

Wider than Welfare: industry, infrastructure and eradication

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Abstract. Acting as an Advisor to the Modernist Society (Manchester, UK) since 2011, the threshold between historian and activist is one that I regularly traverse. Similarly, as a member of the Casework Committee of the Twentieth Century Society, my research frequently informs decision making in attempts to conserve architecture and landscapes of the post-war period. I am interested in expanding the discourse of state related construction 'wider than welfare' into territories of industry, infrastructure, services and more. In a period of nationalisation in Britain after 1947, vast swathes of the built environment were touched by the hands of the state in a modernisation programme that ran parallel to social reform. Where social housing is irrefutable evidence of 'socially committed architecture', I argue that forms of industry and infrastructure are also a demonstrable legacy of a political structure that favoured the citizen. The eradication of much of this built legacy has been drawn into issues of culture and class in the UK and, more than just subject to development pressures, its erasure may be viewed as politically calculated and deliberate.

In this paper, I reflect on a 'wider than welfare' state and collective efforts to establish a broader understanding of the state's role in the built environment of the post-war period. I will question the values of mainstream modernism in narrating these wider histories of the state's influence on the built environment. I shall present primary research concerning county council architecture departments, the design of infrastructural landscapes and higher education institutions to disclose how the research has led to various forms of protection and activism. The idea posited in the session outline, of 'eliminating evidence', will be discussed in terms of the UK's market economy and an apparent subjectivity within current governance that favours certain forms of built heritage and denigrates others.

In this paper I address three major concerns. Primarily, this is a call for understanding the activities of particularly the British state as expanding 'wider than welfare' – that, in the post-war period in Britain, during an intense period of nationalisation and amidst significant social consensus, most forms of physical change were influenced directly by the activities of the state. Secondly, I want to emphasise the impact that this has had in terms of attitudes and decisions in relation to the statutory protection of buildings, landscapes and structures. Finally, it is my aim to evidence that the hand of the state continues to shape ideas of value attached to architectural preservation in academic circles and to consider what this means in terms of objectivity and prevailing political binaries.

These views are informed by more than two decades of researching the mainstream modernist architecture and landscapes of Britain. My work deliberately eschews overtly pioneering and avant-garde constructions in favour of those conventionally overlooked by architectural historians. Such purpose reveals alternative histories, more directly connected to the everyday, and the ways in which most citizens experienced the built environment.

The post-war rebuilding of Britain has been described as, 'an era when the state – or, as we might express it more benignly, wider society through the instrument of the state – assumed direct responsibility for housing its people decently'.¹ However, in Britain the responsibility of the state went well beyond housing. Energy provision, transport, healthcare, industry and education were all part of the key reforms to secure 'fair shares for all'.² Historian, David Edgerton, developed the term 'warfare state' to describe the parallel activities of the British in service of the cold war, advancing an argument that military expenditure in the post-war period outstripped that spent on welfare.³ Thus, through an array of policy means, including the major legislative programme of the Labour government from 1945-1951, the state had a guiding hand in vast swathes of social, industrial and military reform.⁴ Reports published between 1940 and 1942⁵ concerning planning and land-use, laid the ground for the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, which was the foundation of modern planning in Britain. An intense period of nationalisation also created British Rail, British Gas, British Steel, British European Airways, the National Coal Board and the Central Electricity Authority.⁶ Some observers even imagined the architecture profession as a branch of the civil service.⁷ The far-reaching effects of this policy

development and its passing into statute still resonate today.

At the close of the workshop, *Architecture and the Welfare State*, held in Liverpool in 2012, a series of questions were posed for the concluding discussion. 'Why do we only talk about housing?' was the most direct, but also asked was, '[h]ow are we to address the differences between the exceptional and the everyday productions of the welfare state?'⁸ Henry-Russell Hitchcock similarly framed 'the architecture of bureaucracy' amidst 'large scale architectural organizations'⁹ proposing that the critic would have 'to develop different tools to evaluate the built results of such practice'.¹⁰ Scholars did not generally take account of Hitchcock's foresight. However, some acknowledge the utility of going 'beyond biographical and stylistic perspectives' to 'relate ... more complexly to the history of the ... welfare state.'¹¹ Here, I wish to expand existing norms - for example, housing is considered as symbolizing the 'collective interventions of the modern state'.¹² However, Pries and Qviström argue that an often singular focus on this aspect has obscured the understanding of the complexities of the state architecture, planning and landscape architecture of the period.¹³ Historians have begun to unpack both matters - the discourse around type has expanded beyond housing, schools and hospitals and considered the architecture and landscape architecture of industrial, infrastructural and civic provisions in the context of state production. Recent research also calls for a more holistic understanding of 'welfare geographies', where multiple perspectives can reveal the more diverse aspects and achievements of state planning.¹⁴

My own research over the last five years has focussed on the architecture and landscape of post-war British infrastructure. Most acutely that of the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) in coal fired and nuclear power stations, the reservoirs of the publicly owned water companies and the development of the motorway system. Nuclear power stations were part of a hidden-in-plain-sight programme for the enrichment of uranium for the British nuclear arms industry.¹⁵ These large infrastructural undertakings were intrinsic parts of the modernisation of Britain but were equally bound to society through the provision of 'amenity', enshrined in statute initially via Section 37 of the Electricity Act (1957), later dubbed the 'Amenity Clause'.¹⁶ It required the minimisation of the impact of generating and transmission sites on scenery, flora and fauna, which created aesthetic value as well ecologically important assets, and resulted in the appointment of landscape architects

on new power station projects. In the same period the 'public relation value' of the landscapes of power stations became a crucial part of government policy.¹⁷ This safeguarded the needs of communities and added another layer of cultural value to these landscapes. In 1961, Michael Porter was appointed as the first Landscape Advisor to the Ministry of Transport. The 1973 Water Act also created a duty to promote 'amenity' by the regional water authorities.¹⁸ Thus, the heritage significance of industrial and infrastructural sites extends beyond the value of the built objects, conventionally recognised as being designed (albeit ostensibly technocratic exercises), to the designed landscapes and to the idea of welfare intrinsic in the provision of public amenity. In these terms, infrastructural landscapes that were sponsored by the state expand the ascription of 'welfare' and its geographies. They are also bound to an ideology that saw the apparatus of the state situate social and cultural provision at the core of its industrial expansion through the policies of nationalisation.

As coal fired power stations are demolished in the UK, so too are the socio-cultural structures associated with amenity provision. The vanishing of an entire industry and the dissolution of its supply chains and attendant businesses (also state directed) is happening in places that have already witnessed one such decimation in the politically motivated closures of coal mines in the 1980s (**Fig. 1**). It has become hard to separate industrial heritage from ideology, particularly as political binaries are increasingly entrenched in contemporary culture wars. Currently, Historic England (a public body funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport) have no plans to afford statutory protection to any relics of the coal fired power industry, despite calls to preserve at least one cooling tower. The listing of post-war architecture is notoriously subject to the whim of government administrations and, despite being framed as an objective rule-based system, is openly affected by subjective decision making at the highest ministerial level. Cynically, one might suggest that some of this decision making is ideologically compromised.

To explore this possibility is it worth considering the case of the Dorman Long tower in England's north-east. The tower was built between 1954-57 as part of a plant producing coke for steel production.¹⁹ The building contained a coal bunker and handling facilities, control rooms and water tanks for emergency firefighting. Disused since 1970, other than retaining its water storage function, the tower was scheduled

for demolition as part of a programme of works to establish a freeport on the site. A notice of demolition was submitted on 3rd September 2021. Following rapid campaign mobilisation, on 15th September the tower was spot listed by Historic England for its 'deliberate monumental architectural statement of confidence' as 'a rare (considered to be nationally unique) surviving structure from the 20th-century coal, iron and steel industries'.²⁰ The 18th September saw a government cabinet reshuffle whereupon Nadine Dorries was appointed as Secretary of State for the DCMS. Her first ministerial act, following lobbying from the Conservative mayor of Teesside, was to overturn the listing decision and the tower was subsequently demolished overnight on 21st September. In cases such as this, objectivity is rapidly obscured by political hubris and to search and locate a truth is largely impossible. Left wing media saw it as a debacle that, 'symbolised the evisceration of local industrial heritage in the name of profit-driven redevelopment – and proved the 'Conservatives' only conserve when it suits them.'²¹ The same authors pointed out that heritage and employment had been set up as binary opposites by the local Conservative mayor, who argued that the retention of the tower prevented jobs being created in the onward development of the site. Apparently, the two were incompatible.

Returning to the case of infrastructure and their landscapes, as my colleague and co-researcher Luca Csepely-Knorr observes, 'motorways or power stations are also sites through which geographies of mid-twentieth-century British modernity – and the ideas of welfare can be assessed and explored'.²² Rapid state driven modernisation in Britain after 1960 was supported by government organisations with responsibilities to various ministries. The Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB, 1958-1990) sat beneath the Ministry of Power and, subsequently (1969), the Ministry of Technology. Similarly, the Ministry of Transport oversaw the construction and management of motorways that were delivered via county authorities. Much of the planning for power and mobility was associated with the British New Towns programme. Thus, ideas of the 'state' and 'welfare' become inseparable when considering the vital links between people, place and employment in post-war Britain. The CEGB were responsible for the provision of power and commissioned and oversaw the construction of large oil fired, coal fired and nuclear power stations.

The fact that these were state enterprises, with clauses on amenity and the environment enshrined in statute, meant that the power stations were part of civic structures alongside fulfilling their function. In all the interviews we have conducted, former employees from every tier of the CEGB have expressed their pride in being part of a service with such responsibility. They recall fondly the leisure and recreation facilities of playgrounds, allotments, sports pitches, golf courses and nature reserves, as well as family days, festivals and fairs, sponsored by their employer. These were not the paternalist-capitalist models of earlier industrialists, more these were undertakings bound with the welfare state. Landscape architects, whilst private practitioners, were guided by advisory committees of design professionals whose interests were aesthetics and amenity in service of the workforce and the wider community. Much of this social provision was lost at the point of privatisation in the 1990s and more was eroded as the post-carbon future beckoned, and sites were closed. Beyond a collectively inscribed socio-cultural value, several organisations are now drawing attention to the heritage value of twentieth century infrastructure.²³ This is in the face of Historic England's current advice that cooling towers, the very symbols of post war power generation, are too ubiquitous and numerous to receive statutory protection.

However, it is not exclusively the objects of infrastructure that are at risk, significant twentieth century designed landscapes (now understood as 'welfare landscapes')²⁴ are being lost at a rapid rate. Absent in any appraisal of decommissioned sites, is an appreciation of the heritage, social, recreational and environmental values of the landscape architecture, so much so that several pioneering and stand out landscapes have already vanished without record or recognition. Our research over the past five years has shone a light on the critical role that landscape architects played in the design and delivery of large-scale infrastructural projects in Britain. Landscape architects were at the forefront of the development of our power stations, reservoirs and motorways. No other profession had the requisite skill and wherewithal to be able to address the scale and significance of these changes to our landscape. Of course, if a landscape architect did a good job, then 60 years later their impact and involvement in these infrastructural advances is invisible. Moreover, those leading the development of ideas and the development of the profession were often women, whose histories, like many female designers, have,

until recently, been obscured.

To landscape historians, influential figures such as Brenda Colvin and Sylvia Crowe are well known, but their designed works, significant in scale and highly publicly visible, are under-celebrated. Crowe stands out for her landscapes around nuclear power stations at Wylfa and Trawsfynydd (**Fig. 2**) in Wales and Colvin for her schemes alongside coal fired power stations at Stourport (from 1952), Eggborough (from 1961), Drakelow (from 1963), and Rugeley (from 1963). At 60-70 years of age, the planting in these schemes is at peak biodiversity, but neither this, nor the design heritage value is preventing the loss of the power stations themselves and their landscapes. Victorian industrial heritage is universally recognised as of value, but the ascription of value to artefacts of the post-war state is seemingly irreconcilable with demands for development in the UK. The only current exception to this general picture, is the preservation of a nature reserve at Drakelow. As historians and researchers bringing attention to the schemes and asserting their historical significance, as well as perceiving inconsistencies and subjectivity in statutory processes, it is hard not to be drawn into arguing for their protection.

To complicate the threshold between objectivity and subjectivity, the UK administers a quinquennial research assessment exercise to assess the quality of work in universities. One of the key metrics is 'impact', defined as 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia'.²⁵ My 'Impact Case Study' in REF2021 evidenced that I had 'impacted on the heritage sector through the statutory listing of post-war buildings'.²⁶ I made successful applications to list two buildings and a public sculpture. The listing was only part of the impact my research had, but nonetheless points to a value system that rewards forms of soft activism, such as raising public awareness and seeking to preserve the built environment. Now, as a member of the Twentieth Century Society's casework committee, the line between architectural historian and activist is blurred and objectivity potentially conflicted. The only conclusion I personally can draw to reconcile this is, that if I, as an academic with privileged access to the necessary resources, do not do this work, who will?

Biography

Richard Brook is an architect and architectural historian whose work focusses on the mainstream modern architecture of the post-war. He is Professor of Architecture and Director of Research for the School of Architecture at Lancaster University. He acts as advisor to the Modernist Society and is an active member of the Twentieth Century Society. In 2022 he co-convened the annual conference of the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain, for whom he also judged the Colvin Prize. This year sees the publication of his monograph *The Renewal of Post-War Manchester: Planning, Architecture and the State* (Manchester University Press).



Figure 1. Building Design Partnership, Ferrybridge C Power Station, South Yorkshire, UK, 1961-68 (demolished). Landscape architects – Milner White. © Richard Brook, 2020.



Figure 2. Basil Spence, Trawsfynydd Nuclear Power Station, Wales, 1956-65. Landscape architect – Sylvia Crowe. © Richard Brook, 2021.

¹ John Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing* (London: Verso, 2018), 85.

² Noel Whiteside, "Creating the Welfare State in Britain, 1945–1960," *Journal of Social Policy* 25, no. 1 (1996): 83–103.

³ For a history of the term, see Keith L. Nelson, "The 'Warfare State': History of a Concept," *Pacific Historical Review* 40, no. 2 (1971): 127–43. David Edgerton, *Warfare State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴ Nicholas Bullock, *Building the Post-War World* (London: Routledge, 2002); Lionel Esher, *A Broken Wave* (London: Allen Lane, 1981); John Robert Gold, *The Practice of Modernism: Modern Architects and Urban Transformation, 1954-1972* (London: Routledge, 2007); Alan Powers, *Britain: Modern Architectures in History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007); Peter Geoffrey Hall, *The Containment of Urban England* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973).

⁵ The Barlow Report (1940) Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population - examining social and economic disadvantage recommended the dispersal of industry. The Uthwatt Report (1941) - concerned with land values and investigated by the Expert Committee on Compensation and Betterment. The Scott Report (1942) was authored by the Committee on Land Utilisation in

Rural Areas and was the forerunner to green belt policy.

⁶ Robert Millward and John Singleton, *The Political Economy of Nationalisation, 1920-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Daniel Norman Chester, *The nationalisation of British industry, 1945-51* (London: HMSO, 1975); R. Kelf-Cohen, *British Nationalisation 1945-1973* (London: Springer, 1973); Michael Robert Bonavia, *The Birth of British Rail* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979).

⁷ Patrick Zamarian, *The Architectural Association in the Postwar Years* (London: Lund Humphries, 2020); T.P. Bennett, "The Architect and Organisation of Post-War Building," *Builder* (29 Dec. 1944) 516-521, (5 Jan 1945) 14-17; "The Future of Architects," *Builder* (6 Sep 1946) n. pag.; "The Architect and the State," *Architect and Building News* (8 Nov 1946) 91-92.

⁸ Adrian Forty, "Appendix: Outcomes from the Liverpool Workshop 2012." In *Architecture and the Welfare State*, ed. Mark Swenarton, Tom Avermaete and Dirk van den Heuvel (London: Routledge, 2015) 321-323.

⁹ Henry-Russell Hitchcock, "The architecture of bureaucracy and the architecture of genius," *Architectural Review* 101, no. 601 (January 1947): 3-6.

¹⁰ Kubo, Michael. "The concept of the architectural corporation." In *Office US Agenda*, ed. Eva Franch (Zurich: Lars Müller, 2014), 37-45.

¹¹ Daniel M. Abramson, "Representing the American Welfare State." *Grey Room* 78 (2020): 96-123.

¹² Miles Glendinning, "Mass Housing: Modern Architecture and State Power - A 20th Century Epic." In *Mass Housing of the Scandinavian Welfare States*, DOCOMOMO conference report (2020).

¹³ Johan Pries and Mattias Qviström. "The patchwork planning of a welfare landscape: Reappraising the role of leisure planning in the Swedish welfare state." *Planning perspectives* 36, no. 5 (2021): 923-948.

¹⁴ Mikkel Høghøj, "Planning Aarhus as a welfare geography: urban modernism and the shaping of 'welfare subjects' in post-war Denmark." *Planning Perspectives* 35, no. 6 (2020): 1031-1053.

¹⁵ Martin Theaker, *Britain, Europe and Civil Nuclear Energy, 1945-62* (London: Springer, 2018)

¹⁶ John Sheail, "The 'amenity' clause: an insight into half a century of environmental protection in the United Kingdom." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (1992): 152-165.

¹⁷ George Goult, "Landscape Electric." *Landscape Design* 162 (1986): 34-37.

¹⁸ Tony Aldous and Brian Clouston, *Landscape by Design* (London: William Heinemann, 1979), 79.

¹⁹ The steel industry in Britain was nationalized on November 24th, 1949, with the passage of the Labour government's Iron and Steel Act. This was reversed by the Conservative government elected in 1951, but the industry was nationalized again in 1967 under a Labour government as British Steel Corporation. The industry was privatized

in 1988 by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher.

²⁰ <https://c20society.org.uk/news/c20-director-on-the-demolition-of-the-dorman-long-tower>

²¹ Claire Harper and James Perry, “Destroying Teesside’s History,” *Tribune*, 1 October 2012,

<https://tribunemag.co.uk/2021/10/destroying-teessides-history>.

²² Luca Csepely-Knorr, “Conditions in Landscape Which the Public as a Whole Wishes to See and Enjoy’ – Electricity Generation, Amenity and Welfare in Post-War Britain.” *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 104, no. 3 (2022): 192–208.

²³ “British Cooling Towers,” Twentieth Century Society, accessed May 6, 2024, <https://c20society.org.uk/news/british-cooling-towers-sculptural-giants-exhibition-opens>

²⁴ A term largely advanced by Scandinavian scholars in discussing the Danish and Swedish welfare state.

²⁵ REF 2019/01, Annex C, *Guidance on Submissions* (January 2019), 90.

²⁶ <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/0966669b-8ef4-47f2-bb3c-64490c5a93d0?page=1>