28.10.2019 — Review

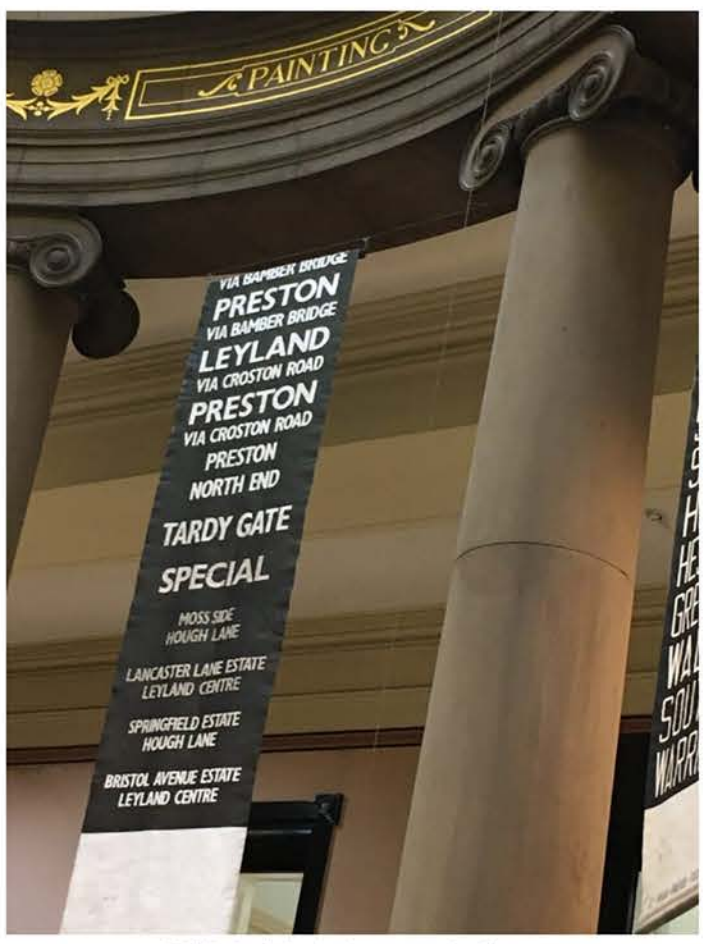
Beautiful and Brutal: 50 years in the life of Preston Bus Station

The Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston
by Derek Horton

Exhibition installation view. Image courtesy Derek Horton.

As an architectural style developed in the 1950s and dominant (especially in civic buildings and public housing) by the 1970s, Brutalism later came to symbolise urban decay and economic decline. Contrary to some assumptions, the word Brutalist doesn't come from the architecture's severe and perhaps inhuman form but from the French for its primary material, raw concrete—*béton brut*. In recent years, partly because its graphic starkness is so photogenic, Brutalism has become fashionable again, resulting in a plethora of lavishly illustrated coffee-table books like *SOS Brutalism*, *This Brutal World* and the *Atlas of Brutalist Architecture*, not to mention innumerable posts on Instagram where the hashtag *#brutalism* has over half-a-million images. Conservation groups are increasingly trying to save classic remaining examples after so many from the 1990s onwards were all too often demolished without a second thought.

One such saved from the wrecking ball was Preston's iconic bus station, celebrated on its fiftieth anniversary at the exhibition *Beautiful and Brutal* at the Harris Museum & Art Gallery, co-curated with the artist and Professor of Public Art Practice at UCLan, Charles Quick, who commissioned a number of artists to make work in or about the bus station. These works provide an imaginative counterpoint to the working drawings, documentary photographs and other ephemera, from signage and ticket machines to litter bins and a barber's chair, that make up the exhibition. Most of this material is in one large space in which photographs of the building in its heyday are enlarged to the scale of the gallery walls to form an effective backdrop. The exhibition is though, to quote its brochure, 'embedded into the whole of the museum'. This works particularly well in the central atrium where bus destination blinds are unscrolled to form hangings that take on a quality reminiscent of text paintings in the manner of Ed Ruscha or Christopher Wool. In other cases though, works can be so 'embedded' across three floors as to be difficult to locate, making the experience of the exhibition somewhat fragmentary and disjointed. For a local audience able to make repeated visits, however, this might make for a more intriguing experience.



Exhibition installation view. Image courtesy Derek Horton.

Amongst the contemporary artworks inspired by the bus station, some of the most evocative are film and video works, from Anna Raczynski's 'Portraits' (2019), a documentation from many perspectives of individuals' memories of using it, to Shezad Dawood's 'Trailer' (2011) in which the building plays an important role in a sci-fi action film. In Nathaniel Mellors' absurdist and hilarious episode from his 'Ourhouse' (2015) series, the bus station is home to an eccentric family whose dysfunctional domestic life is disrupted by Neanderthals.

In more elegiac mode, Keith Harrison's 'Conductor' (2019) involves 32 buses whose skilled drivers perform slowly choreographed movements from the bus bays and across the forecourt, apparently triggered by the actions of volunteer performers in the passenger concourse, accompanied by a soundtrack by Preston Field Audio created from electronic loops played through the station's PA in response to Harrison's drawn scores. The whole performance is documented by filmmaker Jared Schiller in his quietly mesmerising multi-screen video.

Overall this exhibition summons mixed emotions. Inevitably there is nostalgia in this hymn to an iconic building, one that is recognised worldwide as an exemplar of Brutalist style but also loved, and occasionally derided, by the local population who see and use it every day. Its preservation is justly celebrated and I have personal reason to be somewhat envious, as someone who keenly feels the loss of John Madin's equally iconic Birmingham Central Library, demolished in 2016. Much criticism of Brutalism is justified though; this exhibition interestingly coincides with one at Huddersfield Art Gallery, *Out Of Time*, in which Mandy Payne's exquisitely rendered paintings, (on small concrete panels) of decaying and graffitied council flats and unloved civic buildings falling into dilapidation, show the other side of Brutalism's legacy. Sadly, it is largely the case that cheaply produced and expensive to maintain buildings heavily influenced by Brutalist aesthetics were imposed on many of our towns throughout the 1960s as an affordable solution to public housing needs, whereas the better quality examples were to be found in the civic architecture of major cities and on university campuses. Preston Bus Station is one such example of the best of Brutalism. It is admirably celebrated in this exhibition and, even better, only a few hundred metres away from the museum, it still stands, now lovingly renovated, as a monument to civic pride and public transport services.

Beautiful and Brutal: 50 years in the life of Preston Bus Station, The Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston.

21 September – 24 November 2019.

Published 28.10.2019 by James Schofield in Reviews
790 words

Preston 11 | The Harris Museum & Art Gallery 2 | Anna Raczynski 1 | Brutalism 1 | Brutalist 1 | Jared Schiller 1 | Keith Harrison 2 | Nathaniel Mellors 1 | Public transport 1 | Shezad Dawood 3