The College Building—Ten Years After

RICHARD BOMFORD, CBE, DM, FRCP, Treasurer, Royal College of Physicians, 1957–1970

On a summer evening in 1957 Robert Platt* asked me if I would be willing to accept the vacant office of Treasurer of the College. Early next morning I met him on the steps of the Athenaeum—an appropriate place because the old College was very much a part of that world—and, with some hesitation, said yes; never dreaming that this would involve me as custodian of the fabric in the planning, building, furnishing and running of the new College building. This was first occupied ten years ago and the Editor has asked me to consider how far the new building has fulfilled its purpose as seen by its College planners; and to ask how far the building actually given us by the architect, which clearly far exceeded the ideas of those planners, may have contributed to the changes that have taken place in the College in the last ten years. But first let me put on record some facts that may be in danger of being forgotten.

In 1957, the Treasurer, the Registrar, the Assistant Registrar and the Secretary were crowded into the small book-lined room adjoining the Censors’ Room (well remembered by older Fellows and Members as the place where they awaited the verdict of the notorious final viva and, if successful, were immediately relieved of a cheque). The four large desks were already strewn with plans for a modest extension upwards of the existing building, however inadequate such an extension must needs have proved.

FINANCES

The main difficulty about a new College was, of course, the cost. The 999 year lease at a peppercorn rent of the site in Pall Mall East was for the purposes of the College only and thus could not be sold. The Government of Canada had for years been interested in acquiring the old building; and the project of a new building became viable for the first time when negotiations between Robert Platt and the late the Hon. George Drew, then High Commissioner for Canada, led to an arrangement whereby Canada would pay to the College, as compensation for giving up its lease, a sum sufficient to pay for a new

* I have taken the liberty of referring throughout to Robert Platt as we then knew him. He was created Sir Robert Platt, Bt. in 1959 and Lord Platt of Grindleford in 1967.
building. The sum eventually agreed was £375,000. It is interesting that the first estimates for a new building were of that order.

As with all building projects, plans expanded and estimates rose. The situation was saved by a truly magnificent gift of £450,000 from the Wolfson Foundation (of which the late Lord Evans was a Trustee) and this, it was thought, would not only allow the completion of the new building but would also provide some endowment. In the final event the total cost of building and furnishing the new College was about £800,000, a cost per square foot that was by no means excessive for a building of its type at that time. The present building is already too small for some purposes but it is clear that for financial reasons alone we could not possibly have contemplated a larger one.

THE SITE
From the start we wanted a site in Regent's Park. The only possibility seemed to be one on the Inner Circle, quite half a mile across the park from Baker Street Station. This was thought too remote and risky for elderly Fellows after dinners and we were reduced to employing agents to search for another. Months went by. Eventually a corner site in the Harley Street area became available and our agents strongly advised us to take it as they saw no other possibility. The matter was put to Comitia and after long discussion the Fellows voted by a majority in favour of moving to this site.

Fellows and Members will know that they owe the new College in great part to the vision, enterprise and determination of Robert Piatt. To me, his greatest single act was to interpret the vote as one in favour of a move, but not necessarily to this site. I believe the whole subsequent history of the College might have been different had we gone to the middle of the Harley Street area.

The need for another site was then desperate, but not for long. The offer of the Someries House site, on which the College now stands, came—shall we say—'out of the blue' and through the good offices of the late Edward Cullinan. The Crown Commissioners granted us a lease; no one raised serious objection to the demolition of a Grade IV Nash building and the bulldozers soon disposed of Someries House. Some Nash buildings are not as solid as they look.

THE ARCHITECT
Robert Piatt consulted Sir John Summerson, a leading authority on Regent's Park and Nash architecture, about the style of the proposed building. Some-what to Robert's dismay, Sir John had no doubt that the new building should be of uncompromisingly contemporary design. He refused to recommend one
architect, but agreed to suggest four or five among whom the College must make its choice. These four or five, with one addition, were in due course interviewed by the building committee.

I well remember that fateful meeting and so does Denys Lasdun. He recalls being shown into the Censors’ Room, as for a final viva, and being sat facing the window with the light in his eyes. He remembers being asked to look across Trafalgar Square at South Africa House—an obvious neo-classical building. Would he, if appointed, be willing to design a building like that? Lasdun said firmly, ‘No’. My recollection is that one or two other candidates dithered a little and one said ‘Certainly, if that is what the College wants’. It has always been my contention that the committee chose Denys Lasdun as a person in whom they could have confidence, and I suspect that we were on safer grounds thereby than if we had tried to judge the various candidates’ architectural achievements.

The building

A schedule of accommodation had been drawn up. Mr Lasdun refers to this as the ‘shopping list’ and recalls that it ended with the words ‘and usual staircases, etc’—an interesting phrase in view of the part the portrait-lined staircase was to play in the eventual building. Mr Lasdun was given a brief outline of the new activities that we hoped would take place in the new building and I think we then expected him to go away and design a façade worthy of a college, behind which he would fit in our stated requirements.

But this is not what happened at all, and for the next few months Mr Lasdun’s thirst for knowledge about every aspect of the College—history, treasures, constitution, functions and so on—seemed quite inexhaustible. He even watched Comitia from the balcony on one occasion but left early because, he now says, he felt out of place. I would venture a guess that at the end of this period he knew more about the College than many of its Fellows. When we asked him at this time ‘ Couldn’t you give us some idea of what it will look like?’ he replied firmly ‘No, I can’t’, and added something to the effect that the inside would grow from his study of the working of the College and then the outside would grow from the inside. It seemed an odd remark at the time. With characteristic modesty he now says that the ‘shopping list’ was nothing, and that all the people who talked to him in those months contributed, without knowing it, to the design. It was, he said, a design by dialogue.

Asked recently whether he could explain this further, he said that he came to feel a close friendship with the building committee, and that this kind of relationship affects an architect profoundly. Our building committee, he said, had treated him as a fellow professional, in a more friendly and civilised way
than most, and this relationship had contributed significantly to the design. ‘Architecture’, he has said somewhere else, ‘first interested me as a social art. I was attracted by the idea of trying to reconcile the practical with the abstract and, through architecture, making a contribution to the quality of life’; and a little later: ‘Architecture is an art. In a sense, the transaction between client and architect has a certain beauty, as does the collaboration between fellow architects who share in this commitment. And all of this is combined with a recognition that architecture has to transcend the practical; that while 90 per cent has to do with the needs of daily life, the other 10 per cent is concerned with the perceptual act—making value judgements beyond the reach of a computer, which finally speak to the onlooker and user. In the end perhaps buildings come to be thought meaningful in proportion to the depth of relevant insight that informs their design.’ These brief quotations may help us to glimpse how Mr Lasdun was able to see past Pall Mall East and into the future of the College.

Two outline plans only were considered. The ‘block’ plan in which the main building ran the length of the site, parallel to the Outer Circle, would have given us a more conventional frontage with windows on Regent’s Park. In the ‘court’ plan the building was swung through a right angle, so that the main windows faced on to a quadrangle formed by the College, the handsome Decimus Burton house and the Nash houses in St Andrew’s Place. The ‘court’ plan was much favoured by the architect and was adopted, a fundamental decision and perhaps only second in importance to the turning down of the Harley Street area site. Those who complain that we thereby missed having magnificent views over Regent’s Park should recall that for half of the year any view of the park is obscured by dense trees and, more important, that a frontage on the park would in fact have meant a frontage on an increasingly busy and noisy road. Let us thank heaven and Denys Lasdun for our quiet quadrangle.

The finished plans were early commended by the Royal Fine Arts Commission; Sir William Holford (now Lord Holford) boosted our morale by saying ‘I would back this building to the hilt’. But many people, including the late Sir Charles Dodds, still had grave doubts about a modern building on this particular site and as the headquarters of an ancient corporate body. Discussion continued; a model was put on view in the House of Commons and eventually planning approval was obtained from all concerned. Comitia rose to the occasion and gave a nem. con. vote in favour. The foundation stone was laid by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother on 6th March 1962.

The vicissitudes of the actual building were many and included the weather of the 1962–63 winter. Two small details should be recorded. The demolition
contractors were given strict instructions to preserve the blue L.C.C. plaque recording that Frank Buckland lived at No. 37 Albany Street. They failed to do so. Happily a new plaque has recently been placed on the east wall of the College garden.

The figures of Linacre, Harvey and Sydenham which occupied niches on the front of the Pall Mall East building were backless and badly eroded by the weather and the pigeons that roosted on them. They were of sentimental rather than artistic value, but an attempt was made to get them down intact. This failed and they were severely damaged. Their subsequent history was described in the College Commentary (October 1970). I have often wondered where, had they survived, they could have been placed in the new College. There was one obvious solution. On each side of the entrance to Cambridge Terrace, immediately adjacent to our own garden, are groups of three backless, presumably Grecian, maidens. Had we placed our battered backless heroes in a similar group close by, they could have remained like figures on a Grecian urn,

‘Bold Lovers, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
They cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and they be fair!’

(John Keats, Ode on a Grecian Urn, slightly amended)

We eventually moved into the office block nearly a year before the main building was finished, and the whole was opened on 5th November 1964 by Her Majesty the Queen. Charles Dodds had then succeeded Robert Platt as President and had written him a remarkable letter explaining how his previous doubts had faded and how much he had come to approve of the new building.

A DISCUSSION
The rest of this article necessarily expresses a purely personal view with which some may disagree.

The building is already not large enough for some occasions. The College’s own planners certainly did not foresee the magnitude of the increase in the size of the Fellowship in the last ten years. They did foresee the increase in educational activities and it is my recollection that the question of housing other bodies was mentioned, though we did not foresee how important it might become. The foundations of the Albany Street block were made strong enough to take two more storeys. Mr Lasdun says that a tower block over the
lecture theatre would be architecturally feasible. Moreover, the Crown Commissioners were asked in 1965 or 1966 to give us first refusal of the leases of the Nash houses in St Andrew’s Place, should these become vacant. Unhappily, they seem at the moment to be zoned immovably for residential purposes.

I am aware that our building does not meet the conference needs of some of the more gargantuan specialist societies. Even if we had had the money I am glad that we did not build a large conference centre. If we had done so, the College could not have been the delightful and intimate, as well as functional, place that it is for our own meetings and for the very numerous courses and conferences with up to 200 or 300 participants that are currently held there. Its popularity for meetings of this size is now frankly embarrassing. Nor can I agree that we should have built a larger but less ‘extravagant’ building.

I recall three ‘extravagances’. The first was the addition of refrigeration to the mechanical ventilation of the main rooms (about 10 per cent of the cost of the building). This was pressed on to us from a source that we could not ignore. The second was the marble in the main hall (1 per cent extra cost) which I agreed to as Treasurer after viewing some elderly terrazzo floors in other buildings. I have no regrets, if only on grounds of durability and ease of cleaning.

The main ‘extravagance’ was, of course, the huge portrait-lined main hall. I am sure that we should never have got this if the medical building committee had been able to read the plans, but fortunately they couldn’t. Was this space for communication and concourse an extravagance? I suppose it is a question of values. For most of us the main hall is the heart of the building. Had we had the same accommodation in all other respects but connected by featureless corridors, the College would have been a very different place, not simply in appearance, but in one of its main functions—as a place for communication. I believe that this hall was by no means an ‘extravagance’. As a practical point, it is possible, by throwing in the library, the first floor landing and the Osler Room, to hold a reception for up to 1,000 people on one level.

It is possible now to criticise certain features of the office block and of the kitchen and serving arrangements. More service lifts and movable office partitions would have been an advantage. The criticism that no provision was made for the disabled is not entirely justified. It is not possible to get a wheelchair into the front hall or the lecture theatre, but there is a side door from the car park opening just by the lifts on the ground floor, giving access for the disabled to all other parts of the building. For security reasons this door is kept locked, but it can be opened at any time if needed. As the supplier of wines, I thought we had an adequate cellar. It held, according to my calculations, eight or nine years’ stocks. But consumption has risen steadily, and my
successor as Treasurer has increased the cellar space by 50 per cent, an action, need I say, of which I heartily approve. These are relatively minor matters and in all other respects we got all that we asked for and a great deal more.

We asked for space for various functions, a dignified library, the preservation of the Censors’ Room with Hamey’s panelling and a few other things. We got a building not only admirably suited to its functions but one which, to me and many others, is a delight to enter. I must confine myself to mentioning just a few things—the light; the use of space (the building creeps into the environment and the environment into the building); the proportions (the huge mass of the library apparently resting only on its delicate columns); the splendid space for concourse and for the hanging of the portraits; the lecture theatre; the working library; and, to me, one of the gems is the fire escape staircase on the north face. Note the careful preservation of the old—the Harvey panels, which were the architect’s special interest among the treasures; the restored but slightly altered (for the better) Censors’ Room; the stained glass looking infinitely better in its modern setting than it did in Pall Mall East, and the carving recording Hamey’s gift on the wall outside the Censors’ Room. This had been lying in a crate for years, and shortly before the opening I spent a Sunday getting it out and cleaning it with a toothbrush.

Most of the hundreds of Fellows with whom I talked in the first few years also expressed delight with the interior of the building. Some were less happy about the exterior, and a recent letter in the *Commentary* (April 1974) from one of our surgical Fellows shows that differences of opinion still exist.

I was myself worried at first by the exterior because it was so unexpected. But what did one expect? And what sort of a style would its critics have liked, given that the basic construction was steel and concrete?

When I was first introduced to abstract paintings I did not like them. After I had lived with some for a year or two I realised that I missed them badly if one or two went, as they sometimes did, to an exhibition. For me it has been the same with the exterior of the College. I would not now have it altered in any way, not even the blue curved wall of the front of the lecture theatre. Apart from anything else this is a superb example of the craft of the bricklayer and its graceful shape an excellent lead-in to the main entrance. I give notice that if anyone tries to grow creepers on it (see a recent suggestion in the *Commentary*) I will personally drop simazine on their roots every time I visit the place. Perhaps it had better be left that you either like the outside of the building or you do not. Many do.

Mr Lasdun was asked recently if he could recall what he thought about the old College and what kind of things went through his mind while he was designing the new one. One of his main thoughts had been that the headquarters
of an important and ancient corporate body should be welcoming (and whatever Pall Mall East was, few people could have found it welcoming). The new College building is welcoming, as I think anyone who attends Comitia, meetings, conferences, dinners or even concerts or balls will agree.

One could restate this in the language of the times by saying that it has turned out to be a splendid place for communication—communication of all kinds, professional and social.

Remembering the purposes of the College and Harvey’s injunction about good fellowship among physicians, what better could we have hoped for? It is true that the wind of change was blowing before we left Pall Mall East. The liberalisation of the College and the development of its educational role had begun. But in my mind there is no doubt at all that the new building has accelerated these processes by providing a house admirably adapted for the purpose. It has been said that in the last ten years the College has opened its doors—to the younger generation, to the regions, to Europe and to international bodies. One reason for this, I am sure, is that Mr Lasdun gave us, if not the façade some of us expected, an open door, leading to an interior that is both functional and beautiful. It may be unfashionable these days to talk about a genius loci but to my mind the honest steel, concrete and brick of 11 St Andrew’s Place has a spirit of friendliness that I never felt in the rather pretentious portals of Pall Mall East. I think this was the architect’s greatest achievement.

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