



Social housing and working class heritage

Winners and losers perspective: Alan Powers

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It was very inspiring to see all those people talking with such affection about a place that I think many outsiders would say 'that's terrible, that should be demolished', and it points up how little people know about what's going on in the inside, and not everywhere will necessarily have that kind of a story, but it was very heart-warming to see how much collective activity there was, and how people's memories kind of coalesced around that place and that group of people.

I think that the Carpenters Estate, quite rightly, it was not a question about listing, and I don't think the residents thought it was, and nobody else did either, and normally one could see where buildings are straying into the territory that's covered by listing, and then the question becomes are they really going to be in it or just outside? The ideal situation for listing a building within the last two hundred years, say, will be that it has the name of a designer or a group of designers attached to it who are recognised as being important. Now that doesn't cover all cases by any means, there are anonymous works that come up, and works by unknown people, and they can be assessed for different qualities, but given the extremely narrow gateway, as it were, through which public housing must pass one would, for example, be able to list something by the LCC architects but not everything, there is a lot of it. The London County Council had its own teams of in-house architects who did the Roehampton Estate, and many other buildings, some were in housing, some were in schools, etcetera, and they were very widely renowned around the world, some of them made their name separately as individual practitioners, some of them stayed inside the organisation, though there was a lot of young talent coming in, like Sir Colin St John Wilson who later designed the British Library, for example. It's very much to do with authorship.

This may be a wrong way of doing things but that's the way it's set up at the moment. There can be a link between social and representative aspects of the thing, and the aesthetic ones, and sometimes there may not be a continuity of inhabitation, there may be nobody to speak for this thing, there may be so many people speaking for it in so many different voices that it's very hard to get a clear single view. So if anybody can devise a system that can in a not entirely obstructive way factor in people's feelings about things and places, that would be wonderful, but I'm not sure quite how it could be done, I mean what Common Ground have been talking about for a long time I am extremely sympathetic to, linking between built structures and landscapes, and sites of memory and folk tradition, and animal husbandry and a wonderful range of what makes up the richness of culture, both urban and rural. And I think that has been reflected in the designation process in some ways, although it doesn't come down to the what you could call the micro scale that Common Ground quite rightly identify of, you know, a field gate, a particular tree, which are often as emotive as something man-made and bigger, and it was a brilliant polemic which I think has influenced people's outlook.

However it's very difficult to turn that into a protection system to kind of assess and evaluate, but when the council comes to widen the road whether they'll pull out that tree, or take down that brick wall that happens to matter a great deal to somebody, I don't know, sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. A combination of the gut feelings of people and the measured opinions of experts somehow joined together would seem to be a very good idea but at the moment I can't see how it could possibly be achieved. I think that although experts may appear to be elitist there is actually some benefit in that, and this is to do with taking a long view. I think elitism is culpable if it is being exercised to the advantage of the person doing it but if, which I think is possible, it is essentially altruistic, then somebody ought to be able to be

allowed to do it because opinions change, the cycle of taste changes, what seems worthless at one time, ten years later when it's gone we suddenly recognise that we should have kept it.

So this is one reason why there is a certain detachment about this selection process, and why a popular view may work in tandem with it but it may not support it, it might go against it, and simply to expect the popular view to prevail I think could well result in some loss, it might result in some gain, we'd have a very different system, everybody concerned would have to decide that that's what they wanted. When I say detached I don't mean that pure minds unlocated in time and space, but they do not have a direct interest, if you like, in the outcome, it may fortify and support something that they believe in, but they're not gaining financially from it or life will not be affected in a major way. It may be tough on people whose lives are affected, possibly adversely by this decision, but this is the way the system has been set up. I don't think there's been a convincing challenge to it being set up that way. One could think of a rock and a stream, buildings tend to get represented as rocks, they get eroded and changed, people are streams, they move through time, they come and they go, they make a difference, but to try and put the rock and the stream into the same side of the balance of the weighing machine seems to me an impossible thing to do, and if we're talking about streams let's see to them, if we're talking about rocks we'll see to them, but keep them separate.