

# THE GROVE BUILDINGS QUADRANGLE

MAGDALEN COLLEGE, OXFORD

In the new quad at Magdalen College, Oxford, the Classical and Gothic languages of architecture are expressed side by side in a series of buildings in harmony with their natural and built surroundings. DAVID WATKIN celebrates a distinguished new landmark in the city's architectural landscape.



MAGDALEN College occupies the most beautiful and extensive site of any college in Oxford or Cambridge. In a very English combination of architecture and nature, its buildings spread in a relaxed and gracious way through gardens and deer park, gradually melting into Addison's Walk, with its river banks and water meadows. It is also the only historic college which has not permitted the construction on its ancient site of post-war buildings in aggressive modern styles and materials. When, in 1991, Magdalen decided to commission a building to contain accommodation for fellows and undergraduates as well as public rooms, including an auditorium, it was determined not to make the mistake of other colleges.

All previous buildings on the site have been either Gothic, like the Founder's Tower of 1458, or Classical, as the New Building of the 1730s, an austere, pedimented block 27 bays long. The new Grove Buildings Quadrangle by Porphyrios Associates, sensitive to this historic environment, reflects the balance at Magdalen between Gothic and Classical, as well as its openness to views of the landscape. From the 1840s to the 1930s, A. W. N. Pugin, J. C. Buckler, Bodley and Garner, and Sir Giles Gilbert Scott all worked at Magdalen in a manner ultimately dependent on the original buildings of the college. These were built in 1467 to 1510 by the founder, William Waynflete, Bishop of Winchester, probably to a master plan by William Orchard.

Demetri Porphyrios argued: 'The long and distinguished history of the college, engraved in its buildings and skyline, has shown us the architectural language with which to compose.' It is refreshing to find so sensible, modest and rational an approach, for the architects of most post-war buildings in Oxford and Cambridge seem to hate the forms and plans of the existing college architecture. Dr Porphyrios, by contrast, seriously considered what lessons can be learned from traditional college architecture. The path to the choice of Dr Porphyrios was not a simple one, for the college wisely gave much thought to the form which new additions might take. It bore in mind that its only building in the 'Modern' style is now widely considered inappropriate to its setting. This is the Waynflete Building, away from the ancient site on the other side of Magdalen Bridge, a grim 1960s block with an exposed concrete framework.

In seeking an architect for new residential accommodation for fellows and undergraduates, the college began by making a

list of 14 architects, some of whom had already worked on the college's seemingly never-ending restoration and conservation schemes, some of whom were personal choices, and some who joined in as news of the search emerged. Twelve of these architects submitted responses, with drawings, simple drafts or manifestos.

Having visited buildings by six of these architects, the search committee presented the designs of three of them to the Fellowship. Widespread discussion was undertaken throughout the college, including consultation with the junior members, to whose use the bulk of the new buildings was, after all, to be dedicated. The overwhelming choice was for the design by Porphyrios Associates, a subtle and varied assembly of buildings designed in creative response to what Dr Porphyrios calls 'the Magdalen vernacular' (Fig 3). Yet the composition is punctuated by the imposing presence of the Classical auditorium so that the whole achieves a combination of the familiar and the unexpected.

The traditional Oxford quad is enclosed on all four sides, typified at Magdalen by the Cloister Quad, yet Magdalen is also characterised by quads open on at least one side: St Swithun's Quad, by Bodley and Garner, of 1884; St John's Quad, partly by Bodley and Garner; and Longwall Quad, by Giles Gilbert Scott, of 1932. It is this open quality which Dr Porphyrios has followed in Grove Buildings Quadrangle, which is a carefully contrived assembly of buildings placed at the junction of gardens and deer park.

The building work has been divided into three phases, two of them now complete (Fig 4). These have created a quad in the form of a long, narrowing rectangle raised on a terrace overlooking the deer park. Along the west side, parallel to Longwall Street, is a long range, four storeys high, with half-timbered dormers, tall chimneys and the long cloister walk from which this element gets its name: the Arcade Building (Figs 5 and 6). In the third

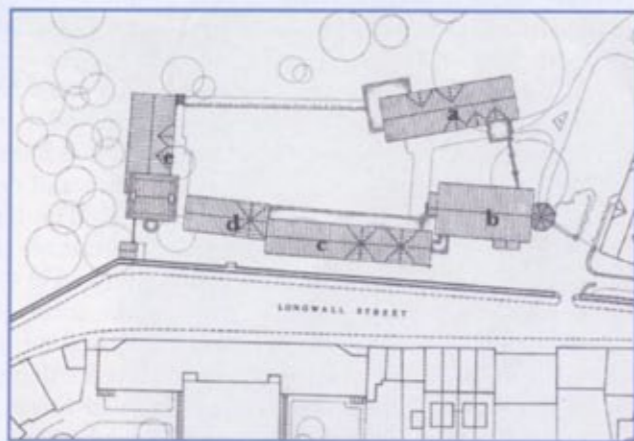


1—The Classical theatre and the Gothic Entrance Tower Buildings. (Right) 2—The interior of the theatre



3—Watercolour perspective of the completed proposal: view from the east

(Right) 4—Plan of the Grove Buildings Quadrangle: a, the Entrance Tower Building; b, the theatre; c, the Arcade Building; d and e, undergraduate accommodation (uncompleted)



and final phase of construction, this will be extended to the north on a line brought forward to allow for a service courtyard at the rear. At right angles to it at the north end will be a free-standing, three-storeyed range of chambers with gables, terminating in a building in the form of a four-storeyed tower house with crow-stepped gables and a projecting *tourelle*.

The scale of the whole is large and the Classical detailing crisp and frugal in a truly Hellenic spirit. At the south end of the Arcade Building is the auditorium for music, lectures and films, designed in an austere Classical style (Fig 1). Seating 170, this great hall, with a trussed oak roof, is a double cube modelled on the tradition of the Classical Odeion (Fig 2). The front rows of seats on its steeply raked floor can

be arranged to form seating in the round. Its unusual circular windows are flanked externally by volute brackets, at the moment left poignantly empty but awaiting future sculpture. The theatre is approached through a polygonal entry pavilion, ultimately inspired by the Tower of the Winds in Athens. The two-storeyed interior of this novel structure is, indeed, open to the winds through its high-level openings. One passes from it into a rectangular, barrel-vaulted hall which also serves as an exhibition space. From this, a shallow ramp stair leads up to the auditorium.

The theatre forms the west side of a small space which, forming an extension of the main quad, is flanked on its east side by a substantial block of chambers known as the Entrance Tower Buildings. This is set

at a splayed angle to the other buildings so that its occupants can enjoy the splendid view back to the medieval Cloister Quad, Founder's Tower and Bell Tower. On the first floor, a fellow's set boasts a large mulioned oriel window with round-headed lights, a nod towards the Classical language of the nearby theatre. The austerity of line and ornament is broken by details such as stone corbels carved with the roses and lilies which feature on the college arms.

The traditional Oxford and Cambridge quadrangle and the staircase system were rejected by the architects of most modern additions to the colleges. Dr Porphyrios has wisely restored the traditional college staircase which, with two or four rooms per landing, encourages conviviality as well as providing privacy. On the ground floor of the Arcade Building are public rooms, including a law library, a college office and a computer room, but all the rooms on the remaining three floors are for undergraduates.

Solid but not luxurious, they have a timeless, almost monastic, flavour. Internal walls are made of plaster with lime paint; the doors are of oak with specially made ironmongery; all rooms are heated by electric panels and some have, in addition, open fires. The walls are load-bearing stone ashlar on brick. The main roofs are of reclaimed stone tiles; the flat roof of the cloister walk and the tower roofs are of lead and that of the theatre is of copper.

This enduring building, lacking the problems of maintenance and repair associated with works by high-tech architects, is innovative both in its stylistic language and construction. Its traditional thick walls provide a slow-response thermal mass, which heat and cool slowly, making the building environmentally efficient. The use of lime mortar also allows the walls to breathe, thus avoiding any expansion joints.

Dr Porphyrios, an architectural philosopher and a prolific writer, is best known as an influential figure in the group of architects which is currently demonstrating that the Classical language is as valid today as it has been in the past. Why, then, the Gothic style at Magdalen? The principal explanations for this are his sensitivity to environment, as well as his statement that the old buildings in the college constitute a 'Magdalen vernacular', and his often-stated belief that 'Classicism is not a style'. This belief is the cornerstone of his book *Classical Architecture* (Academy Editions, 1991), in which he analyses Classicism as a form of building construction, quoting extensively from ancient and modern authors such as Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Cicero, Pliny, Vitruvius, Alberti, Kant, Lessing, Hegel, Semper and Tessenow.

He argues that: 'Although we are often told today that Classical architecture has

nothing to do with innovation, in fact, it has been the most innovative and enduring of architectural languages, always understood and practical in a context of cultural continuity and tradition. Innovation in Classical architecture is about the slow distinction of similarities.' The irregularity he has adopted at Magdalen, especially in the trapezoidal shape of the Quad, also has Classical precedent in the ancient Greek practice of angled planning, in which the *stoa* was placed at an angle so as to make one's first sight of the temple a three-quarter perspective view: the effect can be seen most impressively at the Parthenon. Related planning techniques can be seen in the trapezoidal *agora* at Assos; and, at Pergamum, the Temple of Athena Polias, with a colonnaded precinct placed obliquely to it, and the sanctuary of Asclepius, where the sacred way runs at an oblique angle to the courtyard. Celebrated Renaissance examples of *piazze* with canted sides include that at Pienza by Bernardo Rossellino and the Campidoglio at Rome by Michelangelo.

Dr Porphyrios describes what he was

trying to achieve at Magdalen as follows: 'The contrast between the Classical of the theatre and the vernacular of the halls of residence heightens the dialogue between their public and private nature respectively: thus underlining the urban quality of the scheme as a whole and its relation to the existing college. This is not an introverted mega-structural scheme, but rather a quadrangle where a number of buildings of different character, dimensions and scale co-exist like members of a family; creating open spaces in harmony with the landscape.'

The project owes much to the dedicated work, particularly in fund-raising, of the president of Magdalen, Anthony Smith, CBE. The achievement of Dr Porphyrios in the Grove Buildings Quadrangle attracted the interest of the HRH Prince of Wales, who honoured the college by laying its foundation stone in 1995.

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5 and 6—The Arcade Building: law library, college offices and computer room on the ground floor, undergraduate rooms above

