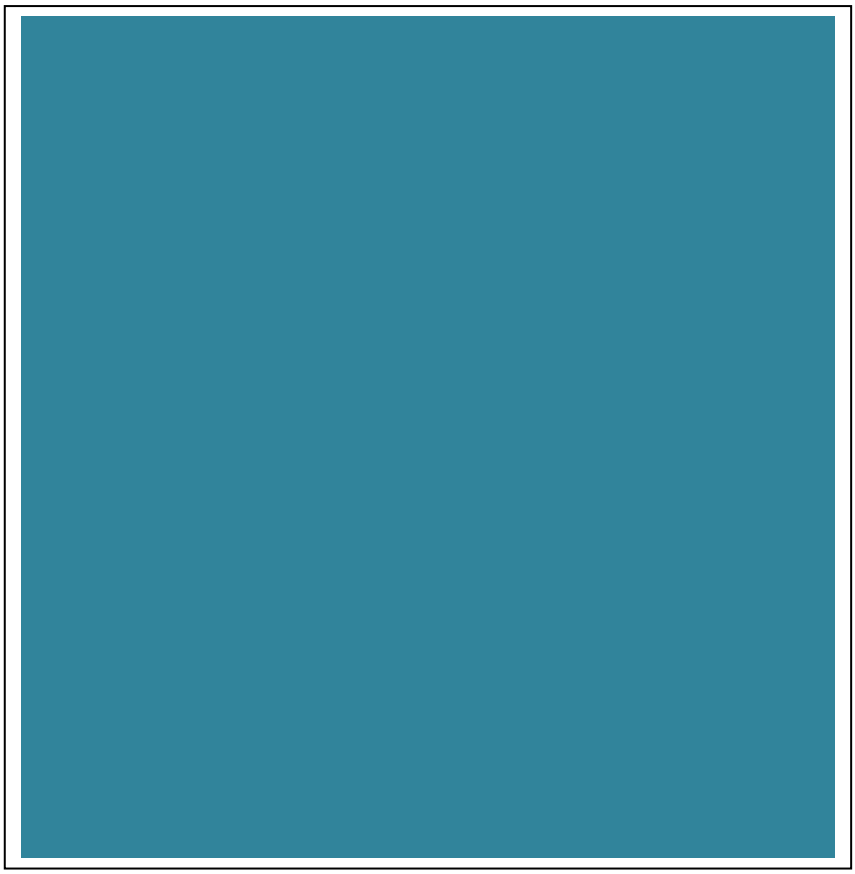
Talking about



Architecture

JTW

2023

Preface

This little work turned out to be more of a ramble than I had hoped, more of a ‘Walking Oxford vol 2’ than the rigorous and structured investigation into architecture I might have managed were I more disciplined. I learned a lot as I went along, at least.

For most of the duration it was entitled ‘Architecture – working title’ which perhaps properly conveys its unfocused nature, but on a late pass-through it occurred to me that it was more about the language used, hence the final name. Just bear in mind that I hadn’t thought of that when actually writing it.

Thanks to everyone who put up with the process, together with the snippets of apparently random detail that I might have come up with over the two years or so of the gestation. Now it is all in one place it will probably be easier to ignore, so that’s good too.

JTW
November 2023

v2: some corrections made; some additional details and footnotes added – and a postscript about other things missed. Also, ‘lanet’ typo fixed on p47 (lancet) and Wykham restored with an extra ‘e’ on p75 – December 2024.

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1 Introduction



Figure 1 Keble dinosaur

This dinosaur has been painted on Keble's Blackhall Road wall since the 1970s. His face was redone after the entrance to the left had been temporarily widened, presumably to facilitate work on the ARCO building in 1995.[1]

What is he doing here? He is emblematic of several themes: continuity and memory; necessary renewal; fitting in.[2] (And, possibly, the conservative nature of building.) Notably, the ARCO building used non-standard bricks; a special order of ordinary bricks was needed to restore the dinosaur's nose.

The non-standard bricks of the ARCO building are puzzling. Keble is forever characterised by the fancy patterned brickwork of its original buildings. Presumably someone decided that bricks were required to 'fit in', but continuing such patterning would be seen as mere pastiche.[3] Some sort of other brick-related fancy was required. The result seems unconnected to the original decoration and strangely arbitrary to me. This is the north-west corner:



Figure 2 Arco brickwork

These bricks are 248 x 102 x 41mm, specially made for the job. (Standard English bricks are 215 x 102.5 x 65mm).[4] What is the effect? And then why are some in stretcher

[1] This vagueness is typical when dealing with buildings. Like trees and elephants, they just work to a different timescale to the human. This makes relating to them hard to track.

[2] And, finally, because I like him! More seriously, I suppose he's a *memento mori.*

[3] I was able to confirm this hypothesis much later: 'The buildings embrace Keble's traditional construction material, using red bricks. However, Mather [the architect] felt aping the patterned nature of the older buildings would be "insipid." His decision to lay the bricks both horizontally and vertically to create a textured surface adds interest and emphasises the fluidity of the curves of the buildings.' https://heritage.keble.ox.ac.uk/history-features/architecture/

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brick#Optimal_dimensions,_characteristics,_and_strength gives a useful table of 'standard' sizes by country. The silly metric measurements are because they are 'really' 8½ × 4 × 2½ inches.

bond and some in soldier courses stack bonded?[5]

Of course, the non-standard bricks advertise that they are 'special'; they draw attention to themselves by their difference. Presumably this is by intent – brickwork, as I said, has always been Keble's 'thing' – though intent is always something of a stalking horse when approaching something made, created, with 'artistic' aspects: the non-functional qualities of art mean that purpose has to be inferred from subjective reaction in the observer, which has to be as unknown to the creator as the creator's intention is to the observer.[6]

To my eye, the stack-bonded soldier courses are particularly awkward, as seeming structurally weak to the point of advertising their arbitrary existence. The lack of headers between stretchers on the horizontal courses is another red flag, one all too commonly met in modern building: the brickwork is less structural than a decorative skin to the inner blockwork, and so anything goes. (I would concede that the gable-end of the ARCO building that faces Blackhall Road, all soldier-laid, is more pleasing aesthetically.)

Similar (although even worse) effects are to be found in the Brasenose Master's Development opposite St Cross, where pre-patterned panels of brick were simply applied to the structure, and in the Jericho Medical Centre, an appalling building elbowing into Walton Street: the latter in particular looks as if the architect, aghast at the volume he had been required to produce, reached for a palette of pattern-effects and spray-painted the surface in a desperate attempt to distract from the awfulness. It doesn't help.

Just what were the architects thinking in these cases?

I was taught (in the 1980s) that the authorial purpose could only be divined from the text. This, of course, was in the case of literature, but the same rule ought to be applied to buildings too. It is up to you, the observer, to work out what they were trying to do by looking and thinking. (The point is that the Creator is a fallible narrator: his or her status as commentator is no better than anyone else's. Except, presumably, to the extent that they might have thought about the Creation longer and deeper.)

Seriously though, is it worth finding out what the architects thought in these cases? Or other experts in the field, who might have specific insights? We seem to lack a secondary literature of architecture – you can find whole shelves of criticism on any and pretty much all combinations of written text, but precious little (in comparison) to do with different buildings.

Having made this assertion, based admittedly on the volumes that might be found in my own house, I thought I had better test it. I tried the Oxford Central Library via the useful remote app Libby, and found only 25 e-titles (and one audiobook) under 'Architecture'; nine

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[5] My information here about the brickwork comes from the Architect's Journal, https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/archive/case-study-arco-building-keble-college-oxford

[6] This has been more complicated since c1900 with the introduction of irony to art (and, possibly, to discourse generally). If something perhaps means the opposite of its overt significance, how can you tell?

of those are in French, one is in fact on Lego, one on building marble runs, and one is 'Life, Death & Art at the Stuart Court' (this is the doubled as the audio book).

'Literary Criticism' seems to include similarly misclassified titles ('The Master Key, an Electrical Fairy Tale Founded Upon the Mysteries of Electricity'; 'On Animals'; and quite a lot of what appear from the titles to be primary texts – the complete works of Virginia Woolf; a lot of books of fairy tales; The Railway Children... Really, what does the library think it's doing?!) but at least gives you a more hopeful 208 (and 8 audio books) to search through.

Perhaps e-books are not a fair basis for comparison; books on architecture – in particular – might be too specialised to be in that format, or not lend themselves to it. Let's try Amazon: books: ah – just where is Architecture?

In Science and Technical? No: this is subdivided between Agriculture & Farming; Astronomy & Cosmology; Biology; Chemistry; Earth Sciences; Engineering; Environment; Geology; Mathematics; Medicine & Nursing; Physics; Research & Development; Veterinary Science. Possibly 'architecture' might fit between Engineering and Environment – but it doesn't.

Nor in university textbooks, a similar list: Business & Finance; Communication & Journalism; Computer Science; Education; Engineering; Humanities; Law; Medicine & Health Sciences; Science & Mathematics; Social Sciences.

Ah, finally, found it! Architecture is in amongst 'Art and Photography', rubbing shoulders with categories such as Business of Art, Radio and Vehicle Pictorials.

Well, perhaps I should have known that that is the traditional classification, but finding Architecture under Art rather than a subset of science seems puzzling to me. Is it because both words start similarly? Or because you use (or used to use) a pencil to draw a design? Is this classification part of the reason that so many new buildings seem confused about form and function?

I found that twisted roots to this cladistics in the history of library classification, including the hegemony of Dewey's decimalisation; also in the Artist as God, or at least prima donna – thanks, Renaissance and Romantics – and the creation in France in the seventeenth century of the *Ecole des Beaux-arts*, which taught architecture. (The *Ecole Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées* did the real work.[7])

At least Architecture here – having found it – lists 'over 60,000 results', though as in the Library, some people are having trouble with their classifications: best-sellers amongst these are apparently 'The UK Air Fryer Cookbook for Beginners and Pros: Easy and Delicious Recipes for Family and Friends incl. Special Air Fryer Desserts', 'Pooping Cats

[7] A divide one would think as fallacious as that found in the English educational system between TEC qualifications and A levels. Will we ever learn?

Calendar 2022' and 'Harry Swotter: A Harry Potter Quiz Book'. One could hardly make these up; but having done so, classifying them as Architecture – or even 'Art and Photography' – seems vaguely criminal.[8]

Literary Criticism ('History and Criticism') is a subset of Poetry Drama and Criticism (again, in the Amazon universe). Classification is again bizarre: primary texts such as Anna Karenina, Frankenstein, Jane Eyre perhaps have critical introductions to lend credence to their inclusion; but weird appearances, such as of 'Free the Tipple: Kickass Cocktails Inspired by Iconic Women' and 'Going to Church in Medieval England', baffle.

As does Amazon's navigation altogether, if I'm honest; I couldn't get beyond the 'best sellers' list in this category, of which two pages; there must be more, because Northrop Frye's 'Anatomy of Criticism' is '10,166 in Poetry & Drama Criticism'.

Blackwells on-line has different but similar problems: you can refine 'Books' down to 'The Arts' – and nothing more granular; nor even an indication of the number of pages of results... Specifically searching for 'architecture' produces an exact 5,000 results, a strangely rounded number; it includes 'Splash! 10,000 years of swimming' and quite a lot about software.[9]

Finally (!) Waterstones[10] offers not only the sort of classification I would expect, but actual numbers of results (albeit with a bizarre maximum result of 10,000 – why, if we're allowed five figures, stop there?), and I can now submit actual data on my assertion:

Art, Fashion & Photography		
Architecture		
Architectural Structure & Design	8,666	
Architecture: Professional Practice	1,820	
History Of Architecture	6,847	
Individual Architects & Architectural Firms	6,596	
Landscape Art & Architecture	9,352	
Professional Interior Design	4,608	
Public Buildings	5,526	
Religious Buildings	2,493	
Residential & Domestic Buildings	5,411	
Theory Of Architecture	3,892	
		55,211
Poetry, Drama & Criticism		
Literature: History & Criticism		
Children's & Teenage Literature Studies	3,884	
Fiction, Novelists & Prose Writers	10,000 +	

[8] Except for needing whole new branches of law to classify such misclassification.
[9] Software, being entirely intangible, likes to claim credibility via metaphor. Often involving the word 'architecture' – 'Fundamentals of Software Architecture', 'AWS for Solutions Architects', etc etc.
[10] https://www.waterstones.com/non-fiction-book

Literary Reference Works	8,608	
Literary Studies		
Literary Studies: Classical, Early & Medieval	10,000	+
Literary Studies: 1500 To 1800	10,000	+
Literary Studies: 1800 To 1900	10,000	+
Literary Studies: 1900 Onwards	10,000	+
Post-Colonial Literature	2,709	
Literary Theory	10,000	+
Plays & Playwrights	10,000	+
Poetry & Poets	10,000	+
		95,201

So the answer is, lit.crit. comes in with about double the titles of architecture. I did rather expect a higher ratio (but who knows just how many over 10,000 those sub-categories come to?) So I checked later against actual shelves devoted to the two subjects in the library and in bookshops. The library was a bit vague, especially with respect to 'lit crit' which was, as on-line, muddled with primary texts – and seemed to be in two different places, at least. Waterstones was clearer: 21 shelves on one, 10 on t'other. So it seems the 2:1 ratio is about right.[11]

And now I realise just how much has already been written I am aghast at the idea that perhaps I might have anything to add. A sense of futility creeps over me, as at the beginning of the week's assignment at university: write about author X's work, and look, the secondary texts thereon already stretch from here to there across the shelves, quite unreadable (obviously because of sheer quantity but – all too-often – because opaque). Surely though, even if unreadable, it is safe to infer that they have already said everything there is to be said already...

And that's before worrying about falling in with the wrong tribe of commentators – the feminists, the structuralists, the deconstructionists, the defenestrators, and goodness knows what nowadays. Not that there is a 'wrong' tribe, but if you spend effort trying to understand one point of view, you risk

a) being persuaded that that – probably rationally-presented – view is all you need, and
b) not having enough time or mental flexibility to take in another viewpoint and its metaphorical constructs.

Where's the objective generalist introduction to start with?!

Nevertheless and meanwhile, to revert to the ARCO brickwork: not only is it visually non-standard, the success of which may have to be argued as matter of subjective aesthetics, but the choice meant that the ties between the two leaves of the wall were problematic.

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[11] Some might question whether the average book on one subject might be a different length from the average of another subject (or, that one field might be more lavishly produced, with illustrations). AEFTR.

> The brickwork did not course with the standard, metric-sized, concrete blocks used for the inner leaf and so tie provision had to allow for the bed joints at different levels between inner and outer leaves.[12]

Not even specialist two-part ties with a sliding anchor, which are available, would work, and a novel solution was required: an expensive and necessarily untested solution. Did the aesthetic merit this?

The narrow bricks look compressed compared to the standard proportions. This might suggest additional strength (and, by association with the appearance of Roman brickwork, longevity) but it also looks mean to me. The unbroken vertical mortar lines suggest comparative weakness – though the way the bricks are laid (made to stand up!) shout that anyway.

However, the real point here is that there seems to be a disconnect between the architect's ideas (as far as they can be deduced from the resulting Object) and the long experience of the users. And there are two types of those: the ones Inside, and those Outside. Is there ever any feedback loop from the users to the architect? Are there ever user-reviews of buildings? I don't think so, though RIBA called 'post-occupancy evaluation' a vital tool as part of the building process and proposed some sort of codification of the procedure in November 2020.[13]

It is not an entirely new idea – few in the field of architecture are (see Vitruvius below, page 9!); a presentation in 1993 compared private sector clients' responses to new domestic, commercial and industrial buildings under various headings, including durability, running costs and 'delight', with responses under the same headings for new cars. The building industry came off badly.[14]

I'll get to the Insiders; for now, I'm an Outsider looking at the ARCO brickwork. It is not purely utilitarian; it has been given variety and difference, presumably for me: the Insiders can't see it, and as for structural security and thermal efficiency (which they would care about, indirectly at least), the fancy-work is presumably indistinguishable from plain standard brick. And those involved in decorating this building for me have spent quite a bit of (extra) money on it. And they will do that with the next building too. It's a bit rum.

A brief side-line on the end-user's perception of thermal efficiency: bricks' thermal properties are independent of their bond. Well, there might be a very small variation depending on the proportion of mortar to brick, see the splendidly technical 'Solid wall heat

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[12] Architect's Journal article again. What they mean is, the standard bricks and blocks used in the typical two-ply modern wall have evolved to work together; non-standard ones might not. The ARCO-building's did not.
[13] https://www.architecture.com/knowledge-and-resources/resources-landing-page/post-occupancy-evaluation-an-essential-tool-to-improve-the-built-environment. Arguably too late for the Arco building anyway, but better late than never.
[14] Cited in the Latham Report, p12, a Government report 'Constructing the Team' about the building sector, 1994.

losses and the potential for energy saving - Classification of solid walls'[15] – don't you just love the tentative precision of a 'final draft'?! – but it is less by an order of magnitude than the difference derived from the choice of brick type, where a face-brick might have an r-value half that of a common brick.[16] And structurally, well, it's just a leaf wall, right? Its main purpose is to provide and protect a cavity.

Not to mention that, meanwhile, the users have absolutely no idea about whether the brickwork between them and the outside is a good insulator or not, first because there is no comparison (they just occupy the inside), secondly because the windows are noticeably colder so would get the blame for any sense of chill, and thirdly the perception of warmth inside is a balance between the heating provided and the insulation – if the heating is effective, the only effect the insulation has is on the bills (and again, no comparison...).[17] In other words, Insiders do not care what the outside of the wall looks like as long as it achieves certain basic purposes, keeping the building up and the wet and cold out.[18]

Back to thinking about how buildings are received. As far as I can see there are three available feedback loops about buildings for architects: immediate awards (which would include articles in trade journals) by other architects or similar; the possibility of repeat work, or work from other clients; and the remote chance that your building might get mentioned in a book on architecture in the medium to long term. It is notable that none of these involve the Insiders.

Once these are enumerated, it is obvious; the decorations are not for me, the passer-by, but for particular Passers-By; I am looking at a peacock displaying, but he is not displaying for me. The external design is for other architects and potential clients, which suggests why so many modern designs appear unattractive to the ordinary passer-by: as with other fashions, the desire for differentiation requires change for its own sake, and in some cases, deliberately aims to alienate the previous generation. Addressed to a specifically-educated subset, the construction's 'narrative' can also reference ideas and earlier discussions that will be recognised by them. As with many specialised discourses, this may well have an alienating effect on those not familiar with the language used.

There is another feedback-loop I suppose, the planning-discussion-negotiation before the building, which does have immediate effects on the outcome. But I was thinking about assessment of the finished article: does it actually achieve its purpose? (Not forgetting that

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[15] Find this at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/657777/WP6_Solid_wall_classification_system_-_structure_final_draft.pdf

[16] https://www.archtoolbox.com/materials-systems/thermal-moisture-protection/rvalues.html. An r-value is a measurement of thermal conductivity.

[17] General practice in institutional buildings is to provide a superabundance of heat centrally, and users vent excess by opening the windows. Which makes discussion of r-values rather moot.

[18] This is a temperate-climate observation betraying my experience and viewpoint. Elsewhere and increasingly (see for example, Big Data in chapter 8) one has to also consider keeping the heat out as well, but the point is the same.

some modern art's 'purpose' is to provoke... does that count?) Do its users, in all their various forms, enjoy it? And, if not, for just how long will they have to put up with it?![19] Interestingly, RIBA have recently added a new stage to their 'plan of work',[20] which used to end on-site with 'hand-over': there is now a review of building performance after one year in section 7, 'Use', which may include a post-occupancy evaluation, and even 'Adaptation of a building (at the end of its useful life) triggers a new Stage 0' – another new stage in the plan of work, prior to 'preparation and briefing'. This was, however, only introduced in 2020.

So, from a brief pause to look at a wall in Keble Road, it is apparent that there is a whole load more to architecture than the ordinary end-user, perhaps recalling nursery experiments with toy bricks and familiar with concepts such as 'safe as houses', 'warm and dry', has thought of.

[19] For basic insiders, 'enjoy' here takes on legalistic shades verging towards 'is it fit for purpose?' Which, surprisingly for a practice with such long history and experience, not to mention the costs and presumed long-term use envisaged, does come up more often than might be wished.
[20] 'The RIBA Plan of Work is the definitive model for the design and construction process of buildings.' Download it at https://www.architecture.com/knowledge-and-resources/resources-landing-page/riba-plan-of-work. Charles Derby of MEBP pointed out the changing nature of this to me.

2 Beauty is in the eye of the beholder

Architecture is a nasty hybrid, a combination of art and mere brute necessity. The soaring ideas of the designer are pinned to earth by gravity, tensile and compressive forces, and the basic scale of the human form; limited too by economics. The unit of the human form – one cannot but help call to mind Leonardo's Vitruvian Man – is the base on which our architecture is constructed.[1]

Yet it seems that the degree of specialisation necessitated by the diversity of modern materials and regulation (all undercut by budgets) means that 'the architect' can all too easily lose sight of one or other of the Vitruvian qualities of *firmitatis, utilitatis, venustatis* – that is, stability, utility, beauty, known about from Classical times; let alone achieve a less-recognised fourth quality that I think is also needed, the ability to harmonise with the surroundings both present and future, something which one might call 'socialisation' or perhaps even 'charity'.[2]

Mind you, even back in the first century BCE the challenge was great. Vitruvius (c. 80–70 BC – after c. 15 BC)[3] spelled it out: the architect

> should be a good writer, a skilful draftsman, versed in geometry and optics, expert at figures, acquainted with history, informed on the principles of natural and moral philosophy, somewhat of a musician, not ignorant of the sciences both of law and physic, nor of the motions, laws, and relations to each other, of the heavenly bodies.[4]

The initial impulse for this book was that I know what I like in architecture, but cannot say for sure just why I like it – and my initial thesis is that the matter of social harmony follows hard on utility and beauty.

In parenthesis, we sort of take stability as read nowadays, though shouldn't really. A lot of effort goes into this prime virtue for a building, though not always enough: 'Quakes in Los Angeles, California, and Kobe, Japan, saw the collapse of buildings and freeways that were built to strict seismic standards.'[5] Of course the standards are being forever strengthened

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[1] No so much because Le Corbusier prescribed units based on this, or because of any theory of ideal proportion, but simply due to the physical characteristics of the body. Architecture is (almost always) for people; a door must be at least about six feet tall and three wide; smaller and it wouldn't be a door for people (though possibly for animals). Similarly with ceilings, and so on. A larger scale is possible but really only for special effects and pretty inconvenient at that, not to mention budgetary considerations.

[2] Elsewhere I try 'neighbourliness' and 'harmony'. You get the drift, hopefully.

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitruvius

[4] https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Vitruvius/1*.html which explains the careful textual work behind both this and the Latin given there: *et ut litteratus sit, peritus graphidos, eruditus geometria, historias complures noverit, philosophos diligenter audierit, musicam scierit, medicinae non sit ignarus, responsa iurisconsultorum noverit, astrologiam caelique rationes cognitas habeat.*
One might object that modern science has moved away from worrying about 'heavenly bodies', but the alignment of your building with respect to the sun, at least, is vital.

[5] https://www.exploratorium.edu/faultline/damage/building.html

with increased understanding about earthquakes; but even then, strengthening *standards* isn't the same, necessarily, as strengthening the buildings.

Even without earthquakes, buildings collapse or fail: the collapsed mega-reno in London is a staple of envy-journalism and the story is re-run every few years. '"A lot of the development is for media rooms and fun things like that. Not usually so their 80-year-old granny can move in,"' the Evening Standard reported someone saying of the collapse of two houses in Durham Place, Chelsea.[6]

Corners are 'inexplicably' cut even in supposedly blue-chip developments. In Oxford, St Cross College's West Wing development (reported initial cost: £10M[7]) developed visible cracks soon after opening in 2019, and, basically, has been out of use since:

> Building consultants found that the original structural design of the building was based on a maximum slab weight that did not provide 'adequate structural capacity to support many heavyweight or solid materials.'[8]

Oops.

A secondary question revolves around the disastrous aesthetic results so often evident in modern architecture. How do they come about? and why are they allowed, by both designers and by their clients?

All this is stimulated – and illustrated – by buildings in Oxford where I live, a city at once beautiful and appallingly ugly. The Big 7 Travel's survey of 2020 found Oxford ranked 44th in the UK's most aesthetically pleasing destinations; on-line comments on the Oxford Times' report of this included:

> - The back of Westgate is particularly stunning. It's really captured the high security prison aesthetic.
>
> - The city centre is generally best avoided
>
> - If you want to see the centre of Oxford at its very best I can recommend getting access to boxed sets of Morse, Lewis or Endeavour. See all the best bits in sunshine with no clutter. No big issue sellers, no cyclists, No buses just an empty city.

And my favourite, by 'nwilson101' on 29th November 2020 05:49 pm:

See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antwerp_building_collapse, branch from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_structural_failures_and_collapses

[6] https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/two-houses-collapse-basement-work-chelsea-b43428.html

[7] https://issuu.com/cherwellonline/docs/week_7_d97ca4820ba5c3/s/20228222

[8] https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/02/20/oxford-colleges-innovative-new-building-falling-apart-three/

> Maybe you overlook the large volume of drunks druggies homeless and lying stealing 'refugees'. Visiting Oxford friends it is far worse than Central London's Soho.
>
> A friend told me of the Oxford academics on buses preying on the innocent naive and mentally I'll.
>
> Is there something in the Oxfird water that causes all the degeneracy criminality and bizarre behaviour?
>
> After 5pm the place is unsafe for women and older folk[9]

I particularly liked the feral academics lurking on buses and the degenerate spelling ('Oxfird'), no doubt due to the mental damage from drinking the water. Not to mention the inevitable conspiracy theory and self-contradiction…

But anyway, the problem is clear, it's people. Well, you might say, the motor vehicle, but they are only there because of the people. Urrgh! Almost as soon as an architect's shiny production has been achieved, it is altered to suit the users (sad-face).

The number of occasions that buildings obviously designed to an aesthetic have had that style almost immediately undermined by the necessary are legion. Retrofitted vents and grills, roof-cluttering aerials, paths of desire across the green space, signage… Even living in some constructs has been deprecated by the originator, to avoid such sacrilege:

> [Mies van der Rohe's] obsessiveness made [Farnsworth] house beautiful, but like a tomb it is happier if its resident doesn't make her presence felt. Faithful to the contempt for comfort shown by Taut and his allies, Mies designed a house that would overheat, steam up in the cold, and – as he fought against spoiling it with mosquito nets – become infested with insects.[10]

But I think this is perhaps an affect of newer constructions, where an external Idea has been imposed on the living; older, more adapted buildings, bear their changes (and occupants) more gracefully.

I diverge. What do I like?

This is one of those really difficult questions one would prefer not to have to answer.[11]

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[9] https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/18905733.oxford-ranks-44th-top-50-beautiful-uk-places/ - comments

[10] Why We Build, Rowan Moore, Picador 2012, p307.

[11] "'You never ask, much, Stephen.' - 'Question and answer has never seemed to me a liberal form of conversation,' said he." O'Brian, The Surgeon's Mate.



Still, I suppose that's par for the difficult course of trying to write a book. Better have a go.

This is 17 Merton Street, Oxford. I like it (deep breath) because of:

- the conjunction of texture, stone, render and wood;
- its domestic scale;
- the proportions of forms in its front;
- the near-symmetry (with interesting differences);
- little details that bespeak care, such as the curved supports to door-hoods and oriel;
- the obvious adaptations to need over time;
- the way it fits in with its neighbours.

Figure 3 17 Merton Street

It is listed as grade II, which means that other people like it too. Historic England explains,

> Listing marks and celebrates a building's special architectural and historic interest, and also brings it under the consideration of the planning system, so that it can be protected for future generations.[12]

The actual citation of 17 Merton Street reads thus:

> House. RCHM 85. Probably originally C17 and altered in C18. 2-storeyed rubble with cellars and a later 3rd storey with a cement-faced timber-framing which overhangs. There are stone bands at the 1st and 2nd floors, a Welsh slate roof and brick stacks. The ground floor has a modern sash window and a plain front doorway with a small hood. In the 1st floor is a modern bay window of 4 lights in a wood frame with a moulded entablature; on each side

[12] https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/what-is-designation/listed-buildings/

of this bay is a single light sash window. The top over-hanging floor has 3 sash windows in moulded wood frames. All the windows except those on the ground floor have glazing bars.

Nos l3[sic!] to 18 (consec) form a group.[13]

There is something pleasingly heraldic in the precise economy of such description. Without the picture, or practice, it is hard to envisage the building from the prose; yet it is entire and specific. Someone skilled has come up with it and although one may be baffled one has to admire the demonstration of such skill. Precise architectural terms are usually beyond one's daily vocabulary – though incidentally *I* would have said that the projecting window on the first floor was an oriel rather than a bay – and they can seem like one of those barriers to competition, fencing off the common man's right to comment.

The pleasing association of number 17 with its neighbouring buildings is caught by Pevsner's *perambulation* of the area, 'on the N side a first group, stucco, stone, stucco, stone...'[14]



Figure 4 Life goes on

The 'domestic scale' is attractive because one can imagine people using it: years of stories going on inside, looping one to another like crochet – the multiple doorbells suggest the shared accommodation of the academic life, descended as it is from the medieval competition for space in the city-centre. Streetview (image capture Jan 2021) shows two large cardboard boxes on the doorstep – perhaps plants, 'this way up' with holes? – and a man in worn jeans and a blue beanie passing by with his dog, carrying a Sainsburys-orange bag. The gutter-edge has been tagged with the blue hieroglyphs that presage water-works. One could imagine living here, small rooms off a tightly winding dark bare wooden staircase perhaps; surprising as one opens the door from the stairs into the rooms, the south-facing windows would catch the sun; from the oriel or higher one would look over the wall across the road into Merton Fellows' garden, and then beyond that to the trees in Christ Church meadow running down to the Thames. Out behind there might be a little patch of garden wedged on the north side, before the huge south range of the Examination Schools blocks off everything else that way.

Perhaps an oddity here is that I have chosen as my first example a piece of architecture with no architect. Is having an architect a problem? Nowadays they are often subsumed in a 'team' (see below, p17), broken up by the polymathematical requirements of Vitruvius.

I suppose it is probably no spoiler to summarise my enjoyment of 17 Merton Street as 'harmony' – it fits in with its neighbours, and history, unique but complementary.

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[13] https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/101369398-17-merton-street-oxford-holywell-ward

[14] The Buildings of England, Oxfordshire, Jennifer Sherwood and Nikolaus Pevsner 1974, p310.

'Today, in the urbanised world, people are spending around 90% of their time indoors.'[15] Well, OK, but is this statement one of those circular things – perhaps 'urbanised' is defined as somewhere people spend 90% of their time 'indoors'? (Certainly 'urban' is in distinction to 'agrarian', where the statistic might be expected to be markedly different.) Not to mention being one of those 'facts' that turns mushy if you think about it:[16] what is the sample-base? How calculated? Is it 90% of *waking* hours - no? Does 'indoors' include a train, for example? What about a car? If 10% is 'outdoors', that's nearly two and a half-hours a day *outdoors* and suddenly it seems that 90% might in fact be an understated figure – are you really outside that much?

Architecture books are full of statements like this. I think it is because of the subject's uneasy balance between hard science and the squishy emotionalism of art. Broad statistics without sources are common. For example, 'buildings generate nearly 40% of annual global CO2 emissions,'[17] or

> the UK's biggest consumer of natural resources is the construction industry, according to Wrap. According [to] their study, the sector uses 400 million tonnes of material every year, which results in 100 million tonnes of waste being produced. To put this in context, this level of waste in construction contributes over a third of the UK's total yearly waste amount.[18]

This last sounds pretty authoritative, does it not? However, in this case, the hyperlink to the 'source', Wrap, is broken, and Wrap (a charity promoting recycling and resource re-use) does not (now) appear to have any comment (no relevant results from searches) on 'building' or 'construction'.

Not that this sort of observation is necessarily wrong – these would seem to pass a basic reasonableness-test[19] – but they are sloppy in general and usually rather definition- and context-light, agenda-leading rather than fact-reporting. If 90% of our time is spent indoors, perhaps it is not unreasonable that that environment should generate 40% of CO2 emissions? Is 100 million tonnes a lot, eg compared to (say) food-waste?[20]

On the other end of the scale, we have remarks like this:

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[15] Indoor Environment and Well-being by Saint-Gobain

[16] The purveyor of this fact relies on the protection afforded by both Science and Numbers: most prose readers will glaze right past.

[17] https://architecture2030.org/why-the-building-sector/

[18] https://www.pbctoday.co.uk/news/planning-construction-news/waste-in-construction/65702/

[19] If you have lived near one of those total property renovations that happen whenever someone buys an expensive house you know what I mean. The skips alone are extravagent.

[20] 'In the UK, 70% of UK food waste (post-farm gate) comes from households, equivalent to a value of over £14 billion a year and 20 million tonnes of GHG emissions' - https://wrap.org.uk/resources/report/food-waste-trends-survey-2021 - so that clears *that* up, at least.

> Buildings are intermediaries in the reciprocation between the hopes and intentions of people, in the present and the past. They are the mineral interval between the thoughts and actions that make them and the thoughts and actions that inhabit them.[21]

And that's before you get into critiques of specific buildings. You can just about see what might be meant by the above riff – maybe, 'people's use of buildings do not necessarily correspond to the way their creators imagined they would be used', or 'the use of a building changes over time' – but if you try to boil it down, it turns out that the *way* it was expressed was probably more important than the content. That is to say, it's just words. I particularly like 'mineral interval'.

The fact of the matter is, we *do* spend a lot of time in buildings, and we, poor feeling reeds that we are, are not very good about thinking consecutively about things; we carry around a huge tangle of emotions, a lot of which get further confused by layers of spiritualism – like an old comfortable jersey, rather sticky from an encounter with honey at breakfast. 'Her projects... aim to "create enduring places where people belong"', or "Storytelling is at the heart of every memorable interior."[22]

'Storytelling' is the posh word for marketing; in politics it is also known as spin. What it means is, selectively presenting information, usually to benefit the teller. As a child one used to be had up for 'storytelling';[23] no-one doubted that that meant 'lying'. That the publication from which the last two quotes above have been taken is one of those glossy productions where the advertisements are hard to distinguish from the editorial content tells the real story.

Nowadays we even get this storytelling with a bit of refurbishment. Exeter College's library work boasted a large bill-board in Brasenose Lane with the vapid annotation "write the next chapter":



Figure 5 Hot air at Exeter

[21] Why we build, Rowan Moore, Picador 2012, p18.
[22] Architect's Digest January 2022 – though it is perhaps unfair to pick on this, other similar examples abound.
[23] Possibly this happened more in Enid Blyton than in real life.

This faux-annotation – see how the pink scrawl corresponds to the ringed-round web-address[24] – has been overlaid with real annotations, considerably more pithy and probably more meaningful – it is hard to tell – just what 'STREAM MANDYS' might signify is unclear to me (possibly not a member of the target audience). I would be willing to bet it means more than the claim that the library is 'for all', however.[25]

I saw another example of this story-telling at Trinity, where their building project was made to stand in for studying at Oxford under the heading 'Transforming Trinity College' – you may read the in/transitive pun of the verb as intended –

> JoiningOxford [sic] can be a transformative experience. Behind these gates, Trinity's own once-in-a-generation transformation is underway to restore key parts of our historic site, to offer a truly accessible and inspiring environment.

I think they should have stopped after 'underway': too many buzz-words tacked on to tick boxes at the end there.

Back to the real world – no-one could really confuse the puffery with actual construction, could they? – should one be judging a building solely by its metrics – dimensions, cost per year, occupancy, material efficiency, longevity? Much easier to evaluate 17 Merton Street on other qualities altogether, such as visual aesthetic. The other information is largely unavailable after all. And look, I was making up stories about it – 'one can imagine people using it'!

Longevity, however, is both (usually) obvious and (I submit) a good proxy for occupancy, efficiency and cost: if any of those had tipped into the awkward red zone for any length of time, the building would have been abandoned or repurposed so radically as to become a different building altogether.

Mind you, I hadn't realised that the two central windows on the ground- and first-floors of 17 Merton Street were 'modern'. Is this an artefact of perspective or terminology – 'modern' meaning perhaps c1880, or modern as opposed to 'original'? Or even, maybe, what I would mean by 'modern', as opposed to 'antique' – ie sometime in the last fifty years?

It doesn't matter. 'Modern' here cannot carry the pejorative slant that it often does in material evaluations; these windows don't stand out as unsuitable for the rest of the building (imagine possible alternatives – metal or plastic frames, plate-glass). It is enough that they are sash windows, like the others (which are presumably also 'modern' as

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[24] Though the implication must be that, in fact, the next chapter has already been written there; the invitation is just a patronising suggestion, scarcely more than a cheer of encouragement, hoo-rah.

[25] The colleges like to pretend their charitable reach includes the public. It doesn't; Jude the Obscure would recognise the feelings of Oxford residents. 'Public-benefit-washing' is often amusing: for example, of the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter (in the next chapter), the University as a whole claims "benefits for the local community include the Jericho Health Centre and easy access across the site between the Woodstock Road and Walton Street" - https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/building-our-future/vision/master-plan-areas/roq

opposed to original, given the original date of the building[26]), and they are not disproportionate (though admittedly larger: appropriately, in their prominent position on the *piano nobile* and all that).

So, 17 Merton Street wears its age well, is nicely proportioned within itself and in its context, and materially harmonious too. It also lacks a named architect, which may be significant. (Chapter 5 addresses architecture versus building.)

Mind you, even new buildings lack such things, though more because they are hidden somewhere in a scrum of specialists (and, one assumes, their cross-linked network of professional liability insurance). This was the sign for the Radcliffe Science Library redevelopment on the corner of Parks and South Parks Roads:



Figure 6 Team at work

I guess the contract administrator, appearing at the top, was responsible for the sign…

The division of labour (ie responsibility) results in a lot of finger pointing when things go wrong. After the St Cross West Wing failure (as above), a spokesman for the architects said: '"Niall McLaughlin Architects were not involved, nor were they intended to be, with the quality control or oversight of the manufacturing process of the glass reinforced concrete panels." He said there were no flaws with the original architectural design.'[27] In this case those responsible (allegedly, as they say) had gone into administration and so weren't able to answer back.

The Latham Report ("Constructing the Team," 1994)[28] addressed exactly this issue. It doesn't seem as if the recommendations have taken root; to read it, though, one can see why not. There is a mass of bureaucracy and a forest of acronyms; changes in law needed to facilitate insurance; long-term training programs, shifts in attitude, collaboration, horrors...

A site that involved so many specialists that architects – Niall McLaughlin again – were appointed to co-ordinate *other* architects – is where the Radcliffe Infirmary used to sprawl.

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[26] Sash windows were first introduced in the latter part of the C17th, The Origin of the Sash-Window H. J. Louw, Architectural History Vol. 26 (1983).

[27] Reported in The Telegraph 20 February 2023, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/02/20/oxford-colleges-innovative-new-building-falling-apart-three/

[28] https://constructingexcellence.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Constructing-the-team-The-Latham-Report.pdf

Now known as the 'Radcliffe Observatory Quarter', it is described as "one of the largest remaining development sites in the centre of Oxford."[29]

Of course 'one of' is a story-telling trope, and a lazy one at that, conveniently ignoring others – such as Osney Mead, which is 44 acres, compared to 10.4 acres at the Radcliffe Infirmary, and 0.5km from the centre (Carfax) as opposed to 1km.[30]

But OK, the site is big and complex, got it. I prowl round it in the next chapter.

[29] https://newoxfordarchitecture.com/radcliffe-infirmary-quarter/

[30] Despite the greater proximity, the University describes Osney as 'just west of the city centre off the Botley Road' - https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/building-our-future/vision/master-plan-areas/osney . I suppose one could estimate where the University 'thinks' the actual centre is, given it has to be 'closer' to ROQ than Osney – perhaps Wellington Square? But then Osney wouldn't be to the 'west' - gotta get those stories straight...

3 Hey, good looking!

Echo-location is not seeing even if it provides the same functional information. You cannot see without light, and for all the controlled-environment of interiors, a lot of external light is a matter of chance. What can we say of value about architectural design (not-chance) in the face of such uncertainty? Perhaps, at most, that the designer allowed for such serendipity. This, on the right, is the Blavatnik School of Government's building in Walton Street:



Figure 7 St Paul's (now 'Freuds') – with BSG

It is probably fair to say that in this case the design with its facetted-curve glass sides was a conscious use of light. Not for this building the flat insistence of a plain reflection, but a prismatic retelling of the surroundings. The photograph above would have shown the reflected sun if I had taken up position to left or right (observe the streaks of light fanning out on the road). Walking past the building you are surprised to catch repeated glimpses of yourself. Looking at it in context one sees vertical slices of its neighbours, revealing them in a new and unexpected way. And although you can never see these neighbours in their entirety, you can see at least a bit of all of them from wherever you stand.

The accompanying blurb eschews the obvious metaphors about looking at things in a different way; rather,

> its design represents the values of openness, collaboration and transparency that are key to the School's overall mission of improving public policy.[1]

[1] https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/our-building

The first two concepts presumably relate to the interior; and 'transparency', in a glass-walled building, especially one with something to do with government, is a well-worn metaphor both in architecture (the new glass dome to the Reichstag in Berlin, City Hall in London...)[2] and in charity and governance.

But given that this fragmented transparency obscures more than it reveals or transmits – even more than the brightly reflective walls of glass that dominate late twentieth-century buildings – could some sort of irony be intended? It would be a rarely honest moment in the literature; I doubt it.

It is a startling building in the immediate Walton Street context, next to the fraud of Freud's, the nineteenth-century Greek temple of a church, and opposite the classical mass of OUP. To its south sits 119A Walton Street, a curious range of smaller buildings with barley-twist chimneys now housing Somerville College's nursery.



Figure 8 119A Walton Street – with the BSG looming – landing? – behind it.

119A is "formerly St Paul's School. 1848. In the Gothic style. Rendered, with some structural terracotta. 2 storeys. Canted castellated bay. 2-light diamond lattice windows. Gabled porch.

[2] "Architects like glass because it allows them to wrap up noble sounding concepts like transparency into a single magic stuff, which concepts can then be claimed simply by specifying it. It makes them masters of philosophy when they open a glazing catalogue." Why We Build, Rowan Moore, Picador 2012 p197.

Slate roof. Restored 1888 by H W Moore."[3] The rest of Walton Street is also mixed though with an underlying basis of Victorian and Edwardian red-brick sub-gothic.[4] The BSG is a modern shock in the context.

David Freud, owner of the temple, objected to plans for the BSG on the grounds of size and height compared to his building, a standard nimbyist reaction though expressed with care and detail under various headings over 17 pages.[5] After the event, it remains a subjective judgement whether this new intrusion into Walton Street is overmastering or if, helped by its glassy bright-work, it manages the difficult balance between being itself and fitting in. I think the use of both glass and a curved plan reduce the subjective volume, as does it being set back from the street; while the reflections are a polite acknowledgement – even enhancement – of its neighbours.

Looking at the planning submissions is salutary (and, with respect to the irreconcilable viewpoints, so typical of modern discourse, depressing). However, at one point English Heritage's letter amusingly picks up the architects' language about the proposed height of the building: 'the applicants perhaps do not do themselves any favours by claiming the upper storeys as a "knowledge and learning sensor", a phrase they seem unable to explain.' It is all too easy to apply such metaphorical language to architecture, in an attempt to encompass the intangible qualities of hoped-for use and experience.

Most obvious from even a short perusal of writing on architecture are the verbs 'articulate' and 'mediate'. All subjects have their technical language, necessary for the careful distinctions that have to be made beyond day-to-day diction; but the (over-)use of fluffy terms like these is both characteristic and amusing:

> doors transcend the demands of function by ***mediating*** the moment of entering and leaving a building or room...[6]
>
> Manhattan is helped by its public structure of gridded streets, parks, and museums, which frame and ***mediate*** the force of the skyscrapers...[7]
>
> Gothic builders used 'blind' arcades decoratively to ***articulate*** wall surfaces...[8]
>
> ...so start with this: ***articulate*** the in-between. Make a welcome of each door, a countenance of each window...[9]

[3] https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1047104?section=official-list-entry
[4] See later about North Oxford Gothic, p44.
[5] https://mycouncil.oxford.gov.uk/documents/s13668/Appendices_%20Blavatnik%20School%20of%20Government.pdf
[6] 100 Ideas that Changed Architecture, Richard Weston, Laurence King Publishing 2011, 'Door'.
[7] Why We Build, p199.
[8] 100 Ideas That Changed Architecture, 'Arcade'.
[9] Aldo van Eyck 1962 'Place and Occasion' – quoted in 100 Ideas that Changed Architecture under 'Place'.

The amusement comes from trying to guess what is actually meant – 'dramatising' for the first above? 'ameliorate' or 'moderate' in the second? 'break up' or 'vary' for the last, and 'express' for last?

So with the BSG's 'knowledge and learning sensor'... these quirks of architectural language arise because architects – and commentators thereon – are trying to bridge the gap between the material solidity of the building itself, and the uses to which it will be put. The latter is much more interesting, and might somehow be made to accrue to the credit of the former via anthropomorphisation – the *building* does something, rather than the *occupants*.

After all, the occupants might not in fact behave as intended: they might merely go through the door to get to the other side, like so many chickens.

It may be seen that new buildings often have a 'narrative', at least according to those in the know, something they share with a lot of other static art nowadays. This extension of metaphorical language might be excusable as an attempt to dramatise the interaction of the occupants with the building, but alas is all too absurd when the *buildings* act out so often.

Architects do sometimes take matters into their own hands with light, when they use artificial forms thereof; while more acceptable than it used to be, with lower-power LEDs, one still feels a bit dubious about the practice. It feels perhaps cheating, or unnecessary, somehow.



Figure 9 Radcliffe Humanities building – pre-dawn lighting

One can't deny, however, that the use here on the former Radcliffe Infirmary has dramatically picked out the building's design in an effective way. The internal lighting in the reception hall[10] is also intriguing, if, again, puzzling as to purpose.[11] Indeed, it might be seen as mere waste, and one has to wonder why buildings are lit up like this. I suppose it is but a part of making something look attractive for the beholder, and so, perhaps no more wasteful than any other aspect of decoration. The prioritisation of sight over other senses is a problem for a lot of architecture though, and that a lot of descriptive writing about buildings is little more than a sort of facebook-commentary, like 'wow, at least an 8, maybe 9', however it might be glossed with technical language, does not improve the chances of a sensible assessment of sound or comfort, or other qualities such as maintainability and efficiency.

> Built in 1759-70... The conventional design is by Stiff Leadbetter... The building is three storeys high and thirteen bays long, the two outer bays either end being in slightly projecting wings. Inside a fine vaulted corridor. In the C19 much was added, and in the C20 more. The result is a missed opportunity.[12]

This describes the Radcliffe Infirmary as shown above; the dense technical description has to be followed closely. However, the last comment is so laconic as to be baffling; opportunity for what? It is a 'could do better' type of report, merely signalling the superiority of the writer; it is an attempt to disguise a subjective assessment as objective fact.

The 'opportunity' seems to be something to do with the additions (or lack of them?) and maybe refers to the whole site, not just the 'Infirmary' itself. It is not quite clear how these additions, invisibly round the back, detracted from the main building's façade as described, though.

[10] The original building had an outside split-stair up to doors on the first floor where the entrance was. It was removed somewhere between 1830 and 1900. 'Universal design' – disabled access for all – presumably kyboshed the reinstatement of this feature, though it would have made more sense of the strong horizontal band above the lower windows.

[11] Maybe the cleaners just left the lights on.

[12] Sherwood and Pevsner, Oxfordshire, p305

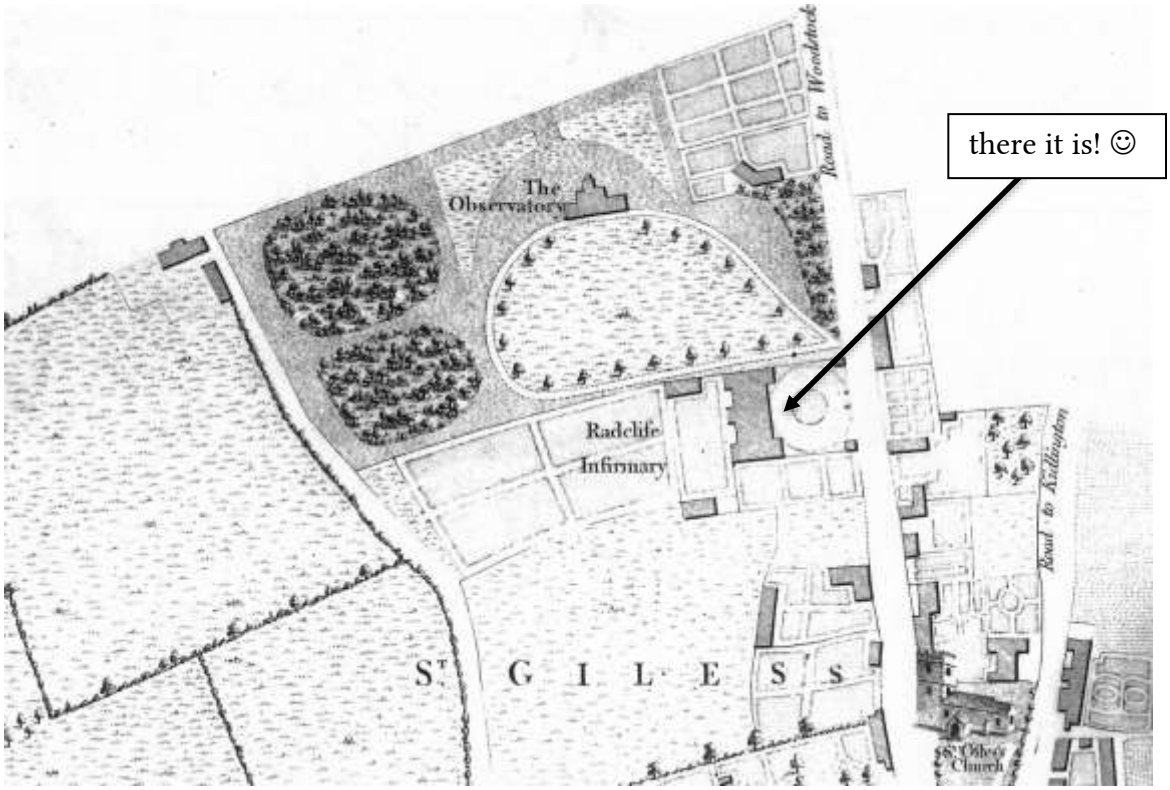


Figure 10 Infirmary site c1790 – from Davis map

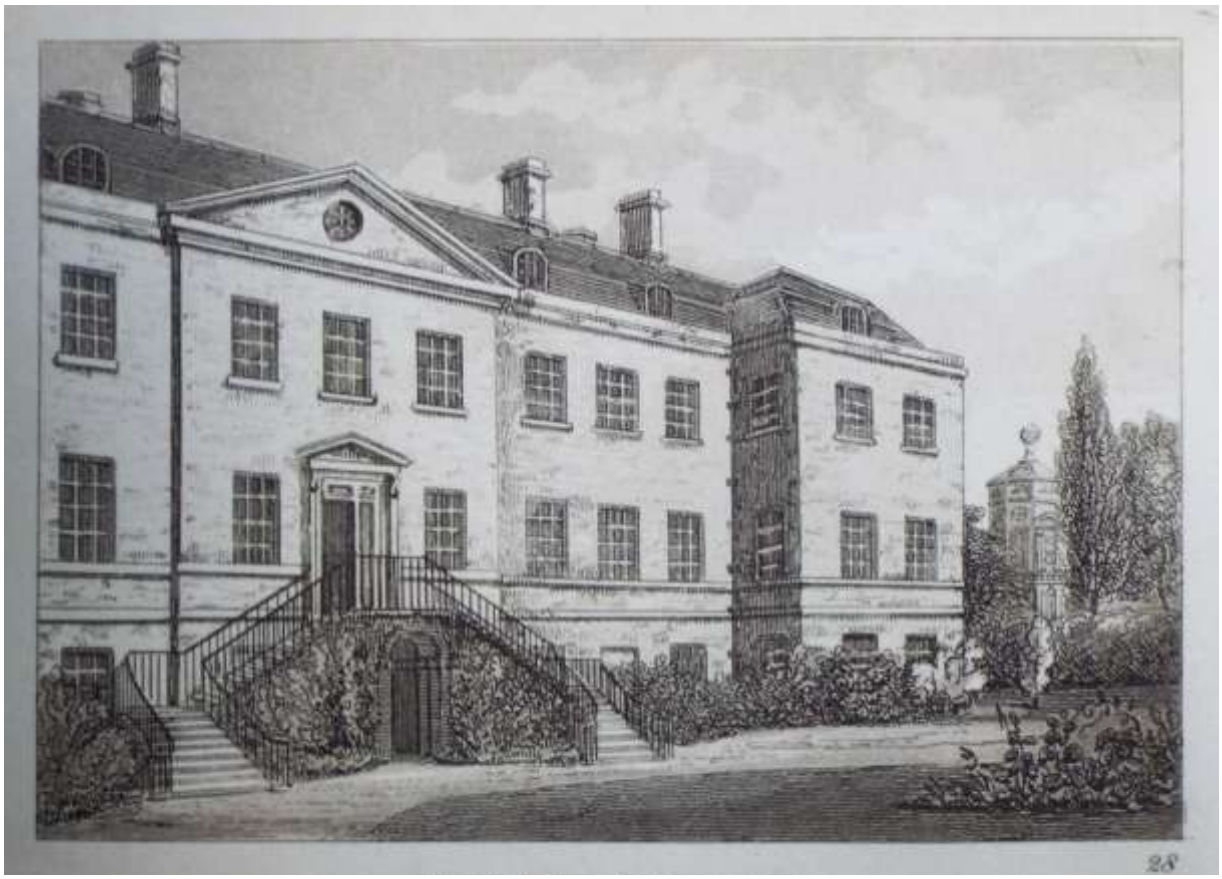


Figure 11 The Radcliffe Infirmary c 1824 – the Observatory visible back right

Creepers grew all across the the building in the nineteenth century, rather like one of those huge Victorian beards. The small window in the roof just to the right of the central pediment had been inserted by about 1900; the staircase was removed during changes in 1933.

The site itself was built up around the original building, particularly in the nineteenth century. The large wing to the front-south of the 'main' building was added sometime between 1850 and 1876,[13] and business 'around the back' was piecemeal and ad-hoc; by the time I experienced it personally and at length in 1973, there was a warren of badly-maintained corridors with scuffed floors, odd ramps adjusting for levels, doors and discoloured heavy plastic 'curtains' trying to keep the drafts out, joining a motley collection of buildings.

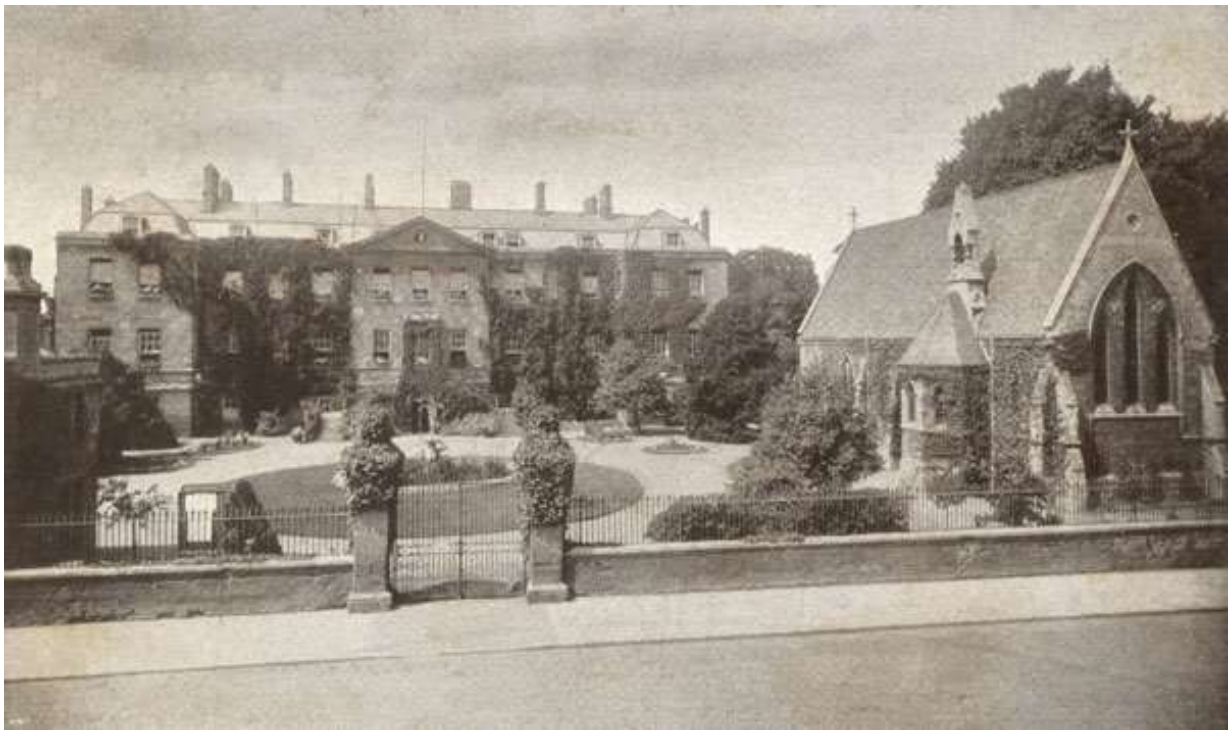


Figure 12 The Radcliffe Infirmary c1908 – creepers!

[13] Hoggar's plan of 1850 does not show it; the 25-inch OS map of 1876 does. See *Development of the former Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford, 1770–1900*, Nigel Jeffries, Tim Braybrooke, Jacqui Pearce & Angela Wardle (2015), Post-Medieval Archaeology, 49:2, 238-268.



Figure 13 Radcliffe Infirmary site c 2005, from the north west. The original building at the top-centre of the picture is almost lost amongst the crowd.

So, in the end, what was the 'missed opportunity'? Could this have all been laid out in a holistic design, finished in stone with Georgian forms? Alas, the hand-to-mouth nature of health-funding, outwith extraordinary donations, meant such a scheme was never likely.

A new layout is arising on that whole site as I write, what is now called the 'Radcliffe Observatory Quarter' (and let's not get into the faux-authenticity of *that*). Interestingly, the BSG is seen to be part of this new whole, which perhaps calls into question more sharply whether that rather unusual building relates to its neighbours, both old and new. This was the 'masterplan' in 2008:

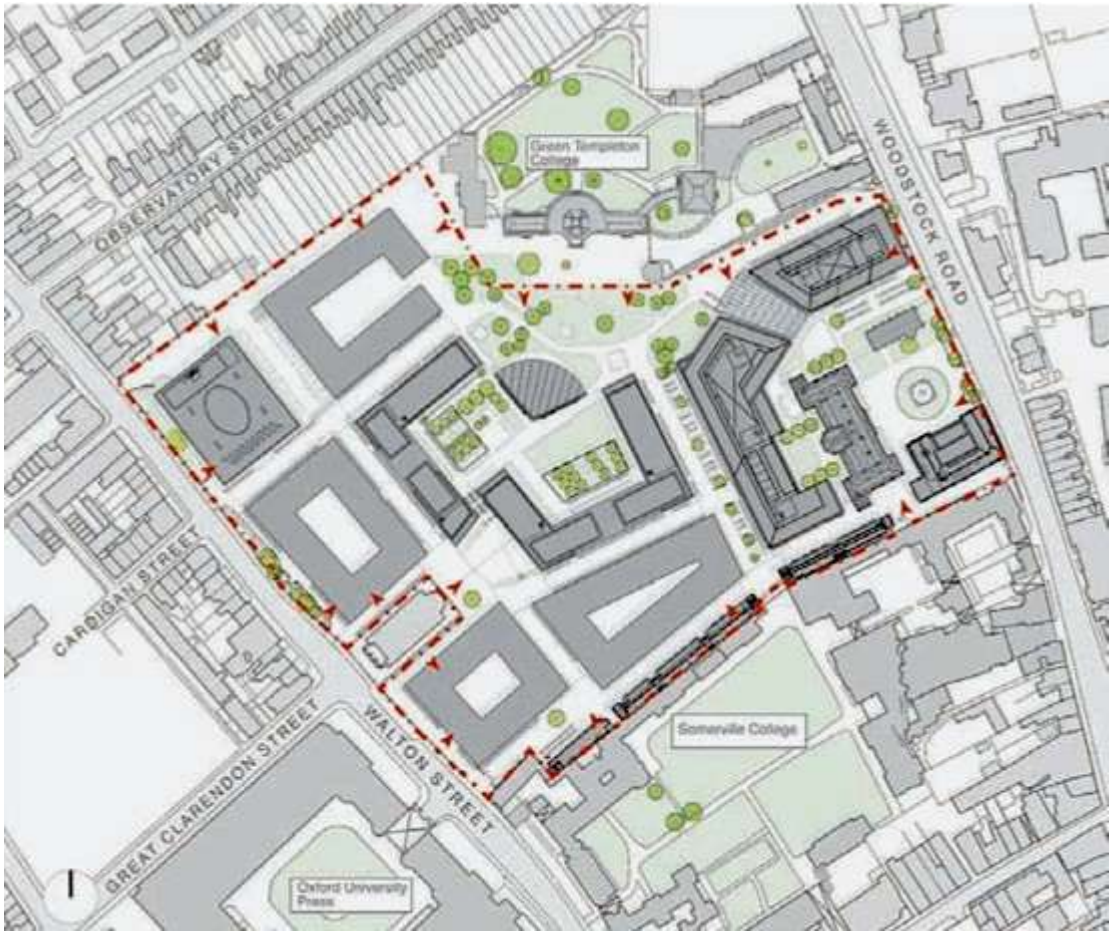


Figure 14 ROQ Masterplan 2008

Raphael Viñoly Architects won the masterplan design competition,[14] though the above plan is credited to Niall McLauglin Architects ('appointed to coordinate the plan'). It is immediately obvious that although the first building, the Mathematical Institute – the building curling around the north and west of the old Infirmary – matches this plan, the BSG does *not*, apart from being in the general location opposite OUP: it is outlined here as a blocky thing with courtyard.

After many years of the central space between the BSG and the Maths Institute being just that (and very nice too, even as a piece of wasteland), it is now being filled in with what is to be called the Schwarzman Centre for the Humanities (or some extended version of this name;[15] SCH will do though).

Perhaps to nobody's surprise, the ground plan for this looks nothing like the masterplan either:

[14] Plan and info from https://newoxfordarchitecture.com/radcliffe-infirmary-quarter/
[15] "The Stephen A. Schwarzman Centre for the Humanities"? - https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/19979874.150m-university-oxford-humanities-building-approved/

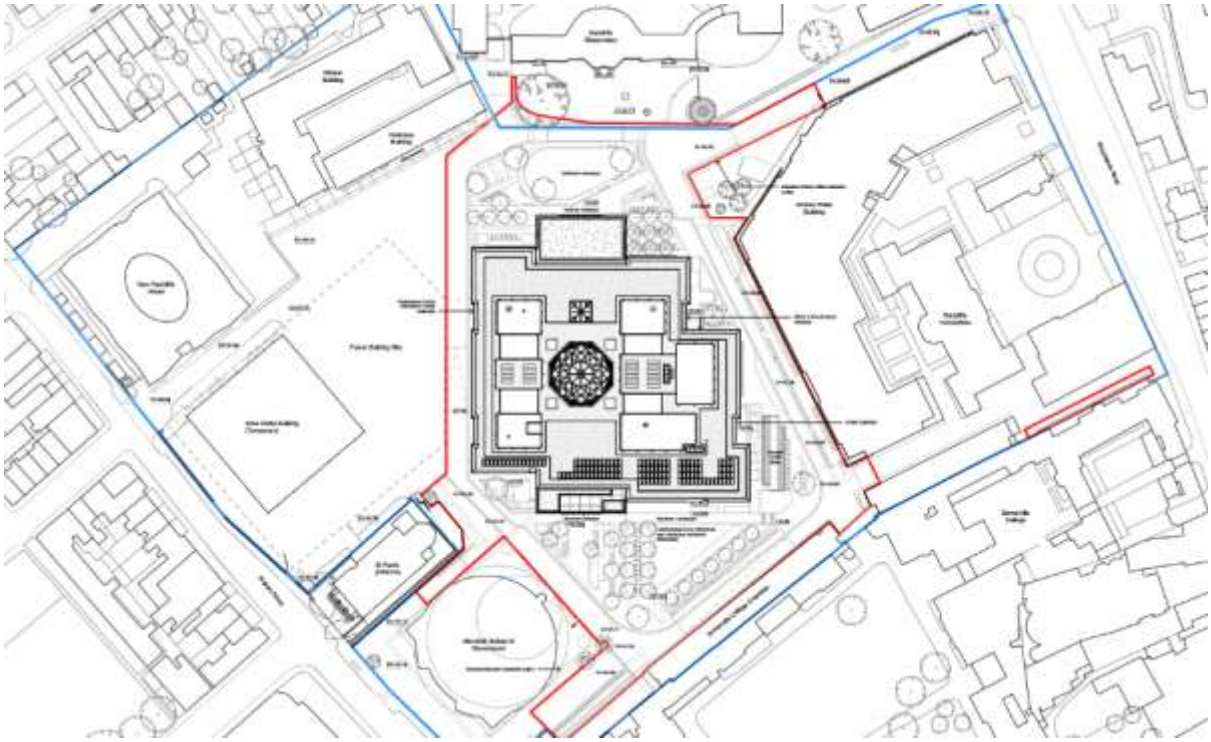


Figure 15 SCH site plan: sweetness and light in the ROQ?

The Oxford Preservation Trust, always good for an opinion on development, commented with respect to the planning application:

> This development is an individual high-quality building on a surprising scale, which is intended to have its own individual architectural merit.
>
> It needs to be sensitive to the setting of some of Oxford's foremost historic buildings, most notably the Grade I Radcliffe Observatory, and sits amongst several substantial and impressive new buildings which have yet to come together to create a place of character and a cohesive whole.[16]

Some alarm bells ring on the 'surprising scale', the slight emphasis on 'intention', and the point about the individual buildings in the area not coming together as 'a cohesive whole'. Whether it is *actually* sensitive is rather left hanging.

In fact, it is entirely clear that, really, despite the 'masterplan', we are not going to get that cohesion. (The SCH is intended to be treated on its 'own'.) It is a bunch of prima-donnas on a single stage.

[16] OPT quotes from https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/19979874.150m-university-oxford-humanities-building-approved/

Well, maybe the largely utilitarian health centre in 'New Radcliffe House'[17] over on the west corner was never much of a prima-donna. As far as that goes, "the architects [Hawkins Brown] explain that

> The building fills the square 'city block' identified by the Masterplan with its major elevation and public entrance facing onto a pedestrian route that will cross the site. The other elevations are carefully screened to offer privacy to examination rooms at ground floor and to avoid overlooking of adjoining neighbours on upper floors. The centre of the building has a huge circular lightwell that provides a calm space for patients waiting to see their doctors. On the upper floors the lightwell offers cross ventilation and daylight into what would otherwise be a deep plan building.[18]

In other words, Hawkins Brown didn't realise that the blocks on the 'masterplan' just showed approximate location of the units. Their effort to make the block less, well, blocky, were as a result limited to a few feeble flexions to the facade and then spray-painting some spurious brick-textures onto that. The result looks arbitrary and awful.

At least the SHC aligns with the Observatory building, and thus, in an immediately striking way from the plan above, with the points of the compass (the Observatory having reason for such alignment); but not much else would seem to cohere, in plan at least. We may be relying on trees. Though 'landscape shown indicatively' on the plan.[19]



Figure 16 SCH facade per architects' drawing – with people drawn in

However, all is forgiven as the Humanities Centre is to 'draw people in' rather than exclude them, plus, wow, donation of £150M, right?![20] And the architectural images of the interiors

[17] This is also known as the 'Jericho Medical Centre', see also p2

[18] https://manchesterhistory.net/architecture/2010/newradcliffe.html

[19] "See Landscape Architect's information", it goes on in print too small to see on my extract.

[20] Facilitated by what is excitedly described as "the largest donation [to the University] since the Renaissance" - https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2019-06-19-university-announces-unprecedented-investment-humanities - a usefully colourful phrase picked up by the Guardian, Telegraph, Financial Times, Evening Standard, Forbes, NBC News, UK Fundraising etc etc. (Now *there's* story-telling!) Oddly the 'donations' total £185M elsewhere - https://www.schwarzmancentre.ox.ac.uk/ - and on the hoarding around it, 'the single biggest project in the University's history, this building is the result of the single largest gift the University has ever received: £175 million...' Given the shoddy prose here I'm guessing this is just wrong. The Oxford Martin School also claims receipt of 'the largest benefaction made to Oxford in its history' so that's something else -

are indeed attractive – even if the exteriors are rather less so.[21] In fact, the exteriors might justifiably be described as 'an opportunity missed'. About the only thing one can say for this mish-mash of non-styles, dominated by cuboid elements, is that it is in 'Oxford' stone. For which, I suppose, we should be grateful – small mercies, and all that. And, don't forget, available to the public...

Contrast this facade – or really, just 'side' – with that presented by the cleaned-up Radcliffe Infirmary building that we started this chapter with. That is a harmonious whole, balanced and comfortable with itself, whether 'bearded' by creepers or freshly restored to its original eighteenth-century design; maybe not very original, but its layout and structure are understandable.

Of course the world is more complicated now, so allowances have to be made, but the Radcliffe Infirmary only cost £4,000[22] – which is reckoned to be about £1M today.[23]

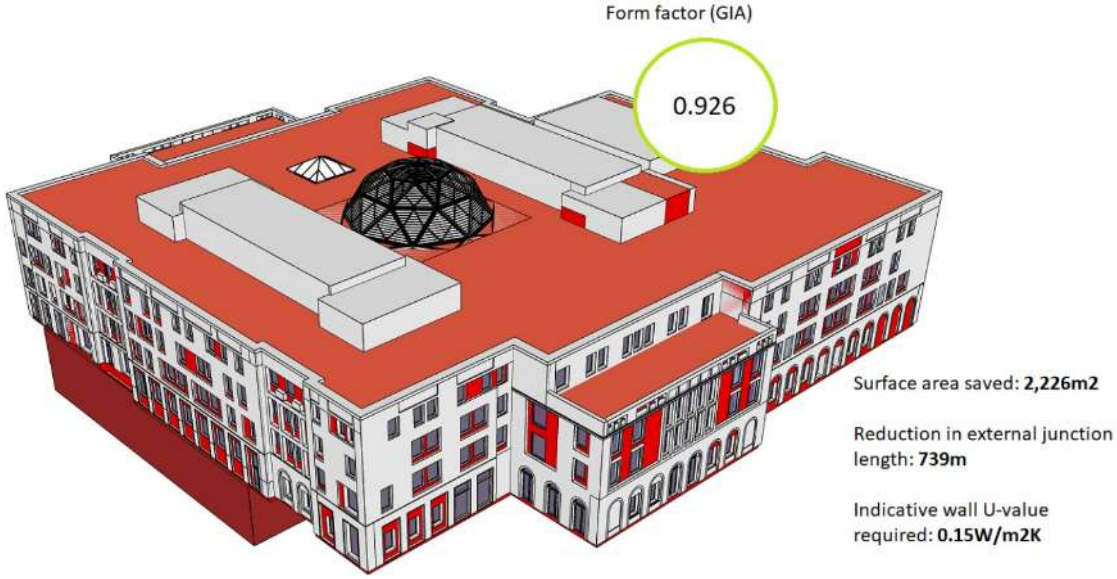


Figure 17 Orthogonal view of SCH (with incidental heating calculations – the overall blockiness is the point here)

What is one to make of this overall form?

And why, despite all the complexity – which, after all, is surely more to do with internal considerations of plant and equipment, and refinements of energy management – do we

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https://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/about/ - tho' $100M in 2005 and $50M in 2009 (https://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/news/challenge-success/) is *probably* less, even with an extra $50M because the second part was a 'matched program' that got others to chip in too...

[21] See https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/hopkins-contest-winning-oxford-university-humanities-plans-revealed

[22] "The sum of £4,000 was released for the new hospital" by the trustees of Dr John Radcliffe's estate: https://www.ouh.nhs.uk/hospitals/jr/radcliffe-infirmary.aspx

[23] https://www.in2013dollars.com/uk/inflation/1770?amount=4000 : "£4,000 in 1770 is worth £933,388 today." And OK, the SHC is also going to be some 4-5 times larger than the RI too, and that's just in terms of ground-plan area. But 150/5 – even 150/15 – is still quite a big ratio.

jettison the fundamentals of elegance? I know I'm verging on the subjective here, but really? Is someone going to claim this is elegant?

4 Memory lane (sight v sense)

Introductory books on architecture often include or circle around a plea that the reader should attempt to consciously engage with the building, and quite right too. An odd little ladybird-style book 'What Adults don't know about Architecture'[1] puts it in a nutshell:[2]

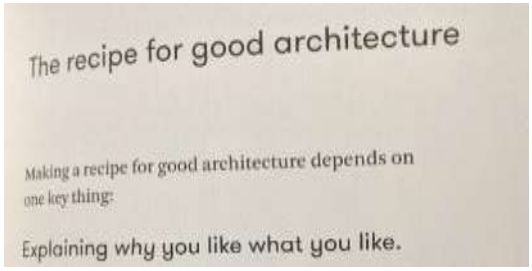


Figure 18 The Recipe For Good Architecture – simples!

It goes on, 'A lot of buildings and places are rather ugly…' Ugly is a visual quality, only, and the book is really only about looking and thinking. Not a bad start, but…

Light is of course vital, but often beyond the architect's possible imagination: the grazing sun along the fieldstone below (scarcely once or twice a year down the northern edge of Oriel Street, one suspects); unexpected shadows of details, often highlighting necessary human use rather than a building's plan.



Figure 19 Light on fieldstone wall in Oriel Street

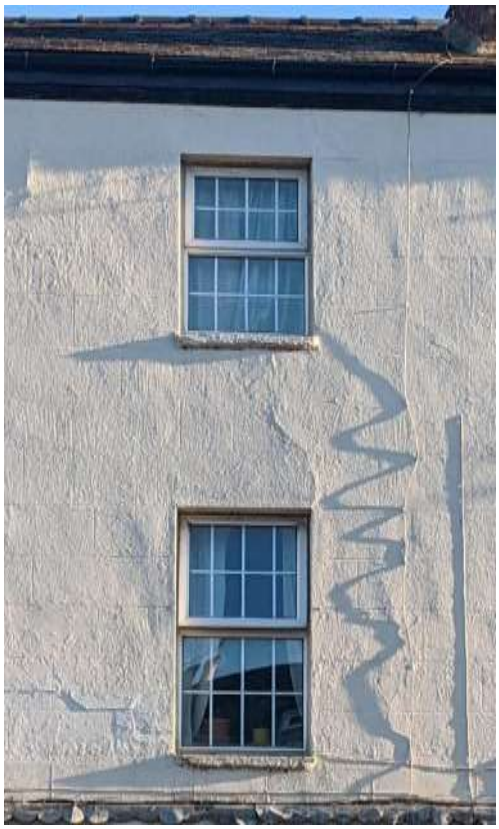


Figure 20 Shadows on stucco, St Clements

[1] One of an apparently authorless series, I think produced by 'The School of Life', explaining things simply: 'This engaging … guide is designed to help children (and their favourite adults) to understand how buildings work and how we might create the better looking world we all crave and deserve.'

[2] A curved nutshell. I was trying to hold it open without bending it (let alone buying it) in Waterstones.

The rough stonework of the Oriel Street wall may actually have been chosen by the designer, and the contrast with the smooth stone surrounds to the windows deliberate; but what chance this exaggeration of the roughness by the sun?[3] Also of interest in this picture is the literal absurdity of the yellow-line-painters, who have added that delightfully narrowing edge to the boundary between cobble and tarmac even as it dwindles to bicycle-width.

Rather similarly whimsical is the shadow of the TV-cable climbing the St Clements house-front to the right, though even more a matter of chance. TV-cables (and others) winding up and down and across buildings are prime examples of retrofitting for new requirements, something architects aren't good at anticipating. In this picture the sun is at such an angle that it picks out the slightest marks of the stucco, so that one can almost feel the texture of it by looking; the unexpected wiggle of the straight smooth cable's shadow is a delightful contrast.

Despite these felicities – and what walk about a town is complete without them? – the priority of sight over other senses is surely ripe for some sort of re-evaluation, a promotion towards a no-platforming, gender-choosing #me-too crusade.[4] The wish to look good, to attract other people, to influence them for one's own purposes; is this not at heart some sort of lie? Some misuse of power? Just because a building looks good does not mean that its heart is. After all, the inside experience may be quite other; glass-walled buildings may be too hot if the sun shines (or simply, *too* open to the public!); the acoustics may be awful; the ventilation inadequate... And vice versa, I suppose in all fairness: the SCH in the previous chapter is or will be a blocky chunk, but inside airy atrium and concert hall.

Yet judgement of all those aspects requires access to the interior; quite possibly, more than access, maybe at least a day or two's use, and then again in different seasons. Reports of such experiences are scarce; academic studies are rather generalised (perhaps necessarily; but they also tend to be just that, too, for example kicking off by defining 'experience' from first principles or at least Plato, Descartes, Locke, Hume and Kant, before getting stuck into – or just in – structural or post-structural relativism[5]), and there doesn't seem to be a forum for reporting actual user feedback about their work environment. I thought maybe GlassDoor might include something, but nothing specific, only chance remark.[6] I guess most office people[7] don't think about how their workplace might have an effect on their experience; one gets the job first and worries about whether it is open-plan or not afterwards – and after *that*, who dictates the air-conditioning or heating (or even, window-

[3] Probably only possible for a few days a year at this angle down this alley.
[4] Word's 'inclusiveness' checks on the draft-so-far suggest 'artisany' (what?!) for 'craftsman' and objects to 'forefathers' and 'landladies' – the latter, rather hilariously, perhaps better replaced with 'landlords'. I think a new line in checking for sight-prioritisation not inappropriate.
[5] See for example, Carolina Coelho, *The Living Experience as a design content: from concept to appropriation* (https://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/606). Discussed further on page 32.
[6] For example, noted as a 'con' for Wenn Townsend, Oxford: 'The office building is a bit quirky but I liked it.'
[7] Those who work with their hands probably have more practical views about layout, lighting and so on.

opening), overhead versus localised lighting, hard furnishings with echoing effect or a sonically damped environment...

I can draw on my own experiences as an auditor, who (in those days) had to routinely attend clients' premises for one or two weeks, but it was a long time ago now and although I remember the varied experience was one of the most interesting aspects of the job, I don't think I was particularly alert to whether the differences arose from the people themselves or could be at least partially attributed to their environment. Moreover, auditors tend to be unwanted guests, and feel themselves so: parked in portacabins, filing areas, storage cupboards; and their intrusions into other people's workspaces often awkward and usually kept brief. Then again, recollection of the assignment was often clouded by how well it was run (or not).

The worst place I experienced was F G Alden Heating, down Aristotle Lane. The building – long since demolished – was a single-storey breeze-block affair finished inside and out in what one might could call nicotine-stain cream.[8] It was a rabbit-warren of twisty passages and closed doors giving onto messy, unclean offices piled with papers. No-one seemed to know anything, except that the person who might know was out. When they might come back was also unknown, of course.

For deliberate insult, Blackwells Publishing in the Cowley Road took some beating. It was quite a big job for us, and we had a senior manager and a senior as well as two juniors, one being me, on site by about 10 o'clock[9] on the Monday the audit was due to start. When we arrived no-one seemed to expect us. Finally the finance director was caught between meetings with enough time to bark that we were in the portacabin in the back car-park; led out there through the rain, we soon found not just the usual need for basic financial information to start us off with, such as a trial balance or bank reconciliation, but for tables and chairs... I remember we calculated the gross hourly charge for this hanging-around while we did that. However, the actual offices, a converted and modernised Victorian building,[10] were much nicer than our reception, and included (to my startlement) showers for the staff – an exceptional touch back in the 1980s. On the other hand, the car park had an unusual number of Audi Quattros – it seemed a job-lot of these unnecessarily expensive devices had been bought for the directors recently – and maybe the showers went with such lavishness.

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[8] This was a good colour choice inside at least because everyone smoked in those days. Or maybe it was a *result* of the smoking.

[9] The first hour or so of the week was spent on admin, most specifically, trying to remember how one had spent every six-minute unit of the *previous* week for recording on the timesheet. 1.0 was a safe allocation to admin for Monday, at least. This rather inefficient system at least had the merit of allowing clients to sort out their own start-of-week thoughts before we arrived.

[10] *Something* at least appears in the right place on the 25in OS map 'Berkshire 6.3' surveyed 1873. It seems to have been rebuilt since I was on the premises – there is a date-plaque '2010' around the corner in Marston Street where the entrance to the carpark had been.

Perhaps these glimpses were inadequate to assess the architecture. However, thirteen years in the Boswells building[11] in the Critchleys offices spread over three or four floors gave me ideas about what might be termed office-ergonomics. The offices were quite old-fashioned in themselves, wooden partitions with small-paned glass panels; but it *was* an old-fashioned time. We all had our own electronic calculators: the firm only provided one or two push-button pull-lever adding-machines.[12] Computers for personal use were undreamed of when I started; they came in gradually, on a communal basis, over the next decade. As for phones – audit staff had to ask the fierce senior secretaries in reception to place telephone calls, and they might well question why a wet-behind-the-ears trainee might want to do that.[13]

Each floor was accessed from an internal staircase of hard stone, three flights at 90-degree turns around an echoing well per floor, dimly lit, walls a brownish cream, metal handrails. During daylight hours, when the front door at street level was unlocked, the public would occasionally wander up this staircase (perhaps having missed the cafe on the first floor), since reception was through a door off to one side as one went up. Mezzanine levels off this stair had a couple of loos at the back of the building: one floor for women and the other for gents. As all the floors looked the same you had to be check careful which door you went through.

Further confusing the architecture there were a couple of other straight wooden staircases running between floors separate from the main stairwell, each in different positions on the floor plan and not linking all the floors. A sort of snakes-and-ladders-like arrangement.

For my first five or six years in this building the top floor was another business, with odd, late-afternoon hours, and during these sometimes our ceiling on the third floor would thump and rattle to the efforts of the dance-studio above. Critchleys later took over this space and it became an oddly modern open-plan audit department,[14] quite attractive in some ways – not least in the sense of space. By then there were four PCs arranged around a central pillar, with a library of 3½ inch floppy disks, one per client, so that was progress.[15]

Both before and after the audit department taking over the top floor, there was departmental schism, staff in other areas hardly recognised, their work unvalued, partners

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[11] Even this is no longer as it was, of course; Boswells closed, after an extraordinarily prolonged decline, in 2019, and the building is now 'The Store', an hotel.

[12] I *think* they could also do subtraction.

[13] This had its uses. 'The partner called them recently' would probably mean, 'don't bother them again' or at least check what that was about.

[14] On the floor below when I joined, we had been 'A' and 'B' group, each with a mixture of audit and accounts work and important equipment, such as scissors, jealously labelled. The 'audit department' on the new floor was itself an innovation.

[15] Earlier there had been one PC in its own room, with orange text on its monitor. Somewhere in-between we also acquired three 'portable' – barely 'luggable', in fact, at 12lb/5.4kg – machines with tiny screens (6 inch monochrome, no backlight) – stand forth the Amstrad PPC 640!
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amstrad_PPC_512

far away, tax scornful of audit,[16] and us auditors, even trainees, rather looking down on everyone else. My theory, which evolved gradually, was that the building itself contributed to this. There was little opportunity for chance interaction between floors. Some partners did wander the heights, but most preferred to hole up in their own offices on the lower floors. After two or three years' training one might be summoned down there to explain something, and for a long, long time, uncertainty about finding them in the rabbit-warren was an anxiety for me.

Some of the problems were perhaps due to the partners;[17] but the building itself, increasingly old-fashioned as time went by and difficult to navigate, did its occupants no favours. On the other hand, the huge open-plan arrangement in the firm's new office in Hythe Bridge Street (through which, admittedly, I have only walked through to meetings – in a separate glass box – a few times) gave me the impression of other horrors soon after the initial sense of wonderful space had sunk in. Such as not being able to talk to anyone without it being seen; visits to the coffee machine, or loo, also being noted, perhaps even notched up, scored.[18]

It might seem that this descent into maybe-maudlin memories is an odd dipstick for architecture – I am dubious of it myself – but what else do we have, except that personal experience? The way some houses are interesting, and others cold or blah, largely (tho' not entirely) irrespective of their interior furnishings. Without this experience, which can only be lived, we can only judge the whole by the appearance.

And without studies of this experience in aggregate,[19] how will we learn how to build better? It is still going to take a long time: the 'recipe' at the start of this chapter introduces a key idea, or part of it: the feedback loop. You have to work out why you like what you like – which can of course take a lifetime, and disconcertingly change over that period too – and then be able to express that; and *then* that expression has to be fed back into the next generation of building.

Two problems: it's a very slow feedback loop (self-examination of my own preferences in the next chapter suggest it might be as long as 300 years). Meanwhile, architects are building for display – look at the peculiar outlines of several modern office towers in London, for example, or the Fleury Building (also in the next chapter).

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[16] Given our ignorance of what the tax department actually wanted from a client's accounts, this regard was probably not unreasonable.

[17] Partnership is a very difficult business model. And most of them were very difficult people, in different ways.

[18] I suppose I experienced this somewhat in the audit department on the top floor at Boswell House; I think there were discussions about how to manage it. More vivid is the sense of profound relief at getting my own office, even if small, on moving to the Dragon.

[19] I did find an article *The Living Experience as a design content: from concept to appropriation*; it is a good start but overloads any chance of practicality with the theoretical (discussed further on page 32).

5 Architecture v building: in which history is shown to be stuff

> My God, don't they know? This stuff is simulacra of simulacra of simulacra. A diluted tincture of Ralph Lauren, who had himself diluted the glory days of Brooks Brothers, who themselves had stepped on the product of Jermyn Street and Savile Row, flavoring their ready-to-wear with liberal lashings of polo kit and regimental stripes. But Tommy surely is the null point, the black hole. There must be some Tommy Hilfiger event horizon, beyond which it is impossible to be more derivative, more removed from the source, more devoid of soul.[1]

And so it is with architecture. The ideas linger, long after the supposed reasons for the feature have been lost. Part of the problem is the life-time of buildings, and ideas associated with them. I think I can trace an echo of Le Corbusier in the slim concrete pillars fronting the ground floor of the modern Computer Science building in Parks Road:



Figure 21 Pillars of derivation

[1] Pattern Recognition, William Gibson - ch.3

Le Corbusier's problem was with the basement, a mephitic, tubercular space,[2] so the solidity and service-providing *piano rustica* is replaced by an open space devoted to the flow of people and vehicles amongst the *piloti*, the main quarters being raised above this.[3] But here at Computer Science we have the *piloti* without the open space; they merely rob the lower ground floor of some square footage for the sake of an echo of a functional idea, reduced to decorative status.

It is the intrusion of theory, *architectural* 'ideas', into the practicalities of *building* that seem to cause the problem. The diversion of 'architect' from its etymological origin of 'chief carpenter' to some good (or evil) fairy, or prima donna, only possible mover of something 'world-leading', can be traced from the Renaissance idea of architecture as art, via the French *Ecole des Beaux Arts* (far fancier than the mere engineers produced at the national school of bridges and roads). The prima donna flavouring comes in from that aberration of civilisation, Romanticism, and all its Promethean revolt from mere Enlightenment.

Of course most architects are relatively jobbing bods, free of the onerous obligations to create something new and special.[4] And it is this much more numerous tribe who learn how to go about things from the previous generation, using ideas often traceable via specific teachers, for example:

> An influential generation of architectural phenomenologists emerged from the teachings of Vesely and Rykwert at the University of Essex in the 1970s, while more recently the Finn Juhani Pallasmaa's writings in eg 'The Eyes of the Sun' 1996 have been popular in schools of architecture.[5]

So on the one hand, there are those busting a gut to create something new and different – a recipe for awkward disaster if ever there was one[6] – and then teams of others recycling ideas that they learned, perhaps not so well and, in any case, with generational drag that probably fails to recognise changes in the way the world wags – for example, the elimination[7] of tuberculosis might mean that an airy basement space is no longer so vital.

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[2] And as I write this on 24 March, World Tuberculosis Day, we should remember that this disease still kills about 1.5 million people a year – an ongoing rate considerably greater than the Covid-19 pandemic's peak.

[3] These combine the first two of 'Five Points of a New Architecture', 1927:

> 1. Pilotis. Replacement of ground floor supporting walls by a grid of reinforced concrete columns that bear the structural load is the basis of the new aesthetic. 2. The free design of the ground plan... Raised on free-standing columns with the absence of supporting walls, means the ground floor is unrestrained in its internal use.

[4] Contrast New Radcliffe House with the BSG in the ROQ development discussed above!

[5] 100 Ideas that Changed Architecture, Richard Weston, Laurence King Publishing 2011: 87, Phenomenology

[6] See 'deconstructionalism' on page 40, for example!

[7] In the 1st world, anyway: in 2021, "TB incidence in England was 7.8 per 100,000, below the World Health Organization (WHO) threshold for a low incidence country (less than or equal to 10 per 100,000 population)" -

Meanwhile, there are other *buildings*, objects that we can recognise, relate to, occupy and use, even though they lack *architects*. Re-reading *The Pattern of English Building*[8] with its insistence on the honest vernacular use of materials, on anonymous craftsmanship and care, and the practicalities of local geology (complete with maps) I feel familiarity and recognition almost like a warm bath. This is how buildings should be. They should be 'of their place', they should relate to others in their area through the use of local materials and styles. There is a sense of 'rightness' to this.

And yet I now realise that this rather romantic sense of mine may be no more than a cultural 'simulacrum of a simulacrum', originating from discussions and arguments trailing roots back to the nineteenth century if not earlier, a braid of 'honesty' and 'picturesque':

The idea about 'honesty' to the materials perhaps derives from Pugin in 1841:

> the two great rules for design are these: first, that there should be no features about a building which are not necessary for convenience, construction or propriety; second, that all ornament should consist of the essential construction of the building,[9]

or from Ruskin's Seven Lamps of Architecture 1849 which not dissimilarly preached that materials and techniques of construction should be revealed honestly. This cry was echoed (with slightly different import) in Modernism with its new materials of iron, concrete, steel and glass, all to be used 'true to their nature', re-echoed perhaps via Adolf Loos' attributed 'ornament is crime'.[10]

Meanwhile, coming up on the outside is the Arts and Crafts movement, via Romanticism. It started in the Lower Sixth, where blank faces about what the Romantics were revolting about (no clue) led to quite an extensive backtrack through the eighteenth century. This was useful in educational terms – some ideas about Enlightened Order and the converse ruins of Romanticism were diffused – but did not really help with the Female Vagrant[11] – social history being quite a puzzle without much actual historical context, and that's before one tries to get one's head around it as a subject for poesy. More generally, William Gilpin's observations[12] laid down the rough, broken and varied precepts of a good view – one in which obvious straight lines are entirely absent.

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https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tuberculosis-in-england-2022-report-data-up-to-end-of-2021/tb-incidence-and-epidemiology-in-england-2021

[8] Alec Clifton-Taylor, Faber and Faber, 'new edition' 1972

[9] 'The true principles of pointed or Christian architecture', 1841

[10] "The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornamentation from objects of everyday use" - *Ornement et Crime*, 1913 based on a lecture given in 1910. The equation of ornament *with* crime had to wait for degenerate popularisation. But catchy, huh?!

[11] Wordsworth, Lyrical Ballads.

[12] *Observations on the River Wye*, 1782, eg "...From theſe two circumftances, the views it exhibits are of the moft beautiful kind of perfpective, free from the formality of lines. // The most perfect river-views, thus circumftanced, are compoſed of four grand parts: the area, which is the river itſelf; the two ſide-ſcreens, which are the oppoſite banks, and lead the perfpective; and the front-ſcreen, which points out the winding of the

Pugin's 'convenient plans'[13] of the next century eschewed symmetry in its elevation of picturesque beauties.

Arts and Crafts took these ideas and blended them with honesty of labour and intention, while retaining the organic design and curvy outlines.

And don't forget, I was brought up to 'admire the view' – always of nature, never of a classical frontage ('a pile') – and my father, whose views these were, had been brought up



Figure 22 Gilpin: a picturesque view...

in the 1920s and 30s by a late child of a grandparent who, born in 1832, had actually lived through the slow evolutions of even the earliest of these ideas.

It turns out that I probably approve of certain things due to a lifetime's exposure and cultural indoctrination (which is what we now have to call 'teaching'). I have ended up appreciating elegant efficiencies of design, where the 'right material' – the most suitable for the design and purpose – is deployed cleanly, without muddle, apology or disguise; preferably combined, or sometimes neatly contrasting, with the picturesque composition, the organic shape, the asymmetrical interest.

In other words, my sense of being able to judge layers of derivation, and of being able to strike to the heart of an aesthetic valuation, is as suspect as a fish theorising about water:

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river.// If the Wye ran, like a Dutch canal, between parallel banks, there could be no front- fcreen: the two fide-fcreens, in that fituation, would lengthen to a point." p18. The illustration is from a first edition.

[13] The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture 1841

ideas may be conveyed, but I cannot stand apart and declare an objective truth. I am swimming in the cultural stream, and these words are only bubbles.

Uh oh, you might retort, we're sliding into the rootlessness of structuralism (nothing means anything except in relation to something else) and thence the pointlessness of post-structuralism and deconstruction (and oh yes, 'deconstructivism', you bet).

I am not sure I could tell all these -isms apart myself, though 'deconstruction' conveys the ominous suggestion of 'destruction' with it, and I do know what passes for architecture in this mode looks like (see text box[14], also Figure 28 on p.52) – something that revolts all sense of propriety in me, presumably deliberately, in that irritating way the brighter elements among the younger generation have of challenging all the comfortable assumptions one has lived by.

Although the forerunners of **deconstructivism** refused to be classified as an architectural movement, the buildings designed with this approach in mind share a lot of similar features:

- opposing rationalism to modernism;

- fragmented volumes;

- rejection of symmetry and Euclidian geometry;

- lack of harmony, linearity and continuity;

- use of straight or flat lines and irregular, disproportionate volumes that have been shattered or shredded;

- no right angles...

And (after all this) I could be wrong about the little pillars holding up computer science anyway. The designer may not have been referencing Le Corbusier at all; once you start noticing these little concrete columns, they are all over the place in modern Oxford buildings, and probably talking to each other in the course of it, maybe harkening back to something else. Unless you're fluent in 'architect', you don't really know what a building is saying.

Does that mean that the observations of someone who cannot speak 'architect' are less meaningful? Perhaps. But perhaps, instead, the refined expression of the building has also lost touch with the ordinary person.

Either way, the real problem is that the bubbles of cultural discourse that come from a building have a longevity beyond our normal life-span – exist above an horizon to which we are not used to even raising our eyes, being scurrying squabbling ape-like creatures, not elephants.

Having undermined the value of not only my own words, but the cultural behaviours of everyone else (other than elephants, perhaps), one might question continuity. I think the best chance for all is a new chapter.

[14] https://www.michaelzingraf.com/en/group/blog/architecture/contemporary-architecture-zoom-on-deconstructivism

6 Continuity

The stone houses on Orkney at Skara Brae, Europe's most complete Neolithic village (occupied roughly 3180 BC to about 2500 BC) include sleeping niches, hearths, cupboards and plumbing, and the still older Knap of Howar (3700 BC to 2800 BC) shows the same pattern except, apparently, without the indoor plumbing.

A farm at Kirbuster, seven miles from Skara Brae, with identical sleeping niches around a central room with hearth and stone cupboards, was in use until the 1960s, providing an eye-opening[1] contiguity with our forefathers.



Figure 23 Kirbuster firehoose showing bed-niche on left-hand side

[1] And eye-watering. One innovation all these designs lacked was a chimney and the air was thick with smoke in the farmhouse. Chimneys were known about from about the 12th century but did not find common domestic use until the 16th and 17th centuries - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chimney#History

I remember as an undergraduate going to a meal hosted by someone I knew slightly – it was a small collection of slight-acquaintances in one of the little terraced houses on the south side of Richmond Road – and our older hostess was clearly unprepared and at a stand about this influx. To help, I opened cupboards and drawers and laid the table, finding everything to hand; there was some surprise expressed, I recall, about me 'knowing where everything is.' This was my earliest realisation that, even with our clutter of modern accoutrements and lifestyle, people – and the way they live – are more similar in their requirements and arrangements than might be thought. Nowadays one has plenty of experience with this 'discovery' through AirBnB stays.[2]

Admitting these continuities, there are some obvious milestones claiming not just quantitative but qualitative status in the development of the house: the invention of the chimney, the corridor, the s-bend;[3] and some narrative arcs, such as the gradual diminution of the 'hall' to a mere appendix and the parallel prioritisation of 'private space' instead. The application of technological progress, such as in metallurgy, electric lighting or glassmaking, might also cause our forefathers to exclaim in wonder.

The effect of glassmaking on windows is particularly interesting, as so obviously effecting the style of windows and thus, largely, both the outside and inside character of a building. By way of simple demonstration, contrast the interior of a seventeenth century house with one from the later Georgian period: small-paned casements have given way to larger paned sashes filled with 'plate' (or 'cylinder') glass, cheap production of which started from about 1780.[4] It should also be admitted that the Neolithic houses in Orkney had no windows at all,[5] which is quite a discontinuity.

'Float' glass, a process of continual production (at 15 metres per minute) allowing relatively huge areas to be produced, became commercially viable in 1959 following development at Pilkington Glass.[6] The continuous nature of production is one of those jaw-dropping examples of industrialisation:

> a float plant, which operates non-stop for between 10-15 years, makes around 6,000 kilometres of glass a year in thicknesses of 0.4 mm to 25 mm and in widths up to 3 metres.[7,8]

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[2] These are now usually more memorable for what 'essentials' have *not* been provided in each case.
[3] What we now call the u-bend; the mechanism whereby toilet odours are kept from backing up into the water-closet, developed by Alexander Cummings in 1775.
[4] https://www.wychavon.gov.uk/component/fileman/file/Documents/Planning/History%20of%20windows%20and%20glass%20document.pdf
[5] As far as one can tell. Maybe they had gaps in the walls above the bits that remain; but certainly no glass, and one can be equally confident that they would be *small* gaps, even with the warmer weather back then.
[6] 100 Ideas that changed Architecture, 'Glass'
[7] https://www.pilkington.com/en/global/about/education/the-float-process
[8] 6,000km/year of course does not tally with the 15 meters per minute cited by 100 Ideas – it's more like 11 m/m. It is still a prodigious wonder.

In particular, of course, this outpouring of glass allowed the 'typical' 20th century building in 'international' style, all steel and glass skyscrapers.

In Oxford, where buildings are not supposed to be higher than Carfax Tower, float glass is used to create rows and rows of little boxes in which to watch the behaviour of undergraduates, like so many trapped lab-rats. This might be mildly amusing for outsiders but has to be an example of the triumph of theory over practicality: although the glass would admit lots of light, those on the ground floor (at least) presumably keep their blinds closed all the time.



Figure 24 Nothing in this one – Master's building, Brasenose



Figure 25 Somerville cubes, Walton Street

The insistence upon a cubic unit is also particularly unappealing, in my view, even if some more recent instances subdivide it with shutters as in the new Maths building on Woodstock Road. Earlier versions, as above, are unapologetic. The post-it-note question mark on the right-hand end seems appropriate. One can probably count the occupied rooms by the drawn curtains.

It is as if architects have been entranced by the availability of the material and got stuck on the 'more glass is better' mantra, without being able to apply any critical thought about the design – the theory, the overall (external) visual effect, triumphing (again) over the practical needs of the users.

Odd, really, given how far the windows = eyes = opening-on-the-soul metaphor penetrates our (western) consciousness. Subscription to the twentieth century International Style meant one has to throw that away; the 'honest expression' of frame structure and urge for spatial continuity (ie homogeneity of presentation) means that traditional windows and all their character are eschewed. And this continues now (demonstrably) despite Aldo van Eyck's 1962 'Place and Occasion' which became the focus of influential critique of this style: "... so start with this: articulate the in-between. Make a welcome of each door, a countenance of each window."[9] The recent cube-farms of undergrad Oxford have no countenance.

If it needs reiterating, this again shows the continuity of architectural ideas, the 'simulacra of simulacra of simulacra' that is a part of the plait of human experience but often seems tediously derivative in the long-term nature of buildings. Given the necessary continuity of *buildings*, ie indoor space in which people about six-feet high and two wide do things, the tedious aspect of this is only obvious because of the separateness of the *architectural* qualities. The separation would seem to derive in turn from the architect as 'creator' rather than master-craftsman, and subsequent exercises in self-justification.

The successive wash of ideas can be shown in 'North Oxford Gothic', a style perhaps more referred to than actually identified with respect to the 'North Oxford Victorian Suburb'.

What is Gothic anyway? RIBA has it clear:

> Gothic is the architecture of the pointed arch, the rib vault, the flying buttress, window tracery, pinnacles, and spires. By the 15th century walls are reduced to a minimum by large arcades, huge windows, with an emphasis on verticality.[10]

They provide glorious images to illustrate this, of church arches, roofs veined like leaves, the west front of Kings College Chapel. Not much of that in evidence beyond the Oxford colleges, you'd have to admit.

It seems North Oxford Gothic – not entirely unique to North Oxford, it is properly 'Gothic Revival' – is but a degenerate echo of all this. We have high gables, and small pointed-arch windows; it 'draws upon features of medieval examples, including decorative patterns, finials, lancet windows, and hood moulds.'[11] Strawberry Hill is usually cited as the break-

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[9] This curious document seems to exist in two forms, 'About Place And Occasion, The Inbetween Realm And Labyrinthian Clarity' http://www.artefacts.co.za/main/Buildings/articles.php?artid=1863 and a shorter version 'Place and Occasion' http://www.geocities.ws/mitchellmosesstudio/place_and_occasion.pdf . Both date from 1962 and both read like some truly hippy-dippy manifesto:

> Space has no room, time not a moment for us.
> We are excluded. In order to be included – to help our homecoming – we must be gathered into their meaning (we are the subject as well as the object of architecture).
> Whatever space and time mean, place and occasion mean more.
> For space in our image is place, and time in our image is occasion.

[10] The Royal Institute of British Architects: https://www.architecture.com/explore-architecture/Gothic

[11] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_Revival_architecture

out romantic vision that kick-started it; by the time we reach the leafy suburbs of North Oxford in the 1870s it is arguably running into the sands of budget-building (and copies of copies of...).

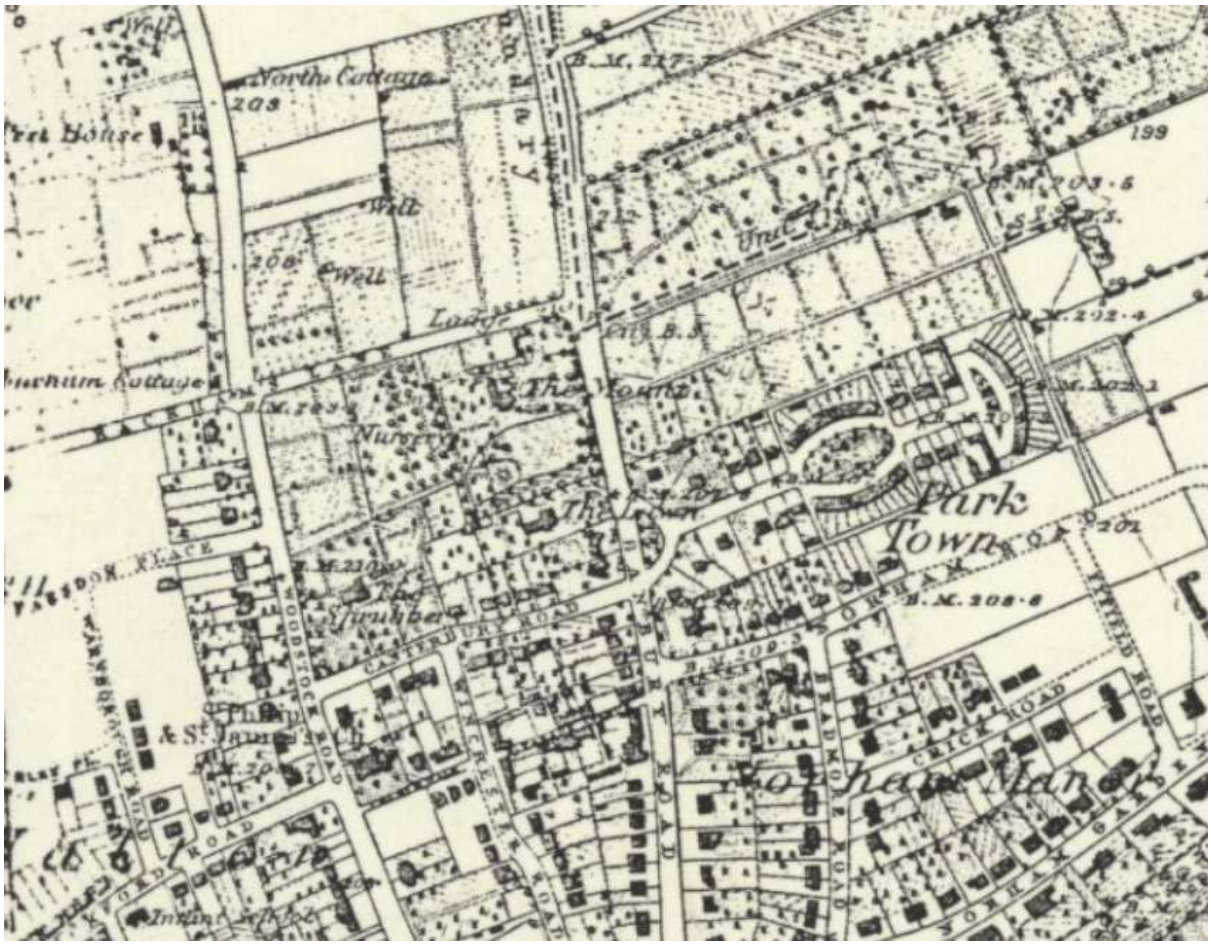


Figure 26 North Oxford 1876: rising tides of building but Gothic ebb

In domestic settings, the Gothic Revival "began to lose force and popularity after the third quarter of the 19th century"[12] – the map above captures North Oxford's development right at this moment. Notable at the bottom left are houses at the south end of Warnborough Road but not the north; the striking layout of Park Town; and the fields and orchards north of this – no building in Bardwell Road at all, yet.

So, 6 Warnborough Road (see page 62) is on the edge of this gothic stuff. Pointed arches? No. Lancet windows? No.[13] Finials? Not really. How about a hood mould? No. Emphasis on verticality? OK, yes, that we do have! And I suppose the red-brick bands are a last (albeit pleasing) gesture towards 'decorative patterns.'

[12] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_Revival_architecture again.

[13] Well, not in that picture anyway. One might just claim there's one on the north side, next to the front door; but this is typical of the stretch needed to identify 'gothic' features around here.

Reading Hinchcliffe's North Oxford chapter V 'The Architecture of the North Oxford House' makes it clear. To find the best examples of the Gothic you have to seek out the larger buildings with low numbers on the Banbury Road – say, number 56. Here indeed from 1867 we can find pointed windows, plate tracery and a stone porch, and fancy-work aplenty (including a niche with a statue, looking rather uncomfortably toes-out). Busy, one might say, looking at it, but as reported by Jackson's *Oxford Journal,*[14] it "may be regarded as a very satisfactory piece of architectural design, in which is embodied a new and useful development of the Gothic, not unworthy of repetition."



Figure 27 56 Banbury Road, complete with William

Its Grade II listing, in heraldic-architectese, says:

> High Victorian Gothic. 2 storeys, attic and basement. Front façade: 1866 build to centre has gable to right, original castellated porch to centre, and wide left bay with single lights flanking front chimney. Chimney has arched stone tablet to base, carved with bishop's mitre and 'Wykeham House', Gothic inscription 'Manners mayketh Man', and canopied stone statue of William of Wykeham carved by W. Forsyth of Worcester. Top part of chimney rebuilt late C20. Flanking single-light windows with cusped stone arches, columns and carved caps. One dormer. Right gable has similar 2-light windows in arched stone tympana with carved roundels, one inscribed 'E III', set in an advanced gable with carved stone dragons. Paired attic lights above with carved corbel to roof vent. Porch extended 1894 as dated on stone parapet, with marble columns to front and curved service stair to basement on right side. Leaded lights. 3-storey tower added to left corner of house also dated 1894, with matching windows, triple top lights and pyramidal roof. Matching gabled

[14] And quoted in Tanis Hinchcliffe, North Oxford p105.

extension set back to right of house has window dated 1884 now concealed within 1900 conservatory.[15]

Strange to think that this rambling great pile was built for personal occupation;[16] it is now the Careers Service building and a right rabbit warren as far as I remember from my own visits.

One can have fun tracing the gradual descent of the Gothic elements from copy to pale copy as one moves away from the centre of Oxford. The styles shift like rings on a tree. And it becomes apparent that the 'North Oxford Victorian Suburb' is not just about the Gothic – it is in fact a medley of styles running down through to the Edwardian, even if somehow it achieves an homogeneous effect from the wide streets and set-back houses, these thanks to at least initial planning oversight by St John's College.

One oddity is Oxford Council's webpage on the subject which offers first a brief history of the listing and what area is now included, and then information about iron railings, "many of [which] were removed during the war and of those surviving many are in need of repair or replacement."[17] So, the area is characterised by a feature that is no longer present...?!

Examination of the detailed documents available provides a more rounded view (if you discount the fact that one of the three is yet again about railings), and the appraisal[18] provides an excellent survey, if somewhat disheartening as the qualities it identifies are systematically undermined by lax planning controls by the same Council as produced the document.

Going back to the 1876 map, I pointed out the striking layout of Park Town. This area demonstrates, right from the start,[19] that N. Oxford is not congruous with Revival Gothic: this development is Italianate Villa and Regency crescents. It is famously hypothesised that we'd have had such stone-faced elegance throughout North Oxford, like Bath, if only the

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[15] https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1392911?section=official-list-entry. It is like describing a shield with many quarterings; worth ploughing through the description, but difficult, difficult.

[16] By design, in a speculative way: it was buy-to-let!

Hatch's occupation was that of draper; a local independent tradesman, he is also described by Hinchcliffe as a bootmaker and theatre proprietor (211, 104). From another source we learn that he had become a "councillor for the Central Ward in 1859" (Dodgson 58)... *Hatch, despite having had the property built for him*, did not live in it himself. The house was first let to a Mrs Harrington, then, in 1872, to Prince Leopold, the youngest son of Queen Victoria, who stayed there throughout his undergraduate time in Oxford until 1876 (see Dodgson 58). Hatch gave up the lease in in 1880, and from the following year Wykeham House became the home of an academic (the distinguished entomologist and future Hope Professor of Zoology, E. B. Poulton) and his wife Emily (see Carpenter).

https://victorianweb.org/art/architecture/oxford/38.html (my italics).

[17] https://www.oxford.gov.uk/directory_record/375/north_oxford_victorian_suburb

[18] North Oxford Conservation Area Appraisal from https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/download/18/north_oxford_conservation_area

[19] "Samuel Lipscomb Seckham (1827–1900) developed the houses in the main crescent in 1853–54, with Bath stone front elevations, and the west-facing crescent with an elevated pavement known as "The Terrace" in 1854–55" - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Park_Town,_Oxford

Oxford dons had been allowed to marry a generation or two earlier, instead of all this red (and yellow) brick...[20]

I have meandered from my theme of 'continuity'. Some trite observations about how these buildings contain the same necessary offices for life, even if that gradually changes dependent on technology, servants, size of family, despite the changes to the outside, might tie it back in. Or, equally simplistically, you could say Gothic is 'rough' compared to the 'smooth' of the classical, and that the shifts back and forth – neo-Gothic! neo-Classical! show a steady pattern: continuity in alternation! Change is our only constant. Make it new (again). And all that.

But let's not. Deconstruction attempted to break all sense of continuity at the end of the 20th century. It derives from Jacques Derrida's 'Of Grammatology':

> Deconstruction proposed a radical critique of Western philosophy by challenging the privileging of speech over writing and exposing the power relations that underpin the familiar binary distinctions - form/content, nature/culture, thought/perception, theory/practice, male/female - that it often invokes. By exposing the 'systematic structure of hierarchical privilege' implicit in these oppositions, whereby one side occupies a 'sovereign' or 'governing' power, Deconstruction sought to show that the subjugated position - the 'other' - was equally necessary, and that fresh creative possibilities were opened up by exploring the new space for thought between the two.[21]

In architectural terms this translated to an 'assault on such familiar norms as horizontal floor planes, vertical walls and a regular structural grid'.[22] Its visual effects are 'chaotic'; I suppose the users cope somehow, perhaps in the way one simply stops noticing one's unchanging surroundings, once some basic adaptation has taken place.

There is a suggestion that deconstruction is something of an expensive luxury: projects conceived of as 'incomplete', bits built for no purpose (challenging the idea of planned use), arbitrary (ie purposeless) applications of geometric systems... Perhaps mercifully there isn't too much of that around Oxford (where, for all their relative wealth and long timescales, the charitable status of the university institutions means a certain care in the use of money). Maybe some derivational suggestion can be seen in the new maths building behind the Radcliffe Infirmary, where the cubes mentioned above come in chunks at odd angles to

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[20] Examination of the professions of tenants of Warnborough Rd on the completion of these houses in the 1870s, from Kelly's Directory, shows that in fact very few were occupied by what might be called 'Gown'.

[21] I used to carry around a copy of 'Of Grammatology' hoping to absorb it by osmosis. This didn't work, but nor did trying to just read it: the text was wholly impenetrable, as far as I could tell, eg "the supplement is exterior, outside of the positivity to which it is super-added, alien to that which, in order to be replaced by it, must be other than it." The relatively clear summary above and my late understanding comes from *100 Ideas that Changed Architecture*, p199. "*De la grammatologie* was first published by Les Éditions de Minuit in 1967. The English translation by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was first published in 1976" - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Of_Grammatology

[22] *100 Ideas* again, p199. There really are buildings like this, apparently.

each other – but, as soon as you suggest derivation, of course you are privileging culture, practice – or something – anyway, not being particularly 'deconstructionalismist'.



Figure 28 Guggenheim, Bilbao – you know Deconstruction when you see it

Perhaps Zaha Hadid's addition to St Anthony's College – the 'Investcorp Building' that expanded the Middle East Centre by joining two Victorian buildings with gleaming curves in 2015 – is the nearest one gets to deconstructive continuity... It's certainly different, even if not *as* different as the Guggenheim, above.

Occasionally described as a Deconstructivist, Zaha Hadid has also been labelled as neo-futurist, parametricist and abstractionist;[23] but while there is nary a straight line on the outside, and "the idea is not to have any 90-degree angles," as she herself characterised her work, I think some of the madness such as eschewing 'horizontal floor planes' has been worn off what might be termed the radical Deconstructivist programme.

[23] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zaha_Hadid reports these labels and their sources.



Figure 29 Zaha Hadid's building at St Anthony's, Woodstock Road

Alas that this beautifully gleaming alien should suffer from the vicissitudes of real-life: pigeons in the trees leave horrible streaky messes down the sides. As with 'modernist' glass walls, cleaning becomes a major issue.

Cleaners. Now *there's* continuity for you.

One particularly lovely aspect of modern buildings is the gleaming shininess of them, literally their newness. And there's the rub: the architect builds up (literally) to that newness, and then walks away; the rest of us have to try to keep it looking that way. Sometimes it isn't easy. International Modernist tower blocks incorporate cleaning cradles, but the irregularities introduced since these – the fractures of deconstruction, Hadid's huge



Figure 30 Window cleaning at the BSG

sweeping curves, or simply the offset drums of the BSG – means such helpful utility is impossible. The window-cleaner of today has to use access cranes (Figure 30), which then spend a lot of time cluttering up the pristine plaza around the bottom of the building.

Similarly, you can have a lovely forecourt constructed, but then find it used for a convenient drop-off or turning circle for vehicles. Here's the result at LMH after they constructed the Leatare Quadrangle – the new (in 2017) wings reaching out to the strangely dwarfish neoClassical porter's lodge and matching front –



Figure 31 LMH: coned off

The cones are pretty much a permanent feature.[24] Not actually pretty, not even neoClassical, and certainly neither in the architect's vision nor in the publicity photos (funny, that).

More serious problems emerge over decades, a timeline that you would think should be considered in the context of buildings but seemingly isn't. Concrete is a problem – recently (2023) in the news in the form of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, but that came with with a warning about life-span right from the start. I'm thinking more of the concrete buildings put up around Oxford in the 60s and 70s, whose modernist minimalism did not run to rain-water-goods. The effects of dirty Oxford rain arcing over the once-white areas is not a good one. Worse yet in those which were faced with stippled concrete, I think in a rough derivation from Corbusier's 'brutalism'[25] or possibly with a genuflection to

[24] October 2023: they have been smartened up so as to be all-blue.

[25] Apparently this idea was an accident. Some cast concrete at the block of flats known as Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles was supposed to have an exposed but relatively even finish. 'The builders, assuming the concrete was to be plastered, took little care to achieve this, and, faced with what he described as 'a massacre of

rustication effects; anyway, they came with a sort of macro-pebbledash style. I doubt these could be cleaned even if scrubbed with time and energy (and budget).



Figure 32 Sad ginkgo, sad concrete, sadder innards – Tinbergen building

It is tempting to say the Tinbergen example was so bad they had to tear it down (it has now, nearly,[26] been replaced by the Life and Mind Building, LaMB), but it wasn't the visual aesthetic that did for it but the 'ACM', asbestos-containing-materials, used 'within the

concrete', Le Corbusier decided to embrace the roughness of the board-marked surfaces – 'Let us keep all that brute', he declared.' – Beton Brut, 100 Ideas that Changed Architecture.

[26] This written in late 2023.

internal fabric of the building as well as being captured within the concrete frame and the fixings between the cladding panels and the frame itself'.[27]

Sir Leslie Martin designed the Tinbergen building in 1965, and it was finished in 1971. Asbestos was cheap, strong, fire and heat resistant and sound absorbing; what's not to like? A case of asbestosis was published in the British Medical Journal in 1924 and the health risks were addressed by The Asbestos Industry Regulations in 1931, but with its benefits use continued until the 1980s. It was finally banned altogether in UK buildings from 1999.[28]

So a pass, perhaps, on its incorporation in the Tinbergen building, but still a sadly short lifespan – it was abruptly closed in 2017[29] – for what was at the time the University's largest building. Perhaps it would have been a bit radical to demolish it for reasons of aesthetic, but really, the 'brutalism' and 'modernist' – both epithets had been applied to this building – had not lasted.

Part of the problem is that materials science has outraced experience since the Industrial Revolution. The novel use of iron, steel, glass and more exotic substances in our fabric of living has probably seemed a good idea every time – and the chance to use these things big time not something the architect as impresario is likely to eschew – but the consequences have been left to the inheritors. One is reminded of Lehrer's joke,

> 'Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down?
> That's not my department,' says Wernher von Braun.[30]

[27] https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/media_wysiwyg/190514%20Public%20Consultation%20-%20Final%20Boards%20low%20res.pdf

[28] https://www.haspod.com/blog/asbestos/when-why-asbestos-banned-uk-construction

[29] So you thought the standard period of 50 years for depreciating freehold buildings was tough, huh? This one only made it to 46. Of course with *some* buildings the problem is that they *do* last a long time...

[30] *Wernher von Braun* from That Was the Year That Was, 1965

7 Subjectivity and modern truth

It turns out that anything I write has a plausibility (in modern parlance, 'a veracity': my truth is just that, and any denial is a micro-aggression that I feel deeply and resent bitterly, all the way to the court of human rights, or at least the fast-publishing equivalent), which is both inhibiting ('you better be damn sure you choose the right actions'[1]) and liberating.

As will have been noticed this personal interpretation is important in architectural terms: I have to work out what *I* like, I have to expand *my* consciousness to take in this construct... Yet, once I have done this, who is to say whether I am 'right'? Does that just mean, that others (should) agree with me? A majority of others? Or just 'right thinking' others? Or that I have learned to think as others do, and now fit in? It is a puzzle, sure.

Take the Florey Building, a monstrous red-clad construct just over Magdalen Bridge towards St Clements. Designed by James Stirling (1926-1992, "considered by many as the premier architect of his generation"[2]) and presumably approved of by those commissioning it (Queen's College), it was reviled within scant years of its completion in 1971:

> The first of the two main objections to this powerful and aggressive building is to the impertinent way in which it turns its back on the rest of St. Clement's which the architect must have assumed would one day be redeveloped. The other objection stems from the fully glazed wall which not only makes privacy difficult but also makes it almost impossible to control the transmission of sound from surrounding rooms.[3]

The tug between usability and architectural éclat is nicely summarised, with the benefit of another twenty years, by Geoffrey Tyack:

> On practical grounds, both of maintenance – the building now looks distinctly the worse for wear – and of the comfort of the students, who are obliged to contemplate each other in their box-like split-level rooms like goldfish in a bowl, roasting in the summer and freezing in the winter, the building must be counted a failure. But it looks impressive in pictures, and it continues to be admired by those who count originality as a primary aesthetic virtue.[4]

Looking at it as an outsider, "it is approached from the street through a public car park, with which it has often been confused,"[5] only the chunky angles and the massive concrete struts suggests anything interesting about its huge blank redness.

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[1] Cordelia on moral choice (Bujold, Barryar series).
[2] https://www.archdaily.com/tag/james-stirling
[3] New Architecture in Oxford – David Reed & Philip Opher – Urban Design, Oxford Polytechnic, 1977
[4] Oxford – an architectural guide – Geoffrey Tyack, OUP, 1998
[5] ibid



Figure 33 The Fleury Building turns its back on St Clements

And that is about where the experience ends, in-your-face, Jude, it's on to the next big commission[6] and Bob's your uncle. (Incidentally, I particularly like the afterthought of a ladder to get to the roof from the upper terrace, a charming touch of practicality on the human scale in contrast to the rest. Presumably not on the original plans.)

Architecture has many aspects, and to please one (the visual impact) is not necessarily to satisfy the next (usability for inhabitants); so there are always different fronts on which its products can be attacked, defended or lauded. It is of course unfortunate that perhaps the most important (usability) is the least obvious and takes the longest to work out. And can a building be pig-ugly and still be pleasant to live in? Perhaps some element of pride (or otherwise) in the visual presentation informs the insiders – 'style was thought important because it was the external manifestation of the individual style of the proprietor', as Tanis Hinchcliffe explains of the Victorian development of North Oxford.[7]

Amongst all this uncertainty, the cost of using a building has become increasingly important as a criterion since about the 1970s, both literally in terms of pounds and pence and in harder-to-quantify eco-costs. For example, the Master's Field development going up for Balliol in 2019-21 used "Cross Laminated Timber (CLT), a new sustainable material providing an alternative to steel and concrete frames. CLT has a range of benefits, including

[6] For Mr Sterling, 1976 Runcorn: Southgate social housing: demolished after only 23 years - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Stirling_(architect)

[7] Tanis Hinchcliffe, North Oxford, Yale Univ Press 1992 – p91.

sustainability, construction programme improvements and reduced construction traffic to site. CLT optimises pre-fabrication…"[8] and although that seems to itemise the same benefit in three different ways, an alternative to steel and concrete has to be welcome. Assuming it holds up.[9]

Many other current building developments in Oxford boast similar eco-cred and, although a bit of salt is needed to swallow the green-washing, it is sort-of progress. Not many boast of any reduction in life-time costs; some might mention the construction, as for the Balliol project, and others the energy use – Keble's Arco block is "one of the 'greenest' buildings in Oxford, using advanced insulation and heat exchange mechanisms to control the temperature of the building"[10] – but putting it all together is still a challenge even as to method. Simplistically, how do you quantify the expected life-time of a building? Sure, accountants will tell you 50 years for freehold, but that's more of a it's-just-an-informed-estimate-(shrug) thing than a practical basis as a glance around most English streets will tell you.

And meanwhile, the poor old Insiders have almost literally no way of having their views quantified, and, one can't help but think, are poorly served by academe when it is full of things like this:

> The interconnection between space and the body is profoundly embedded in architecture and is understated when describing, conceiving and assessing its spatial outcome. Spatial features have the ability to be a stage for life to evolve, but also to constrain or potentiate the actions that they shelter, working as a catalyst of the life within, and as a facilitator of experiences.[11]

This whole article is splendid[12] and eminently mockable as only High Academe can be – "lined by a critical consideration" – could there be a problem in translation?! Elsewhere, it takes the citation of no less that *four* authors to substantiate the claim that schools "represent a facilitator of experiences and specifically of the learning process". Incredible.

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[8] Sign on hording around site during construction.

[9] See earlier about St Cross.

[10] Supposedly so described by the College itself, cited on https://manchesterhistory.net/architecture/1990/arco.html#:~:text=one%20of%20the%20'greenest'%20buildings,a%20terrace%20and%20Newman%20quad. This and other similar claims are always about the *intention*, and never supported by any evidence of whether it worked.

[11] Carolina Coelho, « The Living Experience as a design content: from concept to appropriation », Ambiances [En ligne], 1 | 2015, mis en ligne le 09 septembre 2015, consulté le 16 mars 2022. http://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/606; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/ambiances.606

[12] "Having presented the User Research methods, and recognizing their relevance and specificities, their translation onto this case study is lined by a critical consideration in order to reach a more robust, systematized and comprehensive methodology, but also a balanced approach between the cost and benefit of resorting to each particular method." I'm loving it! Though perhaps only in small chunks, which might be unfair. No, I don't think so.

Relief perhaps comes from the field of neuroaesthetics and the collaboration between neuroscientists and those involved in the design of living spaces. Although some of this seems to verge on pseudo-science, with the 'biophylia hypothesis' (we like green things and wood) and arguments from possible selective benefits based on supposed proto-environments (the savannah for sight-lines, but nearby places to hide: so, open-plan offices with your own carrel?), at least some degree of testing is being carried out.[13] It still seems a long way from explaining the attraction of, say, a kitchen extension with higher-than-expected sloping ceiling and skylights therein, or changes in level in a building – going up a whole floor is routine, and just one step is merely a hazard, but two or three, or even half-a-floor, introduces new and unexpected – interesting? – sight-lines.

Meanwhile, that life-time measurement of cost (which includes environmental costs) is elusive. I remember, from when I was training as an accountant in the first part of the 1980s, the fearsome spectre of inflation accounting, whereby all (actual) numbers were to be shifted bodily into some fair-value-equivalent to truly enable period-to-period comparison. It was like trying to move a tall rigid building about on quicksand; suddenly everything was at an angle, uncertain. This horrible idea cropped up tangentially a few times, and was (perhaps) an echo from the 1970s when inflation had hit 24% (and looked like it might come back in 1979 and 1980, when it reached nearly 18%), but mercifully I must have fluffed my way through whatever testing of such ideas was thrown at me, and then never had to prepare actual accounts using such methods.

The point is, even in the benign period of relatively stable currency since,[14] calculating the present-value of the simplest item in the future is baffling to most people – or conversely, working back from the future expected cost. The elderly resent the price of bread and lament their once seemingly-adequate savings. Trying to conceptualise the future value of a pension, say, is so fraught with compound interest that it is all but meaningless; discounting it to present value is so wholly dependent upon interest-rate assumptions that you feel cast adrift in a fragile coracle on tumultuous waves, an uncertain existence menaced by uncontrollable forces – and much poorer than you hoped.

Part of the problem is trying to evaluate the relative merits of current and future beneficiaries. In cases where you are choosing whether to buy something now or later, you only have to contend with that shimmering fiction, your future self and associated future feelings (or purse); but where considering the possible benefits to others it is an order of magnitude harder. Conscientious parents face this routinely: 'if I don't spend it now, the children will benefit.'

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[13] Better by Design, New Scientist 16 April 2022

[14] For those of us who lived through the inflationary periods of the 70s and 80s, the current rate (CPI to Aug 2023, last reported as I write, 6.7% - https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/timeseries/d7bt/mm23) is a bore and an anxiety about whether it might get serious but not much more. Amongst the G20 latest core inflation goes up to 125% (Argentina) via 69% (Turkey) - https://tradingeconomics.com/country-list/core-inflation-rate ...

Charities have also had to learn to think about this problem – in other words, whether some money should not be used to help now because someone in the future might need it instead – though it is strange to remember that this was a novel idea not so very long ago, maybe in the late 1980s when the first SoRP[15] was produced. The problem is of course that the 'future beneficiary' is semi-mythical; and, even if they are real, benefit only at the cost of the possible current recipient. In building terms, how do you choose between a bit of maintenance now or more later?[16]

Apply these difficulties to a building in an attempt to calculate whole-life-cost ("WLC" – of course) and you can see the difficulty; balancing construction costs against usage and eventual disposal costs is not an easy task, and whether you're spending a penny to save a pound later or vice versa remains unclear.

An attempt to demonstrate this by making a rough assessment of the typical costs of an office building over 30 years, generated the ratio:

0.1 to 0.15 for design (ref. OGC Achieving Excellence Guide 7 - Whole-Life costing).
1 for construction costs.
5 for maintenance and building operating costs during the lifetime of the building.
200 for the cost of operating the business during the lifetime of the building.
(Ref. Report of the Royal Academy of Engineering on The long term costs of owning and using buildings (1998).)

However, this has been criticised as misleading, not least because the construction industry accounts for around 7% of GDP, implying a much more significant proportion of business costs than the ratio suggests.

Other ratios of construction costs to operational costs to business costs have suggested figures as low as 1:0.6:6 for some types of buildings. However, the usefulness of these ratios is questionable, other than if they are calculated based on actual figures for specific businesses.[17]

This confusion of ratios and multipliers pale into insignificance when considering the shifting value of money over the life-time of a house. Consider 6 Warnborough Road, where having the windows alone fixed[18] in 2022 is five or even six-figures; its original cost

[15] Statement of Recommended Practice 2, 1988. In those days it really was only 'recommended', even if one of the recommendations included saying if you didn't follow the recommendations. And it wasn't the first SoRP of course, being 'SoRP2', just the first *charity* SoRP.

[16] OK, we have been indoctrinated with ideas of prevention rather than cure, 'a stitch in time saves nine' and all that, but still. Mind you, those in charge of buildings made with 'reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete' (RAAC) are now ruing their budgetary restraints. At the Dragon School I soon found out how constraining 'planned maintenance', an easy way to balance the budget one year, merely built up a bow-wave of need in following years.

[17] https://www.designingbuildings.co.uk/wiki/Whole-life_costs_for_buildings_WLC

[18] Draught-proofed only: £30k. Draught-proofed, doubled-glazed and (where necessary) replaced, £80-110k.

of the whole house was perhaps £600 - £800 back in the late 1870s;[19] or the ever-puzzling divergence between rebuild cost (about £700k[20]) and market value (about £2.2M) – though of course the land and rights to build on it are worth some part of this.

In other words, over the course of the Warnborough Road house's current life of about 150 years, one has to consider a change in value of £1 by a factor of 1,000 (£700 > £700,000). Obviously it has survived 150 years. Will it survive as long again? The changes in life since 1870 to the modern day are scarcely imaginable even in retrospect (the list of astonishing developments is a common trope, but electricity, telephones, bicycles, cars, submarines, aeroplanes, rockets, computers and weapons of mass destruction all bear another pause for thought); what changes will another 150 years see, and what will they signify for the building, and the cost of maintaining and adapting it?



Figure 34 6 Warnborough Road west front: work needs doing – but at what cost?

And that's before you get into environmental costs, which are approximated by monetary costs but not really; though it may be imagined that they will become more aligned in the near future, no doubt leading to some sharp shifts in financial bases (ie, factoring in the true of cost of water usage, or carbon emissions will be charged effectively), the actual evaluation of any of this verges on the head-shakingly imponderable.

Analogously I have to consider replacing my petrol car with an electric one; in terms of emissions per mile that I drive, this is a no-brainer[21] (and will allow me to access the city centre again, after the ZEZs are brought in and not a moment too soon[22]);

[19] This estimate is based on the houses in Norham Gardens, Bradmore, Crick and Fyfield Roads etc being about £1,000 – £1,100 when Codd was trying to sell them to avoid ruin (he needed £1,340 from each on average) – Tanis Hinchcliffe, North Oxford p55.

[20] (A year later: seems the valuers might have left off VAT from this. But still.)

[21] As long as I'm careful about where my electricity comes from...

[22] Writing as city resident trying to breathe the air, at least.

but what about the environmental cost of production of the electric vehicle, and the disposal of the old one? A masterful comparison of lifetime costs for internal combustion, hybrid and electric vehicles[23] highlights up the horrid fact that lithium-ion battery production is hugely deleterious. But does my choice have to include that consideration? After all, the electric car is 'just there' as far as I am concerned, probably standing next to a traditional and hybrid model right there on the forecourt; and one's individual choice, say, to *not* purchase electric (by way of protesting the environmental cost of battery production) has as much chance as registering with the powers-that-be as my vote in the elections does. And should I not weigh the total cost of disposal of the old vehicle plus purchase of new, versus the do-nothing option? I wish I knew how.

The truth is, we can be almost paralysed by this sort of choice, and the fear of making the wrong one. Amongst the complexities of these calculations, however, the clear overall answer as far as the cars are concerned is to *drive less*. Can some similar conclusion be made with respect to buildings? *Build* less perhaps?

A subliminal attraction is to be found in repurposed buildings. Warehouses converted for loft-living; mills and barns as houses; older buildings, just on the basis of their long history. Is this because the conversions (at least) typically provide unusual spaces, attractive simply because different from the usual two-up two-down (or the modern 'equivalent', which might be 'four-bed four-bath'!)? Or do we respond emotionally to the sense of care for history, restoration, re-use?

Some historical attributes are obviously incidental to these aspects. Think of the lists of desirable houses in The Week, for example, characterised by history ('lived in by famous people', 'listed') – these labels are quite irrelevant to the actual buildings. Yet old walls, windows and doors – even Victorian ones, though I would normally include that period in the 'modern' – have character completely absent in new build.

What is this 'character'? Is it just a sort of roughness, a subliminal narrative of former years, scarcely noticed except through some unconscious attraction to the trace of this prior use and history? The window-replacements being contemplated at Warnborough Road will remove slightly wavy-glass and definitely bumpy and lumpy woodwork (patched-up and over-painted again and again) and replace them with smooth frames and clear glass. How do I evaluate the loss of the one against the benefits of the other? And is it consolation or counsel of despair to think that one will hardly notice after a few months, anyway?

The ability to not notice things after a bit is a blessing in some respects, a toughening of one's sensibilities, a hardening of foot or hand or mind. How could we exist if the exasperations and outrages that bombard the modern life were constantly raw, the

[23] Pipitone, E.; Caltabellotta, S.; Occhipinti, L. A Life Cycle Environmental Impact Comparison between Traditional, Hybrid, and Electric Vehicles in the European Context - https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/19/10992/pdf

amygdala rampant? It seems that a lot of our built environment[24] is only tolerable because of this. Yet hardening the mind – or soul – there's the rub. It is like the taste of tap water, or air pollution; you can live with that, but would you not be better without?

The 'build less' movement suggested above – which might be generalised to 'do less': travel less, eat less, use less energy, less water, and perhaps romanticised under a banner of 'Tread Lightly' – is usefully tied in against the absurd wastefulness of the industry mentioned in chapter 2 (page 14). Even if one's individual efforts to tip the scale in the context of the overall industry are as insignificant as one's choice not to buy an electric car because of the lithium-production; puny. Screaming from the touchline doesn't change the rules of the game, alas.

There is also the sneaking problem that many new buildings are inherently attractive, clean and hopeful. There is something beautiful about almost any new wall (though I think I can except large areas – all too large, alas – of unvaried cladding in brick, all laid lengthwise without headers and without any variation, and new estates of identical houses using this material); the audacity and aspiration of many modernist steel and glass skyscrapers is breath-taking; creamy new stone is beautiful. Such things can inspire hope and aspiration, visions of new achievements and dreams of clean dawns. Must we do without these?

I suspect it is a matter of training, a gradual bending of the mind: we need to learn to judge our buildings less on visual impact and more on what I might call 'harmony', a portmanteau for both economy of operation and pleasure in use; and, by gradually learning new ways of judging like this, so improve our buildings too (as we improve other aspects of our lives similarly).

Subtracting visual impact finally leaves the Fleury Building up the creek and no pitch hot.

Subtracting visual impact also makes further architectural discussion – I have lots of photos to go! – rather difficult, given that lived experience of the various interiors is so hard to come by. All that is left is history and classification – which is again mainly of stylistic, ie visual, features, not much more than a history of clothing, providing warmth and decency or otherwise so far out on a fanciful limb as to be practically useless, no more than a footnote in the continuity of what actually works.

So, having dug myself into a hole, what *don't* I like?[25]

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[24] Not to mention a lot else. Banks, for example and their inept prioritisation of security over service. Phone help-lines with their mechanical questions and recommendations to look at the website. Traffic queues (and other drivers). Rule-breakers and scoff-laws. You name it...

[25] Subjectivity being the last possible objective study.

8 Awfulness abounds

Most awfulness is casual bad behaviour – litter, filth, driving too fast, bad language, thoughtlessness – and hard to pin down. But sometimes it comes in the form of concerted effort that cost a lot of time and money, like this development in New Hinksey:



Figure 35 New build in North Hinksey

Well, perhaps we could admire the way the crisp angularity of these buildings match that of the huge pylon standing over them. But it's a stretch.

Something about the mean-looking concrete steps up to the doors – there's infirm-friendly breaks in the run, but perhaps a level entrance might have been better? Ah, it seems they are flats – six of them, somehow.[1] Though a satellite view shows a single shared (uncared-for) outdoor space behind.



Figure 36 View from above 2023

[1] North Hinksey Parish Council Planning Committee agenda 14 July 2016, ref P16/V1492/FUL https://northhinksey-pc.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/old_site/Files/NHPC%20-%202016%20Agenda%20-%20Planning-Pub%2014-07-2016.doc

And the two square windows – in contrast to the relatively attractive 'bay' column of them – are – I'm lost for words. They're just holes in the wall.

The general impression is of course not helped by the expanse of brickwork in front; perhaps planting in those little patches to the side of the steps might help a bit in due course – but one's hopes aren't high.[2]

Possibly the disappointment with this development is because of the aspiration in the unusual design (these are not 'traditional' Oxford houses): they tried to do something different. What a pity it turned out so. And alas, what a pity such an impression is not restricted to Hinksey:



Figure 37 New Radcliffe House, Radcliffe Observatory Quarter: part of the Walton Street elevation

I had harsh words for the construction shown above, variously known as Jericho Health Centre and New Radcliffe House, on page 2 and again on page 29. Here, despite the amelioration provided by the old wall (retained, I believe, from the original Radcliffe Infirmary) and the trees trying to obscure it all, you may observe the slight and odd angles applied across the façade – why? other than as an admission that imagination has failed – and the odd patch of 'fancy' brick texturing in the top right corner, ditto.

Moreover, although perhaps difficult to see in the picture, the unbonded brickwork wavers just slightly but to rather a nightmarish effect.[3]

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[2] Luckily. A quick look in July 2023 showed that those patches are now gravelled over.

[3] This is a not-uncommon problem with brick walls generally, but seems particularly noticeable in the modern unbonded version. Even Keble's Arco building, where brickwork is all, suffers (eg in section towards east end along Keble Road – quite horribly dizzyingly, if you look).

Then, the windows! Look, we'll make some stick out and some stick in; those that stick out will have white frames. The sticking-in ones will be black-framed. Why, again? And is there a pattern? Every other one? I don't think so.

Their proportions are essentially square – the box-frames of the sticking-out variants try to disguise this, but unsuccessfully. The framing is mean – the effect is of holes punched in a surface. They are just too small to be interesting – the proportions in the context of wall are odd – mean, again – and as windows they are probably too big to be private from inside (observe the privacy blinds, one drawn even on a cloudy day), although that was the intent.

As a building, it probably answers its purpose: insiders get health treatment. As a feature in the civic city-scape, it is awful. It not surprising to me that the facilities management webpage for the site claims that a picture of the old Observatory is 'New Radcliffe House'![4]

In striking contrast of both intent and execution, see The Big Data Institute on the Old Road Campus, Headington:



Figure 38 Big Data Institute, OU Old Road Campus

The angularity of this building – emphasised by this picture's viewpoint – recalls the first item in this section, the development at New Hinksey. The resemblance ends there.

[4] https://estates.admin.ox.ac.uk/new-radcliffe-house

One might be rather dubious about the way the two wings of the building reach forward like crab-claws, protecting the glassy façade inside, and the strong horizontal bands – particularly the arbitrary ones across the taller windows... but you can't deny that it is a striking building. Except for the caution learned earlier about 'narratives', you might reach for a phrase such as 'making a statement' (which is, as always, followed by wondering just what is the statement about!? Probably, 'I've got more money than you').



Figure 39 Big Data in context

The shape is in fact neighbourly. A previous building to the right of the picture, NDM Research, was curved like the right half of this one, to fit in with the site's edge along Old Road, as seen in this view from above:

The shape is then reflected on the left to make a thematic whole.

The triangular space created by the angled front of the new buildings is completed by a thematic sculpture, but is also functional as the top of the ventilation system. (It is also matched in an inverted way across the road by the Triangle Day Nursery!)

The Big Data ventilation system is particularly innovative, at least for western architecture: it is passive, driven by a concrete labyrinth below ground level, and makes the massive atrium in the heart of the building a functional element.[5]

One's sense of rightness when looking at the Big Data building, despite its startling initial affect, is helped by the fact that it fits in so well with the neighbouring buildings. Perhaps not surprisingly they are by the same architects, 'Make'.

The Kennedy Institute of Rheumatology to the south is somewhat less horizontally themed than the other two. In fact it majors on thin verticals, both on the outside and inside with

[5] https://www.architecture.com/awards-and-competitions-landing-page/awards/riba-regional-awards/riba-south-award-winners/2018/big-data-institute-oxford. Passive ventilation has of course been used in Africa and Persia for centuries if not millennia. And I would like information about whether it worked as planned...

thin stringing supporting the central staircase around its large atrium[6], but the whole, in situ, is of what one might call similar 'texture'.[7]

The ground plan for this building is interesting as it shows both the NDM centre to the north - and that the Big Data Centre had really not been pre-planned:

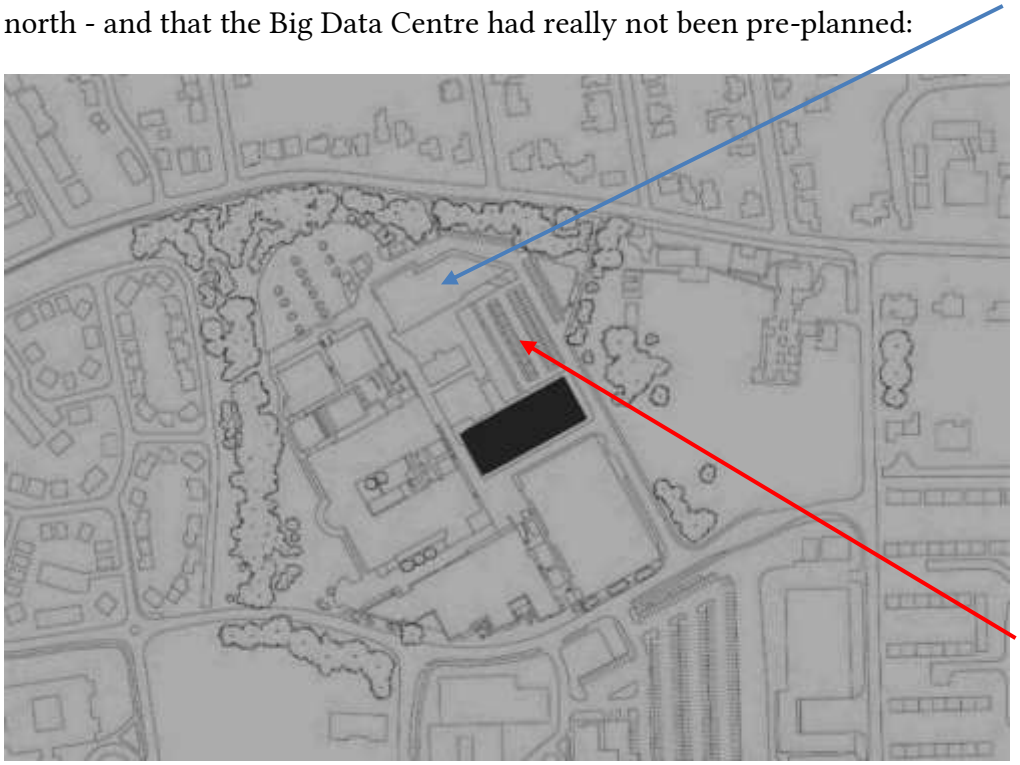


Figure 40 Kennedy Institute location: Big Data no more than a carpark in the designer's eye

To the north, the NDM research building is in fact a precursor to Big Data, not only in shape but in external features, particularly the horizontal banding; it is hard to believe that the one might have been conceived separately from the other.

The three buildings are each, individually, large: Kennedy offers 7,300 m² floor space, the NDM 5,600 m² and Big Data 7,449 m², and in combination might be overwhelming;[8] but they are of moderate height for their footprints, and pleasantly spaced out (especially the latter two). They succeed as a group.

This corner of the campus, then, provides a sense of homogeneity-with-difference which is attractive, though more usually found in groups of older buildings.[9]

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[6] Albeit one with a 'feature staircase' so that it acts 'as the circulation hub rising up from the ground floor' - https://www.makearchitects.com/projects/kennedy-institute-rheumatology/. Sounds like a large stairwell to me and not somewhere you might want to sit, and rather looks like that too from Make's picture! The Big Data core is much more attractive as a linear crevasse rather than a simple square – see that previous link.

[7] I might be grasping for something analogous to family resemblance in people. The physical attributes might be overtly different – horizontal v vertical – but may still be visibly related.

[8] https://www.kennedy.ox.ac.uk/about/history/building, https://www.makearchitects.com/projects/ndm-research-building/, https://www.architecture.com/awards-and-competitions-landing-page/awards/riba-regional-awards/riba-south-award-winners/2018/big-data-institute-oxford.

[9] eg the row along the south-west part of Oxford's Broad Street, or the south-facing run of cottages in Binsey.

Still, these new buildings[10] perhaps need to be re-judged in time, to see how they manage the rigours of real life. I used to think the roof of the redeveloped Ruskin Building, now Exeter's 'Cohen Quadrangle', was interesting and beautiful, with its patterned metal squares. Sadly it looks as if the design itself means that water – *Oxford* rain water at that – collects and drips from the bottom corner of the tiles, because the effect is now horribly marred by dark streaks:



Figure 41 Cohen roof: black streaks in Worcester Place

> Student rooms and fellows studies are enclosed by patterned stainless steel that folds across wall and roof surfaces. The over-riding concept of a 'scholarly home' is characterised by this all-embracing curved roof...[11]

Thus the 'narrative' provided by the architect Alison Brooks for the building. This is a good example of architectural stories, and a salutary warning: the second sentence sounds good but, on consideration, is meaningless. What is the 'concept' of a '*scholarly* home'? (Why would it be characterised by a roof?) 'All-embracing' – don't roofs always cover *all* their buildings? (OK, I think they're trying to say something about the way it curves, which is unusual for a roof; but perhaps a second draft would have helped...)

And, if we did accept this characterisation of the roof as somehow representative of scholarly life, the irony that it is now streaked and stained is unfortunate.

The building won a volley of accolades:[12]

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[10] Kennedy 2013, NDM 2014, Big Data 2018 – or thereabouts. Last two are award-years.
[11] https://www.alisonbrooksarchitects.com/project/exeter-college/
[12] ditto

RIBA South Building of the Year Award 2022
RIBA South Regional Award 2022
Civic Trust Award 2021
Education Estates – University Project of the Year 2021
Education Estates – Inspiring Learning Spaces 2021
Architects' Newspaper AN Award 2021
Architecture MasterPrize 2021
WAF Higher Education & Research Building of the Year 2018

Not that it isn't a beautiful and effective space, and the roof is definitely a 'feature'; it even won an award itself (in addition to the buildings' general plaudits), for 'best hard metal roofing, 2017', at the UK Roofing Awards.[13]

But did *no-one* consider maintenance issues?

The tiles were made from steel provided by Rimex Metals UK, 'specialists in metal finishes'. Their guidance is that

> for stainless steel components where an attractive appearance is particularly important such as building cladding, shop entrances and signs; regular cleaning is advisable in order to maintain the prime condition of the material.
>
> Washing also removes dirt and impurities that may cause corrosion to stainless steel and discolouration of the metal surface if left in place too long. The more polluted the environment, the more often such washing of the stainless steel should be carried out.[14]

They provide a table suggesting that in a polluted city the tiles probably need to be cleaned every 3-6 months. Nope, can't see that happening. Just getting to different parts of such a curved surface is going to be difficult (and still harder further along from my picture, where the roof crests like a wave): even in construction, aided by necessary scaffolding, "access was difficult and time-consuming."[15]

I wouldn't suggest the Cohen Quad is 'awful', quite the opposite really. But awfulness has come upon it (or at least its roof), in a disappointing gee-isn't-life-unfair way. My point is that the aspiration of the design turns out to be sadly impractical. This could have been anticipated: and there's the disappointment. The rockets have gone up, and the champagne popped; the long-term consequences were let to fall where they would.

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[13] https://www.exeter.ox.ac.uk/cohen-quad-wins-uk-roofing-award/ The plethora of awards does suggest that pretty much everyone is going to win something, in the best modern way. But this building is obviously one of those who go up to receive head of school, captain of cricket, maths, latin, charitable work, and DofE prizes…

[14] https://www.rimexmetals.com/support/safely-and-maintenance

[15] https://roofingtimes.co.uk/cohen-quad-exeter-college-oxford-case-study/

9 Budgets v dreams

Awfulness squats on meanness. Often the ship is spoiled for a ha'p'worth of tar, sometimes from bad planning but more often, one suspects, because of the profit motive.

It is often the little details that lift a building beyond the mundane and saves it from utilitarian dreariness – and *vice versa*. The problem is that buildings cost a lot, and it is the little details that represent the icing on the cake and would take the last 5% of the budget, except that the budget has been long overspent by the time they come into question.

This overspending is dramatized for us in the Grand Designs series, where 'we'll be in by Christmas' is almost always following by an aside to the camera, 'but *which* Christmas?!' Moreover, these programs, in an un-English insistence upon that dirty subject, money, push the question of costs v budget at the end of each. An analysis shows that only 8% (of 123 projects) come in under budget and 7% on; 80% were over, some hugely.[1]

One should bear in mind that budgeting is a very difficult process, particularly for the inexperienced – which, almost by definition, is anyone contemplating a 'grand design'. Indeed, almost any building work is unfamiliar to the individual. The corporate builder, who might know better, seems to think differently about what they are doing most of the time – by which I mean, their focus on cost-control apparently comes at the cost of even thinking about any icing of cakes before they start.

The individual is often hopeful anyway, or compelled by circumstance. Yet, although having the right intentions, even choosing quality materials for the basic construction can fall by the wayside. The customer assumes the builder knows what is best, or at least what they are familiar with – which is not necessarily the same thing at all, unfortunately. Or the choice is between two alternatives without much between them except for the cost, with sadly predictable results.

For example, constrained by the mortgage[2] and the costs of a young family, we chose the cheapest options for our new windows and window-frames shortly after moving into Warnborough Road. These were in basic softwood and maybe not very well made. They turned out to be quite unsuited to the weather-facing side of the house; they had to be replaced in their entirety 35 years later. All the others, despite being over 100 years older, only needed repairs.[3]

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[1] https://www.cadagency.co.uk/digging-into-the-data-of-20-years-of-grand-designs/ 5% refused to disclose the spend v budget result: these can probably be added to the overspend column! https://www.beenletdown.co.uk/insights/which-grand-designs-projects-failed-to-stay-on-budget/ has slightly different figures based on 200 projects but although it broadly agrees, they don't quite add up.

[2] Now *that* had a budget. We could just afford the 8.5% when it started; but within a year or two it was up to over 15%...

[3] OK, we replaced the sashes, but that was so as to take an upgrade to double-glazing. Their frames were basically good. Cills had suffered most.

Even if you wanted to find out, information about building materials is rarely available to the end-user, and often indeterminate. You might get an 'expected lifetime' expressed as vaguely as 'can last for decades', 'approx 30 – 50 years', or 'can last from 20-50 years if properly maintained.' More detailed studies reveal the sort of different ranges, as for example collated in 'Life Cycle Assessment of timber, modified timber and aluminium-clad timber windows':[4]

Window type	Asif (2002)	Citherlet (2000)	HAPM (1996)	WCC (1990)	BRE generic window	BRE TWA window
Aluminium	43.6	45	35+	50-60		
PVC-U	24.1	30	25	30	25- 35*	
Timber	39.6	45	35+	40+	30	35
Alu-clad timber	46.7	45				

(The headings abbreviate the different authors' and organisations' studies.) What is one to make of a comparison between 50-60 and 40+? +what? Which is better, 25-35 or 30? Often the most you can hope for is the statement that one material will last 'longer' that the next, which doesn't really help assess the relative cost.

The accompanying text in the above study notes that

> Evidence from traditional and historic buildings would suggest that timber windows have a life expectancy greater than 100 years [Davey, 2007]. English Heritage argues that traditional windows can be very durable: many original Georgian and Victorian timber windows are still in place [Wood et al, 2009].[5]

But what about which type of timber? This is typical:

> Both hardwood and softwood windows can last your entire lifetime if maintained and refurbished. There are cases of listed buildings with softwood windows that have lasted well over 150 years!
>
> You can expect your wooden windows, especially hardwood timber, to last up to 60 years or more... Softwood windows are more responsive to the seasons and will expand and contract more, whilst hardwood windows are a safer bet in terms of longevity.[6]

So, hardwood, right? No: "when you are deciding between hardwood and softwood windows, essentially the choice is yours. However, we would generally recommend

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[4] Report for the Wood Window Alliance by Dr Gillian F. Menzies, Institute for Building and Urban Design, Heriot Watt University June 2013 - https://www.bwf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Life-Cycle-Assessment-Report-1.pdf

[5] https://www.bwf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Life-Cycle-Assessment-Report-1.pdf again.

[6] https://www.windowsonlineuk.co.uk/blog/hardwood-vs-softwood-windows/

softwood windows…"[7] You're essentially down to betting on the life-span, and assessing lifetime cost is overwhelmed by immediate cash-flow considerations, ie up-front cost.[8] (Let alone wondering about eco-measures.)

The range of lifespans quoted for roof-material is no clearer than the choice for windows. How does one compare 'approx. 30-50 years' with 'approx. 25-30 years, with a potential of 50 years'? A 'potential for 150 years' against a 'potential for 100+ years'?[9] Possibly the problem is that people just don't live long enough to find out, or the variables – location and especially weather; maintenance; installation[10] – have more impact than the materials themselves. Even the installation is out of your control – you are usually just immensely grateful if the builders turn up... And then, which instructions do they follow, if any? Charles Derby of MEBP told me of a problem with a roof that had been constructed at a certain angle of pitch: looking at the issue, it was found that the manufactures' spec-sheet no longer permitted that angle, although they had at the time of construction!

So, we have imperfect information about the materials and imperfect information about the future (other than that it will probably be 'someone else's problem'). All we do know is how much it will cost now[11]; and, as astronaut John Glenn is supposed to have said of his rocket, the scariest thing is that you know 'you [are] sitting on top of two million parts — all built by the lowest bidder…'[12]

However, just sometimes the budget can be made to stretch a bit. Robin Swailes redeveloped 1 Upper Fisher Row with sensitivity and care (in 2015):[13]

> Without significantly altering the form and scale of the building the restoration of the exterior means that Number 46 is now the most elegant in the street and lifts the tone of the entire area. Careful attention in the scope of the works has preserved and enhanced the existing features and new additions are sympathetic to the original parts of the building. The brickwork has been cleaned and repointed and lime mortar used in line with the original building, distinctive stone window sills and headers replaced... The Portland stone

[7] https://sashwindows.london/news/hardwood-or-softwood-sash-windows Their reasons include softwood being easier to work and 'more environmentally friendly' – because the trees grow quicker and the wood dries out quicker – and so overall cheaper.
[8] You go through the same guessing game every time you compare a cheap made-in-China bit of electronics with a European or Japanese brand-name original,
[9] Figures are from https://www.roofingsuperstore.co.uk/help-and-advice/product-guides/flat-roofing/how-long-do-roofs-last/, for sedum v GRP (fibreglass) and clay v natural slate.
[10] 5 Warnborough Road chose natural slate for roofing when redone in 2020, which would seem a safe choice, but the builders only secured the slates across the top, not top and centre. This means they flip up in high winds, and will crack well before they should. Two or three already have.
[11] Even that is not always clear. Quotes are 'indicative', or not even given. Sigh.
[12] https://www.marketwatch.com/story/that-famed-john-glenn-quote-about-a-rockets-2-million-lowest-bidder-parts-2016-12-11
[13] Found from Google Street view history.

corner steps and double doors – originally the access to The Running Horses pub – have been reinstated…[14]

While self-reporting by anyone has to be taken with a pinch of salt, this is essentially correct. Although not mentioned, the 'distinctive stone window…headers' include decoration, a nice (expensive) touch:



Figure 42 1 Upper Fisher Row, new window header with original decoration replicated

Thus the windows on the visible corner of Hythe Bridge Street. If you turn into Upper Fisher Row itself, where the building angles back from the passing viewer in a new extension, six windows have similar lintels but with whimsical rock-and-roll variations to the decoration, with tributes to the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Elvis Presley and Pink Floyd (and two others, hard to see at the top!):



Figure 43 1 Upper Fisher Row – two window headers from the new extension

It is a mark of the renovation's excellence that this extension is indistinguishable[15] – other than by this bit of fun – from the original part of the building.

North Oxford gothic offers a range of 'decorative extras' that reflect budgetary (and social) aspiration, from the significant extra of the statue of William of Wykeham down to the mere stripes at 6 Warnborough Road. Stripes and similar bits of decorative brickwork, you would think, wouldn't cost much extra. Even little terraced cottages can include this lift from the mundane, and can be found unexpectedly almost anywhere if you stop and look.[16] On the way to Hobbycraft recently, passing down Earl Street, a rather down-at-heels red-brick row off the Botley Road[17], I noticed this:

[14] https://www.robinswailes.com/projects/6

[15] I had to look back through old images of the site (Street View's historical archive) to confirm this really was an extension. Knowing that, it is true that in certain lights you can see that the brick here is newer than most of the original structure.

[16] This stopping-and-looking is perhaps the best thing to come out of even such a superficial study of architecture as this. I commend it, just after advocating walking to start with!

[17] '…which is not a place to promise much, you know,' like Birmingham.



Figure 44 7+8 Earl Street: brickwork icing on cake

Look at the arched door ways with yellow details - the red headers along the middle of the yellow-bricked band, and similar punctuation over the arched window - the yellow headers under the roof line! – and, of course, the decoration in the centre of the two cottages. A genuine lift to the heart, even though this was originally no more than a pair of two-up two-down.

For true bonkers nothing-but-glory-is-good-enough, you have to go back to building houses for God though. The rose-and-ball decoration on Oxford minarets, such as festoon the sky-scraping of St Mary's spire, are all but invisible to mortals on the street except as a sort of haze along the edge. The lengthy craftsmanship in these stone flowers is scarcely credible nowadays, should you ever manage to get up close (such as by climbing the tower) – let alone other bits of churches (and colleges, with their monastic origins). They are hymns to the Almighty, more than day-work to be got through.

But perhaps that is the problem with our current architecture: at most, it is for the grandification of an organisation, or sometimes, a major donor. Otherwise, it is designed by committee and/or to a budget.

When budgeting, you start with the essentials. In the domestic sphere, that means it is all about square footage per person. Apparently, on average in the UK, the answer is 393.4;[18] though you have to wonder just how that is calculated.

[18] A perhaps spurious accuracy, given the range (Slough, 292 ft2, Blackpool 480…) https://www.centreforcities.org/reader/making-room/how-much-space-do-people-in-diffe rent-cities-have; in the US, 400-600 is a target: "To find out how big of a house you need, multiply 600 square feet by the number of people in your household" - https://www.quickenloans.com/learn/how-big-of-a-house-do-i-need.

The square footage on estate agent information is supposed to be a standardised 'gross internal area', GIA, and figures in particulars are often specified as such.[19] Unfortunately this may be measured in different ways.

The principles are easy: "To calculate the gross internal area of a property, measurements are taken on each floor level, up to the internal perimeter walls." It gets murkier thereafter, since "this can include: areas occupied by - internal walls and partitions; columns; piers; chimney breasts; stairwells; lift-wells; vertical ducts; [and] other internal projections." Worse: "*Common* exclusions to gross internal area include: open balconies and fire escapes; minor canopies; areas with less than 1.5m of headroom (other than underneath stairs)."[20]

My emphasis back there – 'common' exclusions don't mean invariable exclusions. As for the lift wells being included – on each floor? – there is actually only one floor's worth of floor-space in a lift. And so on. GIAs stated by different agents may vary by as much as 13%.[21] How were the average footages-per-person calculated, and was it done consistently one wonders?

There is a better measure, 'NIA', net internal area, which is supposed to only count areas that can be used for specific purposes; but it is much more complicated to work out (and, from estate-agents' point of view, smaller…).

Then you have outside space: and gardens! Well, it seems we just don't have time for them, and indeed houses with labour-saving lack of space outside are often seen as more attractive, or at least are presented that way – though car-parking rates highly. You can see how the details are left to the devil.

I am reminded of the Genesis song about redevelopment, where Genetic Control issues an edict restricting humanoid height: very 'sad', but "it's said now that people will be shorter in height/ They can fit twice as many in the same building site."[22] A plan evidently more real than fantasy, to judge by what can be seen.

Back to Earl Street, where the extras in brick proclaim the houses to predate the meanest of the modern: along with Duke Street, this was a relatively early development along the Botley Road. Odd place to put it though, in the lowest part of the Botley Road reach west – these flood so often that Earl Street has its own communal pump, nothing to do with a City Councillor living in the street of course!

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[19] But not always. And some don't give you measurements at all, which is a *real* cop-out.

[20] https://www.technicsgroup.com/services/area-measurement/, who start off by saying "accurate area measurement is a vital step in the valuation, rating and marketing of property."

[21] re 19C Brackenbury Gdns: John D Wood, 916; Horton and Garten, 1037.

[22] *Get 'em out by Friday*, on Foxtrot, 1972.

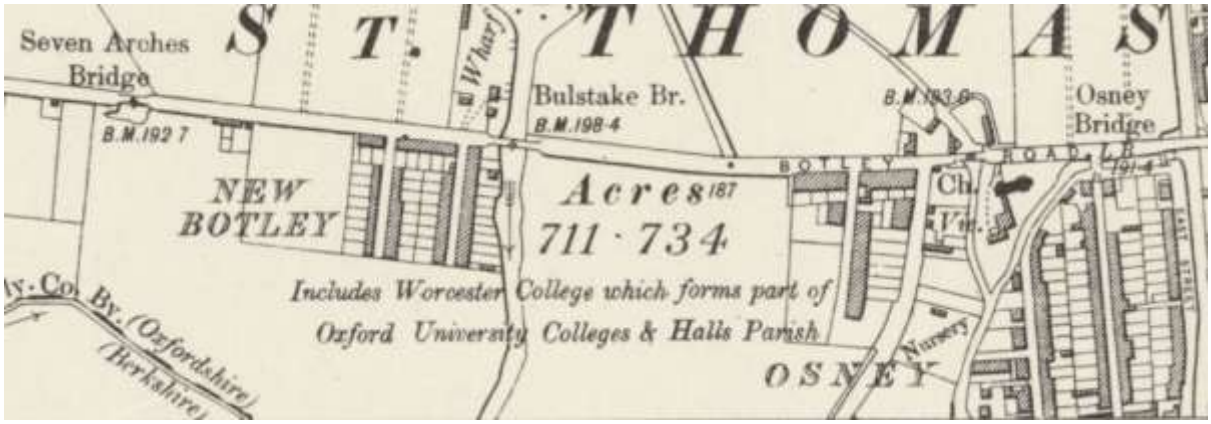


Figure 45 OS 6-inch map – Oxfordshire Sheet XXXIII.SW Revised 1898, published 1900.

This map shows the two streets on their own, just to the left and down from Bulstake Bridge.

The previous edition, surveyed in 1876[23], shows the piecemeal development of Duke and Earl streets, and perhaps in that too is the clue to both the difference and the additional detail. If you look closely, the example pair of houses, 7 and 8, are slightly bigger than their neighbour (as well as more decorated) – they weren't built together.

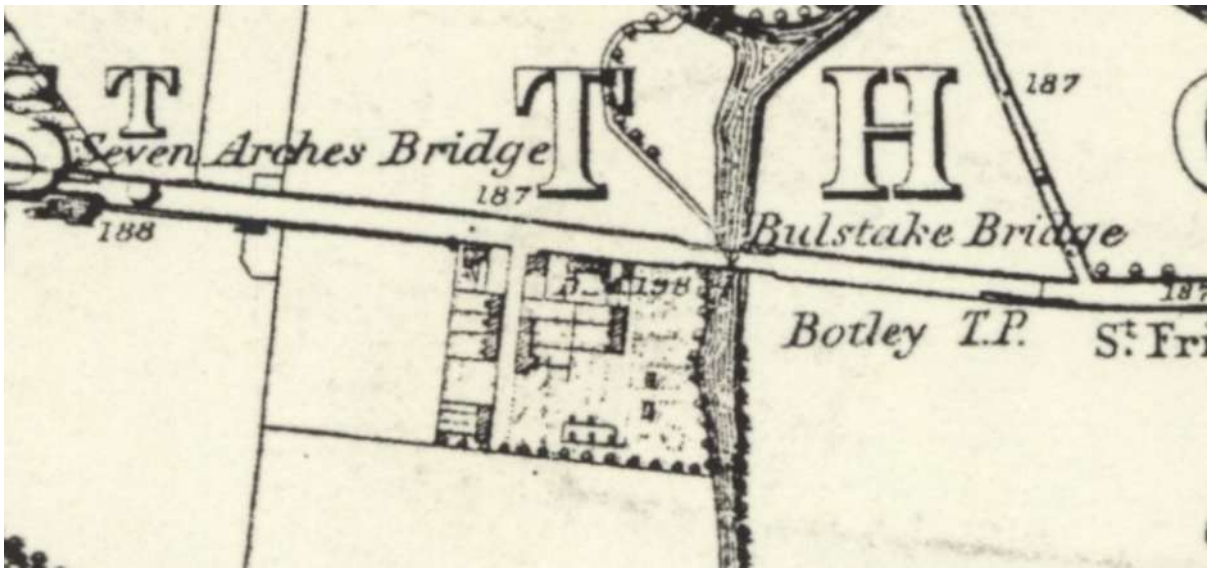


Figure 46 OS 6-inch map – Oxfordshire Sheet XXXIII Surveyed 1876, published 1887.

Point being perhaps, that when individual houses – or pairs, or at most runs of four – are developed at even slightly separate times, by different people, they will make more effort to keep up with or even outdo 'the Joneses' – which translates into, in this context, architectural decoration that can give pleasure 150 years later.

[23] And seemingly drawn rather better – you can even see the little bits sticking out at the back of the pairs of houses on the earlier version. This version also shows Duke Street as hardly started. It is not certain however if my 7&8 Earl Street example has been built, or not – is that three pairs of houses down on the left or four?

Moreover, the gap between Duke and Earl Street is about 63.6m; that between later roads to the east, such at Harley and Oatland Roads, is less at 59.3m.

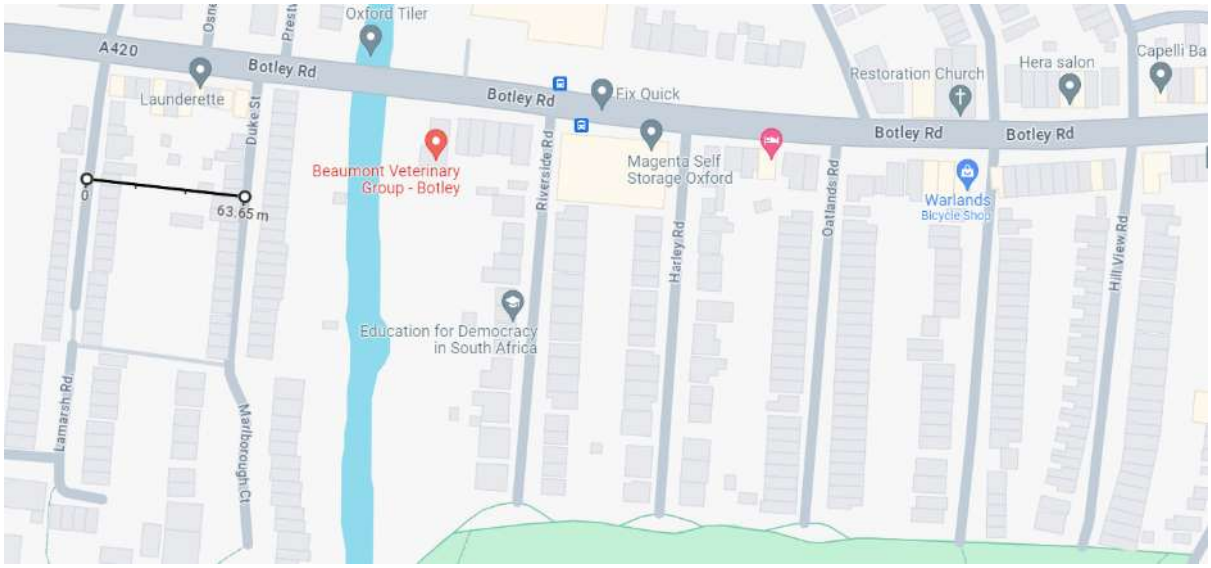


Figure 47 Developmental density down the Botley Road

Notable too is the proportion of garden to building – much less in the later streets. I don't insist upon this correlation, but it is true that the 'Waterways' development on Aristotle Lane, for example, have very *small* gardens for the size of house.

Modern development has fully embraced the efficiencies of mass production, and all too often a long row of houses are both identical and without any redeeming features. Looking out an example to illustrate this is a dispiriting business, but here's one that couldn't help but catch my eye in Nelson Street:



Figure 48 9-20 Nelson Street: 1970s economy

The interest and charm of Jericho is in the variety-upon-a-theme of the houses, and, often, the small decorations used to make these little differences; it is like a Haydn string quartet. This block betrays these qualities. The Jericho Conservation Area Designation Study puts it very mildly:

> A row of 1970's houses have been inserted into the terrace on the southern range. Numbers 9-20 (consecutive) are of a sympathetic scale but a number of features, such as fenestration proportions, lack of chimneys, inset porches and some integral garages mean the terrace does not gel as well as it could have.[24]

I have not been able to identify the culprit but clearly they were all built by the same entity, whether City or College – I suspect the former[25] – and clearly there was little thought for the dignity of the work, let alone the glory of God, in their making.

Similar awfulnesses litter our townscapes, particularly from the mid- to later twentieth century. Almost all our towns and villages have pleasant cores but are surrounded by a scurf of tedious unimaginative development... And it is not always clear that newer developments have quite learned the lesson, though some effort at variety may usually be seen, such as at the Waterways area, or the Mosaics site off the Oxford northeastern bypass, or the expanses of Great Kneighton and Trumpington Meadows at the southern tip of Cambridge.

I may be overstating the 'awfulness' of many of these.[26] They presumably represent comfortable and efficient dwellings inside; as the Jericho study says, the Nelson Street houses are at least on a 'sympathetic scale'.[27] They probably don't leak (more than other houses), and almost certainly have indoor plumbing - their predecessors on the site may not have, at least not until recently.[28]

Moreover, and in defence of our elected representatives (as responsible, if not for the Nelson Street houses, certainly for similar ones elsewhere, such as in St Ebbs), most budgets represent a horrible choice. An extra £5 on brickwork here is £5 less for the homeless elsewhere. One might not always agree with the choices made, but I for one am glad I don't have to make them myself.[29]

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[24] Oxford City Council – City Development, October 2010
https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/file/200/jericho_study_oct_2010

[25] I think this is proved by a Freedom of Information answer of 2009 that lists 11-18 Nelson Street as Council houses - https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/council_owned_properties_in_jeri

[26] Or I might not be, according to the Guardian report mentioned below (p. 76).

[27] You can tell, because modern cars are huge next to them, like giant trainers with their huge blocky soles. I was lucky to find a stretch without any vehicles in front for my picture!

[28] The floorplan for 6 Nelson Street shown in the HEET case study
https://www.oxford.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/753/heet_case_study_4_no_6_nelson_street_jericho.pdf
shows the loo and bath stuck out the back on the ground floor. 43 Cranham Street had an upstairs bath and loo carved out of one of the bedrooms in the 1970s, but still had a separate outside loo then.

[29] Not least because everyone else would choose differently, and tells you so.

And there is, one accepts, a great need for 'affordable' housing. There are just two imponderables: perhaps 'affordable' need not necessarily lack for something a little extra. A not-untasteful yellow brick can be had for £1.19;[30] assuming the detailing in this different brick is no more 5% of the whole wall, and that similarly attractive red bricks are 97p,[31] the increase in cost will be a little over 1%, or, if you have a house-front that is about 5m x 5m as I estimated for a Jericho cottage, £16.50.[32] A little more interest and involvement from the bricklayer might even make this up with less than a couple of hours' work[33] spent attending, rather than bunking off for tea or to check the phone.[34] There is another cost too, in that if you're simulating headers in your single-brick wall you will have to cut the bricks in half to make these; not very satisfactory, if probably not a great deal extra.

Secondly, how to judge the long-term benefits of the extras? We are really into the unmeasurable now, since I have already shown the uncertainty about the lives of building materials: multiply that by the unquantifiable lift of the heart[35] generated by say, this brickwork from just up the road from Nelson Street:



Figure 49 Brick detailing, Walton Street Crescent

About 150 years of passing pleasure: wonderful. The detailing is part of the structure, rather than being merely additional.

[30] https://brickwholesale.co.uk/ibstock-arundel-yellow-multi-stock-facing-brick-pack-of-475/

[31] https://brickwholesale.co.uk/aab-farnley-red-multi-stock-facing-brick-pack/

[32] It takes about 1,500 bricks to do this area: who knew? https://www.jewson.co.uk/material-calculators/brick ! As for the brick-costs, you can find cheaper and more expensive bricks, red and yellow both; only at a quick glance did it appear that yellows tended to be a bit dearer...

[33] Charles Derby of MEBP points out that most construction work is now costed and charged on the basis of piece-work rather than day-work (ie the bricklayer says, £600 for the wall, rather than £200 per day and probably three days), with a consequent focus on doing it as fast as possible.

[34] It's a hard job. But not as hard as visual evidence of many 'workers' seen in Warnborough Road in recent years seem to think.

[35] Though The Week's Last Word 28 October 2023 has an extract from 'Humanise' by Thomas Heatherwick, citing a study by Colin Ellard in 2012 which surveyed people walking past contrasting locales in New York City. So maybe it is measurable; just not easily.

The budgetary constraint of modern builders is called 'cost control' and feed straight to the bottom line of the major builders. Given the risks evident from Grand Designs, costs are indeed something to keep under control; however, a recent article in the Guardian[36] exposes the lamentable products of the larger house-builders, responsible for over half the homes built. As the article reports, the industry is cracked, fractured, dysfunctional, ill-managed, ill-supervised, basically plain broken, and its products, unsurprisingly the same. But this is to lambast the workmen, who are, one has to assume, executing the intent of the architect or designer, a separate subject; my problem is with those who decide to build using the most basic design because that is the cheapest.

On some modern estates the 'variety' that I think is almost a necessity for a human environment – back with respect to 17 Merton Street on page 12, I identified a quality of 'harmony' – is mimicked by simply twisting the same ground plan around at various angles; or relatively large blocks of identical houses being 'mixed' with other large blocks of a different design. This is case at Waterways and Mosaics. The eye is not really fooled and the cheapness disappoints. It is hard to imagine – despite the most sympathetic of efforts – someone feeling a lift of the heart when passing any of these creations in 150 years.

In the commercial sphere, one of the great outstanding questions of recent architecture is, what will we think of the cathedrals of modernism, those towers of steel and glass, in a similar span of time? The jury is of course still out. Presumably they are relatively efficient, at least, in providing a lot of floorspace on a small footprint; and, demonstrably, they are still standing. The lurch to working from home caused by Covid has called into question whether we really need such concentrations of workers, but that's an evolving subject; as for the buildings, neuroscientists are increasingly vocal about the cumulative effect of these.[37]

Irrespective of their affect, I suspect that the crisp surfaces of these buildings offer an interesting lesson in scale. Their clean minimalist lines and planes are attractive (if they are – perhaps the clean-and-shiny helps?!) *because* they are so big: what is pleasing, interesting, is that such large areas are immediately recognisable for the shapes that they are, and awesome for it. I think that an attempt to use this modernist language on a domestic scale all too easily ends up looking meanly plain and industrial. Perhaps the new build in North Hinksey illustrates this (page 65): the attempted 'clean lines' of the façade just look plain and unfinished. The Clore Music building in Mansfield Road is another example: the plain stonework looks just that, with a suspicion of premature dirtiness.

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[36] https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/oct/21/cracked-tiles-wonky-gutters-leaning-walls-why-are-britains-new-houses-so-rubbish - the links to planningshit and HateNewBuildHate on Twitter https://twitter.com/PlanningShit/, https://twitter.com/HateNewbuild/ provide hilarious evidence of the awful results.

[37] See the useful report 'The hidden ways that architecture affects how you feel', https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20170605-the-psychology-behind-your-citys-design. This too (as well as footnote 35) refers to Colin Ellard's work, among others.

Conversely, the detailed brickwork I so enjoy in the Jericho cottages rather takes one aback when applied on a colossal scale, as at Keble. Oxford has become inured, perhaps even fond of this giant Faroe-isles sweater; it is perhaps as well to remember the shock with which it was initially greeted. St Johns students formed the Destroy Keble Society, with the aim of dismantling it brick by brick. G. M. Trevelyan reckoned that 'the monstrosities of architecture erected by order of the Dons of Oxford and Cambridge colleges in the days of William Butterfield and Alfred Waterhouse give daily pain to posterity.'[38] (It is *not* true, however, that Kenneth Clark called Keble College 'the ugliest building in the world'[39]; he merely reported that in his time at Oxford, it was generally believed to be that.[40] Which is fair enough.)

The fondness of familiarity – 'a monster, but yes, *our* monster…' – makes it hard to judge of the result now, though the jury seems to have been swayed.[41] With respect to budgets, about which I'm meant to be writing, the College's sponsors had very little: building commenced with the novel funding of an accumulation of relatively small donations, and had to be done gradually.

Butterfield was 'uncompromising [in his] defence of the lines of his building.' This went as far as prohibiting the planting of trees, writing: "The precincts of a building are so important to the building itself that a building may be much injured if the ground on which it stands is not laid out by the same person who designed the building."[42]

Yet despite this rigid approach, even he had to compromise in the face of the budget – he 'had wanted to use a deep red brick [for the chapel], but it was too expensive.'[43]

Interestingly, given the long-term controversy, there was some discussion even at the time about the chapel being in brick – let alone a deep red brick: Dr E.B.Pusey wrote to the Warden that he had imagined it would be in stone, even if brick had been used for the

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[38] English Social History A Survey Of Six Centuries, p524. He was not explicitly attacking Keble though: https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.503181/page/n533/mode/2up?view=theater, thanks to a library in India, shows the context from your armchair. He goes on to lament the lack of craftsmanship and beauty in the face of mass-production, somewhat as I am, though much better expressed. It is perhaps a measure of our fallen times that he also dislikes 'the jerry-builders' who 'believed that if they "stuck on a bit of Gothic ornament," all was well' – since I now grasp at these straws as wonderful.

[39] As asserted by https://www.oxfordvisit.com/university-and-colleges/keble-college/ which also pinned Trevelyan's remark to Keble. Alas.

[40] Correctly reported per *Butterfield and Brutalism*, Elain Harwood, AA Files, No. 27 (Summer 1994), pp. 39-46: https://www.jstor.org/stable/29543894.

[41] The buildings are now listed Grade 1, eg the north quad https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1046691.

[42] https://heritage.keble.ox.ac.uk/history-features/gardens-and-grounds/ Within a very few years the dons disagreed strongly enough to go ahead with planting.

[43] Bishop Edward S Talbot, first Warden of Keble, from his Memories of Early Life, p63, as quoted by Peter Howell in "'Our very quaint old architect': Some Letters of William Butterfield", Architectural History, 2010, Vol. 53, pp. 217-243 - www.jstor.org/stable/41417508

domestic buildings; 'Liddon[44] too ...wrote that it would be prudent to use sandstone "instead of throwing down the gauntlet to Oxford opinion by having variegated bricks in the Chapel walls as well as elsewhere."'[45] Would stone not have been even more expensive? It might not have lasted so long! – stonework has not suffered the city's acidic rain well.[46]

Keble is however as far from the golden heart of 'old' Oxford colleges[47] as could be (until they let women in too a few decades later – they were even further out), so maybe the difference is less important than it could have been – the obligations of neighbourliness less.

Large buildings perhaps create their own neighbourhood. Certainly they often attract other large buildings. The Natural History Museum, another Victorian railway-station-style creation,[48] is opposite Keble; and behind the Natural History Museum lurks The Science Area, whose many buildings merit little more than a shudder – here are buildings built purely for purpose and to budget! – Keble's are at least worthy of discussion.

The Science Area has much of at least incidental interest, even if perhaps actual architectural 'merit' is absent. I find the earlier forms of 'science-specific' building fascinatingly in their gradual evolution of form for new requirements. And I have to also admit that the Townsend Building has a pleasing front[49] as one enters the area from the Keble direction – but it is hopelessly crowded by the later growths, a muddle of utilitarian rectangles.

No, the best you can hope for in the Science area is some decidedly odd structures, like tanks of liquid nitrogen encrusted with ice, glimpses into laboratories with strange equipment and light, unexpected sub-levels revealed under glass pavement or down sudden crevasses next to the path. All more murky than quotidian issues of budget or design!

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[44] H.P.Liddon was one of the group who met after Keble's funeral and decided to promote a college in his memory - https://heritage.keble.ox.ac.uk/history-features/foundation-of-college/

[45] Howell, www.jstor.org/stable/41417508 again.

[46] It is well to remember that many of the stone buildings visible in Oxford have in fact been completely re-clad in new stone since they were first unveiled – eg 'Christ Church library was re-clad in the 1960... Replaced fascades [sic] included the Northern, Eastern and western walls.' https://goldholme.com/history-stone/the-stone-that-built-oxford/ . The Sheldonian Heads are on their third incarnation: 'The first set, erected on stone plinths in 1669 endured for 200 years... Their replacements, erected in the 1860s, lasted for half the time and were described by John Betjeman as "the mouldering busts round the Sheldonian". In 1972, they were replaced by the existing carvings.' https://www.heritagenetwork.ox.ac.uk/article/mystery-decaying-emperor-heads

[47] Keble's safe distance from the 'real' Oxford has (of course) been remarked upon before: Reginald Turnor's Nineteenth Century Architecture in Britain (1951) has "Butterfield's brickwork is an insult to Oxford's collegiate architecture even though, mercifully, it is away from the centre of the city." Quoted in *Butterfield and Brutalism*, Elain Harwood, p43.

[48] There is an apocryphal account of a French visitor declaring of Keble, "*C'est magnifique mais ce n'est pas la gare*?"

[49] Duly listed, https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/101392967-the-townsend-building-oxford-holywell-ward#.VeB80vlVhBc

Where some attempt has been made to jazz up the cuboid carapace, the results are awkward at best – such as the strangely coloured glass flanges on Biochemistry (now the 'Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin Building') and bizarre angular shapes on Earth Sciences:



Figure 50 Coloured fins on Biochemistry

Fine enough in their own way – utilitarian, task-oriented, efficient – except that they're not really the first two!

Coloured fins? Really? They're an odd addition. They emphasise the verticality of the building. Perhaps the range of colour suggests something to do with biochemistry?[50] They certainly don't fit in with anything around them.



Figure 51 Angles at Earth Sciences

And these angles on Earth Sciences!

Well, I suppose these too, like the coloured fins, are a deliberate flouting of any suggestion of matching form and function – applications of decoration unconnected – *disconnected*, even – from the structure.

Are the interior windowsills also wonky, one wonders?

[50] 'The... building is wrapped in a vibrant, colourful and extensively glazed façade that showcases the scientific activity within for passers-by.' https://www.hawkinsbrown.com/projects/dorothy-rowfoot-hodgkin-building/. So, no, no reason for the attached flanges at all, really.



Figure 52 Stunted colonnade with wooden entablature

Then you might come across this older masterpiece of oddity, a short row of stout columns, complete with entasis.

The entablature in wood adds a splendidly discordant note to their stone.

All the proportions are a bit odd to the eye – columns too short for their width; entablature too thin...

And *then* this entrance way to the courtyard behind has been blocked with brutal pragmatism by the newer infill behind them...!

The whole experience is little short of bizarre. As for budgets: well, these additions are clearly in addition to the utilitarian, so I suppose someone was paying attention. But, scientists, right?

Anyway, to wrap up this ramble, what can one conclude? Most of the future is horribly uncertain, but that it will happen is not, and one should plan (and budget!) for that accordingly.

Speaking of the future, don't forget to build in maintenance plans for your Grand Design!

Decoration is nice but (in my view) it helps if it is connected to the design and structure, rather than being merely applied as an apparent afterthought.[51] In such a context it is probably affordable too.

Variety on the domestic scale is vital. Square footage is not all.

Decoration on the gigantic scale is dangerous, unless a homogeneity of decorative 'texture' is achieved – as in older churches and Oxford colleges (yes, even Keble).

And whatever your budget, don't forget to dream.

[51] Again bowing to my cultural inheritance from Pugin and Ruskin (page 39).

10 In which a conclusion is reached

'It has been a blast!'
– Roger Boden, Bursar, on JTW's production of Keble's annual accounts for 2020.

Much like the earlier 'Walking Oxford' work, this can probably conclude only with a series of vacuous-seeming observations[1] along the lines of 'could do more'. 'Could do better' is to be understood, of course.

However, it has gradually become apparent why modern architecture is so often awful; it is because people are.[2] Those involved in creating new buildings are not often interested in making those buildings as good as possible: they have budget and time constraints, a committee to please, planners to placate, and the populace to appease. Quite apart from any personal issues they might be dealing with at the time.

If the 'architect' is a big enough name, they might be able to produce something individual and interesting, but at great risk of failing to satisfy either the insiders or the passers-by, *because* they have tried to do something new, and really, the solutions to creating space for six-foot bipeds are pretty well known already. Novel shapes – deconstructivism, might I be thinking of you?! – are like party-games: maybe fun for the evening; maybe not even that.

Moreover, it is likely that the architect (or committee) will never know whether they actually achieved their objectives. This is partly because no-one is trying to find out; partly because architecture, in its creative aspect, shades into art and the appeal to posterity is unanswerable; and partly because the arc of a building's life is too long for useful feedback to be obtained for the next project.

It would perhaps help if the objectives were set less metaphorically. The glibness of 'access' and 'experience' obscures rather than elucidates security and comfort. Higher flights of poesie (eg the 'knowledge and learning sensor') are risible.

As for what I like? Well, the introspection has clarified the 'shiny' aspect of new buildings – all those modernist jobs – as a possible mirage. They do often make a good picture, with clean dramatic forms. I had lots more to include that never made it, such as:

- the Said Business School from the garden-side (much better than the front – now *that* is a railway-station...);
- the interesting use of colour and shape at the University's pavilion near Marston Meadows;
- contrasting brickwork and vertical wooden elements at Islip House on the corner of Banbury and Hernes Roads;

[1] The end of the last chapter was doing pretty well for these already.
[2] Surprise!

- the Jewish Centre's extraordinary curving copper[3] roof in Jericho (extending the1974 building in 2004.)[4]

Not many glass and steel towers in Oxford because of the no-higher-than-Carfax-tower rule, so not even a chance of appearing in my list. The Science area has most such constructions (eg Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin, p85), and Brookes and the Churchill campus up on Headington (eg Big Data, p67) have more; glass and steel feature in the lobby of the Maths Institute, the Ruth Deech building at St Anne's (as seen between the Gothic gables to the south of Bevington Road[5]), and others – not always decently clothed in stone or brick – but the lack of vertical scale, even of those outside the centre, moderates the 'modernism' of the material style.

I had more pictures of older and more characterful details, buildings and groups of buildings:

- the cottages in a row at Binsey;
- a nicely repurposed stable at Locks Court, North Place, Old Headington;
- the harmonious variety of Beaumont Street fronts;
- ball+flowered minarets in a little forest above Magdalen;
- the very charming Quaker meeting house in St Giles, dated 1660.

All these exhibit charms of one sort or another; neighbourliness being high on the list. That the latest dates to the Regency[6] is probably no coincidence; longevity is a good proxy for quality, I reckoned earlier.

And a third category, wherein the old and modern, perhaps unexpectedly, blend together:

- the curved-glass-brickwork of the Hertford Graduate Centre with Folly Bridge and Georgian stucco and brick buildings;
- the Computer Science's elegant eyebrow of a roof arched between more normal gables as one looks over the West Walk of the Parks;[7]
- the Malthouse in Tidmarsh Lane (now Estates Facilities or 'FM'[8]) as seen from Quaking Bridge, unexpectedly ameliorating the brutalist concrete of the Oxford

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[3] At least I assume it is oxidized copper. It is green and appears to be of metal.

[4] https://www.jerichocentre.org.uk/about_jericho/about_landmarks_item/oxford-synagogue has a sketch of the synagogue before the renovation; https://manchesterhistory.net/architecture/1970/synagogue.html is all I have been able to find connecting the centre with architecture (ie, not much). The original building is credited to David Stern and Partners, now subsumed in Stern Thom Fehler Architects ~~https://~~stf.co.uk/profile/ who are doing synagogues and such per their unsecure website but don't remember the Jericho work.

[5] 'Oddly', stonework tones down this modernism on the inner, south, side.

[6] Beaumont Street, 'The finest street ensemble in Oxford' per Sherwood and Pevsner, Oxfordshire pp. 324–325, was laid out 1828-1837. The towering pile up of the Randolf up the east end is of course a generation later.

[7] This building chosen to illustrate the use of *piloti* on p37, but you have to stand further back to appreciate the roof line and volume in context.

[8] Facilities Management Services, I suppose: https://estates.admin.ox.ac.uk/the-malthouse

Centre for Innovation, as well as coping with a later brick+steel confection on the corner;

- the Tower of Four Winds and the green hemispheric dome of an observatory reflected in the glass front of the new Maths Institute lobby.

For all these delights however, and my walking around Oxford has been the more interesting for coming across them, my favourite building of all[9] is the Freie Waldorfschule Überlingen. Although a modern building, it is an almost organic creation, grown from the community. I was lucky enough to see it in the course of construction when staying in the area in about 1980.

We deliberately picked up building elements from the Lake Constance landscape, e.g. beaver-tail tiles on the roof, which can be seen in the old town of Überlingen; as well as the simple masonry on the first floor and the half-timbered structure on the second floor, as we are familiar with from the farmhouses in this region.

The arrangement of the rooms is reminiscent of a 'village'. The buildings are grouped around the square in the middle: two lower levels with 8 classes each, one in the east, one in the west. The upper level is spread over both. In the East there are more artistic spaces, in the West there are natural sciences. The rooms shared by everyone in the middle around the foyer - cafeteria with kitchen, hall and stage, administration, teachers' room, large conference room and activity room, large library. The roofs sometimes stand out individually, but are still connected to one another in the context of the large, swinging line.[10]



Figure 53 The main building from above

[9] Subject to revisions and exceptions, oh yes and wow that too...

[10] https://waldorfschule-ueberlingen.de/unsere-schule/portrait/architektur - as translated by Mr G.



Figure 54 Inside

Although large, it is nicely proportioned; although with grand aspects, it manages to be domestic; the echoes of local architecture connect it with its neighbours and locale; the schools' parents' deep involvement in the planning, right from the outset, is reflected in the result. They "were also involved in the work in many ways - former parents still know which parquet they laid and which wall they painted."

The most striking aspect of it is the lack of right-angles compared to most architecture. To my eye, at least, this is an enormously welcome relief: not that I mind a rectangular door, say, but need everything be based on this shape? Really, it comes about just because it is easy to build – ie, mechanical and cheap; and it looks it. Curved shapes look more 'natural', more welcoming; especially, as with this school, combined with extensive use of wood.

Epilogue

When I was looking at information about the Freie Waldorfschule Überlingen I realised that it is not at all unique, but part of a whole school of architecture associated with anthroposophy.[1] Other examples of beautiful organic curvy buildings exist – I saw several other schools in my searches for this particular one that I had seen being built! So the one near Überlingen is not alone, even if still (by virtue of its particular curves) unique.

As a school of thought anthroposophy has obvious flaws, but strong points too – not for discussion here, really. In architectural terms it results in a subset of 'organic architecture',

> which emphasize the harmony of building and landscape, a form that is appropriate to the building materials and 'organically' developed from function, as well as biological, psychological and social practicality of architecture. More recently, the concept of *ecological building* has emerged, which partly coincides with concepts of organic architecture.[2]

All laudable, even desirable, and seemingly all completely alien to anything one can see in or dream of in Oxford.

In choosing the Überlingen buildings as my 'jokers', I was betrayed by my own personal narratives. First, of course, I had seen it myself, at the impressionable age of 20 or so, and it was indeed unlike anything else I had experienced. Then, my brother, with whom I was staying at the time, and who worked part-time at the school itself, had told me that it had been built entirely by the teachers and pupils; they had learned all the different trades and overcome all the difficulties themselves. I remember seeing people of all ages with wheelbarrows and building materials on site, earnest but apparently unpressured by the constraints of work: it was just part of life and learning. The school grew to fit the users' needs.

This narrative seemed wonderful to me, an ideal to hold up. However, reading up on the school's story shows a slightly more nuanced view. Sure, the parents were deeply involved in planning the school *as* school – ie the curriculum and organising teachers – but their creative input to the structure was limited; even the input to construction seems to have been less than I thought, as could perhaps be realised from pictures showing tower-cranes on site:

> The shapes were developed with the artist Wilfried Ogilvie from Alanus University. The architectural firm Bockemühl & Partner created the work plans. The construction works, under the direction of Manfred Hahn, was created and took over the majority of the work.[3]

Perhaps 'Die Bauhütte, unter der Leitung von Manfred Hahn, entstand und übernahm den überwiegenden Teil der Gewerke' in fact describes some parent-teacher collective doing the

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[1] https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthroposophische_Architektur
[2] https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organische_Architektur
[3] https://waldorfschule-ueberlingen.de/unsere-schule/portrait/architektur again.

work. If so, it isn't trumpeted as an extraordinary achievement, as I would think it would be – and as I had imagined it.

Point here being that I had confused the building-as-object – perhaps functioning space would be a better term – with building-as-story. This contamination of the result by a 'narrative' is all too easy. How often have we watched an hour-long documentary that is 50 minutes about how people tried this and that, faced difficulties and obstacles in the course of their work, and then 10 minutes about what they found out in the end? How many works of art are confused by the backstory, how the painter struggled for recognition, how they rebelled against their parents, position, gender, whatever; how the writer was rejected by publishers before a breakthrough. Subsequently, the dreaded reception story intrudes: people reviled it, the newspapers panned it, it met with catcalls, ovations, it was re-assessed and came to be recognised as brilliant...[4]

All these narratives are substitutes for actual engagement. We swallow them whole, adopt them like comfortable sweaters, and the usual biographical arcs involved are particularly easy on our intellects.

The alternative is working out what to think for ourselves – difficult; and then trying to put than in our own words – harder still.

So I am left feeling slightly let down by the Überlingen school; but not because of what it is. The let-down is because the story in my head about it was false, and now my feeling about *that* attaches to the building. Not fair. If I rethink it without the backstory, I perhaps might be interested to learn *how* it was built, but I shouldn't really care at all *who* built it. As for whether it works as a building or not, or even looks nice – I think it manages those irrespective of who made it; as the users report:

> Not without pride, but with all humility and gratitude, we dare to say that we live in one of the most beautiful school buildings...[5]

The organic and ecological schools of architectural thought seem to be the way to go. I am reminded of the 'curvy wooden house' on Grand Designs, almost literally hand-carved by the owner-creator.[6] Julia's House under the eves of Shotover, hand-built by Julia and Wichard von Hauenschild, is another example from experience. These buildings follow a completely different course to the usual mechanistic processes associated with most of our culture.

It has to be admitted that the curves and idiosyncrasies of these particular structures are not well suited to city living, where buildings have to abut each other: 'Keine rechten

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[4] Less common is the story about the wonderfully-received thing that is then reassessed as a blip, a squib, rubbish, though this arc is actually the more usual. There being a great love of novelty.

[5] https://waldorfschule-ueberlingen.de/unsere-schule/portrait/architektur - "Nicht ohne Stolz, aber in aller Bescheidenheit und Dankbarkeit wagen wir zu behaupten, dass wir eines der schönsten Schulgebäude bewohnen..."

[6] https://www.tomraffield.com/pages/grand-designs

Winkel'[7] is then a problem. Although the picture of the gloriously curvy Zaha Hadid extension at St Anthony's (page 53) doesn't show it, connecting this shape to the Victorian buildings at either end is something of a bodge:



Figure 55 Lamprey v right angles

Never mind?!

I suppose in the end I come down in favour of a sense of careful, hand-crafted living; and that is why I find both the domestic scale and older buildings so attractive: by virtue of their long lives and continual re-use, they have acquired that same patina of care that is also found in the wholly hand-made. In the town or city context, with terraces, an additional aggregate quality can sometimes be sensed as 'neighbourliness' or 'harmony', from the buildings' long-term relationships with each other. But not always. I think they have to be friendly buildings to start with.

The reader might complain that I have said little about Oxford colleges and their architecture, except almost parenthetically, whereas surely this is the glory of the city?[8] Well, yes, that is true. But access to the colleges is often awkward, if not actually prohibited; it isn't so much that you can't, but that every one is its own little fiefdom requiring separate negotiation. For example, some colleges accept that an Oxford Alumni card is just that, you are part of Oxford as a whole; but others will turn the card over and

[7] 'No right angles' - https://ivk.waldorfschule-itzehoe.de/waldorf-architektur

[8] Though if this hypothetical reader has got this far at all, 'well done!'

look at where you studied, as printed on the back, and say, 'you're not an alumnus of *this* college.'[9] A bit embarrassing, especially when associated with a disinclination to give them money to go in. £5 per head for Balliol, for example, or £18 at Christ Church.[10]

As part of the narrative about architecture, colleges – especially the older ones – have an uneasy life with their buildings. Are they heritage objects, to be displayed to the public? They are difficult to adapt to modern requirements! Some even tie themselves in knots over this, claiming maintenance of their buildings, and access to them, as part of the 'public benefit' they provide, eg Lincoln's annual statements for the 2022 year-end say:

> ...the College's aims for the public benefit are:
> - ...
> - to welcome *members of the public as visitors to the College* ...;
> - to preserve and share its heritage.[11]

However, its web site has this instead, under 'visiting':

> Current students, alumni, prospective students and other associates are given free access to College. Unfortunately, due to the small size of the College, we are *not able to allow access for the general public.*[12]

My italics.

So, yes, there is lots of 'university architecture' to see, but I'll leave that AAEFTR,[13] as I said at various points in 'Walking Oxford'. Just remember if you try this though, most of the 'medievally-looking' gothic is nineteenth and early twentieth century; and the older stuff has been renewed, and renewed... though it is nice too that this is done, of course.

Anyway, get out there – walking![14] – and keep your eyes peeled.

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[9] Balliol: 'Oxford alumni are allowed free entry.' Queens, Hertford and others clearly welcome old members only. Some are ambiguous, such as Brasenose: 'Alumni are always welcome back.' I think more fall into the latter two types rather than the first – see the appendix.

[10] £19 in July and August. And £1 off each if bought on-line. 'Family tickets' (for two adults and two children or one adult and three children) a £56 bargain, unless on-line, £6 less, except in July and Aug, when £3 more but only £3 less if on-line then. (*So* complicated.) And self-guided multimedia tours 'are required' – https://www.chch.ox.ac.uk/visit/daily-multimedia-tours - unless you upgrade to a guided group tour.

[11] https://d307gmaoxpdmsg.cloudfront.net/collegeaccounts2122/Lincoln.pdf

[12] https://lincoln.ox.ac.uk/discover/the-college/visiting-lincoln

[13] As An Exercise For The Reader. See appendix of all the different colleges' entry policies, though the variety and complexity – down-right ambiguity in some cases – rather mitigates against the value of this; and, one suspects, what is published might not be up to date anyway.

[14] One delightful side-discovery when following up Trevelyan's views on 19th century architecture was his essay on 'Walking', with his two doctors, his left leg and his right, setting his humours to rights.

Pictures – sources, credits

All pictures by JTW except *where stated.*

1 Keble dinosaur, Blackhall Road, 27 March 2020

2 Arco brickwork, Keble Road, 26 December 2021

3 17 Merton Street, 1 September 2020

4 *Life goes on (at 17 Merton Street), Google StreetView Jan 2021*[1]

5 hot air at Exeter College – story-telling at work 26 August 2023

6 Team at work – the architects amongst others at the Radcliffe Science Library redevelopment, 29 March 2022

7 St Pauls (now 'Freuds') with BSG, Walton Street, 29 March 2021

8 119A Walton Street, with BSG behind it, 13 January 2022

9 Radcliffe Humanities (ie Radcliffe Infirmary) with lighting, Woodstock Road, 26 November 2020

10 *Infirmary site c1790 from Davis map, from photocopy of copies held at Oxfordshire History Centre, St Luke's Church, Temple Road, Cowley*

11 *The Radcliffe Infirmary c 1824 –H Slatter, Herald Office, Oxford; image copied from http://www.rareoldprints.com/p/11035 or other places online.*

12 *The Radcliffe Infirmary c1908 – H Taunt. Think I found this from: https://www.oxfordhistory.org.uk/old_oxford/woodstock_road/radcliffe_infirmary.html "The postcard below is from a photograph by Henry Taunt. On the right is the hospital chapel, built by Sir Arthur Blomfield in 1864". There is a collection of Henry Taunt photos at https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/photos/collection/HWT01 and maybe the original is with them (this archive is hard to both browse and search).*

13 *Radcliffe Infirmary site c 2005, from the north west. From 'A Major Op at the Old Infirmary', Oxford Mail 27 February 2012 https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/9554706.major-op-old-infirmary/#gallery0*

14 *ROQ Masterplan 2008, https://newoxfordarchitecture.com/radcliffe-infirmary-quarter/*

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[1] Just what is the status of all this imagery made available by Google? Ah, "Print: DON'T DO THIS: Street View imagery may not be used for any print purposes." Well, now you know. Oops? Or, 'this document is to be distributed electronically…'?

15 *SCH Site plan, from planning application documents https://public.oxford.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=documents&keyVal=R1ZXMEMF18P00*[2]

16 *SCH facade per architects' drawing – with people drawn in, https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/hopkins-contest-winning-oxford-university-humanities-plans-revealed*

17 *Orthogonal view of SCH, ditto* (you scroll through the gallery on the same page. This also shows the interior views that *do* look nice.)

18 *The Recipe for Good Architecture: simples!* (photographed in Waterstones)

19 Light on wall in Oriel Street, 28 January 2019

20 Shadows on stucco, St Clements, 14 June 2021

21 Pillars of derivation – Computer Science building, Parks Road, 23 March 2022

22 *Gilpin: a picturesque view... from William Gilpin's Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, &c: Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty: Made in the Summer of the Year 1770. This picture comes from from a first edition copy that was for sale at https://stellabooks.com/books/william-gilpin/observations-on-the-river-wye-940099/2123311 but may no longer be...*

23 Kirbuster firehoose showing bed-niche on left-hand side, Orkney, 4 September 2016

24 Nothing in this one (Master's Building, Brasenose), St Cross Road, 19 May 2022

25 Somerville cubes, Walton Street, 6 November 2023

26 *North Oxford 1876: rising tides of building but Gothic ebb – from 6 inch OS map "Oxfordshire Sheet XXXIII" surveyed 1876 (published 1887), National Library of Scotland https://maps.nls.uk/view/102346822*

27 56 Banbury Road, complete with William[3], 31 August 2023

28 *Guggenheim, Bilbao – you know Deconstruction when you see it: https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/the-building#gallery-1*

29 Zaha Hadid's building at St Anthony's, Woodstock Road, 3 March 2016

30 Window cleaning at the BSG, 16 November 2022

31 LMH: coned off, 4 September 2023

32 Sad ginkgo, sad concrete, sadder innards – Tinbergen building 3 March 2016

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[2] And can one use *this* material in print?

[3] Of Wykeham, not the adventure-bird!

33 The Fleury Building turns its back on St Clements, 6 May 2022

34 6 Warnborough Road west front: work needs doing - but at what cost? 5 May 2022

35 New build in North Hinksey, 12 September 2019

36 *View from above 2023, https://www.google.co.uk/maps/@51.7507176,-1.2908694,139m/data=!3m1!1e3*

37 New Radcliffe House, Radcliffe Observatory Quarter: part of the Walton Street elevation 11 October 2023

38 Big Data Institute, OU Old Road Campus, 29 November 2020

39 *Big Data in context, https://www.google.co.uk/maps/@51.7528153,-1.2152139,277m/data=!3m1!1e3*

40 *Kennedy Institute location: Big Data no more than a carpark in the designer's eye, https://www.makearchitects.com/projects/kennedy-institute-rheumatology/*

41 Cohen roof: black streaks in Worcester Place, 11 October 2023

42 1 Upper Fisher Row, window header with original decoration, 17 October 2023

43 1 Upper Fisher Row - two window headers from the new extension, 17 October 2023

44 7+8 Earl Street: brickwork icing on cake, 21 October 2023

45 *OS 6-inch map - Oxfordshire Sheet XXXIII.SW Revised 1898, published 1900. https://maps.nls.uk/view/101457951*

46 *OS 6-inch map - Oxfordshire Sheet XXXIII Surveyed 1876, published 1887. https://maps.nls.uk/view/102346822*

47 *Developmental density down the Botley Road – Google map measurement, https://www.google.co.uk/maps/@51.7516649,-1.2804557,17z*

48 9-20 Nelson Street: 1970s economy, 28 October 2023

49 Brick detailing, Walton Street Crescent (no.45), 28 October 2023

50 Coloured fins on Biochemistry, 6 November 2023

51 Angles at Earth Sciences, 6 November 2023

52 Stunted colonnade with wooden entablature, Sherrard Road, 27 April 2023

That's a full deck. And the jokers:

53 *The main building from above - Freie Waldorfschule Überlingen - https://waldorfschule-ueberlingen.de/*

54 *Inside Freie Waldorfschule Überlingen* - *https://waldorfschule-ueberlingen.de/unsere-schule/portrait/architektur*

55 lamprey v right angles - the Investcorp building at St Anthony's, Oxford, tries to interface with a Victorian structure, 10 November 2023.

Appendix - Oxford Colleges: yet more architecture to be seen!

Grab your Baedekers! (Or Pevsners, if you're serious about the buildings.[1])

College	Website or other published info*	Comment
All Souls	Members of the public are welcome to visit the College Front and Great Quadrangles and Chapel as individual visitors or in small groups (up to six) free of charge from 2.00pm to 4.00pm on weekdays and Sundays when the College is open.	
Balliol	Balliol College welcomes visitors who wish to tour our buildings and gardens. We are open as often as we can be, but from time to time there are College events that require the College to be closed. As part of admission, you will be able to visit the gardens, Chapel and Hall. We are open from 10.00am until 5.00pm (or dusk, whichever is sooner). Entry fee: £5 per adult, £2 concessions and students, free to potential applicants. During term time (weeks 0–9), summer exam periods and the admissions period, the number of visitors per group is limited to eight people including a guide. Green and Blue Badge holders only can bring a maximum of 19 guests. Admission includes free map and guide. Members of Oxford University and Oxford alumni are allowed free entry.	
Brasenose	Guided tours by travel companies and public visitors are very welcome and the opening times are:- Monday to Friday: 1000-1130 and 1400-1630, Saturday and Sunday 1300-1630. Individual tourists can be allowed in at the discretion of the duty porter, with a small donation to the College. The College reserves the right to close at any time due to unforeseen	

[1] You'd better get the new edition (24 October 2023), now by Simon Bradley as well as Nikolaus Pevsner and Jennifer Sherwood, which will include a good few more of the buildings. A surprising amount has been built since 1974.

College	Website or other published info*	Comment
	circumstances. Visitors should report to the Lodge at the main gate where they will receive a map and information about the College. Alumni are always welcome back to College during visiting hours.	
Christ Church	Free entry via Meadow Gate for Oxford University alumni card holders and up to two personal guests per day during visitor opening hours. Please show your Oxford University Alumni card to the Custodian at Meadow Gate in order to visit. Permanent Residents of Oxford (OX1–OX4): We will shortly be launching a card for local residents and are in the process of finalising the details and application process. Updates will be published here. In the meantime, please contact us on tourism@chch.ox.ac.uk if you would like to arrange a visit. Please note that free entry is for permanent residents of OX1-4 only, and all visits must be arranged at least 24 hours in advance.	They normally let me in through Tom Tower too!
Corpus Christi	Planning to visit Corpus Christi and Oxford? Oxford has excellent public transport links. Its railway station is served by GWR, Chiltern Railways and CrossCountry trains, and runs frequent and speedy services to London. Corpus is a twenty-minute walk from the station.	Nothing about opening hours, policies...!? Or even if this might be addressed to touristy type visitors rather than, say, those with business there…
Exeter	Members of the public are welcome to visit Exeter College at Turl Street, unless the College is closed for a special event. Entrance is free for children up to the age of 12, all prospective students, Bodleian Card holders, and Oxford alumni provided they have their alumni card with them. For other visitors entrance costs £3. During term time the College may waive the fee if parts of the College are closed to visitors. The College is normally open between 2 pm and 5 pm	

College	Website or other published info*	Comment
	during term time and between 1 pm and 5 pm outside of term time.	
Green Templeton		'Visits to Tower of Four Winds only possible with Oxford Open Doors…' nothing about visiting generally.
Harris Manchester	"Our college grounds are **closed to all** members of the public."	Web site had "Visiting:" as a specific page, but it was blank other than "Find Us [and address]". A page for "Visitors and researchers" about using the libraries. Info provided on the left was just a printed sign on the door Nov 2023.
Hertford	Hertford alumni are always welcome to visit OB Quad and the Chapel, usually between 10am – 3pm Monday to Friday and on Saturdays between 2pm – 4pm. Unfortunately we are closed to visitors during exams (usually mid-May to the end of June). Alumni wishing to visit other parts of the college may be able to do so accompanied by a member of the Development Office, which is open Monday to Friday, 9am – 5pm – please get in touch if you would like to arrange a short tour. ... As a small college, Hertford is unfortunately closed to tourists.	
Jesus	We are pleased to be able to welcome alumni back for pre-booked visits and B&B stays.	…followed by a lot of links to tourist information and how-to-get-to the college, which you'd think alumni might know. So, implication is that others might be allowed in but nothing about whether they are or not, or when.
Keble	Keble College welcomes visitors daily from 2.00pm – 5.00pm. Alumni, prospective students and offer holders are welcome to visit the College at any time. Occasionally during the year we will be closed for College events so it is always best to contact the Porters prior to planning a visit.	

College	Website or other published info*	Comment
Kellogg		No info for 'visit' or 'visiting'. Even finding out where 'reception' is was impossible, though the 'Mawby Room is near reception' (no, no info about where the Mawby Room is either, although it is also close to the bar). There is a café somewhere which 'is open to members of the public' as well as college people.
Lady Margaret Hall		No info for 'visit', 'visiting' or 'tourist'. A page of benefits for alumni, most of which involved paying the college £££.
Linacre		Not even a 'search' on the website, which was 'different' to the point of unuseability. No info that I could see about visiting/ entrance.
Lincoln	Current students, alumni, prospective students and other associates are given free access to College. Unfortunately, **due to the small size of the College, we are not able to allow access for the general public** or large tour groups. At the discretion of the Porter on duty, exceptions have been made, dependent on numbers, time of day, if events are taking place in College, etc. **If you would like to visit us**, please call the Porters' Lodge on 01865 279800 or send them an email to confirm that the College is open on the day of your visit. Please note that the College closes for a two week period over Christmas. All services in the Chapel, including Evensong, are open to the public.	So, no, but maybe!? Published accounts (2022) say: ...the College's aims for the public benefit are: • ... • to welcome members of the public as visitors to the College ...; • to preserve and share its heritage.
Magdalen	Magdalen College is open every day from 3 January to 22 December between 10am and dusk or 6.30pm, whichever is the earlier. Admission charges: Adults: £9.50...Family ticket (2 adults and up to 3 children aged 7 or over): £28. Free admission is available to: Children under 7; alumni; those who live locally and one guest; those who hold an Oxford University card, an OUP card, or an alumni card and one guest; prospective students and their families; Pathway to Success participants.	
Mansfield		'Visit' is a blank webpage. 'Visiting' is about school groups.

College	Website or other published info*	Comment
Merton	Opening Hours: Monday to Friday 2pm - 5pm; Saturday 10am - 5pm; Sunday 12 noon - 5pm. Last entry is always 4:30pm. … Entry: £5.00 for adults… Entry is free for: Merton College alumni; members of the University of Oxford (with up to 3 guests) on production of a valid University card (blue stripe) or alumni card; and accompanied children aged 12 years old and under.	
New	2023 Summer opening hours... 2023 Winter opening hours (from Tuesday 17th October): 1.30-4.30 pm, Tuesday to Sunday (closed Monday) - please note that last entry is 4.00 pm. We kindly ask all guests to vacate the premises by 4.30 p.m. The dining hall may be closed over lunchtime (usually between 11.45 am-2 pm. Admission Charges: Adults: £8...Free admission is available to: Children under 7 years of age; Oxford City permanent residents (proof of address required); New College old members and their families; Prospective students and their families; Bodleian card holders and Oxford alumni (along with two guests). Please show your card on arrival.	
Nuffield		Much like LMH, no 'visit', 'visiting' or 'tourist' info; alumni have a slew of 'benefits' though 'Please note that, due to the ongoing coronavirus situation, many of these privileges are on hold for the time being' (!) - this in Nov 2023.
Oriel	Orielenses are welcome to drop in and visit the College when in Oxford... The College is generally open for visitors between 2pm and 4pm (or dusk, whichever is earlier) each day, except in Trinity (Summer) Term, when College is not open to visitors due to student examinations. Trinity Term runs from around mid-April to the end of June. You can check precise dates	Concessions £1, nothing about the alumni from other colleges or city folk.

College	Website or other published info*	Comment
	on the University's website. Price of admission: Adults: £2...	
Pembroke		No 'visit', 'visiting' or 'tourist' page; lots about outreach, something about open-doors day. A 'how to find us' page with details about travelling to the college.
Reuben		Well, do you even know where it is?! At least it has a clear statement about alumni (which came up on a search for 'visit'): "Everyone who studies at Reuben is a member of the College for life."
Somerville		Much like LMH again, no 'visit', 'visiting' or 'tourist' info; like Pembroke, stuff about the open-doors day.
St Anne's		'Visit' is a form to request a visit *to* or *from* the college - it's for schools. No visiting or tourists. A long menu for alumnae, starting with 'giving back'.
St Antony's	Visitors and conferences: [after extoling its site…] Whether you are looking to host a conference, spend a weekend in an Oxford College or find a unique setting for a dinner, we can help.	Enquiry at reception was clearer: 'sure, just come in. If it's open, it's open.'
St Catherine's	St Catz is an open college, and welcomes visitors throughout the year. Situated towards the east of Oxford, on the bank of the river Cherwell, it is a short walk from Oxford City Centre. The College grounds, made up of striking Grade I listed buildings and Registered Garden, are designed by Danish architect, Arne Jacobsen...	"... and include a music house, amphitheatre and water garden. Jacobsen's design went much further than the buildings and grounds, as he created an integrated environment that was both practical and beautiful, including the cutlery, furniture and lighting. Visiting St Catz gives you the unique experience of witnessing a living museum of his creation."
St Cross		A nice statement about alumni as with Reuben College. A virtual tour pitching for hire of rooms, event spaces and communal areas. No relevant results on searching for visits, visitors or tourists (as with other 'no results', a lot about visiting fellows, outreach visits, etc. Just not for, well, actual visitors).

College	Website or other published info*	Comment
St Edmund Hall	'Visit us' says St Edmund Hall is very happy to welcome prospective applicants, teachers and parents… with more details under each heading. A separate page 'Visiting the College' ("information about how to find us and college opening times") but this just gives directions, the usual warnings about lack of parking - and no opening times.	Nothing about tourists, townsfolk or alumni. The slowest website of all[2]: you think search has broken after entering a term. Candidate for worst college website (others include the weirdly different Linacre and the cobwebby Nuffield with its covid warning).
St Hilda's	Visitors should report to the College Lodge on Cowley Place which is marked on our College map. We have bicycle parking on site[!]. There is NO unallocated car parking on site at St Hilda's.	Doesn't seem as if they are necessarily talking about tourist-type visitors… Various news-pages about 'Open doors day'. A page about the gardens: "St Hilda's College gardens enjoy a unique setting along the River Cherwell, looking west towards the Oxford Botanic Gardens and the historic city of Oxford. The garden features a detailed perennial tapestry, with several majestic old trees and a wildflower meadow." So, can you go and look at them? Not clear.
St Hugh's	If you are a member of the public who would like to visit St Hugh's College, please contact hello@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk. ... If you are a Senior Member of the College, our Development team are always happy to welcome you back to College. All visitors should report to the College Lodge on St Margaret's Road. We are a short distance from Oxford city centre and it's a lovely walk [!] along either Banbury Road or Woodstock Road.	
St John's	Members of the public are welcome to visit St John's College to see Front Quad, Canterbury Quad, the Chapel, Kendrew Quad and the gardens… [Further down] Gardens Members of the public are welcome to the Gardens from 1.00 to 5.00 pm daily, or until dusk in the winter. The Chapel is open Thursday to Tuesday from 1.30 to 5.00 pm, or until dusk in the winter. The Chapel is closed on Wednesdays. Holders	I thought St Edmund's search was bad. This one doesn't seem to do *anything!* -oh, long after I'd given up… Right, there is a 'visit-us' page. Seems clear, members of the public can visit… then, a long way down, 'Oxford Alumni' may visit free of charge - so there's a charge for the welcome members of the public? Not clear! (Visiting Oxford Colleges website (see below) says it is all free.)

[2] Nearly. St John's was even worse when I got there.

College	Website or other published info*	Comment
	of an Oxford Alumni Card may visit College free of charge with up to three guests, at any time during daylight hours. Please present your Alumni Card to the lodge porter on arrival.	
St Peter's	We look forward to welcoming you to our beautiful College on New Inn Hall Street. Charge: visiting St Peter's College is free, but donations are welcome. Hours: we are open for visitors from 10:00-17:00. Entrance: please report to the Porters' Lodge on New Inn Hall Street to begin your visit.	
Queen's	You are welcome to visit Queen's. Prospective students and Old Members are always welcome to visit at any time when the College is open. We ask Old Members to bring their alumni card if they have one; if not, then you may be asked for proof of identity. The best way for Old Members to arrange a visit is to email the Old Members' Office. Members of the public can arrange access by contacting the local Blue Badge Guides. Additionally, the Chapel holds a number of public services, and during term there are frequent public concerts and recitals.	So, in fact, as a member of the public you're not really welcome to just 'visit'. You have to go arrange a proper guide. Alumni from other colleges and townsfolk are mere members of the public.
Trinity	Trinity College welcomes visitors throughout the year. As a busy and lively working academic community we like to ensure that you will enjoy your visit, whether it is as a potential student here, an alumnus, an academic visitor, or a tourist… The principal areas of Trinity that are normally open are the Dining Hall, Chapel and extensive gardens. Please note that at present we are open on weekends only due to work being carried out on the restoration of our dining hall through early 2023; During term time: 10am to 12pm & 2pm to 5pm. Out of term: 10am to 12pm, &1pm until 5pm.	Per accounts: "All heritage assets are maintained securely and conservation works are undertaken as and when advised by specialists to be necessary. Public access is possible by arrangement with the College." Though they aren't talking about the buildings here.

College	Website or other published info*	Comment
	Admission prices: Adults: £4.00 Concessions: £3.00 Under 12's: free of charge	
University		No search results for visitor, visitors or tourists (search is *very* odd). A section for alumni (including the apparently mandatory 'give back'); a section for 'conferencing'. Visiting Oxford Colleges website (see below) says "Open: 09:00-17:00 (open to the public out of term time only) Charge: £2 per head (children under 5 years free)"
Wadham	Thinking of applying here? Coming to an event? Or just want to stroll in our stunning gardens? Visitors are welcome... Visitors are welcome to Wadham College Front Quad, Fellows' Garden and Chapel during opening times. Alumni and prospective students are also allowed to visit the Back Quad. In term time the College is open to visitors from 13.00 to 16.15. Out of term we are open from 10.30 to 11.45 then 13.00 to 16.15.	
Wolfson	'Visiting' page simply says: "Wolfson College is located 30 minutes' walk from Oxford city centre, at the end of Linton Road, off Banbury Road."	Visiting the colleges website (below) clarifies: Open: Daylight hours Charge: Free.
Worcester	The College is usually open to all, 10am-4pm seven days a week (GMT)... There is no entry charge and no need to pre-book, though donations are welcomed. Group sizes for all visitors are limited to six people and visitors are not able to bring dogs on site (excpet [sic[3]] assistance dogs).	Per visiting the colleges website, "Open to current and Old Members, daily 09:00-17:00. Open to residents of OX1 and OX2, daily 14:00-16:00 (book via telephone or lodge@worc.ox.ac.uk) " - ie, this is out of date.

[3] this page also said the college was closed because of strong winds – for a date ten days earlier.

Postscript

There's another way of getting to see the buildings, I learn since producing both the preceding and especially the appendix. Go to lectures! Their locations are at least as interesting (on average) as the content. Why, in one sample week I got to see the inside of:

- the Examination Schools – upstairs to the South School
- Kellogg College – Mawby Room
- Martin School – up the spiral stairs...
- Manor Building – a lot of atrium
- Maths Institute – downstairs to L1

I've also realised that there's lots of stuff I perhaps *should* have covered but didn't – architecture turns out to be a truly sprawling subject, and its examples, good and bad, are multitude! How did the Castle Mill flats on the edge of Port Meadow avoid inclusion in 'Awfulness Everywhere'?!

More about the stress between trying to do things better, necessarily differently, and the fact that this often involves serious risk. How can new materials and products be guaranteed for longer than they have existed, with any real plausibility? Not to mention the uncertainties when trying to fit them: the Dragon School's forum building included a "'Flying Mast' structure [which] was the first of its kind in the UK and only the second in the world."[4] The first attempt to assemble this resulted in the fabric at the anchor points being ripped apart by the tension.[5]

Perhaps more, generally, about planning: 5 Warnborough Road and the 'conservation area' again; the 'Jericho Wharf' business; broken rules such as building 'no higher than Carfax tower'[6], not to mention the generally dysfunctional opaque reportedly-corrupt process – is it any wonder that the resulting built environment is no more than we deserve?

Not to mention reparsing and reframing the whole general drift to focus better on the late-found 'title-theme' of how architecture is discussed.

Mutability, is my defence.[7] Even these (relatively) long-standing products of our culture, buildings, boil and bubble like images of air: whither are they vanished? Maybe some traces remain – "there was even a committee to save the singularly ugly disintegrating remnants of the late Twentieth Century"[8]

– but that's another story: keep up. I don't have the time.

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[4] https://mebdesign.co.uk/projects/dragon-school-2/

[5] I am grateful for Charles Derby reminding me about this piece of history. He was the architect involved.

[6] "The Blavatnik is higher than the 18.2-metre limit usually imposed on buildings in 1,200 metres of Carfax Tower" – https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/13650895.work-two-major-university-projects-way-jericho/

[7] Everyone should have a handy excuse for laziness.

[8] Bujold, *Brothers in Arms*