

## Redevelopers and ruminants

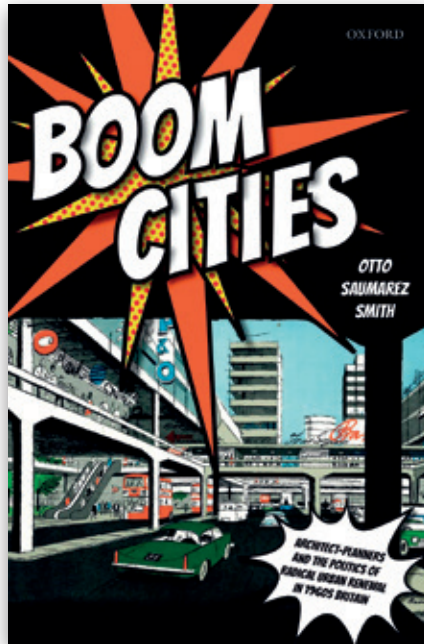
**Boom Cities: architect-planners and the politics of urban renewal in 1960s Britain**

Otto Saumarez Smith, Oxford University Press, 2019, 198 pages, 31 black & white illustrations, ISBN 978 0 198836 40 7, £65

Otto Saumarez Smith, an assistant professor at the University of Warwick, recognises himself 'as part of a generation born after the glory days of the welfare state which looks back on the physical remains of this vanished era with nostalgia for a lost idealism'. *Boom Cities* deals with a subject that has received an overwhelmingly negative press: the redevelopment of city centres in the 1960s, from the more balanced and nuanced perspective of a young scholar who was not there at the time.

Saumarez Smith identifies 1963 (the year of publication of *Traffic in Towns*, Wilfred Burns' plan for Newcastle and Peter Hall's vision of the London region in 2000) as a high point of city-centre redevelopment. It was a period of economic prosperity, optimism and an assumption that motor traffic could grow almost without limit. These were views shared across the political parties. Consultancies and local authorities employed the dual-qualified architect-planners who would reshape cities to reflect the 60s zeitgeist. Konrad Smigielski's 1964 Leicester Traffic Plan rode this wave of positive energy. The plan, like Smigielski's work in general, had much in it that was good, including an emphasis on public transport. But, with elements like a monorail system, it proved over-ambitious.

Blackburn's was one of the earliest and most radical redevelopment schemes, promoted by a public-private partnership. It covered six hectares of the city centre, separating traffic and pedestrians. The result was praised at the time by critics such as Ian Nairn, and Saumarez Smith finds Blackburn still worthy of respect. Graeme Shankland's plans for Liverpool and Bolton followed; his unbuilt plan for Hook



new town provided a model. The excitement generated by Shankland's radical plan for Liverpool was not followed through and left large areas of dereliction. The plan for Bolton was more successful. The aristocratic Lionel Brett had a more incremental approach than Shankland in his plans for Hatfield new town and Portsmouth, and in his 1966 conservation study for York. By 1970 Brett had moved to advocating a restrained approach to redevelopment before his career took off in a different direction.

Tracing the overall trajectory of city-centre redevelopment, Saumarez Smith quotes Richard Crossman, minister in the 1964 Labour government, admiring the rigorous geometry of Cumbernauld while privately suspecting that most people would prefer the kind of living environment offered by Welwyn Garden City. Crossman was also concerned about the contrast between ambitious drawings and poor quality in the corresponding built schemes. Saumarez Smith identifies a mismatch between schemes designed on the basis of an assumption of future affluence and the reality of cities like Stoke-on-Trent which were moving towards a post-industrial state. He ends the book with a useful plea for a holistic view of the post-1945 legacy, including 'the shopping centre, the roads and the underpasses'. The

story, he concludes, has 'its share of both idealism and crassness' and 'doesn't fit neatly into a polemic'.

Older readers may find that the author's portrayal of 'architect-planners' as urban power brokers does not quite ring true: in the reviewer's memory these professionals were sometimes ruminative types who developed an interest in the then niche field of conservation. Academic publishing is clearly challenging but it is a pity that the price of the book may deter many who would find *Boom Cities* interesting and enjoyable. This is a brilliantly researched and very readable book.

Michael Taylor is editorial coordinator for *Context*.

---

## Manifold interventions

**Old Buildings, New Architecture**  
Richard Griffiths, 2019, 176 pages, 34 black & white and 323 colour illustrations, ISBN 978 1 527231 62 7, £35 (copies can be ordered online through [www.rgarchitects.com](http://www.rgarchitects.com))

The London architect Richard Griffiths has published a book about the work of his firm since its foundation in 1993. It discusses and illustrates the practice's manifold interventions to listed buildings; among them works on national treasures such as St Pancras Hotel, Lambeth Palace, and St Albans Abbey (one of two cathedrals, alongside Southwark Cathedral, where Griffiths was cathedral architect for many years).

A number of his projects have received Civic Trust and RIBA awards and featured in the architectural press, but do not expect another example of vanity publishing. This monograph is about the stimulating environment of history, memory and the graceful process of ageing, about the art of adding a new layer to old buildings. It sums up the life experience of a designer who would not be pigeon-holed in the role of conservation architect. He reflects instead on his considerable range of contributions involving historic buildings, from



contrast'; 'The care of cathedrals'; 'The typology of barns'; 'The art of repair and the texture of age'; 'The art of construction and detailing'; 'The case for restoration'; 'The regeneration of historic areas' and 'Conservation cause célèbre' (the last being about King's Cross and St Pancras).

The thematic structure allows readers to use the book as an encyclopaedia as well as a course on contextual design. It will be of equal interest to professionals and those who would like a taster of both heritage and design. Each chapter presents examples of completed projects, starting with a briefing on the history and significance of the building in question, giving colourful insights into the process. The information is concise and accessible as the text strikes a balance between jargon and artful storytelling. The reading experience is enhanced by a plethora of eye-catching images, zooming from site to surface; a printed compendium

of site visits, focusing on object and subject from various angles.

Practice brochures in the architectural sphere tend to select just a handful of prominent buildings and dwell on them to showcase a firm's achievements. Griffiths' book takes a different approach. It does not discriminate in favour of glamorous projects, but provides an authentic, holistic panorama of the rewarding work of the practice in the historic environment from the Ragged School Museum, Limehouse, to Jesus College, Cambridge; from Oxford Prison to Kenilworth Castle Tudor Privy Garden, Warwickshire; from barns in Suffolk to manor houses in East London; from London Dock Warehouse to the Garrick Club. It comes complete with lists of projects and clients, awards, articles and staff.

*Michael Asselmeyer is an architect and architectural historian who worked for Richard Griffiths Architects in 2001.*

repair and conversion to extension and new building in context.

A plea for beauty in architectural design, followed by an autobiographical introduction and a passionate conclusion, provide the bookends for 16 further chapters that cover topics across the historic environment. These include 'The layering of history'; 'Old and new in context'; 'Old and new in

**Working with the public, private and voluntary sectors to turn heritage liabilities into assets**

Consultants to Nottingham City Council for Carrington Street Townscape Heritage round 2

**Creative Heritage**  
 Creative Heritage Consultants Ltd  
 Buxton, Derbyshire Tel: 01298 77774  
[www.creative-heritage.net](http://www.creative-heritage.net)

**Rainclear Systems**

**THE HOME OF METAL GUTTERING**

- Online ordering - pay securely by credit card or PayPal
- Next day delivery on a huge choice of stocked items
- Take-off service, free quotes and technical advice
- Unrivalled customer service

45% OFF CAST IRON

STEEL  
 CAST IRON  
 ALUMINIUM  
 COPPER  
 ZINC

HIGH QUALITY  
 LONG LASTING  
 TRADITIONAL & CLASSIC  
 CONSERVATION OR REFURB

0800 644 44 26 • [www.rainclear.co.uk](http://www.rainclear.co.uk)