

The Treasury Project

Mark Power

I was commissioned to photograph the refurbishment of the Treasury in December 2000, a little after the demolition of much of the interior had begun. Over time, as I watched the destruction process continue, fragments of a more glorious past were revealed as each layer of the building was stripped away. It soon became clear that there was something familiar happening here; this was domestic redecoration writ large, and I sensed something more tangibly human embedded in the grand architectural scale. I was reminded of home.

There, back in Brighton, it had been a familiar story. A brother and sister had grown up in the house and returned in their middle-age to sell, following the death of their mother. They were comforted that it would remain a family home when they sold it to us.

Over the years we have made the house our own, demolishing walls, erecting bookcases, sanding floors. But the process of change has inevitably uncovered the past. Ancient copies of the *Daily Express* below swirling carpets; delicate drawings and mathematical notations under layers of floral wallpaper; a pile of towels in the loft. Sturdy panel doors were hidden beneath flimsy hardboard, *Brian and Susan - October 1984* predicting our work, perhaps an acknowledgment that what they were doing was somehow wrong, yet confident in the knowledge that the boards would be removed one day, their bashful signature displayed and whispering once more.

We have painted our home the colours of today: deep reds, salmon pinks, lilacs. Our kitchen is largely pink Formica. Tastes will change and I know that our choices will be frowned upon one day, probably sooner than we'd like to think. It would disappoint Brian and Susan already, because, in their memories, the house will always look like it was, and memories are rarely tolerant of change.

It is a sturdy Victorian house, yet one day, inevitably, it too will be demolished. But the

clothes it wears now, did wear then, and will wear in the future are part of its life, its character. It is the beauty of old houses. It is why I could never live somewhere new.

While still at University, photographer and filmmaker Petra Creffield returned to the house in Leeds where she had lived as a child. She projected old family snapshots into the building which had become, after a succession of occupants, home to a group of students. It was powerful work, but the picture which really stays with me was altogether more simple: it showed a badly chipped newel post, the marks revealing tiny flecks of paint down to the bare wood below. 'That was our colour', she said, pointing at a scarcely visible green hidden amongst the browns, pastels, primaries and whites, the fashionable colours of successive generations.

And there it was again, a personality laid bare, at the Treasury. As I watched and made photographs, a living, breathing piece of history was stirring; something was being released. My work became a search for this elusive thing, a more compelling quest than simply recording the building's transformation from that..... to this.

It was a far cry from my only other construction site experience, when I witnessed at first hand the Millennium Dome grow out of a windblown East London wasteland. Everything about the Dome was shiny and new, a homage to commercialism. Not so the Treasury. It and its neighbours - the Houses of Parliament, Downing Street, the Foreign Office - are the pillars, bricks and mortar of the British establishment. A century old (to be precise, it was originally built in two phases, between 1900 and 1908, and then again from 1912 until 1917), the Treasury is a listed, Grade Two (starred) building, dictating what the developers could, or more often could not, do with it. The aim, essentially, was to transform a claustrophobic labyrinth into a modern democratic space.

When a building is completed there is usually a 'topping out' ceremony. The press are invited, there is a party and congratulations all round for what has been achieved. The Treasury refurbishment hosted a 'bottoming out', traditionally a gathering to raise the spirits when a building has been demolished. It is by all accounts a low point in the process of a rebuild, when doubts are raised, the mess is unbearable, and the enormity of the task facing the developers looms all too large. Beyond this I sensed a more

complex emotion common to all present. The demolition complete, some of that essential character, the history of the building itself, had been destroyed forever. As a photographer, a non-combatant, this process had been painful to watch, yet the inevitable clash of violence and beauty, the very aesthetics of destruction, had been something to delight in. For different reasons we shared a similar guilt.

Now, eighteen months later, the completed building waits for its politicians and civil servants. It is a relaxed affair. I try to imagine the spaces filled with people, but I cannot; the pictures in this book have become part of my own intolerant memory. But, after fifty-odd visits, grace has emerged from brutality, silence from noise. For now at least it is beautiful in its stillness.

Mark Power. Brighton. August 2002