

You don't know what you've got till it's gone



Building Design magazine has awarded the Walkie Talkie building at 20 Fenchurch Street its Carbuncle Cup as the worst building in Britain. Andy Rogers has a very personal interest.

While I understand that even the architect, Rafael Vinoly, is not entirely happy with it, the person who would surely be turning in his grave if he hadn't been cremated is my father, William Rogers. He was the architect of the Kleinwort Benson tower that stood on the

same site for 40 years following its completion in 1968 and was finally demolished with great difficulty to make way for its infamous replacement.

Why so hard to demolish and why did it take over six years between the start of dem-

Late last night I heard the screen door slam
And a big yellow taxi took away my old man
— Joni Mitchell,
Big Yellow Taxi



olition and the completion of the new building last year? Thereby hangs a fascinating tale – no pun intended. What pun? you might ask – the answer to which lies in the unusual construction of the Kleinwort Benson building as a column-free office tower with a central concrete core (constructed using an early slip-form method) whose floors are suspended on perimeter hangers carried by a large concrete 'umbrella' cantilever at the top.

As these pictures show, this produced a light and open tower with uncluttered office floors and a spacious podium where it meets the ground. All rather more elegant than the "ludicrous warped ostentation" (*Guardian*) of the Walkie Talkie.

So why was the Kleinwort Benson building demolished? The answer probably lies in the strange economics of the early sixties. When constructed, as a groundbreaking example of the new towers that that City planners allowed using light angle calculations to take account of daylight passing a tower rather than what would filter down to the narrow City streets, and as the first hanging system building in the UK, it was considered to be far ahead of its time and possibly difficult to let. The City of London Real Property Company (my father was their chief architect) clinched a deal, which was then unusual, to let the whole building to one occupier on a 99-year lease at something like nine shillings per square foot. By the time that Land Securities had taken over CLRP and moved into the twenty-first century, the building was no longer economic. A clunking design that maximises high-value floorspace by expanding as >>>

it ascends, so that the higher office areas are increased, was preferred, even though it's "an unappetising lump ... the wrong building in the wrong place" (Deyan Sudjic).

How it was demolished is more pertinent and it took many months – following which the recession delayed a start on the new construction. As it would have to be taken down from the bottom up – removing the roof first being impossible – there were severe problems for the demolition contractor. The top was triangulated, three storeys high, and built using heavy heavy post-tensioned concrete beams. These would have to remain in place until the main floors were removed, but the resulting concrete 'mushroom' could not be safely demolished from the top down. So the demolition involved re-supporting the structure from the bottom up with steel columns, allowing it to be taken down in the normal way. It was reported that when the hangers were cut "there was a bang, the hangers dropped by 35mm, the truss dropped 16mm and the whole building shook". Not too surprising as the floors of the original construction were raked upwards to the perimeter so that when the whole structure was fully loaded they settled into a true horizontal plane.

I once asked someone from English Heritage why it wasn't listed, as an iconic and well-designed example of early sixties commercial architecture with sheer glass curtain walling – unprecedented then – described at the time by Michael Manser in the Observer as "one of the few exciting developments in City architecture – whose recent record is one of monumental dullness". While it was therefore among the first 'signature' towers in the City, it was apparently not felt to be sufficiently important. But it was certainly more beautiful than the building that now fills the site. And a lot more interesting.

As my father's *Times* obituary pointed out, he worked in-house for a developer in an age when architects did not enjoy proper recognition. His buildings were far ahead of their time and commanded great respect, but the constant renewal of City offices inevitably means that many of interest have been removed. In this instance to be replaced with something rather worse. ■

And the seasons they go round and round
 And the painted ponies go up and down
 We're captive on the carousel of time
 We can't return we can only look behind
 From where we came
 And go round and round and round
 In the circle game
 – Joni Mitchell, *The Circle Game*

