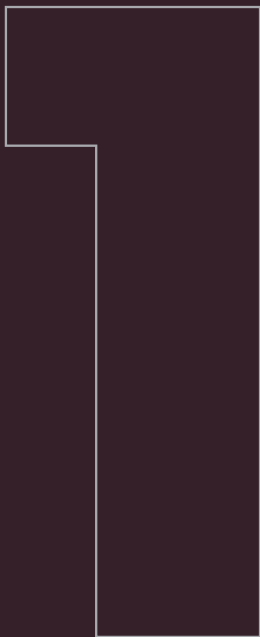


Architecture: The Fourth R
The Past
Sure is Tense



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'What the past shows is what wonderful architecture other ages created to meet their own needs... The past is a challenge, perhaps a rebuke.'

These essays by Sunand Prasad were originally broadcast over five consecutive nights in October 2010, as part of the BBC Radio 3 series 'The Essay'.

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Imagine you are standing facing Birmingham's Selfridges, its bulbous shape studded with silvery discs; an icon of modern architecture. Turn on your heel and you face St Martin's, a fine ancient church remodelled a number of times between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries. Not only do these two buildings coexist happily but, between them, they create a special place, well used and well liked by Birmingham's people; a place that expresses the best of the city's past and present. It also simply works. Just a decade ago, such places were almost non-existent in Birmingham. The city seemed in the depths of its decline. But even then, voices calling for an economic and social renaissance were being heard and they were linking this rebirth with the recovery of the city's civic space – which would mean a reversal of the architectural principles imposed by post-war city planning.

We are profoundly affected by the buildings and spaces around us. How could we not be? Architecture is inescapable. Even the act of escaping it, seeking out wildernesses, gets defined in opposition to urbanity. Given Winston Churchill's often quoted phrase "first we shape our buildings, then they shape us", it frustrates me that we talk about architecture and civic space so little and so superficially, despite their profound impact. If people knew

half as much about home energy use as they do about house prices, we'd be well on the way to dealing with climate change. Newspapers have whole supplements devoted to books, music, sport and food; only occasionally is there an article about architecture or buildings; even more rarely about city planning or engineering. See how many hits you get googling architecture or building, compared to these other topics. Three cheers for Channel 4's broadcasting Grand Designs and the Stirling Prize – perhaps two of the most significant popularisers of the subject. Though not incisive or analytical, they do show a popular appetite for knowing more about this most fundamental of human activities: the making of shelter.

As an architect I long for a more vigorous and better informed public discussion about the nature of our homes and the future shape of our cities and countryside. It is our best means for making them excellent. I think a keen awareness of our surroundings should become an essential part of citizenship, as important in the future as the three 'R's. But, more immediately, this is a rich and rewarding subject, full of history, stories, mysteries and opportunities for every participant to write themselves into the action.

In these five essays I want to speak of some of these stories and these mysteries. How can we know whether we are getting value when spending the huge sums necessary to build anything at all? What is the connection between climate change and architecture?

In this first essay I want to talk about modernism in architecture and planning and how it stumbled in the 1960s and 1970s, damaging confidence in our ability to create great buildings and places. I want to look at how – I believe – architecture has recovered, allowing us to put behind us the meaningless opposition between tradition and modernity that has characterised our recent past.

In 1962, a few months after coming from deeply rural India to live in London, I learned in a geography class about the brand new modern marvel that was the M1. This road meant glamour and excitement. A couple of summers later, my scout troop went camping in North Wales and I have a vivid memory of being entranced on the way back by the flowing river of liquid light that was the motorway in the dark. This was much more than just a way of getting from A to B faster than ever. It was the modern dream – freedom and the future.

Birmingham, now far better connected to London and the South East, was still being rebuilt after severe war damage and the later and even greater clearance of old streets and houses. The new city plan was based around a motorway-like ring road girdling the city, later to be called the concrete collar. There was a spirit of optimism and progress about New Street Station, the Bull Ring shopping centre, and the circular tower of the Rotunda. This was a car-centred approach to city planning, with isolated buildings standing in ill-used space that no one could possibly care for or about. When you go to Birmingham now, you see how much that idea has been reversed. Now it's the pedestrian and public transport that count. Now there is an emphasis on urban public space, like the space created by Selfridges and St Martin's.

But I don't see such easy coexistence of new and old architecture reflected in wider cultural attitudes today. Many of us aspire to Regency mansions, few to interlocking spaces and plain materials. But hold these attitudes to scrutiny and they present some paradoxes. Pop stars and sports personalities might commission 'period houses', but inside them, life is unimaginable without desirable modern products showing off technology with sleek designs.

I want to examine this popular ambivalence about modernity. It is said that people are not so much against modern architecture as against any development. That most of us want things to stay the same, that we are natural NIMBYs. But if that's so, why in the past was there such enthusiasm for building the future? It characterised the Victorian era, and infused much of the twentieth century up until about two decades after the war. What changed?

One plausible answer is that the change, and the pace of change itself, has proved so unsettling that people now seek the reassurance of old surroundings.

Another theory is that the British are visually apathetic, their enthusiasm being for the literary. I find that one hard to believe. When my parents came to England in 1962, they fell in love with the beauty of its villages. When eventually we got a Ford Popular, its primary use seemed to be for drives round the settlements of Hertfordshire.

Some forty-three years later my youngest son and I cycled from London to Bath over four days, mainly along rivers and canals – away from towns. In the pleasant countryside that rolled by we barely saw a single modern house or building. Curious, then, the aesthetic

revolution that I have seen over the same decades in regular visits to builders' merchants. Far fewer curly wurly, olde worlde handles, latches and knobs in wrought iron and brass. Far more cool stainless steel and ergonomic bathroom ware. I think it is fair to assume that retail displays are a good barometer of popular taste. Perhaps Brits are really closet modernists, hiding their private tastes under a public wrap of tradition.

During my college days, Captain Beefheart was a musical cult. His line "The Past Sure is Tense", is a clever, entertainingly pointless pun, but it neatly sums up the generally uneasy coexistence of tradition and modernism in architecture today. But it's a curiously western thing, this ambivalence about past and present architecture. While Birmingham was demolishing its ring roads and returning to older urban patterns, updated for the twenty-first century, Beijing was driving six-lane ring roads through ancient neighbourhoods. Chinese planners were doing away altogether with the architecture of the past as a lived experience, replacing it with shining glass towers. In India, I have seen the number of flyovers trumpeted in a tourist blurb for a city. Perhaps this reflects an enviable faith in the future, eroded in the West, a confidence in the human capacity to fashion our environment using the technology



Sunand Prasad in Sevagram, India aged 11 making a steam powered Meccano big wheel.

of the times. But it is also the permanent and tragic erasure of ways of living supported by an organically evolved physical fabric that has taken a long time to create. Why can't we have the best of both worlds?

In the West, we can perhaps lay some of the blame for our distrust of modernism at the feet of post-war architecture and planning. How did they get it so wrong? After all, no one got up in the morning and said: "I know, let's help slum dwellers by putting them in concrete towers, where now they won't just be poor, but friendless." They didn't even say 'we'll erase the past – it stinks', though there was a bit of that around. The talented, pioneering architect Wells Coates summed up the mood in the 1930s: "The problem is that the past is not behind us, but in front of us, blocking the way." He was animated by hatred of a class-ridden society that condemned so many to a life of drudgery and dingy, cramped, unsanitary homes solely by accident of birth. I admire and share his passionate belief that modern architecture was about the elevation of our sights to create a better world. The NHS was the product of similar thinking. There was widespread popular support from the 1930s to the 1950s for the modernist promise of bright interiors filled with daylight; of transparency, connecting indoors with the

outdoors and nature; of garden cities where the air was ever fresh, of soaring buildings with great views. I remember, as a child, making little buildings in the construction toy 'Bricklayer', with sleek ribbon windows and curving white surfaces reminiscent of the superstructure of ships. Ships go places. Tomorrow was an exciting country.

There was certainly a deal of naïve utopianism in the planning and architecture of the post-war decades – and perhaps that period could be described as a gigantic and failed experiment in idealism. But it is not idealism, laudable or foolish, that shapes modern cities; it is their political economy. Cities are places where powerful interests, about which most people have little idea, compete to create wealth. Without that commercial energy there would be no cities; but because of it, entire communities and neighbourhoods can find their lives blighted or ruined. Notions of collective interest, and providing for the vulnerable and weak, play a very variable part in shaping cities across time and culture. In rebuilding European cities after the war, generally well-intentioned politicians chose the instantly understandable, easily bureaucratized and apparently cheap solutions proffered by town planners and architects. Big roads, big buildings, a clear and allegedly scientific separation of home,

shopping, leisure, clerical work and industrial work with lots of leftover open space in between.

With hindsight, we can see that, for all the good intentions, our confidence in professional knowledge was much greater than our real understanding of how it would all work. In the second half of the twentieth century, we thought we were replacing trial and error with science, in a range of subjects spanned by architecture and city planning. We abandoned craft knowledge in favour of the new study of 'building science' and we abandoned local customs and loose regulations in favour of centralised planning. We lacked the means to really know what was, and was not, of value in the past – we could not predict how these buildings would perform, how they would weather, what kinds of homes they would make, and how they would alter people's lives.

Out went the mouldings and weathering details developed over centuries through trial and error. In came apparently logical, simple, uncluttered construction with flat roofs, economical with space and money. Its early advocates rooted modernism firmly in the rational world view of the industrial revolution, but its cultural imprint is as a new aesthetic. Unfortunately, the inspiring visions

of modern masters were recycled en masse in combinations of materials that leaked, stained, rotted and generally failed. No mouldings, but quite a lot of mould. Worse, in 1967 one person died when a corner of the recently occupied Ronan Point flats in the East End of London collapsed, just like a pack of cards, because of a gas explosion in a boiler on the first floor. In 1973, a fire in the Summerland leisure complex on the Isle of Man killed 120 people. The terrible discovery was made that the fire spread so quickly because of new materials used.

Although these events led to huge and rapid improvements in design and construction enforced through regulation, they left a bitter legacy. Words and phrases like 'concrete monstrosity' and 'eyesore', and of course, Prince Charles's 'carbuncle', would have had far less resonance in popular opinion if post-war building design had not let us down on such a terrible scale.

But where does it leave us now? I believe that the new study of building science today really has become worthy of the title. As shown by a multitude of well-designed, well-constructed buildings, modern architecture and engineering far outstrip what was possible in the past – not just in terms of height, span, transparency and spatial complexity but real comfort,

convenience, safety, energy consumption and sustainable use of resources. I think of London's Evelina Children's Hospital, the Brighton Public Library, the Eden Centre in Cornwall. There has been a patient study of how a vast range of new materials perform in a variety of different conditions. So we can now accurately consider the whole life of buildings and their impact through design, construction, use, adaptation and eventual recycling.

Learning from building failures is one thing, learning how to make liveable and attractive neighbourhoods quite another. Much earlier than Ronan Point or the Summerland fire, back in 1957 sociologists Michael Young and Peter Willmott made a study of the lives of people moved out of East London after the war and settled in new housing estates in Essex. The organically evolved places that they were moved out of severely lacked amenities. But, the study showed, these slums had fostered mutual support amongst residents that was vital not only socially but also economically. In the brand spanking new estates that they moved into, families and friends were split up. The result was a loss in people's collective ability to overcome hardship. Like Beijing Municipality clearing away the traditional hutongs in Beijing, the London authorities could only see dirt and backwardness in the slums. Had the people

been consulted, they would have put the experts right.

We are now learning to maintain, strengthen and often remake the connections between people and the places in which they live. For that to happen, it is vital to harness the knowledge held by occupiers, owners, managers and neighbours. But getting to this knowledge is like extracting metals from ore. A better informed and more energetic public discourse would be like a smelting plant, or even a blast furnace.

What the past shows is what wonderful architecture other ages created to meet their own needs – here ordinary and fitting, there sublime or exciting. The past is a challenge, perhaps a rebuke. People travel across the world to be in the streets of old cities. Today, we should be creating buildings that in the future are regarded as having equal value.

Birmingham's public space is returning to its role as a connecting network for the city's social and economic life. We are beginning to understand that as there is ecology of nature, so there is an ecology of man-made social, economic and physical systems.

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Sunand was President of the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) from 2007 to 2009, where he was responsible for a number of projects designed to focus the energies of the profession upon the need to address climate change.

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