

Prospect NW Jan.05



Prospect NW Issue 17 £4.95
www.prospectmagazine.com

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PPA award winning magazine



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Penny Lewis Editor

This magazine carries a ream of photographs by Daniel Hopkinson of the Maths Tower in Manchester. This is probably the last record of the occupied building in its present state, it may well be the last ever record.

I am not a passionate conservationist and I believe, in general, that unloved, old, redundant buildings should be adapted for re-use or demolished. So I find myself in a strange position of supporting two building preservation campaigns in one month.

I am a trustee of the second campaign for St Peter's Seminary at Cardross by Gillespie Kidd and Coia, which is currently the subject of a planning application.

In both cases these buildings are worth saving and responding to creatively. In the case of Cardross, which is A-Listed, because it is probably the best piece of modernism in Scotland located in a fantastic setting. It is hard to see how, with a bit of imagination and ambition, we can't come up

with a better solution than turning it into a shell.

The Maths Tower is not listed, but it is a fine building and an important landmark in the city. It seems strange that in a city that has spent millions on the B of the Bang, a brand new landmark sculpture by Thomas Heatherwick, they should simultaneously be making plans to demolish one of the city's publicly recognised landmarks.

I have been told that a new use cannot be found and that I am harbouring romantic sentiments that have no place in the real world. But why is it that, in a word awash with design champions and design agencies, we don't have the mechanism or the public money to champion the projects that are really worth championing? It's great to see that the NWDA will support Urban Splash to redevelop the Midland Hotel in Morecambe.

This is exactly the kind of thing the RDAs should be spending their money on.

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Cover photograph University of Manchester's Maths Tower **Photographer** Daniel Hopkinson

www.prospectmagazine.com

To subscribe to Prospect call 0141 335 9065 Annual subscription £49.50 (£89.50 overseas)



Published by **Carnyx Group Limited**
3 Park Street South, Glasgow, G3 6BG
Telephone: 0141 332 3255 Fax: 0141 332 2012
Email: prospect@carnyx.com
Isdn: 0141 331 1958

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PPA Scotland 2004 Scottish Magazine Awards
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Business & Professional
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17 Maths Tower

by Phil Griffin

Prospect Jan.05



Demolition plans The Maths Tower is an important landmark on Manchester's skyline, it identifies the university campus. However, under new proposals to redevelop the university's estate the elegant tower will be demolished.



THERE is a spiral staircase between a study room and a mezzanine library ten metres from the entrance to the Mathematics Building in the University of Manchester. It has an aluminium handrail. The floors are cork-tiled, sections of wall are clad in vertical timber slats. Aluminium framed windows with integral sills look inwards to the podium courtyard, one wall of which appears to be being eaten away by some grey mouldering organic growth, not unusual in Sixties buildings. Except, this organic culture is concrete sculpture by Michael Yeomans, representing some mathematical formula. For this is a building from other days, optimistically conceived and heroically realised. The podium is a cluster of teaching spaces and lecture theatres that anchor a slender eighteen-storey tower of glass and dark brick, which is by far the tallest on campus. The Maths Tower is a landmark, it locates the university from anywhere in the city. The new administration, intent to lift Manchester's newly

amalgamated universities to the heights of Berkeley, Yale and Harvard, seems equally intent to tear the Maths Tower down.

The Mathematics Building, designed by Scherrer and Hicks, opened for serious equations in autumn 1968. Current opinion seems to suggest that it will be empty by spring 2005, and then demolished. The building's own department has voted it "unfit for purpose". True, a few things have happened in the world of mathematics in thirty-odd years of the building's life, like PCs, scientific calculators and whiteboards. I wonder when our city councillors and officers will vote Manchester Town Hall "unfit for purpose", or maybe maths and vote counting, city audits and budget balancing have very little in common. In any event, architects Scherrer and Hicks turned out the bees-knees of all maths departments back then, one that eager sixth-formers would kill to join. Retired lecturer John Reade tells me that on open days they





gaped at the Sixties chic and must have seen themselves in a James Bond movie.

Wilson and Womersley are not two of Manchester's favourite names. In the 1960s and 1970s these architects were busy driving the city into a bright tomorrow, which included their designs for the notorious Hulme Crescents, the unloved Arndale, the totally under-utilised University Precinct, and a comprehensive Masterplan for the university campus. They turned from being heroes to pariahs in barely a generation, but their Oxford Road Campus Masterplan was groundbreaking. They proposed a sort of academic apartheid: students and lecturers physically separated from the hoi polloi. A five-metre-high walkway was to link campus buildings along and across Oxford Road, way above the traffic. There are only two remnants of Wilson and Womersley's ambitions: a walkway leading from the Precinct to the Royal Northern College of Music and the over-scaled

ramp to the main entrance of the Mathematics Building. Soon, it seems, there'll only be one.

The Maths building has good hardwood details: hand rails, doors and shelves. The lift core, like the exterior walls of the podium, is clad in mosaic tiles. The Yeomans sculpture has a partner chandelier in the entrance, an elegant composition in stainless steel tubing and pearl bulbs that resembles an atomic structure. Too bad the building they embellish is unfit for purpose. The main stairwell in the tower is, I suspect, a rare bit of architectural bravado, a sort of structural pun. It has a suitably mathematical triangular plan, all the way down through eighteen floors, like an extruded triangle or an offset Toblerone. The exterior of the tower is a bundle of cubic shapes, all of different heights, folding around each other, rising and dropping away, seemingly at random. The slender verticality of the tower has horizontal counterpoints, offering another sort of geometric

reference. Look out of the high windows and, with the notable exception of the original Alfred Waterhouse buildings and a quite funky Catholic chaplaincy, what you will mainly see are university buildings totally lacking imagination and style. Of almost all the university buildings of the last forty years, only the Maths Tower has grace and scale. A pity then, that it is unfit for purpose.

Project Unity combined the Victoria University of Manchester and UMIST (the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology) on 1 October this year. The new President and Vice-Chancellor, Alan Gilbert, has ambitions to lift the University of Manchester up the global ratings. He has a building budget of around £350m to spend across eight or nine projects. John McAslan and Partners has designed the mixed-use scheme that will occupy the Maths Tower site. Surely the McAslan scheme will support contemporary ecological and sustainable practice? John McAslan is well >



"THE EXTERIOR IS A BUNDLE OF CUBIC SHAPES, ALL OF DIFFERENT HEIGHTS, FOLDING AROUND EACH OTHER, RISING AND DROPPING AWAY, SEEMINGLY AT RANDOM. THE SLENDER VERTICALITY OF THE TOWER HAS HORIZONTAL COUNTERPOINTS..." >



> known for restoration work on Frank Lloyd Wright's Florida College, the De La War Pavilion, Peter Jones Department Store, and others. The Maths Tower isn't listed. For some reason it seems that the Twentieth Century Society didn't feel that it merited spot listing. I get the distinct impression that the building has few fans in the city's planning office. But senior lecturer John Reade (Retired) does not find the building he first taught in in October 1968 "unfit for purpose". He occasionally and unwittingly strokes the walls as he guides me around the building he so clearly loves. I suspect he'll take a trip out of town when the demolition gang moves in.

The all-new University of Manchester is a highly ambitious international teaching establishment, a seat of learning and a cultural paragon. A pity, therefore, that the Estates Department's first act is to destroy one of its finest inherited buildings, a building that is so clearly a candidate for recycling, intelligent reprogramming and skilful refurbishment. Should not a university founded in 1824,

re-invented and reborn in 2004, be the first to demonstrate its commitment to best sustainable practice? Should not the new University of Manchester be the first to challenge notions that a building of quality, barely forty years old, should not be condemned as "unfit for purpose" without other and original purposes first being rigorously tested? Should not an architect with John McAslan's skill and reputation be the first to fight for the retention, in some appropriately modified form, of a building so relatively young and so architecturally distinctive? God knows, if McAslan doesn't, who will? If a retired maths lecturer can see grace and beauty in this fine building, surely somebody, somewhere in the office of Alan Gilbert, the President and Vice Chancellor, must recognise that the all new University of Manchester is about to set out on entirely the wrong foot and might easily find itself condemned as unfit for purpose. ■

Photographs by Daniel Hopkinson