Seminar review

Review of the seminar run by TRADA titled 'Recycling Historic Buildings' held at Dean Clough Mills in Halifax, West Yorkshire on the 16th April, 2008

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TRADA, the Timber Research and Development Association, brought together more than 60 structural engineers, architects, surveyors, conservation officers and researchers at its 'Recycling Historic Buildings' Seminar in Halifax. The venue was the Theatre Gallery of the Dean Clough Mills complex, a refurbished industrial site that was once home to the largest carpet producing plant in the world.

A common thread running through the presentations was the need for meticulous information gathering at the outset of any regeneration project.

Alasdair Beal, of structural engineers Thomasons LLP, urged delegates to 'go back to first principles and think. Working on a historic building is different from new build. You cannot just pull out codes of practise and start churning our calculations'.

'The structure already exists', he continued, 'but there may be no drawings and it may well have been designed using unfamiliar techniques. You need to understand the building on its own terms. A careful inspection and appraisal of the structure is critical, including finding out its original use and whether it has been altered or shows signs of distress. Measurements need to be made very carefully to avoid errors, while stresses should be generally to the standards of the time when the property was built'.

He added, 'However, once you take time to understand these old structures, working with them can be a fascinating exploration of the development of ideas and techniques over time'.

TRADA's Dr John Williams also underlined the need for a thorough inspection of the building before proceeding with any remedial treatment or change of use. 'Good information enables you to manage risks, identifies where the obstacles are, their possible impact on the project and how these risks can be overcome. Buy thinking time, so that rash decisions can be avoided'.

Modern grading rules, he added, can be punitive when trying to assess the strength of historic timbers. 'As timber dries it becomes stronger. Modern codes for permissible stresses are based upon 16 to 20 per cent moisture content but timber in older buildings may be as low as 10 to 12 per cent, so automatically there is an opportunity to increase the strength of timbers, but only if they can be assigned a visual strength grade'.

Paul Bennett-Hughes of materials consultancy STATS Ltd agreed with the need for a detailed survey at the outset. 'One of the main reasons to assess the structural fabric of a building is to make sure that you are using repair materials that are similar in character to those used in the past and that are sympathetic to the original structure'.

There are many test methods that can be used, including visual condition survey microscopical examination, chemical analysis, physical or non-destructive testing and

various X-ray techniques. Mr Bennett-Hughes stressed, 'Careful consideration of the style of conservation is required before any intervention is made'.

Peter Barker of Chiltern International Fire outlined the fire safety challenges imposed by historic buildings, which can evolve over many centuries. 'Wings are added or modified to reflect the style of the time, while facades may be changed. *Ad hoc* repairs, piecemeal upgrades and poor maintenance can, over time, lead to hidden structural damage, while shrinkage, insect and fungal attack may create enlarged voids, all of which can present particular fire risks'.

Approved Document B — Building Regulations for Fire Safety (ADB) provides practical guidance for England and Wales, but historic buildings rarely 'fit' the prescriptive nature of the regulations.

Mr Barker added, 'By conforming too rigidly to the guidance outlined in ADB — the changes may impact too greatly on the structure and fabric of the building. Historic buildings need to be considered on a case-by-case basis to develop a holistic fire safety strategy, which also meets the functional requirements of the building regulations'.

Following the formal presentations and an excellent lunch, the seminar concluded with the delegates treated to a guided tour of the refurbished Dean Clough Mill complex, which is a nationally renowned landmark site in Halifax, measuring two-thirds of a mile from end to end. Thomasons LLP were the structural engineers for the regeneration project that has become celebrated as a model of regeneration since 1983. The tours were led by Alisdair Beal and his colleague David Nesbitt.

From a TRADA perspective, the formula for the day was considered successful, and John Williams stated that TRADA will repeat the seminar at other 'case study' venues later in the year. This venue was particularly valid for TRADA Technology who have been working increasingly on restoration projects in the M62 corridor, and thus enhancing their reputation as a specialist in this field.

As a delegate I would agree with TRADA that the day was both beneficial and successful. The choice of speakers was inspired, and every speaker was able to offer something for every delegate, regardless of the level of their prior knowledge. Each speaker carefully developed their theme from first principles, but each was also able to produce new information for even the most experienced of practitioners. Each delegate delivered his or her paper with obvious knowledge, passion and enthusiasm. TRADA were slightly victims of their own success, and the auditorium was a bit full of delegates, but each still had an ample view of the speaker. The event was very well organised, timing was meticulously adhered to and the catering provided excellent buffet fare. During lunch, the buffet format afforded the chance for delegates to network and thus provided a valuable opportunity for many delegates. Each speaker was also on hand to answer any further questions.

Should this prove to be the first of a number of similar events hosted by TRADA, I would recommend attendance for members of the target professions regardless of their experience in this field. At a total cost of £140 the event represented extremely good value, in terms of the quality of the experience, and the value of the material for both career development and professional CPD purposes.

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