



Opportunity lost?

On Thursday 9 June, Norwich City Council's planning applications committee approved the redevelopment plans for Anglia Square. The approval is subject to a list of conditions, but after years of stop-start discussion and wrangling, the demolition of Sovereign House is almost certain. The concrete-and-glass office block is an example of the work of the so-called 'brutalist' movement – another, more famous example in the city is the original UEA campus by Denys Lasdun. Today many of the UEA buildings are listed and so protected.

As part of the redevelopment of Anglia Square, Sovereign House will be demolished. Charlie Watson speaks to Anthony Hudson, a local architect and a vociferous advocate for reusing the 1960s landmark, about what might have been

Photography: Andy Crouch

Below are excerpts from an email conversation that took place after the planning committee's decision.

In recent years Sovereign House has been deteriorating before our eyes, and now it's scheduled for demolition as part of the redevelopment of Anglia Square. You've written elsewhere that Sovereign House is a building worth keeping, but why?

I do think it should be kept if an imaginative reuse could be found and it made economic sense, but I don't think anybody has given this proper thought. It's about responsible use of our resources. Unfortunately buildings

of this age have had a bad press and I imagine few would naturally support keeping it but it's got huge potential. Something of this scale, substance and, yes, quality should not be dismissed so easily. I certainly don't think it should be listed, but if it was a 19th-century warehouse, developers would be trampling over each other to get hold of it. History is littered with buildings that have been revamped when they have gone out of fashion.

I can see the 'responsible use of our resources' argument, but what is the huge potential you see in Sovereign House? As Anglia Square is about to be redeveloped, isn't it better to treat the whole site as a blank slate, rather than having to integrate an existing building that no one seems to want?

There is no such thing as a blank slate, since there is always a context within which an urban designer or architect has to work. Any new development should imaginatively integrate with its surrounding context, and any buildings that might have value in reuse need integration as well. For me the proposed redevelopment of Anglia Square fails to learn from past mistakes. We once again see a square which is more or less isolated from surrounding streets and doesn't properly connect into the main thoroughfares such as Magdalen Street so I am not optimistic about its success. I also think that a new development has to be at least as good as what it is replacing, but the proposed architecture comes nowhere close to the potential of Sovereign House.

It's interesting that people see the potential of 19th-century buildings, but find it more difficult to reimagine their 20th-century cousins. Is that to do with the exterior look, the interior division of space, the materials used etc? Maybe it's simply that a certain length of time must pass before we can accept an older building having a new purpose. I've often looked at Westlegate Tower, for example, and wondered whether that area of the city would be better off without it or not, but I don't have any architectural or design background, so it's hard to visualise the alternatives. It's very easy to say, "Oh,

let's just knock it down and start again. Problem solved." The public debate often seems to operate at that level.

You are right. I think it is difficult for many people to see the virtues of modern buildings and even more so how they might be changed. Boundaries were being pushed in aesthetics and technology, and I have to admit there have been quite a few experiments in the 20th century that have been problematic. It's partly due to poorly designed cladding, which has deteriorated in an ugly way and performs appallingly – overheating in summer or freezing in winter, for instance. Both Sovereign House and Westlegate Tower have suffered from this particular problem, but it is a problem that is not hard to rectify. We have learnt lots of lessons, and the art and science of cladding a building are pretty sophisticated. I similarly have looked at Westlegate Tower, but thought differently from you. I've thought, "Here's an amazing opportunity to do something fantastic." It's an unusual building in Norwich and one that could add interest, beauty and uniqueness to the skyline if imaginatively dressed.

It's interesting to learn that the cladding problems are easily rectified – again, I'm sure the public perception is exactly the opposite. Perhaps what's needed is an exemplar project that shows what can be done. Are there any converted or repurposed 20th-century buildings we should know about – if not locally then further afield? The other issue, of course, is that developers need to be persuaded, and for them the main consideration is the number of zeroes on the bottom line. Could an imaginative government – one concerned with what you earlier called "responsible use of our resources" – make a difference by offering tax or other incentives?

I wouldn't say they are easily rectified, but there are a growing number of 20th-century buildings which are going or have gone through this process, such as

- the 1960s art tower at Sheffield university
- a 1970s science building at Queen Mary University, London

«I've looked at Westlegate Tower and thought, here's an amazing opportunity to do something fantastic»

Previous page: Sovereign House, Anglia Square
Right: Angel Building, Clerkenwell, London
Opposite: Westlegate Tower



- the Angel Building in Clerkenwell, which won the Refurbished/Recycled Workplace Award 2011 and the RIBA London Award
- and currently a 13-storey tower building for Guy's hospital

All suffered the same problem as Westlegate Tower and Sovereign House, and all now have a new or potentially new life and look. The closest we will have is the overhauling of M&S. Obviously costs come into the equation of whether to start again or refurbish but the odds are stacked against reuse -- partly prejudice against these buildings and partly because we still have not built into the cost equation the huge carbon footprint entailed by demolition and rebuilding. And yes, an imaginative government could encourage reuse by financial incentives such as the Low Carbon Building Programme, although this is not specifically for existing buildings. But the other issue is finding a use for an empty building. Again this needs a little imagination and entrepreneurship. I've mentioned in other articles how Bennie Gray, a developer, transformed Birmingham's Custard Factory from dereliction into an exciting and extremely successful arts and media quarter. Why not Sovereign House and Anglia Square? **///**

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→For details of the planning applications relating to Anglia Square, go to <http://planning.norwich.gov.uk/online-applications/> and search for 'Anglia Square'

