

## Rowan Moore's best architecture of 2018

New council housing excelled, while brutalism's popularity underlined the timidity of much current architecture. See our top five list below

The Guardian - Sunday 30 Dec 2018

Let's start with the good news. New council housing, as now being built by [certain London boroughs](#), is as good as it's ever been. That is not to say it's as architecturally inspiring as some of the postwar work of the pioneer modernists Tecton, or the 70s low-rise housing of the late [Neave Brown](#) and the London borough of Camden. But if you add modern building regulations to the efforts of committed architects, you get places that are warm, dry, well-dimensioned, well lit and thoughtfully designed, inside and out.

To continue with some fairly good news, all the main political parties at least recognise that the only way to meet the serious shortage of homes in at least some parts of the country is to build more. They recognise that the private sector has never – and will never – do this alone, and that local and national government therefore has to take the lead. There is also a realisation that it would help if the design of new homes is of a high quality and sensitive to its location. Which brings us to the much less good news that Roger Scruton, a philosopher who [appears to think](#) that only classical-looking architecture can achieve these aims, is [to chair](#) the government's new [Building Better, Building Beautiful](#) commission.



The restored Preston bus station. Photograph: Gareth Gardner

It has otherwise been a bit of a flat year, in which the [shortlist for the Stirling prize](#) was criticised for being a bit beige. Speaking as one who can appreciate a subtle bit of beige, I can only agree. Some of the most notable events have been the reopening of concrete marvels formerly threatened with obliteration, such as [Preston bus station](#) and the [Queen Elizabeth Hall](#) and [Hayward Gallery](#) in London. And one of the reasons for the [ongoing rise in popularity](#) of brutalism is doubtless how fearless and oomphy it looks, compared with a lot of current architecture.

It might be argued that [the Tulip](#), a 1,000ft tower proposed for the City of London, will bring the missing zip; that it will, as its architect Norman Foster says, be “in the spirit of London as a progressive, forward-thinking city”. But it looks like an old-fashioned way of being futuristic, a throwback to the viewing towers of 1960s world fairs – not to mention a runner-up to the recent, taller, similarly floral Lotus Tower in Colombo, Sri Lanka. It also looks like a rather infantile attempt by its owners, who also own the Foster-designed Gherkin next to the site of the proposed tower, to assert their manhood in the face of the bigger buildings now going up around it.

Whatever a new not-boring style of British architecture might be, it needs to be cleverer than what is, in the end, a distinctly boring case of willy-waving. Something like Amin Taha’s [15 Clerkenwell Close](#), for example, a tour de force with a load-bearing front wall that delights in the fossil-rich textures of solid limestone. The building is, however, under threat of demolition by the London borough of Islington, a council that has approved some mighty blots elsewhere in its territory, over alleged breaches of planning consent that seem at most minor. If you’re looking for reasons why architects can be a bit timid, this saga is good place to start.

## The top five architectural works of 2018

### 1. [Secular Retreat by Peter Zumthor](#)

Massive but subtle, a sort of domestic Stonehenge: future generations will wonder how they managed to get so much concrete to a remote corner of Devon.

### 2. [Preston bus station](#)

Really this should have been in the review of the year 1969, when this magnificent brutalist landmark, above, was completed, but there’s still reason to celebrate the fact that it has been successfully preserved and restored.

### 3. [The Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Galleries, Westminster Abbey](#)

And this one should have been in the review of the year 1258, which was roughly when the first phase of the triforium galleries, high above the abbey’s floor, were completed. Beautifully converted by McInnes Usher McKnight Architects, and

reached via a new gothic-ish tower by Ptolemy Dean that seems to have escaped from a medieval Cape Canaveral.

## **4. Peter Barber: 100 Mile City and Other Stories**

Advertisement

This one is for all the heroic architects striving to make beautiful and affordable housing. Barber is one of the most inventive of them, as this straightforward Design Museum exhibition shows.

## **5. 15 Clerkenwell Close by Amin Taha**

A celebration of the many characters of limestone that is bizarrely threatened with demolition by the London borough of Islington due to alleged infringements of planning permission. The building is robust, for sure, but the multifaceted area in which it stands can take it.