THE CONTROL OF CHANGE: CONSERVATION, PRESERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT[1]

CONSERVATION is a very emotionally charged subject. I perhaps as well as anyone know from my work in the Civic Trust[2] what passions can be aroused by the issues of what to keep and what to change. The atmosphere surrounding this subject is now very different from what it was five years ago. The last few years have seen the publication of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government Book, *Preservation and Change*, the Five Town Studies, the *Civic Amenities Act*, and the new *Town & Country Planning Act*. And there was the Historic Towns Conference at York. But I am afraid I feel rather sceptical about the validity—although not the sincerity—of much of this concern, because Conservation is still thought of as a self-contained issue whereas, with preservation and development, it is only one aspect of the same thing—planning. A change of attitude would seem to be required; the assumption of many planners that their job is essentially to alter the environment is not very helpful or intelligent. The new *Town & Country Planning Act* should make it more possible to approach planning in the right way. The time is ripe for a cold, hard look at preservation and change in all its aspects, not just in the contexts of historic buildings, or groups or towns. I will attempt to outline what I believe are the steps which should be taken, touching on a number of aspects all of which might be subject to further study.

First of all we need to establish the nature of change and preservation. This seems the sensible order in which to approach the problem, for although change has always been with us, the call for preservation, at least on the scale we now know it, is something new. Change has not always been thought of so universally as a natural destroyer of beauty, because in the past it was a slow process. The materials used in crystalising change

[1] This paper is based on one which was read by Mr Ashworth to a conference on Preservation and Change, held on July 6 1968 in Chester and organised by the Cheshire Community Council.

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were familiar and the few people who could effect it were on the whole able and experienced. It is all different now. The pressures for change are many and varied, its agents legion and often vulgar. Perhaps we can only accept change when it occurs on a small scale and slowly and not when it happens in the wholesale way of today. We also seem to lack self-confidence; we are afraid, sometimes with justification, that nothing we build today will be as good as that which we destroy. How much of the current desire for preservation is really only a love of the familiar? Do we really want to preserve or to conserve? This seems to me to be the starting point of it all. For, to me, conservation means the taking of a building and, while preserving its essential spirit, giving it a genuine purpose and use in the present day. Preservation has about it an air of sterile aimlessness incompatible with change whereas conservation can withstand the pressures of change.

PRESSURES LEADING TO CHANGE

These may be broadly divided into two categories:

(i) External pressures leading to change in general.

(ii) Internal pressures leading to change in particular.

Within the first category there are four particular pressures:

(a) Population

The pressure exerted by a rapidly expanding population is obvious enough. What is perhaps not quite so obvious is that although this pressure cannot be removed it can be altered by new dispositions of the population. Pressure for 'redevelopment' could, for example, be reduced and become pressure on the Green Belts.

(b) Car ownership

The motorcar whether private or commercial, moving or stationary, demands ever-increasing amounts of space which many of our existing towns and cities cannot provide.

(c) Leisure

The problem of increasing leisure hours, which we seem unable to take very seriously at the moment, will soon have to be tackled in earnest, for the concomitant pressures for new facilities for eating, watching, partaking, ski-ing, cruising, gardening and so on will bring new demands on both town and country.

(d) Higher standards

The inevitable demands for a higher standard of living,

for more comfort, cleanliness and efficiency will all exert their own pressures for change.

Within the second category there are four more pressures:

(a) Age
Even with the best buildings there comes a point when maintenance costs begin to outweigh the advantages reaped from them and when the logical answer seems to be to build a new building.

(b) Condition
This idea needs rationalising. Any index developed would have to include not only fabric, but also internal working conditions, external conditions and traffic access.

(c) Functions
Even within the same trade or use, such as warehousing or housing, functions and habits may change so rapidly and fundamentally that continued use of premises once purpose-built is precluded.

(d) Gadgets and services
No amount of ingenuity can introduce many of the modern appliances and conveniences into old buildings.

Behind all these pressures are economic factors, for only in a time like ours of economic expansion and prosperity, or when a country is consciously attempting to raise its standards of living, is change a really dominant force. India has her population problems but because there is no applied wealth there is little demand for change. Underdeveloped countries often have leisure but again there are not the same problems as we are facing because surplus money is absent.

There is another pressure for change which I would like to believe was more powerful than it would seem to be—the desire to create something beautiful. The creators of the towns of Karlsruhe or the Palace of Versailles, of Bloomsbury Squares or much English Landscape were doubtless interested in the prestige value of their creations, but they were also concerned to achieve excellence for itself. Where do we find such concern today?

FACTORS FAVOURING CONSERVATION

Here again we must look at conservation in its widest sense, at the conservation not only of historic buildings within towns but also of towns within the countryside.

(i) Towns in the countryside

There may sometimes be a case for retaining cities and towns in their entirety for their importance in the history of planning and for the examples of high standards of townscape which they provide. Every student of town planning could profitably spend a weekend in Chester, for instance. York, Welwyn, Saltaire, Harlow and Coventry are other towns which fall into this category. And then there may be social or literary advantages to be obtained from the retention of a community out of all proportion to the cost involved in maintaining that community in existing or improved housing.

(ii) Buildings in towns

(a) We have sympathy for Max Lock when he says 'a town without old buildings is like a man without a memory', for we have not really learnt to sever our association with familiar things as quickly as modern technology requires. For too long planners have ignored the psychological significance which buildings have for people and it is to be hoped that Kevin Lynch's quasi-scientific studies of the 'imageability' of some American cities will be heeded by the professionals. Further research is needed into the 'elements' that are significant in 'townscape'. Perhaps change is psychologically acceptable only if it occurs slowly. Perhaps we should slow the pace down.

(b) Invested Capital. It is not valid simply to discount the fact that buildings are money. However unsuited buildings may be to the functions carried on within them, they still represent large capital investment which cannot be squandered.

(c) There is a widespread and well founded view that at present the building industry is incapable of meeting the demand for new buildings at the same time as producing good work. Perhaps this again suggests a need to slow the pace.

I have left until last the factor which, until recently, has been the only basis for assessing whether or not a building should be preserved—architectural or historic interest. The need for real criteria of assessment has been realised for some time now. Dr Quentin Hughes, in an unpublished paper, has done valuable work in suggesting seven conditions or criteria by any one or more of which buildings might be judged:

1. Buildings illustrating an important technological development.
2. Building illustrating the social characteristics of an age.
3. Building directly connected with an historic person or event.

4. Good examples of a national development in architecture.
5. Good examples of local architectural characteristic.
6. Buildings which symbolise the city.
7. Groups of buildings which form a well defined architectural unity.

Michael Middleton, of the Civic Trust, has taken a slightly wider look at criteria. He writes of a building's intrinsic worth, includes some although not all of Quentin Hughes' criteria, and adds the important factors of the condition of a building and its European significance. (Although, as outlined earlier, I think that 'condition' should be treated quite separately, it clearly does affect a building's worth.) Middleton then goes on to emphasise the importance which individual buildings and groups of buildings may have in townscape terms, whether they are corner or terminal buildings, elements in a unified scheme like a terrace or a crescent, or elements in an organic group. He also refers to the importance which an individual building may have in a total context—it may be unusually important because it is the only historic building in the town or because the town is totally historic and would lose from the removal of even one element.

Clearly a points system needs to be evolved and used for some time by independent and trained observers in the field. It should range from individual buildings to whole towns. The confusion between historic and architectural merit also needs to be cleared up. To say a building or town is a prototype or that it shows a local characteristic is to refer to its historical merit. How many buildings have been listed for the beauty of their proportion, scale, or detailing—for their architectural merit?

THE BALANCING OF FORCES

So there are then two conflicting pressures—for change and for preservation. The essence of planning is to achieve a balance between the two. A series of maps and statements however good in themselves is not enough; a rationalised planning process needs to be evolved. It is to be hoped that the new Planning Act and the Ministry circulars that will follow may supply this need. I believe that intelligent resolution of these pressures will produce planning policy for all levels. Three alternatives seem to emerge: Total Conservation, Total Renewal and a Compromise. Each produces a demand for studies not yet undertaken.

1. Total Conservation

If we are to be able to handle total conservation competently when the need for it arises, we must first systematically codify the various uses to which different types of old buildings can be put, the conversions which can be attempted. Secondly, we need to examine existing techniques and those that must be evolved to cheapen maintenance costs, improve the fabric of buildings, and combat rot and infestation and so on. These studies would need to be closely related to case histories of conservation techniques both here and abroad.

2. Total Renewal

This is really a subject in itself for it includes the whole question of development control and design requirements. I would suggest that at least three guide lines might be set down for the consideration of all developers whether large or small:

(i) Materials
A schedule of materials should be available with comments on their behaviour in certain conditions.

(ii) Height and bulk
A building height contour map might be prepared.

(iii) Access
Pedestrian and vehicle access to buildings will become increasingly important and new techniques will be needed to achieve this access without creating awkward or ugly spaces between buildings.

3. The Compromise

This will be the most widespread situation. In most of our communities there is felt a desire to 'improve' without losing the 'old character'. To talk of 'character' is not to be sentimental. There is, I think, something about many of our existing towns and cities apart from their age which makes them precious to us, and it ought to be possible to go some way towards defining this quality. Valuable work has been done in this direction by Camillo Sitte, Thomas Sharp, Gordon Cullen, Elisabeth Beazley, Kenneth Browne and others, but their work has perhaps sometimes been misleadingly interpreted as proof that the townscapes which we have come to acknowledge as satisfying derive their success from the organic nature of their growth. This need not be so. By studying the disposition of buildings and the place of individual buildings in any given townscape composition—terminal buildings, for instance, or curved buildings which deflect the eye—it should be possible

to suggest some guide lines which new development could follow to achieve the same effects as the old. Such studies would almost certainly suggest that in certain situations it ought to be possible to waive daylight, rights of light, or sight-line legislation in the interests of townscape. There is also a need for some wider studies like those undertaken by Kevin Lynch which helped to discover some of the things which give a town or city a memorable 'image' in people's minds.

LEGISLATION AND FINANCE

To achieve all this we need new legislation. Powers already exist for total renewal, but the necessary guidelines are alarmingly absent, a situation which continues to produce appalling redevelopment proposals from incompetent if well-intentioned people who are free to exercise these powers.

Legislation for conservation has been greatly improved by the *Civic Amenities Act* and the recent *Town & Country Planning Act*. The negative emphasis of previous Planning Acts has been removed, and the concept 'Conservation Areas' introduced. The fact that whole areas may be worthy of conservation because of their 'character' and even if they contain no buildings of architectural or historic interest, has at last received officia recognition, and powers have been introduced to provide not only for the preservation of a Conservation Area but also for its enhancement. A framework is thus provided for the proper integration of preservation with positive planning. Loopholes remain in the legislation however; it is still too permissive and too dependent on the will to conserve.

It is not only the legislative machinery that is missing. Financial flexibility is essential too. So many of our most exciting conservation possibilities lie in jeopardy through lack of available finance. In Haworth, for example, the condition of much of the housing is bad and young people, wanting better and more healthy living conditions, are moving away, yet the local authority housing list does not justify housing. There is also a crying need for private housing, but when it is built it is to a poor standard. A relief road is essential, but the need of such a small community, although frequently visited in the summer, has to take its place in the queue behind more urgent national issues.

I believe this whole question of conserving the best and securing good design when change occurs has to be seen against the cold facts of a limited land mass, an expanding population,

a growing economy, a spread of leisure and the motor car. A cogent policy is essential. Just one final thought, in conclusion, and perhaps it calls for yet another study. Ought we now to be turning our attention to design and construction which have 'change' built into them? Or are we even now creating even bigger problems for our successors than we have ourselves inherited?

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