

Conservation or Change for Works of the Modern Movement

BY JAMES DUNNETT

The Modern Movement in architecture, in so far as any such movement can be defined, was predicated on the idea that architecture had to change to reflect the radical technological advances that had occurred during the century preceding its formulation, and also to reflect the changing social needs that those advances had generated. Architecture, it was felt, had ossified and lost vitality as a result of not recognizing those changes. A century has now passed since the Modern Movement first formulated this program, and technical advances and the social changes they induce have of course by no means ceased, rather they have accelerated. So, it seems legitimate to say that a technological – and socially – determined architecture should reflect these further advances and changes. The evolution continues. But does that mean that each Modern Movement building created at a particular point in that evolution has in itself to continue to change in order to “catch up” with the evolution subsequent to its creation? It is a question that has importance when it comes to considering the conservation of Modern Movement architecture. It is an assertion that would ignore the formal element in architecture.

In each generation there are a number of buildings created that we seek to conserve, for various reasons but most frequently because they embody high architectural values. Their creators have managed to bring together the functional demands of the brief and the technology available at that time to create something that resonates in our minds, something in which the form and detail and material cohere as an expressive unity, embody a sense of harmony, and evoke in us a powerful reaction. They have created a work of art.

It is arguable that in a building of the Classical or Renaissance style, where there is a powerful formal architectural language superimposed on the structure, functional details, such as window frames for example, are not a significant contributor to the architectural expression and could be changed without harm to its status as a work of art. The Banqueting House in Whitehall in London, for example, designed by Inigo

Jones in 1619, originally had leaded casement windows, but these were changed at an early stage to the technologically more advanced sliding sash windows that we still see and take for granted. The published engraved elevations of classical buildings from the 18th century generally show the windows just as dark rectangles, omitting any detail of the window joinery, which was evidently considered unimportant. Yet conservators today would be very keen to conserve the original joinery in such buildings if it survived. Similarly, the importance would be recognized of conserving the joinery in a cottage of the same period, where there is no superimposed classical order and details such as window joinery become more prominent.

A building of the Modern Movement, generally without an emphatic superimposed architectural language, is more in the position of the cottage described. The details of the windows can become the dominant design element of the façade and, from an internal viewpoint, they mold the relationship between the interior and exterior that was so important a part of Modern Movement spatial aspiration. The very blankness of the windows of an early house by Adolf Loos, for example, is evidently an important part

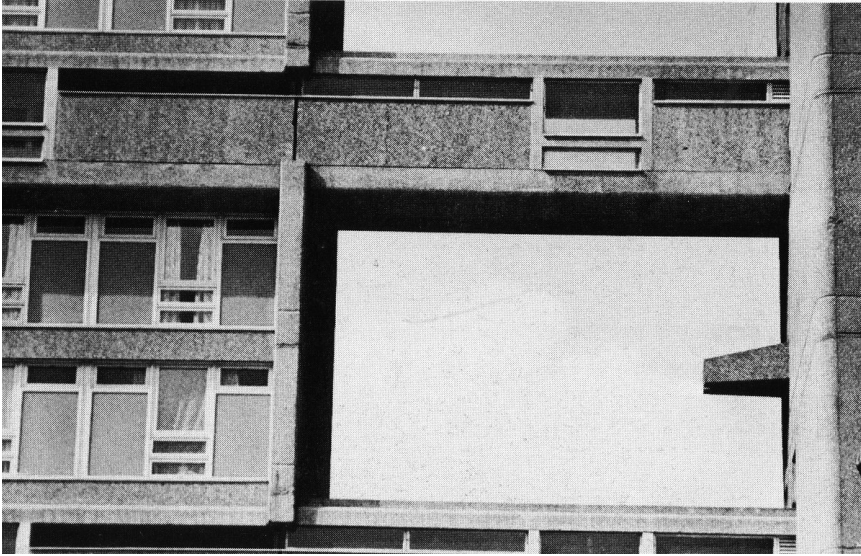
of the thematic suppression of detail in the design as a whole. In the case of Frank Lloyd Wright's Falling Water the steel windows are clearly critical to the character of the building, to allowing the architectural planes to float free – including the points where the glass is set straight into the masonry without any frame at all. In the case of Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House the windows almost are the architecture, and in Le Corbusier's *Maisons Jaoul* the inventive design of the window joinery contributes very importantly to their architectural expression. In the case of the *Unité d'Habitation* at Marseille Le Corbusier was so distressed by the design of the window joinery produced by his office while he was away in New York dealing with the United Nations Headquarters that, by his own account, he was forced to impose on the façades their powerful polychromy to distract the eyes of onlookers from noticing the windows.

Of course, some might argue that in all these cases “time must move on” – the original windows were inefficient in terms of minimizing heat loss and use of energy, and the original architect would certainly have used some other technology now available had he had that choice, so we should change these windows accordingly now. Few would agree in the case in the very iconic modern buildings mentioned – it would be recognized by most that any such change would seriously detract from the architectural value of the building concerned. But it is an argument that is influential in the case of many other valuable elements in our Modern Movement heritage.



01 Ernő Goldfinger, Balfron Tower, London, UK, 1965. © James Dunnett and Gavin Stamp, *Erno Goldfinger*, London, Architectural Association Publications, 1983.

02 Ernő Goldfinger, Balfron Tower, London, UK, 1965. © James Dunnett and Gavin Stamp, Erno Goldfinger, London, Architectural Association Publications, 1983.



03 Ernő Goldfinger, Balfron Tower, London, UK, 1965. © James Dunnett.



04 Ernő Goldfinger, Balfron Tower, London, UK, 1965. © James Dunnett.

Take Balfron Tower, for example, designed by Ernő Goldfinger in 1965, a 26-story social housing block in east London, which is now listed Grade 2*, placing it within the top 6% of all listed buildings in the UK assessed in terms of importance. This did not prevent Historic England, the agency charged with assessing works to listed buildings on behalf of the Government, from approving in 2016 the removal of all the surviving original timber windows designed by Ernő Goldfinger and their replacement to a different design in a different color and material, as well as the complete re-planning of all the apartments – as part of the conversion of the block from social housing to private for-sale housing. Indeed, this change of appearance may be intended by its promoters to dissociate the privatized housing visually from the remaining social housing around it, some of it also

designed by Ernő Goldfinger. A year earlier, I had a conversation with the then Mayor of this part of London who had enthused about how, when the block was renovated, it would be possible to install all those modern features that the original architect would have used if they had then been available. I replied that, while Ernő Goldfinger certainly used the most up-to-date materials and technologies in general, we could not know what he would have done with them now, and that the purpose of listing was to preserve what the original designer had actually created (in this case the original windows were double glazed from the start, but those on one façade had since been replaced in plastic, albeit following the original design). But the following year Historic England evidently held the same opinion as the Mayor – even though it is certain they would not have done so in the

case of an 18th century palace, for example.

The contribution of original components of the façade of this kind is vital to the cultural significance of such buildings. This was recognized clearly, for example, by Professor Wessel de Jonge when he carried out his highly-regarded conversion of the Van Nelle Factory in Rotterdam from industrial use to use by small offices and studios: he was careful to conserve the whole of the external curtain walling including the original glass with its industrial imperfections. The whole conversion strategy – and enhancement of energy performance – recognized the need for that. The Van Nelle Factory was very “advanced” for its time – but that did not mean that the conversion had to recognize or adopt changes that had occurred in curtain walling technologies since its time. In this case it recognized rightly that considerations of conservation had to take precedence. So, they should have done in the case of Balfron Tower. The rhetoric of *docomomo* should be careful not to encourage unnecessary change where it is destructive of cultural value.

James Dunnett

Architect, who worked for Ernő Goldfinger (1973-5) and for the London Borough of Camden. In 1983 he set up his own practice, James Dunnett Architects. He mounted a comprehensive exhibition at the Architectural Association of the work of Ernő Goldfinger, while collaborating on a publication about him with the late Professor Gavin Stamp: *Ernő Goldfinger* (London, Architectural Association Publications, 1983). He is the former chair of *docomomo* UK. He has taught and lectured at a number of universities and continues to practice architecture.