Understanding Post-War Architecture

The Twentieth Century

Key Events

1916-20. Inflation pushes up the cost of building materials. Additionally shortages of materials encourage the use of new materials such as Crittall windows, sand-lime bricks, and prefabrication (steel and concrete systems) for council housing. These experiments were to be developed further after the Second World War, eg. No Fines housing, first tried in Britain in 1924 was widely used by (especially) Wimpeys (builders) after WWII.

1919. Housing (Addison) Act promises ‘homes for heroes’.

1921. Cut backs in public expenditure (Geddes Axe) as post-war boom turns to depression. It can be argued that the general economic malaise of the 1920s had a greater effect on British building than the Great Depression of 1929-33 which was devastating in localised areas, notably the NE and Wales.

1924. Empire Exhibition, Wembley (stadium opened the previous year).

1925. New Ways, Northampton, by Peter Behrens is first Modern Movement house, for W. Bassett Loake, who had previously commissioned C. R. Mackintosh to modernise a house in Northampton.

1926. General Strike.


1928. The first talkies in Britain (Al Jolson in The Singing Fool the first wide release here). Cinematograph Act requires cinemas to show a quota of British films. Film makers, distributors and exhibitors begin to combine and large companies (Gaumont, ABC, later Odeon and Granada) come to dominate the market, building big new super-cinemas.


1930. Stockholm Exhibition heralds modernism in Scandinavia, mixing natural materials and Russian constructivism; by Gunnar Asplund, the exhibition is also a model for the Festival of Britain.

Emberton. Sudbury Town Station (Piccadilly Line) heralds modern architecture on the Underground (Charles Holden).


1933. The lowest point of the Depression – 75% unemployment in Jarrow leads to the Jarrow March. A few public works commissioned, e.g. the Queen Mary to relieve Glasgow dockyards. Housing programme in Leeds begins which leads (1938-40) to Quarry Hill Flats. Boots D10 factory by Owen Williams opens. Hitler comes to power in Germany and Jewish and left-wing architects begin to emigrate.

1934. Lawn Road Flats (Isokon) by Wells Coates the first truly modern housing in London. Also the Penguin Pool by Lubetkin and Tecton at London Zoo.

1935. Highpoint One, by Lubetkin and Tecton and the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill by Mendelsohn and Chermayeff are completed, probably the most iconic modern buildings in Britain and showing the importance of refugees.

1936. Mendelsohn leaves for Palestine and then USA. Mary Crowley’s houses at Tewin, Herts, of brick with monopitch roofs show Scandinavian influence – the sort of architecture we might have had in the 1940s but for the war. On 30 November the Crystal Palace burns down. Constitutional crisis as Edward VIII gives up throne for Mrs Simpson.

1937. Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer leave for USA as little work in England. Rearmament begins.

1938. Crisis over Sudetenland heralds prospect of war with Germany.

1939. Finsbury Health Centre, Islington, by Lubetkin and Tecton heralds modernism put to social agenda. 1-3 Willow Road, Hampstead, by Ernö Goldfinger show modernism adapted to British conditions, using brick not concrete. War declared 3 September 1939.

1940-1. Restrictions on building materials imposed. Licensing (or rationing) continues until November 1954. Denis Clarke Hall’s school at Richmond, Yorks, with its attention to daylighting for young eyes, a model for post-war schools. A little prefabricated housing, e.g. in Coventry and Liverpool. 7 December, attack on Pearl Harbour brings US into the war, following USSR earlier that year.

1942. In Chicago, Mies begins building a series of simple exposed steel-framed buildings for the Illinois Institute of Technology, later followed by tall apartment towers on Lakeshore Drive (1948). Interest, too, in Oscar Niemeyer’s curvaceous modern forms beginning to appear in Brazil. Battle of El Alamain (November) portends eventual allied victory. On 1 December William Beveridge captures the mood of optimism with his report on a post-war social security system that challenged five ‘giants’: ‘Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness’ and led to the establishment of the NHS.

1943. Exhibitions on Swedish and American housing suggest the possibility of prefab housing after a programme of building farmworkers’ brick cottages is an expensive flop. The County of London Plan suggests in a lavish book how London might be replanned after the war, with lower densities, separation of housing and industry, more public space and new roads. It is followed by plans for Hull, Plymouth, Middlesborough, Manchester etc.
1944. The first single-storey prefab bungalows demonstrated at the Tate Gallery. An exhibition at Northolt, featuring Frederick Gibberd’s BISF housing, compares traditional and prefabricated construction for two-storey houses and flats. D Day is 6 June (Normandy invasions). Education Act establishes principle of secondary education for all, to age 15 from 1948, defining grammar, technical and secondary modern schools. LCC/ Coventry/ Anglesea/ Westmorland opt for comprehensives.

1945. War in Europe ends in May, in the Pacific in August. A competition for public housing (mainly flats) in Pimlico is won by Philip Powell and Jacko Moya, aged 24 and 25 respectively. Work begins in 1947. Labour wins the General Election with its first ever majority. A proposal that Britain commemorate the 1851 Exhibition in Hyde Park (the Crystal Palace) is developed by the Board of Trade.

1946. Realisation dawns that there has been a baby boom since 1943. Moreover a quarter of the population have been displaced in the war, and a programme of houses, schools and factories begins, with the economy geared for export after the US ends all aid (lend-lease). New Towns Act promises first New Town at Stevenage, designated in November. 11 more follow by 1950. In Herts, a programme of prefabricated schools is begun to meet the demand for 10 new schools per year. Nationalisation begins with coal, later transport, electricity and gas; iron and steel briefly nationalised.

1947. Appalling winter accompanied by coal shortages, electricity failures and a run on the pound. Cuts on public spending imposed in July, and restrictions on private house building rigorously enforced. Only flats like Spa Green, Finsbury (Islington) by Skinner and Lubetkin (completed 1948) show what might have been had not further austerity been imposed. Town and Country Planning Act sets out legislation for listing buildings, requires local authorities to make formal development plans and introduces a tax (betterment) on commercial redevelopment.

1948. NHS begins in May. The South Bank chosen for a Festival of Britain and the Royal Festival Hall commissioned as its centrepiece and lasting legacy. Rebuilding begins in bombed cities, notably Plymouth, also Coventry. Nottingham is raised to full university status and a programme of university expansion begins. Frederick Gibberd wins commission for Heathrow Airport, having already been confirmed that year as architect to Harlow. In Portland, Oregon, Petro Bellushci’s Equitable Savings and Loan Association is the first curtain-wall building – i.e. the 12-storey frame is sheathed in a glass skin.

1950. Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House, Falls River, outside Chicago, is a minimal glass box set in a wood.

1951. The Festival of Britain, the consummation of a picturesque revival in British architecture and of collaboration between architects, engineers, sculptors and landscape architects. In Harlow, opening of the Lawn, Britain’s first ten-storey ‘point’ block of housing. Basil Spence wins competition for Coventry Cathedral (completed 1962). The Conservatives come back to power, and encourage more yet cheaper schools and housing. British architects visit Marseilles to see Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation.

1952. Accession in February of Elizabeth II. Controls, e.g. on new cars, begin to be lifted. The Conservatives encourage the expansion of existing towns, e.g. Bletchley, rather than new towns. Buses and Iron and Steel denationalised. London’s last trams run. At Roehampton, S West London, two estates inspired respectively by Sweden and Le Corbusier cause polarisation of the LCC Architect’s Department into ‘softs’ and ‘hards’. Golden Lane housing competition for the City of London won by mixed development of low-rise flats and a high tower by Geoffry Powell (Chamberlin, Powell and Bon), but success d’estime for Alison and Peter Smithson and for Jack
Lynn with long slabs of flats inspired by the Unité. End of betterment. In New York, Lever House by Gordon Bunshaft of SOM is the first tower and podium office building.

1953. The Coronation causes a demand for television sets. Plans for the Shell Tower herald the first tall office building in London. Change in housing policy encourages slum clearance rather than building for general provision, putting pressure on city centres. First scheme by Sam Chippindale, developer of Arndale Centres, in Skipton. Competition for additions at Sheffield University won by Gollins, Melvin and Ward, and includes a tall tower.

1954. End of building licensing in November. Opening of a new secondary school in Hunstanton, by the Smithsons, causes critical attention because of its exposed (Miesian) steel frame. School specialists complain that it is insufficiently child-centred. Licensing ends in November. Jack Lynn and Ivor Smith begin designing slab at Sheffield, Park Hill. Opening of the LCC’s first large comprehensive, at Kidbrooke.

1955. ITV launched. Rock around the Clock is the hit film, prompting new youth culture. The Smithsons publish a manifesto ‘The New Brutalism’ that defines the ‘hard’ style with its truth to form and natural materials – wood, brick and concrete, referring to Frank Lloyd Wright and Japanese architecture. Chamberlin, Powell and Bon begin plans for what is to become the Barbican.

1956. A big year for theatre – Waiting for Godot, Look Back in Anger. London County Council ease restrictions on tall buildings in London, where first schemes for Barbican are published. Preston by-pass is begun, the first motorway in Britain (opened 1958). Span’s first major scheme, Parkleys (Richmond- Kingston borders) opens to critical acclaim – a landmark in private low-cost housing. Powell and Moya design extensions to Brasenose College, Oxford, not built until 1959-61. At St John’s, young fellows led by Howard Colvin reject a traditional scheme of additions by Edward Maufe in favour of a modern scheme by the Architects’ Co-Partnership. Notts CC opens its first prefabricated (CLASP) school, designed to ride subsidence from coal mining and consequently dubbed ‘the rock and roll school’. White paper on technical education creates Colleges of Advanced Technology.

1957. The first publicly funded theatre opens in Coventry. A new university is founded at Sussex, heralding a programme of new universities around the country to meet growing demand. An exhibition in London highlights the traditionalism of many new buildings at Oxbridge and the red-brick universities, particularly Manchester. Growth of office building in London.


1960. St Paul’s, Bow Common, by Maguire and Murray, is the first centrally-planned post-war church. Competition for Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral is won by Frederick Gibberd with a circular design. Opening of Keeling House, London and Park Hill, Sheffield, high-density housing on slum clearance sites. A programme of local authority swimming baths is encouraged by government. Chamberlin, Powell and Bon produce first master plan for Leeds University. New universities approved for York and Norwich.
1961. John Darbourne, aged 23, wins competition for Lillington Gardens with a medium-rise scheme clad in brick. First proposals for the Brunswick Centre as a medium-rise development (Martin and Patrick Hodgkinson) after tall towers are rejected. A shortage of building materials encourages local authorities to turn to prefabrication for public housing. While the LCC build temporary bungalows, most authorities turn to large multi-storey systems, developed by the major British building companies often with French or Scandinavian construction systems. To meet increasing staff shortages, the LCC produce a new list of approved private architects to design their smaller public housing schemes, leading to commissions for Ernő Goldfinger and the Smithsons. Work begins at Sussex University, by Basil Spence. Denys Lasdun is appointed to design UEA. New universities approved at Canterbury, Coventry, Colchester and Lancaster. The LCC publish a book on its plan for a rejected new town at Hook, Hants, a model of pedestrian and vehicle segregation and high density dwellings. Skelmersdale declared a new town.


1963. Profumo Scandal. Completion of University of Leicester Engineering Building by Stirling and Gowan. A master plan by Robert Matthew, Johnson-Marshall and Partners for York University places small colleges round a lake, and adopts CLASP, while UEA and Essex Universities (the latter by ACP) opt for long teaching buildings and housing blocks in close proximity. Buchanan Report, Traffic in Towns, a response to rising car ownership and road casualties, is a best seller – it recommends the organisation of towns into neighbourhoods or ‘precincts’ separated by improved roads, and encourages the segregation of pedestrians and vehicles. Even more widely read was the Robbins Report on technical education, recommending that higher education should be made available to everyone likely to benefit from it, and encouraging more courses in applied science and technology. Exceptionally cold January and February saw rising unemployment and fears for NE.

1964. Labour win narrow election victory. Wilson promises housing built ‘with the white heat of technology’, but already the Ministry of Housing and Local Government are looking at low-rise, high-density alternatives, e.g. their scheme for Ravenscroft Road, West Ham. George Brown imposes a ban on new office buildings in London. Manchester’s College of Technology given university status. Opening of the Economist Building, London, by Alison and Peter Smithson, and of St Catherine’s College Oxford (completed 1966). Washington declared a new town to boost economy of the NE, also Redditch and Runcorn.

1965. Reform of London government creates Greater London Council and fewer, larger London Boroughs. These boroughs develop their own strong architecture programmes for housing, while GLC develops Thamesmead as a quasi new town. Richard Rogers and Norman Foster (as Team 4) build Reliance Controls, Swindon, a light steel-framed factory for the computer industry that owes much to Californian houses and schools. The South East Regional Plan suggested that another 1,250,000 people had to be accommodated in the area over the next twenty years.

1966. Labour secures larger majority. The Colleges of Advanced Technology created in 1956, plus Bristol College, are raised to university status. Opening of Severn Bridge.

1968. Collapse on 16 May of Ronan Point, Newham, following a gas explosion, causes reaction against prefabricated tower blocks. Riots in Paris; student occupations at LSE and Hornsey School of Art.

1969. Ralph Erskine is appointed to rebuild Newcastle’s Byker neighbourhood.


1974. Return of Labour Government amid miners’ strike. Reform of local authorities outside London; many authorities rush to commission new buildings rather than see their reserves pass to a successor authority (particularly if likely to be of an opposite political persuasion), or to create a lasting landmark. Creation of Public Service Architects section within DOE.

1975. Reform of British economy driven by International Monetary Fund. European Architectural Heritage Year.

1977. Elizabeth II’s silver jubilee.


1979. 3 May sees election of Conservative Government under Margaret Thatcher. End of public housing programme that November.


1985. Sir Clive Sinclair launches C5 battery electric car (first home computers were 1980)