– Foreword –

Without any doubt, London is one of the best cities in the world for modern architecture. But it is also one of the biggest cities in the world, and it does not make a display of its best things. A visitor looking for new buildings in the City and the West End might well be justified in turning away with a shudder. Yet delightful things may be waiting for him in Lewisham or St. Albans.

Hence this book, which consists of short notes on about two hundred and fifty buildings. All of them are in the London Transport area, which goes as far as Bishop's Stortford in one direction and Guildford in another; all but a handful of them are included on merit, rather than the architect's reputation or capacity for self-advertisement. The remainder consist of a few buildings (such as Shell and London Airport) that are so big or so well known that it would be wrong to leave them out. I hope that my comments will leave the reader in no doubt whether I think he is coming on a sheep or a goat. In addition I have listed about thirty buildings that I thought were near misses.

The only sensible arrangement if this book is to be used in the field is by administrative areas, especially

as the local authority itself has the power to alter the kind of architecture that goes on, either through its own building programme or through the exercise of its planning functions. Within the areas, the entries are arranged so that they form some kind of continuous chain.

All types of building are fairly represented except one. In the whole area, there are only six new churches worth going to see, where any big continental city would have at least two dozen. So there is a hole at the centre of the book, and of English architecture. The deep humanity which has gone into the design of many of the schools (there are more than forty in the book) is not quite a replacement.

Historically, the book takes in everything that is immediately recognizable as modern. The line comes just this side of Battersea Power Station and the cottage terraces of Welwyn Garden City; the earliest building in the book was built in 1929. The reason for going back as far as this is to be able to present a complete growth rather than something which begins at an arbitrary date. In fact, only a handful of pre-war buildings have stood the test of a quarter-century of English weather, and many that were once famous are now barely recognizable. Looking back, they seem to have been designed as a special kind of exhibition stand. Many buildings in this book will doubtless decay in the same way, and this is no small indictment. In the circumstances, it is especially nice that the best of Charles Holden's Under-

ground stations seem as fresh and appropriate now as when they were built.

This is not a technical book. It is written by a layman for laymen, and my purpose has always been to present a building's personality or character rather than detailed descriptive information. If you are interested, that can always be looked up in the reference library.

Finally, it will be only too clear from the descriptions that I have seen all these buildings myself, and reacted accordingly. About twenty per cent of them I have found by accident over the last ten years. There must be many more unpublished buildings, hidden away, that deserve some kind of commemoration.

Ian Nairn
London, 1964

1

– City of London –

1 Bucklersbury House and Temple Court, 3 Queen Victoria Street

Campbell Jones & Sons 1954–61

A few yards away from the Mansion House, the Bank of England and the Royal Exchange: a good place to start. This mass of building has a lot of storeys, a lot of windows, freedom from pointlessly applied period detail, freedom from obvious gracelessness, freedom from aesthetic megalomania. It has no virtues and no vices: it is the null point of architecture, the base line for the judgments in the rest of the book. This is where architecture begins.

2 English, Scottish and Australian Bank, 55 Gracechurch Street

Playne & Lacey and Partners 1958–60

Near the Monument; a decent, dignified, carefully furnished office building. Not outstanding, but perhaps worth a special visit to understand the difference between good design and cliché-mongering, which is exemplified in pre-war modernistic terms on its right, and in post-war terms (1962) on its left. The difference in the way that abstract mosaics are used in the two

recent buildings is very telling. No. 55 has a pattern deftly fitted on to the roof of the recessed balcony on the eighth floor; the Midland Bank next door has a garish design sprayed high up all over the stairwell. Quality will always tell, whatever the style.

3 Malvern House and Zidpark, Upper Thames Street

C. E. Wilford & Son 1961

A wry little architectural parable here. The office block is ordinary, and the various touches intended to humanize it seem gauche and inorganic. But the Zidpark behind, because it was designed for cars and not humans, is an unaffected and straightforward job. Completely automatic, with the cars moved vertically on lifts and horizontally on rollers. The building is just an open-sided grid with bolted steel floors and vertical steel rods to stop you feeling nervous about the family saloon. No walls, no windows. The car-fronts make their own pattern. The unhappy and unnecessary fins attached to these rods were at the request of the planning authority who wanted it to have a 'solid appearance' at a distance. It used to look very well seen from Bankside, across the river. Now the view is hidden by a new building, but this has the best of reasons for being there, for it is the first new riverside pub in London since the war.

4 Rebuilding east of St. Paul's

Various hands, 1954 onwards

If by whim or temperament you want to find somewhere to say: 'Oh dear, the English!' then this is it. Every change has been rung on timidity, compromise and incompetence. There is the grinding neo-Georgian horror of the Bank of London & South America, 40 Queen Victoria Street, EC4, one of the deadest buildings in the whole of London. There is the cautious equivocation of Gateway House, 1 Watling Street, EC4, next to it, which is not too bad, especially in the way it incorporates a public footpath underneath. There is a good deal of unremarkable packing-case stuff; and there is the extraordinary *Financial Times* building (Bracken House, 10 Cannon Street, EC4) by Sir Albert Richardson. Unlike all the others, this is a serious and sincere building; a real attempt to adapt and extend eighteenth-century language to modern conditions. Brown brick and red sandstone make weird bedfellows for the City, and the result seems clumsy and heavy; but at least you feel it was designed by a human being for human beings. Oddly enough it would be more at home in Milan than in London, for the style is more or less what the followers of Neo-Liberty are trying to do in Italy.