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An examination of the multiple voices – architects, end-users, and decision-makers – and cultural encounters found during the renovation of the Arts Tower at the University of Sheffield.

Finding common ground: architects, end-users, and decision-makers in the renovation of the Arts Tower, Sheffield

Prue Chiles, Daniela Petrelli, and Simona Spedale

Prologue

Prue Chiles

The Arts Tower at the University of Sheffield was completed in 1961 to designs by Gollins Melvin and Ward and it has been dubbed by English Heritage ‘the most elegant University tower block of its period’. Its renovation, finished in 2012, can be understood as representative of wider debates on the attitudes and values attached to the future use of notable twentieth-century, modernist architecture. This article explores the dilemmas and decision-making that characterised the complex negotiation processes that decided how best to renovate this icon of modernity. It highlights the different perspectives and multiple voices within the University and explores the role of architectural values that privilege design in decision-making processes. It may be a familiar tale to anyone who has built or renovated a building that involved a complex client or a diverse set of building users.

Through the analysis of four alternative narratives of participation, the complexity of a multi-voiced organisational process is exposed. These four narratives belong to four different players in the process, representing four different cultures. The first accounts for university management (the client); the second the School of Architecture and Department of Landscape (‘end-user’ clients); the third the Estates department (the client’s representative); and the fourth the expert architectural historian (an academic and end-user).¹ This complexity was represented in the composition of the organisational body in charge of the project and the decision-making process.

At the University of Sheffield, in larger University building projects a Project Executive Group (PEG) is formed for this purpose.² In view of the particular bond in this project linking the education of architects with the Arts Tower from its inception it was agreed that we, the School of Architecture, could perform a ‘consultative’ role – through this Project Executive Group although this was never fully defined or formalised. When it came to the way we should do things, there were polyphonic voices within the departments, sometimes

discordant, many with different priorities. We were aware that our position was privileged. We were not responsible for delivering the project and could therefore take the ‘high-moral design ground’. I was asked to act as the user client with a small team of dedicated colleagues. All of us having one foot in practice, we were fully aware of building design processes, the complexities of working with a twenty-storey tower and the challenges that would arise. These PEG meetings gave us a particular insight into how other organisational actors, and especially the Estates department, went about managing the process with other academics unused to the process of building.

In 2012, when the building was ‘finished’ and occupied again after the long and sometimes arduous journey, I was given the opportunity to reflect on this process with two colleagues from other institutions. Daniela Petrelli, who was interested in comparing the design process and management processes and the ways in which they unfold, and Simona Spedale, an expert in the organisational processes of decision-making, who was interested in exploring issues on participation and procedural justice. We are aware this is an unorthodox triangular collaboration with Prue being both a narrator in this story and an interviewee in the analytical narrative. However, in the end this is an architectural story and needed an architect as author. The process of writing this only worked because we stuck to the informal communication protocols set, rather like the process of the Arts Tower renovation itself. So, the article has two interconnecting parts: an analytical core using narrative analysis to dissect the different identities of the participants in the process; and an illustrated description of the building for the interest of architects and their love of the story of the architectural solutions simply told.

Introduction to the Arts Tower

Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother opened the Arts Tower in 1966 at a time of vast expansion of Universities in England. It is prominent in the hilly landscape of Sheffield, a reminder

¹ **New curtain walling with glazed spandrel panels.** The Arts Tower facades and the original sash windows went through many design iterations. In the end they were completely renewed with double-glazed panes. The Estates department and the architects did a lot of research on the glass spandrel panels below the windows, having a full size mock-up made of one unit, to retain the elegant translucency of the facade.

of the importance of the Victorian idea of the civic university and of education generally to an industrial city ravaged by war and soon to be ravaged by the contraction of the coal and steel industries in the north of England.

The Arts Tower represented a 'state of the art' education building gleaming with modernity, a vast emporium of underground lecture theatres, and flows of people on the famous paternoster lift, enabling smooth continuous movement up into the sky where the whole of Sheffield, the vast reaches of the then-industrial Don Valley lay before the viewer to the north. To the south was the arcadian vision of the Peak District, a layering of hills and valleys and to the west, Broomhill and Crookes sweep up to eye height on the fourteenth floor due to the dramatic topography of the city. The whole of Sheffield is laid out as a 360-degree panorama.

In 2008, 100 years after the University of Sheffield was founded and forty-five years after the completion of Gollins, Melvyn and Ward's competition-winning twenty-storey tower and university library, the University had an enormous challenge laid before them; both were in need of complete renovation. At 78 metres tall the Arts Tower remains the tallest and most elegant university building in the Country. Forty-five

years of robust use had taken its toll on both. The introduction of more stringent fire regulations, enormously increased student and staff numbers working in the buildings, and typical university 'small-project adaption' had led to the 'closing-in' of the space to accommodate new needs.

In the case of the adjacent Western Bank University Library, also designed by Gollins, Melvin, and Ward, a brand new undergraduate 'Information Commons' had been built nearby allowing many of the books to be relocated and for the building to return to a gentler postgraduate use. In the case of the Arts Tower, the future use of the building was more contested. One proposal was to knock it down on the grounds that it was too vertical, at twenty storeys, to serve as a twenty-first century teaching building. This was dismissed, however, as it had become a Grade II* listed building.³ Another popular option was to set aside the Arts Tower for University administration. The School of Architecture put a strong case to stay, with the Department of Landscape, in the top half of the building. The building after all was designed as an architecture school and we wanted to raise the profile of the building as an architectural icon. The building needed to be conserved for the next generation of university users, we argued. All other Arts and Humanities departments opted to move out.



Illustration of the Arts Tower, 1964

2 The corners of the building. The only detrimental effect visually of the new glazing system on the building are the corners. Where, before, they were frameless single glazing, butt jointed, they now have a thin vertical glazing bar that changes the whole appearance of the building. The original effect is perhaps best seen in this 1964 drawing of the Arts Tower, where the corners seem to disappear.



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Despite various problems with the building, there were still remarkable qualities to be experienced in the Arts Tower. One, for example, is the low window seats fitted between every column in every window – ideal on the higher floors to watch the weather coming around the corner from Bakewell in the Peaks and dream. While the building was heavily compromised, inefficient, over- or under-heated depending on the season and dark around the core, the School of Architecture still held a candle for it.

Tatjana Schneider, then a new colleague, was so impressed with the building that she researched and wrote a small book on the story of the building of the Arts Tower.⁴ The story is a fascinating read – a ‘detective story’ about the people who made the decisions, how the decisions were made and their priorities at that time. What is striking is that many of the events and processes that occurred in the building of the Arts Tower were mirrored in the renovation nearly half a century later, particularly the role of the staff and professors in the School of Architecture. It shows, as Jeremy Till’s ‘Foreword’ discusses, how the Head of the Architecture school was ignored but the Vice Chancellor of the University submitted a sketch for consideration that was nearly built. And it was Stephen Welsh, a Professor of Architecture from 1948–57, who played a defining role by developing the brief for the building. One lesson is that universities have not changed as much as the world of construction; except perhaps that two of the participants involved in this story are women.

Schnieder noted in the preface about the story of the building of the Arts Tower that:

3 The highly engineered **original walling system** exposed before renovation.

4 **The windows and window seats** today, from inside, with the solid corner mullion. The whole facade is set back a little from the columns, so it feels like the glazing is not attached to the columns. The window seats, still one of the glories of the building, mean you can sit in every window, on all nineteen floors.

Whilst highly specific to the context of Sheffield, this particular story is, at the same time, a story of the general condition of Architecture. It is about [...] the inevitable external forces and mechanisms at play in the production of the built environment. In its focus on these mechanisms it dissolves the typically presented autonomy of architecture to describe the conditions and circumstances of its production.

A short essay in the book, ‘The Arts Tower: An Appreciation’ by Peter Blundell Jones made it clear what he appreciated about this form of international modernism and its grand gestures. It also contained a warning in the final sentence: ‘when this building is refurbished this blatant contradiction between concern for the external appearance and the experience of the interior environment will need to be reconsidered’.

Schnieder’s reason for writing her book was to understand the process that led to the building of the Arts Tower and the relative anonymity of the building and the architects. The widely-publicised

but unbuilt competition entry of Alison and Peter Smithson is still more likely to be known. The Arts Tower, almost from its opening, had been much disliked locally in the city for being too tall and cold. For many years, comments about the Arts Tower from the users generally and the public were mainly negative: one regular local visitor from the council called it the 'Dark Tower of Mordor'. Another common local expression was 'faulty tower'. However, Heritage Open day tours staged by the School of Architecture, with a cleaned-up corner of a studio, and a visit to both the roof, trips in the open and continuously moving paternoster lift, and the underground domain created enormous and surprising interest from the general public. The tide was turning.

Defining terms

The polarised points in the narrative, to be described in this article in architectural terms, relate to whether the Arts Tower should be restored or refurbished. The *Architect's Journal*, in an article in 2011 referred to 'Retrofitting the Arts Tower', a rather alien term to the stature of the building. The more discussion went on, the more we realised a central debate was whether we were restoring the building to its former condition or refurbishing it to 'good repair' for the twenty-first century. We preferred a term in the middle – the less conscious 'renovation' – to make something like new again.

A note on briefing

The University's Brief

Briefing for renovating the building, from the University's Estates department, initially prioritised economy, new services for improving sustainability, and performance. No conservation report was commissioned and there was no main client or champion. Initially the Estates department acted as client and the listed status was seen as something 'to get round'. Often with twentieth-century buildings, a conservation plan is not always the first point of call in decision-making. After discussing initial feasibility ideas and options with the appointed architects, the need for a conservation plan emerged as a pressing concern.⁵ A client was appointed: a Pro-Vice Chancellor with experience of completing another new building at the university. A full conservation report was carried out and the listed status and significance of the building was acknowledged and worked with.

The School's Brief

To their credit the University and the Estates department let the School of Architecture and Department of Landscape lead a process of visioning our departments for the twenty-first century. Changing teaching and learning and technology needs and increasing numbers meant a complete rethink was timely. The Bureau of Design Research (Bdr)⁶ within the department was paid to enable workshops and briefing sessions. We initially had help from space consultants DEGW but the result, we felt, was too commercial and did not reflect

our vision or needs, so we ploughed on ourselves. Many issues were contentious, others unanimously decided upon. All were current issues in University building design. For example, the thorny issue of individual versus shared offices for academics, the merits of flexible space used in different ways, acoustics, a good thermal environment without mechanical ventilation, good facilities and for it to feel like a forward-looking School of Architecture and Department of Landscape. The whole re-visioning of the School and Department was a long and participatory affair. We all agreed on historical priorities; that we should keep as much of the original spaces and as many of the modernist details as possible and, where we changed anything, for it to be removable. All of the newer additions and compartmentalisations were to be removed in order, most importantly, to open up the building to the views through more internal glass.

Methodology and the collection of data

Daniela Petrelli and Simona Spedale

Core to the research project was the collection of personal accounts of the people involved. More than other research methods, autobiographical narratives can reveal individual differences, opinions, and cultures. An understanding of the system is then constructed through the polyphony of individual and personal experiences.⁷ Collecting the data was structured as an open-ended interview, a conversation around the experience of being part of the 'renovation' project of the Arts Tower. To facilitate the personal expression of the four participants, the interviews were carried out by two researchers not directly involved in the process and therefore able to maintain a neutral standing.⁸ Interviews lasted 90 to 120 minutes, were recorded and verbatim transcribed.

Although the researchers had points they wanted to cover, they explicitly refrained from making reference to any specific case and thus could establish the most crucial issues in the informants' own experiences. Neutral expressions like 'tell us about your experience' and 'what were the highs and lows' were used to prompt self-directed narratives. The expectation was that this would be enough to prompt all informants to talk about what they perceived as having been critical, but everyone would describe their own experience from a different perspective and personal perception.

The study was conducted in the spring of 2011 when the project was nearing completion and The School of Architecture and Department of Landscape were due to move back into the Arts Tower over the summer. The timing was instrumental to allow for a fresh account of the experience by the participants while ensuring some degree of emotional distance from the more controversial issues. All the voices were passionate about and committed to the Arts Tower despite expressing different concerns coming from their individual backgrounds and organisational roles.

This data collection was complemented by a contextual inquiry, a technique that combines



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5 **The appearance of frameless glazing between the columns.** Everyone involved worked hard to retain the frameless appearance internally, despite the heavier double-glazed panels. In the end it felt like a job well done. Give or take tiny details, like the one shown.

6 **The toilets.** Washing your hands with the best view in South Yorkshire. The white Corian hand-washing troughs are simple and are set away from the windows. The lights are the same as elsewhere, and on timers, so, from outside at night, it doesn't look like a vertical strip of toilets right up the front facade of the building. In future, the toilets could be removed, as if never there, except for three small holes in the floor slab.

7 **The ceiling heights.** We lobbied hard for full height doors and the highest soffit possible. To accommodate an increased volume of building services, we had to have a suspended plaster soffit. At least we escaped the suspended ceiling tiles originally proposed. The doors, when fixed open, allow a view right from one side of the tower to the other and more sky is visible.



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observations and questions within the specific setting of investigation. Specifically the researchers walked around the Arts Tower in a tour lead by the 'end-user' architect and the Project Manager from Estates. Elements discussed in the interview were pointed out and discussed in-situ. Walking the space triggered further comments not emerging in the interview and helped contextualise the narrative accounts gathered during the interviews.

Analysis of the data

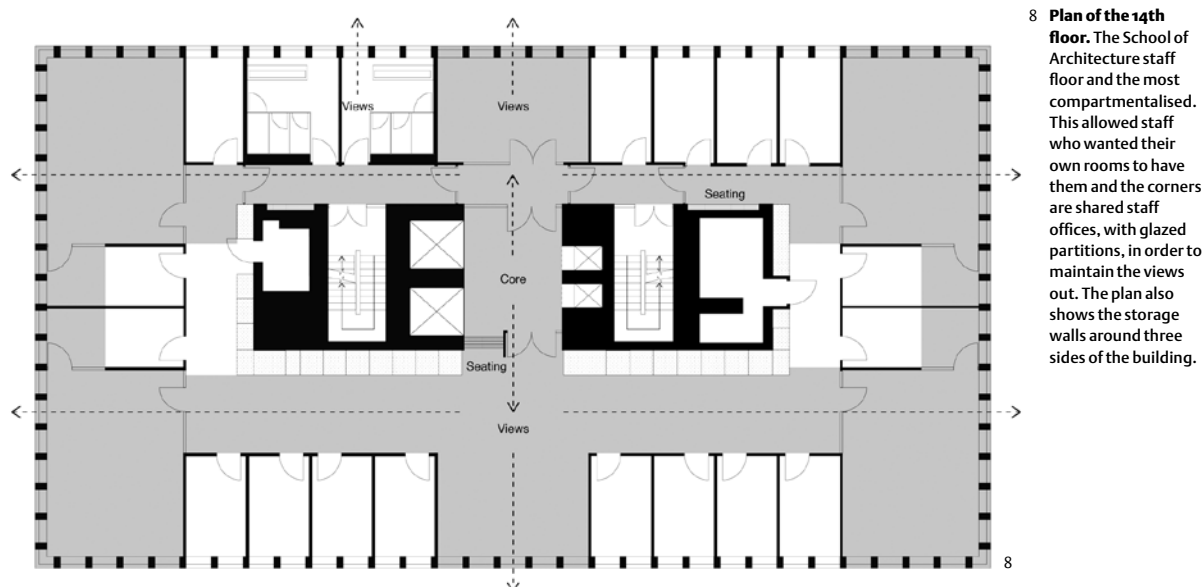
Interview data were analysed according to the principles of narrative inquiry.⁹ This process comprised of a series of transformations: listening, transcribing, analyzing, and reading. All interpretive efforts were directed towards understanding the distinct style and unique structure of the model of representation chosen by each of four 'voices' at the centre of the study. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and the written text was complemented with interviewers' notes that captured the minutiae of conversational pauses, inflection, and emphasis. This allowed for the emotional context of the stories being told to emerge during the analysis and interpretation.

After initial reading, the analysis progressed through four steps. First, narrative segments within each transcript were identified using Labov's six structural categories (abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and



7

coda).¹⁰ Second, all the narratives were compared and a final selection was made in order to identify the one examined in detail below. The choice was guided by two key criteria, besides richness of data: first, all characters, without being directly asked, identified this particular story as especially representative of the whole process in terms of their personal experiences and dilemmas; second, the story is emblematic of a much wider



architectural debate on the importance of the modernist canons of architecture in the future use of notable twentieth-century university architecture. The third step in the analysis involved a close comparison between the different versions (or voices) of the same story authored by the four main characters. The comparison was organised using Aristotle's classic typology of plots, which distinguishes between romance, satire, tragedy, and comedy.¹¹ According to Barbara Czarniawska, the plot is the basic means by which specific events are brought into a meaningful whole and, as such, it represents the 'theory' the narrator uses to make the chronicle meaningful to herself and to others.¹² The fourth and final step of the analysis involved a careful re-reading of the four narrative accounts and their final interpretation, informed by earlier analyses, in terms of three categories: the criteria championed by each character in the story as relevant for decision-making; the negotiation process that led to actual decisions being made and the role of different criteria in achieving those decisional outcomes; and the evaluation expressed by each character about the quality of the decisions themselves and on the overall quality of the decision-making process.

An issue of respect: preserving the modernist 'core' or complying with building regulations?

With its emphasis on function over ornamentation, the original open plan interior of the Arts Tower captured the ideals of social cooperation and communication often assumed to be central to modernist architecture. Over many years of organic occupation, however, many 'trouble-free areas' suffered from progressive encroachment: clean lines were broken; light was blocked from pouring through the windows; partitions prevented the free flow of people, air, and light through the building. Nevertheless, the majority of the participants in the decision-making process were, in principle, in favour of the repair and, whenever possible, the reinstatement of the integrity of the Arts Tower as

a modernist icon. But, in the course of over fifty years, 'functions' have changed, often significantly, and both current and future demands had to be considered. The areas of health and safety and fire regulations proved especially critical and became an arena for controversies and conflicts between different interpretations of what 'integrity' and 'respect' were actually about.

All four voices represented in the following sections of this article identified the 'issue of the toilets' as a paradigmatic example of the dilemmas faced by the decision-making body, the PEG, in respecting the architectural integrity of the Arts Tower. An essential feature of modernist architecture is the combination of an open plan floor plate with a central core hosting all services, the stairs and lifts. In order to comply with new regulatory standards, the refurbished Arts Tower needed to be equipped with a higher number of toilets than in the past. Beside legal considerations, changes in the type and number of users moving through the building called for a different provision: more specifically, the enormous rise in the number of students and, more specifically, of women in the building (students, academics, and administrative staff) generated increased demand for toilet facilities. This created a 'spatial' dilemma: the space in the core was not sufficient for the increased number of toilets and other services. For example, data cabling and electrical wiring were also competing for more room in this already crowded core of the building.

Each of the voices in this article told their own version of the 'issue of the toilets' and their polyphony can be analysed by comparing their individual plots and variations to the story. An in-depth investigation of similarities and differences can, moreover, shed light on the actual controversies and dilemmas that emerge when architecture moves away from the realm of ideas and speculative designs to become a large-scale project that requires the organisation and

9 **The glazed screens to lift lobbies** allow views through the tower on every floor and create a much better space to wait for the lift or paternoster. The paternoster was restored at great cost. This single requirement of the listing allows the building to break out of its horizontal floor plates. The original spiral staircase too between floors 16 and 17 creates fluid movement in the largest studio area.

10 **The storage walls** are one of the most successful elements of the renovation. Without altering the concept of the central core with open floor plates, the vertical timber joinery, with a specially made copy of the original full height handles, was detailed by the Architects, HLM.



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management of a multiplicity of actors, each contributing functional expertise and specialist knowledge, with strict resource constraints in terms of money and time.

The University client

According to the client – the representative of the University Management in the PEG – the issue of the toilets was the ‘first bone of contention’ for the decision-makers. It developed into a personal quest for consensus and compromise reached through the successful deployment of sophisticated managerial skills combined with aesthetic sensitivity. In her version of the story, her decision to accept the role of chair of the PEG was motivated by the fact that she ‘knew the departments involved’:

So I had some background [n.d.r. she had been the client for a multi-storey new building, a previous projects carried out by the University] and I was in the senior management. So I was qualified. But on a personal level, as a personal interest, I am interested in architecture.

My background is art history.

The client’s narrative around the issue of the toilets is organised as a romance, where the client-hero faced a series of challenges en route to her goal and eventual victory. The nature of this challenge was, in the client’s own voice, ‘managerial’ and ‘the key was to keep the project within budget, keep as many people happy as possible [and] keep within the timetable’. Minimising conflict was of the essence, and the main potential source of trouble



11 **Joinery details.** The joinery softens the hard surfaces on every floor of the Tower and allows for much needed storage and sink units in the studios and pigeonholes in the reception area shown here.

was identified in the involvement of the School of Architecture and Department of Landscape in the decision-making process:

the thing we [the University management] had to address was that the architects were defending the building. So I thought, that's good. Makes my job easier, but they have to work with everybody else. They can't drive it.

In particular, the clash in perspectives between academic and professional architects was regarded by the client as a worry:

[Academic] Architects, who are the users, will have a view about the professional architects and will have this arrogance that nobody else knows what they are talking about, they are the only ones who do. So that comes to my role. If you chair this type of body [the PEG] you have to be objective, you have to ensure that it is for the greater good, no one component part of the stakeholders bullies anybody else, and you want to make sure that there is consensus.

The client's account of the conflicting perspectives of academic and professional architects and, more generally, of the difficulties of managing academics, infuses her heroic quest for consensus and compromise with a strong element of satire. A complicating action¹³ ruptures through the linearity of her romantic success story and unveils the complex web of unresolved emotions and political manoeuvres that actually characterised the decision-making process.

The 'negative' character is played by the architectural historian who, in the client's account, refused to accept a 'good' compromise solution

acceptable to all other stakeholders: locating the toilets on the external walls of the building – a significant exception to the modernist principle of services in the core – while paying great care to the actual design and finishing of these services, whose interior adhered as much as possible to the ideals of purity, rectilinearity, and 'light' characteristic of such modernist structures. For example, it was decided that the actual cubicles would be located on the internal partition walls, allowing as much light as possible into the area. Moreover, a special flat, rectangular basin was selected to face the glass windows, complemented by fittings (taps, etc.) in keeping with the modernist decor. In the client's version of the story of the toilets, this compromise – encroachment of the open plan in exchange for strict respect for modernist aesthetics in the interior architectural features – was 'a no-no' for the architectural historian:

That was just not acceptable. And he tried all sorts of arguments, including that they could reduce the number of urinals and that the women did not need any more toilets, and that women always have fewer loos and blah-blah-blah.

The irony of the tone amplifies the sharpness of the conflict, which dragged on and involved a series of political moves and counter-moves. For example, the architectural historian presented a petition to the Vice-Chancellor in what was perceived by the client as a direct challenge to her role and authority within the PEG. He also wrote to the UK conservation body The Twentieth Century Society,¹⁴ trying to gain external legitimacy for his cause. From her managerial stance, the client-hero:

sorted it by ignoring it. I just did not [...] I did not engage with and give him the credibility. Once I knew the right thing – the 'compromise' solution acceptable to all others, we persisted.

Whatever the action at managerial level, the conflict has not lived as a light point:

This idea that you write to somebody, you know, to go over your head rather than come and talk, it hurt me because I would pride myself in negotiating and dealing and being sensible.

The coda of the client's version of the issue of the toilets constitutes an opportunity for personal reflection and for making sense of her overall experience:

The loos were the low [the 'low point', in emotional terms, of the whole process] [...] but I could turn it into something facetious. I thought if that's the only problem we have, we are winning here. [The loos is] where we compromised, but I don't think the compromise was a serious one.

The architectural historian

This closure on the positive note of a compromise between aesthetics and functionality is in direct contrast with the voice of the expert architectural historian, whose chosen plot is a tragedy with strong elements of satire. According to his version of events, what was purported as a participative decision-making process developed instead into a lonely, and ultimately unsuccessful, personal battle for the preservation of the absolute integrity of the Arts Tower. In his narrative, the provision of toilets before the refurbishment project 'was perfectly adequate and it was not worth violating the whole concept of the building in order to get more lavatories'. In contrast to the other voices represented in this article, the historian did not think that changes to the building were necessary to respond to new functional needs. His answer to those who pointed towards building regulations requiring a statutory number of toilets was to repeat 'time after time that we weren't queuing for lavatories [...] In fact when half the lavatories weren't working because there were plumbing problems, we still weren't queuing for lavatories'.

As a tragic hero, the architectural historian constructs the story of the toilets as a doomed fight between 'good' and 'evil'. The 'good' stood for a staunch defence of history, for the proper principles of conservation embodied by listing regulations, and, last but not least, of the modernist concept of the Arts Tower. The key weapons were aesthetic and historical sensitivity combined with 'true' architectural knowledge. If deployed with care and respect, sensitivity and knowledge, they would produce a 'gentle masterpiece of restoration' as had, indeed, been the case with the Western Bank Library. The 'evil' stood, instead, for an unwavering and, in the architectural historian's voice, 'illiterate' and 'subservient' compliance to contemporary building regulations. Unfortunately, 'evil' prevailed:

There wasn't a willingness to see beyond any of these regulations, and as an historian I don't see life today as being so very different from thirty years ago. The building regulations change and will change again, and perceptions of risk seem to me to be extraordinarily inaccurate and driven by who is making lawsuits. And so violating history of the basis of those, I am not very sympathetic to, and I think actually historic examples are a good way for showing some scepticism and putting up some criticism of all these rules.

In the architectural historian's voice, the fight was not only doomed to failure but also lonely. No significant support was forthcoming from the other stakeholders or colleagues involved. None from the professional architects in charge of the whole project, who were 'not known for restorations, and regarded the listing as a kind of impediment rather than something that really needs respecting'. None from the University top management, who did not respond to the petition he had organised and that was signed by all members of staff in the School of Architecture because 'the director of Estates was prepared to ignore it and the Vice-Chancellor

was not prepared to over-write him'. None from external bodies such as the Twentieth Century Society, whose help he tried to enlist by writing an article in a major architectural journal. Despite all efforts, the tragedy unfolded towards its inevitable conclusion of personal defeat and disillusionment: 'At that point after the latest attempt with the Twentieth Century Society I thought I can't be bothered. I was thoroughly demoralised and I felt no power as a professor of architecture at all.' This statement, delivered in a self-mocking tone, conveyed the depth of his passion as well as of his dejection at the realisation of his own marginality. The architectural historian directed stinging criticism both to the quality of the actual decisions and to the entire process of decision-making. The University management ultimately bore responsibility for silencing the voices of those who, in his eyes, held authority on the basis of their competence and professionalism, and privileged those who were, indeed, 'ignorant and illiterate':

I don't feel I have been allowed any participation really [...] And it was probably regarded as just a stupid aesthetic matter, architects making a fuss about aesthetics, and not being seen. And I hate that attitude, because aesthetics isn't a separate boundaried area. There is an aesthetic aspect to everything, and aesthetics begins with a job well done.

The 'user client'

The third voice in this article, the user representing the School of Architecture and Department of Landscape, stated that 'good design that is faithful to the appropriate architectural canons is never in opposition to functionality'. The user's narrative of the issue of the location of the toilets is organised as a mixture of romance and tragedy, where the final happy ending is severely tempered by an disenchanting view of her own 'heroic' role, of the influence that the users managed to exercise and of the actual power dynamics that dominated the decision-making process. The user was invited into the PEG as a member with limited formal authority and in a mainly consultative role. In her version of the story, her experience of involvement was a mixed blessing: 'I picked up that mantle, probably due to the fact I am an academic architect but have one foot in practice and so I had a knowledge of the necessary process.' This comment evokes the clash in perspectives between academic and commercial architects also highlighted by the client and by the architectural historian. The positions, however, differ. While the client regarded both types of architects as potential sources of problems and the architectural historian expressed criticism of the professional architects in charge of the refurbishment as lacking the knowledge and experience needed to deal with a listed building, the user client regarded knowledge of the commercial aspects of such a complex architectural project as a necessary evil sometimes.

An interweaving of multiple tensions informs the user's version of the issues surrounding the toilets. A first potential fault line emerges in the



relationship between management and architects, and is voiced by the user in terms of a personal reflection on the role of the University client: 'I am not saying that she did not have the best interest of the project at heart, but she did not have the knowledge that we have.' This is reinforced by the user's judgement of the position taken by the Estates department, who 'technically were the client's agents but felt they were the client, so they would come to the meetings with their ideas about how they were going to do things and we would say "hold on a minute, there are other ways of doing this": a judgement that implies a criticism of the way different stakeholders participated in the process and of their lines of communications. A second potential fault line divides 'contemporary' architects, whose main concern is with the present and the future, from the historians who see the past as the gold standard for evaluation. Her position was that the 'Arts Tower has got to be a functioning place for hundreds of people to work in the twenty-first century. I do understand the problems of making it into a twenty-first century building, but there are different ways of going about this.' In representing the totality of the School of Architecture and Department of Landscape, the user often found herself in the difficult position of having to mediate between, and reconcile, very different attitudes:

I had three sets of people. One set would complain about everything no matter what you achieved, but who really did not care one way or another except for their own personal office space. One set who were sympathetic and responsive, and on the same kind of wavelength in regard to the need to make the Arts Tower into a living working place for the twenty-first century, but reverential to the modernist significance



of the Arts Tower. But then I also had the more extreme version who thought that we should have gone for a very low key refurbishment, we should just have cleaned up the space and maintained what was there as much as possible as it once was because it is a Grade II listed building.*

A third potential fault line emerged between different approaches amongst the more commercially aware architects. In particular, those who, like the user client herself, combined experience of building architecture with an academic background, often demonstrated more sensitivity and care for the modernist nature and character of the Arts Tower and paid more attention than the purely commercial architects in charge of the delivery of the project in striking a balance between conservation and modernisation.

Not infrequently, these potential fault lines escalated into more overt tensions. In her account of the issue of the toilets, the user highlights her sadness at the behaviour of the architectural historian who intervened in the process without consulting with her and, from her point of view, undermining her legitimacy and power as the School's representative. She pointedly remarked, 'he did not discuss his letters with me and I was supposed to be coordinating it! He could have jeopardised our involvement completely and the University disallowed us from having any further input.' This expresses a wider sense of frustration for her liminal position in the process. Her role was not formally recognised in the governance structure of the PEG and its functions were officially limited to those of a consultative representative, somebody whose voice was only heard at other participants' will. This resulted in a stressful and conflicting personal experience of the decision-

12 The studio floors have large sliding screens to allow them to be completely open or closed for reviews. The light fittings were our biggest failure. We were keen to develop a light fitting like the original that was surface mounted and reflected light down and up on to the soffit. The view from the outside at night is forever changed. The lighting is bland and uncomfortable and staff prefer to use their Anglepoise lamps.

13 The scholar's desk. We worked with architects Bucholz McEvoy, after a chance visit to their Berlin studio, to alter their now called Berlin table to our dimensions especially for the Arts Tower. Beautifully made by Unifor in Italy, the desk has a delicacy that is right for the crisp modernist edging details of the original building. We hope these beautifully crafted steel tables with soft linoleum tops will last another fifty years.

14 The shelving. We attempted to create a series of light furniture appropriate for the small offices and original detailing and the aluminium trimmed notice boards. The aluminium shelving, also made by Unifor, is refined and elegant and catches the light on the shelf edges.



making process, with paradoxical feelings as the following two quotes highlight. The first is rather negative and expresses the 'tragic' dimension of the whole narrative:

I am a bit deflated. I am kind of exhausted, and in the end all the successes we had [...] were not recognised, really. I have had to work so hard, in difficult conditions, and it has been extremely stressful not because of the actual amount of work and the long hours, but because of the process. Of never knowing whether you had any influence; of being just the 'end-user' without any power; of having to negotiate for everything and appropriate every ounce of respect.

The second is more in keeping with the romantic plot of the happy ending:

I don't really mind because it was worth doing it and we had some success. I have to believe that it would not have been this good if we had not been involved, otherwise I have wasted a lot of time and effort. But I think we made it better, aesthetically and functionally [...] just better. We made it neater, cleaner, with better detailing [...] and we thought about it whereas the commercial architects would have simply not had the time.

This more optimistic account of the process is reflected in her judgement of the actual decisions in regard to the toilets, which are:

pretty good after a long battle. We now have elegant Corian basin 'troughs' standing away from the window. The partition walls are not permanent; they could be taken out. The only thing that compromises the actual structure of the building is the hole in the slab for drainage.

There were more important things to fight for and we were not going to win the toilet argument. That we were successful in raising the suspended ceiling 150mm made a vast difference to how much

sky you see, thinner glazing bars on the windows, so they did not show internally, in keeping with the original detail and pushing for more glass partitions internally were all much more fundamental than fighting for fewer toilets.

Client's representative, and project manager

The fourth and final voice in the article belongs to the client's representative, a project manager from the University's Estates department with an architectural background.

In a departure from previous accounts, the narrative of the client's representative is remarkably short on details: 'This issue of the toilets [...] which different people had different ideas on.' In their view it might, technically speaking, be classified as a 'non-story', the characteristics of which are nonetheless poignant when interpreted in the light of the polyphonic ensemble. Three main features appear to be significant. The first is the emphasis on the number and variety of stakeholders involved in the decision-making process, for the toilets and, more generally, for the entire project. The client's representative regarded this multiplicity as a 'problem, a big issue that you have to come round to and overcome'. 'Services' and 'Procurement' were especially singled out as central actors, a degree of attention that has the rhetorical effect of reducing the importance of other participants in the process, most particularly the 'end-users'. The School of Architecture 'wanted a big input. They have got their input' but the key to success was 'compromise'. The second feature of their story is that compromise was seen as the solution to conflicts in a world (the Arts Tower project) dominated by antagonism and by the presence of divergent interests. It was not the

constructive coming together of actors who, each from their own standpoint, shared a common interest and were willing to find common ground. The vocabulary used by the client's representative is indicative of this attitude, with terms such as 'hurdles', 'headaches', and 'issues' dominating the narrative. In the case of the toilets, compromises were made possible thanks to the close partnership between himself and the contractor's Project Manager, who effectively operated as 'Siamese twins bounded together'. This alliance gave meaning to the roots of all efforts to compromise, which were, in this particular voice, invariably grounded on efficiency considerations: solutions were ultimately adopted because they were 'economical' and because 'a good business case could be brought up'. If achieved, aesthetics was a pleasing added bonus, but it was not of the essence. Interestingly, in his narrative, the affective dimension of aesthetics is not married with functionalities. His role in Estates and the need to respect current building regulations seemed to overcome passion, except when he was describing the windows and the light pouring through.

Discussion and conclusions on decision-making

The analysis reported in the previous section highlights how each character expressed, through their narrative, both their personality and their role, which were not always in harmony. Although emotions surfaced in the narratives, their role is what dominated their actions. All four talk about the importance of aesthetics, but only those for which aesthetics is an integral part of their role (the user and the historian) actually pursue it. For the client and the manager, other aspects ended up dominating their standing and ultimately influenced the decision. As we expected, the different participants discussed the same issues showing how critical points were perceived across different cultures. The user-client brought to the fore two architectural issues that were not or only marginally mentioned by others, namely the windows and the ceiling heights.

The criteria championed by each character in the story as relevant for decision-making, and the presence and the interplay between different criteria, is a key to the way in which different cultures operated in this particular project. More

generally, good architecture does not 'materialise' without complementary competences, such as organisation and commercial nous. The negotiation process that led to actual decisions being made and the role of different criteria in achieving those decisional outcomes indicates there are different views of what happened, with some highlighting constructive participation and positive consensus-building and others hinting at a 'darker' picture of a competitive world of power struggles and emotional battles. Both are, in a sense 'true'.

The evaluation expressed by each character on the quality of the decisions, and on the overall quality of the decision-making process, is, again, mixed. The notion of participation implied in the 'involvement of the end-users' is very ambiguous. It was interpreted (and enacted) by different people in different ways with significant impact in terms of motivation and overall satisfaction. This has significant implications for how organisational structures and mechanisms are designed in the architectural and procurement processes that occur in organisational contexts.

Specific lessons from this particular story – focused on the toilets – in its context – the Arts Tower project – offer an opportunity to speculate more generally on the wider issue of the role of University buildings to reflect the schools and departments inhabiting them, and it reflects the enormous effort people felt like they made to make the building a success. Perhaps the biggest lesson is the passion and care shown in the processes of restoring a building and in this case how important the Arts Tower became to the University.

Clearly, in architectural terms, the outcome of the project is a compromise. It is less purist but perhaps better than it was before. The spaces of the Tower are lighter and open up more views previously in its history. Timber storage walls add a warmth and friendliness to the building. The lighting works less well, the biggest failure, and one which at night completely changes the external character of the building.

Already, after more than four years, certain internal spaces have been compromised and the School of Architecture has outgrown the number of floors allocated to them. And other voices, now in decision-making roles, have dictated changes, not always for the best, architecturally.

Notes

1. In this article, two of the four highlighted voices were allocated to the School of Architecture. This is only representative of the passion and interest in the building from many colleagues. Other voices in the process of building were considered and would have been valuable to include, for example the contractor's project manager, but we chose to focus on the
2. The constitution of the Project Executive Group comprised of heads of department or delegated representatives, external and internal (to the university) project managers and relevant university administrators all to ensure smooth communication channels to departments inhabiting and using the building.
3. The Arts Tower and Library were
4. Tatjana Schneider, *This Building Should Have Some Sort of Distinctive Shape: The Story of the Arts Tower in Sheffield* (Sheffield: The University of Sheffield, 2008). Funded by a grant from the RIBA.
5. The University's favoured architect of the time, HLM, were appointed, without discussion. The conservation report was carried out by John Allen, who later went on to be appointed as

architect for the refurbishment of the adjacent Western Bank Library, a beautifully spare restoration.

6. The Bdr had many years experience of arranging design workshops, enabling participation and co-production with schools and communities and then presenting design solutions.
7. M. Fischer, *Emergent Forms of Life and the Anthropological Voice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
8. Similarly, the architect was not involved in the definition of the inquiry: her contribution occurred at a later stage when the architectural perspective was put in dialogue with organisational theory and process analysis.
9. David M. Boje, *Narrative Methods for Organisational and Communication Research* (London: Sage, 2001); Catherine Kohler Reissman, *Narrative Analysis* (London: Sage, 1993).
10. William Labov, 'Building on Empirical Foundations', in *Perspectives on Historical Linguistics*, ed. by W. Lehmann and Y. Malkiel (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1982), pp. 17–92. Labov's six structural categories are: *abstract* (a summary of the substance of the narrative); *orientation* (the time, place, situation, and participants); *complicating action* (the sequence of events); *evaluation* (the significance and meaning of the action and attitude of the narrator); *resolution* (what finally happened); and, *coda* (a return of the narration to the present).
11. Boje, *Narrative Methods*, p. 109. According to Boje's descriptions: *Romance* is a drama of self-identification symbolised by a heroine's victory over the world of experience. The hero is redeemed and/or liberated. *Satire* (irony) is the opposite of romance; it is a drama of apprehension symbolised by the heroine's captivity in the world. He or she is never able to overcome the darkness, get out of the abyss. *Tragedy* occurs when the hero is defeated by the experience of the world, yet hope exists for those left behind by their understanding of the limits of overcoming the abyss. Liberation is possible. *Comedy* offers hope for the heroes in a temporary triumph over darkness. Comedy offers temporary reconciliation or harmony. Reconciliations are symbolised by a festive occasion and harmony can be achieved between conflicting parties.
12. Barbara Czarniawska, *Narrating the Organisation: Dramas of Institutional Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
13. William Labov, 'Field methods of the Project on Linguistic Change and Variation' in *Language in Use*, ed. by J. Baugh and J. Sherzer (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1984).
14. The Twentieth Century Society's mission is to safeguard the heritage of architecture and design in Britain from 1914 onwards. See: <<http://www.c20society.org.uk/>> [accessed 5 December 2016].

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This article is dedicated to Peter Blundell Jones: our tragic hero and inspiration.

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