

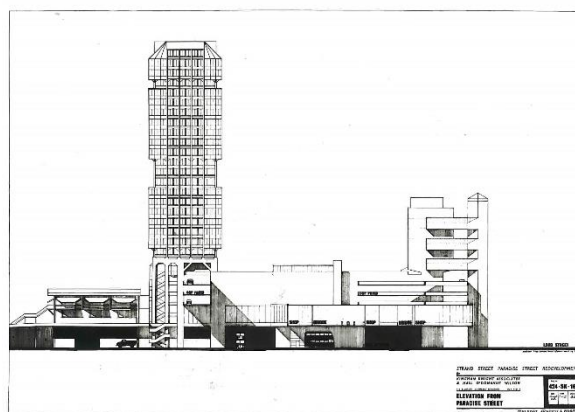
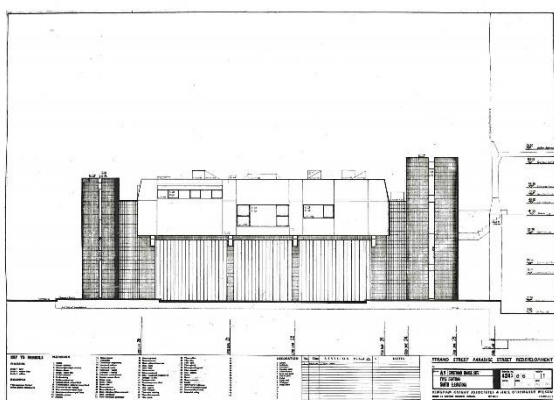
## Civic Architecture and the Municipal Estate

In adverse times we often reflect fondly and with a degree of post-rationalisation upon past glories, such is the purpose of this essay, to offer a rose-tinted reflection upon forgotten monuments to local democracy. It makes no claims to comprehensiveness or balance.

There are legions of advocates, reams of paper and megabytes of data dedicated to the study, preservation and appreciation of the modernist masterpieces of post Second World War liberal democracy. We will not be discussing the Lasdun's or the Stirling's but the Paterson, Macaulay & Owens, the J.C.Prestwich & Sons, the Hall O'Donahue & Wilson's. Ever heard of them? No, not surprising for they are the local disciples', the providers of branch libraries, fire stations, and schools. Not for them the RIBA Gold Medal, glossy monographs or whispered excitement at North London dinner parties. Their's is the Civic Architecture of the Municipal Estate.

Often knowing and referential, frequently compromised this architecture provides the Civic backdrop to housing estates and new towns, it is the remarkable made everyday, and it is an endangered species.

A perfect illustration of this type is the Canning Place fire station in Liverpool by Hall O'Donahue & Wilson, 1971-73. A small branch station to serve the city centre, this was planned as part of the proposed Strand/Paradise Street redevelopment, a fore-runner to Grosvenor Estates Liverpool One shopping centre. Located adjacent to a section of the inner ring road in the shadow of a mixed use block of warehouses and offices by the same architects, it was influenced by Corbusier's unfinished church of Sainte-Pierre at Firminy 1971<sup>1</sup>. A curious transposition of functional precedents made all the more bizarre by referencing the new ruin.



Canning Place fire station and Paradise Street re-development, Hall O'Donahue & Wilson 1970 onwards (1&2)



Canning Place fire station, Hall, O'Donahue & Wilson 1971, with warehouses by same architect in background. (3)

A reference lost with the completion of the church in 2003. The formal association, decoupled from the supposed functional determinism of the precedent, makes architectural references to and for other architects. The white stack bonded ceramic tiles are another collaged element this time from the work of YRM, which included the nearby Liverpool University Electrical Engineering building, 1965. As a fire station it was incredibly popular with its users and despite its diminutive stature became something of a local landmark. Demolished in 2006 its site is now occupied by the entrance to the Hilton Hotel.

This practice was rather fond of Corbusier references with another Liverpool fire station the extraordinary Storrington Avenue Fire House 1967 giving a passing nod to the Maison Jaoul 1954. This is a well-trodden source with the rather more famous Liverpool trained James Stirling also using it for his Ham Common flats, 1958. Stirling was at Liverpool School of Architecture with George Hall and Colin Wilson and would visit their office on his return to the city to see relatives at Christmas<sup>2</sup>. Featured in *The Architects Journal* 27.12.1967, this was a training school which involved designing a domestic scale structure which was entirely fireproof so that it could be filled with combustible material and set light to on a regular basis. The result is a house which takes on a monumental quality through its material palette and strong simple forms. The mannerist use of exposed concrete slab edges and Fletton bricks brings a peculiarly contemporary feel to the composition (would Caruso St John be happy with this in their back catalogue?).

*"This remarkable building already looks and smells, especially internally, like an aged relic;"*

*Architects Journal* 27.12.1967 p1648



Storrington Avenue Fire Training centre by Hall, O'Donahue & Wilson 1967 (4).

This building still exists although the adjacent fire station has been replaced and it is now concealed behind a collection of lack lustre suburban community buildings.

Across the River Mersey on the Wirral another practice was drawing upon the oeuvre of modernist motifs to good effect in the Bebington Civic Centre. A collection of Library, Police Station and Health Centre set in a mature generous landscape, this grouping designed by Paterson, Macaulay & Owens, 1965, represents the very essence of local municipal functions made solid. Listed grade 2 by Historic England in 2016 the library in particular plays a similar game:

*"...confidently referencing both Denys Lasdun's 1960-4 Royal College of Physicians and Le Corbusier in its form,"*

Historic England list entry number 1422767, April 2015.

the listing goes on to mention the not just the exemplar of 1960's library planning but also:

*"...lavish provision of other community activities alongside the library in the form of a suite of civic meeting rooms, originally with a coffee bar, and an exhibition space;"*

Historic England list entry number 1422767, April 2015.

Here we have a comprehensive set of public functions set out as a playground of architectural references by a local practice with an international image library. The projecting Piano Nobile with the paired offset fin wall columns is Lasdun all over whilst the roof top objects come straight from Corb at Marseille. Formalism at the service of the state giving a civic focus to the suburbs. This example of Civic values in the Municipal estate has been recently afforded

a degree of protection but many more are vulnerable to changing patterns of use, local authority budget cuts, maintenance backlogs and a lack of understanding of their importance.



Bebington Public Library by Paterson, Macaulay & Owens, 1965. (5&6)

The Turnpike Centre in Leigh halfway between Liverpool and Manchester is another example of local architects delivering upon the welfare states promise of culture for all. Designed by J.C. Prestwich & Sons in 1971 this combination of library and gallery provides the civic focal point in a small mill/mining town whose other architectural wonders extend to a Victorian town hall, a couple of brick mills and a terracotta pub or two. In this environment, manifest state indifference is only countered by the residue of past Municipal investments. The Turnpike Centre replete with its William Mitchell concrete relief sculpture over the entrance has the promise of a future that is only dimly remembered.

Again the future is one of Modernist motifs, in this case the source is Ahrends Burton and Koralek's Berkeley Library at Trinity College Dublin, 1960-67. The concrete hooded vents are substituted for concrete hooded windows the ground floor glass oriels at Dublin become framed in concrete at Leigh but the overall effect is of a lesser, later, reduced budget relative. Recently (2008) threatened with a rather insensitive upgrade, incorporating a new foyer which would have concealed the front façade and obscured the William Mitchell relief. For now it appears that local authority budget cuts have saved the building from alteration as it slowly passes into community group administration. The role of poverty in preserving the built environment, (Georgian Dublin, Victorian Liverpool), is an interesting subject for another time.



Turnpike Centre, Leigh by J.C. Prestwich & Sons 1971 (7)

These examples of municipal modernism have a value greater than their architectural lineage, they represent a faith in the future, in liberal values of the enlightenment updated for the welfare state.

At 50 years plus of age many have been demolished or altered beyond recognition, when an architecture supposedly derived from a functional basis no longer functions surely the argument goes it should be demolished. This makes the mistake of conflating what architects say with what they do, and by extension would lead to the loss of any building that changes its function. The need investment is obvious, even the apparently indestructible fire house at Storrington Avenue won't last forever. That they will receive investment is far less certain, perhaps the best we can expect in the current political climate is benign indifference tempered by local activism. The small selection of North West examples could be repeated in any part of the country with a different set of local practices of equal obscurity each producing on a good day work which has architectural merit. Combined however they represent much more, the grass roots of a Civic Architecture.

#### References:

1. George Hall in conversation with author, 1998.
2. Letters from James Stirling to Colin Wilson in the archive of George Hall, recalled by Evelyn Hall in unscripted interview with author, 2016.

#### Illustrations:

1 & 2 – Hall O'Donahue & Wilson archive

3 – Elsam Mann & Cooper

4 – Elsam Mann & Cooper

5 & 6 – Author

7 - ? (will update with my own image to avoid copyright issues).

**DW 01.03.17**