

Brute Ugly: heritage, memory and decorated boards

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For several years the fate of Portsmouth Tricorn has been contested: city council, developers, politicians, the DCMS, English Heritage, the media, the local conservation society, the architect, have all rehearsed their arguments from within their communities of expert discourse. Jeannie Kerswell, however, responded to the developer's request for decoration to 'brighten up the hoardings' around the site, by designing a socially interactive space for the public to record their memories and express their views on the values they attach to the building and its past, present and future as contemporary heritage. For many, excluded by a professionally mediated hate campaign, it was an invitation to access the language of architectural and design politics employed in local city planning.

Introduction

On March 25 2004 in the city of Portsmouth an architecturally unique building, the Tricorn Centre, opened in 1966 and designed by architect Rodney Gordon for Own Luder Partnership, received its first assault by giant sledgehammers to full media attention. The event was attended by a radio roadshow, triumphalist developers, politicians and city officers and still protesting residents. Over the summer and into the autumn the destruction of the building revealed its internal structures, reinforced concrete guts spilling out, hovering above the city. It has been a painful, tragic sight and no one can *not* be affected by the emotional impact of its destruction.

Artist Jeannie Kerswell, known for her work in New Genre Public Art, was invited by Portsmouth City Council to tender for a brief funded from the PR budget of the developer, Centros Miller, to 'brighten' the site's hoardings and to work with Portsmouth's residents. The artist's proposal to create a public artwork which would act as a graphic spatialisation of residents' memories and experiences was welcomed by the developers as a project that they believed would add value to their marketing.

Kerswell's research into the historic and symbolic value of the Tricorn across the numerous discourses evolved over the building's lifetime revealed that for over 35 years the council and developers had neglected the building and the local media had fronted campaigns to foster its reputation as an ugly, concrete monstrosity and to marginalise resident voices demanding its preservation. A hysterical public language evolved around the building which served to '*whip up the lynch mob to howl for itsexecution*' (Luder). Misrepresentation of the building as a '*deserted, unloved and dilapidated eyesore*', contributed to comments to the Minister five to one against listing and calls for its demolition, as did most local people in conversation with Griff Rhys Jones, the presenter of the TV programme *Restoration*.

This paper offers an account of the private and public forces which have determined the spatial politics and social history of a building claimed for modern architectural heritage as a unique example of visionary urban retail design. The role of the artist, her work and its contexts is examined through the three main themes that have shaped the building's

narrative thrust: the drive and influence of the dominant discourses which determine capitalist venture in city centre regeneration; the precarious nature of the survival of modernist architectural heritage in Britain; and the importance of a space for critical dialogue.

An everyday urban retail story?

A visit to the www.portsmouthcc.gov.uk relates the history of the building developed in the 1960s as the result of a study by Portsmouth Corporation of the changing needs of shoppers, retail shopping patterns and developers. The architect assigned to design the building for the E Alec Colman Group of Companies was Owen Luder with Rodney Gordon, who proposed a pioneering concept of a 'casbah centre' or 'market in the sky'. Conscious of economies of construction, Gordon chose a brutalist style, gaining the building the accolade of a *'true Corbusian fantasy in Britain'*. The design principle of the plan was a pedestrian precinct. At ground level there would be shopping around a central square, comprising 35 shop units with two larger stores and a department store. There was a covered wholesale fruit and vegetable market on the first floor above the shopping precinct with vehicle access by spiral ramps and parking on four floors in stacked trays. Nursery, toilets, restaurant, bowling alley and public house were additional facilities, as well as eight flats of residential accommodation. The area was comprised of 11.700 square metres with a massive 2.000 square metres of supermarket surface. Unparalleled by the norms of the day, the vision was a unique mixed purpose retail concept.

Two thirds of the site was acquired by compulsory purchase order and the remainder bought by a development company which sold back to the Corporation. The whole site was then leased to the developers. In 1968 it was sold to Freshwater Property Group and the restaurant was granted planning permission for changed use as a club. In 1977 the flats were boarded up, most having never been let. They were considered poor by modern standards, the view was obscured by the structure of the building, the kitchens were cramped and the underfloor heating was faulty. Rodney Gordon had originally expressed misgivings about the siting of the building, since it was not integrated with other retail areas of the city. Also developers expressed a hostility to covered markets, ironic in the light of subsequent trends in urban regeneration and traditional multiples such as Marks and Spencer were wary of investing in such a brave experiment. The department store was short lived and local traders occupied the small shops (among them Richard Branson with his first Virgin Store).

In 1981 the club was changed to a gaming room. By 1977 a proposal was made to link the Tricorn to other city centre retail areas and in 1989 an indoor mall, the Cascades, was built. In 1988 New Property, part of the Freshwater Group agreed to sell the lease to Briargate who were planning a joint development with Taylor Woodrow-Chippendale. The developers agreed to use their 'best endeavours' to incorporate the Tricorn into the Cascades development. New Property tried to break the lease but Briargate successfully appealed and the ownership went to Taylor Woodrow. In the end the building was never finished, successive owners invested little and it became a 'local business ghetto' at the northern end of the complex.

In 1999 Taylor Woodrow obtained permission for the demolition of the building and the construction of a surface car park as an interim measure, although in fact Hants UK website closes its Tricorn history with the sentence, '*demolition is unlikely until proposals have been agreed to the site's development ... expected in the near future*'.

However, a visit to the website of the city's architectural preservation group, the Portsmouth Society reveals that, Centros Miller (the city's chosen developers for the site) who have part-owned the building for four years and have hastened its deterioration by closing down all its uses, including the car park, have presented no plans to the public and in its so-called 'consultation' leaflet, a one-way communication, alleged that the building *had* to come down.

This may at first sight seem an all too familiar study of the vagaries of development and planning which in this case contributed directly to the lack of forward progression on preparation of plans for the Tricorn's future. It is a narrative well described by Gardner and Sheppard in their study of 1980s urban retail development.

Yet there is a twist in this tale. Gardner and Sheppard write of the 80's planning trend where the triumvirate of retailers, developers and funding agencies, '*(swept) everything in their path: (local people) got something which everyone had in exchange for something uniquely their own. As local independent traders and traditional markets disappeared, local and regional difference went, designing out diversity.*' (Gardner and Sheppard 1989:128)

There can be little doubt that the people of Portsmouth will eventually get something which everyone has. Yet the Tricorn Centre is not simply unique to the locality or region and the conflicts over its retention as either a listed or refurbished building have not been hinged on arguments pitting the local vernacular against capital. It is, in objective terms (is because demolition will take months to complete and as Luder writes, in its partially destroyed state *it reveals its internal structure more marvellously than when untouched*) a monumental building of national and international significance. Thus the familiar media trope of local nostalgia for the unreal authentic does not stand up here.

Also let us not forget that when we speak of heritage we should acknowledge that the citizens of Portsmouth are more actively familiar with the phenomenon than almost any other city in Britain. To live there is to live in a heritage goldfish bowl. Portsmouth is a maritime city, home to the navy, the Victory, Nelson, D-Day, the Historic Dockyards and in the 1980s became the city of National Maritime Heritage. More recently as the pull of the heritage punters has declined the city has gained the Millennium Spinnaker Tower and a new award-winning retail, residential, entertainment mixed development, Gunwharf Quays. For almost seven years the people of the city have watched this monument to heritage lottery money rise slowly, still not completed and beset by local authority scandal and incompetence. A monument to zero degree meaning, it has cost each member

of the city approximately £60 per head. Landmark bids are hence viewed with deep scepticism by the majority of the city's population.

Many believe that the Tricorn offered a major opportunity as part of the *City Centre Strategy, Towards 2000 and Beyond* for the city's north planning brief which was required to include a landmark building. The city now claims that it will construct a landmark building, a fraught ambition and laced with irony, given that it already *had* one which it has now rejected.

From adulation to defamation

The Tricorn's unique muscular brutalist monumentality was acclaimed once the complex was opened in 1966 and by 1967 had won the Civic Trust award for its exciting visual composition. It was included in the New York Museum of Modern Art exhibition of 1970 as a classic example of a megastructure of the century. Ian Nairn of the Observer declared upon the Tricorn's opening that, '*Portsmouth now has something to shout about, equal to Berlioz's 1912 Overture.*' It was, he believed, every student's dream made visible.

However, defamation soon followed adulation and by 1967 it had been voted Britain's fourth ugliest building in a poll of 500 designers. In 1989 the Observer named it the sixth ugliest building and according to a BBC phone-in was considered one of the worst buildings of all time.

During the more recent campaign to save the building, the BBC featured the Tricorn in *Dream Spaces* in November 2003, notable architects have described it as a valuable legacy of the 1960s. Tom Dyckhoff, the Times architectural correspondent (20 January 2004, *Beauty and the Brute*) described it as a '*classic example of a 1960s megastructure, a micro-city type of building*' and suggested that English Heritage had trouble deciding whether it was a carbuncle or part of the heritage. Owen Luder argued that:

'It is ... a unique example of a particular timeframe. It was the first significant response to demands for bigger and better shopping and car ownership.'

Dyckhoff argued that '*brutalism is most threatened of all, precisely because you have to appreciate its muscular architectural qualities rather than picturesque aesthetic.*', indicating that beyond the building itself it was the architectural type that was attacked, again a common theme. Others have argued that more buildings from the 1960s are threatened just as the public is learning to love them and Finch McIntosh Architects who prepared extensive, well researched plans for the refurbishment of the building as part of the planning application to the DCMS, have pointed out persuasively, beyond their reiteration of the impact of neglect on public perception, that their experience has led them to observe that, '*public perception of beauty and ugly works on a pendulum principle and reaches its nadir just before a fresh and positive evaluation.*' (www.portsmouthsociety.org.uk)

It is not the brutalist style alone that has led to such extreme criticism. As Luder himself in his application to the Department of Culture Media and Sport to save the building pointed out there are omissions in the city council's account of the Tricorn's history. Namely that together with the developers it has been responsible for neglect of the building for over thirty years, since it owned the freehold and the lease of the wholesale market and therefore must take some blame for the neglect. More importantly, he rightly points out in his statement to support the application to English Heritage for the listing, that the building's public image has largely been determined by this neglect. Stains, leaks and lack of repair were the visible signs which produced the dominant trope which came to signify the Tricorn as a concrete monstrosity and eyesore. The neglect, he argued, was not a reason to not list the building, since many listed buildings were in disrepair.

Nevertheless the image of the building provided the developers, politicians and the media with their message, continuously placed before the residents. Yet the immediate signs of dereliction, boarded up shops, graffiti, fly posters, delapidated upper stories and piles of litter *were* signs of disinvestment which undermined the vitality of the building. As it stood, Gordon argued that the Tricorn was not an ideal building for Portsmouth. Crime and vandalism and the resulting sinister atmosphere was unsafe for families and would not be improved without attention. His plans for redevelopment and partial preservation aimed to save £8 million pounds on the cost of redevelopment and the significant expense of demolition.

Despite calls for against its preservation, 50:50 for and against, according to the Portsmouth Society, the image of the Tricorn as a derelict, unsalubrious and dangerous site evolved with time. The mediated trope of failed architectural style, social collapse, and urgent redevelopment was constructed to support the calls for its end. The Portsmouth Society's campaign, prior to its demolition, was to '*reverse the image from a negative to a positive one*', by cleaning it up, repairing the concrete and dramatising its sculptural qualities with imaginative lighting and permeability, introducing new vibrant life. They intended that the building be recognised as a beacon. The society website closes with the following statement:

People hold it in great affection and cherish their experiences, artistic, recreational whether at ground level or in its amazing upper region' (www.portsmouthsociety.org.uk)

Considered critical opinion, dialogue informed by historical, cultural and architectural knowledge found little place in public forums and one wonders in a city like Portsmouth whether it would have drawn large numbers of the public. However, Rodney Gordon, when, offering proposals for its refurbishment to the Portsmouth Society, did become aware that once people acquired some knowledge of the strengths of the building and its possibilities shifted their view on its future quite noticeably.

(www.portsmouthsociety.org.uk) But these dialogues have taken place among those with cultural capital and '*such specialist texts do not serve the people*' (Paolo Freire: 1985: 62) Equally Sennett has observed, '*the city offers formal occasions in which citizens voice civic complaint, outrage ...but these do not translate into everyday social practice.*' (Sennett 1994: 359)

It was to be the Hoarding Project that would present the space for expression of affection as visible social practice.

The Hoarding Project

Kerswell's work as counter-hegemonic practice created a space where people could express the spatial realisation of their social experiences as thinking, feeling, doing subjects, a space of resistance that briefly tried to weld place, politics and identity (Keith and Pile 1993: 6) By this is meant spatial realisation as social agency in the evolution of the building's history. In other words they had been there, contributing to its commercial, social and cultural life through direct spatial interaction and now could write this history 'on the building' for public consumption.

Jeannie Kerswell intervened directly in the debate with an artwork which unfolded over its 70metre hoarding from the theme of *Love it or Hate it*, symbolised for her by the iconic Marmite jar. To her Love or Hate seemed to be the two positions which a critically impoverished and persistent mediation had permitted to residents. She wanted to invite people to have a voice hitherto denied them. With permission from Unilever foods to use the image of the Marmite jar, she manipulated the device to design a graphic piece which could be read from a vehicle, which stimulated conversation on the passing buses and which entered the pedestrian's space. The work was constructed in vinyl, a ubiquitous advertising material which enabled the artwork to communicate with precision and impact. The work assumed the authority of the printed word and in so doing re-appropriated and subverted marketing's own language.

Networking was the artist's key tool and initial interviews with people who had connections with the building, key contacts, or 'nodes', as the artist terms them, led to a proliferation of further communications producing an ever widening community with shared histories. Working with volunteers and artist, Jan Williams, Jeannie spent time recording the comments of shoppers and market traders, the people who had been most affected by the Tricorn's gradual disintegration. Press releases stimulated e-mail responses from across the country while internet searches produced innumerable sites devoted to the building. It is believed that no other retail site has had so many websites devoted to it.

The form of the Marmite jar with its white label declaring love and hate opened the first section of the work and adjacent text invited passers by to 'stand and stare', and reflect on the building. Larger than life blue cut-out figures strode along the 70 metres of the piece, a reference to those who moved uninformed through the debate without reflection or regard for wider opinion, whilst the silhouette of a former fan of the famous night club, Granny's, was emblazoned in vibrant scarlet and pink with the text *'the colour happened on the inside'*, a reference to the life and vitality to which so many familiar with the space had born witness.

Most importantly the artist included a series of white shapes symbolic of shopping and clubbing life, stretched the length of the hoarding, where people could enter into an active relation with the installation and turn their private histories into a public space for conversation. The careful management of this section ensured that in writing up comments collected from early research an impartial perspective, for and against the building, was maintained. An open invitation to the public to come and fill the remaining 50% of space resulted in individual perceptions and histories ignored and devalued by the media recorded across the whole work. Throughout individuals offered their precious memorabilia, CDs, videos and photographs to place in the artist's safekeeping. The final section of the hoarding designed with a light bulb image asked 'WHAT NEXT' for the future of the Tricorn. Residents came with several creative ideas.

As with the Portsmouth Society, the project offered people an invitation to work with the negative *image* of the building, with the myths that had been constructed over many years. Marius Kwint in commenting on the process of materialisation in the invention of tradition suggests that '*The act of public forgetting usually involves lies and myths wrapped in lies are the most potent if they are tangible*' (Kwint 1999: 12). This idea points to ways in which the artist succeeded in creating a public and civic space where the process of dominant control of language was turned upside down. The developers and city council had expected that the people would confirm their argument to demolish the building. In fact that is not what happened, reminding us, as Tim Benton's work on Fascist architecture has shown, that *(m)onumental things become unstable within the operation of memory*. (Benton 1999: 14)

Here was a space where the corporation had forty years ago tried to signal its power through a particular built form, now it wished to obliterate that expression and replace it painlessly with a new landmark. Kerswell's project interferes with this ambition. Once an architectural symbol of corporation authority, its earlier meanings became overlaid with new associations, but as Benton has asked '*how do personal memories fit into these manipulations?*' (Benton 1999: 202) What seems not to have been foreseen was that the myth of monstrous brutalism, elaborated by tales of drug dealing and suicide might not work its influence so totally at the vinyl face of Kerswell's project.

The strength and significance of the Hoarding Project was the opportunity it offered to experience spatialised memory. Perceptions full of memories, accumulation over time of individual and shared sensations were brought to the surface, literally and metaphorically. The relationships between '*sense activity, representation and expression*' (Stewart 1999: 17) were written out on the hoarding's surface. Susan Stewart invokes Marx when she states that, '*aesthetic forms both produce sense experience and result from it.*' She wonders whether, '*In talking of an object's qualities (do) we form an object's qualities*' (Stewart 1999: 17). She poses the problem for the museum, how to '*(engage) with the dynamic relation between sense experience and thought.*' To capture this relationship is to release the energy of emotional memory since, '*With the immediate and present data of our senses, we mingle a thousand details out of our past.*' (Stewart 1999: 16).

Stewart's understanding of the power of touch within the museum context underscores the artist's strategy to call on memory through an invitation to see and touch: to see the building and touch the hoarding as artwork. Stewart writes,

'We sometimes perform action by 'touch' or 'feel', to this extent touching is also doing in a way unique to touch as sense ... Some of our distinctions between seeing and doing relies on this difference between vision and touch. Perception here is characterised by transitivity, a transitivity with consequences for the perceiver and the perceived. Because all immediate tactual perception involves contact between a sensitive portion of the body and the thing perceived, it also involves perception of this contact itself. There is a carrying-over from experience to experience of the experience, a kind of doubling which finds its illustration in the image of the living thing bringing a dead thing to life. (Stewart 1999:33)

The practice of erecting hoardings around major construction sites is used by developers only as security device and to keep the public out but to communicate a sense of excitement, that something vital is happening in the citizen's midst, that they are part of the enterprise. Sometimes viewing points are cut into its boards so that the viewing public can watch capital growing. Kerswell takes this function which is to serve the dominant interest and transforms it into a spatialised relation between the real, the imaginary and the symbolic for the citizen. Her hoarding becomes the material and metaphoric outer skin of the building. It performs as material surface, vinyl, which can capture with graphic sharpness and linearity the vitality pens moving across it creating a declarative clarity of the (shared and interactive) written word. It performs as a metaphorical representation of the building to which entry is now forbidden but on which thoughts and experience of the building as lived in can be inscribed.

'The temporal aspect of touching also implicitly bears a notion of causality. The pressure we feel when touching a material thing – a pressure toward and against the thing and toward and against ourselves as well – brings about an idea of causality, of something having happened or made another thing to happen.(32) Touch and impression are key elements of the scene of awakening. (3)

Kerswell devoted care and time to explaining the Tricorn to her visitors, engaging in dialogue to explore the history of the building, the role of the news and means to understand its architecturally unique character. Residents who had been denied access to such knowledge were able to expand their social awareness of the building beyond the purely personal. The entry into abstraction, as Rodney Gordon had found, mobilised the articulation of argument and opinion far beyond the rudimentary polarity of Love and hate to which they had become accustomed.

Reference has already been made to Paolo Freire's work and it is relevant here to draw on it. In his work on adult literacy and his commitment to evoking the recollection of forgotten knowledge through language development he writes that *'The true educator's role is to propose problems about codified existential situations in order to arrive at a more critical view of their reality.... For the educator who experiences the act of knowing together with his students dialogue is the sign of the act of knowing. (Freire 1985: 55)*

When there exists a culture of silence as in the case of the Tricorn, then, as Freire writes of a conversation with a Chilean peasant who says, subjects have '*nothing to say. The body carries out orders from above. Thinking is difficult.*' (Freire 1985: 60). Freire has shown through his teaching that '*people expand their vocabulary and their capacity for expressions by the development of their creative imagination.*' (Freire 1985: 59). He adds, '*The act of knowing is elaborated in a cultural discussion group, whereby the participant becomes engaged in critical analysis of the social framework in which individuals exist*', a necessary process already expressed earlier by Sennett. Under the liberating conditions created by the artist, participation then became a political act, where people could reflect on *the negative attitude toward their own culture as ugly and inferior*, inculcated by the dominant and have the choice to reject it as false comprehension. (Freire 1985:192)

The project created, what Freire has referred to as '*a breaking point ... where something snapped*'. Culture and cultural experience happened at the hoarding project produced by active participants and real subjects. Dialogue and reflection happened and was , as Sennett has asked for, '*collectively shaped into a civic narrative.*' (Sennett 1994: 358)

A project that was viewed as a decorative solution to the brief by the developers has been acclaimed as a significant artwork and as a true sounding board for the people of Portsmouth. The council, after initial silence, has declared that it wants the work to be incorporated into the new site development, although the developers allowed it to be trampled underfoot. As yet there have been no announcements about what will take the place of the Tricorn.

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Jeannie Kerswell's project can be seen at www.vodex.me.uk.

www.portsmouthcc.gov.uk

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