

Executive Summary: Listing Review Representations

The Point, Midsummer Boulevard, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire

Introduction

1. This Executive Summary has been written by Heritage Collective LLP on behalf of Hammerson UK Properties Plc. It follows a review of two separate, detailed reports on the building prepared by Richard Coleman Citydesigner and Nathaniel Lichfield & Partners. Heritage Collective concurs with the findings of the aforementioned reports for the reasons set out in this summary, following the overview section.

Overview

2. The multiplex cinema is not a pioneering new building type, but instead a late 20th century development as part of the on-going post-war evolution of the cinema. By the 1970s the concept of introducing more than one screen was already established in Britain: Rank and EMI had converted most of their old Odeon and ABC cinemas to three-screen “film centres” in the 1970s. The name “multiplex”, along with the concept of a cinema housing a number of screens, was imported from the US, and this also included the concept of creating an entertainment environment as a destination, rather than the cinema as the sole attraction. By the 1980s the multiplex cinema was nothing new – it had been developed in the US since the 1960s – although it was novel in the UK and revived the dwindling cinema attendance of the time.

3. The Point happened to be the first multiplex cinema in the UK as part of a broader programme of rolling out multiplex cinemas. This can at least to some extent be attributed to the fast-track planning applicable to the site, because the Milton Keynes Development Corporation held the planning powers to approve new buildings and The Point fulfilled their aspiration for an entertainment complex. Contemporary multiplex cinemas were being built, or planned, for many locations in Britain at that time. The lack of red-tape at Milton Keynes may have been the only reason The Point was built before the second UK multiplex cinema, at Salford Quays (which opened at the end of 1986).
4. Whilst The Point is the first example of this particular type of cinema in the UK, that is not by reason of innovation or particular advances in technology, etc. (e.g. IMAX technology). Instead The Point followed AMC's standard cinema design and contemporary accounts reiterated that these were of standard specification/design.
5. The design of The Point was conceived by an interior designer (Neil Tibbatts) and reflected the physical arrangement of the facilities required inside; BDP was responsible for the architecture, structural, mechanical and electrical engineering, and acoustics. The purpose of the central 'mall' on the ground floor was to connect most of the facilities and offer an enclosed area for customers to meet or congregate. The building is structurally unremarkable, although the exterior was designed to be conspicuous in order to attract attention and draw customers.
6. Like shopping malls and retail superstores, the multiplex cinema soon became ubiquitous in the national context, as indeed it still is. In 1989 the Architects' Journal (19 July, 1989, p59) noted:

"Although the multiplex has been the saviour of cinema as a mass entertainment form, its effect on architecture must be regarded as rather less of a cause for celebration. The new-generation picture-palaces are largely indistinguishable from the superstore or shopping centre neighbours, and the flamboyant excesses of cinema history have sadly been distilled into the ubiquitous blind, bland box."
7. Whilst The Point is of some historic interest as the first example of this type of cinema and the importation of the American concept of a mall-like

entertainment environment, the arrival of the multiplex cinema in Britain cannot be described as a historic event of national significance. Similarly the brash exterior, notwithstanding its prominence, is architecturally undistinguished and uninspiring.

Statutory selection criteria and principles¹

8. Architectural interest: The design of The Point reflected the physical facilities required inside and the exterior was dressed up to give the building prominence. Like shopping malls, the design of the centre was based on the concept of a controlled commercial environment characterised by ease of movement, in which visitors could take advantage of the various facilities. There was nothing new about this concept although it had not previously been applied, in quite the same way, in Britain.
9. The building's original layout has been largely lost and, with that, much of the interiors have been stripped out. The internal detailing and fittings that have survived are unremarkable. The cinemas and cinema foyer have been refurbished, with only the columns now remaining in the foyer, which in many respects was the heart of the multiplex cinema. The interior of The Point cannot be described as being of "special interest" and it is certainly not "outstanding".
10. The original proposal was for an 80 foot crystal pyramid of mirrored glass with the 10 screen cinema in a windowless silver block at the back; the 70 foot ziggurat structure in mirrored glass was a trimmed-down compromise as a result of budgetary constraints. The fact that Bass Leisure's logo is a red triangle may, at least in part, explain why that form was chosen.
11. In terms of its external appearance, the primary design objective of The Point was conspicuousness in order to attract customers. In Tibbatts' own words it was a rushed job and the object was commercial success, not creating quality architecture. In this respect the building's design is more akin to a promotional stunt than a thoughtful piece of Post Modern architecture or even an architectural statement. The building did not win any architectural awards or acclaim at the time, which is unsurprising given that it was not intended to.

¹ Principles of Selection for Listing Buildings: General principles applied by the Secretary of State when deciding whether a building is of special architectural or historic interest and should be added to the list of buildings compiled under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. Department for Culture, Media and Sport (March 2010).

Instead it is its commercial success that was mostly noted in contemporary accounts.

12. The red truss pyramid structure's vertical 'columns' that finish just above ground level and 'rest' on floating spheres, is not unusual when considered in the context of the prevalent Post Modern architecture of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Post Modern buildings were often characterised by contradictions of conventional/rational architectural principles, which were commonly employed as 'features'.
13. In terms of its architecture, The Point cannot be described as being of "special interest". It is certainly not of "outstanding" architectural quality by any measure.
14. It has been suggested that The Point was influenced by the work of Archigram and that it is redolent of Mike Webb's thesis project at the Regent Street Polytechnic from 1959-62. There appears to be no factual basis to support this. None of the contemporary architectural and design journals linked The Point in any way to Archigram and there is no evidence to suggest that The Point was in fact influenced by the theories and approaches of Archigram. On the contrary the available evidence indicates that the design approach taken at The Point was more superficial, rather than based on architectural theory or scholarly principles. It is particularly difficult to see how the original proposal for a crystal pyramid of mirrored glass could in reality have been influenced by Webb's thesis project on the site of the Empire Theatre in Leicester Square. Webb's thesis project included the Sin Centre – multi-level circular towers connected with circular ramps. Whilst Sin Centre contained a department store, plaza, foyer, dance floor and bowling alley, there can be little doubt that the leisure facilities at The Point would have been dictated by AMC's imported business model and/or commercial requirements, rather than Webb's thesis project, two decades before, or the theories of Archigram.
15. Neither can the exposed 'structure' be compared with the innovative High Tech architecture of the late 1970s and 1980s, whereby the structure and/or servicing elements of buildings were externalised and overtly expressed in the design (e.g. the grade I listed Lloyd's Building by Richard Rogers Partnership, begun in 1981 and opened in 1986). In The Point, the non-structural steel

components were cosmetically applied and not structural expression. The welded-together joints, without articulation or expression, only emphasises the crudeness of the 'structure' and has nothing in common with High Tech architecture. Consequently the building's main design feature gives it an inescapably kitsch appearance that undermines any hints of structural or architectural integrity.

16. It has also been suggested that the design of The Point is noteworthy as a relatively early use of architectural computer-aided design (CAD). The use of CAD must be considered in light of the fact that The Point was designed and constructed on a budget, and to a fast-track programme. CAD programs simplified the process of editing drawings and reduced the need of draftsmen significantly; the use of CAD would therefore have been ideally suited to a fast-track, budget project. Only the larger practices could afford the necessary outlays on computers and software, which is perhaps why BDP had this resource available. The use of CAD in architecture was initially typically limited to producing drawings similar to hand-drafted drawings. There are no indications that the use of computer drafting influenced the design of The Point, or conversely that its design required CAD, or could only have been realised by using CAD. Instead the use of CAD seems most likely to have been driven by cost and time constraints. In any event, subsequent advances in programming and computer hardware – notably solid modelling – allowed for more versatile applications of computers in building design and facilitated non-standard structures which were previously almost inconceivable, such as the Deconstructivist buildings of the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Frank Gehry's more sculptural buildings). The Point does not fall in this category.
17. Historic interest: Although The Point is a relatively modern building, it is of some historic interest as the first multiplex cinema in Britain – despite the fact that this was 'incidental' and at least in part due to the quirks of the British planning system. At that time there was over 150 multiplexes in the US, and many British cinemas had been converted to multi-screens.
18. Whilst The Point typifies a step in the evolution in cinema-going in post-war Britain, fuelled by commercial success, this does not represent a particularly important aspect of the nation's social, economic or cultural history.

19. Group value: The Point does not have added interest in terms of group value. It was completed approximately 20 years after the initial laying out of the new town centre, and as such it constitutes no more than a 'building block' within an established framework. In a very broad sense it is a modern building of strict geometry, set in a modern context dictated by a strict geometry, but that does not infer special interest.
20. Features of interest: There are no features of the building or man-made objects or structure fixed to it that would warrant listed status.
21. Age and rarity: The Point is 28 years old (taking into account the date that works began on site, in August 1984). Buildings under 30 years old are normally listed only if they are of "outstanding quality" and under threat. For a building to be of outstanding quality it would require greater than special interest and therefore normally warrant being listed a higher grade, i.e. grade II* or grade I (inter alia "particularly important buildings of more than special interest" and buildings that are of "exceptional interest"). There are no indications that The Point can reasonably be categorised as a building of outstanding quality.
22. Aesthetic merits: The interest of The Point is not derived from any intrinsic architectural merit or group value.
23. Selectivity: Listing is largely a comparative exercise and needs to be selective where a building is listed primarily because it represents a particular historical type, in order to ensure that examples of such a type are preserved. The Curzon Mayfair in London (grade II), which dates to 1957 and was designed by Sir John Burnet, Tait and Partner, is the finest surviving cinema building of the post-war period, and it is also the least altered. The Renoir Cinema, part of the Brunswick Centre in London (1967-72), represents a different type of cinema within a pioneering example of a 'megastructure' that combines several functions of equal importance within a single framework.
24. Whilst it was the first multiplex to be completed, The Point is not the most representative or most significant example of a multiplex cinema (assuming the multiplex cinema is important enough as a type to be preserved). The Harbour Lights, Southampton (1995), which was designed by Burrell Foley Fischer, is a more recent example; what sets it apart from The Point is the fact that it is a

building of considerable architectural merit and it successfully performs a landmark function without resorting to brashness or vulgarity. Richard Gray of the Cinema Theatre Association (CTA) specifically highlights it in his book *Cinemas in Britain: One Hundred Years of Cinema Architecture*². The case studies of recently considered buildings in the Richard Coleman report (i.e. the Shopping Building and Lloyds Court) demonstrates the selective approach to listing and highlights the degree of quality and intactness that is required for buildings of this age to warrant inclusion on the statutory list.

25. National interest: The arrival of the multiplex cinema in Britain is not an historic event of national significance. Neither does The Point represent a “regional building”.
26. State of repair: The state of repair of The Point is not advanced as a relevant consideration.

Conclusion

27. Despite being a relatively modern building, The Point is of some historic interest as the first multiplex cinema in Britain. The multiplex cinema is not a pioneering new building type, but instead a late 20th century ‘import’ from America that forms part of the post-war evolution of the cinema in Britain. At the time, the model of more than one screen to a cinema had already been adopted. The introduction of the multiplex cinema to England does not illustrate an important aspect of the nation’s social, economic or cultural history and there are better examples of post-war cinemas, both listed and unlisted.
28. The Point is architecturally unexceptional, and it has been subject to alteration and extensive refurbishment.
29. It does not have the special architectural or historic interest required for listing, and it is certainly not of outstanding quality in either respect.
30. Heritage Collective concurs with Richard Coleman Citydesigner and Nathaniel Lichfield & Partners that The Point does not satisfy the statutory criteria for listing.

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² London: Lund Humphries Publishers (1996)