Anatomy of a building

The RCP's Regent's Park headquarters celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2014. In the run-up to the opening of an RCP exhibition celebrating Sir Denys Lasdun's modernist masterpiece, guest curator and architectural historian **Dr Barnabas Calder** looks back on the building of a building.

Designed by Sir Denys Lasdun & Partners and built between 1958 and 1964, the RCP's Regent's Park headquarters is widely regarded as one of the most elegant buildings by any Modernist architect. The building stands at the high point of British Modern architecture, when the style was at its most intellectually engaged, exciting and innovative. Its mysterious sculptural form intrigues those who pass by, and every year thousands of people visit to discover interiors as beautiful and striking as its exteriors.

The RCP building was given the rare accolade of Grade I listing – the highest available heritage protection – only 34 years after its opening, and has been impeccably maintained and conserved throughout its life, unusually for a building of its period. This year marks its 50th anniversary, and in September a new exhibition will open at the RCP to mark the occasion.

The anatomy of a building: Denys Lasdun and the Royal College of Physicians explores the career of Sir Denys Lasdun and the central place of the RCP in his work. It examines the formative influences that helped to shape his work in later years, and will demonstrate the importance of the RCP in Lasdun's process of artistic self-definition as he established himself as a mature architect.

It brings back to vivid life the origins of the building's design in the exciting intellectual and artistic debates of the 1950s, the progression of the design from comparative conventionality to the remarkable built scheme, and the interesting ways in which the architecture of the RCP building balances radical modernity with a respectfulness to historical context and collegiate tradition. The architectural world has changed hugely in the past half century, and this exhibition will help visitors to understand the richness of architectural, social and artistic ideas that underlie this extraordinary building.

Often with architectural exhibitions there is a feeling of a gap at the centre of the display, where the building itself ought to be. The RCP can do what is so rarely possible: it shows a major exhibition on a very important building within the building itself. Thus, visitors will be free to alternate between the exhibition and its subject. Some of Lasdun's remarkably beautiful architectural models showing Keeling House, University College London, and an initial model for the development of the South Bank will be on show for comparison and to give context.

Lasdun believed strongly and explicitly that architecture was an art. *The anatomy of a building…* will reveal the extent of intelligent, focused thought and creative endeavour that went into the RCP building, which made it one of Britain's great examples of the art of architecture at its timeless best.

A step forwards

Denys Lasdun & Partners was the most internationally admired architectural practice to achieve significant success in the UK in the 1960s, when London's architects were among the most watched and discussed anywhere. Lasdun's architectural career was almost immediately outstanding –

while still a second year student, he got a commission for a strange little house by talking so excitedly about architecture at a party – but it was the RCP building, the opening of which was publicised around the world in 1964, that took him and his team from being exciting newcomers to leading figures in the international architecture world. It is the building with which Lasdun came to architectural maturity, and in successive designs a move from self-conscious and unconvincing demonstration of architectural importance through the addition of flamboyant touches to an artful, aesthetic composition of elements that are necessary for structure or function becomes apparent. Lasdun's excellence as an architect lay in his ability to do this exceptionally well, culminating in his knighthood for creating the National Theatre in London.

Lasdun's design process showed unusual depth and focus in discussing the purpose of any building with his clients. He gradually progressed from more conventional buildings to the extraordinary tour de force of the RCP, inspired by ideas of anatomy, the collegiate architecture of the middle ages, and the Regency terraces around the site, as well as the advanced architectural thinking of his time. The RCP building is positioned on the cusp between high technology – remarkable engineering makes it stand up, and the services were the most advanced available – and the ancient traditions of building craft.

Origins

Before relocating to Regent's Park, the RCP was housed on Trafalgar Square. The organisation was offered a good price for vacating its building, today known as Canada House, and decided to accept it, partly in order that a new building could be created to suit the requirements of a organisation in revolution – responding to the radical changes brought about in the restructure of the medical profession with the new National Health Service in 1948.

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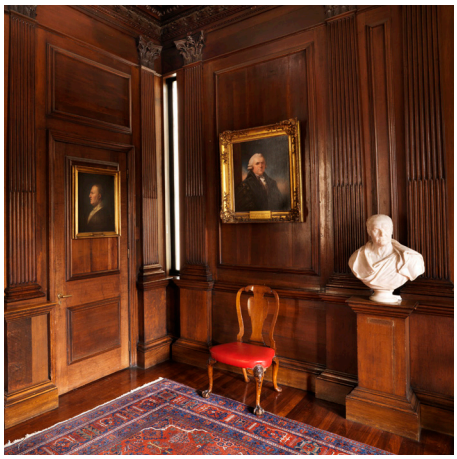
Lasdun was commissioned to design the building during the presidency of Lord Robert Platt. The RCP was offered its present site on Crown Estates land in Regent's Park, where Someries House, one of the early 19th-century houses laid out by John Nash, was standing in ruins after being damaged by bombing during World War 2. The Regent's Park development had been seen as architecturally unimportant during the first half of the 20th century – an attitude demonstrated by the piecemeal demolitions and insensitive replacements along the nearby Portland Place. But in 1945, the influential architectural historian John Summerson published his book *Georgian London*, which started to turn around views on Nash's planning, gaining it new admirers for the ways in which he used his buildings to shape the outside space between them.

Concept

With Regent's Park once again respected, Lasdun and his team were faced with a considerable challenge in producing a building in the middle of it. They had to ensure that the building was sufficiently respectful to its surroundings to get permission to be built, but at the same time they wanted to produce a building that would make a strong and clear assertion of the modernity and importance of the RCP. The choice of materials was central to resolving this dilemma. The porcelain



mosaic tiles that comprise the exterior walls were specially commissioned from a factory in Candolo, near Turin, to perfectly match the stucco colour of the surrounding Crown Estates houses – although readers who have visited the building will know that they no longer match because the paint favoured by the Crown Estates now is much creamier than that used in the 1950s and 1960s.

The dark blue Baggeridge engineering brick of the lecture theatre and lower floors of the RCP pick up on another Regency material: the slate of the roofs. In the sloping hump of the RCP lecture theatre's front wall you might see the double-pitched roofs of the 1800s terraces. The combination of columns in front of the doors and the similar materials almost makes the RCP building seem to be a Cubist recomposition of a Nash terrace in the manner that Picasso recomposed the faces of his portrait sitters.

To Lasdun, the word 'college' in the RCP's name suggested a courtyard from the earliest stages of the design – like the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, disposed round peaceful green quadrangles to allow focused thinking and conversation. In Lasdun's early sketch schemes it is clear that, whatever else changed, the idea of protecting a three-sided garden courtyard from the noise and intrusion of the roads on each side was consistent. The result produced is unexpected: for a building overlooking a major London green area, the RCP makes very little use of Regent's Park for views. Its largest windows instead face onto its own garden, which Lasdun justified by arguing that views over the park would distract people in the governing council meetings, which would be held in the Dorchester Library, and that, in any case, the view was not particularly good. This decision might also reflect Lasdun's sense of the RCP's role as an inward-looking body, and could have been intended to foster productive conversations between physicians.

In his desire to resolve in satisfactory Modernist terms the requirements of an unusual brief, Lasdun organised the building around clear expression of its ceremonial and practical functions. The route between the Censors' Room (where the membership examination historically took place) and the Dorchester Library (where the ceremony of conferring membership occurs) became the central architectural experience of the building. The successful candidate, flushed with career triumph, was to come out of the dark, comparatively small Censors' Room into the high, airy staircase hall, turn through 270° while ascending the staircase, portraits of earlier physicians all around, and process into the generous Dorchester Library with its distinguished-looking collection of books. Lasdun used appropriately anatomical metaphors to explain the building, referring to the library as the brain and the Censors' Room as the heart; the staircase between them was a broad artery.

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In early plans, the ceremonial parts of the building were going to be signalled architecturally by spectacular, sculptural rooflines, which were indicated schematically in sketches as a series of diamond-shaped curves or folds and as a sort of low, flat-topped ziggurat. These flamboyant gestures were later abandoned, and instead importance was indicated by the materials that were used. The ceremonial parts of the building (the Dorchester Library, Censors' Room, dining hall and staircase hall) were clad in white tile, while the rooms with less formal purposes – lecture theatre, offices and the lower ground floor – were clad in deeply contrasting dark engineering brick.

These different materials helped Lasdun to understand the building in Modernist architectural terms. Following an advanced architectural theory of the 1950s, he saw the building as composed of permanent elements that would not need to change, and others that were flexible or even 'temporary'. This thinking was a response to the awareness that technology and society were changing faster and faster, and that many buildings would become rapidly obsolete unless designed to accommodate substantial adaptation. The sense in which these parts were ever truly temporary is clearly metaphorical rather than literal, however. Lasdun felt that the lecture theatre, for example, might require expansion or replacement as technologies advanced, so it is clad in brick. By contrast, the ceremonial functions of the Censors' Room or the Dorchester Library would be unchanging, so they are porcelain-tiled.

The building process

The technologically sophisticated appearance of the RCP building tends to make viewers forget that it was built by hand by craftsmen. Buildings as well-made as the RCP can seem almost the products of some industrial process. The smooth, precise finishes and simple volumes of the building itself have the look of computerised drawings, though they were produced decades before architects started to use computers. But the building is the product of a range of building crafts, old and new, from carpentry for the hardwood doors, to stone carving for the curved marble inner handrails of the main staircase, to skilled metalwork for the steel reinforcement bars within the concrete.

Between the clean clarity of the architectural drawings and the elegance of the finished

building came the messy business of construction. Once the architects had come up with a sketch design for the building, they discussed with their consultant engineers, Ove Arup & Partners, how to make it buildable. The building is predominantly made of concrete poured on site into wooden moulds made by skilled carpenters and scaffolders. Tile and brick have covered the resulting rough concrete surfaces, though Lasdun wished it to be clear that concrete had been used, so allowed it to be exposed on the escape stair and lift tower above the building (both now painted cream). The roof beams, up to 50 feet long, were made on the ground and dropped into place by crane.

The considerable overhang of the Dorchester Library – which seems to float apparently weightlessly – posed a difficult engineering challenge. Support was required at its front edge, and Lasdun and his colleagues reflected long and hard on how to introduce support columns in an architecturally satisfactory manner. This is joked about in an unsigned Christmas card to Lasdun in 1959, in which the writer has sketched the front of the RCP supported on two huge balls. This may be a reference to Christmas baubles or, from the message within – '99 cough… Merry Christmas from the Medical Orderlies' – a more ribald joke. The room was eventually supported on slim columns, in which it was necessary to use a lot of steel within concrete, which was tightened once the concrete had set but before the moulds were removed to maximise its strength. The careful composition on which they finally settled is one of the most memorable images of the RCP.

One of the most remarkable features of the building's perfectionism is the 37 different shapes of brick that form the distinctive curved wall of the sunken lecture theatre. Cut surfaces of bricks have a different texture and colour to fired surfaces as they emerge from the kiln, so these special bricks had to be hand-cut before they were fired, and many were rejected as being of the wrong texture or colour. Like the brickwork, the other materials and building crafts used in the construction of the RCP were of the highest quality, meticulously thought through by the architects and executed by specialist craft workers.

Reception

Although it has long been recognised as a classic of Modern architecture, the RCP's daring and assertive modernity was not immediately loved by all. Meeting memos record some of the discussions of the committee responsible for commissioning the building. It was the robust support in particular of the president, Lord Platt, and the treasurer Dr Richard Bomford that enabled Lasdun to produce the building. Funding from the Wolfson Foundation meant that, whereas most other commissions of the period had their interior spaces shrunk to save money, the RCP's interior includes a substantial addition to its original brief: the staircase hall, which evolved as a kind of interior courtyard. Its scale and opulent materials make its fine portraits look appropriately dignified. The transitions to the historical panelling of the Censors' Room and the classical proportions of the Dorchester Library avoid jarring contrast through the atypical luxuriousness of space and surface in the entrance and staircase halls.

The importance of the new building was recognised early enough for the Queen Mother to lay its foundation stone and the Queen to attend the opening of the building on 5 November 1964. But in the 1980s and 1990s, Lasdun's architecture was unfashionable amid the bright colours and historicist references of Postmodernism, and Prince Charles attacked the National Theatre, comparing it to a nuclear power station. A cartoon in the exhibition shows one artist's jokey idea of what the Prince of Wales would have preferred it to look like, and a Lasdun sketch, annotated with an appropriately warlike quotation from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, shows that Lasdun saw this period as a fight to retain the integrity of his buildings and his architectural reputation against the tide of fashion.

Recently British Modern architecture has been widely reassessed, and Lasdun has emerged as a key figure. He was always fascinated by the English Baroque architect Nicholas Hawksmoor, the Swiss-French Modernist Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright and Ludwig Mies. All of these were strikingly original and distinctive handlers of building shape, and in the centenary year of his birth it seems appropriate to recognise Lasdun as a worthy successor to their architectural ideas. You can see in the RCP some echoes of the floating, crisp whiteness of the Villa Savoye, the mysterious hovering masses of Falling Water, and the challengingly mannerist strength of Hawksmoor.

His relationship with the RCP remained close throughout his life, and one of his last building projects was the Council Chamber and Seligman Theatre extensions, which were added to the building in the 1990s. Lasdun's memorial service was held in the RCP on his death in 2001, the death of one of Modernism's great architects, and one of Britain's great architects. ■

The anatomy of a building: Denys Lasdun and the Royal College of Physicians runs from 8 September 2014 to 13 February 2015. For more information visit www.rcplondon.ac.uk/RCPLasdun. A book, *Anatomy of a building,* by award-winning architecture critic Rowan Moore, is available for purchase from the RCP for £12 (plus postage and packaging). To order, or for more information, please phone +44 (0)20 3075 1358 (8.30am–4.30pm) or email publications@rcplondon.ac.uk.