



# Beyond the Skin

JOANNA VAN HEYNINGEN

*Joanna van Heyningen set up her practice in 1977, and was joined in 1982 by Birkin Haward to form van Heyningen and Haward Architects. She became a consultant to the practice in 2012. The practice's work is typified by the thoughtful organisation of plan and section in building and place-making. Weight, light and sound are constant themes, as is the importance of context. She has taught and lectured widely.*

When I arrived in Cambridge in 1968 I was already a graduate (Modern Languages at Oxford) and had had a year in work. I had a yearning to put a name to what I would put my life's energies into. So when, on our first day (we were 50, of whom 5 were women) our tutor John Hix called us, prematurely but inspiringly, "you architects", it was a life-changing moment.

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Leslie Martin was Professor of Architecture for my undergraduate years. He was a great man and a huge influence on my way of thinking both about architecture and about practice. In our practice we consciously followed his example of measuring success by the quality of the work rather than by the size of the practice. We always said our ambition was to be mentioned in Pevsner.

The architecture that the school aspired to, under his influence, was rational. Anyone who knows his buildings (the law library in Oxford for example) knows that rationality does not preclude beauty. He was at that time involved in the setting up of the Centre for Land Use and Built Form Studies (now named after him) with Lionel March. The Centre's original goal was to apply geometrical principles to ground coverage and

*Lerner Court (photograph by Will Pryce).*

building form, with better housing layouts foremost in mind. Graduates like Richard MacCormac and John Ellis, the current Visiting Professor of Sustainable Urban Design at Cambridge, have been using and developing this sort of thinking ever since. This rational and wholistic approach to urban and suburban planning has by no means run its course. In my last two years Bill Howell was the professor of Architecture, and Marcial Echenique, Professor of Land Use and Transport Studies, was beginning to be a big player on the scene.

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Our second and third year master was John Meunier, now Professor of Architecture at Arizona State University. There was a very exciting day when he, Barry Gasson, and Brit Andresen won the competition to design the Glasgow museum to house the Burrell collection. My Swiss Army penknife was instrumental in allowing champagne to flow. Among our much-valued visiting teachers were Michael Brawne, Ted Cullinan, Richard MacCormac, David Thurlow and Birkin Haward. Birkin, who later became my Partner, was a particularly brilliant teacher, who worked with you to distil what you were trying to achieve. This he would encapsulate in diagrams sketched on the side of your drawing, and you took these round with you like a talisman for the whole of the ensuing week and sometimes weeks. I have felt ever since that the essence of any scheme should be capable of being encapsulated in diagrammatic form, and that, as it develops and comes under the influences of financial and other constraints, the scheme should be tested against the original concept.

I think I am remembering correctly when I say that by and large we all had more or less complete disdain for the idea of architecture as a business; so when, in preparation for Professional Practice exams, David Thurlow taught us the mantra about income – a third on salaries, a third on overheads, a third on profit (if only...) – we thought this was rather distasteful. We had a lot to learn.

I have said that rationality (however poetic, viz. Leslie Martin's great hero Alvar Aalto) was at the heart of the teaching in Cambridge at that time. What this resulted in was

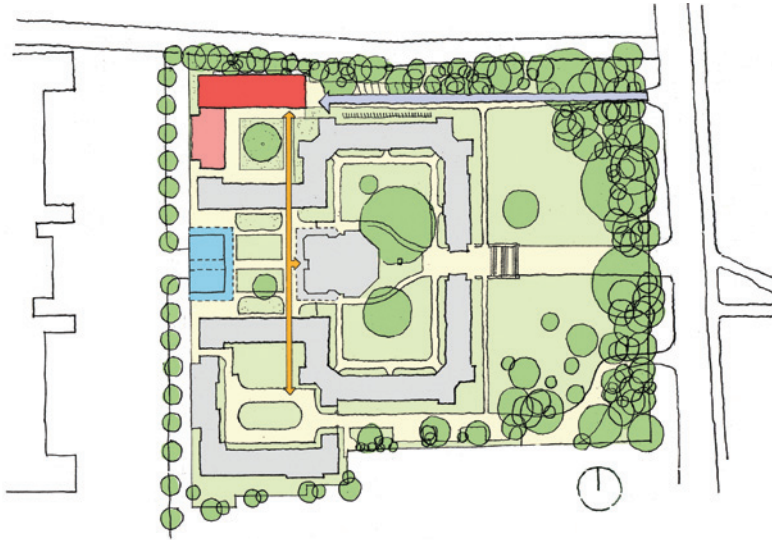


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a virtually exclusive concentration on organisation, at the scale of a building or of a city, in plan and section. This had a huge impact on my contemporaries' architecture and on my own. If there is one thing we are extremely good at, it's planning. I like a building with a complex brief to be legible and effortless. I want to de-mystify. I want the section to serve the plan and vice versa.

I think it is not a misrepresentation to say that we barely considered what our projects looked like externally – surprising as this may seem now. We cared a great deal about the three dimensional qualities of internal spaces and the distribution of daylight, and we cared about how buildings worked within their landscape setting and in relation to other buildings, but we did not really give attention to buildings as objects, and there were many occasions when we would find ourselves elevating the plans of our buildings the night before or the morning of our final crit, and discovering very late in the day what they might look like.

*Lerner Court (photograph by Will Pryce).*



I am not saying this was good; it was just how it was. This early and enduring mindset took some years to overcome and I would still find it almost impossible to start the design process by thinking of how a building should look – indeed, this aspect sometimes emerges quite late in the day, to the occasional frustration of the client. At Clare College we won the competition, against stiff opposition, to design Lerner Court (see photograph on previous page). We did this without committing to the appearance of our scheme. We even considered a case for it being built as if by the hand of Giles Gilbert Scott, who had designed the original campus over many decades. The client was convinced by our site strategy (above) and the plan and the section, and trusted us to get the whole thing right in the end. Nowadays most clients want to know what a building looks like first and everything else second. I don't think Cambridge trained architects are cut out for this way of approaching the job.

*Lerner Court site strategy (courtesy of Van Heyningen and Haward Architects).*



This concentration on the organisation of a project has had, I now realise, a positive impact on our work. It has always taught us to think beyond the skin – deeper than the skin. It influenced our commitment to material and stylistic longevity in our buildings. We have been uninterested in what is fashionable, although I concede that we will have been subconsciously influenced by it. We have been passionate about designing things of lasting quality. We recently spent a day at the Olympics, and chose to return from the Olympic Park via the Jubilee Line at West Ham Station. We designed this in 1991, and it was one of the last of the famous Jubilee Line Extension stations to be commissioned and one of the first to be opened. It was probably also the cheapest. We were deeply moved to be part of the mass of humanity streaming through our station and excited to see that it looked marvelous: strong, timeless, effortless. I am happy to give Cambridge School of Architecture the credit.

*West Ham Station (photograph by Birkin Haward).*