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Looking for the issues

On Monday, after weeks of rumour, the GLC's chief architect, Peter Jones, announced his intention to challenge Larry Rolland, RIBA Council's choice as president-elect (p32). But, in taking up the challenge to get elected president and lead the defence of the GLC and the public sector (which Michael Manser made to Jake Brown at York), Jones may have left many people wondering what this election is about.

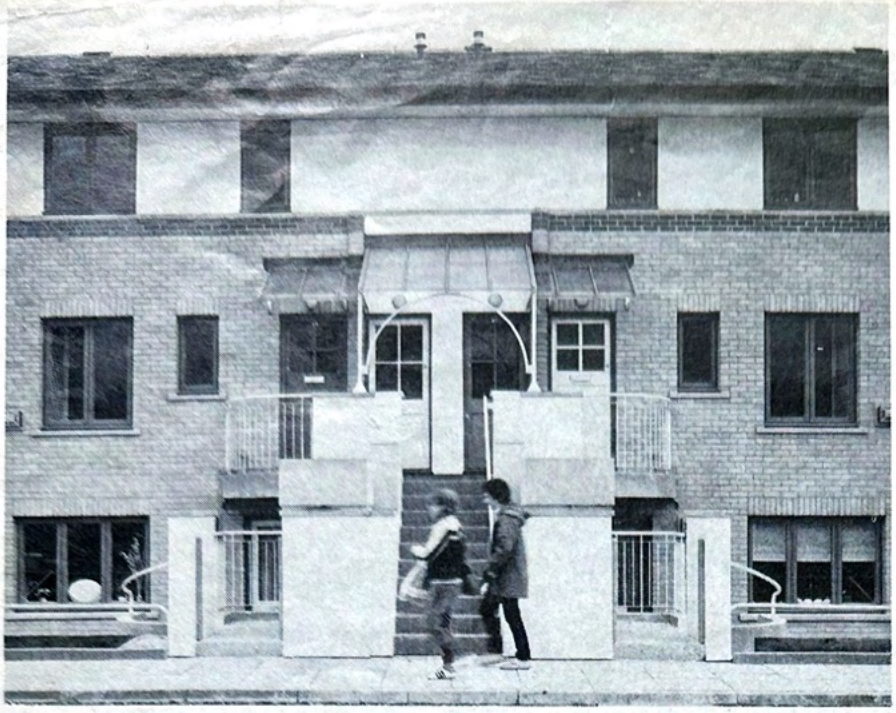
Jones' concern for competence, CPD, small practices, the public sector and building stock investment are matched by Rolland's work at the RIBA (and, before that, at the RIAS). In these shared interests we can detect at last a welcome and convincing swing back to the more serious and powerful forces of quality of service and concern for the common good that underpin a healthy profession.

So what are the issues? There seems to be just two. The first is a more aggressive and public defence of the public sector—a cause likely to be espoused with greater vehemence by Jones' supporters than by Jones himself. The second is the individual candidates: previous contests have shown that it is the candidate who presents his persona most effectively who wins.

A defective process

There is also one issue raised by the election itself. As the potential leader of the Group of Eight, an incoming president needs every week he can get to familiarise himself with the corridors of power. Council's choice has a year for this process as well as his previous experience. An external challenger has six months and no previous experience. Given the complexity of the problems now facing the RIBA, this is no way to run the profession. The ability to mount a challenge must be retained but the timetable must now be changed.

Jones believes, 'The whole membership of the RIBA ought to vote in presidential elections'. But, if precedent is anything to go by, the membership will not oblige. Just three years ago Manser and others plotted and achieved the first such election for 57 years—on the grounds that it was a matter of interest to the whole membership. Their candidate, Owen Luder, was voted for by 18 per cent of the members. Two years later Manser was voted in by an even more derisory 15 per cent. One can only hope that the winner of this election will be more convincingly supported.



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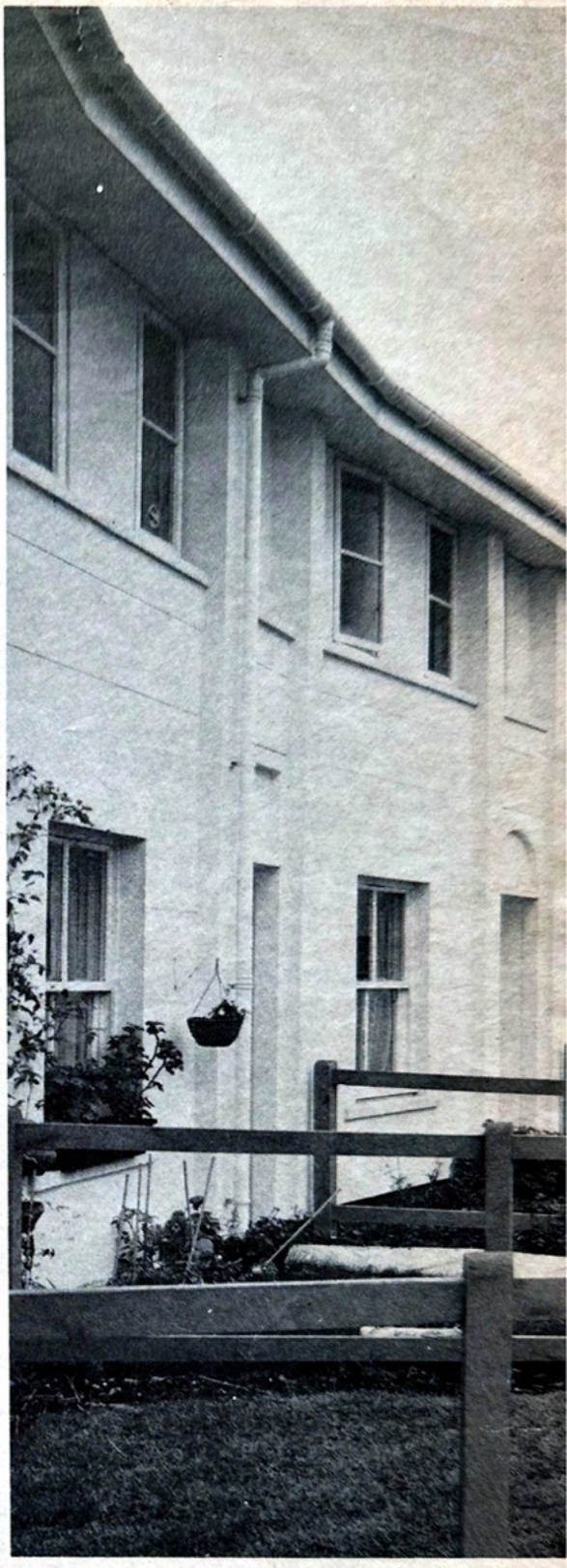


A housing scheme now being completed in north London seems to epitomise housing in the 1980s. It is financed by both public and private sector and contains a mix of accommodation designed in a variety of styles, all attempting to invoke the pre-modern housing tradition. Patrick Hannay reports. Photographs by Peter Cook.

PRIVATE GAIN, PUBLIC LOSS

There was a time, not so long ago, when there was simply public or private housing, the former for rent, the latter for sale; the former Parker Morris, the latter NHBC. There was also a time when the architecture of public housing in the London Borough of Camden was all white, flat-roofed and of complex section.

The Camden housing of 1984, as portrayed in Peter Mishcon & Associates' Elm Village scheme for the United Kingdom Housing Trust, the Halifax Building Society and the Nationwide Building Society, is almost unrecognisable when considered in the light of that straightforward context.

There are no more housing schemes simply for sale or for rent. On a 4 acre

1 Stairs and doors to the flats in block A: the memory of early LCC housing meets post-modern architecture.
2 Houses in block E—the late Victorian artisan look.
3 The Crescent (block D), an evocation of the classical past with implied pedimented doors and pilasters.

site on the industrial hinterland just north of King's Cross station, the architects have created 162 homes, set on a semi-urban/suburban layout, comprising 50 'cost sale', 85 'shared ownership' and 27 'fair rent' houses. This mix, say the architects, has been 'achieved through an unprecedented partnership of different public and private sector agencies'.

Warped images

There is no more white architecture. In its place we have an astonishing variety of familiar and not quite familiar elevations run up in front of a standard timber-frame structure. There is the white rendered crescent, with its faceted facade made to look curved by the cunning use of pilaster strips, and terraces with banded brick facades and chamfered lintels invoking late nineteenth century artisan cottages. Another terrace changes its detailing in mid-run—metal porches give way to large scale subclassical surrounds, while yet other terraces have rendered first floors in memory of early LCC housing or rough granite courses set in the brickwork in memory of some influential turn-of-the-century building or other. And, sprinkled over all, are familiar post-modern fun details—curvaceous stairs, implied pediments on balls over doors and trellis verandas.

The natural conclusion to draw from all this is that the architecture is an exact mirror image of the complex funding and management strategy. It isn't. Rather, it reflects the fact that architects are still carrying on their own internalised debate. In the closed world of white architecture; no lay person was invited into the debate, there was no room for objectors.

Recognisable language

Now at least at Elm Village there is a popularly recognisable housing language of crescents, terraces and mews courts. But architects have picked up all those desires for historical continuity subliminally. They are still in as much control as before. Don't be taken in by the new Elm Village architecture, even though

Mishcon hopes you might be; this is not the work of, as it might seem, five different architects designing five different schemes at different times.

Of course, whether the housing is of the period of white architecture and Parker Morris, or eclectic architecture and 'value for money', there are many regulations and administrative fixes which, quite understandably, generate a great deal of the solution. But they are not enough to explain the extraordinary eclecticism carried out by one practice in such a small area.

A question of motivation

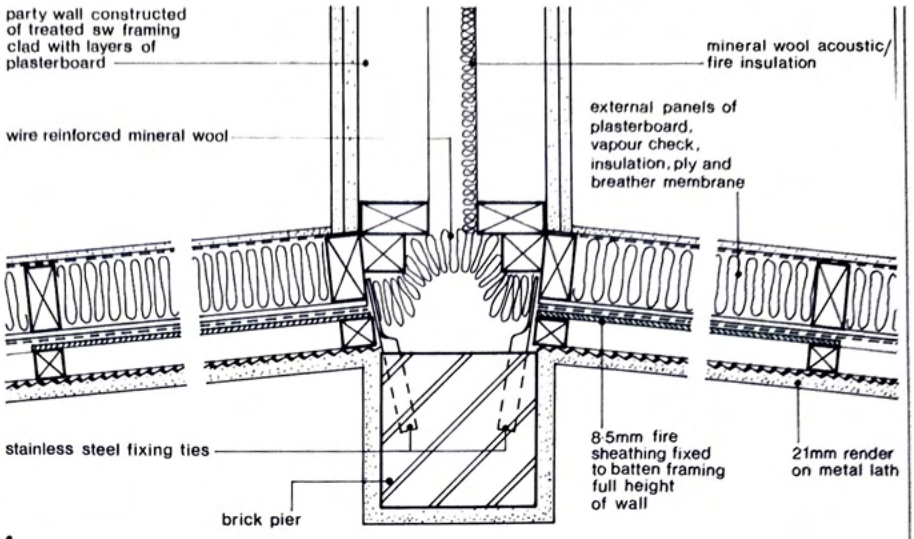
There is not space here, nor do I wish, to comment on the quality of the individual elements or even the composition of the whole. What I do want to question is the motivation for such deliberate variety. It is difficult to give any rational answer that holds water. I would suggest it is more the hidden consequence of an internal paranoia in the profession, exaggerated by a misconceived over-reaction to some earlier atrocities in public housing.

There is a yearning for contact with the users in this preplanned design process, which of course does not include users. This is not co-operative housing. Elm Village is not a project where each individual house is designed and built by its tenant or buyer. The eclectic architecture is a misplaced form of social engineering, something everyone hoped had at last been cleared from the profession's attic—an idea that somehow the class division, which seems (some say naturally) to arise through the competitive diverse routes by which people have access to a home, can be bridged through the architecture. The paradox is that it simply exaggerates the divisions.

Stimulus to tension

What such eclecticism does is simply reinforce the idea that everyone has publically to stamp their status on the public front of their house to let you know that they are different from their neighbours. Mishcon talks sensitively of wanting to avoid an 'estate' feel. But such a feel does not have to be negative. The model estates that sported to the rear of the house the organic expression of the individual through endless extensions and additions, while maintaining a unified sense of public composure on the fronts, were a far subtler resolution of the perennial conflict between private and public interest. This artificial creation of variety by architects only acts as a stimulus to the social tensions that already exist. The diversity on the public fronts emphasises the individual at the expense of the community.

Credits
architects Peter Mishcon & Associates
quantity surveyors Seadens
consulting engineers Michael Barclay Partnership; HSD Building Consultants Ltd
contractors Walter Llewellyn & Sons Ltd



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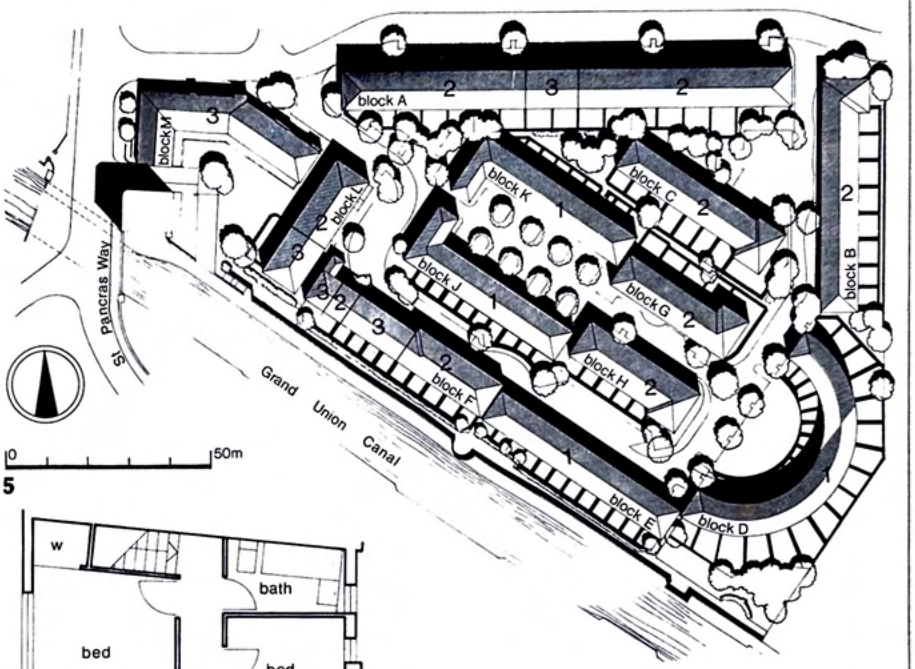

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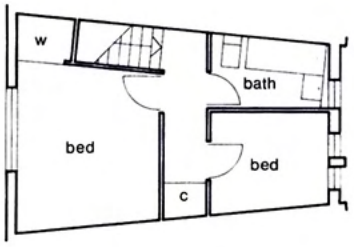

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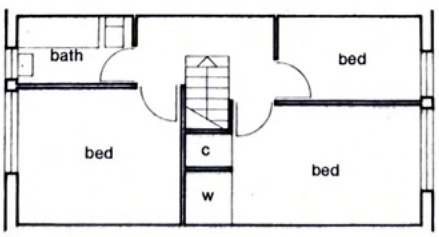

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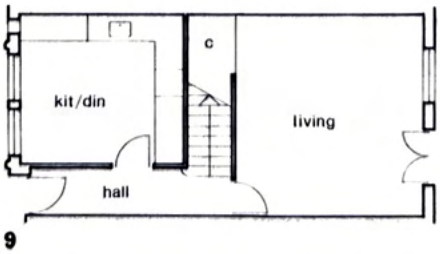

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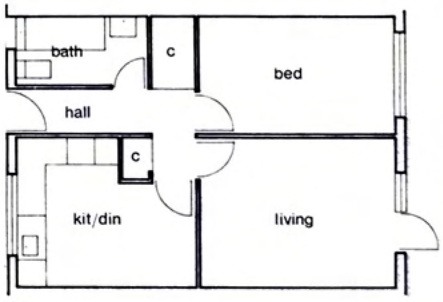

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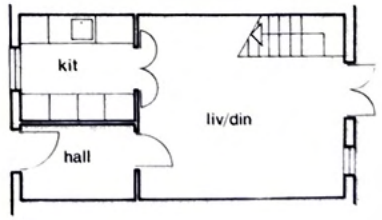

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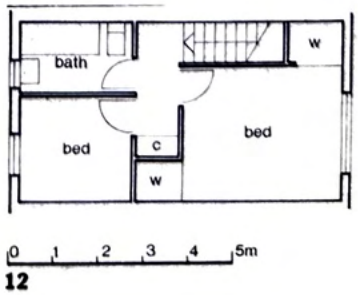

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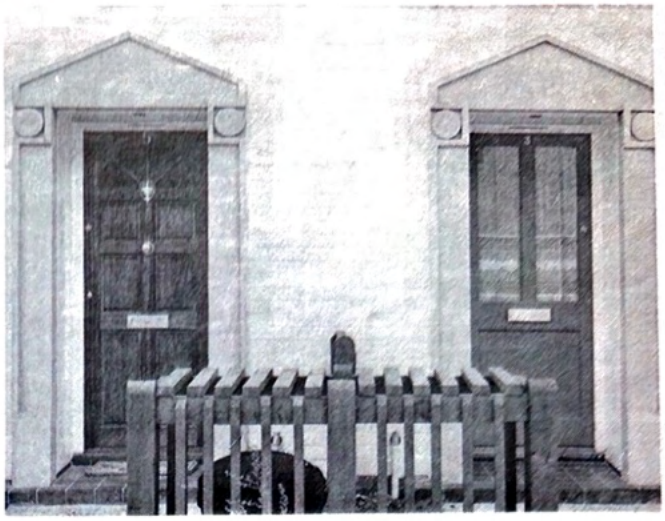

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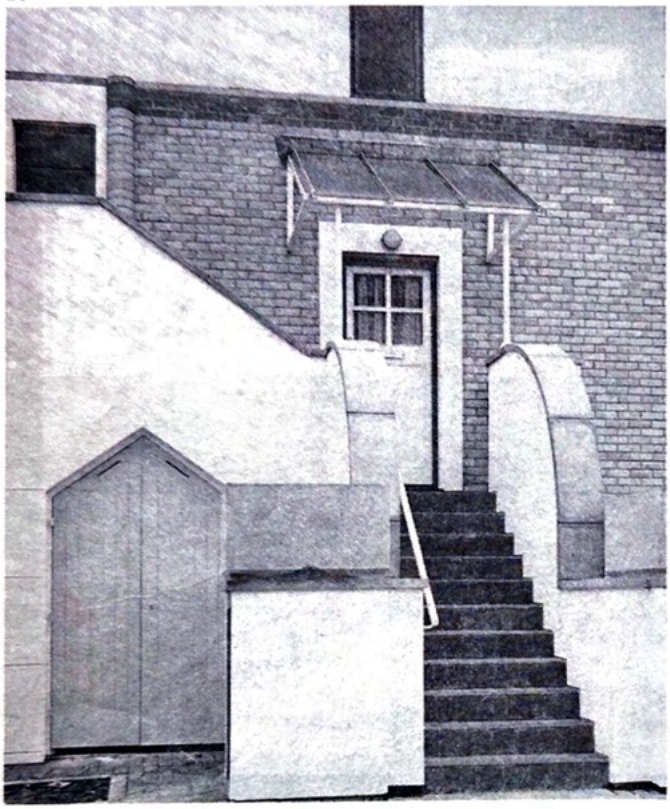

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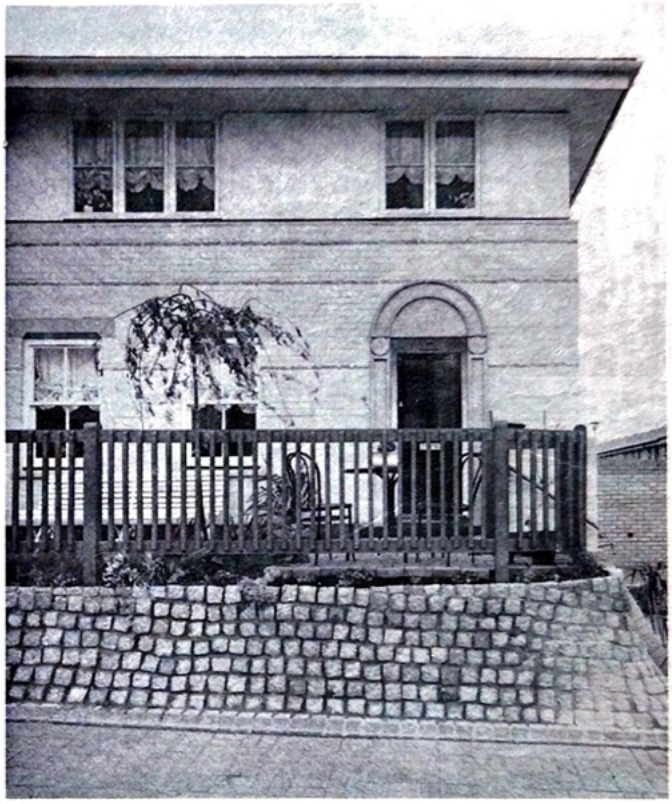

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4 Section through facade and party walls at first floor level of houses in The Crescent.
5 Site plan showing type of housing. 1 is cost sale, 2 shared ownership, 3 fair rent.
6, 7 Three-person house sold on cost sale basis. 6 First floor; 7 ground floor.
8, 9 Five-person house; shared ownership. 8 First floor; 9 ground floor.
10 Two-person flat; shared ownership.
11, 12 Three-person house sold on cost sale basis or fair rent. 11 First floor; 12 ground floor.
13, 16 The artificial variety created by the architect—details change in the same terrace, 13—and variety created by occupiers, 16, where the standard door is replaced.
14 Corner stair on block A.
15 View along block A.
17 Post-modern classical doors, LCC rendered first floor—a strange mix.

Sold down the lane

When the Lanes shopping centre in Carlisle opens at the end of October, you won't be able to find the Co-op. For on this location it will be named the County Stores—and that tells you more about the aspirations of the development than the architectural style itself. Nevertheless BDP has come up with a style that is almost tweedy in its rural allusions, an attempt to integrate the 5 acre complex into the centre of the historic town.

Twenty years of indecision dogged the Lanes, as this part of Carlisle is called, and the result is that not a single original building will remain (the last, an unlisted Victorian shop, will be demolished—despite opposition from BDP—because the funding authority, General Accident, will not countenance its retention). So the many lanes that ran off Scotch Street have been reduced to two, and glassed over (again the developers' decision). The Town Hall Square is confronted by five facsimiles, and Carlisle is no longer 'drastically undershopped', as consultants Donaldson's found it some years ago (AJ 8.3.78 p428). Extras, not standard shopping centre trimmings, include 27 units of housing, to animate the Scotch Street elevation, and a car park dressed up with pitched slated roofs. The new centre is meeting with popular approval, apparently, but dissenters find the monolithic nature of the centre at variance with the character of Carlisle, and no amount of architectural top-dressing can deal with that.

Living history

An intriguing series of lectures begins next week at the AA. Andrew Saint, who you might remember as the author of that excellent if idiosyncratic book on the profession, *The image of the architect,* has arranged a series of 'Post-war building' seminars in which projects designed in those days of optimism, confidence and achievement will be remembered and discussed by their leading participants.

This, if all goes well, and if Saint persuades the veterans to reveal the truth about those times that have never been published, will be real living history. The first subject is the Brynmawr rubber factory (1945-51) and its strange client, James Forrester. This was the biggest building of real ambition handled by private architects during the immediate post-war period.

The architects were the Architects Co-Partnership who, in the persons of Michael Powers and Sir Anthony Cox, will be present along with its engineer, Sir Ove Arup. Other seminars include Roehampton (24 October) with participants including Rosemary Stjernstedt, Cleeve Barr and Stan Amis; the rebuilding of Coventry (7 November) with Sir Donald Gibson, Arthur Ling and Percy Johnson-Marshall; the making of the Festival Hall

Bottom, BDP's massive shopping scheme at Carlisle set behind reconstructed facades in Scotch Street, and, below right, reconstructed eighteenth century facades in Town Hall Square with dreadful windows. Below, the Victorian shop that is still to be demolished. See 'Sold down the lane'. Bottom right, post-war optimism: an illustration from C. B. Purdon's 'How should we rebuild London?' of 1945. See 'Living history'.