules. Classicism might be an evolving canon, but it was not “an open basket of goodies to be plundered at will in the service of me-ist self-expression.”¹⁴

Such columns and pilasters as do appear on the new façade deliberately ignore any suggestion of rhythm and, openly declaring their structural incapacity, hang irregularly bunched in one corner like a derelict curtain half-drawn.¹⁵

... this extended Mannerist conceit is oddly ineffectual, and the building itself acutely disappointing, a nervous, fumbling small-spirited creature, plain but not ugly, ill-composed and awkwardly planned, overcome by self-regard and undermined at every turn by its own immense perversity.¹⁶

Farrelly's review was not alone in its sentiment: another described it as, "A dull, cowardly edifice designed not by an architect but by an exterior decorator."¹⁷ The issue surrounding what constituted appropriate infill within an historic setting was focused on style, the superficial adoption of the language of the existing historic buildings did not resolve the issue.

1 December 1987 HRH Speech

On 1 December 1987 Charles was invited to give a speech to the annual dinner of the Corporation of London's Planning and Communications Committee at Mansion House. By now the then Prince had surrounded himself with a group of architectural advisors led by Jules Lubbock, professor of art history at the University of Essex, who would head the Prince of Wales Summer School in Civil Architecture in the early 1990s. Also in the group were Colin Amery, architectural correspondent for the *Financial Times*, who had published the *Rape of Britain* with Dan Cruickshank in 1975, and Christopher Martin, a BBC television producer, renowned for his documentary with Christopher Booker, "City of Towers".

The address focused on the redevelopment of Paternoster Square, the area immediately surrounding St Paul's Cathedral: in essence it was a campaign to save the curtilage of the Cathedral that had significantly survived war damage, adding to its primary symbolism as a religious building. Surrounding development in the 1950s and 1960s had destroyed the church's skyline, and the Prince had been invited to comment on the seven finalists in a private competition for a proposed new development that offered a second chance to correct the mistakes of the earlier buildings in Paternoster Square. He had been "deeply depressed" by the responses and chose his evocative words carefully, noting the "great dome" would be lost "in a jostling scrum of office buildings, so mediocre that the only way that you ever remember them is by the frustration they induce – like a basketball team standing shoulder to shoulder between you and the Mona Lisa." Later he added, "You have... to give this much to the Luftwaffe; when it knocked down our buildings, it didn't replace them with anything more offensive than rubble. We did that."¹⁸



Figure 8. Paternoster Square - view of south side looking towards St Paul's Cathedral, 1940 (© London Metropolitan Archives, City of London, record no. 35558, Cross and Tibbs Collection).

Well aware that the crux of the problem lay in the challenge of providing commercial architecture within an historic setting, he acknowledged that the error lay primarily with the brief, in its “overriding commercial consideration[s]” and the request for a “bold concept for retailing.” He made reference to the Mansion House Square development that was, at the time, awaiting a final decision and sought an opportunity to ply his earlier mission for public involvement in the nature of the city.

To resolve the dearth of suitable design submissions he called for the public’s input into the planning decision, and proposed three longer-term planning solutions that would circumvent future instances of the problem. He did not hesitate to offer his own vision for the area: one that was human in scale; returned to the medieval street plan, knitting the remaining fragments together; allowed for the dome of St Paul’s to dominate the skyline; and used traditional materials aligned with those on cathedral. He questioned why buildings had to look like machines, and why beauty could not be based on the observance of rules that would encourage “the right kind of creative freedom rather than inhibiting it.”

Paternoster Square Campaign

The Paternoster Square competition was hopefully deemed “the final burial ground of the 1980s style wars.”¹⁹ The site became central to the argument between modernist and traditional architecture. Charles Jencks pre-empted the campaign: “This is where modernism did its best to put up a fight with Wren and failed so fantastically that nothing remains except grimed-up cladding and an atmosphere of humiliation.”²⁰

The site takes its name from the prayers, or paternosters, said by former monks. It consisted of 7.5 acres alongside the Cathedral, with Paternoster Row forming the heart of the publishing industry from medieval times. Suffering heavy bomb damage in the war, the area contained modern office blocks built in the 1960s which had become the target of public criticism as typical, infamously grim “blocky glass and stone office buildings” with “windswept geometric plazas” of the period.²¹



Figure 9. St Paul's Churchyard, between the Cathedral and Chapter House, looking west, 1977 (© London Metropolitan Archives, City of London, record no. 48990, London County Council Collection).

Together with the Church Commissioners, the developer Stuart Lipton drew up a short list of seven architects to produce a master plan for the site in 1987 – Arup Associates, led by Sir Philip Dowson, Norman Foster, Arata Isozaki, Richard MacCormac, Richard Rogers, Skidmore Owings & Merrill (SOM), and the partnership of James Stirling and Michael Wilford. Arup Associates won the international competition with a scheme that was an effective privatisation of the public domain.

The official assessors of the competition, who included Colin Amery, Charles Jencks and William Whitfield, had originally voted in favour of Richard Rogers and Arup Associates as the joint winners. Rogers was said to have promptly resigned when it was clear that there was opposition to an interventionist scheme. Architect Peter Buchanan commented disparagingly in a special feature in *The Architects' Journal*:

... is it possible to create a contemporary architectural language capable of addressing a major historical monument, let alone of providing continuity or harmonious contrast with older surroundings and a genuine sense of place?
.... do we have any option except to ape the past, or are there other approaches to architecture and planning better suited to the present day, and indeed to St Paul's and its surroundings?²²

John Simpson, a young classicist architect, had attended the event at Mansion House in December 1987. After the speech he was said to have gone for a drink at a nearby pub, where perchance he met up with some like-minded traditionally orientated journalists, including Dan Cruickshank. Mira Bar-Hillel, a reporter with the *Evening Standard*, who was also in the party, later convinced her editor to finance the cost of an alternate traditional design to be worked up by Simpson. Informal meetings were then said to have taken place between Charles, Leon Krier, Cruickshank and Simpson, with Simpson undertaking responsibility for preparing a surrogate classical revival scheme.

By the middle of 1988 both Arup's and Simpson's unauthorised proposals went on public display in the Cathedral crypt. The exhibition had been organised by Lord St John of Fawley, Chairman of the Royal Fine Art Commission, in a bid to supplant Arup at Paternoster. Financial support from the *Evening Standard* enabled Simpson to prepare a model and two paintings of his design, although, as Martin Pawley commented, it was unfair to compare the two proposals as Dowson's plan for Arup was not a detailed solution but a master plan for the site.



Figure 10. John Simpson's master plan for Paternoster Square. Painting by Carl Laubin, 1988 (John Simpson Architects Ltd).

In October 1988 Prince Charles broadcast his views on the Paternoster schemes to the public at large. His television programme “A Vision of Britain” offered a segment that defended John Simpson’s plan, clarifying that a traditional style did not imply the notion of pastiche or fake, and that classical architecture was equally equipped to supply contemporary office requirements. He concluded, “Paternoster Square has become central to the argument between Modernist and traditional architecture, or, as I’d rather put it, it’s the argument between the inhuman and the human.”²³

Its failure to be realised immediately and the onset of a recession in the 1990s added to the financial stress of the Paternoster venture. By 1989 the site was in the hands of Greycoat, together with the Park Tower Group of New York, who were joined by the Mitsubishi Estate Company of Tokyo in 1991. Although Simpson’s scheme was now the favoured one, responsibility for the design was extended to Allan Greenberg and Quinlan Terry, Terry Farrell and Thomas Beeby, with Robert Adam, Demetri Porphyrios and Sidell Gibson. While Simpson’s initial design had respected the original London streetscape, redeveloping the area with the grain and character of the pre-war street pattern, the new proposal was compromised. The Americans were held to have a dominating interest in the project and were insisting on a subterranean shopping mall: the “series of individual buildings ended up as a single megastructure which spoke the exuberant language of American commercial Classical architects.”²⁴

Peter Rees, director of planning at the Corporation of the City of London, was cited several times in the press: “It is a sad reflection on architecture that we’ve reached a stage where we have to cover commercial developments with classical wallpaper in order to gain credibility.” Rees was responsible for the preparation of a 60-page document, outlining 20 grounds on which the proposal was unacceptable. Described as “groundscrapers rather than skyscrapers,” the blocks “loom, rather than soar... a simplified medieval street-plan that accentuates rather than reduces the scale of the buildings... the proposed development is still much bigger than what is there at present.”²⁵

In February 1992 the City relinquished its decision-making power to the Department of the Environment, where Michael Heseltine was the current Environment Secretary. The developers were obliged to trim the scheme and reinstate Simpson’s central square, with the amended classicist scheme being granted planning permission in 1993.

By the mid-1990s, however, Mitsubishi remained the only partner from the consortium of property developers. A change in mood was reported: “City firms want imposing office blocks with large open-plan floors, which they felt were not catered for in the prince’s scheme.”²⁶ The press, however, misrepresented the Prince’s support for the later scheme. He had not endorsed the strong commercial stance that the design eventually accommodated and he had become, at this point, a *persona non grata*.

Sir William Whitfield was appointed to review the controversial redevelopment plans at Paternoster Square and devise a final master plan in February 1996. Being a Royal Fine Art Commissioner and former surveyor to the Fabric of St Paul’s, Whitfield was an established and secure choice of architect to undertake a re-evaluation of the project. *The Independent* quoted him as confident for the task:

The war paved the way, understandably in many ways, for a generation of iconoclasts. We have had to live with the results for the past 50 years. It has not been very satisfactory....

What is most important in the development of city centres is not the style we choose to build in but how individual buildings relate to one another. I see my job as helping to patch the City together elegantly and well. We neither

need extreme modern buildings at St Paul's nor what I call 'costume' architecture. I hope we can find a middle way.²⁷



Figure 11. View across Paternoster Square with St Paul's Cathedral behind. Whitfield Partners, Architects – final master plan, 1996 (Photograph by Robyn Christie, 2022).

Whitfield was also one of the Prince's favoured architects. At 75, "he was the subject of an adulatory feature in a recent issue of *Perspectives*, the Prince's architectural magazine," and there was certainty that his ideas would "be relayed to the prince." He had, however, been handed "the thorniest design challenge of modern London: creating a new Paternoster Square next to St Paul's Cathedral."²⁸

The new Whitfield master plan dispensed with the underground shopping mall and the massive mega structure. Views of St Paul's and the Chapter House were improved, and the square opened up with the reestablishment of a traditional street pattern. Differentiation between the buildings was achieved, each block being self-contained, allowing for the possibility of a phased development and for individual sale. The master plan provided for separate designs by MacCormac Jamieson Prichard, Michael Hopkins, Allies & Morrison, John Simpson, as well as Sir William Whitfield.

Prince Charles gave his personal approval of the Whitfield plan in November 1997 and, following submission to the City of London Corporation, the scheme was approved in July the following year.

The Great Debate

The Great Debate event at the V&A had formally voted on three questions that were simultaneously offered to attendees and the public visiting the exhibition. The first asked whether it was good that the Prince had focused public opinion on architectural and planning issues; the second question, whether his solutions to the problems had been correct; and the final question was whether his influence upon architectural and planning decisions was right. The majority of both the exhibition audience and debating attendees thought it positive that public opinion had been awakened, but simultaneously did not think it was right for the Prince to interfere in planning decisions. The two audiences differed, however, on the question as to whether the royal solutions were correct.

There was no doubt that at the time of his first speech in 1984 the Prince expressed a feeling that was shared by the general public that much of modern architecture was unloved. Simon Jenkins had written in *The Sunday Times*: “The Modern movement was not just a phase, it was a mistake. It was architecture torn loose from style, invading politics and posing as social engineering.”²⁹ He reported that there had been a rise in interest in conservation as a result; both the number of listed buildings had increased, as well as membership of conservation bodies.

Opinion polls and agreement on the issue were reflected in the Prince’s rising popularity and gave credence to his authority on architectural matters. By the time of the second speech, the *Financial Times* had recorded that the Prince was “rapidly emerging as the nation’s Architect-in-Chief” and, though not necessarily agreeing with the sentiment, the American architectural correspondent, Paul Goldberger, acknowledged that he had “done wonders in getting architecture onto the front page of newspapers around the world, and this is no small achievement.”³⁰

As might be expected the debate was of equal concern to the architectural profession. Michael Manser, president of the RIBA in 1984, did not agree with the public stance against modernism. Already he foresaw that the controversy over new and old had become focused on the wrong issue, the issue for him was whether the architecture was good or bad, not new or old in style. Seven days after Jenkins’ article, he wrote in *The Sunday Times*:

The Prince’s view that unusual new buildings should not be set down amongst older buildings disputes our entire architectural history. Even the

Wren extension to Hampton court, where he made his pronouncement, was a startlingly new design in its time, and foreign to boot, which Wren added in a visually brutal manner to Wolsey's softer medieval palace.

Our whole urban inheritance is one of contrasts of succeeding styles and no generation was more disregarding of previous periods than the Victorians.³¹

But the architectural profession was not united; there were those who supported the royal approach. In a private letter to Prince Charles, Terry Farrell expressed his despair with Manser's view and wrote: "Unfortunately the strength of support among the architectural establishment and many powerful and influential clients and critics for anti-historic, non-contextual architecture is a peculiar characteristic of Britain today."³²

Rodney Hackney's appointment as President of the RIBA in 1987 reversed the modernist position within the Institute, and resulted from his efforts to restore inner cities and promote community architecture. Needless to say, his campaign also had the strong support of the Prince. In 1988 Léon Kier published an extended article in *Modern Painters*. "God Save the Prince!", however, was more than an offer of support or a eulogy to his royal patron: it was a careful consideration of the planning metrics to disentangle the economics of high-rise building.

Maxwell Hutchinson, an outspoken opponent of the royal opinion, then became President of the RIBA in 1989. He gave a controversial speech as his inaugural address, which was published in *The Prince of Wales: Right or Wrong? An Architect Replies* the same year. He reiterated, "the morphology of our urban landscape cannot fail to be influenced by the need for new forms in a new scientific age. We simply cannot go to the Millennium Ball wearing the threadbare rags of post-modernism and neo-classicism."³³ Christopher Martin disclosed in *Architectural Design* that the organisation was "torn by its own internal politics, bedevilled by chronic financial pressures, split over issues like regionalism and what to do with its library and drawings collection." Far from being a "fountainhead of inspiration," it had become a "block house of Modernism."³⁴ Regarding the question of royal privilege, Charles Jencks had published *The Prince, The Architects and New Wave Monarchy* in 1988 as a guarded offer of support. It was an attempt to balance the genuine achievements and value of Prince Charles' crusade into architecture, and included as an appendix a selection of both royal speeches and architect responses. A year later in a special issue of *Architectural Design*, which ran a

“Profile on the Architectural Debate”, however, Jencks took a stronger ethical stance against the Prince.

It is not fair to intervene from a privileged position in public inquiries while the inspector is writing his report; it is not fair to damn architects in such a way that their practice collapses... it doesn't appeal to our sense of a match between equal contestants.³⁵

Conclusion

Prince Charles' strong preference for classicism and a return to traditional details should not obscure the importance of looking back at the decade of the 1980s in Britain. Exploring through the contemporary press the three case studies within the historic core of the City of London, has highlighted their relevance to understanding the issue of infill in historic urban areas. It is easy to foreground the accusation of fakery and mimic, which somewhat ironically was followed by an irreverent eclecticism in the postmodern solutions at both Mansion House and Trafalgar Square. The topic of new into old was clearly confused: the critical issue was one of urban design and not the language of infill architecture. Inadvertently the then Prince had highlighted the importance of context and urban design in the design of contemporary architecture in historic settings. In support of the Prince, Giles Worsley later concluded that for Paternoster:

... the real issue is not a battle of columns against glass and steel, but of planning and respect for the setting of St Paul's. The columns and pilasters may have gone, but the principles for which the Prince argued would appear to have survived in Whitfield's master plan.³⁶

Although the majority had not agreed in Charles' stylistic proscription, a pathway to reassessing important urban design principles had been opened.

Endnotes

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