

LIVERPOOL AS ARCHITECTURAL PALIMPSEST:

Rise and fall of Empire: Herbert J. Rowse (1887-1963)

This article is dedicated to the late Eric Hyde M.Phil, a long standing tutor at the Centre for Architecture, Liverpool School of Art and Design, who often reminded me of the urban relevance of the work of Herbert Rowse.

Introduction

“It is still an open question, though one that is often asked, whether architecture can project an inherent meaning at all. Is there, in fact, such a thing as a totalitarian, or democratic, or nationalistic building ? And if they do exist, what is it that gives architecture such meanings ? Can classical columns or glass walls really be described as the signs of fascist or democratic buildings ? Are these fixed and permanent meanings, or can they be changed over time ?” Deyan Sudjic (2005)

The architecture of great Empires and City States has always been based on the appropriation of building styles and methods of construction from other Empires. The Pharaonic Egyptians, Athenians, Romans and Venicians all borrowed styles and construction from other cities of Empire; architects and masons traded their secret craft skills between locations. Architecture of Empire was built on top of previous architecture; layer on top of layer, public space on space; so the Temple of Rome became the Church of Christ.

Architecture is all about power of Empire. Napoleon III, Mussolini, Saddam Hussain, Adolph Hitler, Albert Speer, Stalin, Chairman Mao, Ceausescu all represented Empires and were enthusiastic patrons of architecture and borrowed architectural styles from the past. The Third Reich’s Chancellery was an over powerful misuse of classical architecture. Franco built his Valley of the Fallen. In France the Sun King built Versailles and Francois Mitterrand built his Grand Projects at the New Louvre and The Grand Arche. In the United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair built the Millennium Dome-a symbol of twentieth century Empire in decline, if there ever was one.

Herbert J Rowse

In this paper I intend to trace the evolution of the powerful architectural influences of the architect Herbert J. Rowse in Liverpool. His buildings stand comparison with buildings of previous Empires. In fact, they have been used to represent authoritarian regimes in film. The British Empire in Liverpool is architecturally and symbolically represented from 1716 in The Bluecoat Georgian School, John Woods Neo-Classical Town Hall, Greek and Gothic Revivals, Functional Dock warehouses, Italian Renaissance influences, Florentine Palaces, Italian Gothic and the influences of John Ruskin visits to Europe, as recorded in *The Stones of Venice*.

The appropriation of architectural styles has always been based on an elite activity of urban tourism, just as the tourism of the Renaissance era was enjoyed by the few. Much Renaissance tourism involved visiting Classical locations related to Greek and Roman antiquity and the main appeal was aesthetic. Out of these visits came the great collections and influential measured drawings and pattern books.

Herbert Rowse came to be the most prominent architect of the late British Empire in Liverpool. During the time of the British Empire (1716-onwards) Liverpool was especially importing architectural and aesthetic ideas from Europe; as in the Neo-Classicism based on the Grand Tours of Harvey L Elmes (St Georges Hall) and John Foster (Lyceum and St Andrews). However, it was also exporting Neo-Gothic ideas in the form of Cast-Iron churches to the West Indies and the Americas (Thomas Rickman, Iron Master). With the expansion of the City the Skyscraper (Liver Building) was imported from the east coast of America and technological ideas of highly glazed buildings, such as Oriel Chambers, were exported to Chicago.

Of all the architects that have come to represent the architectural power of The British Empire in Liverpool, it was Herbert Rowse. He reflected the colonial Empire in The India Buildings, the power of global banking in the Martins Bank Building, the control of new technology and engineering in the Mersey Tunnel Ventilation Towers and the cultural ambitions of the Empire in the Royal Philharmonic Hall. Rowse had been a student of Sir Charles Reilly (1904-1933) who encouraged his students to visit

America and also enter for the Rome Prize; at that time Liverpool was most certainly the second City of the Empire in terms of Architectural education.

We shall see that passing of Rowse was synonymous with the passing of an architectural age, indeed the passing of a social age. Rowse lived, designed and built by Empire standards and as the Empire was dying, he died to.

The Impact of Herbert Rowse on Downtown Liverpool

‘It is sadly true that many buildings built by famous architects of the 1920’s-30’s are now virtually at the end of their respectable life, whereas the work of the Liverpool architect Herbert James Rowse, to my knowledge, is weathering superbly and is an example to all those who design today.’

Richard Brown, 1993, (worked for Herbert Rowse in two periods surrounding the Second World War).

The architect Herbert Rowse is probably little known inside and outside Liverpool; despite this he had a significant impact on the city. He carried out his major buildings and most impressive buildings in Liverpool; India Buildings, Martins Bank, the ventilating towers for the Mersey Tunnel and the Royal Philharmonic Hall. Each of these projects was a new concept for Rowse and his clients, especially in the case of the Mersey Tunnel, where no one had faced and solved such a technological and urban design problem before.

In 1906 Rowse obtained release from his pupilage and entered the Liverpool University School of Architecture under its new Professor, Charles Reilly. Herbert Rowse was a hardworking student, full of enthusiasm and ideas, and very able to produce beautiful and accurate drawings. Traditionally, drawing has always been central to architectural education. The teaching at the Liverpool School was unquestionably based on the French Beaux Arts system and this shows in the Martins Bank Building. Rowse also admired Edwin Lutyens work and he owned several of Lutyens books, and the later domestic work by Rowse indicates Lutyens’ influence.

The major projects by Rowse show his true ability to plan and detail impressive urban projects; The Martins Bank Building, The Philharmonic Hall, The Mersey Tunnel Brick and Stone Towers and The India Buildings all occupy urban blocks and are built of the finest building materials including stone, brick, copper and lead.

Rowse had spent 6 months on an architectural Grand Tour of Italy on a Holt Scholarship (The Holt Scholarship is still available today) and also 2 years in America working on Frank Simpson's Winnipeg Competition. In Rowses Classically inspired buildings the *cornices, entablatures, attics, mouldings*, ground floor *rustication* are all reminiscent of Roman Palazzo: whilst the cellular plans, concealed services, high speed lifts and steel frames were derived from contemporary American architecture.

Incontrast, the Philharmonic Hall shows Willem Dudok's (Dutch Modernist) influence. The careful brick detailing of Rowse's Mersey Tunnel is repeated but his massing of the Hall is masterly. The interior has low relief plaster mouldings of mythical and musical images. Leo Beranok, writing in 1962 said of auditorium, '*The music is unquestionably clear, brilliant and absolutely faithful.*'

The interiors of the Martins Bank and India buildings are majestically classical: intersecting, deeply coffered barrel vaults in the latter make an interesting comparison with the two storey, flat ceiling Banqueting Hall comprising a large rooflight complete with Greek mouldings. The granite columns are in one piece, slotted over the steel frame- Rowse wanted one joint- he was a perfectionist in terms of detail.

The massive urban design problems with which Rowse was presented in the siting of the Tunnel ventilating towers must have been daunting because there was no model in this country to work from. Rowse had worked in America where large office blocks and silos were common, but he could not have known what would face him some twenty years later. The Liver Buildings, Cunard and Mersey Docks and Harbour Board Buildings all have a human face with windows to give scale but the Ventilating Towers have none; Rowse used brick detailing, stone sculpture and ornament to good effect.

The End of Classical Rationalism and the Architecture of the British Empire

Although Herbert Rowse should be most famous for his major Liverpool projects he also designed many Classically inspired local, national and international projects. His portfolio included the Lloyds Bank on Church Street Liverpool, Lloyds Bank in Childwall, St.Pauls Eye Hospital, A Portable Bank for Martins, Pilkintons Offices in St.Helens incorporating Dutch brickwork and modernist glass blocks, The Pharmaceutical Headquarters in London, The Electrical Research Association in Leatherhead, The Woodchurch Housing Estate, Lancashire Schools and The UK Pavillion at the 1938 Glasgow Trade Fair. He even worked outside of Britain, in India and Spain.

Herbert Rowse was an architect in an age of architectural transition for *“Britain, the pioneer, found it more profitable to invest her surpluses abroad than to modernise her home environment and production. This meant that the elan of 20th industrialism did not emerge in Britain. It emerged in a newer industrial nation like Germany...”* CM.Chipkin, *’Lutyens and Imperialism’*.

“My own opinion is that the passing of Rowse was synonymous with the passing of an architectural age, and indeed, the passing of a social age. He lived to Empire standards, and as the Empire was dying, he died too. This age could never return but can always teach its lessons of brilliance, wisdom and folly if we are prepared to take the trouble to look back to take stock of it.”

Richard Brown, 1993.

There are no books about Herbert Rowse but a number of unpublished dissertations are available at both Liverpool John Moores University and Liverpool University; Eric Hyde’s is the most comprehensive to date.

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Photographs prepared by:-

Mr Reg Philips, Photographer,

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Martins Bank Building

Mersey Tunnel Entrances and Ventilation Towers ,(Liverpool and Birkenhead).

India Buildings

Philharmonic Hall

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