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– Superlative Newcastle-upon-Tyne –

[July 1960]

Newcastle is a magnificent city for sheer excitement – the view that stops you dead half-way along a street, or the flight of steps that sucks you in like a vortex. Too few people know about it; fewer still understand just why the Newcastle pattern is so marvellous. It is vital that they should, because as a city it is almost at full term. After a period of political stagnation (a merciful one, by the look of some of our other English cities) many things have to be done, quickly. What happens now, whether the city adds to its potential or stamps on it, is up to the architects, the clients, and the city planning officer: the last newly created, as an independent post, and due to arrive – from Coventry, happily – in September.

Newcastle has a fine tradition of radical change. It is built on one side of a hundred-foot gorge, and the medieval town struggled up it from the quayside, producing dozens of sets of steps or 'chares' which even in their present neglect can produce a kind of topographical ecstasy as you go up and down, perpetually seeing the same objects in a different way. On the flatter land at the top the early 19th-century grafted a new

town on to the old pattern – not replacing it, but superimposing itself, so that today's walker in Newcastle can have the benefit of both. The 19th century threw bridge after bridge across the river, and, with a terrifying optimism I would not ask anyone to imitate today, coolly built a rail link across the old city between the castle keep and its gatehouse, spanning the old streets at an immense height. All these, acting together, have produced today's Newcastle: a typical view is of steps,

Quay Market

alleys, smooth classical buildings, railway bridges, all in the same view. Anything new must add to the polyphony, not erase it and replace it with banality. And the place where new life must start – this may be a surprise, because nobody seems to care two hoots for it at the moment – is the quayside.

Whichever way you come to Newcastle, get down to the quayside first. By road, after the extraordinary explosion of bridges and spires seen from the Tyne Bridge, the only easy way is left and left again. By rail, forgetting for the moment the excellence of the railway station and the grand black streets, it is right and right again. Sooner or later there will be a chare, and crazy views over derelict buildings like a fragment of the Forum: then there are boats and sheds, and at the bottom of the Tyne Bridge a city within a city, with the Exchange and some famous half-timbered buildings (such as Surtees House) that seem to have skipped straight across the Baltic – no cosy oriels and godwottery, but tremendous horizontal bands of windows. Newcastle is in the north-east and looks north-east; and Lübeck seems nearer than London. It is busy on a weekday, busier on a Sunday morning with the Quay Market, the local Petticoat Lane. Wrong-headed people have tried to close it, time and again, when it should be extended and enlarged. It is the true city charter, more true than all the municipal paraphernalia, that hundreds of people will come to a city centre to enjoy themselves and to create urban fife; and the

visitor can add to that the elements of every Newcastle riverside view – boats, water, bridges, towers.

Everyone who comes to the Quay Market must make a journey. Nobody lives there now, and the lack is cruelly pointed by the state of All Saints Church on top of the cliff beside the Tyne Bridge. Two years ago, when I saw it, it was happily in use, if a little shabby. Now there is only a curt notice saying 'Keep Away – Building Dangerous'. The church has flown, and a committee is sitting. It should be Newcastle's first big job to get the church back into All Saints and a possible congregation around it by building a miniature Barbican, as intimate and complex as the site itself. Whatever happens, the building must be preserved, because it is one of the best of its date in Britain. It is one of our very few oval churches, built in 1786 by a local man, David Stephenson – the only comparable building is St Chad, Shrewsbury. In front of the oval is a vivacious paraphrase of the tower of St Martin-in-the-Fields; attached to it are apses and vestibules, the latter as I remember them containing superb scissor effects of stairs leading up to the galleries. The style is loosely Adam, but with Adam's effeminateness discarded and replaced by a tense, crisp virility, as happened all over the north of England: in fact the design itself, far from the academicians and gossip-writers of the time, is probably better than it would have been in London.

The view north from the churchyard can only add

to the list of doomed or disused buildings. Immediately to the north is the Royal Arcade of 1926, probably by Dobson, with a splendid terminal façade to Mosley Street. It is all but disused, and is due to come down for a traffic roundabout, yet with just a little ingenuity and multi-level circulation – just that kind of pattern which made Newcastle what it is – it could be part of a pedestrian link between the railway and the main bus station. Look at it while it still stands, because it is probably the best of its kind in Britain, each dingy, dirty bay elegantly top-lit and wreathed round with honeysuckle ornament. To the right of this is Holy Jesus Hospital, 17th century, hopelessly derelict: the corporation bought it before the war, ostensibly to preserve it. Further east along City Road is the Sallyport Tower, part of the old city walls delightfully made into the Ships' Carpenters' Hall in 1716, looking like a Vanbrugh toy house, with corner turrets and a carved relief of a ship: disused again, though repairable. It is all not good enough.

West from here any street will take you into Grainger and Dobson's Newcastle – Grainger the client, Dobson the architect. It was all built between 1825 and 1840, though it left a legacy of restraint which lasted until the end of the century, and walking around it is an ennobling experience (I mean this literally: there are some places that seem to have the gift of transferring or sharing their qualities with the viewer, as though they were incomplete until he arrived.

Amsterdam is like this; Paris, on the other hand, is completely self-sufficient). The precise quality is grandeur without pomposity: everything serious but not lugubrious, everything formal and firmly urbane but not oppressive. Because it is so unobtrusive it comes over the visitor gradually, then with a feeling of tremendous homogeneity: this is not an architecture of a few set pieces, but the spirit of a whole city – and the qualities seem in fact to be reflected in Tyneside faces, whether they are the business people in Grainger Street or the Rembrandtesque cloth-capped old men on the Quayside; it would surely be difficult to be an abstract artist in Newcastle.

The scheme was based on a very clever, very subtle superimposition of a new pattern on the old. The recipe is that of Haussmann's Paris, but nothing so gauche happened here. Existing streets were continued, the complicated ups and downs of the site were respected, axes were used with discretion. The models were Edinburgh New Town and Nash's improvements in London; Edinburgh first, with the dour Eldon Square, Nash a little later with the more freely designed blocks along Grainger Street and with the whole basis of Grey Street. These two streets epitomize the whole scheme; one leads from the railway station, the other takes up beautifully one of the medieval streets of Newcastle, and they meet at the Grey Monument, put up by Grainger to commemorate the political freedom given to the city in the Reform Bill of 1832.

Grey Street

Grainger Street is the formal axis, straight and serviceable, dignified and not too long, its model dimensions unlearned by 20th-century town planners such as those responsible for the long acres of Armada Way, Plymouth. Grey Street is a long, uphill curve, Nash's Regent Street with an added dimension and better workmanship, one of the great planned streets of Britain. It can be begun right at the quayside, where the old Newcastle starts in Dean Street and The Side; the newer pattern grows effortlessly out of it north of Mosley Street, each change in level beautifully taken up by the intelligent sober frontages, each bit of the curve given just enough emphasis. Half-way up, the Grey Memorial comes into the view, and then at the

same time the projecting portico of the Theatre Royal. This is a stroke of genius, for the end of the view is now not one object but a composite made up of a constantly changing balance of tensions: point and counterpoint, speared space and netted space.

The Theatre Royal was actually designed not by Dobson but by Benjamin Green. In fact, in spite of Dobson's own belief that with one exception 'he was the only professional architect between Edinburgh and York', Newcastle had a splendid set of architect-builders who often did better at individual buildings than Dobson himself: they seemed to catch exactly the dour Northumberland grandeur that Vanbrugh felt when he built Seaton Delaval, and for which the Grecian style and industrial soot were so appropriate. Today, the soot is misguidedly being removed due to some survival of puritan ideas on cleanliness, but Benjamin Green's Literary Institution near St Nicholas is still splendidly sooty, and so is the Moot Hall opposite the castle keep, designed by William Stokoe in 1810. Both make the official masters of the style – Smirke, Wilkins, and so on – look like pallid pedants. The Greek Doric portico of the Moot Hall has a monumental force that almost pushes you back across the road.

The most overpowering of all the early 19th-century buildings in Newcastle was done by yet another architect, Thomas Oliver. This is the Leazes, an estate farther north than the other buildings, on the edge of the Town Moor. It was designed as a complete unit,

like Regent's Park, with houses of all sizes, but it has gone downhill. The small houses are perhaps past saving, the big ones are in urgent need of attention. They form one astounding quadrangular block like a latter-day Northumbrian keep, of prodigious size and scale – 196 bays altogether. Now the ironwork is falling off, the windows are broken, some of the capitals have disappeared, and there is even, in one place, the sight of fluted stone pilasters peeling off as though they were stucco. King's College [now the University of Newcastle] owns most of the houses; eventually they propose to convert the whole block, keeping the outside façades, rather as is being done with the Regent's Park terraces. This is admirable, but I wish they could start piecemeal: Holy Jesus Hospital was doubtless bought with just that kind of good intention.

East of the Leazes King's College is everywhere. Like most colleges, it has woken up to its architectural responsibilities rather late, but it has provided Newcastle's best modern building in Sir Basil Spence's new physics block which is almost complete. It is a slab with a wedge-shaped auditorium projecting from one end, and the end elevation to Percy Street is a good tough-minded contrast of purple and green slate walls. The sides suffer from the same defect as Thorn House in St Martin's Lane: that the rhythms are too sparse for the area to be covered. Someone once said of the 18th-century composer Grétry that a coach and four could be driven between the treble and the bass, and a little

of that effect is visible here: there is not enough going on. I don't mean that it should look like the patchwork-quilt sides of the Festival Hall (heaven forbid!) but that whatever was to be said about the shape and pattern of wall and window ought to have been said more richly and more insistently.

One physics block: it is not much. Bigger things are on the way: immediately east of King's College, behind Dobson's frilly Gothic church of St Thomas, a new civic centre has just begun, designed in the City Architect's office. This will certainly be modern and decent, but a lot more than this will be needed if it is to be the 20th-century equivalent of Dobson and Oliver – and Newcastle deserves nothing less.

This inexhaustible city still has a completely new dimension to explore. It might be called, I suppose, the medieval civic centre, around the castle and cathedral. There is no difficulty about finding it: the extraordinary 15th-century spire of St Nicholas haunts most of the skyline views of Newcastle. It has a 'Scots crown', an openwork spire made up of four stone ribs meeting in a point. The other crown-builders were content to leave things there: at St Nicholas they hoisted a toy bell-chamber on to the point and put another spike on top of that. Why the builders put up this strange airborne tabernacle we have no idea. Perhaps, as it might be today in Brazil and Venezuela, simply to see if it stayed up. The same question, 'what were they after?', occurs inside St Nicholas but at a more important level. The

whole interior is 14th-century and is very clearly a design, and a fine, delicate one – do not be put off by the absence of height, width, or excess ornament. The designer throughout dispensed with capitals to the piers, and this is far from being a dry archaeological point: it means that the space flows along and around instead of being articulated bay by bay, that the interior is as unified as if it were a single space like the Sainte Chapelle. And clearly this was a conscious decision, consciously appreciated, for a hundred years later the mason of the tower took up the idea in the tower arch, but let it go to his head (I began to think he was a bit of a wag) and produced an arch of six orders, all without capitals, arcing from floor to floor in a jungle of mouldings.

The little square in front of St Nicholas brings back 1900 in an impressive way. In the middle of it sits Queen Victoria, under a fantastic metalwork canopy, all done by Alfred Gilbert. This is not the proud 'Ind. Imp.', but a worn-out old woman, almost with a premonition of two world wars, her fears reinforced by Gilbert's neurotic Art Nouveau detail. It must be one of the best and least hypocritical public statues in the country.

The other notable medieval building is the Castle Keep, a few yards to the south on the edge of the cliff. Between them there is the Black Gate, a jolly conversion of a gatehouse into an Elizabethan dwelling; and then, improbably, a busy railway fine. Yet the contrast, although drastic, is exhilarating: to look out of the castle windows and see signals and engines a few feet

away intensifies the effect of the building rather than diminishing it.

The keep was built for Henry II in the eleven-seventies, and because of the Pipe Rolls we do know something about it. It cost £911 10s. 9d., and the designer's name was probably Maurice, probably also the same Maurice who worked on the Dover keep a few years later. Henry II's keeps are among the grimmest buildings in Britain, and Newcastle's is no exception – grim as a deliberate act, like Newgate, not grim as an incidental expression of an austere total life, which is what one feels about 11th-century keeps like Rochester and the Tower. Newcastle has a good deal of ornament, and it is rather interesting – standard abstract late-Norman forms, without a hint of the pointed arch. Yet Maurice as a royal mason must have been *au fait* with the new style which was just being built at Canterbury in the eleven-seventies and which had been anticipated in all sorts of fragmentary ways. Perhaps as an engineer he would have nothing to do with this new-fangled style, just as Sir Owen Williams today is deliberately heavy and anachronistic in his motorway bridges: human nature doesn't change much. He was, all the same, a first-rate designer, and the little chapel embedded in the walls is a perfect late-Norman equivalent to the early Norman chapel in the Tower of London.

So, finally, back to the railway station, Dobson's last gift to the city he served so well. Its simple arched *porte-cochère*, seen obliquely, fills the end of half a doz-

en Newcastle streets; with the immense curved space inside it seems to epitomize the refusal to compromise common sense and natural dignity for the sake of the flashy *tour de force.* It would have been so easy to pretend that Newcastle was a terminus, and give it a grand palace-front. Instead, the sooty arches are content to echo the shape of the platforms. The effect is so understated that it takes some time to sink in, but once comprehended it never palls – just like Newcastle itself.

In short, this is or could be one of the great cities of Europe, and it must not be messed up by penny-pinching or the wrong man doing the wrong building. Most of all, it needs a client as far-seeing as Grainger, and the natural choice is the Corporation itself.

Too many superlatives? – I don't think so. It is as silly to withhold praise as to be too fulsome. I want to add one more to them, to sum up the whole pattern of the city in a small space. Suppose that you have half an hour to wait for a train. Turn right at the station entrance, then immediately right again, that is along a tunnel under the railway tracks called Orchard Street. It goes through industry and dereliction to the edge of the cliff, takes in a dizzy view, becomes Hanover Street and starts steeply downhill. Half-way down on the left is a grim brick bonded warehouse; half-way along it is an arch. You look in, and steps lead down to the quayside far below, the grandest of all the chares. But this is a chare inside a building, and the roof of the passage stays at the upper level: you finish your descent in a

slit thirty feet high. It is grimy, smelly, and dank, but it is also one of the greatest expositions of change of level that I have seen anywhere – Piranesi in stone and brick. It is even worth missing the train for.

POSTSCRIPT 1967

The 'city planning officer who arrived in November', Wilfred Burns, has certainly engineered a revolution in Newcastle's centre. Paradoxically, he has ensured that nothing can yet be seen, by freezing planning permissions for two years whilst he prepared his plans. These involve multi-level reconstruction on a large scale north of Grey Street, which is just about to begin. In the process Eldon Square will be demolished – a pity; but at least the new design will be by Arne Jacobsen. And the other parts of Grainger-Dobson's Newcastle are safe; so is the Leazes, now in the middle of a piecemeal restoration by the university. So also is All Saints Church, with more than £20,000 raised; it is even hoped to preserve the Holy Jesus Hospital. The Royal Arcade has disappeared, but the front is to be reinstated – on a roundabout!* It all seems very heartening; what has yet to be seen is the quality of the new buildings. And the City Hall, now complete, is not heartening at all; literal nullity, without virtues or vices.

* The city is now trying to get itself out of this mildly absurd position.

Interesting new things are confined, at the moment, to the university site. The most exciting building is William Whitfield's Students' Union, but the novelty could easily wear off. A surer place in the future is likely for the mathematics building, by Richard Sheppard and Partners, the architects of Churchill College: a quiet, sensitive quadrangle in brown brick.

POSTSCRIPT 2013

Newcastle-upon-Tyne is one of the places that seems, most likely entirely inadvertently, to have taken Nairn's advice to heart. From the 1990s onwards, 'regeneration' in the city started with the Quayside, which is the heart of Newcastle's burgeoning tourist industry. Grainger's planned town and the Leazes are now wholly recognised, protected, and cleansed of their soot – the latter would have disappointed Nairn. The successful transformation of the Quayside into a public promenade is a lot more impressive than the actual buildings. Best on the Newcastle side is Ryder and Yates' Salvation Army Hostel in delicate, purple brick, curving subtly towards the Quay. These aside, it's a rum selection, from postmodernist offices and courts by Ryder and CZWG, to Panter Hudspith's steely, swoopy-roofed Pitcher and Piano, to the sundry blocks of flats, serving a new culture of speculation and nightlife. More interesting is what happened on the Gateshead side, which is now more easily reached

from Newcastle than from central Gateshead anyway, due to Wilkinson Eyre's elegant, etiolated Millennium Bridge. Here, Ellis Williams' remodelling of the Baltic Flour Mill into an art gallery and Foster's huge Sage theatre are bold, dramatic complements to the heavy metal of the bridges over the Tyne. The grim spec flats behind them are not.

However, the city planning of Wilfrid Burns – and his patron, Labour council leader T. Dan Smith – is a different matter, and is still a subject of fervent debate, and of national political mythology. The City Hall Smith commissioned, and that underwhelmed Nairn, is now reasonably widely appreciated for its vertical complement to the medieval skyline, and for its integrated artworks by the likes of Victor Pasmore. The regional boosterism of the era surely had a role in getting the Tyne & Wear Metro built in the 1970s, easily the finest and best-designed (with good stations and fittings by Faulkner-Browns) public transport system in the UK outside of London. Yet the rest of that legacy is far more contested. The partially completed ring road that necessitated the (eventually botched) re-siting of the Royal Arcade is hardly pedestrian-friendly, though is very exciting to drive along, with a racetrack-like circular sweep, ringed by expressionistic car parks. Burns's housing projects, unmentioned by Nairn, were largely system-built towers that elicited a more intricate, long-term response in Ralph Erskine's justly celebrated Byker redevelopment. Saddest of the losses is something that

stayed unbuilt – Arne Jacobsen's Eldon Square, a design that could have become one of the finest modern buildings in the country, replaced by a nondescript shopping centre that has since spread like a virus across the west of the city centre. However, Newcastle's magnificence is perhaps better appreciated now than it was in the 1960s – a rare and welcome example of a city managing to lose the perpetual self-hatred that plagues provincial British cities.