

Durham's Modern Moment – Creating Human Community in Dunelm House and on Kingsgate Bridge

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Introduction by Professor Ludmilla Jordanova, Emeritus Professor of History and Visual Culture in the Department of History, Durham University

Architecture is a major area of interest for CVAC. One of its most successful events was a conference - **Caring for Brutalism**, which took place in the context of debate within Durham University and more widely about the future of Dunelm House, which is adjacent to the already listed Kingsgate Bridge in the centre of the city. It was recently announced that the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has awarded the building Grade II Listing; conversations will now ensue about its future. In his essay, Adrian Green from the History Department, trained in both history and archaeology, shares his enthusiasm for the building and sets it in broader contexts.

Responses are welcome and should be sent to cvac@durham.ac.uk

Durham University has a reputation for being somewhat traditional, not least through its collegiate structure.¹ But in the 1960s the university commissioned two startling pieces of modern architecture, designed to level social class and foster new forms of human community based on social happenstance rather than hierarchy.

Kingsgate Bridge and Dunelm House were commissioned as part of a strategy to expand the university – linking the science site and hill colleges to the historic peninsula, on which Durham Cathedral and Castle sit. Dunelm House provided a central Student Union and Staff Club – making Kingsgate Bridge (opened 1963) and Dunelm House (completed 1966) the geographical and social crossing point for the university. Recognised internationally as a dazzling piece of 1960s design, Kingsgate Bridge and Dunelm House remain the most significant architecture erected by Durham University in the twentieth century. To say so is to make an historical claim. Many of Durham University's finest buildings were originally built for other purposes. Its modern estate is relatively undistinguished by comparison with the historic core around Durham Castle. The Secretary of State's decision to List Dunelm House (Grade II) alongside Kingsgate Bridge

¹ Stefan Muthesius, *The Postwar University: Utopianist Campus and College* (Yale, 2000), places Durham's collegiate tradition in wider context.

(Grade I) recognises their architectural value. This essay seeks to convey their historical significance, particularly for current members of the university community.

Durham's most famous pieces of modern architecture were erected at a particular historical moment in the development of the university, realising in built form a socially levelling vision of human community. Kingsgate Bridge was further intended to facilitate intermingling between town and gown – the bronze expansion joint at its centre is 'said to symbolise the connection between town and university' in the letters T and U.² Quite uniquely, these remarkable pieces of engineered concrete are an expression of what Durham has always been – a human community gathered around a cathedral that connects it to the universal. As a modernist expression of a thousand year tradition they are irreplaceable.



Dunelm House with Kingsgate Bridge linking to Durham Cathedral. The tumbling shapes of the town side elevations of Dunelm House were meant to match the vernacular architecture of Durham City.

In a 1960s vision of social progress, the Student Union and Staff Club were intended to provide a cultivating space. Exposed surfaces showed the grain of the boards in which the concrete was poured following the *Béton brut* technique. Concrete, quarry floor tiles and bespoke furniture were meant to make obvious the natural materials from which this place of human cultivation was built. The concrete poured *in situ* was made in Consett – creating a creamy-white building

² Gareth Gardner, 'Kingsgate Bridge joint', in *My 20C Detail – Looking Closely at 20th century architecture and design*, ed. Catherine Croft et al. (Twentieth Century Society, 2020), p. 55.

with regional credentials. Comparable to the recently restored Apollo Pavillion at Peterlee (1969) by Victor Pasmore, Dunelm House is an exemplar of the progressive post-war architecture advocated by Alison and Peter Smithson. Architects of a cultivated “Brutalism”, the Smithsons met and trained at King’s College, Newcastle – then Durham University’s architecture school, subsequently the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Newcastle was also the birthplace of Ove Arup, the engineer responsible for Sydney Opera House (1959-73) as well as Kingsgate Bridge, and consultant engineer to the design of Dunelm House. Brutalism – like all the hardest 20th century art and literature – can be difficult to appreciate. But universities, of all places, should be capable of educating people in Modernism. No-one of my acquaintance with a training in architecture fails to appreciate Dunelm House, and this understanding should be more widely shared.

Dunelm House was built as part of a particular historical context, worth remembering. As a Student Union, Dunelm House responded to the Robbins Report (1963) on higher education. Built with public money from the University Grants Committee, the new building provided a communal space for extra-curricular activities, enacting Robbins’ directive to shear family and class ties, creating cultivated citizens. In the language of the time, students might enter the university as “children” but graduated as “adults”. Present day higher education policy encourages a more consumer-oriented paradigm, with architecture designed to meet the demands of a customer experience. UK universities are currently operating in an environment that encourages an architecture of baubles, to attract students in a global marketplace. Universities meanwhile face the challenge – arguably, an obligation – to conserve their cultural assets. Fortunately, Durham University recognises its custodian role, and remains committed to producing cultivated and responsible global citizens. The October 2017 “Caring for Brutalism” conference, organised by the University’s Centre for Visual Arts and Culture and sponsored by the City of Durham Trust and the Twentieth Century Society, enabled experts in post-1945 British university architecture to meet and discuss the historical context, architectural significance and conservation challenges. The conference was a response to Durham University’s request for a Certificate of Immunity from Listing for Dunelm House, answering an urgent need for a well-informed discussion. The contributors made plain quite how special Dunelm House is.

Dunelm House and Kingsgate Bridge make a contribution beyond the university – their architecture is an integral part of the historic city of Durham. Technically innovative structures of international stature, both bridge and student union have been celebrated by architecture critics for their contribution to their location. They form part of the setting for what UNESCO recognises through its World Heritage Site inscription (1986) as Durham’s “universal human value”. Dunelm House and Kingsgate Bridge are anchored on Durham Cathedral –

reinventing the historic axis of the river ford to King's Gate in the outer bailey fortifications of Durham Castle and pedestrian route across the peninsula. The aesthetic relationship of Dunelm House to Durham Cathedral makes it the best Modernist expression of what Durham has always been. For a thousand years Durham has been a city beneath a cathedral – a human community linked to God/the universe. But Dunelm House's relationship to Durham Cathedral did not occur by happenstance. It came about in its particular historical context – partly shaped by Le Corbusier, the leading architect of twentieth-century Europe.



Elegant interiors with exposed concrete and designer furniture by Alvar Aalto possessed dramatic views of Durham Cathedral and the River Wear gorge.

The elevated horizontal platform of Kingsgate Bridge is inspired by Le Corbusier, as are Dunelm House's cascade of terraces. An internal courtyard relates to Le Corbusier's Monastery of La Tourette (1953-59). Horizontal bands of windows follow La Tourette, with irregularly spaced mullions based directly on Le Corbusier's drawings. UNESCO recognised Le Corbusier's architecture in 2016, with 17 buildings across Europe designated a single "World Heritage Site". And the setting for Durham's World Heritage Site includes a Le Corbusier inspired building. Le Corbusier admired the medieval cathedral city as an architectural form that had successfully created human community in the Middle Ages. Core to his search for a new architecture was the belief that the Modern Age demanded new solutions.³ But in Durham continuity matters. Rather than breaking with the city's medieval past, these partners in concrete make a memorable contribution to it. Kingsgate Bridge and Dunelm House together achieved what Douglas Wise described as "the greatest contribution modern architecture has made to the enjoyment of an English medieval city."⁴

³ Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture* (1923; English trans. Getty, 2007).

⁴ Martin Roberts, *The Buildings and Landscapes of Durham University* (Durham University, 2013), p. 89; Wise headed the School of Architecture at Newcastle.

Le Corbusier set himself the challenge of devising a new architecture for urban-industrial human fulfilment, and can be criticised for failures of human sympathy, especially in his larger urban projects. But Dunelm House is a more subtle realisation of Ove Arup's prescription, that there are two routes to human happiness: one can grab directly, or recognise our relationship to others in human community.⁵ The historical context that generated the intricate design of Dunelm House was intended to create a cultivating space for human community. Its central staircase with broad landings for social interaction and riverside terraces are articulated on views of Durham Cathedral. A generation on, with its external concrete worn and dirty, overpainted internally, and its bespoke Scandinavian furnishings dispersed, it is worth recalling quite how sophisticated this building was when first designed to be appreciated.



Generous social spaces around the central staircase were intended to generate human community, as were the riverside balconies. Quarry tiles complimented concrete as a natural material.

For all its aesthetic qualities, the buildings were commissioned for pragmatic reasons. The history of Dunelm House and Kingsgate Bridge relates to the university strategy for expansion in the 1950s and '60s. Durham University decided to purchase the New Elvet land and develop the riverside site because the County Council had made available its estate in Old Elvet. As the County Council

⁵ Ove Arup, 'The Key Speech', *Arup Journal* 20.1 (1970): 34-36.

designed itself a new County Hall with the assistance of Basil Spence (1963), the Old Shire Hall became the administrative offices for the university. No-one would consider demolishing Old Shire Hall today. But it was denigrated for decades after its construction in 1898. In 1937 Thomas Sharp considered it “one of the most grotesque buildings ever erected in a city with any claim to architectural distinction”.⁶ Many people express a dislike for Dunelm House today – but it is not a question of “like”. It is a question of significance and understanding. Historic England, the statutory body responsible for Listing, has been advocating its Listing as an exemplar of its kind since 1998. Dunelm House’s protection at Grade II now recognises its historical significance as the foremost Student Union built in England in the 1960s.

The Grade I Listing of Kingsgate Bridge in 1998 occurred as part of a national survey of bridges. Dunelm House, meanwhile, was recognised as worthy of Listing for its architectural significance as an example of its kind amid an effort to protect the best of England’s post-war university architecture. That initiative failed for political reasons.⁷ Dunelm House met the criteria for Listing because of its architecture and contribution to its setting. Durham University’s decision to pursue a Certificate of Immunity from Listing in 2016 occurred amid an estate strategy that pulled the university’s offices and departments out of Old Elvet, with a view to redeveloping Elvet Riverside. The administration moved from Old Shire Hall (now a hotel) to the Palatine Centre (2012), and plans were mooted for a new student union building on a new site. A university estate strategy even stated that Dunelm House should be demolished and replaced. This decision-making process seemed to pay scant attention to the historic circumstances that led Durham University to erect a building of such special architectural quality in the first place.

Dunelm House preceded the new campus universities. Innovative post-war university architecture in Britain was led by the “Bee Hives”, Oxford (1958-60). This refined student accommodation was commissioned for St. John’s College, where the distinguished architectural historian Sir Howard Colvin set out to find the best architect for the job. Sir John Summerson, curator of the Soane Museum in London, recommended Michael Powers at Architects Co-Partnership. Oxford in turn recommended their architect to Durham. “Such was the success of the “Beehives” that Powers, assisted by Richard Raines, was invited to design the Durham University Students’ Union, Dunelm House.”⁸

⁶ Thomas Sharp, ‘The North East – hills and hells’ in *Britain and the Beast* ed. C. William-Ellis (Readers Union, 1937), pp. 141-59.

⁷ Alan Powers, ‘Building of the month: Dunelm House, Durham’, January 2017, Twentieth Century Society, at <https://c20society.org.uk/building-of-the-month/dunelm-house-durham>.

⁸ Elain Harwood, *Space, Hope and Brutalism: English Architecture 1945-1975* (Yale, 2015), pp. 219-20.



Durham Cathedral framed by the upper window of Dunelm House, with a human couple seemingly brought together by the university in conversation on the balcony.

Durham is not unique in facing the seemingly daunting challenge of conserving innovative 1960s structures, as these buildings now become historic. Cambridge is currently grappling with conserving James Stirling's History Faculty (1968), while The Queen's College, Oxford, has taken responsibility for its Florey Building (1971). The Twentieth Century Society worked with the University of

Leicester to restore its Engineering Building (1963), which adorns the cover of Elain Harwood's *Space, Hope and Brutalism*. Built of Leicester red brick, Stirling's design was meant to resonate with the city's vernacular architecture and tradition of manufacturing; once regarded as a costly liability, it is now celebrated as an asset by the university and city of Leicester.

Architecture erected in the 1960s is currently at a point in the cycle where the structures are ready for repair, and cycles of architectural taste as well as issues of cost can make buildings of a certain age vulnerable. Yet, Durham University has the opportunity to conserve and re-purpose Dunelm House as part of a vision to redevelop the Elvet Riverside buildings. The site's history helps make plain the logic of doing so. University strategy first decided to expand into Elvet in 1957. Swinging Kingsgate Bridge to the far north of the site maximised the land available for building – with a Student Union at the top and teaching rooms and lecture halls in the blocks below. The breaks between the three buildings followed Thomas Sharp's prescription for creating new views of Durham Cathedral.⁹ Built in two phases, Elvet Riverside 1 and 2 were also designed by Architects Co-Partnership. Some of the window detailing on the roadside block of Elvet Riverside 1 references Dunelm House, but neither scheme is its equal.¹⁰ The fact that the same architectural practice was unable to create buildings to match the stunning quality of Dunelm House underscores quite how special the circumstances were that led to its being built with public money. The university had nothing like the same budget for Elvet Riverside 1. Redeveloping the poorer sections of Elvet Riverside would rectify an historic design deficit. A new architectural commission could work alongside a conserved and repurposed Dunelm House, now justly protected as a Grade II Listed building.¹¹

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⁹ Thomas Sharp, *Cathedral City: A Plan for Durham* (Architectural Press, 1945).

¹⁰ Roberts, *Buildings and Landscapes of Durham University*, pp. 95-6; Martin Roberts, Nikolaus Pevsner and Elizabeth Williamson, *The Buildings of England: County Durham* (Yale, 2021), pp. 336-7, details the history behind these schemes.

¹¹ Catherine Croft and Susan Macdonald eds., *Concrete Case Studies in Conservation Practice* (Getty Conservation Institute, 2018), demonstrate the scope. The Getty's 'Keeping it Modern' scheme has funded concrete conservation works worldwide: [Keeping It Modern \(Getty Foundation\)](#)