

A Roof with a View

Date : October 20, 2009

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Whilst assisting at a SWLLN workshop this summer I was intrigued by a problematic feature of the heritage site hosting the event. Tyntesfield House, a National Trust property, is currently undergoing extensive conservation, necessitating the erection of a second roof over the entire structure. Until recently standard Trust policy was to close such a property to the public until conservation had been completed. At Tyntesfield it was decided to not only keep the house open as far as practicable, but also to build an observation tower out of scaffolding up to the top of the Victorian roof, allowing visitors to view the work being undertaken. The observation tower had been completed and opened to the public before the second roof covered adjacent parts of the old building. Therefore whilst visitors in June 2009 could not see any roof-related conservation activities, they could stand on a platform that had never previously existed and look over the Victorian roof to the Tyntesfield estate and the valley beyond.

The staff consistently described the tower as existing primarily in order to view the conservation efforts (a task it was evidently not performing during the summer of 2009). This distinction between the old and new structures was shared by the visitors, who consistently took photographs of the view that included the chimneys and tiles of the Victorian roof but pointedly excluded the scaffolding of the tower. But this supposedly transient, inconsequential and apparently unphotogenic object is anticipated to have a lifespan of at least a year, during which time it will continue to modify both the building's physical appearance and the visitor experience in a myriad of unacknowledged ways.

Staff and visitor reactions to the tower epitomise the Trust's perspective regarding the properties in its care. Each site is presented as a physical relic of a point or period in time, which has always occurred prior to the Trust acquiring the property. Some of the Trust's interventions are presented

as conservation or restoration of the material fabric with the aim of 'returning' structures or landscapes to this privileged previous period. More prosaic alterations, such as turning fields or gardens into visitor car parks and the interiors of less cherished structures into tearooms, offices and holiday accommodation to provide sufficient funding to maintain the more visually spectacular elements, the Trust prefers to exclude from open recognition or debate.

An alternative conception would be to consider sites such as Tyntesfield House as evolving in direct consequence of their acquisition by organisations such as the National Trust. What the Trust regards as 'turning back the clock' is in reality the creation of an entirely new artefact. Though some elements come close to visually resembling the site's previous appearance, others are entirely new and the site as a whole is fundamentally different both in its social rationale and agency. Such an approach would admit a proposal that during 2009 Tyntesfield House physically grew through the addition of a modernist openwork observation tower. The tower turned Tyntesfield into something other than it had ever been before, was as much a part of the architecture as the earlier elements of the assemblage, and had a specific social function that related directly to the desires of the human actors that visited the site during 2009.