



## Prof. Adam Sharr and Dr. Stephen Thornton

17 January 5:30-7:00pm Library (Department of Architecture, Cambridge)

### Demolishing Whitehall

In 1965, architect Leslie Martin submitted a report to Charles Parnell, Minister of Public Building and Works in Harold Wilson's Labour administration, proposing the wholesale demolition and reconstruction of a large part of Whitehall.

Still reeling from war damage, Whitehall's eighteenth and nineteenth century palazzi stood then as the patched-up centre of a faded empire. Martin's project – by no means modest in conception, scope or scale – proposed replacing these with a series of ziggurat section slab blocks spanning roads into Parliament Square, framing the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey.

Only small aspects of the project came to fruition – and those not in the manner that Martin envisaged – but his un-built proposal will be the focus of this talk.

Architecture manifests the values that inform its procurement and design, and we propose reading the Whitehall scheme, and Martin's scientific conception of architecture, for their insights into Wilson's government and Wilson's Britain.

Martin's Whitehall project has contemporary resonances – the proposal included a hall of residence for MPs – and the idea of demolishing Whitehall will always have a certain appeal.

But it also seems to come from a different time; one whose attitude to the future – similarly expressed in the Concorde project and the Post Office Tower – was more utopian than that of our managerial age. On one hand, Martin's Whitehall project has been read as high-handed and elitist, displaying a disregard for history, memory and the grain of the city. On another, it can be read as optimistic, the talisman of a socialist society intent on using technology as an instrument of popular salvation.

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