

Contemporary Westminster

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Westminster Planning, March 2009.

The City of Westminster is a conservative sort of place – and received wisdom is that it likes its new architecture that way too.

Contemporary Westminster - an exhibition at New London Architecture, sponsored by the City Council, which showcases 50 completed projects from the present decade¹ - challenges that perception. It is a conscious attempt to show that they are not as backward-looking at City Hall as you might have thought.

I was convinced. There is an impressive range of projects here, from 'object' buildings like Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands' Asticus Building in Victoria and the White Cube Gallery in St James's to discreet infill such as the Chagford Street houses. There is plenty to lift the spirits, and no projects that don't at least meet the standard of 'pretty good'.

'Contemporary', of course, has a stylistic connotation, as well as meaning that these buildings are recent – and sure enough, nearly all of these 50 projects are, broadly speaking, modernist or modernist-inspired. But there is no sense of samey-ness, and more than enough to refute the suggestion that modernist architecture struggles to respond in a neighbourly way to established urban contexts.

When I think of recently built buildings in the City of Westminster, though, I might just as readily think of those mediocre brick-and-stone, milk-and-water 'repro' buildings – often based vaguely on eclectic 1880s architecture, but with all the interesting details eliminated, and the proportions a bit adrift to accommodate modern floor-to-floor heights -

that can be found all over W1 and SW1². You wouldn't put them in an exhibition, and they're not in this one.

What does this tell us? It would be fair to deduce that the City Council doesn't think the 'repro' model of building in Westminster is much good either, or they might have found some examples to put in their exhibition. So if they are not promoting that version of building in Westminster, who is? Is it clients and architects who think that the 'repro' road will get them an easier planning consent, when to go 'contemporary' is assumed to be more challenging? And if that is what they think, surely that is borne out of bitter experience, rather than being based, all these years, on a dreadful misunderstanding of what the City wanted?

Forget about 'modern vs. traditional' as a matter of principle or ideology – just consider the evidence. From the point of view of getting the best possible new buildings in Westminster, you'd go for 'contemporary Westminster' every time.

These are gloomy times – this exhibition shows that there is a clear choice to be made between the fresh and cheery optimism of the approaches on show here, or the depressing turgidity of the alternative. I hope that the lessons to be learnt here will be absorbed by Westminster's planning committee members and officers, as well as everyone else.

¹ At the Building Centre, 26 Store Street WC1, until 28 March.

² I've got nothing against good new traditional architecture – I'm referring to bad new traditional architecture.