

THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST

AN ESSAY BY RICHARD MACCORMAC

This exhibition explores ideas and themes which have evolved in the practice's collegiate buildings in Oxford and Cambridge, and in the recently completed college for Cable & Wireless in Coventry.

The fact that all the buildings were commissioned by financially independent clients is important. This is not because they can afford better buildings than clients harnessed to the public purse but because their independence, whether academic or commercial, allows them to define their aspirations collectively through fellowships or boards of directors respectively.

The clients for each of these educational buildings are at the leading edge of a commitment to excellence in their fields and the buildings are intended to demonstrate that ethos. Education with this purpose, is itself a form of patronage in the sense that the word means to defend and promote a legacy of values and accumulated knowledge. As architects we have been privileged to be the beneficiaries of such patronage and hope that in each case our buildings have repaid the client's dedication, patience and generosity of spirit without which our architectural aspirations would have remained unrealised.

All the buildings were commissioned to serve useful purposes within defined budgets. They are pragmatic in a particularly British way, responses to practical requirements rather than autonomous symbolic gestures. Yet they respond to some very different purposes; on the one hand the teaching requirements at Cable & Wireless were absolutely precise and exacting in physical and measurable terms while on the other hand the Chapel at Fitzwilliam had to respond to the psychological as well as congregational needs of modern liturgy and to evoke the historical tradition out of which this has grown.

An objective of much late 20th century British architecture, particularly that of 'Hi-Tech' practitioners, is an intellectual clarity in which form is the incontestably rigorous outcome of analysis,

and appearance the consequence of absolutely refined technique.

This pragmatism enables the architect to explain architectural intentions to the client without resort to subjective explanations or the intervention of personal values which might risk losing the client's trust. In such a discourse aesthetic issues are, ideally, completely coincident with practical ones. To paraphrase Sir John Summerson's conclusion of his RIBA paper of 1957; If the function and technique are the source of form is it positive to admit another organising principle.

Forty years on a whole generation of British architects schooled in the Modern Movement of that time still finds this a difficult question to answer and it is arguable that the failure or refusal to develop explicit aesthetic values out of the legacy of the Modern Movement precipitated the reaction towards historicism which took place during the 1980's. One of the inadequacies of an ideology which makes appearance purely a consequence of function and technology is that it cannot lay claim to any public significance or meaning, extrinsic to its practical purpose. Nor can it incorporate historical and cultural allusions without compromise.

One of the fundamental intentions of our work has been to reconcile the pragmatism and the language of making which are the legacy of both the Arts and Crafts tradition and of the Modern Movement with independently expressive ideas which are specific to client and place and which draw on a wide range of historical precedent. Spatial, formal and technical ideas get passed on from one project to another but they do not add up to a superficially recognisable style for the practice. Instead a series of themes reappear almost subliminally within buildings which look outwardly very different from one another.

For example, the Oxford and Cambridge residential buildings all explore interrelationships between staircases and shared kitchens which promote sociability amongst students and the delegates of

conferences. At Worcester, Fitzwilliam and St John's the kitchens and stairs overlook each other in different ways creating intricate spaces and unexpected views. These specific ideas are part of a broader interest, which infuses every scheme, of circulation as an organising principle, a kind of armature around which cellular spaces are gathered.

Constructional themes underline the evolution of the work. Worcester, earliest of the projects exhibited, remains something of a one off – a complex lakeside elaboration of pitched roof, courtyard housing of brick and timber which emerged out of the domestic tradition of public housing. But the common room at Worcester is the precursor of an evolving commitment to concrete post and frame construction. At Fitzwilliam the use of precast concrete is combined with loadbearing cavity wall construction to amplify the contrast between trabeated bay windows and the sense of enclosure found in conventionally constructed walled rooms. Such constructional contrasts are developed vertically at St John's.

The construction of St John's is the most complex of the five buildings, rising from a plinth of massive precast elements which create introverted cave-like spaces, to a roof scape of slender framed double height rooms which have spectacular views out into the College gardens. At the lower level the precast elements are critically engineered to support the building above and the arches and pendentives form clusters of cantilevers which spring from columns and piers and are locked together with precast keystones. Contrasts in finish, point tooling, needling, grit blasting, acid etching and polishing are intended to find a rhetoric for a material which has been misunderstood and undervalued in the past.

This expressiveness is not just about the necessity of construction but about its materiality, its embodiment. Hence in the upper parts of the building the scale of Roman brickwork gives a density which is deliberately in contrast to the precast courses and large cornerstones which lock together the freestanding planes of brickwork which form the front, back and flanks of the towers. These elements represent an idea of construction rather than a necessary expedient.

The buildings also share geometric themes which clarify the relationships within their spatial and structural organisation and convey the intention of the building in its broader setting. The most complex is Worcester College which unfolds towards the lake on a diagonal axis as a series of layered terraces. These consist of paired L-shaped groups of student rooms which can be seen as diminutives of the building as a whole. On the orthogonal axes a cruciform arrangement of staircases, landings and kitchens creates a transparent core of shared space around which the rooms are arranged.

The New Court at Fitzwilliam although very different in appearance develops the social, geometric and spatial themes of

the circulation at Worcester. Here the circulation core is also transparent, opening out laterally through the kitchens and vertically through the roof-lights. Internally along the length of the terrace the staircases form a continuously rising and falling wave of space. The location of the kitchens displaces student rooms to create a similar wave form externally which is articulated by the changes of plane taken up by the bay windows in every room.

The complexity of plan at Worcester is disciplined by a 'tartan' grid which locates the kitchen cores, the passages on each side of them and the rooms themselves. At St John's a similar kind of grid disciplines the relationship between the three public spaces – auditorium, dining room and atrium. In Louis Kahn's terminology these are 'served' by ancillary spaces which take up the thinner modules of the grid and amplify the primary spaces, providing for circulation, galleries around the auditorium, and small rooms.

Geometrically the Chapel at Fitzwilliam is very simple, consisting of a circular enclosure around a square, the square standing as an extension of Lasdun's terrace to which the building is attached. This proposition is made more complex by the insertion of the wooden vessel which holds the congregation and responds both to the linear tradition of the nave and the central focus of modern liturgy. The objective of all the detailed design of this building is to reconcile and articulate the distinctions between these ideas, with materials, space and light.

At Cable & Wireless College a collection of buildings with different functions is subsumed within a serialised layering which places the teaching wings in east-west bands separated by long transverse courtyards from the wall of the residential building at the north edge of the site. Everything is organised laterally, without turning corners, except the oblique routes which link circulation in the teaching wings to the other functions via the oculus which marks the centre. These oblique axes define the 'V' shaped opening to the south which reveals the layering of the blue roofs and their visual relationship with the residential wall.

In our work we have set out to challenge the dichotomy between the self-referential pragmatic and technological architecture of late British 'modernism' and the kind of classicism and post-modernism which treats history passively as an inventory of styles. We believe that the vitality of the past depends upon active interpretation and that in engaging with history the architect not only amplifies our sense of the present but affects our understanding and feeling about the past, our connection with it.

So at Worcester College the new building plays the role of the picturesque destination or the garden temple at the end of the serpentine lake – completing the sequence of landscape events in the walk through the College garden. This sequence begins with the entrance court at the end of Beaumont Street which leads into the loggia under the library. From the loggia the great trees in the

garden are revealed but the lake remains out of sight only to be discovered once the visitor has passed out of the main quadrangle into the garden beyond. Here the lake is found curving out of sight, inviting the further exploration along its serpentine edge which reveals the new building. The new building itself offers the equivalent sequence in reverse with entrance court, loggia and raised terrace framing the view of the trees, then revealing the lake and with a gate through a wall starting the return journey through the garden back to the eighteenth century quadrangle.

Landscape ideas also underline the Cable & Wireless College. Like Palladian villa-farms such as the Villa Badoer, the College is both workplace and emblem. It opens itself out to address the landscape and public highway to the south, with its outstretched wings. In the tradition of the English country house the driveway enters the site obliquely preserving the centre as a grass parterre with ha-ha separating it from the road.

The sense of anticipation characteristic of the 18th century English landscape garden finds its extraordinary miniaturised architectural equivalent in Sir John Soane's House and Museum where spaces open into one another unexpectedly. In the Breakfast Room a paradox is offered which anticipates the spatial revolution in the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright a century later. The enclosure of the room defined by the domed ceiling is contradicted by the larger space defined by the walls and by the daylight which falls between ceiling and perimeter defying customary expectations of enclosure. An equivalent experience occurs at the front of the house where the stepped stone screen wall with its abstracted classical language extends the front rooms literally out of the building into an ambiguous indoor outdoor realm which seems to belong to the gardens out in the square as much as to the house itself.

At Fitzwilliam we reworked this stepped frontage to give every student a bay window with a soffit higher than the ceiling of the room itself to give the illusion that the room is extended into a glazed balcony which belongs as much to the garden as to the interior.

The tricks of Soane's Breakfast Room are reworked most literally into the design of the dining room and auditorium of St John's where the displaced perimeter walls are naturally lit through gigantic hollow keystones. The Chapel is the most radical reinterpretation of the Breakfast Room. At the upper level the central space is cubic rather than circular and the outer defining walls circular rather than square. Daylight falls between, hardening the silhouette of the concrete posts which defines the central space and softening and gently pushing outwards the rendered outer arcs. At the lower level the disengagement of walls and ceiling is achieved by the convex underside of the vessel.

The Fitzwilliam Chapel distinguishes between sub-structures and super-structures, the world below and the world above, and this most archaic of architectural contrasts finds its distinct rhetoric

in three of the other projects. At Worcester the building stands on the edge of a shallow escarpment and the change of level across the site allows the common room on the diagonal axis to establish the idea of a plateau from which the super-structure of the building emerges. This has something to do with the outcrop upon which Alvar Aalto placed the town hall at Säynätsalo in Finland and this in turn probably reflects Aalto's response to Hellenic sites.

At Cable & Wireless the building appears to emerge out of a plinth revealed by the gentle slope of the land to the south but the plateau idea is more fundamentally established by the in-situ concrete structure of the teaching wings which creates a discontinuous table across the site above which the blue roofs float independently. This has something to do with the perception of another Scandinavian, Jorn Utzon in his essay 'Platforms and Plateaux' which explained the sources for the great stepped base and the floating shells at Sydney Opera House with extraordinary drawings and photographs of clouds suspended above the sea and above the massive plinths of Mayan temples. At Cable & Wireless the ceramic roofs reflect the changing sky and the central oculus creates a cut out which captures the sky in its elliptical frame.

The division between upper and lower worlds has a psychological purpose in the Chapel and at St John's. At Fitzwilliam it refers to the archetypal distinction between the crypt and the world of worship above. At St John's the underworld is secretive, discovered behind the wall of the garden, veiled by the glazed ambulatory created by the artist, Alex Beleschenko. Above are gardens from which rise residential towers glazed at the top like the Prospect Towers of Hardwick Hall, and arranged in ranks of different size to seek the complexity of silhouette found in the works of Vanbrugh and Hawksmoor.

Design can be described as a process of invention but it is better described as a process of discovery, like a journey to an unknown destination. All creative activity is of this kind. Shiva Naipaul wrote of journeys as a metaphor for writing and for life, his observation applies equally to design:

'A journey, one hopes, will become its own justification, will assume patterns, reveal its possibilities – reveal, even, its layers of meaning – as one goes along, trusting to chance, to instinct, to hunch. Journeys undertaken in this spirit – acknowledging, that is, the obscurity of the impulses that have provoked them – resemble a work of the imagination ... When you start off you do not necessarily know where you are going or why'.

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