

ADDRESS

Former Robinson Building, 1 REDCLIFF STREET, BRISTOL

Parish BRISTOL
District BRISTOL
County AVON

Case UID: 161634

Date First Listed: FOI Case Number 84260

Formerly Listed As:

RECOMMENDATION

Adviser: Ms F Duterloo-Morgan

Outcome: No, do not list

Recommended Grade: NL

20-JUL-2007

Advice Text: After examining all the papers on this file and other relevant information and having carefully considered the architectural and historic interest of this case, the criteria for listing are not fulfilled.

CONTEXT

The application concerns a request for the spot-listing of the former Robinson Building at 1 Redcliff Street in Bristol. English Heritage is also offering advice to DCMS following a request for a Certificate of Immunity (Col) for this building submitted by a member of the public (UID 162721).

The former Robinson Building stands in the centre of the Redcliff Conservation Area, adjacent to St Thomas Church (grade II*), four C17 houses (now shops and offices; grade II*), a group of late C19 commercial buildings along Victoria Street (grade II).

DESIGNATION HISTORY

In 1995, an application for spot-listing was received from Bristol City Council following the receipt of a planning application for a large wavy canopy above the main entrance. Subsequently, the building, then just over 30 years old, was considered by English Heritage's Post War Steering Group, who decided it merited listing on a national level, however, as Bristol City Council had negotiated an acceptable and demountable canopy for the building, and any immediate threat of alteration had now disappeared, English Heritage felt that it would be inappropriate at that time to recommend listing. The case was thus returned to the DCMS as an open rework.

CURRENT PLANNING ISSUES

Recently planning permission has been granted, subject to a Section 106 Agreement, to develop the car park to the south of the former Robinson Building with a six storey Civil Justice Centre which includes the reorganisation of the access ramp to the garage under the former Robinson Building.

HISTORY

The 0.6ha site on the corner of Redcliff Street and Victoria Street had been occupied since 1846 by Robinson's, a successful paper and packaging manufacturing business. In 1876 they built a large office building to a design by W S Gringell. Following bomb damage during the Second World War, the company decided in 1960 to build new offices on the same site, capable of taking 1000 people, with adequate car parking, and dining and conference facilities. The building also had to be simple in design and economic in capital cost and maintenance. Robinson's decided to use their in-house architects led by John E Collins (1922-), with Colin Beales as job architect mostly concerned with

the interior and the furniture. Collins, born in Bristol, trained as an engineer and in 1946, just as he began to retrain as an architect, he joined Robinson's. In 1948, on completion of his studies, he became chief group architect. Collins claimed that his background in engineering gave him a proficiency in services, and in 1956 he founded a building centre in Bristol. He designed a number of other large office buildings in Bristol, including a block of flats in Sneyd Park, where he still lives. None of his buildings are currently designated in the national context.

Work on the Robinson Building began in July 1961 and was completed in August 1963. Collins and his group of architects worked with the builders on site throughout the construction of the building, and in 1963, in *The Observer*, Ian Nairn compared this method and approach to the way warehouse engineers used to work, and described it as a 'medieval process producing a highly up-to-date result'. In 1962 a mock-up building was temporarily erected on the site, as was often used in America, to test materials and construction methods both for the interior and exterior.

On the completion of the Robinson Building there were very mixed reactions to both its scale and design. The building did cause controversy, both locally and nationally, and was seen by many as failing to respond to its environment, in particular its physical relationship to the adjacent Church of St Thomas and nos 25-31 Victoria Street. However, it also received praise as a thoroughly modern office offering a pleasant work environment, and was described by Sir Basil Spence as 'a gift to the City'. The exterior was described in various reviews as 'fussy' and as 'lacking in structural expression' but also as 'elegant', 'neat', 'precisely designed', 'powerful, relaxed and sure of itself' and as having 'a monumental quality enhanced by its consistency and simplicity of detail'. The contemporary reviews are discussed in more detail in English Heritage's report on Tall Buildings (2002) and are listed in this advice under Sources.

DESCRIPTION

MATERIAL: The building has a reinforced concrete frame and is clad in concrete panels finished with exposed Carrara marble chippings set in black marble dust. It has bronze framed windows with mosaic panels below.

PLAN: The fifteen storey tower has a rectangular plan, and is arranged around a 15 square metre, load bearing service core, positioned off-centre, with lifts, service ducts and escape stairs. It is surrounded on each floor by flexible open office space (1st floor to 13th floor), with a plant room, cooling tower and caretakers flat on the top floor, an entrance hall at ground floor level and a garage and boiler room below at basement level. At ground-floor level, perimeter columns, or structural mullions, are alternately two storeys and single storey in height, whilst above this level all are two storeys. To the north-east, an attached single storey conference block is raised above the ground on eight pillars, reached from the main entrance hall in the tower via a bridge at mezzanine level.

EXTERIOR: The tower is characterised by the repetition of a single fixed window motif on 1st to 13th floor level, reinforced by the curved lower edges of the panels above the windows. The 14th floor at the top has a tall parapet with rounded arches repeating the window motif below and hiding the plant room. The ground floor is characterised by a full height glazed entrance hall set back from the buildings perimeter columns. The main entrance is on the south side along Redcliff Street, and consists of a bronze glazed lobby with a flat canopy with later C20 lettering. Above it is a white wavy canopy introduced in 1995. The rectangular conference wing has fixed full height glazing in bronze frames on both sides. An external, glazed spiral staircase at its north-end allows access to and from Victoria Street and the underground garage.

INTERIOR: The ground floor, partly refurbished in the later C20, has an entrance hall along Victoria Street, laid out with a reception desk and waiting area. Stairs in the far north corner lead to the conference room and have pre-cast terrazzo treads with later C20 handrails, replacing a former metal balustrade with wood rails and handrails.

The south part of the ground-floor is now separated from the entrance hall by partition walls to create more office space. Formerly these areas were occupied by the timekeeper's office and an area for taking deliveries.

The ground-floor has a suspended ceiling finished in plywood squares with circular air conditioning ducts, and has terrazzo flooring (probably surviving under the current carpet, though this could not be certified). Both the plywood ceiling and terrazzo floor extend outdoors to the edge of the tower and its supporting columns.

The central service core on the ground floor has terrazzo clad concrete walls, one with a fixed plant box. The internal glazing with doors to the lift lobby appears to have been replaced in the later C20 including the former stainless steel door surrounds to the lifts and its trimmings, which now only survive in the basement.

The open plan offices in the tower, designed to be flexible with the possibility of sub-division, contain custom made Venetian blinds to the windows and specially designed casings to the air-conditioning units below sill level. The ceilings, mostly replaced in the later C20, formerly consisted of metal panels with incorporated lighting made to run in one direction so as to present a uniform appearance from the exterior at night. The current lighting, though replaced, appears to have remained in the same position in the ceiling grid. The former director's floor, which contained a teak panelled board-room, could not be inspected, though staff on site confirmed these no longer exist and the floor is now used as further office space. The conference room, now partly subdivided by demountable partitions, contains its original windows and heating units.

ASSESSMENT

Ever since its completion the former Robinson Building has caused considerable controversy, one of the main discussions revolving around the position of the building within the historic Redcliff area and in particular its relation to the adjacent grade II* listed church and medieval buildings. Bristol City Council has stated that were the same design to be submitted today in this area, it would almost certainly be refused permission (English Heritage, 'Tall Buildings', p 115). However, for the purpose of assessing the level of interest of a building in this position, and of this type and date, it is important to understand which architectural and aesthetic traditions and values it follows and to measure its level of interest in this context. The positioning and scale of the former Robinson Building, which indeed dwarfs its immediate environment, is a testament to a period in which the protection and/or enhancement of historic urban areas was in its infancy, and did not necessarily form part of planning decisions. Its design and positioning also reflects the overall optimism and confidence of the post-war era and the modernist ideas on architecture as expressed by the architect Le Corbusier. The Robinson Firm always had a strong connection with the Redcliff area: the building replaced their former printing works which stood on the site and which had suffered bomb damage during the Second World War. The firm opted for a totally new approach, and undoubtedly the bold and stark architecture of the tower block was perceived as an appropriate expression of their company's success and confidence. Today, whether liked or disliked, the former Robinson Building is generally perceived as one of Bristol's landmarks, visible from various points within the city, very much like Centre Point is one of London's.

The former Robinson building was the first commercial tall building in Bristol, and nationally it was one of the first tall buildings to be designed as an open-plan office offering flexibility through the installation of demountable partitions. It is also one of the first air-conditioned office buildings in England, with fixed windows installed throughout in order to reduce sound pollution. Its novel climate control system, designed and installed by the well established heating engineers GN Haden & Sons Ltd, displayed the emerging technology in heating and climate control influenced by technological innovations in the USA and further developed in England from the mid 1960s onwards.

There are positive things to be said about the building. In architectural terms, the very distinctive and repetitive round-headed window units to the former Robinson Building were influenced, according to its architects, by C19 warehouse design in Bristol. This Bristolian type of mercantile architecture was the appropriate style for their firm's new headquarters, expressing both its corporate image and local origin.

The quality and use of its materials, such as the bronze frames to the windows and the Carrara marble aggregate finish, are of a high standard and have aged well, remaining finely finished and unstained. Also, its construction method, with the architects working on site throughout the building process, and the erection of a mock-up building to test materials, was novel and innovative at the time.

Commercial buildings are generally prone to a considerable level of change and in common with office buildings of this type and date, such as Centre Point in London and New Century House in Manchester, the former Robinson Building has been the subject of internal alteration and refurbishment. However, its exterior has remained completely unaltered and retains the power of its architectural expression, and the interior, whilst altered and adapted to current needs, has not adversely affected its essential architectural qualities. Unlike Centre Point, however, there are no interiors of note here.

For C20 commercial buildings to merit designation on a national level, there must be clear evidence of special interest as expressed in the quality of its design, architectural detailing and materials and in the level of innovation in its overall layout, design and/or engineering. Additionally, the level of intactness and degree of change needs to be taken into account. The former Robinson Building certainly has presence, and the specialist points concerning its early date as an open-plan, air-conditioned building are of some interest. Its outward form is crisp and considered, and for an out-of-London office block it is progressive and very much of its time. However, for listing to be warranted it must possess special interest of a clear and unequivocal manner. Although thought to be listable in 1995, greater experience in assessing such buildings now leads us to challenge this view. The poor integration with its setting; its repetitiveness; its lack of any interior and its very mixed critical reception all argue against listing. It is of interest in the local context as one of the key post-war buildings in Bristol. In the national context, however, it falls short of the necessary standards.

CONCLUSION

It is recommended that the former Robinson Building is not added to the list.

SOURCES

The Builder (16 March 1962), p 566.
R Winstone, Bristol As it Was (1963).

The Observer (July or August 1963).

Interbuild (November 1964), pp 24-27.

Architect & Building News (2 December 1964), pp 1067-72.

Architect's Journal (30 December 1964), pp 1555 -70.

The Observer (11 April 1965).

An oil painting showing the Robinson Building viewed from the Bristol Bridge, signed by Peter Andrews, 1967 (private collection).

Building Design (10 November 1972), p 6.

English Heritage's notes as part of the assessment of the former Robinson Building, by E Harwood, October 1995.

Tall Buildings: Aspects of their Development and Character in England (English Heritage 2002).

A Foyle, The Buildings of Bristol (2004), p 187-188.

The Robinson Building: A report supplied by Scottish Widows in response to the Application to List compiled by Sir Andrew Derbyshire, 2007.

Evidence and (historic) photographs supplied by the CIBSE Heritage Group, June 2007 (on file).

Conclusion: This advice has been considered by the H.P. Director; Roger Bowdler has contributed to the advice.

Reasons For Designation Decision:

REASONS FOR DESIGNATION DECISION:

The former Robinson Building is not recommended for designation, for the following principal reasons:

- * Although a fairly early commercial high-rise office building, and an early open-plan, air-conditioned block, it lacks sufficient special architectural interest
- * The exterior lacks finesse, and is repetitive
- * There are no internal features of note
- * The building has enjoyed a mixed critical reaction, and its impact on the streetscape is not offset by architectural design quality.

VISITS

22-MAY-2007 Partial Inspection

Please note that as the building is let to various businesses and organisations, the HP Adviser was allowed access to the groundfloor, basement, conference room and one typical office floor.

COUNTERSIGNING

First Countersigning Adviser: Ms G Abercrombie

Comments: Agreed: this case has been carefully considered. While it is a striking design with some technical claims to note, overall its critical status has yet to be established. Doubts remain as to its architectural quality, and the lack of any internal features of note further undermines the claims to special interest.
29.8.07

Second Countersigning Adviser:

Comments:

HP Director:

Comments: