

Sir Basil Spence Archive

Sir Basil Spence (1907-1976) was one of Britain's most celebrated architects, famously recognised for his radical designs for a new Coventry Cathedral following its destruction by bombing during the Second World War. He was also responsible for many other significant and high-profile architectural projects, including the University of Sussex; Hyde Park Cavalry Barracks, London; the British Embassy, Rome; the British Pavilion at Expo '67, Montreal; the Gorbals, Glasgow; exhibition displays at the Festival of Britain and the extension of the New Zealand Parliament buildings and yet his contribution to the story of 20th century British architecture was until recently surprisingly under-researched.

However, following the gift of his archive to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) by his daughter and son-in-law and with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Scottish Government, a highly successful project has demonstrated the potential of original architectural records for research and education, as well as community outreach activities.

The Archive spans Spence's complete working life, from his student drawings and early career in Scotland to the design and construction records of a great many of his projects including Coventry Cathedral and his final design, a cultural centre for Bahrain. Also included are designs for projects that never made it beyond the drawing board. The archive is particularly complete for many projects and contains business records, correspondence, design drawings, photographs, news-cuttings, models and personalia, providing the opportunity to pursue many lines of enquiry from analyzing the architectural design process to studying individual project histories and investigating construction methods, all within the context of contemporary society. It represents a rich and diverse collection of unique primary source material which contributes to a greater understanding of our architectural, sociological and artistic heritage.

During the project, the Archive was catalogued and conserved and made accessible through the RCAHMS online catalogue Canmore. A workshop programme was designed to use the archive to engage with communities in areas around 12 significant Spence buildings in various parts of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Thurso, Coventry and London, encouraging groups to explore, learn from and enjoy his contribution to their local environment. The workshops explored the original archive material relevant to the surroundings and used it as an inspiration and platform for creative learning. For example, retired Glasgow Airport staff and aviation enthusiasts shared their memories and explored the ways in which the building had changed over its 40-year history, working with a graphic designer to produce an in-flight magazine. Other creative results included 3D models, video artworks and short films. The dynamic partnership formed between specialist staff and the vision and inspiration of professional artists, unlocked the creative potential of the Archive which was successfully displayed for all to see in a national touring exhibition.

A further component of the project was a major retrospective exhibition held in the Dean Gallery in Edinburgh - 'Back to the Future: Sir Basil Spence 1907-2007'. Awarded a five star review by The Guardian and described as 'fresh, accessible and seductive' by Scotland on Sunday, 22,700 people attended and the success of the exhibition resulted in an opportunity to tour it to the RIBA Gallery in London and to The Herbert Museum and Art Gallery in Coventry. The exhibition examined Spence's work through his drawings and models of his projects, archive photography, film and sound recordings were brought into play to illuminate the history of the period.

Through the Sir Basil Spence Archive Project, it has been possible to reassess the work of Spence and to demonstrate the potential of architectural collections to encourage people of all ages to appreciate and explore their heritage. "This has been an important project for RCAHMS and we are delighted that the Spence Archive is available to all. It has brought together, as Spence himself did, a number of diverse partnerships, groups and cities. The Archive and exhibition allowed an examination and celebration of the notions of architecture and design, bringing them into the public and popular domain, in the same way that Spence attempted with his works. As well, and justly so, Sir Basil Spence himself was revisited and reassessed." Lesley Ferguson, Head of Collections RCAHMS.



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