

The Twentieth Century Society wishes to propose for listing Pool Court, Sonning, a distinctive and substantially intact house, designed in 1975 by the important nationally renowned architect Francis Pollen. The house is identified in the Conservation Area Appraisal as a Positive Building Enhancing Character. Apart from the clear indication of its importance in the Conservation Area Appraisal, the house is listed in the entry for Sonning in Pevsner's Building of England series for the County of Berkshire, which is the first and most basic indicator of the significance of a building of this age. It is noted in the Twentieth Century Society's Journal 4 which lists important architect-designed houses of the century and Alan Powers' monograph on Frances Pollen. Pollen (1926-87) is known for his church work such as Worth Abbey in Crawley and more locally St John Bosco, Woodley and St Peter, Marlow. Powers considers that his importance as an instructive figure of his time has only been partially recognised as yet. He was also well known for applying his contextual modernism to commercial and residential commissions. Having met Sir Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944) as a child and having worked on the Lutyens Memorial volumes for Country Life, Francis Pollen was the ideal choice of architect to design a contextually appropriate house for Sonning, on the same road as Lutyens' Grade I listed masterpiece Deanery Garden.

Having started his career heavily under the influence of Lutyens, by the mid-1950s being aware that this style was deemed anachronistic, Pollen switched to Modernism, in a form that still retained some Lutyens-like qualities of three-dimensional solidity, and also of playfulness of form. Even his smaller buildings were designed with a sense of mass, emphasised by continuous horizontal lines forming bands that tie together the different masses of the building. He was influenced in this also by the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, so that his work frequently reads as an amalgam of these two predecessors, each a major figure of the same generation. This strategy gives calmness and monumentality to his larger buildings, such as the Church of Our Lady Help of Christians at Worth in West Sussex, 1962-75, but is also seen in a small house such as Pool Court.

As Alan Powers notes in his monograph on Pollen, at Pool Court he deliberately employs a 'Lutyens'-like roof form, steep with sprocketed eaves and glazed tablets' in deference to its context. This roof, the distinctive corner window detailing and the low single-storey plan emphasise the care that Pollen has used to create a modern building which fully responds to its surroundings whilst using modern architectural language. The windows are given robust timber frames that read strongly in elevation. Between the roof and the walls comes the strong line of the painted timber 'cornice' so typical of Pollen's work that visually binding together the ins and outs of the window bays while also giving beauty to the practical device (avoided in so many flat roofed houses) of an overhanging roof to protect the walls and windows from rain water. The house is an important transitional form in the oeuvre of Pollen as Powers notes, 'where he pre-empted and resolved the fierce debate of 'tradition' versus 'modernism' that broke out around 1977'. Pollen's response to this debate fuses tradition with modernism but does not resort to the applied decoration which was to typify the post-modernism that was in its nascent form at this time. The plan form and fenestration are essentially modern, including the corner windows favoured by Frank Lloyd Wright, but the shape of the roof echoes the work of Lutyens. There might have been discord between these architectural languages, but Pollen combined them skilfully in a way that could still inform designers in the early twenty-first century.

In a direct communication with the Society, Alan Powers has commented further on the case for listing this house, as follows:

'In terms of recommending Pool Court for listing, it would be theoretically possible to assess other houses by Pollen for comparison, but since a listing request can only currently be considered when there is a threat, it is clear the Pool Court is the only relevant example, and in my view, as the author of the book on Pollen, I believe it is as good as any other example of his work from this phase of his career. It is a small and modest house, but buildings on this scale, when designed by major architects, are as deserving of listing as larger works.

Further arguments in favour of listing could include the fact that his major domestic work, Cray Clearing, Harpsden, near Henley, was demolished in the early 1990s. Given his connection to Lutyens, it would be appropriate if a work by Pollen were listed in the same village as a major Lutyens house, The Deanery Garden.'