Ike Ijeh Submissions Explanation Document

IBP AWARDS 2018

- **IKE IJEH_AMG 1_Review of Old Bearhurst by Carmody Groarke**

Architectural review of private house in East Sussex. As most of my building studies relate to public buildings or housing developments, this is the first one I have ever compiled for a private house.

- **IKE IJEH_AMG 2_Review of Barts Maggies by Steven Holl**

Architectural review of the Maggie's care centre in Bart's Hospital. This has been a hugely controversial and long-running project due to its perceived detrimental impact on an important historic site.

- **IKE IJEH_AMG 3_World Heritage Sites Investigation**

Prompted by the 30th anniversary of the UNESCO World Heritage Site inscription for the Tower of London and also by ongoing controversies over the stewardship of World Heritage Sites in London, Liverpool and elsewhere, I decided to take a detailed look at the issue of World Heritage Sites and the increasing friction between conservation and development they appear to entail. This has been an issue explored in recent years by other articles in other publications. But I believe mine is the first to revisit Dresden to reveal what impact losing its World Heritage Site inscription in 2009 (the only city to ever do so) actually had on the city and assess the implications this might have for other cities threatened with similar sanctions.

Building Study: Old Bearhurst, East Sussex, by Carmody Groarke

By Ike Ijeh | 25 April 2018

An inspired mix of old and new, AYA Gold Award winner Carmody Groarke's studio and guesthouse wears its split personality with brutal honesty, writes Ike Ijeh. And it comes with a subterranean surprise...

Corten steel complements the rustic quality of the existing brickwork

Photos: Johan Dehlin

For obvious reasons the idea of melancholy isn't really seen in a positive light in our modern world. But in times gone by this was not necessarily the case. "Melancholy," said Victor Hugo, "is the pleasure of being sad." Equally, in late 18th and early 19th-century architecture, the deep tones and brooding landscapes of the picturesque and romantic movements revelled in melancholy, seizing upon it to inject a new emotional and melodramatic charge into everything from gothic ruins to isolated follies. To put it simply, there was once a time when melancholy could be fun.

And this, at its core, is one of the concepts that drives the latest work of BD Architect of the Year Gold winner Carmody Groarke. It is arguably the practice's most enigmatic and esoteric project to date and one that gives these age-old templates contemporary expression while retaining all the haunting seclusion of the past.

The structure is occupied by a single, lofty living space

Old Bearhurst is a private house nestling amid appropriately picturesque East Sussex countryside. Two of the circular brickwork oasthouses that are so common in the region form its historic core. In 2012 these were converted and extended by Duggan Morris to create a new single-storey, oak-clad home for a property developer and his family. A crumbling adjacent farmhouse however was left

untouched and it is the restoration and conversion of this structure into a sculptor's studio that Carmody Groarke has now completed.

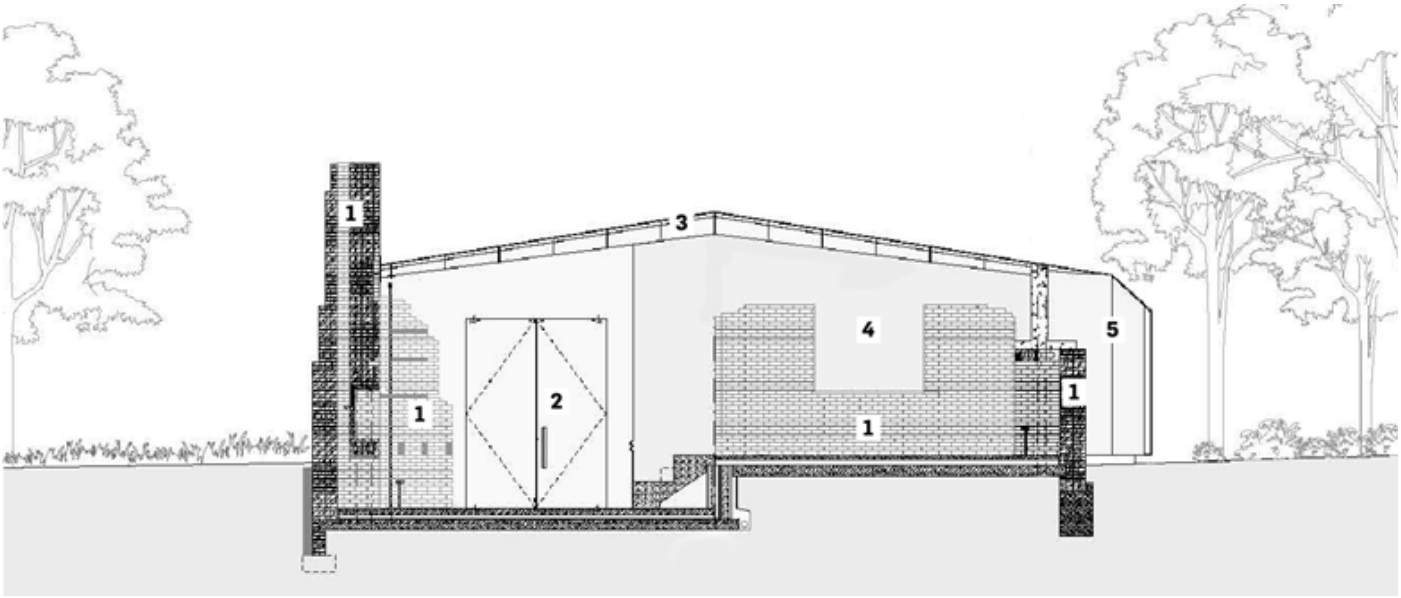
When the project started, the farmhouse was to all intents and purposes, a ruin. The roof had long fallen away and only a dilapidated skeletal shell of crumbling brick walls exposed to the elements remained. To many, the structure would have been ripe for demolition. But it was this very abandoned state that prompted the architect's investigative journey towards melancholy and seclusion. "It got us thinking of the historic idea of a hermitage, a simple, isolated retreat often in the middle of the countryside," explains project architect Wynn Chandra. "We found a quote that described a hermitage as a place of 'contemplative solitude and pleasurable melancholy' and this seemed the perfect kind of quality we wanted to capture here, a secluded place for thinking and making."

The original farmhouse – a skeletal shell of crumbling walls

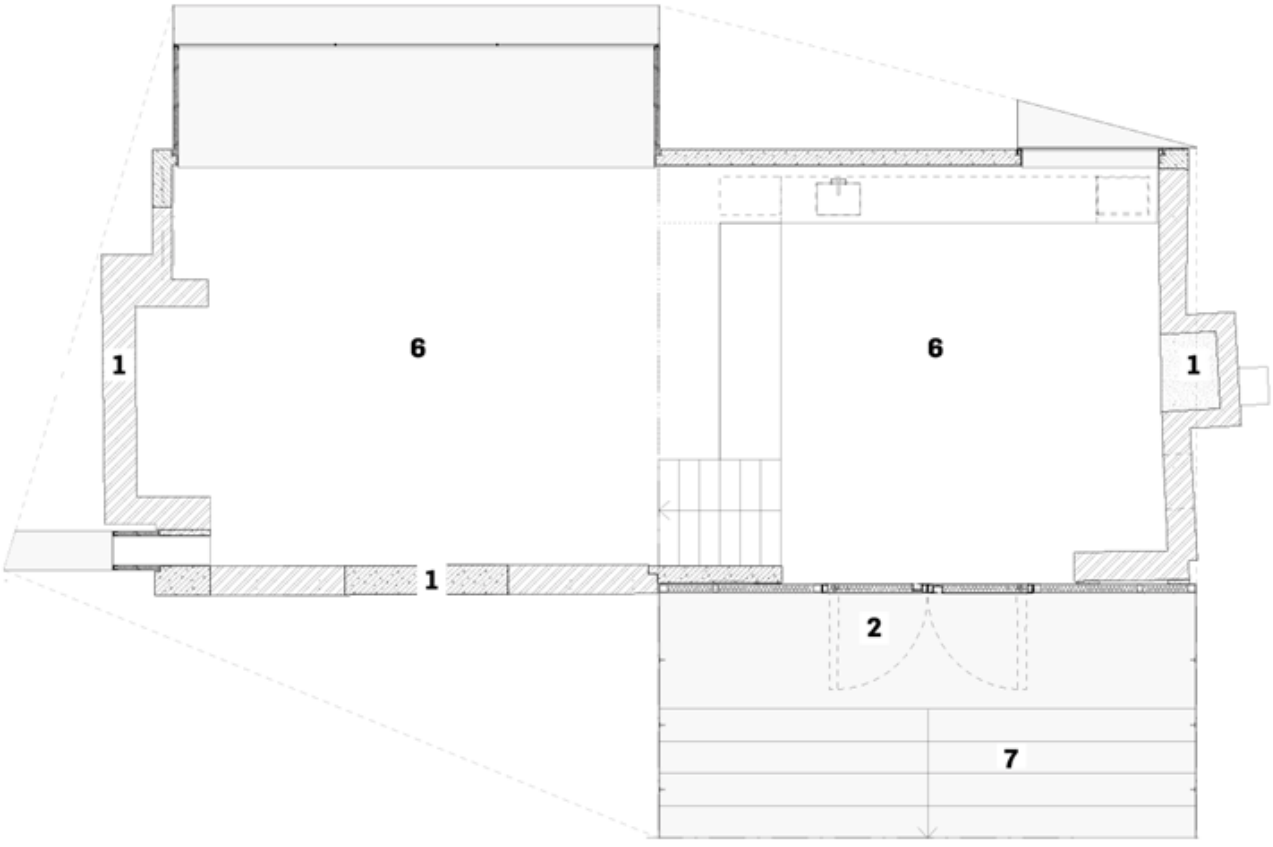
The studio

The process that Chandra describes of attaching emotional value to physical form fits perfectly within the romantic tradition. Crucially, this in turn suggested that the finished building retain something of the "ruins" quality it exhibited at the start of the project.

Herein lies the basis for the project's architectural solution. What was left of the brickwork was retained, complete with gaps and the jagged, stepped profile it had acquired as a result of missing courses. Brickwork was internally strengthened with helibars.



Studio section: 1 - existing walls; 2 - main entrance; 3 - corten roof; 4 - concrete wall; 5 - corten wall; 6 - studio space; 7 - stepped entrance



Studio plan: 1 - existing walls; 2 - main entrance; 3 - corten roof; 4 - concrete wall; 5 - corten wall; 6 - studio space; 7 - stepped entrance

Gaps in the walls were replaced with new walls of concrete, corten panels and glass. And a new shallow-pitched corten roof has been applied, hoisted up by the new concrete walls below. This folds over the building footprint to create a series of overhangs and recesses around the envelope, their dark shadows and sunken recesses again speaking eloquently of melancholy and romanticism.

The building's new elevations have been determined by a quartet of views to all four sides that capture a unique aspect of the surroundings. These again are framed by the language of cutaways, recesses and voids, making each elevation unique. This arrangement creates an extraordinary sense of dynamism as you move around and inside the building – it may house a studio but it suggests all the latent energy of a pumping station or electrical switch house.

These themes continue internally with the structure occupied by a single, lofty volume. Like most farm or agricultural buildings it is uninsulated, with the architect determined not to clad or cover the brickwork and thereby treat it as a concealed artefact. The result is a cool space flooded with daylight and framed within a series of hard, worn surfaces, whether they be old and new.

A shallow-pitch corten roof is supported on the concrete walls

Indeed, what is astonishing about the building in conservation terms is the brutal honesty with which it expresses its split personality. Visually, the brickwork essentially keeps its ruined profiles both

The corten was welded on site and left unfinished with joints and blemishes exposed

inside and out and it is clear where both it and the new concrete and corten insertions begin and end, a thrilling juxtaposition between old and new. The corten too has much of the raw and crafted nature that one associates with rural industry. Welded on site by a local welder, this is no refined urban block but more a rugged and rustic outhouse that appears as if it were hammered and bent from a single sheet of metal.

This in fact is deliberate, with much of the corten welded as a series of monocoques – Chandra describes the building as being constructed like a "capsule or ship's hull" . Accordingly, it has a wonderfully imperfect quality, with close inspection revealing very subtle warps, joints and indentations, all adding to the sense of industrious artisan assembly that pervades the entire site. Chandra reveals that the project required very few architectural drawings in the traditional project sense and was very much crafted on site – with additional ribbing, for instance, added to corten

panels when structurally required.

The result of all this is a rugged and dynamically charged workshop where the interweaving of old and new and the raw articulation of materials and form achieves a haunting beauty even more wistful than the idyllic twin oasthouses beside it. Moreover, in its craftsmanship and skilful use of views and setting, the new studio is as rooted to the pastoral practices and traditions of its site as both the oasthouses and farmhouse that once stood on this spot.

The bunker-like guesthouse includes a deck over the lake conceived as a drawbridge

A guesthouse – and a surprise

The studio however is not the end of Carmody Groarke's exploration of the themes of melancholy and retreat on the site. Overlooking a lake on the other side of the Duggan Morris house, the practice has also built a detached guesthouse for the property. Externally this is expressed as a rather ungainly concrete bunker, softened somewhat by large glazed doors that lead out onto a tiny deck jovially conceived as a drawbridge.

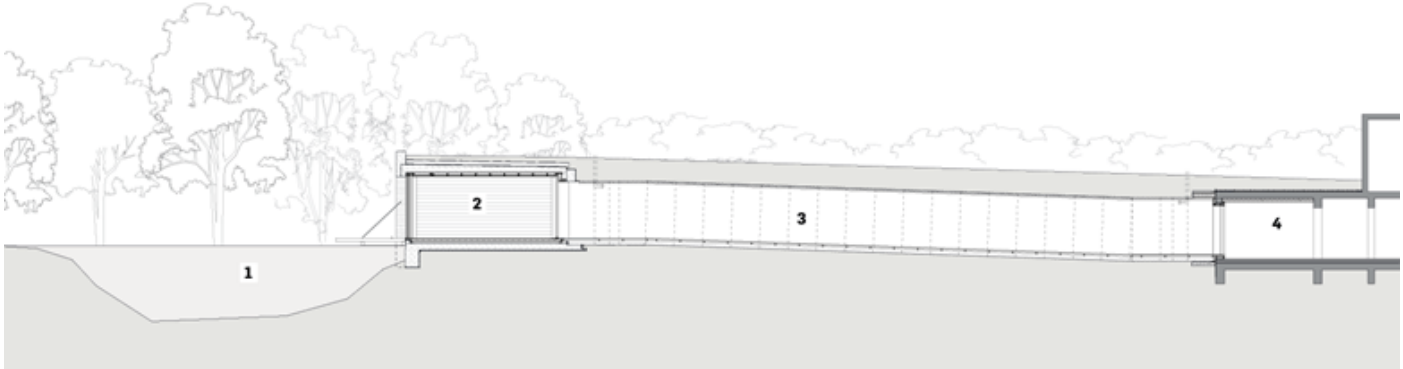
Inside, however, the large, single-room guesthouse is more softly finished, with timber panels exuding a warm domestic feel. What captivates most about this room is the shaft of light that cuts through the dark oak-trimmed shadows, offering a prospect onto the glistening lake from the single glazed opening. It is the sort of blissful view that one imagines would have easily fired the romantic souls of a Shelley or Keats.

A tunnel encased in a ribbed proprietary tube system links the two buildings

And yet there is more to come. Although separated externally from the main house, internally they are linked by the most extraordinary revelation of all: a new tunnel. Accessed from the main house via the type of heavy, concealed wooden door for which the term ‘secret passage’ might have been invented, a snaking tunnel unfurls, illuminated by concealed uplighters underfoot and encased in a ribbed proprietary tube system ingeniously procured from an old sewage pipe.

The tunnel emerges in the guesthouse with a framed view of the lake

In fact, the tunnel is more Crossrail than countryside, an awkward relic of subterranean heavy infrastructure inexplicably burrowed deep under the rolling East Sussex pastures, with all the absurd, mute menace of an unexploded wartime bomb. But it is this very incongruity that works, elevating the otherwise humdrum transfer from main house to guesthouse into a burlesque catwalk that eventually emerges into the luminous lakeside panorama.



Section of guesthouse and tunnel: 1 - Lake; 2 - Guesthouse; 3 - Tunnel; 4 - Studio

It is a mischievous conceit and once again perfectly illustrates how melancholy – in this case an underground route – can be enlivened by dynamic manipulations of light versus shade and openness versus enclosure. The tunnel underlines the enormous subtlety and skill with which the themes of solitude, retreat and contemplation are inexorably woven into Carmody Groarke's interventions at this site. In each of these gestures but most especially in the vividly recharged ruins of the studio, never has melancholy been so poetically expressed.

The guesthouse under construction showing the entrance to the tunnel

Project team

Architect: **Carmody Groarke**

Structural engineer: **Stephen Evans Associates**

Electrical/Mechanical consultant: **The Design Collective**

Landscape architect: **J&L Gibbons**

Quantity surveyor: **Quantem**

Building Study: Barts Maggie's by Steven Holl

19 December 2017

It may be caring on the inside, but as a piece of architecture on one of London's most historic squares, Steven Holl's Maggie's Centre is crashingly insensitive, writes Ike Ijeh

The new centre sits beside James Gibbs' Grade I-listed North Wing of the Barts Hospital central courtyard

Simplistic as it may sound, when seeking to place new buildings in a historic context, architects must inevitably decide between two ambitions: contrast or harmony. Admittedly there is a considerable grey zone between the two positions. While the shimmering metallic tube of Zaha Hadid's Investcorp Building, for example, appears to be a galactic space station poured into the pastoral idyll of an ancient Oxford college, the architect maintains that its mirrored skin was actually designed to reflect the building's rich context. Equally, buildings that fuse together old and new, such as Stanton

Williams' University of the Arts campus in London and much of the output of the Chris Dyson studio, tend to incorporate elements of both harmony and contrast to alternating degrees.

But in the main, for the majority of both architects and the public, the contrast vs harmony camps represent a clear, binary choice. It is a position well understood by prominent US architect Steven Holl. Holl is a veteran of several projects that seek to reconcile new and old, including his controversial extension to Charles Rennie Mackintosh's much revered Glasgow School of Art. But his latest project, the £7.5m Maggie's Centre at St Bartholomew's Hospital in the City of London, arguably scales even greater heights of controversy. Indeed, when the Queen's former gynaecologist gets involved in a planning row at Europe's oldest hospital, it is clear that the stage is set for a historic altercation. And in the five years since Holl's plans were first unveiled, on this point at least it has failed to disappoint.

Located in the corner of the neoclassical courtyard that marks the heart of Barts, which itself dates from 1123, Holl's three-storey glass block is built right next to James Gibbs' grade I-listed 1732 North Wing. This wing contains the hospital's Great Hall, by far Gibbs' most important surviving secular commission in London. And it is precisely this intensely sensitive site that was the source of the new building's problems.

Initially rejected at planning in 2013, the scheme narrowly won permission the following year by being pulled slightly away from the Great Hall. This failed to placate the Friends of the Great Hall, who backed a rival scheme by Hopkins Architects which moved the Maggie's Centre to a completely different site on the hospital grounds and which had also been awarded planning permission.

Following Holl's planning win, the Friends, headed by the aforementioned gynaecologist, mounted a judicial review claiming that Holl's plans would have a "massively detrimental impact" and cause "significant harm to the 800-year-old UNESCO-listed site". The challenge was only dropped when the scheme was altered internally to provide shared facilities used by both Maggie's visitors and the Great Hall itself. Interestingly no external amendments were made but the changes were sufficient to see construction start in 2015 and for it to complete and open to the public this month.

The building is encased in a milky glass skin

Holl describes his concept for the scheme as a “vessel within a vessel within a vessel”. The outermost “vessel” is a frosted glass skin of matte white and coloured glass fragments. These are wrapped around the rectilinear block in 90cm-wide horizontal strips that droop diagonally on the side elevation to follow the path of the internal stair. The intermediate “vessel” is a branching concrete frame, subtly visible through the translucent glass skin when the building is internally lit. And the innermost component is a skin of bamboo that encases walls and soffits throughout the interior.

Such a concept seems innocent enough – so what exactly was so contentious about Holl’s plans? The answer lies in which side of the contrast-harmony debate Holl has elected to follow, which becomes clear as he describes his new building: “I believe to really respect the authenticity of historic architecture you must make an authentically new piece that doesn’t overwhelm it, that complements it. To really respect this James Gibbs building would not be to mimic it in some kind of a stone extension. You can’t match the stonework, you can’t match the quality or the craftsmanship, so that would be an unauthentic kind of action and I think that the authenticity of the James Gibbs piece deserves an authentic piece as a complementary contrast.”

There is nothing wrong with contrast in historic conditions – few now rage against IM Pei’s Pyramid at the Louvre. But in cynical hands, contrast can all too often be used as a convenient Trojan horse for

chaos and carelessness. These are consequences that are sadly all too evident in most of the City of London's wider urban fabric today and ones that, regrettably, Holl has now introduced to Barts.

A model shows the relationship between Maggie's and the central courtyard and reveals how the new building fits into its tight historic site

Holl's building doesn't complement its setting, it weakens and disrupts it. Recently rejuvenated by Hopkins' masterplan which has pedestrianised and relandscaped what was once, scandalously, a car park, the Barts courtyard is a tranquil garden oasis framed on three sides by the stately cadence of Gibbs' handsome facades, all of which are faced in Portland stone.

But now in one corner squats a lurid and stumpy interloper, its glass sheath mocking its limestone neighbours and introducing a snide and discordant tone at the very corner point where a classical square needs to project firmness and strength. Holl speaks of the building's curved edges respectfully retreating from the adjacent quoins of the North Wing. He also reveals that the coloured glass fragments recall the "neume notation" of 13th-century medieval music.

But any concept so abstract and rarefied that it needs to be dictated rather than discerned is likely to pass right over the heads of the unsuspecting general public not to talk of visiting patients. Moreover,

the only thing these convoluted conceptual parlour games achieve is to ensure that the same contextual incongruity that infects geometry thoroughly infiltrates materiality as well.

Bamboo panelling features prominently in the interior

And to top it all off, while at night the translucent skin allows a subtle internal glow to ebb enigmatically between the skeletal concrete frame, during the day and save for a few patches of clear glazing, the milky glass facade offers the blank, sallow impenetrability of a laboratory or vault.

The interiors are significantly less contentious, although one suspects that the formulaic Maggie's template of intimate domesticity checked some of the more disruptive impulses evident on the exterior. A large double-height kitchen essentially forms the entrance space and it is enclosed by a staircase and balcony that descend dramatically in a single sweep like the extended embrace of a consoling arm.

A series of more private consultation, work and meeting spaces flow discreetly from this central void, their wide, full-height doors cleverly achieving the required balance between privacy and openness. Much of the glazing is also frosted internally meaning that, with few exceptions, there are virtually no views outside. But unlike the exterior, this is no tawdry tantrum of introversion, more the opposite. Many of Maggie's patients will come from the surrounding hospital and their visit to Maggie's

provides a cathartic opportunity to escape their clinical treatment and the institutional environment where that treatment is dispensed – core principles of the Maggie's philosophy.

So rather than views out that offer unwelcome reminders of ongoing medical rigours, what visitors get instead is an environment where animation comes naturally in the form of the delicate modulation of light. This is delivered by variations in the translucence of the glass and the intermittent intrusion of its embedded coloured glass fragments. Maggie's chief executive Laura Lee reveals that Holl's "trademark" ability to "subtly modulate light in a gloomy corner site overlooked by higher stone buildings" was one of the key reasons he was chosen for the project.

Curving glass walls enclose the roof terrace

There are two other winning elements to the Maggie's interior. First a generous roof terrace finally offering views of the rear of the site and again embraced by extending glass walls in a mirror of the comforting motif of the internal stair. Secondly, and most enigmatically, is the bamboo finish lavishly deployed on interior spaces and fixtures, its pale, luscious surfaces casting an almost embryonic sense of warmth and enclosure throughout the building.

This sense is however sporadically interrupted by outbreaks of exposed concrete along walls. Yes, the building has a concrete frame but one suspects that its appearance here is more a stylistic architectural decision than one determined to bring comfort and succour to Maggie's visitors.

It also stands as an inconvenient reminder of the overriding theme of discordance that dominates the exterior. For all the effort that has been taken to craft an inviting and welcoming interior, the exterior – which far more people will encounter – does the opposite by gravely unsettling the rhythm and character of its surroundings.

In the same way that harmony is no excuse for pastiche, neither is contrast an excuse for disorder, and in its arrogant assertion of self rather than setting this building has recklessly delivered the harm many predicted it would. This is by no means the "lantern" Holl describes it as, nor is it a work of architecture that complements its site. It is in fact the loose bead that selfishly dislodges the entire pearl necklace.

Project Team

Architect Steven Holl Architects

Client Maggie Keswick Jencks Cancer Caring Centres Trust (Maggie's)

Main Contractor Sir Robert McAlpine

Engineer Arup

Cost Consultant Gardiner and Theobold

World Heritage status - a blessing or curse?

By Ike Ijeh | 30 August 2018

After 30 years as a World Heritage Site, the Tower of London faces being delisted. Does freezing a city at a moment in history do it more harm than good?

Source: Alan Novelli / Alamy Stock Photos

Unesco has long threatened to put the Tower of London on its in-danger register because of the impact of nearby tall buildings such as the Shard and the Walkie Talkie

Next month the 4th annual World Heritage UK conference will be held at the Tower of London. The date coincides with the 30th anniversary of the Tower of London's elevation to World Heritage Site status, the coveted Unesco designation that recognises a landmark or location for its unique "cultural, historic or scientific" contribution to global civilisation.

The UK has 31 such sites and they include natural landscapes such as Giant's Causeway and the Lake District as well as urban landmarks such as the city of Bath and Edinburgh Old and New Towns. London has four such sites, and globally the designation also includes iconic locations such as the Taj Mahal, the pyramids of Giza and the Grand Canyon.

But this autumn's conference in London will seek to examine how the wider setting of UK Unesco World Heritage Sites can be enhanced and protected, and this touches on an incendiary issue that has caused growing concern among heritage lobbyists and others in recent years.

Aptly, the Tower of London itself remains a case in point. When it received its World Heritage Site inscription in 1988, the citation identified it as "the most complete example of an 11th century fortress palace remaining in Europe". While this accolade remains unchanged, in the intervening decades the setting of the Tower has been altered almost beyond recognition by a forest of City of London skyscrapers crowding the skyline behind the medieval fortress – with more still to come.

Source: Lamberto Jesus / Shutterstock.com

Unesco has also complained of "harmful" development close to the Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey

This has led to concerns from Unesco that the Tower's visual impact and historic setting are being eroded. From 2007 onwards successive visiting Unesco delegations have warned that the Tower of

London could be placed on the organisation's in-danger register due to the "negative" impact of tall buildings such as the Shard and the Walkie Talkie. Just last year, concerns over plans for Make's 1 Leadenhall skyscraper prompted Historic Royal Palaces, which manages the attraction, to warn that "the steady build-up in both density and height" of the City's tall buildings risked "becoming visually dominant in iconic views of the Tower" and thereby putting its World Heritage status at risk.

Similar concerns have been raised at central London's other World Heritage Site at Westminster. There too various developments in the surrounding districts of the South Bank, Waterloo, Vauxhall and Elephant and Castle have prompted Unesco to issue dire warnings about the Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey precinct also being placed on their in-danger register unless "harmful" development was curbed.

In 2013, Unesco wrote: "Over the last years, the world heritage committee has repeatedly expressed concern about the actual or potential adverse impact of tall buildings on the setting of the property [the area around parliament]."

Arguably the situation is even worse in Liverpool. In 2004 a large swath of the docks and city centre was granted World Heritage Site status, but just eight years later it was placed on Unesco's in-danger register because of concerns about inappropriate modern development. These are chiefly, though not exclusively, centred on Peel Group's massive planned Liverpool Waters redevelopment, a hugely controversial £5.5bn proposal to erect, among other things, a wall of skyscrapers along the city's iconic waterfront.

Initially Liverpool reacted bullishly, with combative mayor Joe Anderson brashly proclaiming that "not one person who comes to visit our city comes to see the Unesco certificate on my wall", an attitude that many assumed would lead to Unesco throwing Liverpool off its list at its Bahrain committee session earlier this summer. Although Liverpool was instead granted a stay of execution, the city remains firmly on the in-danger list.

Future Unesco versus developer flashpoints may also may also be brewing at London's two other World Heritage Sites, Maritime Greenwich and Kew Gardens. Last month a public inquiry was held into Studio Egret West's 32-storey Chiswick Curve tower. The tower had already been refused planning permission by the local authority in 2017, on the grounds that it would cause "substantial harm to a range of designated heritage assets, including the Royal Botanic Kew Gardens World Heritage Site". Should the planning inquiry overturn the refusal, Unesco is unlikely to be happy.

And earlier this month Historic England savaged Allies and Morrison's proposed skyscraper cluster at British Land's £4bn Canada Water regeneration scheme, claiming that it would "adversely affect the setting of highly graded designated heritage assets", including the nearby Greenwich World Heritage Site.

Allies and Morrison is also potentially flirting with Unesco ire at the Bath World Heritage Site. Despite the practice's mixed-use Bath Quay North scheme receiving outline planning permission a fortnight ago, it was slammed by the council planning officers – who claimed that its "resulting obstruction, bulk and height compete with, dominate and impact on the distinctive character of Georgian Bath and the wider World Heritage Site".

Liverpool's placement on Unesco's in-danger register was prompted by plans to build a wall of skyscrapers along the city's waterfront as part of the proposed Liverpool Waters redevelopment

Height versus heritage?

So does this growing number of clashes and potential points of contention between Unesco and new schemes mean that World Heritage Site protection is simply becoming incompatible with the development and regeneration needs of modern cities? Is Peel Group former development director Lindsey Ashworth right when he says that "Unesco status is a badge on the wall but we cannot afford to fossilise our city"?

Absolutely not, according to Rosemarie MacQueen, former strategic director of the built environment at Westminster city council, who has almost 40 years of experience in planning and conservation in

the borough and is now a commissioner for Historic England.

“The terms ‘fossilised’ and ‘preserve in aspic’ actually amuse me. Aspic is a jelly that doesn’t have a solid state; it grows and mutates in exactly the same way that urban development does. Seventy-eight percent of Westminster is covered by conservation areas and it has more listed buildings than any other borough in the UK. Yet it receives over 13,000 planning applications every year, and the vast majority of those are successful. How on earth can that be fossilised?”

For MacQueen, World Heritage Sites are certainly not about prohibiting modern architecture. “New and old coexisting does not have to be problematic. There is already a wealth of sophisticated policy that can promote new and old in a sensitive and dynamic way. Flexibility in use class orders can also be a hugely influential legislative tool to modernise and adapt existing heritage assets.”

Might it then be a case of it being easier to ensure protection in rural rather than urban contexts? Not necessarily, argues MacQueen. “Stonehenge is having its own problems, with Unesco and Historic England being at opposite ends of the argument over the new underpass, and there are many cities – such as Edinburgh and, to some extent, Bath – that seem to have more effective management plans that protect heritage yet foster development.”

So why, then, the undeniable increase in friction in London between heritage and development in recent years? For MacQueen there is one significant reason: property values. “Westminster was once an exemplar when it came to conservation, but at some point there was a definite sociological shift. It probably happened when the property market began to attract significant amounts of foreign investment and investors began to realise that the London market was able to offer them astronomical rates of return.”

The most obvious built environment symbol of the pressure to capitalise on these high rates of return is the tall building. It is this building type, more than any other, that has inflamed heritage concerns at World Heritage Sites in both London and Liverpool over the past decade. Back in 2013, Unesco acknowledged this trend around Westminster and called for action to “strengthen the systems for protecting the immediate and wider setting of the [World Heritage Site] property, which does not have a buffer zone.”

The government resisted, in a move that MacQueen cites as one of the chief sources of current friction. “A buffer zone with clear criteria about maximum heights would save an awful lot of trouble – as would a strong management plan. The latest London Plan says more about protection to World Heritage Sites but it’s still too fluffy and vague, allowing for multiple opposing interpretations that leave the door wide open to inappropriate development.”

The Russian connection

But one of the biggest World Heritage Site flashpoints in recent years did not happen in Westminster, Liverpool or the City but 3,000 miles away in St Petersburg. Ironically St Petersburg's modern skyline of domes and spires was inspired by London's own largely vanished 17th-century equivalent.

But in 2005, energy giant Gazprom stunned conservationists and smashed a host of local planning policies protecting this skyline by proposing a 403m-high RMJM-designed skyscraper right in the heart of St Petersburg's World Heritage Site. Pandemonium ensued, with protestors mounting legal challenges, planning meetings descending into riot and the Russian Union of Architects boycotting the competition from which the proposals sprang.

But arguably the most stinging sanction was Unesco's threat to strip St Petersburg of its World Heritage Site status if the project went ahead. In this rare instance the threat actually worked, with a court ruling in 2010 that the existing height limit in the city centre could not be violated. The tower was subsequently moved to a new and less historically sensitive site on the outskirts of the city – with another 60m defiantly added to its height for good measure. The tower opens as the Lakhta Centre this autumn, overtaking the Shard as Europe's tallest skyscraper.

Unesco's threat to strip St Petersburg of its World Heritage Site status in the face of the planned Gazprom Tower prompted the project's relocation to the outskirts of the city

The Gazprom Tower incident shed an interesting perspective on the extent to which Unesco involvement influences development in World Heritage Sites. Is Unesco providing an essential public service that protects important cultural sites from the insensitivities of planning authorities and profiteering developers? Or is Unesco – essentially an unelected technocracy – overstepping its remit by interfering in local and central government's legitimate democratic mandate to decide what does and doesn't get built?

For Philipp Nikandrov, chief architect of Moscow-based Gorproject – which took over the Gazprom designs from RMJM – Unesco's influence veers towards the latter. He further claims that the body's policies for the management and protection of its World Heritage Sites is based on a series of fundamental theoretical misunderstandings.

"Unesco's practice of 'blacklisting' cities is wrong. If designed delicately and contextually, tall buildings can become iconic landmarks with historic backgrounds. Instead Unesco targets new developments to freeze historic cityscapes in and around World Heritage Sites. This stops creating a new architectural history and treats the city as a museum rather than a living entity. If we can further add observation decks to the top of tall buildings then this provides the opportunity to enjoy aerial views of historic ensembles, which adds great value to World Heritage Sites."

Nikandrov still insists that the design of the original tower would have been sympathetic to the historic surroundings of its original location. "The winning RMJM design was extremely contextual, being shaped as a transitional form between the dome and spire, the two dominant historic vertical forms in St Petersburg. This would not have damaged the historic city or its skyline as its visual impact would have been less than that of the Shard in London."

In terms of Unesco's specific influence on the Gazprom project, Nikandrov believes that the furore was politically rather than architecturally motivated and that it exposed a host of policy inconsistencies in how Unesco manages and determines World Heritage Sites.

"St Petersburg has the largest World Heritage Site in the world, which protects 70km of the River Neva embankment. This is much bigger than that of Rome, Paris, London or Venice. Yet only 5% of this huge expanse houses historic buildings and 95% is agricultural and industrial land. It's an unfairly inflated World Heritage Site and it requires urgent reconsideration.

"Equally, Dresden was delisted as a World Heritage Site because it built a low, four-lane bridge a mile from its historic centre. Yet over the past 15 years St Petersburg has built three huge suspension bridges within the World Heritage Site with steel supports that exceed the 122m spire of the historic St Peter and Paul cathedral. But since these projects didn't attract objections from conservationists, Unesco never even bothered to take notice."

Source: DPA Picture Alliance / Alamy Stock Photo

Dresden was delisted after construction of a motorway bridge

The Dresden precedent

So, what happens when Unesco does take notice? Well, on recent evidence there are possible outcomes, which can neatly be summed up as the London, Liverpool or Dresden scenarios. The London scenario largely amounts to ignoring Unesco's threats and launching a government charm offensive in order to diffuse the risk of delisting, a policy that appears hitherto to have been successful in thwarting World Heritage expulsion for Westminster and the Tower of London, much to the chagrin of conservationists.

The Liverpool scenario involves appearing initially defiant but then making discreet concessions that keep Unesco happy for the time being. In order to avoid being delisted this summer, Liverpool council proposed a range of measures including a new skyline policy, height restrictions and an independent advisory taskforce on heritage. Unesco contentment is presumably assured by Peel Group's subsequent admission that the changes mean there is now "no likelihood" of its Liverpool Waters scheme proceeding as originally planned.

The nuclear option is the Dresden scenario. This is where Unesco actually follows up on its threats for once and delists a World Heritage Site. To date only two sites have ever been delisted: the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary in Oman where, poachers helped deplete a natural habitat, and the city of Dresden.

Like Liverpool, Dresden was listed in 2004 in recognition of its incomparable, if largely reconstructed, baroque architecture. But Unesco considered the construction of the Waldschlösschen bridge so grave a desecration of the city's historic character that the city was formally delisted on 25 June 2009, incidentally the same day that Michael Jackson died.

The move surprised many, particularly in light of the multiple violations that Unesco continues to tolerate in London and Liverpool. But it does provide a rare opportunity to assess the material value of World Heritage Site status. If the Unesco inscription is such a coveted asset, then what happens when it is removed?

Unesco could react badly if the initial planning refusal for Studio Egret West's Chiswick Curve, near Kew Gardens, is overturned

According to the chair of the Dresden Tourism Association, Johannes Lohmeyer, not much."There were huge fears about a negative impact when we were delisted in 2009, and we were all disappointed by the decision. But what has happened since we were removed? Simply nothing. With the exception of small dip in 2015/16 there has been an average increase in the city's tourism profits of 2.5% every year since 2009. I am convinced that the removal of our World Heritage status has had absolutely no impact on tourism."

Nikandrov agrees: “The World Heritage Site is just a status title; Unesco does not provide any finance associated with the status and it’s entirely the obligation of the participating country to protect the site.”

But MacQueen takes a more positive view. “There’s a definite value. If I’m visiting somewhere for the very first time and I buy a guidebook to plan my schedule, I’ll prioritise the locations that are World Heritage Sites. Something like 85% of first-time visitors to the UK visit the Westminster World Heritage Site. There is validated academic research that proves they offer real tourist and economic value.”

Would tourists still visit Big Ben if it wasn’t a World Heritage Site? It is utterly inconceivable that they wouldn’t. But while economic benefit is tangible and probably isn’t determined by Unesco inscription, prestige and reputation are more indeterminate qualities and these are undoubtedly bestowed by World Heritage status.

As Liverpool mayor Joe Anderson succinctly puts it, it is “a delicate task” to “balance the needs of a growing city whilst protecting our World Heritage status”. This invariably is the challenge for all cities in the 21st century, seeking to embed new architecture into old heritage.

And in doing so, one can’t help but be seduced by MacQueen’s analysis of how old and new can successfully coexist. “It’s not about autocratic restrictions on new architecture, what’s important is analysing and understanding what makes an area special.” As ever with urbanism, understanding is the key. But until planners, architects and developers enshrine this understanding in policy and design, World Heritage Sites will continue to be the celebrity battleground for a wider civic conflict between commerce and conservation.