

## Some Recent Buildings in Oxford : A View From Cambridge<sup>1</sup>

By HUGH PLOMMER

MACAULAY'S fellow-traveller, who descended from the Birmingham coach for a few minutes' rest in Oxford and who wondered afterwards what that uncommonly fine city might be, could now traverse it with hardly a moment of admiration. He could not in any case see it for the traffic ; and just as in all matters of national politics and domestic economy its inhabitants, we are assured by the poll-samplers, are typical of the rest of England, so the modern buildings injected into its parks and streets have obliterated its skyline and reduced much of it to the shapelessness of an ordinary English town.

Modern architects have to use standard, prefabricated units, only thinly disguised by rather desperate quirks and gimmicks. When they attempt to learn some of the simplest tricks of the old craftsmen, they or their builders commit the most obvious errors ; they have never properly mastered, at any rate in England, the art of planning so long and so rigorously expounded in the *École des Beaux Arts* ; and they have long lost the services of their keenest and most accurate draughtsmen to the soulless but well-paid workshops of the mechanical engineers. The fanatical academism, the enthusiasm for the Classical, which inspired almost every artist in Italy during several centuries, is unknown or hateful to the leaders of modern taste—just when so-called 'universities' proliferate—and even in King's Chapel the decorators of our own day can only create barren eye-traps and call them beautiful.

Some six years ago, when I was first invited to comment on the latest buildings in Oxford,<sup>2</sup> I took the designs of the new laboratories half-seriously. I shall waste no words on them this time. For all their bulk and the great area that they cover, they make no claim to be real architecture. For no one could ever in a calm moment contemplate their shapes or proportions with any genuine delight. At best, they help the motorist arriving from Birmingham to feel at home.

<sup>1</sup> The author was invited to express his own opinions on recent Oxford architecture, which should not be taken as necessarily reflecting those of the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society or its Officers—Ed.

<sup>2</sup> In the *Oxford Magazine* for 24 February 1963.

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When I last studied Oxford, the newest buildings were the Provost's lodge of Queen's, with its façade of stretched india-rubber on the Lane, the extension of Magdalen, with the illegible inscription (how wretched after Castle Ashby !) along its rudimentary parapet, and the strange addition to Brasenose, tucked away behind the range on the High. This last began the vogue for small buildings constructed of giant members, cleverly fitted together, no doubt, but perverse in principle and cursed almost inevitably with barbicans and dark entries. Cellular planning, too, was beginning at St. John's, with 'helio-thermic' and alas ! also 'heliopsychic' façades, and was destined to inspire several pompous and rather unmanageable imitations. But the ringing mead-hall of Harald Wagbeard at St. Catherine's, reared after the high Viking fashion, had still to receive its thrones and festal boards.

Even then, of course, central Oxford had already lost much of its charm as a city of gardens and open spaces. The *ensemble*, indeed, even more than the individual buildings, has suffered continuously, ever since the decision to extend the Bodleian on its existing site ; and the admission of too many new departments and students has hastened the fall from grace. At Cambridge we seem to have more space in which to tuck our horrors away ; so that I rejoiced last year to be told by a research-student, fresh from New Zealand, that we appeared to have no new buildings. Dogged opposition to modernism can still bring its rewards. But in Cambridge, too, we are losing all-important gardens and other open spaces.

It seems best to take some of the more interesting new buildings of Oxford in alphabetical order. I consider only those that I noticed during my visit last December.

*All Souls.* The additions to the old buildings, required, it seems, even here, have been carried out with a tact and reverence rare in modern Oxford. A medieval cellar, second only to that at Winchester College, has at last been cleared, and Hawksmoor's undercroft converted into seminar rooms. Several sets have been built east of the first quad. They are a passable effort in the local vernacular of late Georgian times ; and it is surely reasonable to try to recover the mode of building which was considered polite, before architecture became first (with Pugin) archaeological *et praeterea nihil*, and then (after 1930) as hopelessly anti-archaeological. The architects at All Souls have not solved the problem of making strong but elegant lintels or flat arches over wide windows ; and they need to study more closely the buildings of Ancient Greece and the Greek Revival, to see how the actual jointing is most gracefully related to architraves and mouldings. Some details are rather petty. The newels of the stairs, for instance, are given the most careful detail, though they seem mere matchsticks after the generous posts of a real Georgian staircase. They remind

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us only that we lack decent timber in this age of 'improved living-standards'. It would have been better to turn for inspiration to Wilkins' staircases in Downing.

*Blackwell's.* The new basement here is remarkable, even inspiring. Here, at last, is a designer who 'thinks big', and who keeps his work simple and tidy. Yet it is still a shop, and still designed to attract, rather than oppress the customer. Had other designers in Oxford worked along the lines of Blackwell's architect, valued scale and despised affectation as he does, we should have escaped many of our present problems.

*Christ Church.* Here, in the new buildings along Blue Boar Lane, we are back to quirks and affectations. Luckily, in Blue Boar Lane they can do little harm. The Portland Stone and dark lead make a gloomy combination. Titanic buttresses are used with no other effect than to darken the windows and barbicans. Here are mere sets of rooms, which do not need the heavy, everlasting forms of Pharaonic buildings, from which the architects have borrowed the ponderous, misplaced cavettos under the windows (see FIG. 15). In the age of the Forth Road Bridge, or even the Tower of Cairo (so much more elegant than the Post Office Tower in London), this is reactionary primitivism with a vengeance. The raised lawns and the absence of adequate groundcourses

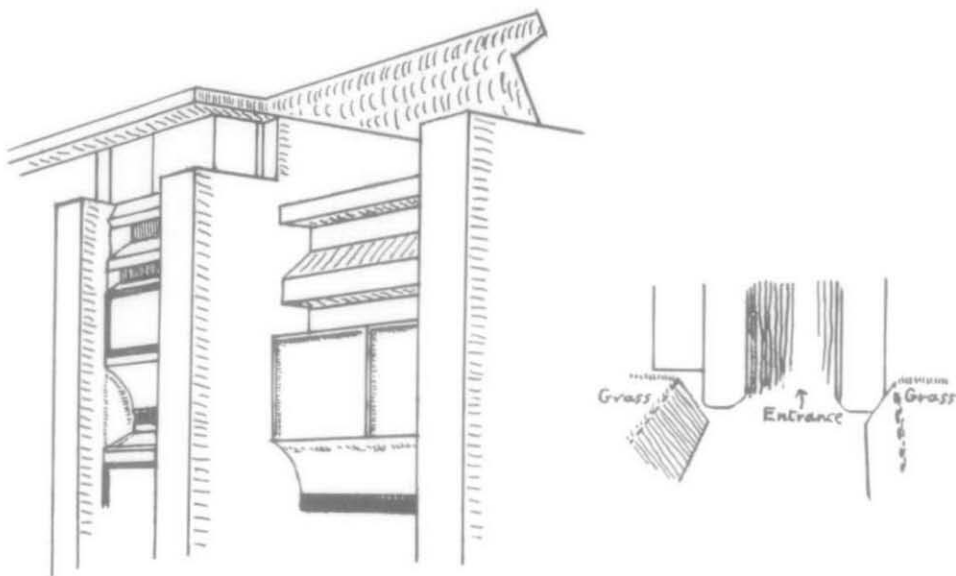


FIG. 15

Christ Church : Some details of the new buildings.

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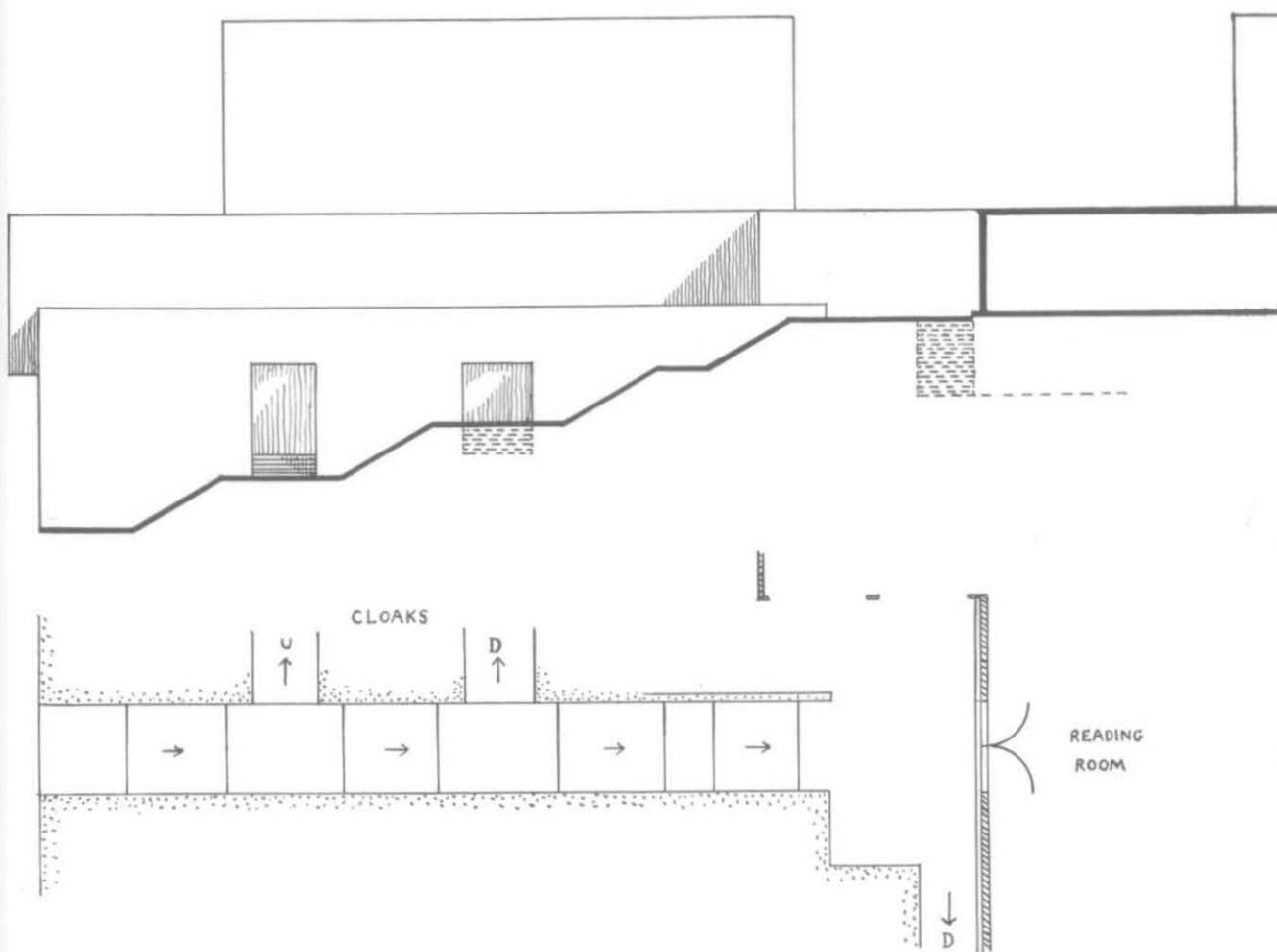


FIG. 16

New Libraries, Holywell : Grand Entrance Stairway.

suggest that these buildings are sinking under their own weight. The very manholes are placed where they will most ruin the effect. Buildings like these seem the work of men who deny that beauty exists.

*Corpus Christi.* The desecration of Magpie Lane is the worst blow that central Oxford has sustained since the Randolph ate up so much of Beaumont Street. In the old days the view of Merton tower above the flat, simple fronts

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of the white houses was perfect—something after which Utrillo always strove, but which he seldom achieved. The College assured objectors that the replacement would be unassuming and moderate, like the old houses. But in fact it has a crinkly front of monster bay-windows, with a forced symmetry about what seems to be a central chimney. Surely it can hardly be that. Presumably it is some vent or duct of the unlovely modern type. The masonry is sneaked, wide-jointed and contemptible. How can British workmen ever recover their enthusiasm and skill, until they once more see designers respecting beauty and possessed of commonsense?

*English Library and Law Library, Holywell.* Already in his Harvey Court for Caius College this architect had exhibited an almost Aztec obsession with terraces and staircases. In these libraries his propensities have run riot. The building stands free on a wide site, an invitation to some familiar, simple design. But here no two rooms are on the same level, and there is no avoiding the stairs between libraries, cloakrooms and staff-rooms. A kind of staircase, of imprecisely assembled slabs, forms the spine of the whole and gives onto ascents and descents at ill-determined levels (see FIG. 16). Along this main stairway the building seems all Ziggurat, a platform with even less to support than had the giant podium of that thoroughly bad building, the Great Altar of Pergamum. This is partly because the great central lumps of the libraries have no windows, though they are supposed to be lanterns (!), and the wrapping-blocks, containing the book-stacks, are low and spreading. So almost everything needs artificial light, and one can only marvel at the electric bill that must be demanded for this free-standing building, 'where all cries out what sums are thrown away'. The actual skylights are too small—less efficient than those in factories on the 'Great Worst Road'—and too far from the reading-desks to cast any light upon them (see FIG. 17). So even in the early afternoon, at any rate in winter, bright artificial lights, attached to each skylight (!), are turned full on. Even with all the other stairs, the threshold of the upper library needs a step of its own. This comes too near the door, which shuts too tightly. One forces one's way through the door, only to stumble down the step outside—a mere 2 in. high, but an intense irritant.

*Unidentified building, opposite the last.* This is about 60 ft. long, and rectangular. No one seems to know its purpose. Its features, which float arbitrarily as in a face by Picasso, offer no clue whatever. It retains, too, though so 'moderne', many time-honoured vices of English architecture. For instance, it has no visible ground-course, and seems to be sinking in the ground.

*Holywell Music Rooms.* An ill-proportioned doorway, with details (especially a vertically fluted frieze) resembling those on a posh drawing-room

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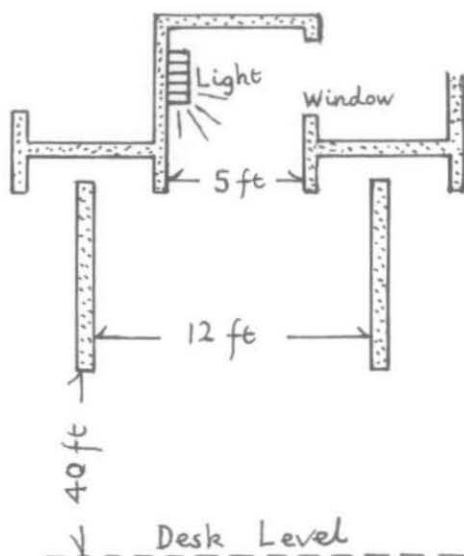


FIG. 17

New Libraries, Holywell : Skylight in Reading Room.

fireplace somewhere in a stockbrokers' suburb of *c.* 1935, has been added by some inconsiderate person at some unlucky moment. I could not penetrate far inside, and found only cloakrooms, not the confronted busts of Beethoven and Dr. Burney. It is sad that so ancient a temple of the arts should now seem so marred and dingy.

*Lady Margaret Hall.* The large new front quad is very interesting—too interesting, like those scholarly buildings of central Munich, which so insistently remind one that one is *not* in Siena or Florence. The west front suggests the stables of some house like Euston or Heveningham (but are the young ladies quite so horsey?), the south range the front of Ham House, some 150 years earlier, the north range (under the new library) a kind of provincial version of the cloisters in the Temple. These replicas are lovingly constructed and must have kept many a skilled craftsman happy in our barren age. Connoisseurs, too, will be amused at the use of the *lias* for some of the trimmings, as on some Victorian houses in Holywell. Even the busts in the 'Ham House' roundels look as if they were recovered from the mason's yard of Nicholas Stone. Or do they come merely from the gardens of the Crystal Palace? But, to reform the artists of the 20th century, one must remember that architecture was developing, was in the right tracks up to the very moment when Pugin wrote his

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pernicious books ; that men were feeling their way to designs of a larger scale and in novel materials, while retaining well-tried shapes and symmetries ; that the buildings of the *early* Railway Age (*not* the St. Pancras Hotel !) were so good, chiefly because the engineers had learnt so much on the drawing-boards of Greek Revival Architects. So, if we have to retrace our steps from the modernistic blind alley, we need go back no further than Telford or Decimus Burton or C. R. Cockerell. But at Lady Margaret Hall we see an imposing but arbitrary assortment of very skilful replicas, which will tell us no more than will a normal museum where our art is to go from here. And all the while Park Town, the natural fount of inspiration, was just round the corner !

*Maison Française.* Here, following a passing fashion, the architect has striven for an aesthetic seesaw between the building and a small statue at some distance from it. There is some sort of aesthetic 'balance' intended here, which as a plain, blunt man I fail to understand. But at least the statue—to please French 'prejudice', I suppose—is pleasantly representational, not the customary inhuman Hepworth or Moore. The brick of this building looks sad, and is easily stained. The front, of seven bays, is almost pleasant, but is entered on the corner, at the worst place aesthetically. Commonsense normally requires an entrance in the centre of a façade, and there was no obvious hindrance to one here. The actual porch is absurd. It is too small to shelter anything, and actually stands free of the building, like Gropius' very misguided peristyle on the American Embassy in Athens. The balancing-trick of the double door-canopy is too trivial to enjoy pride of place, as it does on this elevation. Inside, the main feature is a corridor, darkened unnecessarily by the perverse design of the porch. The library is not unpleasant ; and this architect could do well, if he designed naturally and not to please those tyrants, the fashionable architectural journalists, who demand originality at all costs and features unanticipated elsewhere. Too often today a designer will strive to seem what he is not. A skilful carpenter will force himself to lift girders of prestressed concrete, a natural follower of Adshead will don the jackboots of the 'new brutalists'.

*Merton College, new Warden's Lodging.* This must be at least the third in the history of this venerable foundation. The coarse but impressive 'Jacobethan' Lodging midway along Merton Street has now been deserted for a small, self-contained 'unit', with garage, near the Examination Schools. This has a small gash or crevice for balconies, recalling Peabody buildings, or early slum-clearance near St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin. The low parapet-walls, of a green composition (Westmorland slate chippings ?), have let in the damp and look very sordid. The front door is not above the area but straight into it, and the 'downward path' is masked by miniature obelisks or bollards of recon-

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stituted stone, recalling the suburban visions of Stanley Spencer. The whole tiny façade, about 25 ft. square, is crowded with features of every kind, none of them well-proportioned in themselves or in harmony with their neighbours.

*Radcliffe Square.* This has been given a new layout. The famous and harmless old railings (the 'don-trap') around the Camera have disappeared. They gave badly needed scale. It was notoriously difficult to gauge the size of the Camera, even when they were there. The circular Camera now appears to spin within an oval grass plot.

*St. Catherine's.* And so we reach the lofty 'mead-hall', taking care that we do not overshoot the entrance, somewhere between the 'bathing-cubicles' to our right, and land in the car park. It is as hard, in fact, to find the real entrance at this college as at St. Pancras Station; and the task is made no easier by long pools, à la Alhambra, and half-grown hedges in semi-private gardens. The colour of the *ensemble* is very sad, as if it had endured a century of Mancunian soot. But perhaps the architects of our garden-cities, who haunt Scandinavia, had persuaded the Norse designer of this college that buildings in industrial England were bound to go grey-black anyway. The plan revives that of Emmanuel and Peterhouse, with the chief communal building (the eating hall, alas! these days, not the chapel) on the central axis between two parallel ranges of sets. The college offices and lecture-rooms seem to be in the 'bathing cubicles'.

This plan would work, were it properly articulated and were it more compact than it is, and if it had proper passages or loggias between the parts (especially the main building and the isolated toolshed—or is it the music room?—to the south), not the long windswept pergolas so absurdly favoured in places like Churchill College and York University. These pergolas cry out for side walls. As they stand, they are almost useless. The staircases, too, of St. Catherine's have top lights too small and too far away.

The dining hall itself appears far lower and far darker than it should. It loses between one quarter and one third of its real height, owing to the deep girders running continuously below the longitudinal roof-lights, as shown in FIG. 18. It seems most illogical to place massive members parallel to such lights as one may have, and only just inside them. The light in this hall is 'subdued', to say the least, and such exclusion of daylight could hardly be justified even in a Mediterranean country. There is only one other building I know that blocks its windows in this way—the library extension at Newnham College.

The High Table at St. Catherine's is set one step only above the rest of the Hall, and this step is poorly marked. I fear there may be some accidents here to dons after dinner. The table itself has table-lights so low, that at a feast they must get confused with the cruets, and one might find oneself passing not the



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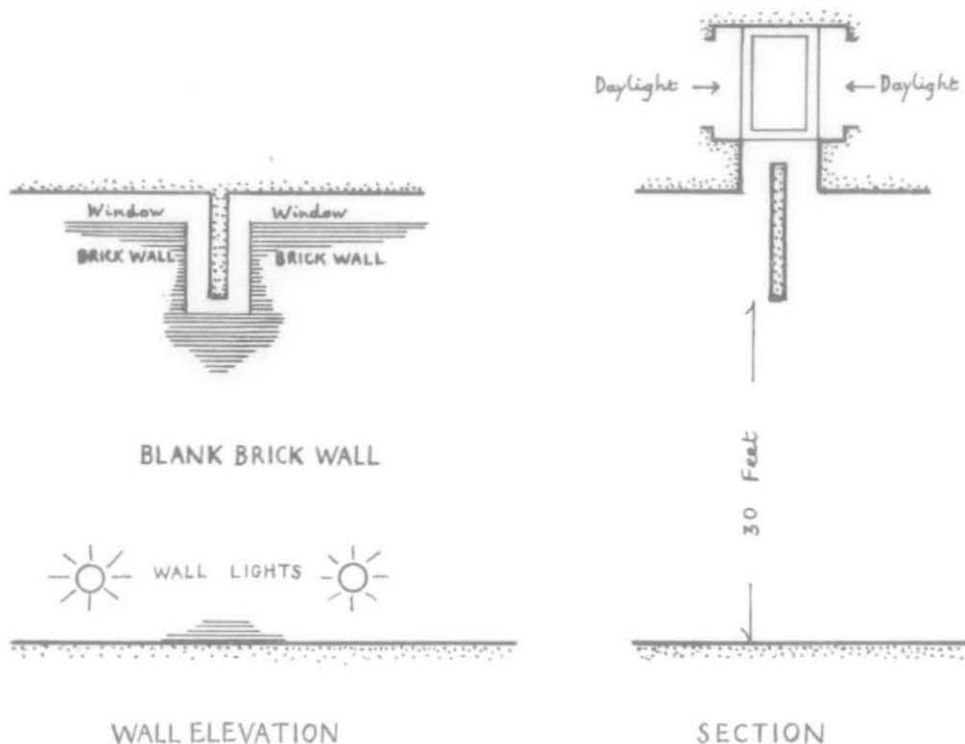


FIG. 18

St. Catherine's : Dining Hall, details.

mustard but the lampstand. The thrones seem rather rickety. Their occupants may have felt restive at times. They seem so carefully designed for bodies of one particular shape, that one fears for any diner not built on the generous lines of a thegn or a jarl.

This building, of course, swept the floor in its time with all the prizes and all the praise. No reasons for this were ever seriously stated, that I know. But professional bodies and self-appointed *arbitri elegantiae* never have to give reasons. Their renown and 'standing' are supposed to guarantee their judgment. This is one reason, I suppose, why Bernard Shaw was tempted to regard the Professions as conspiracies against Society.

I here finish my censorship of the buildings I saw of the current *lustrum*. I may seem very destructive. But what else could I say? From 1830 to 1930 architects were determined not only to find precedents for all their details but to copy them slavishly. From 1930 onwards they have been equally determined

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to copy nothing, and to invent everything possible. This innovating temper, no less than modern technology and modern materials (largely 'ersatz'), has isolated our architects from past achievements and starved them of inherited skills. They have all behaved like novices in the Bauhaus—or should one say Balnibarbi?—and ignored the simplest and most sensible solutions of the commonest problems. 'Academism' may have been stuffy, but 'Modernism' is the tyranny of invincible ignorance.