



Ernö Goldfinger, Brownfield Estate, London, England, 1965-1970, with Balfron Tower, right. © RIBA Photographic Collection.

Conservation by consensus: heritage management in large housing estates

BY JOHN ALLAN

This study considers the role of management guidelines in regulating the pressures for change in large housing estates where heritage constraints are involved but where the use of formal enforcement procedures would be unrealistic and uneconomical. The author's experience in creating such documents indicates the importance of cultivating a sustainable consensus among stakeholders that balances respect for and understanding of architectural and historic significance with a realistic acceptance of the need for change. The author suggests that the success of such instruments depends upon three crucial attributes – fairness, usability and resilience. The examples, all in London, include the Barbican, Golden Lane and Brownfield.

Overview

All three estates resulted from wartime aerial bombardment which – most dramatically in the case of the Barbican – left huge tracts of derelict land in need of comprehensive redevelopment. They are among a select few post-war estates in Britain that have been listed as outstanding for their special architectural and historic interest. They are thereby subject to the regulations and protocols of our Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 – hereafter “the Act.” The formal recognition of such considerable areas of development was in itself a major departure in the treatment of modern heritage in England – listing typically involving only single buildings or small ensembles, and it is chiefly the factor of scale that underscores the relevance of management guidelines. So before considering the details of each estate in turn it is useful to study the features of such projects that are common to them all.

The effect of listing any building or site (regardless of size) is to bring the designated “heritage asset” within the ambit of the Act. The relevant clause specifies that “no person shall execute, or cause to be executed, any works for demolition of a listed building, or for its alteration or extension in any manner which would affect its character as a building of special architectural or historic interest unless the works are authorized.” Authorization is the responsibility of the Local Planning Authority (LPA), who may in cases of higher-grade listings refer the matter to Historic England, the Government's advisory agency on heritage issues. Penalties for non-compliance can be severe.

Now whereas the operation of this regulation is relatively straightforward in the case of individual buildings in single ownership, its application to large estates involving several hundred residents and extensive public realm is clearly a different matter. There are simply insufficient public resources to be able to rely on enforcement as a realistic means of control. This is where management guidelines have a vital role to play, as their primary purpose is to cultivate among stakeholders sufficient understanding of

the significance of the asset that a consensus is created to achieve compliance by voluntary means. In summary, the key aims of listed building management guidelines are:

- to analyze the special architectural interest of the listed buildings and their environment and cultivate stakeholder recognition of these attributes;
- to provide guidance on the management of change and clarity on when formal authorization is required;
- to enable all interested parties to contribute;
- to make provision for regular review.

Such projects when properly conducted should benefit everybody. The conservation authorities can have confidence that the regulations will be observed without the need for excessive policing; owners may undertake works of alteration knowing where these will, or won't, require formal consent, and third parties such as amenity groups and others may be assured of the responsible stewardship of heritage assets that they care about. The importance of consensus cannot be overstated. However, it does not necessarily arise of its own accord – it usually must be cultivated. This underscores the need for consultation and inclusivity in the preparation of management guidelines documents.

In 2000, the United Kingdom (UK) government promulgated a Code of Practice on Consultation as a standard for its own such exercises as well as those of other public bodies. The observance of these principles becomes important because guidelines may then acquire the enhanced status of a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) thereby becoming part of local planning policy. Whilst SPD's have only advisory status, they are then a provision to which the LPA must “have regard” when determining matters that may affect the heritage asset concerned. It was with these considerations in mind that the City of London Corporation, owners of the Barbican Estate, embarked on the project of creating management guidelines following its listing in 2001.



01 Chamberlin, Powell & Bon, Barbican Estate, London, England, mid-1950s-1982. Aerial view, a whole piece of city. © Christoffer Rudquist.

The Barbican Estate

The Barbican is the largest, and last to be listed, of the three estates covered in this study. But it was the first exercise in creating management guidelines and therefore merits the fullest study as many of the considerations affecting all three examples were pioneered here. Designed by architects Chamberlin, Powell & Bon, and built from the mid-1950s up until completion of the Arts Centre in 1982, the Barbican endured every vagary of architectural taste before its listing (at Grade II) in 2001, though even this was not without controversy. In 2003, it came top in an opinion poll of London's ugliest buildings and was a regular object of public odium, both for its Brutalist architectural style and also for the notorious difficulties in navigating its elaborate public realm. This particular feature, known as the Highwalk, raised on a podium some 6 meters (m) above ground level to segregate pedestrian from vehicular traffic, had not been helped by drastic reduction of the larger scheme of pedestrian walkways originally planned to connect the estate with the wider city context.

The Barbican as built contained over 2,000 dwelling units, as well as two schools, a library, several cinemas and restaurants, a youth hostel, two theaters, a concert hall, two art galleries, a huge conservatory, two large exhibition halls and a range of other commercial and retail spaces as well as extensive public landscaped precincts, private residents'

gardens and a lake. In short, it is not so much "an estate" as a complete piece of city. It is believed to be the largest built object ever listed – but this raises some significant questions. How would it be possible to apply the procedures and protocols of listing to some 35 acres (14 hectares) of London accommodating over 4000 people?

It was in 2003, in this disputatious atmosphere, that Avanti Architects, of which I was then a Director, was appointed to find answers to these questions. Whilst the designation had been prompted by controversial interventions by the City Corporation itself there was still resentment within the resident community that it was detrimental to their property values, as well as ignorance about what listing actually entailed. Many believed it only applied to building exteriors, or just to elements that had never been changed. In fact, listing covers everything that exists at the time of designation, original or not, though this of course not does mean everything is of equal significance.

The first step involved devising a suitable vehicle to administer the project. This took the form of a stakeholders' Working Party comprising representatives of Barbican residents, English Heritage, the Twentieth Century Society, officers of the Corporation, ourselves as independent consultants and also a widely respected City Alderman acting as Chairman. As well as establishing its mandate through this inclusive representation, it was also necessary

to understand its status as a non-voting body where decisions must be reached by debate and eventual agreement. Equally important was that its members would promote the group's conclusions to their respective constituencies.

The next challenge to ourselves as consultants and authors of the eventual document was to identify and analyze “special interest” throughout the estate, establishing as objectively as possible the circumstances in which the formal consent requirements specified by the Act should and shouldn't apply – then to persuade others of our recommendations. “Special interest” of course applied at many different scales and levels – so while some of our judgements were beyond dispute, others had to be argued out.

The grand urban proposition represented by the Barbican was clearly of incontrovertible significance, not only as unique example of its type in the UK but also in its historic differentiation from the rest of the Square Mile which, almost without exception, has been built and re-built over the centuries on the original Medieval street pattern. The estate's three towers (originally the tallest in Europe) make a unique contribution to London's skyline in being a coordinated urban composition, in sober contrast to the City's chaotic medley of tall buildings elsewhere. The segregation of pedestrian from vehicular movement is the most extensive experiment of its kind in the UK, while the podium also works as a powerful architectural datum, being encased in brickwork matching the tiled paving of the Highwalk itself and thereby becoming a visual plinth – or “made ground” – supporting the concrete superstructure above. The many other aspects of special interest were articulated and discussed – from building forms to roof silhouettes, the diversity of unit types, the materiality of expressed concrete, the character of windows and balconies, even the original kitchens and sinks, with their innovative Garchey waste disposal system.

We proposed a “Traffic Light system” – whereby examples are given of almost every imaginable type of intervention ranging from works which would not affect “special interest” and could therefore be undertaken without consent (green); to works that were uncertain, and needed further enquiry (amber); works that would certainly affect special interest and therefore require formal authorization (red) though this would not necessarily mean it would not be given; and finally works that were most unlikely to get consent because of their clearly detrimental impact (black). This analysis was then applied to the residential buildings of the estate in three categories – building exteriors, common parts, and flat interiors – a tri-partite structure that was reflected in the eventual guidelines. This made the document extremely user-friendly.

But it did not avoid controversy. At the first consultation stage the Working Party was deadlocked over several critical issues, most acrimoniously the question of residents' freedom to alter their kitchens, which had originally been manufactured to a highly distinctive design. Should this issue be placed in the green or the red category? Most kitchens need replacing after 30 years, and in many cases the originals had already been replaced before the listing. Naturally if residents wanted to replicate the original design that was

fine. But at such a scale was it reasonable to demand like-for-like replacement, or even feasible to police it? Most of the original components no longer existed. The group eventually agreed that residents should be encouraged to restore original kitchen fittings where they survived, but that they could not be prevented from replacing them. The formal consent trigger was set at the point where replacement would entail modification of the original floorplan. Interventions involving plan alteration would therefore be placed in the red category.

In the process of reaching a workable settlement membership of the stakeholder group was expanded to include representation of a particularly vocal faction of residents as well as another member of the Corporation's planning committee. This helped to bring disputatious elements “into the tent” rather than remaining at large and potentially weakening the Working Party mandate. It also enabled the eventual document to be signed off by the Working Party itself. To have sought the individual agreement of 2,000 separate leaseholders would have been quite unfeasible.

It also meant extending the program. Altogether the Working Party met 16 times over the 18 months it took to develop the first two volumes of guidelines, with two public consultation episodes at first and second draft stages. Consultation periods of ten weeks were allocated for comment and over 300 responses were received. These were all individually considered following the protocols of the UK Government's Code of Practice on Consultation. This was crucial to eventual validation. Many of the comments helped clarify the document and make it stronger. Once agreed within the Working Party the final draft passed through the City Corporation's committee approval processes, and was formally adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance in May 2005.

Other Conservation Strategies

In addition to the “Traffic Light” sections there were other important measures, which we grouped into a further section called Conservation Strategies. These included creation of a number of Heritage Flats, which could be preserved in all details to serve as a permanent record of the original design. This “representative conservation” took some pressure off seeking a more restrictive settlement within the Working Party. Of course, even these Heritage Flats brought their own challenges, as a) they had to be found within the reducing portfolio of rental units still owned by the Corporation, and b) they needed to be tenanted by particularly committed residents who would accept the constraints entailed in safeguarding the authenticity of the interior. We also recommended the establishment of a Salvage Store to be based beneath the Podium where residents could source or exchange original items or fittings that were lost and which is managed by volunteers on the estate. Other measures included establishing a palette of approved colors for consistency in maintaining external metalwork, as well as the proposal for a Visitor Centre housing a Barbican archive for the benefit of residents and researchers. With the exception of the latter, all these proposals have been successfully achieved.

A further section on Best Practice for the Corporation's

in-house maintenance team addresses one of the greatest problems of heritage management on large estates – that is consistency in supervision of minor works and repairs, which individually seem trivial but which if done thoughtlessly can lead to cumulative erosion of integrity and original character – e.g. mis-matched paving replacements; illiterate proliferation of external cabling and pipework, uncoordinated signage, ad-hoc external lighting, errant security alarms, etc. – altogether resulting in a steady loss of visual hygiene through being casually and even innocently undertaken by personnel who may have no knowledge of listing or the damage they are doing. Few of these works would merit individual applications for listed building consent, even if the resources were available to deal with them, which makes it that much more important to cultivate wider understanding of their detrimental impact if allowed to happen in an improvised and unregulated manner.

Future proofing

Provision for future-proofing the document was made by including a review regime. Initially after adoption, the Working Party continued to meet every six months for the first two years to evaluate the Guidelines in operation. After five years we undertook a systematic review of the whole document and produced an updated version including changes in legislation and several new references. The revised document – now an SPD (i.e. “document”, superseding the previous SPG – “guidance”) – was adopted in October 2012 and is on the City of London website. The review process revealed that apart from a few gaps in detailed coverage or regulation changes the instances of where things had gone wrong had generally not been due to deficiencies in the Guidelines themselves, but to failure to apply them correctly. Thus, the review process itself serves to refresh peoples’ awareness of the document and how it can help them.

Later volumes of the Guidelines

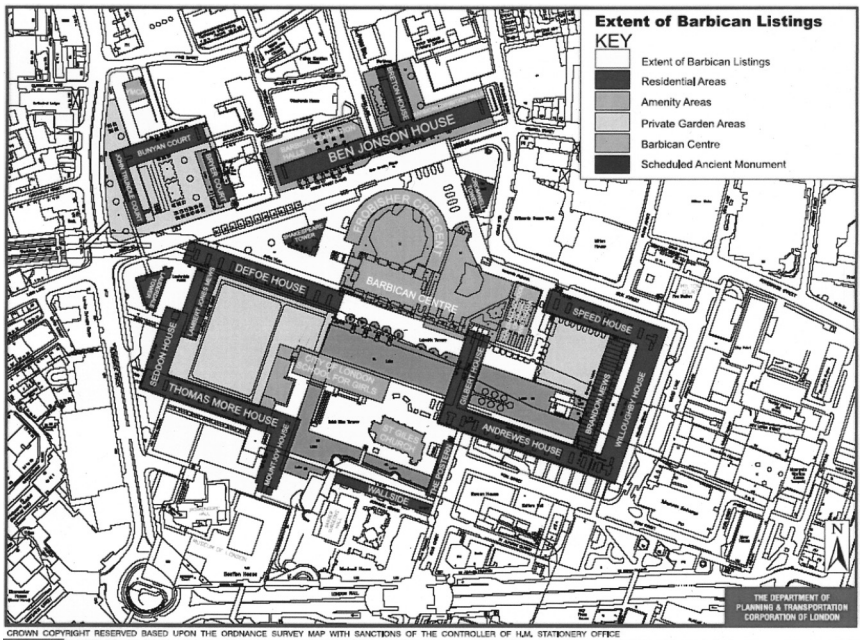
The Guidelines were always envisaged as comprising four separate volumes, and the process described above relates only to the first two. The introductory volume provided basic information and procedural advice. The second covered the residential parts, which constitute the bulk of buildings on the estate. We have now also produced Volume 4, the Barbican Landscape, in collaboration with J&L Gibbons LLP Landscape Architects – using a similar Working Party vehicle and consultation processes. This sought to capture the special interest of the designed landscape with its grand courtyards, luscious gardens and splendid lake, as well as considering such details as paving materials, lighting, furniture and signage. In addition to their listing the exterior works are also designated in the Register of Parks and Gardens, at Grade II* – a rare accolade. A Traffic Light analysis was included as well as guidance on Best Practice and Green Infrastructure. This volume was formally adopted in 2014 and is likewise available on the Corporation website. Finally, Volume 3A covering the Barbican Arts Centre was commissioned in late 2015 with drafting completed in July 2017 and is currently awaiting external consultation.

The Barbican Arts Centre, opened by Her Majesty The Queen in 1982, is the largest performing arts, recreational and cultural venue of its type in Europe. It is a major commercial enterprise and public destination in the heart of London, visited daily by thousands of people. The Guidelines for the Arts Centre are intended to inform the ongoing management and conservation of this Grade II listed building. As with previous volumes, a Working Party was composed of relevant stakeholders – in this instance from the various departments within the complex, as well as representatives of the City’s Planning Department, the Barbican Estates office and their retained architects, the firm of AHMM. The intention has been to achieve consensus on the draft document amongst these “internal” stakeholders before consulting more widely among residents’ groups, Historic England and the Twentieth Century Society. This consultation is currently awaited.

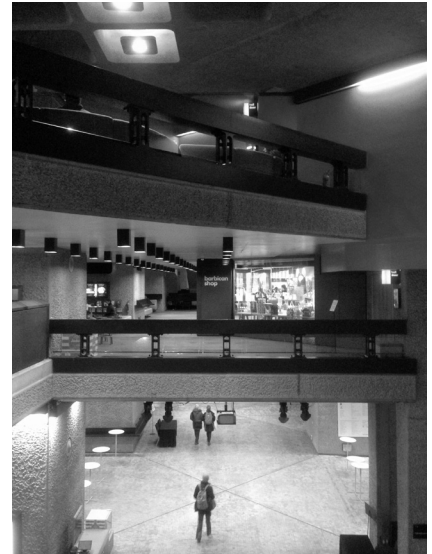
My methodology was to survey the entire building area by area to research the original design and principal subsequent alterations, locate and analyze “special interest,” offer general guidance and devise a detailed Traffic Light system for every part of the complex. Heritage significance here ranges from the Centre’s distinctive external form and materials that clearly proclaim it as a public building within its residential context, the deep spatial quality of the foyers, the “set piece” interiors of the concert hall and theatre, the conservatory, art gallery and library, down to the detailed finishes and fittings which constitute a highly distinctive and consistent design vocabulary for the whole building. In addition to the Traffic Light analysis, I also proposed a “Star Rating Scale” which attributes a hierarchy of heritage sensitivity to the various sections of the building according to their public prominence and surviving authenticity. The two systems complement each other but do not necessarily overlap. Thus a minor intervention could require consent in a highly sensitive location such as the concert hall or theater, whereas a major modification might be of little consequence (in heritage terms) in an area of low sensitivity such as the back-stage areas or offices. Whilst all areas are covered by listing, higher starred areas need to be approached with particular attention to heritage considerations.

Perhaps the most difficult issue here has been that of protecting the unique spatial qualities. The Barbican Arts Centre brief became bigger and more ambitious as the original project evolved, but its site was already confined by earlier phases of development. As a result, the building is characterized by deep excavation and dramatic interior spaces. At the time of our appointment a scheme was already underway for the introduction of a new retail floor which, though finely detailed in itself, has substantially reduced the open spatial character of the main foyer. Such is the commercial pressure to treat “space” as “room” and monetize what was once free. Given the timing of the two projects the Guidelines could not have prevented this intervention, but my Executive Summary still particularly urges that the inter-visibility and spatial drama of the common parts – a defining aspect of the Arts Centre’s character and special interest – are not further diminished through infilling or enclosure.

02 The Barbican Listed Site Boundary. © City of London, Department of Planning & Transportation.



03 Chamberlin, Powell & Bon, Barbican Arts Centre, London, England, mid-1950s-1982. Interior space/view. © John Allan.



04 Chamberlin, Powell & Bon, Barbican Arts Centre, London, England, mid-1950s-1982. © Johanna Gibbons.



05 Chamberlin, Powell & Bon, Golden Lane Estate, London, England, 1952-1962. Typical view with Great Arthur House, center.
© Nicholas Kane for Avanti Architects.

Also emphasized is that the guidelines apply equally to “minor” operational activities to ensure protection of heritage significance and character. A constant stream of installations – some worthy, some less so – continue to alter the Arts Centre on an almost daily basis – and whilst seasonal and special events are an inherent dynamic in such an institution, it must also be recognized that to avoid cumulative heritage detriment a consistent level of daily care and understanding is required.

The Arts Centre has now been in intensive use for over 35 years and has assimilated considerable change over this period. This is a testament to the resilience of the original design and demonstrates that progressive adaptation, if intelligently and sympathetically conceived, need not be detrimental to its special architectural interest. The challenge going forward will be to reconcile the constraints of listing with the realities of maintaining this major international institution as a leading cultural and commercially competitive venue, guiding and controlling the endless pressure for change to avoid harming the special qualities for which it is listed.

Golden Lane Estate

The original volumes of Management Guidelines have now been operating on the Barbican Estate for 15 years and are believed to be the first example of this conservation technique at such a scale in the UK. But their benefit was already registered when soon after their completion Avanti Architects was commissioned for the equivalent project at the adjacent Golden Lane Estate – an earlier work of Chamberlin, Powell & Bon which was built

between 1952-1962 and listed in 1997. Though smaller and of a different architectural character to the Barbican this estate was likewise conceived as a complete urban neighborhood. There are 550 units housed in eight blocks, with twenty shops, a pub, a community center, swimming pool, tennis courts, children’s nursery, recreation rooms and underground carparking. The project, one of the earliest progressive housing schemes after the war, aimed to provide high-density accommodation for those who needed to live in the City and was enriched with a designed landscape on the former bomb-cleared site, listed at Grade II in 2020.

This Guidelines assignment presented much the same challenges as those described for the Barbican, although as the estate had generally been more highly regarded, with an arguably more appreciative resident community, it attracted little of the Barbican’s controversy. The equivalent document was formally adopted in 2007, reviewed in 2012, and re-adopted in 2013. As with the Barbican, the Golden Lane Guidelines have generally been effective in managing change on the estate, most conspicuously in the recent exemplary facade replacement project for its central 16-story tower Great Arthur House, achieved with scrupulous concern for heritage values. However, despite their injunction to avoid detrimental impacts on the estate’s setting, the Guidelines have not been heeded by the recent development of a grossly over-scaled private apartment block on an immediately adjacent site. This illustrates the greater challenge of guidelines maintaining traction beyond the listing boundary itself.

Brownfield Estate

The Brownfield Estate was designed by the *immigré* Hungarian architect Ernő Goldfinger (1902-1987), and built in phases between 1965 and 1970, with later sections forming what is now an extensive designated Conservation Area. This was the last of the three Conservation/Guidelines assignments in the series discussed here, though ironically the most prominent component of the estate, the 26-story Balfron Tower was earliest of all the buildings to be listed at Grade II, in 1996 (being raised to Grade II* in 2015). Set in a bleak and bomb-damaged area of the East End, the Brownfield Estate – like its later cousin Trellick Tower (1972) – epitomizes the Brutalist style of Ernő Goldfinger in his maturity.

Our Conservation Management Plan was commissioned with the aim of informing a major regeneration project being planned by the estate owners, Poplar HARCA a registered social landlord, to whom it had been transferred by the local authority LB Tower Hamlets. The study was comprehensive with a detailed statement of heritage significance covering all aspects of the listed estate including its landscape and setting. Also included were conservation strategies and recommendations on best practice in maintenance works, with particular emphasis on the quality of concrete repair and the treatment of facade components – windows and screens – all of which were meticulously designed by Ernő Goldfinger in the original scheme.

The Conservation Management Plan was delivered at the end of 2007 and proved effective during the first phase of the regeneration. However, the project took a new

direction when Balfron Tower later became the subject of a joint-partnership of Poplar HARCA with a luxury private residential developer. The ensuing “gentrification” has led to all resident tenants being displaced and, despite objections, no social housing being retained in the block. The Conservation Plan has been largely ignored, with a complete fenestration redesign dramatically altering the character of the building. The completed refurbishment, inexplicably condoned by Historic England but condemned by the Twentieth Century Society as “a tragic missed opportunity,” illustrates the limitations of management guideline documents in the face of raw commercial ambition and underscores the crucial role of ownership culture in the authentic conservation of modern architecture.

Conclusions – Lessons learned

So what lessons can be drawn from these projects that might be useful to others in the field? I would suggest that for achieving successful Conservation Plans or Management Guidelines addressing heritage assets on this scale there are three key attributes – Fairness, Usability and Resilience.

Fairness

There are no short-cuts to cultivating a consensus, and there has to be enough time for the engagement of all who need to be involved. So the process must be adequately resourced. In case of the Barbican its sheer size was actually an advantage as the resident community already had its own internal democracy – house committees, residents’ association newsletter, etc., which provided a consultation infrastructure we could tap into directly. Meticulous attention to peoples’ responses and transparency on reasons for accepting or not accepting their suggestions is also vital. Gaining the trust, or at least respect, of divergent stakeholders entails scrupulous even-handedness with all participants.

Usability

Then there is the importance of producing a user-friendly result. How many well-intentioned documents of this sort have been shelved and forgotten? There are probably two reasons – insufficient stakeholder traction in the first place, and second the documents themselves being too unwieldy or academic. This can be a case of the best being the enemy of the good, leading to a document too intimidating for the ordinary user. Yet the tempting response to keep it “quick and dirty” may not be right either. In my view, the answer lies in output format rather than project scope. For such documents to have credibility the historical research and analysis of significance do need to be done properly. However, the material may not all need to be in a single large document. It may be better to customize the outputs to suit the different stakeholders. Conservation authorities and amenity societies are concerned to see that heritage assets are properly researched and understood before considering proposals for change. Meanwhile, owners and maintenance staff are more interested in a “how-to” manual that tells them quickly and simply where they stand in relation to the listing

regulations. These diverging needs may be best resolved by formatting the outputs to serve the different constituencies respectively – but always preserving all of the material for those who might want to refer to it. In both the Barbican and Golden Lane projects the full guidelines were complemented with short leaflets covering the essentials, but cross-referenced to the main document.

Resilience

A key aim of guideline projects is to raise heritage consciousness. But how does consciousness stay raised? Review procedures refresh memories and help ensure guidance remains current. Formal adoption and SPD status also provide a degree of existential permanence. But the longer answer is surely less by consciousness “staying raised” as by becoming engrained, whereby what is initially deliberate eventually becomes instinctual. This surely goes back to the issue of “heritage recognition.” The recognition and good stewardship of modern heritage in the UK is still a work in progress encumbered by controversy, prejudice and neglect. To the extent that popular recognition of the architecture of any period as “heritage” is commensurate with its age, it may be anticipated that the informed conservation of modern buildings for their “heritage” value (as distinct from economic or environmental reasons) will depend on when they can command the equivalent popular appeal as their historic forbears. In achieving this desirable goal fair, usable and resilient management guideline projects surely have a valuable part to play.

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