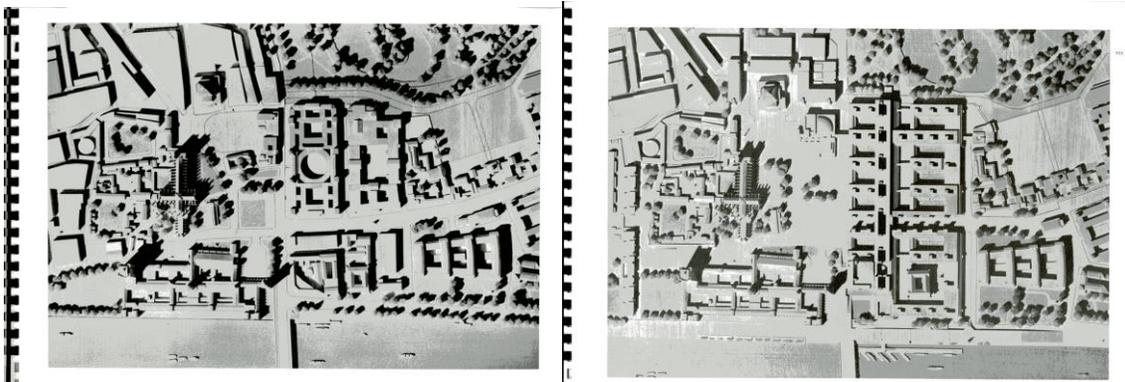


The White Heat of Conservation

Adam Sharr and Stephen Thornton

While architects and scholars are now exercised by the conservation of modern architecture, few modern architects were similarly exercised by conservation. This paper investigates the attitude to conservation apparent in one highly symbolic, but un-built, project from 1960s London. It was a project to demolish and rebuild the historic nineteenth century *palazzi* of Whitehall – the so-called ‘Government Centre’ of Britain – and replace them with a megastructure comprising stepped-section slab blocks (Martin and Buchanan, 1965), a project dubbed as ‘ziggurats for bureaucrats’ (Rice, 2004). This megastructure would span the roads into Parliament Square and re-frame the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey [1]. The architect of the proposal was Leslie Martin, now best known as designer of the Royal Festival Hall (completed in 1951), as Cambridge Professor of Architecture (from 1956-1972) and as a competition juror who selected Stirling and Gowan for the Leicester Engineering Building and Jorn Utzøen for the Sydney Opera House project (Carolin and Dannatt, 1996).



[1] The model made for the Whitehall plan showing the existing condition (left), similar to that which remains today, and the proposed design (right). Whitehall curves gently east-west into Parliament Square, which is slightly left of centre. To the south of the square is the Palace of Westminster, commonly known as the Houses of Parliament, and to its west is Westminster Abbey. The River Thames is at the bottom of the model and St. James' Park is top right. Copyright: HMSO.

While Martin's Whitehall project is now largely forgotten, it provides a fascinating insight into the particular values of a particular time. The design was submitted to Harold Wilson's Labour administration in 1965, to a party which had, two years earlier, pledged to remake Britain in the 'white heat' of a scientific revolution. On one hand, the Whitehall plan can be read as an attempt to burnish the pride of a British state impoverished by the Second World War and divested of empire. On the other, presented

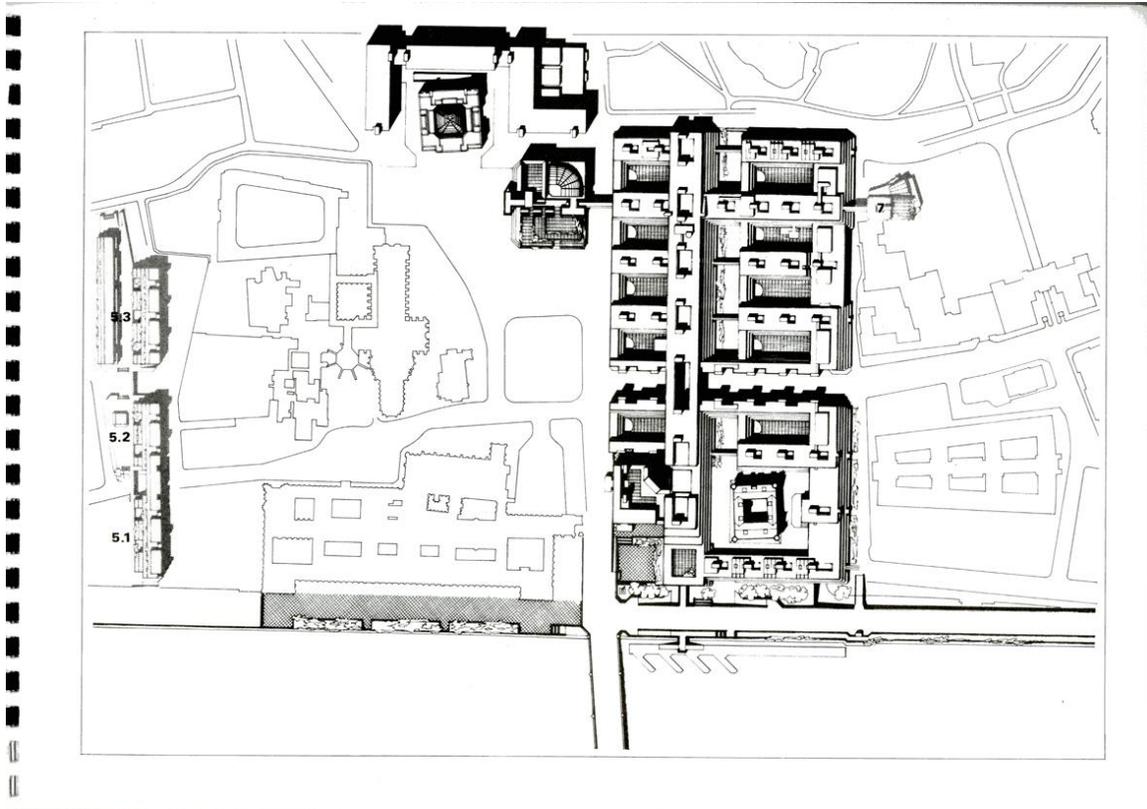
to an administration elected on the promise of re-forging socialism in terms of a scientific revolution, it can also be read as forward-looking and utopian, intent on demonstrating the value of technology as an instrument of popular salvation. From today's perspective, when the idea of demolishing grand palaces like George Gilbert Scott's Foreign Office – a proposal at the centre of the project – would seem ludicrous, the plan's eager anticipation of a new future makes it an object of fascination.

Leslie Martin's Whitehall plan

The Whitehall plan was described by different authors in a Victorian Society anniversary book published in 2010 as a 'megalomaniac conception' and a 'draconian plan' (Hill et al., 2010). While this is the most common interpretation today, the plan was seen rather differently in 1965 (Sandbrook, 2006). The architecture of the Foreign Office and other Whitehall buildings *then* stood for a past age; one which recalled a rigid nineteenth century social hierarchy – of patrician gentry, white-collar functionaries, blue-collar trades and domestic service – at a time when the new political rhetoric of 'white heat' favoured the idea of the meritocratic, scientific professional.

Martin's Whitehall report began with the problems of Parliament Square – then, as now, 'prejudiced by traffic'. His associate leading the project was Lionel March who, as a Cambridge student, had transferred from Mathematics to Architecture at the same time as Christopher Alexander and had recently returned to Britain from a PhD at the Harvard/MIT Joint Center for Urban Studies. Under Martin's supervision, March developed a scientific approach to the Whitehall design. Drawing from Fresnel's diagram of squares – which subsequently became the emblem for a new approach to research at Cambridge's Centre for Land Use and Built Form Studies (Martin and March, 1972) – March evaluated different building forms on a generic site to test the ideal form for government offices. On this basis, the report challenged the conventional modernist orthodoxy of towers set in parkland, proposing instead a stepped section of eleven stories spreading across the site, accommodating open-plan offices at high level around a series of arcades [2]. A graph was produced comparing site area, plot ratio, efficiency of floor area and clerical density in order to find the ideal plan and section form to be applied [3].

would put road traffic in a new tunnel in the Thames, pedestrianising Parliament Square and completing a new riverfront. The sixth phase would demolish a series of buildings including the Middlesex Guildhall – a nineteenth century neo-Gothic structure which was converted in 2005 to become the new home for Britain’s Supreme Court – to enclose the north side of Parliament Square and add a so-called ‘major building of national or international significance’. The seventh and final phase would enclose the west side of the new ‘parliamentary precinct’ with a hall of residence for parliamentarians, similar to that called-for by the British press in the wake of the 2009 expenses scandal [4].



[4] Drawing showing the seven phases of the project complete. The megastructure spans Whitehall. Norman Shaw's Scotland Yard is seen locked into it below Whitehall; Lanchester and Rickards' Methodist Central Hall is enclosed by a block to the top and Inigo Jones' Banqueting House is shown right-centre. Copyright: HMSO.

As this short outline suggests, the plan was by no means modest in scale, scope or conception. It envisaged clearing and rebuilding six blocks of Central London – part of which is now a World Heritage Site – including various eighteenth and nineteenth century buildings now listed in the UK at Grade 1.

Conservation values apparent in the plan

This is not to say that Leslie Martin's Whitehall plan pursued a wholly *tabula rasa* approach to historic buildings. Inigo Jones' famous Banqueting House, commonly

assumed to have launched English Palladian architecture, was to be retained and its neighbour, the Georgian Gwydwr House, was to be removed in order to emphasise it. Richard Norman Shaw's Arts-and-Crafts headquarters for the Metropolitan Police at Scotland Yard was also to be retained. Stripped of its later extensions (including that by Shaw) in order to emphasise its four-square perfection as an object, it was to be locked into a courtyard of the megastructure. Also to be retained, on the north side of Parliament Square, was Westminster Central Hall, a place of Methodist worship completed to designs by Lanchester and Rickards in 1911 with a French baroque inflection to its Arts-and-Crafts details. Strikingly, these historic buildings to be preserved were described by the report 'the invariants of any plan'.

Martin's Whitehall designs, then, demonstrate a curiously selective view of history. When asked recently, in an interview with us, why certain buildings were to be saved amidst the demolition, Lionel March replied simply 'because we liked them'. We suspect, however, that this is not the whole story. Antony Vidler has suggested that post-war modern architects used history in three ways:

'first, to demonstrate the fundamental antiquity of the old way of building; then, to tell the story of the prehistory of modernism as it emerged out of the old; and finally, with the help of abstract ideas of form and space, to be redrawn as a continuing process of invention and a repertory of formal and spatial moves' (Vidler, 2008).

Martin and March's scientific conception of design can be located in Vidler's third approach to architectural history: they sought ideal diagrammatic archetypes which would be useful for the future, similar to the approach of J.N.L. Durand in the eighteenth century. But the architects of the Whitehall plan were also sympathetic to the second approach: the recasting of architectural history to make modernism its logical consequence. Nikolaus Pevsner's *The Pioneers of Modern Design*, included by Martin on the first year reading list for student architects in Cambridge, tells the story clearly; indicating a lineage from the Ancient classical temples to Palladio's villas, to the beginnings of functional expression in *Jugendstil* and *Art Nouveau*, to the proto-modernists of the Arts-and-Crafts movement and finally to the mainstream production of modern architecture (Pevsner, 1960). In this light, Martin and March's preferences in the Whitehall plan can be appreciated as fulfilling the story of Pevsner's Modern Pioneers.

There is another curiosity in the conservation values at work. Jones' Banqueting House, Norman Shaw's Scotland Yard and Lanchester and Rickard's Methodist Central Hall were all to be isolated in space, stripped of their adjacent structures. They were to be presented as objects for contemplation. This is, perhaps, a fulfilment of the art-historical idea of architectural history. This approach serves to idealise the art object, imagined as a thing-unto-itself, presented for discussion in photographs in books and journals with its surroundings cropped-out. Like framed photographs, Martin and March proposed isolating historic buildings to present them as exemplars for future contemplation by art historians. They were imagined as objects of scientific curiosity, made available for study like a specimen in a test tube.

Intriguingly, the conservation values apparent in Martin's plan did not chime harmoniously with those of the government led by the herald of 'white heat', Harold Wilson. Paradoxically, the previous Conservative governments of Harold Macmillan (1956-1963) and Alec Douglas-Home (1963-64) were conspicuous for their lack support for many conservation projects, of which the 'murder' of the Doric arch at Euston station was the most celebrated example. As John Delafons has explained (1997), it was only with the election of a Labour government in 1964 that a coherent conservation policy was initiated in the UK. At the centre of this development were the Minister of Housing and Local Government (MHLG), Richard Crossman, and his junior minister with responsibility for historic buildings, Lord (Wayland) Kennet. Crossman initiated a change in his department's previously dismissive attitude to conservation, noting that his long-serving most senior official at the MHLG tended to regard 'preservationalism', as 'a word of abuse', whereas Crossman himself favoured, 'a new and sensible relationship between planning and preservation' (Crossman, 1975). Furthermore Kennet had a long standing interest in the history of architecture and urban design, and was heavily influenced by the French *zone protégé* system. Thus, and in awkward contrast to the sentiments expressed in Martin's plan, Crossman and Kennet sought to push the idea that 'it was not only single buildings which could have architectural or historic interest, but also groups of buildings, streets, quarters of towns, whole towns' (Kennet, 1972). This clash of conservation philosophies between architect and government was one of a number of factors which prevented Martin's scheme – which had been commissioned by the previous Conservative administration – from being realised.

Modern conservation values at work

Conservation values commonly applied to both pre-modern and modern buildings – those of ICOMOS's Venice Charter charter for example (ICOMOS, 1964) – derive from the values of William Morris' *Manifesto for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings*; from a particular late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century mindset. They promote the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the building as a total work of art, appreciating history as a series of archaeological layers made visible in architectural artefacts, seeing those artefacts as part of their urban or landscape settings. Thus, contemporary conservation experts consider historic buildings holistically as artefacts in contexts, curated to make the past apparent as a sequence of layers.

This is in contrast to the values of the Martin plan, where historic buildings were instead imagined as ideal objects, complete in their formal perfection, to be isolated for the contemplation of future generations. No multiple histories were to be visible through the expression of historical layers; there was instead one history: that of modernism. Thus, the Whitehall plan – and the distinctive conservation values at work in it – raises an important question about the idea of conserving the modern. Specifically: why do we employ the same set of values for conserving modern buildings that we employ for conserving pre-modern buildings?

Many of the early protagonists of modern architecture saw it as a decisive break with the past. Martin, for example, understood modernism as replacing the old idea of the architect as an aesthetic connoisseur with a new idea of the architect as a research scientist. The new architecture, for him, was scientific and technical in orientation. It was not just about absorbing the *image* of technology – drawing from cars and ocean liners – but also about absorbing its *methods* and *procedures* in the scientific pursuit of ideal building types (Martin, 1983). If Leslie Martin’s Whitehall plan can be taken as an example, then at least some modern architects seem to have thought about conservation differently. Historic buildings were imagined as ideal geometric building forms presented to future generations as objects for studying modernism and its origins. Does this mean, then, that the contemporary conservation of modern architecture should be thought about differently? If we conserve pre-modern architecture according to pre-modern values, then should we learn instead to conserve modern architecture, as Martin did, according to modern values?

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