Completing the College

This article is a resumé of the talk recently given at the RCP by Sir Denys Lasdun, architect of the College, who describes the influences he drew on to design the College, and how the new extension completes his original concept.

It is nearly forty years since I was summoned for an interview in the splendidly severe Neo-Classical building, in the Greek Ionic order, in Pall Mall (the College’s fourth home since it was founded in 1518) and commissioned to build a new College. The building in Pall Mall contained various artefacts from the College’s past, such as portraits and books, some of which had been rescued from the Great Fire of London. One such ‘artefact’ was the portrait of Harvey which now occupies a central position in the present College’s Dorchester Library. Another is the set of 17th-century cedarwood teaching panels on which are displayed the human blood vessels and nervous system that, having been injected with hardening solution before removal from the body, were arranged onto thin blocks of wood and varnished. These panels seemed to me beautiful even though their original purpose was solely for instruction. They are prominently displayed in the Library. It was considering these artefacts, now embodied in the new College, which alerted me to one of the key challenges of modern architecture—how to build today without destroying the old, and yet to progress.

Although I had been officially appointed to build the new College, I still had no idea where it was to be sited. It turned out to be Regent’s Park, one of the architect John Nash’s foremost pieces of planning and architecture, most of which was built in the first quarter of the 19th-century. Nash was a brilliant planner whose work was redolent of what a city should be like. He sought to incorporate the ideas of the Ideal Society—a movement based on the thinking of the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau—so he planned villas for the rich, barracks for the soldiers and even a retirement home for superannuated governesses. Nash’s own brand of Classical architecture is not only redolent of the idea of the City but is distilled through a prodigious architectural intelligence. The familiar elements of classicism in architecture cannot be reproduced successfully in a modern building, but the principles on which they are based—proportion, scale, line, silhouette and coherence—are as vigorous and as relevant as ever.

A major change in art and design came in the 1920s and ‘30s with the Bauhaus school and the advent of Cubism which gave new energy to design and new perceptions of the relationship between objects. No artistic movement has been as significant since the Renaissance. The College building in Regent’s Park would not exist without the inspiration of Cubism and the innovations of great Victorian engineers such as Isambard Kingdom Brunel and Joseph Paxton. The Arts and Crafts movement in the early part of this century also influenced the design.

When designing the College, one of the first decisions was to set the main body of the building at right angles to the line of the Regent’s Park terraces so that it formed, together with buildings in St Andrews Place, a Court. This configuration is bounded on the fourth side by the wall of the lecture theatre, thus creating a quadrangular collegiate medical precinct.

The most significant feature of the College design is the placing of its formal interior spaces—the Library, Staircase Hall, Dining Hall and the Censors Room. The mosaic inside and outside matches and rhymes with Nash’s stucco. The blue brickwork is used to define other parts of the College which anticipate change, such as the building of the new extension.

The Censors Room, bridged by the College building

This article is based on a lecture given by Sir Denys Lasdun at the Royal College of Physicians on 2 July 1996.
The form of the College is characteristic of Cubism, defining and yet not containing space. This is exemplified by the design of the Censors Room which, when viewed from various aspects, is bridged by the main building without seeming to touch it. However, the plans show that the Censors Room has a focal position in the design of the College and is treated as a sanctuary. The route from the Censors Room up the stairs to the Library mirrors the progression of a physician through the College, upwards past portraits of earlier eminent physicians to the pinnacle of the College, Harvey’s portrait.

The large windows on either side of the Censors Room aim to connect the College with the outside world by giving uninterrupted views. Their effect is to maintain contact with the city beyond, of which the College is part, rather than regarding it as a separate entity.

The new extension is now almost complete. It comprises a meeting room, lecture theatre, dining facilities and displays for the College’s silver. It is the realisation of something that was anticipated and made provision for long ago when the new College was first conceived. Nevertheless, breaching the portrait wall to construct the extension proved a major feat of engineering. Placed on the central axis with the Censors room, the extension now gives overall symmetry to the College.
The Meeting Room has already been renamed; originally to be known as the Council Room, its name was changed in the interests of democracy. This room has been conceived as a contemporary transformation of a small scale chapter house. It is envisaged as a place where great and lively discussions will take place, where decisions are made and from where the College grows and moves on.

The new Lecture Theatre will accommodate 140 people with steeply raked seating to ensure a good view for the entire audience. The acoustics will allow sound to travel sufficiently without the aid of microphones, although audio facilities are of course available.

The Staircase Hall will now become a much livelier place as people leave the extension to enter the main building—so creating an atmosphere very much in the spirit of the College that Harvey had envisaged.

I am deeply grateful to the College for its monumental act of faith when, in 1958, it commissioned me to design such a modern building, and for offering to me the opportunity to complete the building as I had originally envisaged it.

The test of the extension will be whether, in years to come, it will be felt as an integral part of the original concept of the College; if it does, then it will have been a success.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Sir Denys Lasdun for granting us permission to use pictures from his collection in illustrating this article.