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Author

Mansfield, Howard

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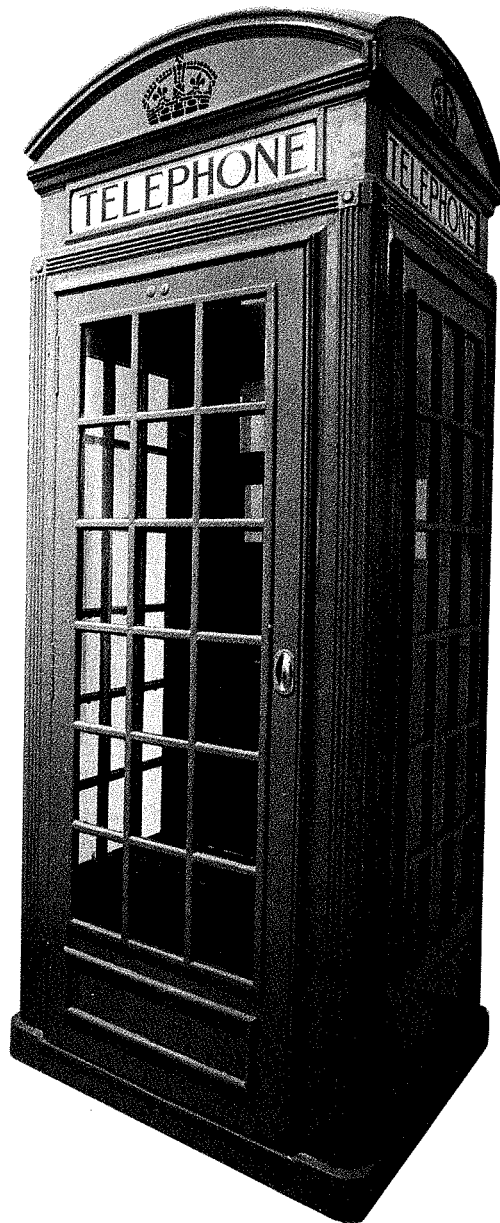
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Britain's Phone Kiosks

Howard Mansfield

London is coming undone. Not in big ways, not with blockbusting towers in the Manhattan manner, but in small ways, down on the street, in the details that knit the city together. London is coming undone detail by detail.

London is a city unified by small highlights of color: the bright red phone booths, mailboxes and double decker buses; the black taxis; and black and white street signs. It is a gray city dressed smartly in red and black.



On each street corner, in the dozens of things one encounters daily, numerous objects say London. When we talk about one place becoming like another, it's these details whose absence we mourn, often without knowing it. When New York City lost its Bishop's Crook street lights and the little figure of Mercury atop the traffic lights on Fifth Avenue, it lost, on each street, hundreds of voices saying "New York." The same loss is now occurring in London.

"Red phone boxes have become one of the symbols of Britain, along with policemen in helmets, scarlet buses and guardsmen in fur hats," wrote Libby Purves in *Highlife*, an English magazine. "After a long time abroad, the sight of a cheerful red box on the corner of a gray London street or a village green building brings tears to an Englishman's eyes; he knows that he is really home. The sight conjures up a powerful national magic, and since the image and magic of Britain are eminently exportable, so, now, are our telephone boxes."

Three years ago British Telecom astonished many when it announced that it wanted to replace the 76,500 classic red boxes in the United Kingdom, many of which have seen between 50 and 75 years of service. Under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the phone service had been taken away from the post office in 1984 and given to a new private company, British Telecom. The company was about to invest millions in the long neglected system, and quite naturally, it wanted a new image. Royal red is the

A stately London phone box stands in all its splendor. Its home is not a London street, but a London museum.



Three regal red phone boxes stand at attention under the awning of the Telephone Bar and Grill. The taxi and the pay telephone inside betray the phone boxes' true location: New York City.

color of public utilities in Britain (hence the red buses and mailboxes). British Telecom wanted to be done with that: yellow and blue are its corporate colors (although it still uses the red phone box as its logo).

At first the company tried painting the red phone boxes a school-bus yellow. To the public this looked about as right as if the Queen's horseguard were to troop the colors wearing baseball caps, instead of fur hats. They protested and Telecom relented. But Telecom hit on a plan it liked even better: remove the phone boxes and replace them with an American Plexiglass model. It's hard to notice what's not there, and sure enough people seemed to pay the new phone booths little mind.

The Thirties Society, a preservation group, was the first to notice, and for three years it has fought a kind of guerilla preservation war phone box by phone box all over the country. British Telecom refuses to meet with the group and leaves the decision to save any phone boxes up to its regional pay phone managers, who at best are uncooperative and in some districts are antagonistic.

The Thirties Society sent out 450 letters to the government district councils and eventually won a two-week stay of execution: if a box were to be removed the local government council would have two weeks in which to act. For a box to be saved, it was up to British Telecom to inform the council. Thus the phone company was cast both in the role of protector and destroyer. In the first 18 months, the Thirties Society managed to save only eight boxes; meanwhile hundreds were destroyed a week.

British Telecom says the boxes are a maintenance nightmare: they offer a vandal a choice of 72 different windows to smash, they provide too much

cover for a thief rifling the coin box, and they are, to certain royal subjects, just the ideal urinal. The company has circulated a video promoting the new phone booths: the poor patron in the video struggles to open the door on an old booth only to find a vandalized phone in a foul smelling space. The video also highlights Telecom's ultimate argument: the elderly find the boxes hard to use, and a small step-up bars access to the handicapped.

The Thirties Society says the problems are with the phones not the boxes: Just replace the phones, and the money saved would be better spent on maintenance. Adjustments can be made for the handicapped, they say (cordless phone technology, new additional booths of another style). And they point out the new boxes are hardly vandal proof: many have been attacked just a day after an installation by vandals who seem to be sizing up their new opponent. The new boxes have a projected life of just 15 years; the old boxes have already served for half a century or more.

The old phone boxes are more properly thought of as little buildings: "stately, temple-like and thoroughly architectural, with almost square window panes, fluted corners and domed roof," as the Thirties Society described them in a report: "They have a solidity lacking in today's throw-away society. Their regal livery and the crowns they bear add dignity to the concept of a public utility." "Solidity" is the word. Each phone kiosk is made of one ton of cast iron. The boxes harken to a well-ordered Edwardian society; each was designed with an umbrella hook, a place for parcels and a small writing table. In fact, they give more substantial appearance than many modern office buildings.

The boxes were designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott (1882-1960), archi-

tect of Liverpool Cathedral and the Battersea Power Station, whose work is now in vogue. His first design, the K2, as it is known, dates from a 1924 competition. In the Royal Jubilee year of 1936, Scott reworked his design, streamlining the windows and making the phone box smaller.

The Thirties Society wants the phone boxes listed as historic sites just as buildings are. There is a precedent in London's protected cabman's booths. The society is careful to say that it does not want all phone boxes listed. As a last ditch effort, they have raised the possibility of having private organizations adopt a phone box, taking on the upkeep of a few as a garden club project.

In a backhand tribute to Scott's designs, the decommissioned phone boxes are eagerly sought. British Telecom has been auctioning them off to companies that strip off 25 years of paint, refinish them and sell them off. Demand is great: in London alone, there is a two-year waiting list and the *Economist* estimated that 30,000 phone boxes could be sold in the United States, where the price is \$3,750 a kiosk (including the steel import tax). The Thirties Society laments this as "asset stripping" or, as it says, "flogging our heritage for a giggle."

Altogether, the Thirties Society has saved perhaps 500 phone boxes. Most have been saved by the Westminster City Council, which covers much of the London seen by tourists. And there, oddly, the reason frequently given is that the red phone boxes should be saved because tourists expect to see them: another British anachronism, along with guns, fewer cops and the pomp of monarchy. It's a kind of Third World reaction to tourism: many native crafts in Third World nations now survive, stripped of function as trinkets of local color.

Inevitably, there is now a company making full-size plastic reproductions, not only of phone boxes but of mail boxes as well. Its advertising has captured the elegiac feeling, claiming that the imitations "echo the elegance and quality of times gone by."

London, you see, *is* coming undone.



Refurbished phone boxes are being spirited to the United States. In San Francisco a phone box (repainted turquoise) sits outside the California Cafe.