

an appropriate manner, but also perfectly express the form and purpose of the church.<sup>5</sup>

## Expression

Churches and temples have always claimed high significance on a symbolic and emotional plane. The majority of the buildings designed today cannot do so. To monumentalise a power station or an office block is to debase the currency of architectural values by pretending that they are something other than what they are. It renders the buildings themselves ridiculous as was only too apparent in the scheme for Paternoster Square in which the office buildings were criticised by the Royal Fine Art Commission as “a series of large and separate ‘palaces’ fitted into an informal street pattern”.<sup>6</sup> The street plan might have generated instead a proper street architecture as in Georgian streets and squares where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Although direct architectural expression of the function of an office block may produce a satisfactory solution in the right hands, it has too often done little more than emphasise the inhuman quality of the building type. “An office block”, as the Royal Fine Art Commission has remarked, “requires a special delicacy in its architectural treatment to dissipate the oppressive effect of the ‘human filing cabinet’ both in respect of those who use the offices and of the passer-by”.<sup>7</sup>

With power stations “a straight forward expression of the practical requirements is usually aesthetically the best”.<sup>8</sup> In 1948 the Royal Fine Art Commission was pleased to note an increasing realisation of the fact that, handled with imagination, a simple housing for the large-scale electrical equipment involved can be much more impressive than a cathedral-like structure. In the case of Bankside Power Station the Commission considered the design eminently suitable for the site but believed that the site was inappropriate for an industrial building of this kind. “Its use for such a purpose struck at the root of good town planning and zoning principles, and necessitated a departure, in some respects, from the Commission’s view that the architectural treatment of such buildings should be more functional and less monumental”.<sup>9</sup>

Bankside and Battersea power stations, both cathedral-like structures, are much admired today, and the latter is even “listed”. Many people would like both stations preserved and adapted to new uses. This is not so much an indication of a change of fashion as confirmation of the lasting tendency

for the public to judge buildings superficially by their external appearance only, and perhaps also of the lasting quality of Sir Giles Gilbert Scott’s designs of the envelope. The fact is that the external appearance of early industrial buildings has usually expressed practical requirements and purpose in a direct and straightforward manner, and this way of designing today’s industrial buildings must remain the most appropriate, even if it does not necessarily exclude other ways.

## Planning and aesthetics

In assessing the merits of a building it can be helpful to distinguish between the building looked at in isolation and the wider aspects, usually regarded as planning matters, of environmental impact, setting, fitting into a given context, spaces between buildings and other aspects of civic design. Use, density, bulk, height, open space are all considered to be planning matters, yet all planning decisions have aesthetic implications. To accept, for example, a single large building with a single use on a whole city block, rather than break up the site with several buildings and uses, has implications of scale, rhythm and silhouette which are aesthetic issues.

It is generally accepted that high buildings, if ill-designed and wrongly sited, can have a disastrous effect by overshadowing fine streets or buildings, destroying famous skylines or causing damage to open spaces like parks, squares or river bank. Yet there is little systematic effort by planning authorities to study the effect at planning application stage and so prevent unpleasant surprises. The larger the open spaces and the lower the surrounding buildings are, the greater is the threat. The vast courtyards of Beijing’s Forbidden City, one of UNESCO’s World Heritage sites, will remain intensely vulnerable to high buildings in the surrounding areas of the city as long as the Chinese economy is booming and planning regulations based on the simple geometry of lines of vision are not applied.

The London parks are not on the World Heritage list but, as the Royal Fine Art Commission pointed out when faced with proposals for the Hilton and Royal Lancaster hotels, “such parks provide the only places of escape from walls and pavements to trees and grass, and it would be wrong to destroy the illusion of rural surroundings that most of them still retain. It would be an irreparable loss to London and indeed to the country as a whole, if these Parks were to become, like Central Park, New York, mere