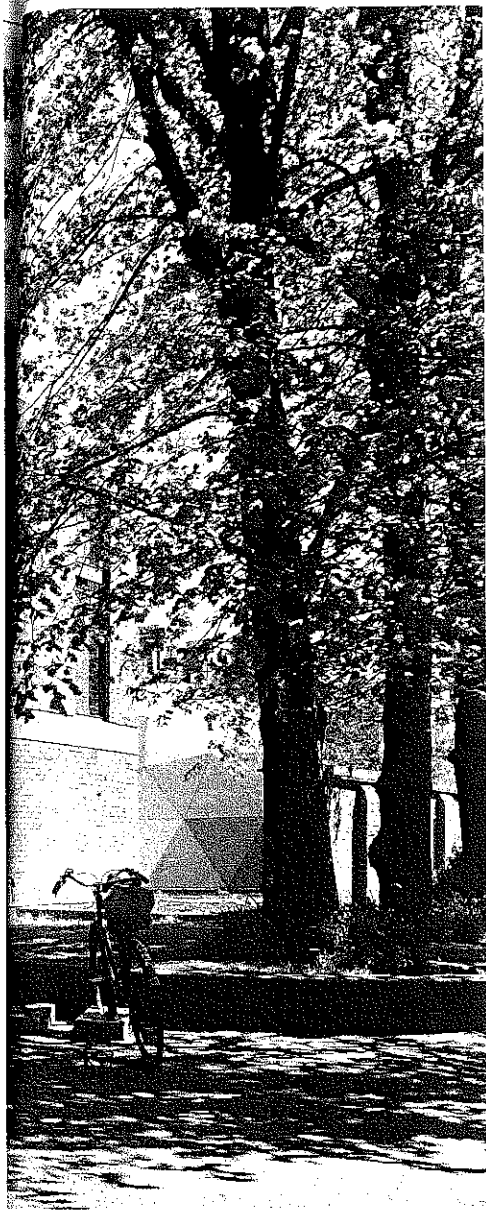


A Cambridge centenary

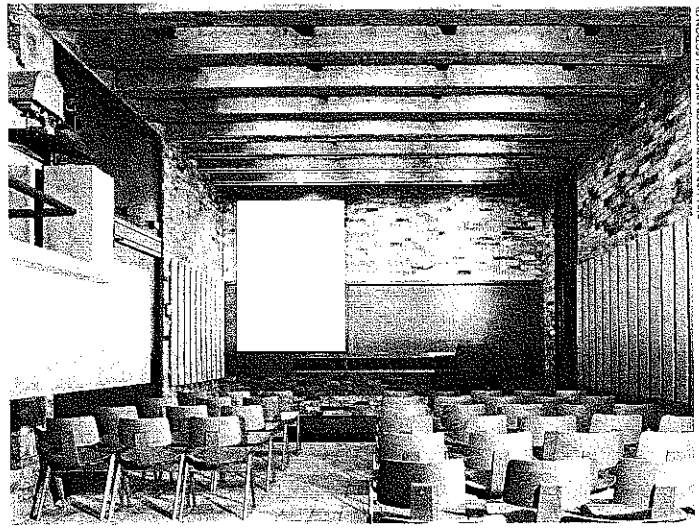
Alistair Fair reviews a significant year at Scroope Terrace

During 2012, the Department of Architecture at Cambridge University celebrated the centenary of its foundation. Promoted by the classical polymath and Slade Professor Charles Waldstein (later Sir Charles Walston), and with the early staff including E S Prior, teaching began in a single room adjacent to the university's law library in October 1912. The three students that first year included Kenneth Cross, later to become an architect of note and President of the RIBA. The next year included Graham Dawbarn and H C Hughes, both of whom later taught at the school. As numbers slowly increased a full-time Head of Department was needed, and Theodore Fyfe was appointed in 1922. Two years later, Architecture began its colonisation of Scroope Terrace, just along from the Fitzwilliam Museum. However, numbers remained small; in 1939 there were sixty students in total, all undergraduates, with, as yet, no Diploma course.

A fundamental shift in Cambridge's fortunes and aspirations occurred with the appointment in 1956 of Leslie Martin as the university's first Professor of Architecture. Martin was unusual among architects at that time in having a PhD; moreover, he had strong interests in both the artistic and scientific aspects of the subject, and was convinced of the potential for research to inform practice. Nationally, he was a key figure in the Oxford Conference of 1958, which considered the nature of architectural education. Locally, Martin's tenure saw the creation of the Diploma course and the formalisation of research activities in the Centre for Land Use and Built Form Studies, later renamed in Martin's honour, as its work expanded beyond an initial focus on mathematical modelling to address issues of environmental performance and sustainable urbanism. Martin also played a fundamental role in 'guiding' architectural patronage across Cambridge and beyond,



Left: the 1959 extension to the School of Architecture at Cambridge by Colin St John Wilson with Alex Hardy. Right, the lecture room, and below, the lobby from the criticism room



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notably stage-managing the Churchill College competition of 1959 to ensure that only Modernists were included. A distinctive Cambridge 'style' appeared, rooted in Scandinavian precedent and often characterised by a particularly rigorous approach to spatial organisation.

In 1972 Martin was succeeded by Bill Howell, whose untimely death in 1974 saw the Professorship pass to Colin St John Wilson. Wilson had first worked with Martin at the London County Council in the 1950s, and he followed Martin to Cambridge to become First Year Master. With building scientist Alex Hardy, Wilson made his mark on Scroope Terrace almost immediately, in the form of an extension providing new staff offices, a common room, crit space and lecture hall. Reyner Banham described the new building – designed as a 'live' studio project and opened by Le Corbusier and Henry Moore in 1959 – as the embodiment of 'the extreme intellectual wing' of Modernism on account of its rigorously geometric basis; it is infused with the golden section in both plan and elevation. Visually, too, it made a powerful statement in the directness of its materials, with unplastered brick and shuttered concrete offering, like James Stirling and James Gowen's Ham Common flats (1956), an early reinterpretation of the Maisons Jaoul. Le Corbusier's influence is also felt in such details as the centre-pivot doors that divide the spaces. Here, then, was embodied the new confidence and intellectual agenda of the Martin era. For Wilson, too, the Scroope Terrace extension was significant in laying down ideas of plan, section and movement that were developed in his subsequent work, not least the British Library.

The 1959 extension – which remains remarkably intact, down to the original mechanical shutters that black out the rooflights in theatrical fashion at the start of lectures – housed a number of the special events that took place during 2012.

Particularly appropriately, it formed the venue for an exhibition, 'Cambridge in Concrete', which explored the university's building projects of the 1950s and 1960s through the photographic collections of the RIBA. Curated by Marco Iuliano and François Penz, the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue revolved around the idea that, save perhaps for C20 and Docomomo devotees, this architecture forms 'another Cambridge', off the tourist trail and not much liked. A round-table discussion accompanying the exhibition brought together a distinguished panel of speakers including Ivor Smith, Nick Ray, Catherine Croft, Peter Carolin, Alan Berman, John Allen, Mark Goldie, Alan Powers, Barnabas Calder and Dean Hawkes. The catalogue includes the images from the exhibition as well as a number of specially commissioned essays, and we intend to restage the exhibition at the RIBA in due course.

Another centenary publication, 'Prospects', looks to the Department's future in a series of essays by present and former staff and graduates, including Nick Baker, Peter Carl and Joanna van Heyningen. Under the recent leadership of Alan Short, Marcial Echenique, Nick Bullock and Koen Steemers, Cambridge has emerged with a renewed focus on sustainable design and urbanism, though with an ongoing interest in the history and theory of architecture and cities. Scroope Terrace was extended again in 2005 by Mole Architects. The new studio workspace, made of timber, glass and insulated cladding, was conceived as an exemplary piece of low-energy design. In its lightness, it contrasts with the solidity of Wilson's earlier building, which was just recently listed Grade II by the DCMS following a submission by the Society. But, in different ways, both represent didactic statements of the potential of architecture, and both play a key part in the life of the Department as it enters its second century.

