

## Celebrating Scotland's 20th century heritage

Scotland's 20th century innovation and achievements in the historic environment are almost overwhelming, not simply in architectural and historic terms, but as a functional resource.



*Mortonhall Crematorium, Edinburgh: architects Sir Basil Spence, Glover and Ferguson; completed 1967; photographed 1970 (All photos are by the author.)*

Recording and communicating understanding of Scotland's historic environment are central to the work of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) and of Historic Scotland. Recent years have witnessed a number of parallel initiatives that celebrate Scotland's rich and varied contribution throughout the 20th century, alongside a series of thematic studies aimed at strengthening statutory protection.

The acclaimed *Dictionary of Scottish Architects* first became freely available on the internet in 2006, when it provided comprehensive coverage of the period 1840–1940 (Yvonne Hillyard, 'Scotland's architects online', *Context* 106, September 2008; [www.scottisharchitects.org.uk](http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk)).

Initially under the direction of David Walker, formerly chief inspector at Historic Scotland and subsequently professor of art history at the University of St Andrews, the project has been managed since 2007 by Historic Scotland – with the support among others of the RCAHMS, Edinburgh College of Art and DoCoMoMo – and extended to cover the period 1940–80. With 12,500 biographical and 53,000 building entries, coupled with a comprehensive search facility and bibliography, this scholarly online dictionary provides an unrivalled and continuously updated resource that now reaches beyond the nominal terminal date of 1980 to encompass architects practising and projects completed in the first decade of the 21st century.

Unsurprisingly Basil Spence, who studied at the Edinburgh College of Art in the inter-war years and became a household name in the 1950s, features prominently in the dictionary. The Sir Basil Spence



*St Joseph's Church, Dunochter, Clydebank: architects Gillespie Kidd and Coia; built 1962–63; photographed 1970*



*St Benedict's Church, Drumbach, Glasgow: architects Gillespie Kidd and Coia; photographed shortly after completion in 1970; demolished 1991*

Dounreay Nuclear Establishment, near Thurso; chief architect to the UK Atomic Energy Authority; built 1955–59; photographed 1970. The landmark spherical reactor is due to be demolished as part of continuing decommissioning.



Mass housing: Anderson Cross Comprehensive Development Area, Glasgow; Scottish Development Department and SSHA Joint Housing Development Unit; phase 1 built 1965–67 using Bison precast concrete panel system; photographed 1970



Plant Exhibition Houses, Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh: Ministry of Public Buildings and Works Scotland (team leader George A H Pearce); completed 1967; photographed 1970



Archive, donated to the RCAHMS by the architect's family, inspired the exhibition 'Back to the Future' at the Dean Gallery, Edinburgh, in 2007/8, comprising drawings, designs and models from his student days, through Coventry Cathedral and mass housing in the Gorbals, to the University of Sussex and the Wellington parliament 'beehive'.

That exhibition and accompanying book (*Basil Spence: architect*, National Galleries of Scotland with the RCAHMS, 2007) form part of an ongoing reappraisal and celebration of Spence's work that includes

the preparation of a source book on his career, anticipated for publication in 2012. Miles Glendinning's authoritative biography of Spence's Edinburgh-based contemporary, Robert Matthew, another previously neglected figure of the post-war years, was published in 2008 (book review, 'From ogre to saviour', *Context* 113, March 2010).

A further practice to feature extensively in the online dictionary is Gillespie Kidd and Coia, whose archive was gifted to the Glasgow School of Art in 2001. A retrospective exhibition, conceived in partnership with the RCAHMS and focused on the period when Andy MacMillan and Isi Metzstein provided the creative leadership in the practice, was held in Glasgow concurrently with the Spence exhibition in Edinburgh, again accompanied by a definitive publication (*Gillespie Kidd and Coia: architecture 1956–1987*, RIAS with The Lighthouse, 2007).

The timeliness of this attention to key players in the post-war architectural scene in Scotland is underscored by threats to their buildings and those of their contemporaries – whether of demolition or unconsidered change. Historic Scotland responded to this challenge in 2009, expressly to promote awareness and seek direction for its approach to the protection of Scotland's more recent heritage (Deborah Mays, 'An update on listing in Scotland', *Context* 112, November 2009). With fewer than 200 post-second world war buildings listed in Scotland, it is hardly surprising that works by Spence, Matthew, and Gillespie Kidd and Coia have already been lost.

'Scotland: Building for the Future' was launched by Historic Scotland at a conference held in Dundee in November 2009. The pre-conference book and the transactions are now freely available online, with the 2010 publications referred to below ([www.celebrating-scotlandsarchitecture.org](http://www.celebrating-scotlandsarchitecture.org)).

'Scotland: Building for the Future' consolidated the immediately preceding, more focused initiatives by providing an overview of the era of master planning and national reconstruction that determined the agenda for architecture and urban planning in the 1950s and '60s.

In today's age of uncertainty and cultural



*Burrell Collection, Pollok Country Park, Glasgow: architects Barry Gasson, John Meunier and Brit Andreson; completed 1983*

fragmentation it is easy to forget the heady optimism, post-1945, that drove the collective ambition to deliver a new society – a new utopia. The social-democrat vision of the early years of the welfare state, shared as it was by state and local authorities, economists, housing and health specialists, sociologists and society generally, positioned architects and town planners at the centre of an all-embracing movement whose foremost inspiration derived from the pre-war writings and visual imagery of Le Corbusier.

‘Scotland: Building for the Future’ served as a reminder of the context for and magnitude of the resultant interventions in the built environment, as well as the spectrum of threats.

Infrastructure developments of international renown such as the Forth Road Bridge (at the time of its completion in 1964 the longest span in Europe and reported in recent years to be nearing the end of its design life) and the symbolic golf-ball profile of the Dounreay Nuclear Establishment overlooking the Pentland Firth (completed in 1959 and now due for demolition under decommissioning) continued a long tradition of pioneering excellence in Scottish engineering.

Scotland contributed five new towns in the early post-war decades. It is symptomatic of the task facing Historic Scotland in its endeavours to respond to negative value judgements today that while Cumbernauld, the most innovative of the five, was recognised as a landmark of community planning in the 1960s, and remains a magnet for architects and students from all over the world, its monumental town centre attracts infamy in national carbuncle awards as the building the public would most like to see demolished.

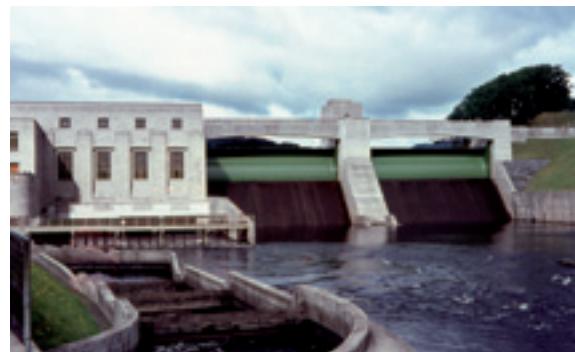
As one of the essays in the ‘Scotland: Building for the Future’ transactions notes, however, heritage values are not inherent in objects themselves, but are shaped above all by their reception by users or consumers – a process that is far from constant either in space or time. Thus, whereas post-war mass housing in Aberdeen is a matter of civic pride and enjoys immaculate maintenance and landscaping, user perception of Cumbernauld is more a reaction to how its town centre has been managed than a



*Landmark Visitor Centre, Carrbridge, near Aviemore: architect John L Paterson; photographed shortly after completion in 1970; damaged by fire in 1973*



*Stratford Street housing development, Glasgow: winning entry in the 1984 RIAS/Maryhill Housing Association ‘21st Century Tenement’ competition; architects Ken Macrae with McGurn, Logan, Duncan and Opfer; completed 1989; photographed 1990*



*Pitlochry Power Station and Dam, Tummel Valley hydroelectric scheme; architect Harold O Tarbolton; built 1947–51; photographed 1962.*

negative reflection on the idealism that inspired its designers. The role of protection today must depend in substantive measure on its potential to encourage enhanced management regimes, as well as anticipation of recognition by future generations.

The post-war years coincided with a crucial period in Scotland’s history. The early decades have left us with an enormous legacy of inspirational and timeless buildings across all domains: from schools to universities (such as Stirling, set in parkland); commercial offices and recreational buildings (such as



*Rannoch Power Station,  
Tummel Bridge and Rannoch  
hydroelectric scheme;  
consulting engineer William  
Halcrow; completed 1933.*

the formal geometry of the Scottish Widows building and neighbouring Royal Commonwealth Pool, both set against the free-form geology of Salisbury Crags, Edinburgh); and including housing, and recreational and religious buildings. Subsequent decades have added to this immeasurably, with cultural icons such as the Burrell Collection and the Museum of Scotland – the significance of which have never been questioned.

Noted individual contributions were made by John L Paterson, the distinguished exhibition designer whose building projects were rare; Peter Womersley, whose brutalist aesthetic has now been revisited in a monograph (Rutland Press, 2009); and Morris and Steedman, originators of some of the finest private houses in post-war Scotland, also the subject of a recent monograph (Historic Scotland, 2010: online).

The urban tenement, the housing archetype in a Scottish tradition that dates back to medieval times, has also enjoyed an important revival: from inherited pre-war slum fit only for demolition; through cornerstone of urban regeneration; to re-invention as a model for 21st century living.

Debate on the rationale for a highly selective approach to the identification and protection of exemplar buildings of the 20th century as heritage, needs to be set within today's agendas of sustainability and climate change. That these provide complementary reasons for an essentially conservationist attitude across the broad historic environment featured strongly in the panel discussion at the end of the 'Scotland: Building for the Future' conference.

Such considerations formed the unstated backdrop to the final Historic Scotland initiative in this article. 'Power to the People: the built heritage of Scotland's hydroelectric power' was launched in Perth in 2010 (Historic Scotland, 2010: online). The hydroelectric sector in effect spans the whole of the 20th century, emerging as a public utility from the 1930s onwards

when, literally, it generated and transmitted 'power to the people'.

This unique and internationally important assemblage of industrial heritage is rich in historic buildings, all of which are maintained in good condition and, along with their machinery, still in use for the purpose for which they were constructed (David Fleetwood, 'Ben Cruachan's hidden giant', *Context* 109, May 2009). Moreover, the entire infrastructure is at the cutting edge of today's agenda for renewable energy. No other heritage sector in the UK enjoys such composite advantages.

Historic Scotland's nationwide thematic study of hydroelectric power has embraced some 350 sites. It has recognised not merely the achievement in terms of building and technology, but also the pioneering vision that underscored the harnessing of nature in some of the most challenging and inaccessible terrains: at first, in private developments to satisfy the interests of landowners and the aluminium industry; subsequently, to establish a network that by the 1960s was generating a significant proportion of Scotland's energy.

'Power to the People' celebrates the grace and sensitivity of architects and engineers in the design and insertion of often large-scale installations into Scotland's dramatic landscape. It introduces a rich canvas of the individuals who campaigned for, designed, executed and continue to manage a vibrant component of our national heritage. It is both a heroic legacy and living heritage.

By way of a conclusion, the question that comes to mind is whether, faced with such an almost overwhelming wealth of 20th century innovation and achievements in the historic environment, the conventional approach of selective listing is adequate to reflect the significance of the heritage of this period, and its value not simply in architectural and historic terms, but as a sustainable and functional resource.

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