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How co-operative architecture sparked the movement's imagination and embodied their ambition: Key buildings in England's north-west, 1844-2016

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This paper examines how co operative architecture in north-west England embodied and communicated the ambitions of the British co operative movement from 1844 to 2016. Drawing on archival research, it challenges the idea of a singular architectural style, instead framing co-operative buildings as evolving expressions of economic purpose, social values, and commercial identity. The study is structured around three themes: function, aspiration, and progress. Co-operative premises were modest initially, over time becoming physical advertisements of co-operative success and legitimacy, more recently incorporating sustainability and technological ambition. The paper argues that co-operative architecture is unified not by style but by its responsiveness to contemporary commercial practices and its role as built propaganda, reflecting both the co-operative movement's ideals and its evolving position within wider economic systems.

Introduction

There have been few pieces of work on specific co-operative buildings or premises as part of the wider movement. The intention of this paper is to discuss some key pieces of co-operative architecture as manifestations of a creative practice that embody co-operative ambitions without necessarily a single co-operative 'style' or architectural language.

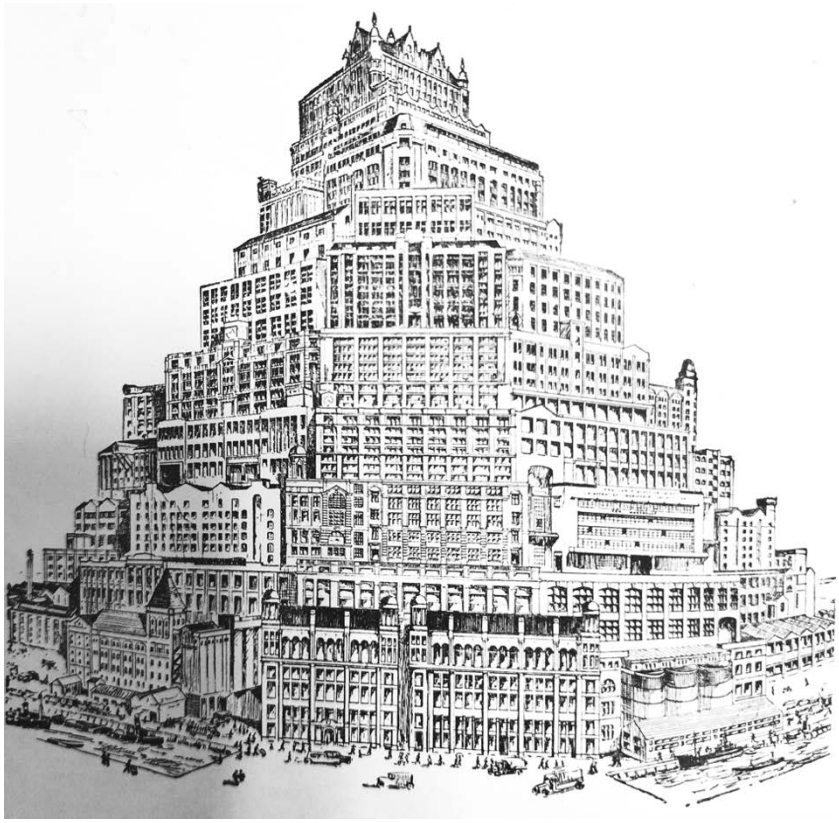
One has only to look at the cartoon of the mountain of Co-operative buildings published in 1932 to appreciate how significant the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) felt their architectural legacy already was at that time (see Image 1).

Architecture is more than building. It can be beautiful, ugly, simple, elegant, technical, sculptural, and symbolic. The choice of a particular material might suggest opulence or humility. A decision to reveal or conceal what activities occur within may create reassurance through transparency or conjure intrigue and conspiracy. The form and structure can allude to sturdy organisation or informality. Not least, the scale of a building can signify power, wealth, or be intimidating

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— status that is indicated in this cartoon but not commonly associated with the co-operative movement.

Image 1: Illustration of a mountain of twenty-five co-operative buildings (CWS, 1932, p. 2)



Conveying power, wealth, or intimidation were not primary aims when the Rochdale Pioneers gave birth to the modern British co-operative movement. They simply had the ideas and all they needed was a place from which they could operate. A plain, pre-existing warehouse near Rochdale town centre would suffice (Holyoake, 1893) and yet, the movement grew into a collection of impressive, fanciful, high-street businesses and a significant library of architecture across the UK — not least in the north-west, due to its Rochdale origins and the establishment of both CWS and CIS premises in Manchester.

This paper will explore this journey and posit that CWS and CIS were not only pioneers in co-operative models, but also in the world of architecture — pushing boundaries and, where they could not, seeking out others who could help them do so. During design development of the Co-operative Group's new headquarters at One Angel Square, Manchester, the architects, 3DReid, said:

> The Co-operative has a long-standing history of commissioning visionary buildings that define the spirit of their age. We are delighted to have had an opportunity to design a building that continues this tradition. (3DReid begins work, 2010, p. 30)

There is, however, limited published evidence supporting this visionary lineage. *This is Progress* (Lowe & Yarwood, 1959) is a pictorial representation of co-operative store development in 1958. *Co-operative Architecture 1945-59* (CWS Public Relations Division, 1959) is a selective, national, pictorial review of CWS architects' work that omits significant Victorian, Edwardian, and Modern works before and after this period. Unfortunately, the CWS Architects Department, which undertook much of the work, no longer exists and it seems its records have been destroyed. New Century House (1962) and the CIS Tower (1963) are referenced in architectural journals at the original time of construction and following the recent over-cladding of the CIS service tower with photovoltaic cells (Hudson, 2007). Only a few of the buildings selected in the

study of modern and modernist architecture of Greater Manchester by Richard Brook (2023), overlap with this research.

Johnston Birchall (1994), Eileen Yeo (1971), and Stephen Yeo (2009) have written widely on the social aspects and significance of the movement. John K. Walton (2008) has highlighted the visual significance of these premises within their respective Victorian social context, but this growth and manifestation is not limited to the Victorian era as the co-operative movement continues to commission new, significant buildings. More recently, Lynn Pearson (2020) has written and published a comprehensive volume for Historic England on the commissioning of these buildings across England, drawing on societal records to focus on their architectural merit and value. Pearson (2020) also provides an overview of the work of the CWS architects. This will be drawn on within this paper along with other sources to demonstrate where this architectural input came from, but it will not dwell on co-operative models of architecture practice. Further information on this can be found in other research and papers (McCusker, 2016, 2018).

Through archival research, this paper builds on and links themes from these publications but with a new focus. It is not a comprehensive review of all significant co-operative buildings, a historical narrative that weaves through key pieces of co-operative architecture in the north-west of England and, where possible, using drawings and images that capture this and have not previously been united for publication together.

It explores the relationship between the co-operative movement's economic narrative and the manner in which buildings, and the practice of architecture, have emerged from it to embody co-operative commercial ambition, asking if there is a consistent style that captures 'co-operative architecture' through three sections:

- Function: The architectural origins of the early co-operative movement, considering repurposing of existing premises, lean budgets, and functional warehouses – simple, rented accommodation and born of necessity. These were buildings developed in direct response to the co-operative movement's business needs.

- Aspiration: The co-operative movement evolved to develop an architectural vision that could host a holistic co-operative way of life, integrating social, educational, and economic functions. This considered architectural form with underpinning values and principles that shaped it within a predominantly non-co-operative economy.

- Progress: The selected examples reveal that the movement's architectural legacy is less about co-operative identity and more about adopting a commercial aesthetic. They were innovating to maintain their edge and use buildings as co-operative propaganda, even when they were just paper ideas.

Function

The buildings of the co-operative movement did not always manifest their vision. In 1884, William Morris (designer, architect, socialist activist, and a central figure in the Victorian Arts & Crafts Movement) delivered a lecture in Ancoats, just around the corner from what would become Manchester's Co-operative Quarter over a century later (How the Co-op solved an academic problem, 1994). Morris reminded attendees that co-operation was borne out of an era when a large part of the population had no property but their own bodies (Linton, 2013). It is therefore understandable that when the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers began trading in 1844, they did not aspire to commission buildings that matched their new model but instead were limited to the humble ground floor of a wool warehouse in Toad Lane. Their communal meetings were held at the Weaver's Arms nearby due to limited space (Holyoake, 1893), but it did not take long for those early co-operators to start imagining other activities that empty shells could host.

The shop stock progressed from flour, butter, oatmeal, and sugar, to tea and tobacco. Ambition, and the consequent need for more space, increased further with the addition of drapery and a tailoring department leading to leasing the entire building within five years (Holyoake, 1893). At this point, they had formalised all but one of what came to be known as the Rochdale Principles — promotion of education (Holyoake, 1893). Stemming from Owenite approaches to enable people through education, they had already begun to use the shop area for Saturday afternoon discussions but the occupation of more floors enabled them to establish a dedicated reading room with papers, journals, and a book department, supporting lectures and classes for members (Allen, 1953; Birchall, 1994). This idea of gathering people in an upper room is something we will return to later as the 2.5% levy devised by the pioneers to fund these activities gave them the ability to grow.

The original shops were rented since a Co-operative Society could not legally own land, never mind commission new architecture. It has been suggested the Pioneers constructed their first purpose-built shop in 1859 (Magnall, 1994; Pearson, 2020) though the manner in which they could invest their growing capital was severely restricted until 1862 when the Industrial & Provident Societies Act enabled them to own land and property amongst other things through the business (Snaith, 1993).

This is an important step that should not be overlooked — imagine being restricted to renting premises owned by individuals, accumulating surplus capital and then being permitted to invent your own buildings, tailoring them to your growing business needs rather than trying to make do or adapt to the parameters of adopted spaces?

Holyoake (1893) suggests that around this time the Pioneers built three or four branch shops, a slaughterhouse, and stables for approx. £1,000 each, a cost equivalent to 30 people's annual take-home wages (Garnett, 1968). This was no mean feat for a small enterprise little more than decade old.

At this point, co-operators have tested their business model, evolved efficient ways of delivering it, expanded to multiple locations where they can refine this testing, accumulated capital, and are supported by legislation to invest in property collectively. In relation to architecture, they therefore had the ability to provide an informed brief, capital funding, and most importantly, imagine what they could do with it.

Aspiration

Holyoake (1893) underlines that the early commissions, though modest, elevated and inspired their surroundings:

> The Pioneers modestly said that these buildings do not disgrace the neighbourhood in which they stand. The fact is, there was little or nothing to disgrace — there being no lively or inspiring buildings anywhere about — and these stores are cheerful, wholesome, and not unpleasing buildings. The Town Hall, Rochdale; which is a municipal glory now, was not then erected. (p. 145)

There is limited information about their purpose-built, flagship store built on higher ground further up Toad Lane in 1867 but as new buildings were erected, it is likely that lessons were learned about how these buildings could respond to functional needs, from occupation of other premises and the investment of £13,360 to achieve this (Holyoake, 1893) indicates the gradual realisation of the aspirational too.

Strategic placement on corners was opportune advertising for the movement, even for a typical brick corner shop without fuss and a simple store with meeting room above. However, this new 'Central Store' approach enhanced this further. Placed prominently on corners these were more ornamental premises — monumental buildings enticing people on the outside, and inside, symbolically proclaiming their co-operative ethos through representative beehives and wheatsheaves that decorated external stonework or faience — a glazed pottery often coloured to brighten the exterior (Pearson, 2020; Walton, 2008).

The Central Store on Toad Lane was elevated that bit more by a beehive-crested clock display on the curve of the street below and its single meeting-room spanned the entire top floor, commanding views of the town and capable of seating at least 1,400 persons — though it reportedly often hosted more than 2,000 people (Holyoake, 1893). To be able to have meetings of this size would, of course, cement the reputation of these pioneers and do much to disseminate the success of their model, supported by a library that contained 12,000 volumes and other educational activities funded by the dedicated 2.5% levy that was set some years before (Holyoake, 1893).

Consider the image of the simple warehouse at one end of the street, expanding the business to consume all of that building and then gradually ascending the street, taking over adjacent buildings and eventually culminating in a purpose-built store within 23 years — all owned collectively. It is here that we begin to see early co-operators claiming recognition for a status equal to non-co-operators. Although written a few decades after the building had been completed, Holyoake (1893) recorded that the Rochdale Pioneers had emerged from historical scorn to arrive at success, obtained acknowledged ascendency in Rochdale and had become the greatest trading body in it: “... their Central Store, towered, like Saul, head and shoulders above every other establishment about it” (p. 146).

So, property was a practical necessity to enable commercial enterprises to produce or trade. It also allowed co-operative societies to support the education and day-to-day requirements of its members. In addition, the presentation of these properties was aspirational — co-operative societies began to realise the potential for their premises to become physical promotional material for their success.

Let us reflect on the sixth principle of the Pioneers: the distribution of the surplus, after the payment of interest and collective charges, in a dividend to members in proportion to their purchases (Holyoake, 1893). In simple terms, it is a loyalty scheme: the more you spend, the more you will return on your dividend and, if you belonged to a more prosperous co-operative society, your return would also be better. As with the beehives and other symbols of the movement, dividend payouts were often promoted on board displays fixed outside shops or society buildings (Pearson, 2020). While literacy and education had improved across the Victorian age, the finery of central premises was probably a way to physically manifest this success in order and attract more members.

While some communal mills had been raised by co-operative subscription, the fast growth of the ‘Rochdale model’ perhaps indicates that more societies could see the benefits of membership growth as a way to reinvest and fund their next endeavours. This was assisted through the centralisation of society services and benefits under a single roof — a model consolidated with the Rochdale Pioneers’ Central Store in 1867 (Holyoake, 1893). If members wanted to collect their dividends they would have to do so in person. This new central store incorporated a dividend collection point downstairs near to the goods and trading areas, reinforcing the commercial model by improving the likelihood of expenditure of dividends when they were being collected — particularly for members who were unable to travel frequently.

Over time, this central premises typology evolved from simple stores to incorporate grocers, butchers, news and reading rooms, and meeting areas to support the needs of members. Architecture anchored a holistic co-operative way of life, integrating social, educational, and economic functions. Many of the store models that developed served as templates and prototypes for others. While this could often be replicated in aesthetics, it might just as much be repeated in terms of spatial organisation or, sometimes materiality (Pearson, 2020).

The Rochdale Pioneers established their first shop with the main purpose being to sell pure and unadulterated goods — a principle that ensured they would maintain quality over profiting from their members. Rather than a race to the bottom, it seems that the movement’s built heritage would reflect the movement’s keenness to celebrate its progressive attitude via new buildings that presented opportunities to employ the latest materials or aesthetics (Pearson, 2020).

Wasteful though it may seem, in places such as Oldham, they were not afraid to demolish premises and build again to improve their standing and facilities. Oldham constructed central premises in the late 1800s and extended them prior to demolition and replacement as soon as 1900, again reimagining how it could be better (Taylor, 1900).

In Salford, Pendleton Co-operative Society's Gloucester Street was demolished to make way for railway expansion (Cottrell, 1910). Not only did they acknowledge the importance of the transport infrastructure, they also saw how the compensation of £20,250 enabled further commercial investment, centralisation, and improvement of the facilities they could offer their membership (Cottrell, 1910). They described the resulting replacement premises, Co-operative Hall on Broughton Road, as the finest building in the borough in 1885, not to mention the significant warehouse, bakery, stables, dairy, and slaughterhouse, which strengthened their commercial position and future growth (Cottrell, 1910).

Similarly, Colne & District Co-operative Society built a new co-operative emporium in 1906, only 16 years after establishing their previous central premises (McCusker, in press). In the early 1900s many of these central stores adopted the title 'Emporium', evoking imaginative images of luxury. It was the first department store in the country constructed with steel-reinforced concrete and conceived by CWS architects, who had only been in existence since 1897 (McCusker, in press). As with the collective ownership of property, the CWS architects could not establish as a collective, corporate body due to the restrictions placed on them by the profession and so they were a department within the CWS (McCusker, 2016).

It is clear that previous to the conception of the CWS architects, co-operative societies had benefited from hiring professionals to assist them with converting their fantasies into reality. It also appears that some architects worked for multiple societies, arranging visits to other premises to share learning and use them as models for the continued development of a unique typology with ground floor retail and first floor social and education facilities (Pearson, 2020).

In the next section, we will consider how this evolution of local retail society buildings influenced the regional CWS and CIS premises through the practice of architecture.

Progress

Prior to the establishment of the Architects Department, CWS premises were conceived by the CWS Building Department which, according to Redfern (1938), resulted in unpretentious warehouses and premises. So, the CWS architects not only brought 'pretension' to co-operative architecture, but also new ideas such as the futuristic ferro-concrete Hennebique system used in the new CWS central premises on Corporation Street, Manchester. Drawing on an array of European architectural styles for their aesthetic, these buildings, in their context, were on a scale that far exceeded the Central Store at Toad Lane (Pearson, 2020). Moreover, the European-style buildings were monuments to their capitalist entrepreneurs and proprietors. So, the democratically owned CWS rivalled them by realising similar, and more modern commercial buildings, relocating from rented premises in the heart of "hell upon earth" (Engels, 1892, p. 53) where they had resided since their 1863 genesis.

While manufacturing and retail was spread regionally, the commercial centre was Manchester. With Victoria Station's growing connections to the ship canals, Liverpool docks, Lancashire, and Yorkshire, the CWS would more likely be able to better facilitate provincial stores that were investing in shares and stocking their goods (Cottrell, 1910). While the Port of Liverpool was going up, the CWS were building their own gateway into Manchester opposite the northern gateway of Victoria Station. Pearson (2020) details this new approach to commercial frontage in their narrative of expanding Manchester Headquarters. These huge, imposing premises were not only restricted to commercial activities. Echoing the central premises model, the original drawings for the Hanover Building included the Mitchell Memorial Hall for meetings and social events (Pearson, 2020). At its highest level, there were offices, smoking, dining, and

board rooms nearby, as well as a dedicated office from which the CWS Architects Department operated.

This is a pivotal point for the manifestation of commercial success within the co-operative movement — the establishment of new buildings in the heart of Manchester's city demonstrates that competition for co-operators was not limited to mills and stores. Pearl, Refuge & Eagle had already built substantial premises in Manchester and the Co-operative Insurance Company (later the CIS) had gained momentum with the need for societies to protect their stock and growing property portfolios (Garnet, 1968). They decided to cease life as a tenant and became a landlord, conceiving a 1908 competition for new, chief offices on a prominent, corner location on Corporation Street next to the CWS (Garnet, 1968). Due to internal co-operative politics at the time, they specifically excluded the CWS architects from entering (Garnett, 1968). Instead, they turned to Bradshaw & Gass, a reputable firm who had a longstanding relationship with their local Bolton Co-operative Society, for both their original central premises and the rebuilding of their new premises after a fire in 1902 (Peaples, ca. 1909).

Perhaps in response or retaliation to the CIS, the CWS built a twin to the Hanover Building on the adjacent block at Balloon Street circa 1909 using the same details to provide better bank premises and a furnishing department (see Image 2). The illustrations published at the time give the sense of a micro co-operative city, its context much smaller and clearly dominated by the strength of this development. Presence of the CWS was clearly visible to anyone arriving at Manchester's Victoria Station, stepping out to meet a wall of towering, impressive architecture. At this point, the CWS architects shift from the ornate commercial styles that dominated the late Victorian or Edwardian period and adopt a more contemporary architectural language.

Image 2: Illustration of Manchester: Birdseye view of CWS central premises (CWS, 1918)



For example, within 20 years the CWS built a newer, better bank further along Corporation Street that, in this author's opinion, is clearly inspired by Otto Wagner's Postal Savings Bank in Vienna. The choice of the stone base, the ornamental details, and the fenestration replicate the sense of security that Wagner set out to achieve in Vienna — not a sense of co-operation. As well as incorporating a new architects office, it contrasted the previous, more traditional offices with light, modern interiors just as Wagner did, but retained a traditional, conservative aesthetic in the public banking hall, although it appears that at this point the CWS architects lagged behind stylistically on an international level (Wagner's Bank having been completed in 1912 and the CWS Bank in 1928), there had been delays due to the First World War and building permits were not obtainable until 1919 (Redfern, 1938). Setting this aside, *The*

Manchester Guardian (A new Manchester building, 1928) reported that the commercial activity of the CWS, its prestige, and the importance of its administrative offices were addressed by this new seven storey bank on Corporation Street. Therefore, this success was now being promoted in the press to wider society and was no longer isolated to the co-operative community.

Riding the tide of this commendation, the CWS estate in Manchester continued to expand. The plain brick walls on the return face of the bank building clearly indicated that the CWS were hoping to extend and build again to complete the development of this block at the rear of the bank. They continued responding to their business needs over the ensuing decades and reflecting the architecture of the times — not limited to that of its immediate context or competitors. Along Dantzic Street we can see generations of architectural heritage backing onto Corporation Street buildings: Federation Building, Holyoake House, the Redfern Building (1937), and the Dantzic Building (1939). These reflect European styles that the CWS chief architects are likely to have seen during their 1930 tour of Holland and Germany to learn about new techniques in modern architecture (McCusker, in press; Redfern, 1938). The radiused corners, and modern approach to fenestration clearly informing the Heath Insurance premises at the time.

Despite previous differences, the CWS now partially owned the CIS and some of their departments were renting offices within the CIS headquarters on Corporation Street (Garnet, 1968). When they moved out into the newly finished CWS premises, the CIS updated the now-ageing Bradshaw & Gass designed building by involving the CWS architects (Garnet, 1968). This acknowledged that the CWS Architects Department seemed to have an edge on architectural design.

Although the CIS buildings escaped significant damage during the heavy bombardments of Manchester's Christmas Blitz (December 1940), both Hanover and Holyoake House lost their respective top-floor meeting-halls (Woodin et al., 2025). The post-war period provided an opportunity to reflect on the future needs of co-operative employees. Just as co-operative retail and wholesale businesses were taking stock of the situation, there were many post war visions for future Manchester.

In addition to the 1945 plan, ideas for a heliport over the nearby Victoria Station were presented in 1956 against a backdrop of CWS buildings along Corporation Street capturing the zeitgeist of the late 50s (Brook & Dodge, 2012). The CWS architects also attempted to reflect this forward-looking approach in *This is Progress* (Lowe & Yarwood, 1959) and *Co-operative Architecture* (CWS Public Relations Division, 1959) publications asserting that the progress of the British co-operative movement was evident in the smart new co-operative stores and shops.

There had been complaints that co-operative shops had too many different styles of architecture with no strategic unification (Walton, 2008) and they were encouraged to adopt modern construction approaches to reduce custom-built fittings to the absolute minimum. These included pre-cast concrete, curtain-walling technology and the treatment of shop fronts generally start to appear more co-ordinated in this era, assisting the movement in re-grouping and re-branding. This also addressed the movement's appeal to a younger generation and set the scene for the new CIS HQ (Lowe & Yarwood, 1959).

As Manchester's post-war beacon for the future, and Britain's first steel skyscraper, the CIS Tower built on 100 years of pioneering co-operation (McCusker, in press). It anchored Manchester's new ring road to its solid social roots and railway infrastructure — both of which gave birth to the concentration of co-operative buildings which preceded on nearby sites, securing the co-operative movement's legacy in what has become Manchester's 'co-operative quarter' (McCusker, in press). As the complex was being completed, Robert Dinnage (1961), General Manager and Secretary of the CIS, emphasised that this was not an overnight vision that had been thrown together — it was a product of post-war workforces and commercial success. The symbolism that such a building embodies cannot be disputed, and in many ways, anticipates a theme within the UK's co-operative industry that was echoed in 2014 as the movement once again considered its position and re-consolidated in new headquarters at Angel Square on the opposite side of Miller Street.

The CIS started working with the CWS architects on the plans for their new headquarters but, however forward looking they appeared to be, the CWS architects could not secure planning consent for a 17-storey block submitted in the mid-1950s. A retired CWS architect recalls an illustration depicting a long, sweeping, horizontal building as a component of this scheme (McCusker, in press). To achieve the monumental building that they desired, the CIS, in dialogue with the CWS architects, reflected on this and agreed to look further afield for an architect that could fulfil their vision (Dinnage, 1957).

They considered opening an architectural competition administered by the Royal Institute of British Architects who in turn recommended several leading architects, including Sir John Burnet, Tait and Partners (CIS Chief Office Premises Sub-Committee, 1957a). Described at the time as eminent London architects, they were eventually appointed to design the new CIS office tower, on condition that they collaborate with G. S. Hay and the CWS architects (CIS Chief Office Premises Sub-Committee, 1957b). Known for modern, prestige office developments Burnet, Tait and Partners had a longstanding association with American architecture and, just as the CWS architects arranged a trip to Europe, a delegation, combining the client and design team, visited precedents in the USA, Canada, Sweden, and Italy (McCusker, in press). Following these visits to contemporary international office buildings were recommendations that the design should be for 20-25 storey building with curtain walling (CIS Chief Office Premises Sub-Committee, 1958). Although the CIS Tower was often referred to as the tallest building in Europe at the time, this was never the case, but those taller buildings used reinforced concrete rather than the steel used in American examples. (McCusker, in press).

Image 3: Drawing of proposed CIS and New Century buildings (Laing, 1961)



In preparing the way for their new skyscraper, S. Leonard Kassell (CIS, 1959), a prominent CWS Director and the CIS Company Chairman, was quick to point out that as CIS assets belonged to the policy holders and not the CIS, the proposed tower would reassure the policy

holders and co-operative community of their ongoing success. CIS explained to employees that expenditure on the Manchester headquarters was not to the detriment of other CIS offices (see Image 3). Staff were encouraged to take pride in the publicity surrounding the skyscraper and the attention that it attracted, since the careful planning of these offices meant they were, in many ways, far in advance of other commercial developments of this era (CIS Chief Office Premises Sub-Committee, 1958). This was acknowledged by the RIBA's Bronze Medal award in 1962 (CIS Review, 1962). One review of the completed building, indicated that cost limits had been of no moment and described a degree of opulence in the new CIS premises that stemmed from both internal décor and external cladding materials, as well as the bespoke art and furniture commissions for the new complex of buildings (Scott, 1963). In his speech on the opening day of the CIS Tower, the succeeding chairman, Albert Wild, said that the new building accurately reflected the size and standing of the Society, adding that the mere fact that it could pay for a building like this proved that the CIS must be doing reasonably well (CIS Review, 1962).

So, the new HQ complex on Miller Street in central Manchester was not merely a functional response to a need for high-quality office accommodation but a clear statement, seeking to address long-standing criticism of the co-operative movement's lack of visibility to the outside world (Redfern, 1938). If the co-operative movement had in the past failed to adjust to new times and to project itself beyond the local and the loyalist consumer (Walton, 2008), then boldly building the first British skyscraper in the international style signalled a new era. In his 1961 address to the International Design Congress, just before the building was completed, Dinnage (1961) clearly set out the CIS's intentions:

> We wanted to impress an 'image' on the people of Manchester and elsewhere of the strength and size of the CIS through the medium of a modern office building. Very few people see our Balance Sheet or read our Chairman's report but his new building will be a constant reminder that the CIS is a large and first-class Insurance Office. We have already made use of the model in our advertising and hope to extend this when the building is completed. We believe that these new premises will have an impact upon our staff, including our senior staff, by giving them a feeling of pride. (p. 20)

This was a deliberate, public declaration that co-operative enterprise was first-class and a symbol of progress. It provided pride and optimism in a post-war landscape where others struggled to finance and realise their visions of the future. Amid the deluge of developer-led schemes that swamped Manchester in the 1960s, the CIS set a precedent of outstanding quality (McCusker, in press). Echoing the prestige of American success, the commercial aesthetic of the skyscraper was extended to 14-storeys with the nearby CWS building (New Century House) via New Century Hall (CWS offices, 1963).

New Century Hall adopted the same structure and cladding system developed by the commercial architects employed there, but also benefited from high-quality materials, bespoke fittings, artworks, and interiors, with the help of Misha Black's Design Research Unit, a highly reputed and innovative design agency at the time (CWS offices, 1963). As if emerging from the ground around the former CIS building and Old Bank, these 1960s additions united new co-operation made clearly visible in the way New Century House kissed the plain brick walls at the rear of the Old Bank that had been awaiting extension for so many decades and completed the Co-operative Campus circuit.

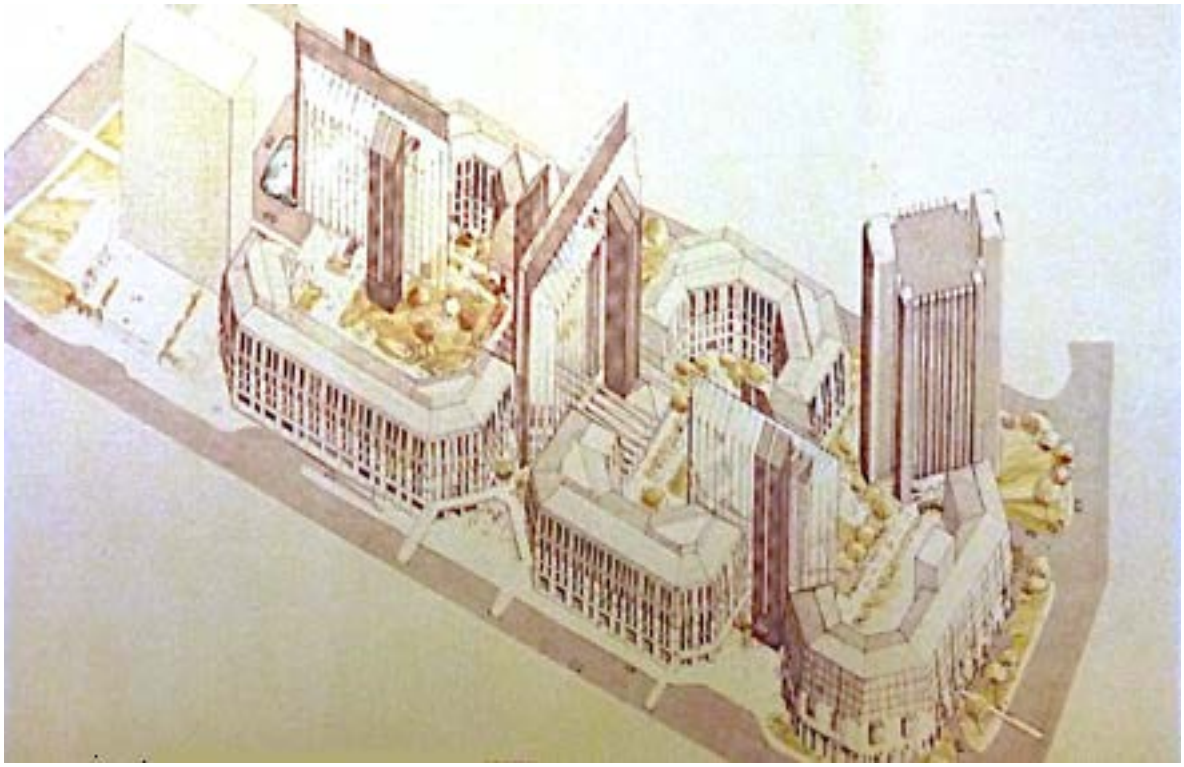
Just as the retail premises had evolved previously to support arrangements for dividend collection, the CWS and their architects also started to move from cellular trading premises or shopkeeper layouts towards open self-service systems and free spanning rooms to link departments (CWS Public Relations Division, 1959; Lowe & Yarwood, 1959). But however keen to progress, they were slower to address this in local retail when compared with the central, regional headquarters and it is possible the burden of successful stores from a different generation slowed them down.

Walton (2008) highlights that the movement struggled to adjust to new cultures of consumerism in the 1960s and yet, ever forward-looking they also responded to use of the car for shopping

as trade moved to areas which provided adequate parking. The formal title of this move was ‘Operation Facelift’ (Birchall, 1994) and marketing was produced to specifically target local authorities, encouraging them to develop centralised retail units outside cramped city centres.

These 1970s superstores were much bigger, regional scale developments than their local predecessors and thus this rising trend in consumerism significantly reduced the number of co-operative shops from approximately 100,000 to 9,000 (Birchall, 1994). This was facilitated by the amalgamation of individual societies and despite all the effort, manufacture and retail outlets continued to decline for the co-operative movement (Birchall, 1994). In addition, the significance of marketing and supporting these facilities through architecture seems to have followed this trend.

Image 4: The proposed redevelopment of the complete Corporation Street site (CWS Architecture & Interior Design Group, 1977)



In 1971, the CWS architects got approval for a new Manchester vision that proposed to replace the Victorian buildings along Corporation Street with those more akin to the recent CIS and New Century additions (see Image 4). One can see in the illustrations, the intention was to demolish all the significant buildings constructed in the previous decades including Holyoake House, the CWS Bank building, and all Dantzic Street buildings, and develop futuristic glass towers containing, offices, hotels, and urban gardens. The CWS’ New Century House and New Century Hall seem to be the only survivors on the block (the white blocks identifiable on the left-hand side of the image).

As the financial service industries, such as the CIS and the CWS Bank, strengthened in the boom of the 1980s, only that phase of the new Corporation Street development was ever completed with a new bank on the junction of Corporation Street and Ballon Street, where it had started nearly 80 years before (Co-operative Bank, 1980). With promotional material at the time declaring that the GRP mansard roof cladding panels for the new bank were among the largest ever manufactured in this country (Co-operative Bank, 1980), it seems that architectural claims were becoming more limited, something that coincided with the end of the CWS Architects Department.

Over the decades that followed, new architecture does not seem to be reported in the same way, perhaps indicating more fallow recession years. As the movement progressed into the twenty-first century, however, the Co-operative Group emerged from an amalgamative process (Grant, 2013). The Group also considered what was left of their architectural legacy and, as

happened across society and architecture in this period, there was retrospective criticism of the quality of later, modern buildings and the application of materials such as the Italian mosaic on the service tower of the CIS building (Hudson, 2007). By this moment the CIS Tower had become acknowledged as historically significant and was Grade 2 listed in 1995 (Historic England, 1995). A technical review of the mosaic problem and investigation into potential solutions coincided with a review of CIS energy use and their development of a sustainable energy policy (Hudson, 2007). Never to miss out on another opportunity for re-birth, the CIS arranged for the tower to become home to the largest area of solar array in the UK in 2002 (Hudson, 2007). While it met only 10% of the building's energy requirements, it solved the failing mosaic problem and once again captured a view of the future attracting European funding as a large-scale demonstration project for the attractiveness of PV solutions within the region (Hudson, 2007).

In 2010, renewed interest and public profile of the co-operative movement across the UK came from the proposed new Co-operative Group headquarters in Manchester (3DReid begins work, 2010). Its innovative use of materials, building details, reinforced concrete, and skyscrapers, announced it as one of the most sustainable buildings in Europe in 2010, while keeping pace with the forward-looking approach that the CWS had demonstrated in the past. Announced as the largest commercial office building in Manchester, the group seemed to be pinning their flags on the biggest, the newest territory, projecting how they wished to be viewed on the pages of history and how they wanted co-operators and historians to remember them (Grant, 2013). As before they sought out a reputed designer of modern offices and commissioned 3DReid who released images of their futuristic vision for the office in June 2009 (3DReid unveils Manchester co-op HQ, 2009).

Image 5: Visualisation of proposed Co-operative Head Office at One Angel Square (3DReid, n.d.)



Using the Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM), the Group's new home at One Angel Square, Manchester, was the first office building to achieve an 'outstanding' rating. By evaluating environmental, social, and economic impact across its entire lifecycle, it achieved the highest ever BREEAM Outstanding score of 95.16% (BRE Group, 2022). Providing the Co-operative Group with another unique milestone in architecture, it also hosted 2,800 desk spaces for up to 3,500 staff and responded to the client's brief on new ways of working (Buxton, 2013).

The scale of the building within its location brought a new approach to dominance in the skyline of Manchester's City Centre, opposite the Co-operative Quarter (see Image 5). Rather than competing with previous generations of architecture, its rounded, beehive form marked a departure from that grid — setting a new standard and again adopting glazed facades and innovative approaches to ventilation in the vanguard of international office design. The

double-skinned facade minimised heating and cooling, and underground, concrete earth tubes provided free heating and cooling for incoming fresh air alongside a water recycling system and rainwater harvesting to lower water consumption (Hickson-Smith, 2013). At the official opening in 2013 Euan Sutherland, The Co-operative Group Chief Executive said:

> From the outset the Group set very high aspirations for the green credentials of the new building but for One Angel Square to be recognised in this way is a truly remarkable achievement. The visit today of the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh symbolises the completion of the building and one of the most significant UK construction projects in the past five years. (Co-operative Group, 2013)

Awards and praise once again came flooding in for the collective achievements of the Co-operative Group and architects 3DReid. The celebrations were short-lived, as the sale of Co-operative Pharmacy, Co-operative Farms, Co-operative Bank, Co-operative Travel, and Co-operative Insurance businesses and portfolios across 2013-2020 rapidly diminished the scale of the Co-operative Group. In the consequent governance review that attempted to understand this decline, it seems poignant that they indicated a link between the Group's most recent failings and the 1958 commission that challenged them previously (Myners, 2014) — a commission that had suggested there were too many different styles of architecture with no strategic unification.

The renewal strategy of 2016 settled on a retrospective logo and rebrand referencing more successful eras of the Co-operative Group in line with contemporary commercial practice rather than specifying a single architectural style for co-operative buildings on the high street — because that is what a commercial business would do in 2016 just as previous Co-operative buildings responded to commercial approaches of their day.

Conclusion

Despite a recurring desire — both contemporary and retrospective — to define a singular aesthetic, this paper demonstrates that there is no fixed or consistent architectural language that can be described as uniquely "co-operative." While certain motifs and spatial arrangements reappear across time — the symbolic beehive, the integration of meeting halls, or later the adoption of curtain walling — these are not markers of a unified style so much as traces of evolving priorities.

What instead unites co-operative architecture is its responsiveness. Across the period examined, buildings emerge first from function, shaped by immediate commercial and organisational needs. From this foundation, they develop into expressions of aspiration, projecting legitimacy, stability, and collective success within competitive urban environments. Ultimately, they operate as instruments of progress, adopting — and at times anticipating — the dominant architectural and commercial practices of their age.

This continual adaptation is not incidental but fundamental. Co-operative architecture consistently engages with prevailing economic and cultural conditions, appropriating forms of capitalist enterprise while reinterpreting them to serve a collectively owned model. In doing so, these buildings become a form of built propaganda: visible, material statements of co operative ambition, credibility, and modernity within a predominantly non co operative economy.

Equally important are the people who animated these spaces. Whether as members, workers, or citizens, their everyday participation — trading, learning, and socialising — embedded co-operative values within the life of these buildings. Pride in place and collective ownership reinforced the communicative power of architecture, extending its influence beyond form into lived experience.

If there is a defining characteristic of co-operative architecture, it is therefore not stylistic consistency but strategic mutability. Its strength lies in an ability to continuously reimagine itself — demolishing, rebuilding, and reinventing — in line with changing commercial realities and societal expectations. In this sense, co-operative buildings do not simply reflect history;

they actively construct it, manifesting the movement's ambitions in built form while continually redefining how those ambitions should appear.

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