

Dear Sheffield: One postcard from Sheffield for each of the Sheffield Society of Architects' 125 years

Sheffield Society of Architects

To mark their 125th anniversary, the Sheffield Society of Architects asked Sheffield residents to send us a postcard with an image of their dearest places in the city and a reason for its selection on the back. The idea was to recover and record a history of everyday Sheffield architecture from the point of view of the people who live in and experience the city, instead of the usual top-down history of landmark, "iconic", or otherwise significant buildings selected by architectural historians such as myself. This way, we hoped to reveal some previously overlooked or unknown places as well as to see the city from a perspective other than our own architecturally trained view. We received a generous response of photographs, sketches, and poems. These included a variety of the usual landmarks, both extant and lost, such as Park Hill or "the Hole in the Road", alongside more personal places that wouldn't traditionally be included in an architectural history, such as back gardens or favourite spots in the city's many green spaces.

Although we posted contributions to the website dearsheffield.tumblr.com, in this digital age of instant communication and immediate recording of everything, it's increasingly rare and delightful to receive a physical postcard with a picture of a place on one side and "wish you were here" message on the reverse. We chose 125 from the nominations received to reproduce in postcard format, and from these, a further 34 to create human scale postcards to form the exhibition. These were curated to describe a cross-section of Sheffield places from the historic to the modern, and from the personal to the iconic. The selection of the nominations was based on three criteria:

First, a great image, perhaps of a familiar place from an unfamiliar perspective, immediately caught my attention and imagination. For example Ashley Mayes' view of the top of the Arts Tower;

Second, a story that linked the person with the place gave the postcard a particular vitality that the image alone couldn't portray. Julia Gash's Ball Street Bridge sketch and tale is one of the most powerful contributions in terms of how meaningful a place can be;

Third, a place that resonates with Sheffield as a city with a proud history. Its post-war architecture, although currently unfashionable, was second only to London's in quality. Places such as Park Hill, Castle Markets, the Hole in the Road (Castle Square), and the recently listed Moore Street

Substation, all received multiple nominations. Equally, Henderson's Relish, the University's buildings, the PeaceGardens and Winter Gardens with their balls of steel, the General Cemetery, the Cutting Edge outside the station, the Crucible, and the "Cheesegrater" car park have all become Sheffield institutions in their own right. Of course, as with any collection, there are numerous omissions. I was surprised not to see any mention of Cole Brothers (now John Lewis), or Coles Corner, or indeed either of the football grounds. I was also hoping for submissions of the Manpower Services building at Moorfoot, a building that is difficult to both love and ignore, and for the never occupied NUM building that is so unfashionable it must surely have come back into fashion? Either way, it is still a potent political symbol of Sheffield's past.

As Ian Nairn, the famous architectural writer from the 1960s and '70s, said of Sheffield in 1961, 'it is typical of this exciting, exasperating city that it never seems to assume its true importance.' As the city struggles to re-define and redevelop itself again for the 21st century, this sentiment remains so true. One of the most lovable characteristics of Sheffield is its reluctance to overstate its importance. But as this exhibition demonstrates, we love our city and its places through which we define our lives. The exhibition is designed to be deliberately non-linear and demountable in order to travel around Sheffield and pop up elsewhere in a different configuration. Almost all of the contributions are by non-professional image makers and this is also deliberate. The only narrative I wish to present is the fondness in which Sheffield is held by the people who make it. Dear Sheffield would not have been possible without the help and enthusiasm of many people and sponsors, but The Sheffield Society of Architects would especially like to thank Pinders and Norton Mayfield Architects, without which the exhibition would have been simply impossible.

Thanks also to the SSA's steering group: Dan Brown, Emma England, Simon Gedy, Elizabeth Motley, Alastair Norton, Neil Orpwood, Lucy Plumridge, and to Andy Mayer of Yoome for the initial postcard inspiration, RIBA Yorkshire, and the designers Peter & Paul.

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