

Modern solutions to old problems



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WE HAVE a problem. In 1961 the musical 'Stop the World - I Want to Get Off' opened in the West End. It proved very popular and ran for 485 performances.

Of course we can't just get off when developers come along with yet another proposal to demolish one of the dwindling number of our Victorian family homes and replace it with one more inappropriate block of flats.

Not only will we miss a friendly face but we shall have to live with a replacement which sends out all the wrong messages. Are there any alternatives? I think there are.

If the building is listed as of special architectural or historical importance it cannot be demolished, extended or altered without consent and we can simply say 'no', but it is unlikely to be protected in this way if it was built after 1840. What then?

One alternative is to make the building fit for purpose but this may be easier said than done because legislation and home owners are demanding ever-rising standards of energy conservation and efficiency, sound insulation, structural and fire safety and access for the

disabled. Can we at least keep the facade and rebuild behind it? Yes, but not always.

A second alternative is to accept demolition and adopt some 'traditional' style for the new buildings but this can only be a short term answer. There is more to respecting the traditional values which characterise our heritage than recycling some 'clip art' features which have their origins to the past.

A third alternative is to look to modern solutions to meet our changing life styles and practical needs. We certainly demand modern solutions to meet many of our other needs.

The problem is that the very word 'modern' is enough to turn us off. We think straightaway of high-rise flats,

shopping centres and office blocks although if modern design is good it can speak to us in a very different voice. The trouble is that too little of it is good.

Perhaps we should give good modern design more encouragement and opportunity. At present we suffer from a vicious circle - few of us see it and fewer still are fortunate enough to actually experience it. There are good examples but, like good manners, they are taken for granted and pass unnoticed and perhaps that it is how it ought to be.

How should we approach modern design? Dare I say with an open (but not empty) mind? Stephen Bailey says that design is about problem-

solving and meeting needs, not about style.

That is important; a style is not a package to be chosen (or rejected) from a box marked 'styles'. It is just one more step on a long road leading into the future. After all what we see as historical now was modern in its day.

What matters is whether the design is fit for its purpose. That simply means respecting its setting, using decent materials and above all giving pleasure. Let it speak and be prepared to listen.

The future has always been speculative, but in these days of unprecedented change, new technologies and possibilities, re-evaluating the shape of our future environment has never been more crucial.