Whose blue?
The true story behind the sky-blue roof of St Pancras International Station

St Pancras International Station – Sharing Conservation Decisions

Construction began on the train shed of St Pancras Station in 1866. It is an immense interior – 689 foot long, 100 foot high at its apex and at that time spanning the largest covered area in the world, and almost half of its surface glazed!

The station is now the main entry point to the UK for visitors arriving via Eurostar. Visitors now emerge into a light airy space – dominated by a light sky-blue. How this decorative scheme was determined and agreed is a testament to successful interdisciplinary collaboration.

In the mid 1990s it was the focus of a major redevelopment of the Channel Tunnel Link, alterations to a busy London Underground intersection and the redevelopment of a blighted area of central London. Decisions about the future presentation of a Grade I listed building had to be made some nine years before the planned opening, and even then the project was working to tight deadlines dictated by submissions, consent approvals and lead in times for massive construction orders.

The correlation of the archaeological and documentary evidence to establish the decorative chronology was relatively simple. Understandably, as the colour of the metal of the metal ribs of the station would have a great impact on the final scheme, Rail Link Engineering (RLE) headed by their principal architect, who had designed the modern extension and new undercroft of the station, were not happy with the idea of having an ‘historic scheme’ imposed on upon them.

This poster outlines how the decision making process in reaching an agreement about the final decoration of this interior. It was important to be aware of the subjectivity of all conservation decisions. Such decisions are always based on a consensus and the values of the parties or stakeholders involved – and do not reflect some hidden fundamental truth. It was important to be aware of and respect the different approaches favoured by the various agents involved in the St Pancras project.

The discussion was opened out to wider consultation to include Camden Council and the Victorian Society. Various schemes, shades of colours were scrutinised. Certain parties favoured ‘a less rigid application of the historical evidence’ while others argued for strict authenticity. The Historic Building Inspector managed to maintain a balance of steely determination, perfectionism and pragmatism. A compromise was reached – archaeological rigour and late twentieth century taste was reconciled with no great loss of face on either side.

In 2007 the station was opened and the scheme received tremendous acclamation. Who says committees cannot make good decisions.