

# UK Newsletter 19

## Contents:

Winter 2009

Editorial

Campaigns

George Pace

Ukraine Modernism

Robert Mallet-Stevens

Influence of Le Corbusier

Chandigarh Symposium

Dawsons Heights

Moscow Heritage



The Eindhoven Statement  
DOCOMOMO exists to:

- 1 Bring the significance of the Modern Movement to the attention of the public, the authorities, the professions and the educational community concerned with the built environment.
- 2 Identify and promote the recording of the works of the modern Movement, which will include a register, drawings, photographs and other documents.
- 3 Foster the development of appropriate techniques and methods of conservation, and disseminate knowledge of these throughout the profession.
- 4 Oppose destruction and disfigurement of significant works.
- 5 Identify and attract funding for documentation and conservation.
- 6 Explore and develop knowledge of the Modern Movement.

# Editorial

Repair, reuse, recycle is the mantra we have been intoning for decades now (though we may chose to ignore it) in relation to household goods and other 'disposables'. Is the message finally creeping into the subconscious of credit-strapped Councils and developers? Those who can no longer make the financial case to demolish whole estates and building complexes are rediscovering hidden value in buildings previously abused and denigrated, conveniently re-evaluating them with a different set of criteria.

New Culture Minister Margaret Hodge's approval for listing of Eero Saarinen's 1960 American Embassy in Grosvenor Square is heartening. But listing of course is a double-edged sword and any future use for the building will have to incorporate the long-term financial commitment of conservation and upkeep. Hodge's comments that listed buildings must be 'fit for purpose', 'the best example of an architect's work' or 'the best example of a particular building type' offer hope to post-war buildings that have reached middle age and are looking for love; though it guarantees nothing.

On the same theme there has been an outraged response from many organisations including the RTPI, the Institute of Historic Building Conservation, planning departments and planners nationwide to the government's Draft PPS15: Planning for the Historic Environment. The thrust of the Draft document, they state, is that historic buildings and places are a burden, whereas their current designation is that of 'irreplaceable asset', and they fear that the result would be to see more historic buildings demolished.

The draft document views buildings non-contextually, relying instead on academic

assessments of empirical architectural value. Thus it is clearly quite out of step with the times and ignores the social, functional, environmental and economic potential of historic buildings while marginalising the importance of local distinctiveness and character. It sidelines the environmental benefits of sustainable management and ignores the possibilities of new advances in reducing CO2 emissions in existing buildings. Imagine the embodied energy of a building such as Birmingham Central Library, and how much energy it would take to destroy and process the concrete waste!

Other areas inadequately covered are the definitions of 'heritage asset' and 'significance', which leave too much leeway for developers to argue against the significance of a building. The importance of conservation areas has been underplayed, leaving local authorities open to challenge on enforcing control. Similarly Grade II listed buildings are sidelined, along with the conservation creed of 'repair rather than replace, repair honestly, avoid conjectural restoration'.

The Draft document, which has presumably undergone its gestation during the property boom, has been roundly condemned and will now, we are assured, be reviewed. All this is very pertinent to the subjects of our campaigns this issue. While John Madin's

Birmingham Central Library is on the critical list, RMJM's Commonwealth Institute has been saved but at what cost, with the complex up for partial demolition, the potential arrival of three overpowering residential blocks, and the threat of unsympathetic remodelling in the building now called the Parabola?

There is mostly good news and some bad on the threat to Goldfinger's Cheltenham Estate. Kensington and Chelsea Council, in a 'road to Damascus' conversion that could only have been prompted by a disappointing financial viability study, have decided to remove the threat of demolition to Edenhall Way, the 100 flats and houses that form part of the Trellick Tower complex. While this is good news at last for anxious residents, and a good result for a fiercely fought campaign, a rather half-hearted proposal from the Council to stuff the former Edenhall Old People's Home site at the foot of the Tower with housing will get very little enthusiasm. Despite an overwhelming need for social rented housing in the area, it is unthinkable to consider building five-storey blocks in such a sensitive area, and to infill Edenhall Way with extra houses. Creative alternatives, please!

To counter the Council's floundering and expensive attempts to tackle the open wound at Edenhall, it has been a genuine pleasure for me as local Councillor of that ward to work

with architects Novarc Studio on a *pro bono* project with the local community that has knocked the socks off its rival study. Starting with the Council's commitment to re-provide older people's accommodation there, and an identified need for a health centre, Novarc's Vision for Edenhall has come up with a quite beautiful reworking of space and mass that was good enough not to displease James Dunnett (no mean feat). It includes a spectacular new public square that resets Trellick Tower and provides a much needed destination for visitors to the local markets and for Goldfinger lovers. Novarc continue to develop the project with potential partners lining up. The full presentation can be seen at [www.golbornelife.co.uk](http://www.golbornelife.co.uk).

Tim Bruce-Dick's study visit to the Ukraine (page 5) brought some unexpected delights, including Vasilevsky's Sanatorium straight from the set of 'Thunderbirds'. Another great season of seminars brought us four masters of the art (page 8) who discussed the early days of working in the LCC and the socialist passions that ignited them, in an evening of debate about the influence of Le Corbusier. Richard Klein's brilliant expose of Robert Mallet-Stevens' work shone the light on this influential character. As ever we are hugely grateful for the continuing patronage of The Concrete Centre.

Clem Cecil's 2007 book 'Moscow Heritage under Threat' has been updated and republished in English with the help of a legacy from our former chair, the late Catherine Cooke, and James Dunnett's comments at the book launch are summarised on page 11. As we are increasingly called upon to defend 'hard to love' post-war housing, Philip Boyle's comments on the LCC's Dawson Heights (page 9) is a timely reminder of what we are all fighting for.



# Campaigns

James Dunnett, Philip Boyle and Emma Dent Coad

Friends of the Central Library Birmingham may be consoled to hear that RIBA Publishing is going ahead with the John Madin Monograph. This will be published in 2010 as part of the Twentieth Century Architects series edited by English Heritage and The 20th Century Society, who have published books on Powell and Moya and Ryder and Yates.

Alan Clawley, Secretary of the Friends, is under contract to write the necessary words and select illustrations for the book.

At the time of going to press we had just heard the negative decision of the new Culture Minister Margaret Hodge on the possible listing of Birmingham Central Library, which former Director of Planning at Birmingham Council, Les Sparks, calls 'Birmingham's greatest post-war building'. After the announcement of wholehearted support from English Heritage, and the lukewarm reception for the new Mecanoo design by the public, the architectural community and CABE, we hoped matters were looking more hopeful for this iconic building. Despite this setback (and it's not over till it's over) we hope that a generation of post-war buildings under possible threat might be rehabilitated in the public mind, with the realisation that it would be wise to reflect upon and learn to love them again, with judicious and sensitive remodelling for long-term future use.

Meanwhile, co-chair James Dunnett is tireless in his campaign to protect Finsbury Health Centre, encouraging the NHS Islington to review the building's future in the light of Sert's TB Clinic in Barcelona. This is an extract from his letter: 'Clearly it is the job of NHS Islington to supply health services and not to renovate historic buildings, but that should not preclude the use of historic buildings where appropriate - Barts Hospital nearby with its recently renovated Grade 1-listed buildings continues to function well, and I dare say the historic location and environmental qualities contribute to the morale, effectiveness, and loyalty of the staff. So might they continue to do at Finsbury Health Centre. A comparable example of its own date and scale is the Central Dispensary in Barcelona of 1934-5 designed by Josep Lluís Sert (an associate of Le Corbusier and later architect of the Fondation Maeght in Venice). Originally intended for the treatment of TB, it was expertly renovated in the 1990s and continues to function as a busy general health centre. It was seen as an emblem of the social policies suppressed by Franco. The FHC likewise is an important symbol of the social provision which the NHS continues magnificently to embody.'

The campaign to save Sheppard Robson's City University main buildings, designed from the late 1960s, from an unsympathetic redevelopment is yet another symptom of the total miscomprehension of Modernist architectural space. In his letter to Planning, Philip Boyle cited the

buildings as 'an exceptionally complete and important example of their work', of which three educational complexes are already Grade II listed: Churchill College, Cambridge; Imperial College Weeks Hall, London; and the School of Navigation, Warwash. Sheppard Robson's work, he stated is 'of acknowledged excellence and value', where the proposed redevelopment would mean 'partial demolition with infilling of all free spaces ... the end result is likely to be loss of the architectural value of the existing complex without the gain of a coherent alternative'. Philip also commended the materials and construction 'finely built of good Crowborough brick, carefully shuttered concrete and



handsome joinery ... apparently in good order'.

Another building probably saved by credit crunch-inspired circumspection is The Sobell Centre, Islington, the sports and leisure centre designed by Bill Laming of Richard Seifert and Partners of 1973. In a classic move the Council's consultation leaflet condemned the building as 'environmentally unfriendly ...with lots of wasted space ...unattractive', totally ignoring the premise of the concept of the 'green city' that set buildings within green space offering a refuge of light and space from the built-up city streets. As James Dunnett put it in an article for the Islington Society Newsletter: 'This is the kind of relief that I believe to be essential to make urban life tolerable'. As in other parts of Islington, 'the ideal of the green city is not understood and such green spaces are not officially valued - indeed they are positively condemned'.

Interestingly, the hugely inflated cost of refurbishing or remodelling the Sobell Centre - £45m - has been magically reduced to £1.7m by a wise decision to repair and update services. Incredible how the true integrity of a building, and its better qualities, are rediscovered when the financial viability study returns with bad news!

Opposite:  
Novarc Studio's Vision  
for Edenham with new  
public square for Trellick  
Tower.  
This page: Sheppard  
Robson's City University

# Cathedrals Fabric Commission Seminar

Judi Loach reports back from Llandaff, 6th November 2009



This year has seen George Pace's organ screens removed from Llandaff Cathedral, to allow installation of a new organ, and the proposal to remove the same architect's choir stalls from St Alban's Abbey, to facilitate changes in liturgical practice. These two high-profile cases spurred the Cathedrals Fabric Commission (CFC), a government quango, to mount a day seminar in November - '20th Century Interventions in Cathedrals: Architecture and Furnishings' - so as to open discussion on how to evaluate and appropriately treat 20th century works, with a view to developing guidelines. It was held in St Michael's College, Llandaff, apt given its exquisite Pace chapel.

We were invited to contribute a session, which Philip Boyle opened with a lively Powerpoint presentation on how DOCOMOMO and The 20th Century Society can contribute to such a discussion. The value of DOCOMOMO was brought home to me in preparing my own part of our session, an overview of precedents overseas. An email to HQ in Paris rapidly put me in touch with members already considering comparable problems across Europe and North America. Since DOCOMOMO Quebec has had greatest experience of developing and implementing comparable guidelines, over the last decade, I used their experience as a case study.

Quebec's pioneering role here is due to a crisis, its uniquely dramatic decline in congregations (in 1960 80% of Quebecquois identified as Catholic, in 2005 around 8%). As elsewhere, 20th century heritage has been insufficiently protected, but this is most glaring for church buildings since about 2/3 of Quebec's churches were built in the 20th century, and half of these post-war; yet only one in eight of listed churches are 20th century ones. A combination of quango (Fondation du Patrimoine Religieux) and its concordat with the State has resulted in a series of protocols and procedures, and arm's length distribution of government funds for building conservation. Church and State acknowledge that church buildings play a key role in community identity for local citizens whether believers or not; if a church is declared redundant, the local community therefore has first option on reuse, and the state pays for feasibility studies. Recognition of the under-representation of 20th century buildings among listed churches led to reappraisal of legislation and an audit of all church buildings. This in turn revealed difficulties in applying standard surveys to modern buildings, as they often lacked standard features; and modern church buildings tended not to fit criteria used for evaluating modern architecture in general because they were often exceptional, offering architects opportunities to express themselves rather than simply designing functionalist buildings. The State's "Religious Heritage Priorities" now emphasise the need for audits and professional training to underpin informed decisions; and the development of tourism and school education so as to ensure the future appreciation of this heritage, including 20th century buildings.

It was gratifying that in concluding the day, CFC's Chair, Frank Field, took on board lessons from Quebec's experience. He acknowledged the rights of local communities, including non-believers, to participate in consultations about church buildings. And he proposed beginning with an audit of 20th century furnishings and fittings in English (and Welsh?) cathedrals, exploiting the memories of those aware of the original intentions.

# Innocents Abroad

## Tim Bruce-Dick on a Study Tour to the Ukraine

A party of eight including three Docomomo members, Christopher Haines, Richard Lucraft and myself visited the Ukraine in July, including the Crimea, in search of Modernism. This is a short account of our adventure.

First an historical note. Very little Modernism survives in the Ukraine thanks to war damage and political interference. Before the war there was a brief period of heroic building before the 1931 order by the Central Committee of the Communist Party to turn to classicism. The Nazi occupation of Ukraine resulted in major destruction, especially in Kiev where the main street, Kreshchatik, had to be totally rebuilt. Any ideas of rebuilding in an International Style were denounced by the Soviet Government and swept away by an article in Pravda on 25 September 1948 which banished once and for all the 'pessimistic formalism' of the West in favour of a new 'Soviet Victory Style'. However, following the elevation of Khrushchev, many ideas of western Modernism were adopted especially for housing and some civic buildings manifested in the use of concrete. This was followed by a partial return to pragmatic classicism under Brezhnev, and after the triumph of capitalism we now experience the excesses of Post Modernism and Bombastic Modernism. So, very lean pickings for us momo-ists.

Opposite:  
Llandaff Cathedral  
sculpture by George  
Pace and Jacob Epstein  
This Page:  
left: 1931 doctor's  
apartment house in brick  
by Alioshin  
right: Igor Vasilevsky's  
1980s Druzhba  
Sanatorium



Arriving at Kiev's Borispol International Airport, you see a fine 1965 arrival hall typical of engineering-led architecture: a shallow Soane-type dome above outward leaning glass walls; a control tower completes the ensemble. This we are told is possibly threatened by redevelopment. In downtown Kiev we stayed in the tall 1959 Moskva Hotel where all the rooms are ..well, big and ..truly equal. Most of our two days in Kiev were spent viewing a cross section of amazingly restored churches, sugar barons mansions (is this where Sir Alan Sugar comes from?) and a handful of pre-war buildings: eccentric architect Gorodetsky's own 1899 house (Kiev's Gaudi), the epic 1927 railway station (think Milan) by Verbitsky, and a 1931 doctor's apartment house in brick by Alioshin (is it still awaiting render and paint?) which elegantly answered the corner site problem. Scattered through the city are 'Czarist'

mansion blocks that have sprung a maze of glazed balconies expressing the residents' individuality. Among later concrete buildings of interest were the 1982 circular Saliut Hotel (ref Seifert's Knightsbridge hotel), and the 'brutalist' 1982 Kummuner cinema by Gaenchuk and Bosenko.



Flying down to the Crimea we found ourselves in the south of France of 50 years ago complete with a few Corb Unité blocks. Yalta was discovered by posh Russians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but unlike the Riviera it never got trains, airports or motorways, and that's the way it is today. You fly to Simferopol and then endure a bouncy minibus ride through a midnight thunderstorm 60 miles to Yalta, still a sleepy resort. Just out of town was our hotel, the 1970s 2000 room Hotel Yalta floating Corb-like above the woods diving down to the Black Sea. Of course we had to see the Livadia Palace, the last Czar's summer residence and scene of the 1945 Yalta conference, and also the Alupka Palace designed in 1828 by British architect Edward Blore and his assistant W Hunt (a weird Turkish-English mixture referring to Nash's Brighton Pavilion). But the high points were visits to a couple of sanatoria, much to our guide's bemusement. Most spectacular was Igor Vasilevsky's 1980s Druzhba Sanatorium, a massive round concrete resort for coal-miners; it was originally meant to revolve but now sits moored statically overlooking the sea. Nearby is the MUSKHOR Sanatorium a rather purer group of 1970s blocks, their piloti and coloured awnings recalling the best of Modernism. On the road we spotted some concrete mushrooms forming a bus shelter and, back in Yalta itself, the 1960s Port Authority building presented a restrained essay in minimalism.

We later visited Sebastopol and Odessa, two quite different 'classical' cities. Sebastopol was totally rebuilt after the war in white Soviet classicism (a striking image across the scudding blue harbour) while Odessa, relatively untouched in the war, occasionally recalls Parisian avenues. Even here occasional Modernistic nuggets were found. In conclusion, a further expedition would no doubt unearth more early Modernism, and of course should include visits to Kharkiv and other cities.

# Rob Mallet-Stevens: Dutch Liqueur in a Gallic Bottle

Stefania Scarsini summarises Richard Klein's Paper



This Page:  
Still from *Le Vertige*  
(1926) directed by  
Marcel L'Herbier,  
décoration Rob. Mallet-  
Stevens .

Opposite:  
top, Cubist Trees at the  
Exhibition of Decorative  
Arts in Paris in 1925.  
middle, Furniture from  
teh Yong Man's Study at  
the Villa Cavrois.  
bottom, one of many  
postcards published by  
the Sauvegarde de la  
Villa Cavrois  
Association.

Looking at a photo with the key figures of modern French architecture from the 1930s, the British specialist would almost certainly be able to pick out Le Corbusier and surely Auguste Perret. I'm not so sure they would recognise Robert Mallet-Stevens.

His death in 1945 explains the relative obscurity of his architecture until the mid 1980s. Mallet-Stevens died too soon to take part in the reconstruction of France after the 2nd World War. And yet Mallet-Stevens was probably among the French architects who were closest to the international avant-garde: film set and furniture designer, interior decorator, he is one of the key figures in modern architecture. He also attempted something that remains rare in France, that is to reconcile architecture with the applied arts, something that distanced him from the French fine arts tradition as well as from the historiography of modern architecture, and which possibly explains the relative obscurity of his work abroad.

Born in Paris on 24 March 1886, Mallet-Stevens studied in Paris at the École Spéciale d'Architecture from 1903 to 1906. After graduating in 1906, he began to actively promote the concepts of modern architecture. His first articles about the architecture of Auguste Perret were written in collaboration with Jacques Roederer. They were published in *The Architectural Review* in 1907 and 1908. He also published in Belgian magazines like *Le Home* and *Tekhné* in 1911, and in French periodicals, such as *L'Illustration*.

His first projects were exhibited at the Salon d'Automne in Paris in 1912. Robert Mallet-Stevens was considerably influenced by the work of Joseph Hoffmann and the principles of the Wiener Werkstätte at the beginning of his career. The Stoclet Palace (1905-1911), built in Brussels

for Adolphe Stoclet, Mallet-Stevens' uncle, and designed by Joseph Hoffmann, was a model for him.

After 1922, his projects began to move away from pure symmetry, veering towards the plastic dynamism of the Dutch-based De Stijl group's work. The Aero-club Pavilion, presented at the Salon d'Automne in 1922, clearly illustrates this tendency as well as a design for a villa in 1924 that was also linked to the architect's work as a film set designer. Mallet-Stevens designed around a dozen or so film sets between 1920 and 1928. The most remarkable were for *l'Inhumaine* (1923-1924) and *le Vertige* (1926), directed by Marcel L'Herbier. His work for the cinema led him to develop a theory of the link between décor and the seventh art, which was directly transposed to his building projects.

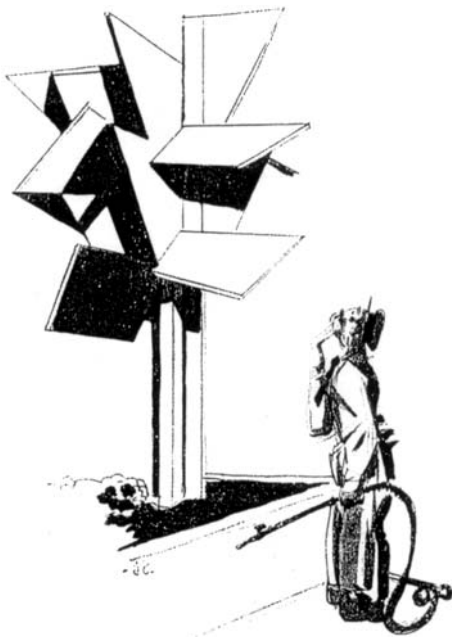
His career as an architect only really took off after the end of the 1st World War, with the villas for Paul Poiret in Mézy (1921-1923) and the Vicomte de Noailles in Hyères (1923-33). The latter was the first in a series of commissions from wealthy people. The exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris in 1925 consolidated his steadily growing reputation. The presence of Mallet-Stevens in the exhibition is quite spectacular, even if his contribution is made of very tiny constructions. The cubist trees realized with the Martel brothers (both sculptors and his friends) were widely discussed. The spectacular Pavillon du Tourisme (1925) that features lines of lateral windows is a perfect illustration of the way the visual dominates Mallet-Stevens' work to the point of masking the expression of the constructive reality. The Embassy Hall, designed in 1925, was the first of many collaborative works (Fernand Leger for the painting, Henry Laurens for the sculpture, Barillet for the stained glass) which prefigured the creation of the UAM - Union of Modern Artists which was founded in 1929.

Mallet-Stevens' seminal work though was the Villa Cavrois in Croix (1929-32), near Lille, which typified the UAM's ambitions in its lighting details, the use of polychrome and the furniture, along with the use of modern technology. In 1934 Mallet-Stevens produced the layout for a railway magazine where he showed a map of France composed of pictures with the most representative buildings of modern architecture. He chose for the north part of the country the Villa Cavrois. He used the image of the villa in all kinds of publications to promote his ideas about modern architecture.

The following three points show the extent to which the Villa Cavrois acts as a Manifesto of Mallet-Stevens' intentions.

## *1. The relationship between architecture and facing or architecture and envelope:*

Robert Mallet-Stevens used 3-centimetre thick bricks for the Villa Cavrois, in a style that clearly illustrates the importance of the role of the brick facing. The facing was designed to reflect the utmost simplicity and to give the



building a uniform façade. The cement for the horizontal joints was applied shallowly to below the brick surface, a technique that accentuated the horizontal shadows, while the cement for the narrower vertical joints contains yellow aggregates, making it virtually invisible. Twenty-six brick moulds adapted to specific situations were used for the basic module, giving the entire building a uniform facing. This intention is evident even to the use of curved bricks. The external appearance of the villa owes much of its spectacular image to its radical use of brick. All of the building's masonry is in fact in proportion with the line of the brick, something that none of his other projects had previously allowed. In this way, Mallet-Stevens preserved the initial homogeneity of a project that was initially intended to be white. Howard Robertson commented on his use of brick, indicating its critical and pertinent interpretation: '... with the outside treatment, one is wafted mentally to Holland and feels that here is the equivalent of a Dutch liqueur in a very Gallic Bottle. There is no label, and only the aroma is a guide to the distant origin.'

## 2. Staging domestic life:

Mallet-Stevens' furniture is generally designed differently so as to fit in with the way the internal spaces are occupied, ranging from the luxury-oriented inheritance of decorative art to more avant-garde references directly related to the De Stijl movement. Some furniture is linked to the stability of the family, like that in the living room with its predominance of fabric, or the black varnished pear in the dining room whose solid and heavy aspect reflects luxury

and durability. The study for Paul Cavrois was designed like the cabin for a captain of industry, where the more geometrical shapes are adapted to its captain's dynamic business space. The furniture in the boudoir was composite and more fanciful, reflecting greater frivolity, with a combination of polished aluminium and wood.

The parents' bathroom is a hymn to sport and hygiene with its marble surfaces, chrome drawers and immaculate white lacquer stools. The hall and passageways are dominated by chrome. The tubular tables and chairs designed by Marcel Breuer in the children's games room are utilitarian, adapted to the electric train, the game which is generally depicted in photos of the space. The smoking room was treated like a piece of furniture, a liqueur cabinet or a cigar box, with mahogany veneer that even covers the ceiling. The young man's study, with a black lacquered ceiling, was furnished with polychrome wood furniture that resembled Gerrit Rietveld's pieces. Like a film set, the furniture and the architecture was designed to situate the different characters, underscoring their psychology in a staging of domestic life.



For Mallet-Stevens, appearance and the illusion of décor, both in the theatre and in the cinema, generates something that is more plausible than the truth, acting as a backdrop that explains and locates the subject.

## 3. Electrical fittings, kitchen and lighting:

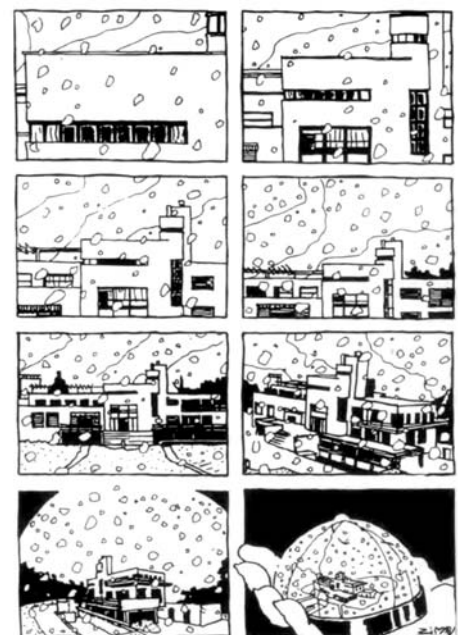
One of the best known pictures of the villa Cavrois is a photograph of the kitchen. Yet, the huge extractor fan, the electrical fittings and the appliances present few of the architectural characteristics associated with Robert Mallet-Stevens.

In the villa Cavrois' design, the electrical

fittings, the networks and the equipment are especially important. The introduction to 'Une Demeure' in 1934 describes in detail the telephones, the clocks in every room and the wireless, which were intended to extend the practices of modern living to the living space via technology. With this in mind, one of the most important technical partnerships was with the lighting engineer, André Salomon (1891-1970).

The more or less simultaneous launch of the Union of Modern Artists in 1929 and the first drawings of the Villa Cavrois obviously give rise to speculation about the link between the project and the UAM's aims. On 5 July 1934, during a reception given at the architect's home, the UAM manifesto was read out: 'For Modern Art, a framework for contemporary life', which argued for a meeting between art and modern technology and the stylisation of functional objects. The Villa Cavrois may be seen as the realisation of this manifesto.

Recognised for his achievements much later than most, Mallet-Stevens' architecture also reflects the challenges that 20th century architecture faces in safeguarding and developing its heritage. Buildings like those in the rue Mallet-Stevens have been substantially altered, while others, like the Villa Cavrois, have been literally torn apart. The survival of the Villa Cavrois is due to the tenacity of the Sauvegarde de la Villa Cavrois Association and the villa's subsequent purchase by the French state in 2001. Mallet-Stevens' work illustrates the real fragility of 20th century architecture at the turn of the new century.



# The influence of Le Corbusier Forum

Emma Dent Coad on a master-class

As part of the Le Corbusier season, Docomomo hosted a Forum of four architects whose work had been influenced by Corb in their student days. These elder statesmen from the glory days of Modern British architecture, with their continued passion for the precepts of Modernism and politically-inspired approaches to social housing, gave a fascinating insight into our recent history.

Docomomo Co-ordinator Philip Boyle opened with a discussion of L'Unité d'Habitation, designed like a ship to be complete. With floors slipped into the structure like bottles into a wine-rack. This iconic masterpiece was the starting point for many of the projects discussed.

**Alan Colquhoun**, Professor of Architecture at Princeton University, and a partner at Colquhoun and Miller; he is author of 'Modern Architecture' (Oxford History of Art, 2002). Alan described his student days at the AA, 1947-49, 'when Corb enthusiasm was thin on the ground', there was interest in the Swedish new systems approach, and many architects at the AA were Marxists. Over time interest grew in issues of form, rather than just function and systems. The Smithsons, also at the AA at the time, became interested in Corb and his 'streets in the air' and became involved in CIAM, though they were 'slightly apart from the group and had their own agenda'.

L'Unité was a 'social organism', with all social services needed, it was a Utopian project, like an 18<sup>th</sup> Century social project, but conceived by the local neo-syndicalist authority. The chunky formwork concrete gave rise to Brutalism in the late 1950s. Alton West and East at Roehampton (1955, 1959) were very much influenced by L'Unité, though the former is one-sided whereas L'Unité is two-sided. Also the sound insulation is very poor in



the British derivative, though the buildings are currently immaculately maintained. He summarised: 'High-rise is fine when there is funding for maintenance, but a disaster when it is not, such as at Robin Hood Gardens (Smithsons, 1972) and the Brunswick Centre (Hodgkinson, 1973)'.

**George Finch** worked at the LCC and GLC with Leslie Martin and Colin Lucas from the mid-1950s, and then in LB Lambeth and in private practice. He also first encountered Corb's work at the AA: 'My mind was cluttered with design rubbish I had to get rid of', he explained. He wrote to Corb and had a reply, entreating him to visit L'Unité, which he had never heard of and was still under works. When he visited he received 'VIP treatment'. The project 'warmed my young Socialist heart; here was housing for the people, Council dwellings built in a park'.

Praising the Parker Morris space standard, that was nuked by Thatcher but is now being reintroduced, Finch discussed his project in Lambeth Road, which has survived, as a 'Corb through plan looking both ways'. The ground floor had a dining room, with a registry office and lunch club overlooking a garden. 'We did not want to copy Corb but were influenced by his approach', he stated, ending with this lament:

'My old Socialist heart is devastated that my attempts to provide housing for people have now become chips in the gamble of the so-called housing market. Who would have thought in those heady days at the LCC that things would come to such a pass. Au revoir L'Esprit Nouveau'.

**Jack Pringle**, past President of RIBA and partner in Pringle Brandon, studied at the University of Bristol. He worked with Powell and Moya during the Festival of Britain when they designed the Skylon – which may be rebuilt for the Olympics, and on the Churchill Gardens project (1962) very soon after graduating, calling it 'Corb via Holland'. 'It is a very successful mix of tall slab blocks and town houses, still in beautiful condition, cleverly sited on the Thames to maximise views. Powell believed a structure should end at the top, so there were no roof gardens but a penthouse.' Particular attention was paid to space between buildings, landscape, and beautifully designed playgrounds that made the project 'a work of real passion and enjoyment'.

Submitting that this first scheme was their best, he went on to describe working on the Museum of London with its 'offices for right-wing avaricious speculators', the Golden Lane flats, and student housing in Cambridge, the Wolfson and Parliament Square.

**Neave Brown** was also at the AA with George Finch, and stated that the Smithsons and ACP 'were the dominant influence with Corb, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies and the Bauhaus'. He worked closely with the Labour government on its social programme, with the battle-cry 'Architecture or Revolution', 'rethinking all the little details and functions to make magically beautiful forms'.

Brown described Patrick Hodgkinson's Brunswick Centre as 'the most brilliant and prescient work I have ever seen that was very influential .. the free plan was intoxicating, we thought we were releasing society from constraints, which was our inspiration'. He explained how Corb classified elements that could be repeated, to make objects with 'an incredible internal intensity. Corb created immaculate objects sitting in neutral urban space'. He also praised Corb's insistence that space should not be second class, that we need air and sunlight.

In the debate that followed, George Finch discussed the problems of siting a Corb-like block in an urban setting, a problem that Powell and Moya had resolved in their work, creating human scale. Alexandra Road is about 'light and clarity of circulation, light falling upon walls, it is about values rather than style'. Neave Brown explained how Alexandra Road (1977) provided a seamless and continuous environment, 624 dwellings each with a front door on to the street. Housing schemes deemed to be socially successful were Ralph Erskine's Byker estate (1979) and Coin Street.

Alan Colquhoun concluded the Forum stating: 'Contemporary architecture has failed to create an architecture for housing that works. Architects have been out of housing for 20 years and few can deliver in volume'.

# Chandigarh Symposium

Philip Boyle remembers an unforgettable day at Westminster University

The Symposium theme covered various aspects of Le Corbusier's practice through the eyes of our four Corbusier scholars: Judi Loach, Maristella Casciato, Flora Samuel, and Peter Carl under the chairmanship of Dennis Sharp.

Aspects of his 'patient research' as illustrated by the fittings and furniture displayed becoming ever simpler and individual, non-mechanically made, hand crafted, had resulted in his achieving his aim to make his own 'objects d'une réaction poétique.

His style as expressed through others' hands was explored. This being an important characteristic of the 'Chandigarh' furniture that is unlike the 'Cabonon' furniture. It is reduced, simple and crude in the same 'l'art du mal foutu' style, but for public institutionalised use. The fact that it was largely carried out by others did not diminish his stylistic drive coming through in his helpers' work. The speakers showed how his studio functioned on his projects to these ends.

The drama of the exhibition setting obliged the contributors to speak from the spiral form of the 'dock' to the audience as an assembled 'court', made for an unforgettable 'Corbusian experience' due to the tireless efforts and imagination of the curators, John and Richa O'Shea.

Opposite: George Finch, Alan Colquhoun, Neave Brown and Jack Pringle.

This page:

top, the speakers, and chair, take questions.

From left to right: Peter Carl, Flora Samuel, Dennis Sharp, Judi Loach, Maristella Casciato.

bottom, the symposium took place in a recreation of a courtroom at Chandigarh complete with benches, judge's dais and accused dock.



# Dawsons Heights Housing - London Borough of Southwark

Some thoughts raised by Philip Boyle in support of an application for listing.



Neither Frank Lloyd Wright nor Alvar Aalto ever designed or built in the UK. One of the things that these two had in common is that they had long, prolific careers which enabled them to do work across the full spectrum of size of project. Others also had such careers, but one of the things that sets these two apart (as well as the profound influence of Italian hill towns) was their particular skill in handling larger projects. As evidence look at FLWs' Marin County Centre. Forget the tacky external details, look to the extraordinary massing when viewed from different points of view in the landscape, the simplicity, clarity and generosity of forms with flowing circulation which negotiates changes of scale between the surroundings and a complex brief for internal spaces. For Aalto look at the University complex at Otaniemi which has equivalent characteristics and achievements in handling groups of large educational buildings, and his stepped housing at Kauttua.

Large-scale opportunities don't come architects' way very often. The later end of the widespread council housing building programmes following the setting up of separate Architects Departments in the London Boroughs was a period beset with problems long since forgotten: overblown political ambition, shortages of materials, technical naïvety, arbitrary financial constraints, lack of in-house staff in the various Boroughs of London. LB Southwark had a reputation for amassing, by means of compulsory purchase, very large tracts of land which were hurriedly developed sometimes resulting in serious problems - Bonamy Street which was later demolished, and North Peckham which is still problematic.

The site for the Dawson Heights housing scheme was untypical for Southwark. It was at the top of a hill clearly visible to the surroundings all around. It was in a suburban neighbourhood as opposed to an urban context. Frank Lloyd Wright famously advised never build on top of a hill, but make your building part of a hill. Of course he broke his rule several times, but the point is well made. Built objects should respect/engage with more vertical terrain with extra care, because when drawn in plan and section they can look ok, but when built become overbearing due to the perspective effect of looking up at things when on real slopes. The sensitive architect is aware of this and adjusts massing near/on hills.

One of the characteristics of high density urban housing is that the aggregate brief for a large number of homes of different sizes is that it allows flexibility in assembling and massing. At Dawson Heights this characteristic is deployed to advantage so that there are stepped ends to negotiate the change in scale with the surroundings, which diminish the perspective effect of blocks when close up, and when combined with the staggering of the two blocks in plan creates ever-changing silhouettes which adds the beauty of surprise to a relentless suburb.

The other characteristic of large agglomerations of housing is access, and how to provide it to the large number of front doors which have to be reached. Here the vertical lift towers and stairs are boldly separated and clearly expressed with solids and voids on a celebratory scale (that is only matched by Trellick Tower an example of housing already listed).

The horizontal circulation by means of two bridges has been demolished at low level (a common fate) but not irreparable. The bridges clarified routes for visitors. However the external spaces which are left without useful articulation for circulation, are of a scale and clarity that could easily be reworked to great success, if someone makes the effort.



The mild stock bricks used here are at the cheap end of those available at the time of construction, but are in fact the commonest to be found in and around London. And here their use plays down the scale intrinsic in 13 storeys while clarifying the rhythm of the balconies. These again are lessons coming from Aalto's work.

The above is an attempt to put this housing scheme in a proper historic context. Architecture is too important to be diminished by the shorthand of terminology often used to describe schemes of this period such as 'megablocks' or 'brutalist' This scheme demands to be examined without such preconceptions. .

# Catherine Cooke - Five Years On

James Dunnett honours the contribution of Docomomo's former Chair



Opposite:  
top: Distant view of  
Dawsons Heights.  
middle: Dawsons  
Heights from close-to.  
This page:  
*Moscow Heritage at  
Crisis Point* cover image  
of updated and  
expanded edition.

James Dunnett spoke at the launch of *Moscow Heritage at Crisis Point*, updated and expanded 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. This is an extract from his speech.

Catherine Cooke, of whose death this year is the fifth anniversary, was my predecessor as Chair of DOCOMOMO-UK. She was an extremely warm and committed person, and I'm delighted that her legacy to DOCOMOMO has found an ideal use in subsidising the re-publication of this important book.

While thinking of what I should say I decided to read Catherine's article 'What is the Point of Saving old Buildings?', first published in a special issue of *Architecton* magazine in Ekaterinburg, and subsequently in *Arq* in England as long ago as 2000 (Vol.4, no.2) – but it reads as something very up to date. It is a tough article and I hope it went down well in Ekaterinburg, because you need to put your thinking cap on. It epitomises for me the DOCOMOMO approach to conservation as part of a creative and forward-looking process. She writes it from the Department of Design and Innovation in the Faculty of Technology of the Open University – not from an art history or archaeology department.

She is ruthless and very unsentimental, condemning what she sees as the uncritical listing process in Britain. One section is headed 'British Poverty and Russian Riches' and the next 'Should buildings die or be allowed to kill people?' The most telling section of the article for me is where she examines what Nietzsche has to say in his 'enormously long essay 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' (1874)'.

In Nietzsche's opinion, she says, 'the challenge is one of

balance. If we are to navigate between the paralysis of knowing too much history and the happy freedom of cattle with no memory at all, we need a clear conception of what history can do for us'. She quotes Nietzsche as follows: 'The study of history is something salutary and fruitful only as the attendant of a mighty new current of life, of an evolving culture for example, that is to say only when it is dominated and directed by a higher force and does not itself dominate and direct'

She then goes on to explain, further quoting him, that this 'higher force [is] living man... as a being who acts and strives, as a being who preserves and reveres, as a being who suffers and seeks deliverance'. These three dimensions of man's life 'correspond to three species of history' which he calls, 'in as far as they are separable, the *monumental*, the *antiquarian* and the *critical*'.

The *monumental* reflects the recognition of a chain in the peaks of human achievement from which, 'man learns that the greatness which once existed was in any event once *possible* and thus may be possible again'. It sets our standards, but it is dangerous territory in which false analogies can 'inspire the courageous to foolhardiness and the inspired to fanaticism'. It is balanced by *antiquarian* history which values the ordinary. 'It spreads a simple feeling of pleasure and contentment over the modest rude and even wretched conditions in which a man or a nation lives'. This record of the ordinary helps us to savour our existence within a larger collective experience over time, but it too 'paralyses [us] from the moment it is no longer animated and inspired by the fresh life of the present'. Society starts to think that 'the fact that something has grown old demands that it be made immortal... Then it must seem arrogant or even wicked to replace such an antiquity with a novelty... which is evolving and has just arrived' - a familiar situation which shows 'how necessary it is to mankind to have a third mode of regarding the past: the *critical*'. This liberates us to move forward. 'If he is to live, man must from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve a part of the past' He must have confidence 'to bring it before the tribunal, scrupulously examining it and finally condemning it' (All quotations from Nietzsche 1874).

Catherine certainly never lost her critical faculties. For me too, the issue is one of architecture: we should never be content for architecture to be replaced by something that is not architecture, or to be defaced so that it is not – but equally we should not oppose the creation of architecture. Catherine's enthusiastic research into the Russian architectural avant-garde of the 1920s and 30s, the conservation of whose products she had close to her heart, has inspired many of us. I am glad to note that this book carries its enthusiasm even further forward, up to the 1970s, including for example the New Arbat and COMECON complexes in Moscow, in which I take a particular interest. Catherine would have approved, and may her example continue to inspire us.

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## DOCOMemos

Prof David Robson, formerly School of Architecture, University of Brighton will discuss Geoffrey Bawa's Concrete on Tuesday 15 December. Robson was a close associate of Geoffrey Bawa and is his biographer. He has also written widely on this architect's work and that of Minnette de Silva and the concrete work of Valentine Gunesequera.

On 12 January James Dunnett will be giving a talk on 'The Modern Movement in Germany – two Docomomo visits in 2009, to Karlsruhe and Breslau (Wroclaw): Max Berg, Mendelsohn, Gropius, Scharoun and others'. ABA Gallery, 66 Cowcross Street, 6.30 for 7pm.

'Gregory Ain, architect, Californian Modernism, Housing in Los Angeles', a talk by Docomomo Coordinator Philip Boyle. Following visits over a period of time to California, an illustrated talk on the work of Gregory Aid, architect collaborator with Schindler, Neutra and Eames, who developed Modern social housing schemes in post-war Los Angeles up until the 'Macarthy' era of the mid-fifties. On Tuesday 16 February 2010 at ABA Gallery, details as above.

Also look out for a joint Docomomo UK/20<sup>th</sup> Century Society Forum with four speakers and James Dunnett chair to discuss 'Listing policy, 20<sup>th</sup> Century and Modern Buildings'. At the Building Centre, details to follow.

A Study Tour to Belgium and North France is being planned for April, with visits to Villa Cavroix (Mallet-Stevens) Maison Delacourt (Neutra), and Maison Guiette (Le Corbusier). Expressions of interest please to Philip Boyle, Coordinator, on 020 7253 6624.

DOCOMOMO International Conference, August 2010

The 11<sup>th</sup> Docomomo International conference will take place in Mexico City on 19-27 August 2010, and will be dedicated to 'Living in the Urban Modernity'. Held at the Faculty of Architecture of the National Autonomous University (UNAM) declared World Heritage by Unesco in 2007. The Third International Docomomo Student Workshop will take place at the Xochimilco Campus of the Metropolitan Autonomous University (UAM). Original papers were invited under the following sub-themes:

- (1) Modern Living;
- (2) Civic and Social Infrastructures;
- (3) The Modern City;
- (4) Technology for a Modern Habitat;
- (5) The University City.

Information from [www.docomomo2010.unam.mx](http://www.docomomo2010.unam.mx) or contact [docomomomexico2010@gmail.com](mailto:docomomomexico2010@gmail.com).