

**INNOVATION, CONTEXT AND CONGRUITY**  
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We fear innovation in our built environment, and we see it as opposed to what we value in our urban tradition. We need to understand why this is and how this opposition might be overcome.

The foundation of our fear is real. We saw in the 1960s and 1970s the destruction of town centres by banal towers, slabs and ring roads that usurped places for people. As the American critic Vincent Scully wrote:

First of all is the question of place, still only partly our own and which, in some strange way, we tend to feel is threatened by us ... [W]e began to become aware that our modern architecture and urbanism were ruining it with enormous rapidity. Redevelopment followed with what came to be one social and urbanistic horror piled on another. The towers rise with no one in the streets. The cars circle endlessly on the freeways around the blank and glittering slabs.

There are overwhelming global forces driving change in both town and country and it is important that we distinguish between those pressures and innovation in architecture. In our planning system they are the subjects of political and economic negotiation in which the architect may have a role as interpreter but not as the initiator. The problem is not a stylistic one - out-of-town supermarkets have the same environmental impact whether their architecture is steel and glass or dressed up as a barn. The difficulty for new architecture is that it has come to symbolise a kind of modernity by which we feel threatened, one not of innovation but of corporate power.

Innovative architecture should be an expression of change and for that to be accepted it has to be part of a cultural consensus, a vision of the future of the built environment in which authentic new architecture is perceived as compatible with the values of the historic past. There is a convergence in our thinking that may be the way to reconcile innovation and conservation, and this lies in the recognition that the legacy we have inherited in our towns and cities is one of place-making, to which new architecture has an obligation. It is surely possible to imagine extending the repertoire of placemaking in the 21st century as in the 18th and 19th centuries the repertoire of streets and squares was extended to include gallerias, covered markets and exchanges.

For this to be possible, however, we need a form of development control that is visionary, rather than reactionary and this is something of which we seem incapable because planning remains two-dimensional. The dissonance and incongruity that appears to characterise new architecture - in London's Docklands, for example - is symptomatic of the lack of any coordinated idea of what the future should look like.

Sir John Soane in his Royal Academy lectures referred to architecture as 'the art of invention' and in his use of light and spatial innovation anticipated qualities of modern architecture. What architecture inherited from modernism was an optimistic sense of the potential of invention. In the modern movement the fine arts also invited us to see things in new ways in unprecedented aesthetic experiences, and this gave confidence that change in constructional technologies, like steel and glass and concrete, could find new and exhilarating visual expression. Perhaps in a more fundamental and even spiritual sense it gave us a belief that through design we could not only accommodate new circumstances but also celebrate them. This is the essence of creativity and creativity in post-industrial society is our most valuable resource, something which architecture should vitally convey.



St John's College, Oxford. This sensitive glass-box extension of the existing Grade I senior common room building shows how dialogues between new architecture and historic contexts can be successfully achieved.

There is a spectacular and ostentatious kind of innovation that is currently fashionable and has its theatrical purposes. But there is another kind of innovation, characteristic of the best British architectural practice, which is rooted in the refinement of the aesthetics of constructional technique and materials and in recognisable building types that can offer a dialogue with the past. Perhaps the most interesting potential for architecture to overcome the polarity of this discussion is the idea of new architecture as a form of historical interpretation that can create a kind of reciprocity between old and new which intensifies the significance of both. This is what Carlo Scarpa achieved in the Castelvecchio Museum, creating a circulation system through the medieval complex that achieved a continuous aesthetic counterpoint, a conversation between new and old. Giancarlo de Carlo achieved something similar in Urbino, setting new buildings such as the underground amphitheatre into the historic fabric, recalling the subterranean archaeology of a Roman citadel but appearing as a bright crescent of glass glinting in the hillside) a gesture of innovation which resonates with its setting. In Britain such dialogues between new architecture and historic contexts have been successfully achieved) perhaps not surprisingly, in university cities such as Oxford and Cambridge, where the commitment to history and to new ideas is a continuously shared aspiration.

Finally a project designed by my own practice, the redevelopment of Broadcasting House, exemplifies the idea of historical interpretation through innovative means. We saw the idea of complementing the convexity of Broadcasting House with an equivalent concavity that terminates the axis of Regent Street. This also lies directly behind the spire of Nash's All Souls in Langham Place and was conceived as a kind of urban cyclorama made of glass specially designed, etched and printed so that at night low internal lighting levels darken the building and thus allow the floodlit spire to stand out. The glass cyclorama was an innovation dedicated to an historical idea.



A model of the proposed redevelopment of Broadcasting House illustrating the translucency of the façade during the day and its transparency at night.