

Stroud Civic Society

THE STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL (TRICORN HOUSE, CAINSCROSS) COMPULSORY PURCHASE ORDER 2008

The Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and the Acquisition of Land Act 1981 Compulsory Purchase (Inquiries Procedure) Rules 2007

STATEMENT OF CASE

Stroud Civic Society wishes to support Stroud District Council's case for the compulsory purchase and demolition of Tricorn House and its replacement by a new, landmark building.

Introduction

Stroud Civic Society is committed to the preservation and protection of the area's rich heritage of vernacular and industrial buildings. We are equally passionate about the quality of new development.

The Society favours high quality, distinctive modern architecture which takes cognisance of but is not subservient to its context. We are adamantly opposed to pastiche which denigrates and cheapens that which it purports to emulate.

Every year we nominate a building for the Stroud Town Council Design Award:

- ◆ in 2007 we nominated the Station Master's House beside Stroud station, a vigorous example of nineteenth-century railway architecture, for its exemplary restoration
- ◆ in 2008 the award went to Stroud College for their new building, a geometrically-elegant, beautifully proportioned homage to the white buildings of the early modernist period

The Society organises a programme of visits to historic buildings and modern developments. Recent highlights include:

- ◆ Cliveden, Charles Barry's exquisite Italianate palace, former home of the Astors
- ◆ Swinhay, a spectacular new eco-house near Dursley

The Society campaigned

- ◆ to save the Hill Paul building from demolition (successfully)
- ◆ to improve the layout, design and appearance of the Merrywalks cinema, bowling alley and shopping development (unsuccessfully)

Retention versus demolition

The Society is more accustomed to opposing demolition, as at Hill Paul, rather than endorsing it. The fact that Tricorn House is a recent building does not make it necessarily any less worthy of preservation if it were a distinguished or unusual work of architecture.

It is worth remembering how many fine Victorian buildings were demolished after the war when they were regarded as ugly and obsolete. Euston was demolished and St Pancras nearly suffered the same fate.

However, the Society believes that Tricorn House is a special case and that the arguments for compulsory purchase, demolition and replacement by a new building are overwhelming.

Popular revulsion

Tricorn House is almost universally disliked by members of the public. It is regularly cited as an eyesore:

‘Stroud's most ugly building by far. Clearly no company would be seen dead occupying it, as it is permanently empty and in a semi-derelict state with broken windows’.

<http://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/313998>

Philip Booth, the district councillor for the area, describes the building on his blog as ‘a monstrosity at one of Stroud's key gateways’ and adds:

‘A while back I raised the issue of compulsory purchase of Tricorn House—this was in response to work I had been doing on Cainscross Parish Plan—it was overwhelmingly one of the most important things that could be tackled to improve the area. Time and time again in the interviews I was conducting for the Parish Plan this issue was raised unprompted.’

<http://ruscombegreen.blogspot.com/2006/10/tricorn-house.html>

Architectural quality

Tricorn House and the Merrywalks multi-storey car park are often popularly reviled as ‘brutalist’ on account of their exposed concrete finish and the remorselessly repetitive elevations of both buildings. However there is also an architectural style—a post-war offshoot of modernism—which flourished from the 1950s to the mid-1970s dubbed ‘the New Brutalism’.

So, despite its unpopularity, is Tricorn House an excellent example of a New Brutalist building which should be cherished, restored and conserved?

New Brutalist buildings usually feature striking repetitive angular geometries and, while not always featuring exposed concrete, where concrete is used it is usually board-marked or aggressively textured.

Distinguished examples of the genre include

- ◆ The National Theatre by Denys Lasdun
- ◆ Birmingham Central Library by John Madin
- ◆ Andrew Melville Hall at St Andrews by James Stirling

The latter is perhaps the most relevant to consider with reference to Tricorn House.

Like Tricorn House, it employs a repertoire of precast concrete panels. And while, unlike Tricorn House, it has its enthusiastic admirers, it has been called ‘the ugliest building in Scotland’. It is regarded by many students and townsfolk of St Andrews as an eyesore.

Yet it won a Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland design award on completion and has been ranked number 12 in the Best 100 Modern Scottish Buildings of the last 50 Years.

A comparison of the two is instructive. (See attached photograph.)

At Andrew Melville Hall

- ◆ the precast concrete panels are sculpted in three dimensions, diagonally-ribbed alternately, and designed to give each student room windows on two sides and a view of the sea
- ◆ the repetitive mass of the precast elements is punctuated by a glazed promenade providing access to the student study bedrooms
- ◆ at first glance the two wings appear to be mirror images of one another, but
 - one is longer than the other
 - one wing falls from seven storeys to six to five to three, the other from six to five to four to three
- ◆ the stepped massing of the two wings suggests a battleship, rising from foredeck to bridge—appropriate to a building facing the North Sea

As can be seen from this brief survey, Andrew Melville Hall is a building of considerable complexity. It is a carefully designed, self-conscious work of architecture. One can appreciate and respect these qualities without necessarily liking it as a building.

At Tricorn House

- ◆ the 192 precast concrete window panels are two-dimensional except for a slight chamfer round the window opening
- ◆ the brown aggregate panels are unrelieved by any other material or architectural feature—the impression is of an overwhelming, brown concrete mass
- ◆ the building is informed by a single architectural idea—a Y-plan—which can be grasped immediately
- ◆ two of the arms have nine bays, one has just six; that is the limit of architectural variation and probably not intentional
- ◆ the elevations are identical—once you've seen one façade, you've seen them all—and poorly proportioned
- ◆ the central stair/lift core and the end elevations have narrow slit windows adding to the aggressive, hostile appearance

Precast concrete panels do not have to be brown, and repetitive precast elements do not necessarily preclude an attractive appearance or even architectural excellence. Centre Point at the eastern end of Oxford Street is constructed of Y-shaped precast concrete components with a brilliant white finish. It is an inspiring example of what can be achieved and is now Grade Two listed. The former Royal Fine Art Commission praised the building as having an 'elegance worthy of a Wren steeple'.

Tricorn House's only discernable architectural idea is its Y-plan, perhaps suggested by the triangular site.

Most Y-plan buildings have arms of equal length. Tricorn House does not, having two nine-bay arms and one six-bay. This arrangement does not improve the appearance of the building, and would seem to be entirely a product of the constraints of the site and/or the incompetence of the designer.

Y-plan buildings were something of a fad in the post-war years, and there are some distinguished examples:

- ◆ Lubetkin's Bevin House is a Y-plan block of council flats built for the London Borough of Finsbury in 1954, featuring a spectacular central stairwell
- ◆ the Stafford Cripps Estate in Islington, completed in 1959, consists of three 12-storey Y-plan towers. It was one of the very first high-rise council estates

Of more relevance, perhaps, is Tricorn House at Edgbaston, Birmingham, a 12-storey office block. The glazed facades are gently curved producing an elegant profile. It is not an architectural masterpiece but is a cut above your run-of-the-mill office block.

Stroud's Tricorn House does not feature on any list of in the Best 100 Modern English Buildings of the last 50 Years. It is difficult to imagine Tricorn House featuring on any such list, however long.

As a work of architecture, Tricorn House is a failure.

Urbanism

The site of Tricorn House is a SLOAP (Space Left Over After Planning) caused by the construction of the Cainscross roundabout, the widening of Westward Road and the building of a new link to it from Dudbridge, bypassing Bridge Street. This created a new triangular island site.

The task of the designer of a building on this site should have been to repair the rent in the urban fabric created by the new road and roundabout. The new building should have created and confirmed a new building line along Dudbridge Road and Westward Road, and turned the corner between the two.

Tricorn House ignores this obligation. It is set well back from the curtilage on all three sides. It stands aloof from the new road layout and makes no attempt to instate a new building line along its Westward Road or Dudbridge Road frontages so as to re-integrate these new roads into the existing urban fabric. Instead it adds to the damage.

As a piece of urbanism, Tricorn House is a disaster.

Gateway site

Tricorn House sits at a key road junction where four major roads meet:

- ◆ Dudbridge Road, carrying traffic to and from junction 13 of the M5 via the Ebley bypass
- ◆ Westward Road, leading to Ebley and Stonehouse and a major bus artery to Stonehouse, Uley and Dursley
- ◆ Paganhill Lane, leading to Stratford Park, Stroud College and the leisure centre, Archway School, Farmhill, Whiteshill and Randwick—also a major bus artery
- ◆ Cainscross Road, leading to Stroud with Marling School and Stroud High School along its length, and another major bus route

Tricorn House occupies a key site at one of the major gateways to Stroud. Large numbers of people pass through every day, on foot and bicycle, by bus and car.

As a first impression the present building could not be more dismal. Occupied and with its windows intact it would do little to lift the spirits.

In its current state—windows smashed, doors boarded up, boundary walls vandalised, with graffiti pleading PLEASE KNOCK ME DOWN and protected by a security fence—it is a daily affront to all who pass by and a shameful testament to the disinterest and irresponsibility of its owners.

Tricorn House would be a problematic building anywhere, but it is a disaster at such a crucial location.

Visibility

As well as its effect on the local environment, Tricorn House has a wider impact on nearby and distant views:

- ◆ From Dudbridge to the south it is seen from below and dominates the skyline
- ◆ From Stroud it terminates the view down Cainscross Road

The site itself is outside the Cotswold Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), but Tricorn House is a prominent feature, highly visible due to its size, shape and unsympathetic materials from viewpoints within the AONB.

- ◆ the building is unmistakable in views from Paganhill to the north, where it is seen against the dramatic backdrop of the Cotswolds escarpment and the distinctive buildings of Stanley Park
- ◆ from the south, it stands out starkly in both short and long distance views
- ◆ Tricorn House is visible at various points along the Cotswold Way

The prominence and extensive visibility of Tricorn House add to the case for demolition and replacement.

Precedents for demolition

The supposedly functional buildings of the 1960s and 1970s, like Tricorn House, have proved remarkably dysfunctional in the short term. Built at a time when even one telephone per desk was not the norm and before the explosion of desktop computers, information technology and electronic communication, their low floor-to-ceiling heights make the cabling requirements of modern offices difficult or impossible to retrofit.

Office buildings of this era are also poorly insulated, expensive to heat and cool, with sealed windows requiring costly air-conditioning or mechanical ventilation systems. They are almost the direct opposite of today's state-of-the-art, super-insulated, naturally ventilated, low or zero-carbon buildings.

The completion of One Canada Square at Canary Wharf in London Docklands in 1991 offered a direct challenge to the primacy of the City of London as the UK's principal centre for the finance industry. The City of London sought to fight back with a new generation of modern large-floorplate office buildings.

With most of the City covered by conservation areas and faced with the time-consuming process of land assembly, the City chose to examine its stock of post-war blocks which suffered from the same problems as Tricorn House. As a result a number of towers opposite the Barbican alongside London Wall—some built even more recently than Tricorn House—were demolished to be replaced by new buildings, some straddling the road.

Following this lead, many other towns and cities have looked to their stock of reviled and unsuitable post-war buildings as candidates for demolition and redevelopment.

Tricorn House is a prime candidate for this approach.

A replacement for Tricorn House

This crucial, highly visible gateway site demands a new building of the first rank. To replace Tricorn House with something mediocre would be unforgivable. Removing an eyesore is not enough.

An eye-catching, landmark building is required with a real 'wow!' factor about it. It should also seek to repair the rent in the urban fabric created by the Cainscross roundabout and approach roads, which Tricorn House so singularly failed to do.

Any new building should be specified to the highest environmental standards to achieve a zero carbon footprint. It should also aim to encourage access by staff and visitors on foot and by bicycle—for instance by the provision of covered, secure cycle parking, changing rooms and showers. Car journeys should be discouraged by minimising on-site car parking.

Conclusion

The compulsory purchase, demolition and replacement of Tricorn House by an outstanding new building is fully justified and is a worthy aim of planning policy.