

SPAB CONFERENCE REPORT

New Design for Old Buildings

The SPAB approach to contemporary architecture in historic contexts



Seminar presented by the SPAB
Tuesday 20 March 2018
St Martin in the Fields, Trafalgar Square, London, WC2N 4JJ
Chaired by David Alexander, SPAB Guardian

Contents

Seminar Aims	..... 3
Speakers	..... 3
New Design for Old Buildings: the SPAB Approach	..... 4-5
The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Negotiating Layers of History	..... 5
A Contemporary Approach to Contextualism	..... 6
Garden Museum, Lambeth	..... 7-8
The Bold and the Beautiful	..... 8-9
Keynote – Progressive Conservation	..... 9-10
Panel Discussion	..... 11-12
Conclusions	..... 12
Reading	..... 13
Definitions	..... 13

Seminar Aims

A celebration of good new design for old buildings, whether domestic, commercial or cultural; urban or rural. The SPAB Approach is that sympathetic but imaginative new architecture can complement the old, and is an important factor in the conservation of historic buildings as well as the sustainability of the built environment into the future.

Exploring, through example projects:

- What constitutes 'good' new design in historic contexts and how it is achieved.
- The relationship between architect and client.
- Constraints and influences on the design process.
- Responses to contexts, design cues, materiality, the interaction and linkage of new and old.

Speakers

New Design for Old Buildings: the SPAB Approach

Roger Hunt & Iain Boyd – authors of New Design for Old Buildings [SPAB / RIBA 2017]

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Negotiating layers of history

Stuart Piercy – Founding Director, Piercy and Company

A Contemporary approach to contextualism

John McElgunn – Partner, Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners

Garden Museum, Lambeth

Alun Jones – Director, Dow Jones Architects and

Christopher Woodward - Director, Garden Museum

The Bold and the Beautiful – selected projects by Chris Dyson Architects

Chris Dyson – Chris Dyson Architects LLP

Keynote – Progressive Conservation

Liz Smith – Partner, Purcell

New Design for Old Buildings: the SPAB Approach

Roger Hunt & Iain Boyd – authors of *New Design for Old Buildings* (SPAB / RIBA 2017)

The SPAB is the Society for the Protection (not preservation) of Ancient Buildings and supports sensitive repair that helps to keep buildings in active use. It does not believe it is possible or desirable to 'restore' a building i.e. return it to an arbitrary point in its history or an ideal state. Nor - contrary to some expectations - does it favour a historicist or unthinking pastiche approach to making new interventions, preferring good contemporary design that is not necessarily 'quiet' but is mannerly and responds to present day needs in the architectural language of its time. (For example, the SPAB supported Sir Basil Spence's designs for a new Coventry Cathedral after the Second World War, when many advocated instead a facsimile rebuilding of the old cathedral.)



Left: Royal William Yard, Plymouth, Gillespie Yunnie Architects and Urban Splash
Right: Martello Tower Y, Stuart Piercy. Photo credit: Edmund Sumner

Good new design is hard to define but readily recognisable. It is achieved through basing interventions on a thorough understanding of the old building – its form, functions, materials, history and development over time – and responding to the cues presented by its volumes, proportions, features, materiality and context. New work might be a non-identical twin or sibling: inserted, woven or echoing

the old. The best examples are those that respect the old building, make creative use of materials (corresponding or contrasting), with careful detailing and high quality craftsmanship, and establish a dialogue between old and new. It is important to remember that old buildings work differently from new and interventions should preserve their ability to 'breathe' – but also that their physical qualities can help architects meet contemporary performance standards (e.g. using thermal mass to assist in regulating the internal environment). Conservation and new design should go hand in hand to sustain the building, the present being only one phase in a long life of use and appreciation.

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Negotiating Layers of History

Stuart Piercy – Founding Director, Piercy and Company

Featured projects: Martello Tower Y, Bawdsey, Suffolk (2010) and Camden Market (current)

Stuart described the importance of retaining historic fabric and the essential character of the subject building, and designing new interventions inspired by and responding to the old. At the Martello Tower, the guiding philosophy had been to devise a geometry for the new (for example, the roof cap) that was derived from the existing, in order that the two could be symbiotic. An ingenious solution using light tubes and slots in the cills of existing openings had admitted borrowed light into the heart of the tower, enabling residential use of a defensive structure where no new openings in the outer wall were permitted. At Camden Market, achieving movement into and through the site, horizontally and vertically, has guided the scheme, which develops from the site's history and layout as a linked series of yards and wharf buildings of differing dates, each with their own distinctive character. It aims to emulate the utilitarian but high quality details of the historic buildings and respond to the layers of texture and patina that have developed over time.

Stuart spoke convincingly about the value of creating physical models to aid the process, both of designing for individual buildings and of masterplanning for complex sites, in addition to the use of BIM. He observed that much new design in historic contexts is development-led, but that the commercial opportunities presented by new work can enable the conservation of the old, with both making a positive contribution. The challenge of working with, or in the context of, old buildings can present to architects more interesting projects with more exciting outcomes than would designing a new building on a clear site.

A Contemporary Approach to Contextualism

John McElgunn – Partner, Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners

Featured project: British Museum World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre, Bloomsbury, London (2014)

John set out the parameters and constraints that had influenced the evolution of this project – a physically confined site; a complex setting (including the iconic British Museum main building, the adjacent King Edward VII Building of 1914, and historic Bloomsbury); multiple stakeholders with a variety of views; and a challenging brief encompassing exhibition space, conservation laboratories and access to and movement around the museum for large and fragile objects. He described preparatory work to understand and characterise context buildings – both historic and more recent interventions in the street scene – before deciding how the new building would mediate between the ‘brown’ brick residential terraces and other ‘white’ Portland stone institutional buildings. He also discussed what ‘in keeping’ might mean, before outlining the deliberate decision taken in this instance not to follow the precedent set by, for example, the use of terracotta facing for more recent buildings in the area.

John spoke eloquently both about the process of planning spaces, and about evolving a design language for the new Centre that enabled it to sit in context and mediate or harmonise with other buildings, whilst also having its own distinctive identity. It was important to continue the British Museum’s pattern of development over time, with the estate growing through the addition of buildings of differing styles in successive eras. The aim here was not to create a ‘subservient’ building (i.e. disappearing into the background) but what John called a “respectful younger sibling”. This prompted designing a ‘white’ building whose proportions relate to the cornice height of the main Museum building, and whose grid module is derived from the scale of the steel-framed, stone clad King Edward Building adjacent. The steel and glass of the new - corresponding with, not copying, the old – play with light and shade; solid, transparent and translucent. The grainy texture of the Roach bed Portland stone skin of the stair tower contrasts with the smooth Base bed Portland stone of the Museum and by keeping the stone clear of the ground it announces that it is a veneer rather than performing a load-bearing function.

Garden Museum, Lambeth

Alun Jones – Director, Dow Jones Architects and

Christopher Woodward - Director, Garden Museum

Featured projects: Garden Museum, Lambeth, London (2008 & 2017)

Alun and Christopher described the two consecutive projects that had adapted the former church of St Mary to new use as the Garden Museum. They first installed an exhibition space, providing museum-standard display conditions, in a light touch way that required no archaeological excavation and little intervention in the historic fabric by using a prefabricated two-storey structure of cross-laminated timber. The church nave / exhibition space was treated as a public square with 'buildings' of functional space clustered around it, setting up interesting juxtapositions of new and old, and of forms and features. Whilst retaining much of the earlier work, the second scheme significantly expanded the exhibition and study space and created new catering facilities to help generate income to sustain the museum and its work – described as “an invisible reality in the scheme” – whilst respecting historic fabric and the character of the building.



Garden Museum, Alun Jones and Christopher Woodward. Photo credit: David Grandorge

Both speakers emphasised the contribution architecture has made in helping the museum to realise its educational and financial objectives, and the importance of constructive dialogue with stakeholders at the planning stage. The guiding concept for the new work was of a series of pavilions arranged around the site and its historic features (such as the listed table tombs of John Tradescant and William Bligh); enclosing a new cloister garden, and framing activities, views and thresholds between the museum and its urban environment. Materials (such as the bronze cladding of the pavilions) and the manner of their use were specified for their character, texture, colour and potential for both durability and developing interesting patination over time. Christopher Woodward described the museum's commitment to remaining in the former church rather than relocating, and characterised the design process as one of "making friends with the building again".

The Bold and the Beautiful

Chris Dyson – Chris Dyson Architects LLP

Featured projects: The Wapping House, Wapping, London (2014); Gasworks, Lower Slaughter, Gloucs (2014); Spitalfields house and gallery, London; The Cooperage, Clerkenwell, London (2015); The Sekforde, Clerkenwell, London (2017)

Through a selection of projects, Chris explored the use of design approaches and materials that respond to and resonate with old buildings and their context, but which mark out the intervention as being new and of its own time – for example the large scale brick arches used in the domestic extension at the Wapping House. He described working with the character and story of a site to add a new chapter, such as the corten-clad writer's tower at Gas Works in Gloucestershire. Here the material is a foil to and contrast with the historic buildings, setting up interplay between the new work, the old stone-built house and the rusted metal ancillary agricultural buildings, and reflecting the industrial character of site. The tower form recalls a cylindrical gas holder. He emphasised the potential for delight and enjoyment in accepting patina and marks of time as part of a building's character, and sculpting or 'carving' space, for example at The Cooperage where dramatic, varied and playful volumes were achieved, rather than filling the height of the building with floors.

Chris encouraged clients and their architects to be bold in their aims and approaches, and robust but constructive in their dialogue with local authorities where consents are necessary. Whilst a practice

might develop hallmark motifs or favoured ways of working, it is always best to approach each project afresh and take cues from the specific context and materiality of the historic building.

Keynote – Progressive Conservation

Liz Smith – Partner, Purcell

Featured projects: Natural History Museum, Oxford (2014); Kew Palace, London (2006); Sammy Ofer Wing, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London (2011); Cardigan Castle (2017); Yr Ysgwrn, Snowdonia (2017); Clandon Park, Surrey (pending); St Ethelburga, Bishopsgate, London (2001)

Liz used her keynote address to reiterate that good new design is rooted in understanding and appreciation, rather than in the application of a particular style; and that continual change is inevitable in most old buildings. Architects are agents and managers of that change and should create it a careful and well-considered way. Alongside principles of minimal intervention and reversibility, she noted the potential of new technologies in “applying innovation to conservation”, for example the use of magnetic LED fittings at the Natural History Museum in Oxford, which achieved improved lighting levels without any need to drill fixings into or run cables over the historic ironwork structure. Documentary research and physical investigation to aid understanding can also provide both evidence to justify intervening in a particular location or way, and the basis for an appropriate design approach - for example a new timber clad lift tower on the site of a former garderobe shaft at Kew Palace. Traditional materials and forms can be used in a contemporary manner, and new can relate to old through rhythm, proportions, layering and juxtaposition. Some schemes may contain elements of repair, re-creation – even restoration, as the context and needs indicate.

Liz reminded delegates of the continued relevance of past RIBA President Sir Alexander John Gordon’s ‘3 Ls’: that for good architecture to be relevant over time, it must be designed to be long life, loose fit and low energy. She also stressed the importance of collaborating with other skilled professionals in a project team (the quantity surveyor, engineer, craftspeople and conservators) and allowing time for analysis, reflection and stakeholder engagement – though noted that it is sometimes difficult to reconcile a reflective and iterative approach with the RIBA stages of work plan, which requires design work to start in Stage 2. The recently published conservation guide to accompany the plan takes more account of such an approach to historic buildings. Liz concluded by anticipating the outcomes of the creative approach being taken by the National Trust to its fire damaged country house, Clandon Park, and reference to

the Japanese art of kintsugi, which treats damage and repair as part of an artefact's history and reveals beauty through visible repairs skilfully executed. She echoed the words of nineteenth century writer and thinker John Ruskin: "Our duty is to preserve what the past has had to say for itself, and to say for ourselves what shall be true for the future".



Kew Palace, Purcell

Panel Discussion

Do we need a new 'R-word'? 'Restoration' is used generically and can be a semantic trap.

Renewal can be helpful, where buildings enter a new phrase of life through adaptive reuse. Renovation lies closer to repair in meaning, and is perhaps more widely understood. Recuperation – not specifically an architectural term – indicates both a capacity for something new to happen, and the sense of healing. Delegates noted the term 'sibling' had been often used of new additions to old buildings in the course of the seminar, and was helpful in connoting a generational relationship between old and new.

How much is the average building owner or observer concerned with semantics, or the philosophy or principles that guide new work to old buildings?

Not very – but people *are* interested in the end results. Change and new insertions or additions can be exciting and help to engage people with a building. The capacity for narrative is embedded in how architects do what they do. In general, people appreciate and value old buildings, but don't necessarily understand how they work and how things can go wrong. The SPAB aims to raise awareness of breathability, traditional materials, and the value of maintenance.

What are the biggest challenges for the future?

The current building and conservation skills shortage and need for training. A lack of coverage of architectural history and understanding traditional construction in architects' education. Housing needs viz a viz pressures on the green belt, and opportunities to use brownfield sites and to repopulate city centres – this may require a bold approach to reusing old buildings. There is a continuing need to make the best use of existing buildings, but much retrofitting in the recent past has been badly done and counter-productive. Sensitive and effective upgrading of housing stock must remain high on the agenda. The transfer of publicly owned heritage buildings into private ownership is gathering pace, and can subject these buildings to commercial pressure for development that is hard to balance with their other value (architectural, historic, social).

What would be the impact if the process for obtaining 'heritage consents' (such as Listed Building Consent) was privatised as Building Regulations has been, in part?

Listed buildings are a public good and assets in the community even if privately owned – the process for managing change must also be public. Retaining competence in local authorities is vital.

Are architectural competitions a good way to encourage good new design?

The competition brief may ask rather different things of the architect than the project actually needs to deliver for the client and for the building; but competitions may help new practices break into adaptive reuse work. The way a winning entry is composed might not be the way the architect would necessarily work-up and implement a scheme. Competitions are best when they elicit a response to a place, or help to match a way of working with the client's aims, rather than requiring a design solution. The Clandon Park competition may, in future, be seen as a landmark in this respect. The panel concluded that "great buildings come from great clients".

Conclusions

- Good new design in historic contexts grows from understanding and respecting the old building – research, context studies and detailed observation of the existing.
- Good new design is context-specific – whether it uses contrasting, complementary or closely matching architectural language and materials, it should be honest and readable, and not confuse the physical record of the building's history.
- An imaginative and problem-solving approach can retain the maximum historic fabric and protect the character of a building or place whilst also achieving the practical aims of the project. Boldness can bear fruit – though local authority attitudes to new design for old buildings vary widely.
- All were agreed on the importance of the careful choice and quality of materials, and of craftsmanship in their use.
- Conservation of old buildings and good new design go hand in hand, as in Kevin McCloud's Foreword to *New Design for Old Buildings* "...good conservation demands a clear and rigorous contemporary approach to new work just as much as it requires delicacy and respect in dealing with the past".

Reading

New Design for Old Buildings – Roger Hunt and Iain Boyd, with Foreword by Kevin McCloud (2017)

SPAB / RIBA Publishing, ISBN 978-1-85946-612-4 (The book contains a helpful bibliography.)

The SPAB Approach: the conservation & care of old buildings – Matthew Slocombe (2017) available on the SPAB website: <https://www.spab.org.uk/campaigning/spab-approach>

Building on the Past – Roger Hunt and Iain Boyd in SPAB Magazine, Autumn 2017, pp36-41

Definitions

BIM: Building Information Modelling is a process for creating and managing information on a construction project across the project's lifecycle. One of the key outputs of this process is the Building Information Model, the digital description of every aspect of the built asset, based on information assembled collaboratively - drawing together contributions from the different disciplines represented in the project team - and updated at key stages of a project. BIM brings together all of the information about every component of a building in one place and makes it possible for anyone to access that information for any purpose (e.g. to integrate different aspects of the design more effectively).

<https://www.rics.org/uk/knowledge/glossary/bim-intro/>

Portland Stone: A shelly white-grey limestone of the Jurassic period, quarried in the Isle of Portland, Dorset and used extensively as building stone around the UK and overseas. The stone occurs in beds separated by layers of chert, with different beds having distinct characters. Broadly speaking, Basebed is fine grained and suitable for ashlar work and fine carving; Whitbed combines fine grains with shells and small fossils and is commonly used for ashlar work and pavings; Roach bed is more shelly with distinctive embedded fossils and is often seen in cladding and flooring.

COR-TEN (Corten): Trade/ generic name for high-strength, low alloy steel, also known as 'weathering steel', used in architecture and sculpture for its structural and aesthetic properties, developing a stable rust-like surface appearance in varied red-brown tones after a few years' exposure.