

## MUIRHEAD TOWER (AREA 5)

### JERRY TEW

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In some instances, landmarks do not just provide a visible point of recognition. They also define and give a particular meaning to the area around them – as with cathedrals and castles in medieval times. When Joseph Chamberlain and the city fathers established the University as ‘a great school of universal instruction’ at the start of the twentieth century, they chose to commission, as their landmark, the Venetian tower now known as Old Joe. This offered a symbolic link to the European Renaissance, differentiating the University from the industrially dominated landscape of much of the rest of Birmingham – the very industry that had created the wealth which had made the foundation of the university possible.

Muirhead Tower was designed and built by Ove Arup and Partners (chief architect Sir Philip Dowson) as a statement in ‘bush-hammered concrete’ which brooded over the central area of the campus, redefining the feel of the university as brutally modern. It opened in 1971 and interestingly came to house, on one of its floors, a radical hotbed of cross-disciplinary thinking led by the Jamaican born academic Stuart Hall: the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Their seminal work on race, identity, culture, class and education has been acclaimed internationally, but was seen as rather too subversive by much of the more conservative University establishment and what was left of Cultural Studies was abruptly closed in 2002 as part of a ‘restructuring’.

The Muirhead Tower itself also seems to have been seen as too architecturally subversive by the University. On the pretext of problems with the fitting of the window glass, the entire building was encased in scaffolding and tarpaulins for many years – although no repair work was actually being undertaken. It was on the radar of English Heritage as one of the leading examples of 1960s brutalism in the country, but I understand that the University managed to convince them not to list it, on the grounds that listing would then make it too expensive to repair. Birmingham-based Associated Architects were then commissioned to renovate the building internally and make certain modifications to its external appearance. Most crucially, this involved fitting angled anti-glare glass slats to the South facing elevation which served to sanitise its appearance as viewed from the central campus. No longer was the landmark to be such an impressive and brooding presence – and the integrity of the original architectural statement was lost.

However, with the more recent opening up of the new ‘Green Heart’ – a somewhat desolate swathe of grass and paving – the landmark status of Muirhead is much enhanced as its

position now gives it a dominant stance over a substantial part of the central campus, leaving the 'rival' landmark, Old Joe, to preside over the antiquity of the Aston Webb building and the immediate space that is enclosed around it.

Photograph 1 shows the East facing elevation of Muirhead, largely unaffected by refurbishment, as it stands almost as a triumphal arch straddling a service road. Apart from the irritating adornment of anti-glare slats on the South facing elevation, Photograph 2 shows Muirhead having considerable presence, as much of its original form and shape still presides over the Green Heart open space.

By contrast, taken from the side of the more conservative Arts building, Photograph 3 shows the almost complete anonymising of Muirhead's South facing elevation with slats and bright metal cladding hiding the concrete forms beneath. If one ignores the metal-clad service tower inserted in the middle, the North facing elevation (Photograph 6) provides a mirror-image glimpse of how the South elevation once looked. Viewed from a little further away, Photograph 4 shows the nondescriptness of the South elevation contrasting with the massive sculptural concrete that faces West.

Two other modernist concrete buildings that were listed by English Heritage, Ashley and Strathcona, stand in the foreground of Photograph 5, providing an overture to the main event, Muirhead, standing behind as the more overtly brutalist landmark that defines the feel of the overall space. Despite the loss of impact of the South elevation, enough of the original Muirhead remains to define the space in which graduates and their families mingle below (Photograph 7). Photograph 8 captures the competition between, in the distance, Old Joe and the Aston Webb dome (as signifiers of one vision of the University of Birmingham) and, in the foreground, the flank of the more recent and controversial usurper, Muirhead.

Although much of the power of the South elevation has been lost, the original statement made by the long flight of concrete steps up to the atrium entrance remains (Photograph 9), forcing the viewer to look up in some degree of awe at its sculptured bulk. Perhaps a little ironically, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which had been summarily extinguished, is now commemorated in a blue plaque to the right of the entrance.