The City and Memory

by Leo Hollis

One of the first rules that I set myself as I was devising my book *The Stones of London: A History in Twelve Buildings* was that whichever places I selected for inclusion they had to be places one was able to visit and see today- in some form or other. The book therefore takes a historical journey that begins at the very origins of the city - the Roman bridge, wall, forum, temple and the London Stone itself - and comes up to the steel and glass of the present-day skyscrapers still rising into the metropolitan sky. Along the route the book takes in Westminster Abbey, the Royal Exchange, Greenwich, 19 Princelet Street, Home House, Regents Street, Westminster Palace, Victoria Embankment, Wembley Stadium and a tower block in Bethnal Green, Keeling House. Despite charting over 1900 years of history, it was important that the book told the story of the present city.

19 Princelet Street Pic: Leo Hollis

Rescuing the buildings and restoring them to their former glory, making them into living homes for families is a wonderful thing; but when one wanders a bit further east into some of the most deprived areas of the city it asks difficult questions of how preservation helps the city. We need to look at historic conservation in a new way that looks not just at buildings as isolated treasures to be mothballed for posterity but also find a way to make the process of remembering a dynamic and positive process for the whole city.

Thus the final selection depended on each building, for one reason or another, surviving, and making it to the present day. Some had been in constant use across the centuries, others had been rediscovered and restored, finding a new function, telling a new story. So, for example, there have been three Royal Exchanges on the same site since the 1560s when Sir Thomas Gresham devised the first bourse for the city. Today, the building is no longer the temple of trade that it once was, but rather a European type brasserie surrounded by luxury outlets. In a similar fashion, 19 Princelet Street has worn many different identities since it was built in 1719 as a family house for the leading Huguenot family, the Ogiers. It has also served as a factory, a school for teaching English, a synagogue and is today the Museum of Immigration and Diversity.

Yet London is a deeply pragmatic and unsentimental city. A Londoner is more likely to shed a tear over an errant kitten than a lost building. It is just the way we are: and what we don't demolish, we allow to decay until it disappears. Over centuries, the list of lost gems of London is extensive. Fire can lay claim to many: Goldsmith's Row which John Stow called the most elegant street in London, as well as Whitehall Palace, but other monuments have been lost to bombs, flooding, poor construction, neglect, and administrative error. Whole neighbourhoods have been flattened to make way for roads and railways for the greater good of the city. Communities have been divided and moved in the hope of creating a better society. It is only because such places as Spitalfields were of such little value that the Georgian enclave of silk weavers' houses have survived to today.

It is good to remember that it is only recently, in the last 60 years, have we started to think about what we need to keep for the sake of history and the list of preserved buildings of national and architectural value is being added by the year. There are 600 buildings listed inside the City of London Corporation alone, from St Paul's cathedral to a telephone kiosk in Austin Friars. As historians of London, I am sure that you can all agree with me that this is a 'good thing', that the preservation of the past offers a legacy to the future, that it maintains something more than real estate prices and incubates and protects the soul of the city.

Or does it?

One of the greatest writers in the 20th century about the nature of the city was the New Yorker, Jane Jacobs who became famous for her 1961 book, *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*. The book was inspired by the author's activism to protect her own neighbourhood, Greenwich Village, against the developers. Her cause gained widespread approval and her books are still considered essential reading for anyone who is interested in the future of cities. One of her victories was to bestow historic district status upon her own backyard which regulated new building and aimed to preserve the character and fabric of the place. Since 1966, 20 historic designated districts were identified in Lower Manhattan, covering 1200 acres - the equivalent size of the City of London Corporation. The same kind of thing is happening over here.

The City and Memory (cont.)

Yet while this important work saves the history of London, we must not take our eyes off the future of the city. Preserving a building, or a conservation area, is a worthy pursuit but restricts the many possible futures of that place. In addition, because we all like to live in a nice neighbourhood, it causes the value of the house to rise and therefore gentrification becomes a barrier to social diversity. In many ways the unforseen consequences of preservation is often the exact opposition of what is hoped for, resulting in a once diverse neighbourhood being transformed into rich enclave that only hedge funders could hope to buy into.

This is exactly the charge that can be leveled against the Spitalfield area which only 30 years ago was close to demolition were it not for the campaigning zeal of the Georgian Group and individuals like Dan Cruickshank who halted the wrecking ball. However, it would be foolish not to recognise that the preservation worked not just because of the justice of the argument but also because it made financial sense. Today, the buildings that once one could not give away are changing hands for about £1.5 million each. Many of the houses have been lovingly restored by their new owners - many of whom are new to the area attracted by the proximity to the financial hub of the City.

As I was writing *The Stones of London*, this question appeared often in my research and was brought to the fore in the debate over the future of the Robin Hood Estate in Poplar, East London. The estate is, for many people, the epitome of all that was wrong with social housing in the 1960s and 70s, and by 2008 the council was emptying the flats and planning demolition. In response, a preservation campaign, led by the Twentieth Century Society, Sir

Robin Hood Estate in Poplar Pic: Leo Hollis

Richard Rogers, Zaha Hadid and (once again) Dan Cruickshank, was launched to save the building as a place of historic importance. Is this building worthy of the same kind of treatment as Inigo Jones's Banqueting Hall? Who should ultimately decide the place's value: the council who pays for the upkeep, architects or the residents who live there everyday? Does knowing that new shiny tower blocks offering sustainable living for 1,200 residents will replace the concrete carbuncle change the way we look at the site?

As we move into the twenty-first century and the life of the city becomes ever more important, we are going to have to decide not only what we want to remember, but also what we have to forget.

About Leo Hollis

Leo Hollis is one of our leading experts and writers on London history. His new book, Stones of London *will be published on 21 April. His previous book,* Phoenix: The Men Who Made Modern London *was published to wide acclaim in 2008. He often gives talks and guided walks around the city. (http://www.leohollis.co.uk/)*