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THE EDUCATION OF A MODERN ARCHITECT: DENYS LASDUN IN THE 1930S

BARNABAS CALDER

In 1930, two years after the foundation of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM), the year between Wells Coates setting up his office and Berthold Lubetkin coming to London, Denys Lasdun's headmaster's report advised the 16-year-old that 'in considering his future, he should remember to try to utilise his undoubted artistic ability.'¹ Lasdun entered the London architectural world two years later, at a time when modernism was gaining a foothold there. When the Second World War broke out he was still seven days short of his 26th birthday, but already it was clear that he had heeded his headmaster's advice: he had played his small part in the establishment of European modernism in Britain. Most architects would still be in their first job out of school at 25, but Lasdun had already built two houses, come fourth in a national competition, and worked for both Wells Coates and Lubetkin and Tecton. His ascent from drifting schoolboy to accomplished and respected architect was quick and dramatic, and in it lie some roots of the artistic vision which he was to develop to such effect after the war.

At the beginning of the 1930s, Lasdun was at Rugby School. Despite taking pleasure in his art classes he had, according to his elegantly self-deprecating recollections, little ambition beyond a wish not to go to university. Having ended up at the Architectural Association (AA) largely through the initiative of others, he was soon becoming serious about architecture. It appears that he was born with the ability to charm and engage potential clients, as his first commission came in his second year of undergraduate training, completely out of the blue, from a couple he met at a party: 'the couple said they wanted to buy a house and did I know any that were for sale, to which I said, "I think it's ridiculous these days to buy a house, you should build one." After which I got a letter saying, "Well, we'll give you £50 to design our house. We know a site in Oxshott."' Lasdun recalled rising at five in the morning to be able to get back in time for ten o'clock lectures at the AA after supervising work on the site – although 'supervising' may be misleading, as he learnt a great deal about building 'under the instruction of the foreman'.²

The resulting house, known as Silver Greys, presumably from the bricks used for its exterior, is rather curious.³ It is very unlike anything Lasdun would build later, but as the work of a 20-year-old student it is not bad. Unsurprisingly, it exhibits very strong influences from the prevailing thought at the AA of the time and is, as such, a peculiar hybrid. The general effect of the exterior is slightly awkward Arts and Crafts, with pitched roof, brick-mullioned windows and asymmetrical elevations. The other tradition still going strong at the AA was a simplified classicism descended from the highly formal, axially planned schemes of the Ecole des Beaux Arts. At Silver Greys, the curiously formal gesture of a pyramid of steps up to the front door, and the back steps which place the building on a sort of podium, are both reminiscent of these sorts of Beaux-Arts schemes. More explicitly classical is the pair of fluted columns flanking the door. They have no base, no capital and no entasis, and even their visual support for the head of the doorway is equivocal, as they rise

Figure 1. 32 Newton Road, 1938. (RIBA Library Photographs Collection).

1. William Curtis, *Denys Lasdun: Architecture, City, Landscape*, London, Phaidon, 1994, p.20.

2. Interview with Jill Lever for National Life Story Collection, 1996–7, transcript in the Lasdun archive, pp. 18–19.

3. *Architect and Building News*, vol.142, 28 December 1934, pp.388–9.

one course of bricks above it. This kind of modified, stripped-down classical reference can be seen in many British buildings of the period, including, for instance, Grey Wornum's Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), London.

To this collision of Arts and Crafts and classicism is added a third influence present in the AA by this time: that of continental modernist theory. This is clearest in the plan, in which can be distinguished various principles being advocated by Le Corbusier and more particularly by Gropius. First, all the living spaces – living room and bedrooms – face south to catch the sun, and their windows are much more generous than those on the north, which only light corridors, bathrooms and other service areas. This kind of clear distinction between served and servant spaces was to remain central to Lasdun's thinking. The 1960s

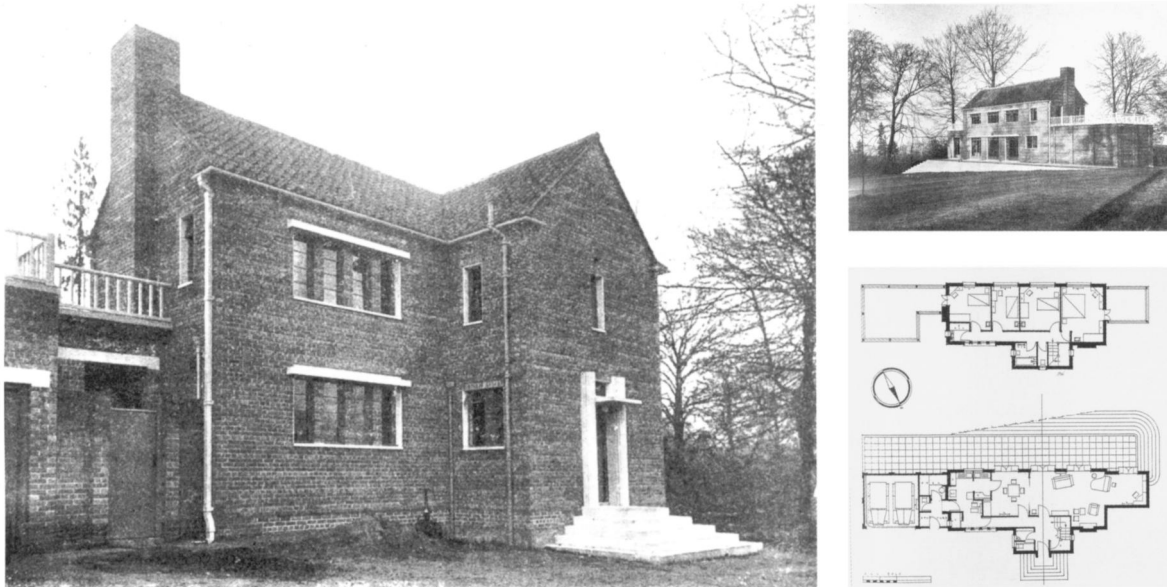


Figure 2. Silver Greys, 1934, front view.

Figure 3. Silver Greys, rear view.

Figure 4. Silver Greys, plans.

student residences at Christ's College, Cambridge, and those at the University of East Anglia (UEA) both contain entirely windowless access and sanitation, while the rooms themselves are full of light from large south-facing windows.

The second feature of Lasdun's plan which would not look out of place in a modernist house of the period is the opening up of the living room into a single space. There are areas for dining, sitting and work, but no walls interrupting them. A possible borrowing from Le Corbusier is Lasdun's use of the roofs above the garage and the end of the living room as terraces, as advocated in the famous 'five points'. The house is the product of a young architect's selection of recent planning improvements from Europe, contemporary technology in the metal windows, overall appearance from Arts and Crafts, and points of emphasis from the classical tradition. This kind of thoughtful eclecticism is strongly reminiscent of the writings of Howard Robertson, who had just left the AA when Lasdun arrived there.⁴ His ethos was clearly still alive in the school. Although Lasdun would never again produce such an undigested blend, he retained this ability to take ideas that he liked from a variety of sources without swallowing the accompanying packages of dogma. He refused at first to join the MARS group (the British representatives at CIAM) when invited by Coates, stating his objection to such attempts to establish orthodoxies, and again after the war he fought against classification as a member of any group, notably rejecting the tag 'Brutalist'.⁵

For his 21st birthday Lasdun received a copy of *Towards a New Architecture*, and was at once excited by its bold and poetically expressed theory. It was not

4. E.G. Howard Robertson, *Modern Architectural Design*, London, Architectural Press, 1932.

5. Letter from Lasdun to Wells Coates, 12 June 1939, Lasdun archive.

long before he profited from a vacation to travel to Paris and look at Le Corbusier's buildings for himself. It was something of a conversion experience for Lasdun, and created in him an admiration for the older architect which was to stay with him throughout his life, and shape his architecture more than any other external source, although he never accepted Le Corbusier's urban theory. The building which affected him most on that visit was the Pavillon Suisse, and the influence is immediately apparent in his third-year project at the AA, for 'An Academy for Colonial and Dominion Scholars in London'. The scheme is by no means a copy of the Parisian model, but the similarity of the disposition of elements and of the architectural language is unmistakable.⁶

As far as Lasdun could recall in later life, it was a summer vacation internship after his third year at the AA which introduced him to Wells Coates's practice. He was attracted there by the obvious Corbusian modernity of the Isokon flats in Lawn Road, at the time recently completed. By the end of the summer, Lasdun had decided that the business of designing and building was much more enjoyable than studying at the AA, and he joined the firm and abandoned his official training.⁷ Coates's glamorous association with Le Corbusier and other leading modern architects through CIAM, and his single-minded application of modernist design techniques in both industrial design and architecture, drew promising younger architects to him. In the office at the same time as Lasdun were Patrick Gwynne, who designed the splendid house in Esher for his father while working here, and Edric Neel, who went on to found Arcon and do important work on plastics and prefabrication. The atmosphere was exciting and progressive. Gwynne recalled the group talking about architecture for hours after work, sometimes in the chair-less sitting area in which Coates alone, with his Japanese experience, could achieve comfort while the others squatted awkwardly; and sometimes in the Gargoyle Club, surrounded by Matisse murals, watching Coates sketching on the pristine table-cloths.⁸

During the two years he spent with Coates, Lasdun must have been involved in a number of schemes, but a few seem to have been especially associated with him. The first two were for blocks of flats, one an unbuilt project in Bristol, the other the Palace Gate block in Kensington. Lasdun and Coates worked together on both, elaborating the Russian Constructivist 3:2 section for use in flats for the middle classes.⁹ The system involved housing service and sleeping areas beneath an ungenerous eight-foot ceiling, but with living rooms rising to twelve feet for a more elegant space. This permitted three floors of service areas to be accommodated in the same twenty-four-foot rise as two living rooms, allowing simultaneously the economic advantages of density and the pleasure of more luxurious spaces. Lasdun was to revisit the principle in planning his block of flats in St James's Place after the war.

Lasdun recalled in 1995 that his role in the Palace Gate design went further, too: it was his suggestion to pull the main block back from the road and allow the entrance hall to project forwards independently. Previously, as he remembered it, the flats had been going to follow the edge of the site like the firm's Embassy Court in Brighton.¹⁰ By coincidence, Denys Lasdun and his mother lived in a Victorian flat directly opposite the Palace Gate site, giving him a chance to see its innovative constructional techniques close up.

The project on which Lasdun was given most autonomy within Coates's office was their entry to the *News Chronicle* Schools Competition of 1937. This was very substantially the work of Lasdun, and won fourth place, ahead of dozens of schemes, including those by Tecton, and Marcel Breuer and F.R.S. Yorke. The competition required firms to design a school which might feasibly be built without massive expense and which might function without wholesale changes to the curriculum, but it simultaneously encouraged innovation and left the brief deliberately rather open. Coates contributed ideas on a system of prefabrication in steel, concrete, glass and, characteristically, plywood. The

6. Curtis, *op.cit.* p.25.

7. Jill Lever interview, p.21.

8. 'Wells Coates: Recollections by Patrick Gwynne: April 1979', copy in Lasdun archive, p.2.

9. Sherban Cantacuzino, *Wells Coates: A Monograph*, London, Gordon Fraser, 1978, pp.75 and 64-71.

10. Interview with Alan Powers, November 1995.

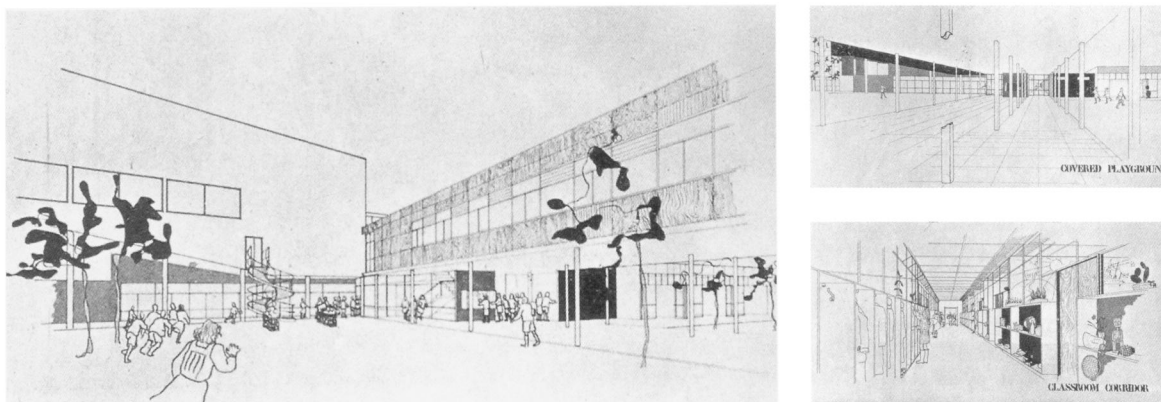


Figure 4. *News Chronicle Schools Competition, 1937*, Lasdun with Wells Coates.

11. *Architects' Journal*, vol.85, 25 March 1937, pp.530–31 and 536–7.

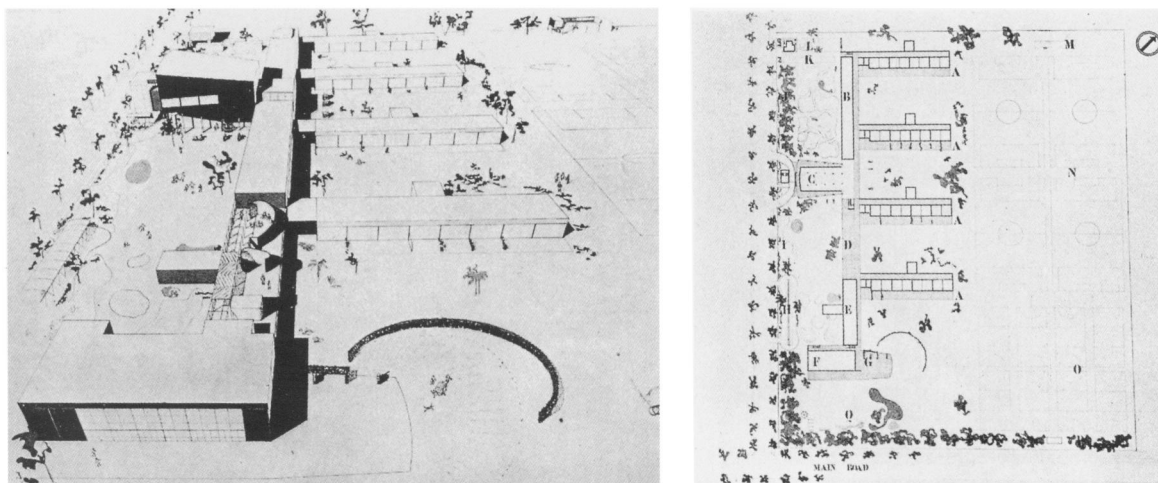
partitions would have offered negligible sound insulation, but the judges seem to have been more concerned that the layout of cloakrooms would mean that in poor weather 'some pupils would have to walk long distances inside the building in wet clothes'.¹¹

Lasdun's scheme, like several of the others, was based on a spine block with components branching off it. He arranged the classroom corridors at right-angles to the spine, creating a series of landscaped courtyards open at one end to playing fields, and leading through *pilotis* at the other end to gardens. The overall layout was similar to the sort of Bauhaus-influenced diagrammatic schemes to which Lasdun was to become hostile after the war, proposing an alternative in buildings like his Hallfield School, Paddington. The landscaping and careful detailing, however, rendered the scheme human, open and welcoming. The charming sketches produced as part of the 1937 presentation show realistic children moving through corridors lined with their toys, and glimpses of murals and child art of the sort which was indeed to become a feature of the schools built immediately after the war, notably the pioneering series in Hertfordshire.

This first period of practice may well have taught Lasdun a number of useful lessons. Lasdun gave Coates generous credit in subsequent interviews for having shown him the importance of sectional planning, and of precision in detailing. Coates's quixotic utopianism may also have presented an instructive counter-example for an ambitious young architect: as Lasdun later recalled, 'most of the projects which he should have done probably collapsed because he frightened people about his tremendously advanced thoughts and macro-

Figure 5. *News Chronicle Schools Competition, 1937*, plan.

Figure 6. *News Chronicle Schools Competition, 1937*, aerial view.



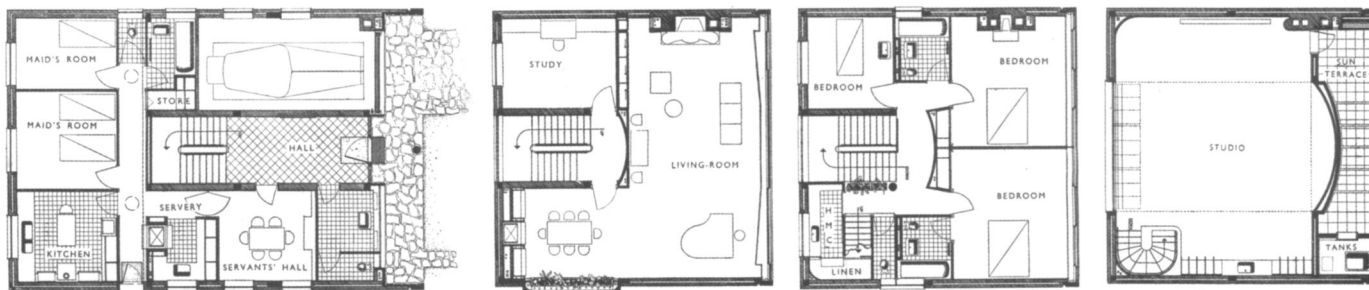


Figure 8. 32 Newton Road, plans.

scopic view of everything.¹² Lasdun avoided scaring off clients in this manner, keeping a clear sense of the scope of projects in which he was engaged. He never sought to replace the entire city, but rather to improve it as much as he could within the restrictions of his site and brief. So well-grounded was he in realism that at UEA and the Christ's College residences he designed the first stages of multi-stage building projects to establish a language for future development by other architects if necessary. This has allowed both projects to retain their architectural quality in spite of remaining incomplete.

While he was still in Coates's office Lasdun gained another independent commission for a house. This time the client was an artist and a friend of Lasdun's mother, and the site was in Newton Road, Westbourne Park. Completed in 1938, the house is in a different world to that of Silver Greys. The conversion to Le Corbusier is very clear – indeed the façade is almost a paraphrase of the Maison Cook, which Lasdun had seen on his Paris visit – as is the great increase in confidence and skill which Lasdun's architecture had undergone in the intervening four years. It uses reinforced-concrete construction competently, thanks in part to the help of the engineer Felix Samuely, and is a unified, well-planned and well-detailed piece of 1930s modernism. Maxwell Fry wrote to Lasdun in 1939 to say that he had paid a number of visits to Newton Road, and felt that it was 'a real accession of strength to modern architecture'.¹³

The façade, with its white-painted concrete and chocolate tiles (currently painted an unhappy pastel yellow) is beautiful in the photos of the day. A gesture is made towards at least three of Le Corbusier's 'five points': the *fenêtre en longueur* in the strip windows, which can open to make a fourteen-foot clear opening; the *piloti* in the structurally unnecessary central column, and the roof garden in the small balcony on the top floor. Structurally it does not meet the Corbusian ideal of separating skeleton from walls, but this might be taken less as a failure of courage than as a victory of practical sense: since thick walls are needed for thermal and acoustic insulation, why not stand the building on them? Similarly the lighting internally, especially in the living room, is from a number of indirect sources, whereas Le Corbusier in his Purism lights from one or two exposed bulbs. Lasdun, in other words, rejects what he does not find admirable in his model, and keeps that which is desirable.

The other quiet divergence from the Corbusian ideal detectable in 32 Newton Road is Lasdun's concern for the location of his building. Whereas Le Corbusier tended to design for imagined green spaces irrespective of the surroundings, and his photographers used all their ingenuity in maintaining the illusion, Lasdun, even in 1937–8, was thinking about the relationship between his building and the street in which it stood. Thus the white concrete façade is not continued round to the side walls, which are instead of London stock brick, just as the neighbouring villas have a stucco front and brick sides. In terms of massing, too, Lasdun fought to be sympathetic to his surroundings, even at the cost of a five-month planning dispute. The house was to be considerably taller than its neighbours, so Lasdun set it as far back from the road as he was permitted, and also matched the tiled panel to the scale of the surrounding houses.

12. Interview with Alan Powers, *op.cit.*

13. Letter from Maxwell Fry to Lasdun, 24 April 1939, Lasdun archive.

Figure 9. 32 Newton Road, Cartoonist Ronald Searle lived in the house after the original client, drawing this change of address card.

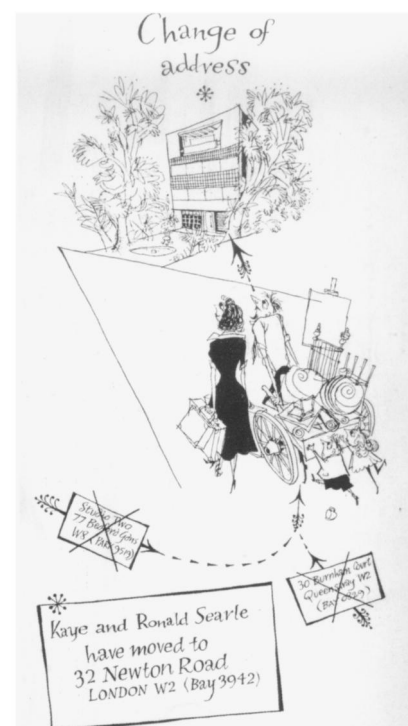




Figure 10. 32 Newton Road, balcony.
(RIBA Library Photographs Collection).



Figure 11. 32 Newton Road, living room
with client's antique furniture.
(RIBA Library Photographs Collection).



Figure 12. 32 Newton Road, living room
with Aalto furniture.
(RIBA Library Photographs Collection).

Internally, the planning is predominantly fairly conventional, with rooms disposed around a central staircase at the back of the house. The artist's studio which almost fills the top floor, and the L-shaped living and dining room are both attractive spaces, but there is little of the sectional virtuosity which Lasdun was to exhibit later in his career. This must be in part because of the nature of the commission, but it also seems likely that he had simply not yet developed that level of sophistication and skill as an architect.

An aspect of 32 Newton Road which demonstrates Lasdun's maturity at this time is the quality of its publicity. Whereas *Silver Greys* was little published, and when it was the photography was technically rather ordinary, Newton Road was widely and beautifully published, with first-class photographs, ample drawings, and, in the *Architectural Review* at least, visually impressive technical drawings extended from photographs to show details.¹⁴ It seems likely that he had learnt much of this technique at Tecton, whose work was always sensationally presented, and with whom he was working at the time the publication of Newton Road was prepared. Two sets of interior photographs were taken, one with the client's collection of paintings and beautiful antiques in place, and the other with a selection of Aalto plywood furniture and strongly shaped pot plants which move from place to place to furnish each picture. This was used as an opportunity for the magazines to meditate on the use of antique and modern furniture in modern interiors, and indeed both look exceedingly attractive in the spare living room with its striking mid-Victorian marble fireplace.¹⁵ This awareness of the critical importance of presentation and image quality to the success of an architect was to stand Lasdun in very good stead throughout his career. For his post-war projects he worked with top photographers (Donat, Einzig and others) and made extensive use of the marvelously intricate, expressive models produced from the 1960s onwards by his remarkable model maker Philip Wood.

14. *Architectural Review*, vol.85, March 1939, pp.119–32.

15. *Architect Building News*, 17 March 1939, pp.330–33; *Architectural Review*, vol.85, March 1939, pp.119–32.

Lasdun later stated that it was an attempt by Coates to poach the Newton Road commission from him which drove him to leave the office.¹⁶ In any case there was insufficient interesting work for the firm by 1937, and finances were stretched. Just as Lasdun had essentially seen Coates as a surrogate Le Corbusier, so now he was attracted by Highpoint I, which Le Corbusier himself had warmly praised, to Lubetkin and Tecton. He made an appointment with Lubetkin, and impressed him with a white-on-black drawing of the Newton Road façade. Lasdun joined Tecton in 1937, and left to join the army in 1938, but he later spoke of this brief period as an exciting one, and a strong influence on him. His memories of the episode were not especially clear, perhaps in part because of confusions between his pre- and post-war work for the firm. He recalled sweeping the steps of Finsbury Health Centre before its opening, but seems to have joined the practice too late to be more architecturally involved in any of Tecton's most iconic 1930s work.¹⁷

What certainly did occupy much of his time with Lubetkin was work on the bombproof shelter schemes which Tecton drew up for the borough of Finsbury as the war approached.¹⁸ One could speculate that the collaboration with Arup on the concrete design for these projects may have increased his knowledge of that material, or that his first taste of political obstruction in a major public project may have helped him to prepare for numerous such incidents later in his career, but it is hard to be confident. When Lasdun was demobbed he went back to Tecton as a partner – an indication that his talents had been appreciated during his first period with the firm.

Lasdun and Lubetkin formed a lasting respect for each other. Lasdun recalled that he 'came very close to Lubetkin ... I really enjoyed his company enormously.'¹⁹ Although the end of Tecton caused bad feeling, and Lubetkin's retreat to rural isolation left them out of contact for decades, Lasdun repeatedly proposed Lubetkin for the RIBA Royal Gold Medal in the 1970s and 1980s, eventually successfully, and Lubetkin was grateful and touched by this solidarity. He wrote to Lasdun: 'you have deservedly flown to such olympic heights that I hesitated to inflict myself upon you. Yet it is obvious that all the time you were busy on my behalf organising the forthcoming exhumation ceremony.'²⁰

With Lasdun's departure from Tecton in 1938, the story of his pre-war architecture ends. There remains the question of what impact his pre-war work had on his more famous buildings of the 1950s and 1960s. He learnt practical lessons and developed an attitude to the role of the architect. He also absorbed several of the influences which were to shape his later work.

Undoubtedly Lasdun had acquired, from Silver Greys onwards, a much more extensive experience of the practicalities of design and construction than most architects of his age. He had worked with two firms which used reinforced concrete confidently and stylishly, and with both Arup and Samuely – the two leading architectural engineers then practising in Britain. He had also seen at first hand the workings of two artistically ambitious leading architects, and had doubtless observed the strengths and weaknesses of their methods of directing the design process. Certainly Coates, Lubetkin and Lasdun, although all competent draughtsmen, each did very little drawing at the height of their careers. Each sketched to demonstrate points, and talked to their assistants, but designed substantially with the hands of others. Each kept their teams small and selected associates with great care. Lasdun's comparison of Coates's role with that of an orchestral conductor would do well for his own creative process too.

Although Lasdun felt he was 'not a political animal', he took to heart the idea that 'architecture was nothing to do with styles, it was to do with society and social requirements' – an idea first put to him by Herbert J. Rowse at the AA, and much reinforced by the utopias, technological and socialistic, for which Coates and Lubetkin fought.²¹ He truly believed in the Welfare State which was the client for much of his greatest work.

16. Jill Lever interview, p.23.

17. Jill Lever interview, p.30.

18. Jill Lever interview, p.29.

19. Jill Lever interview, p.30.

20. Letter from Berthold Lubetkin to Lasdun, 9 March 1982, Lasdun archive.

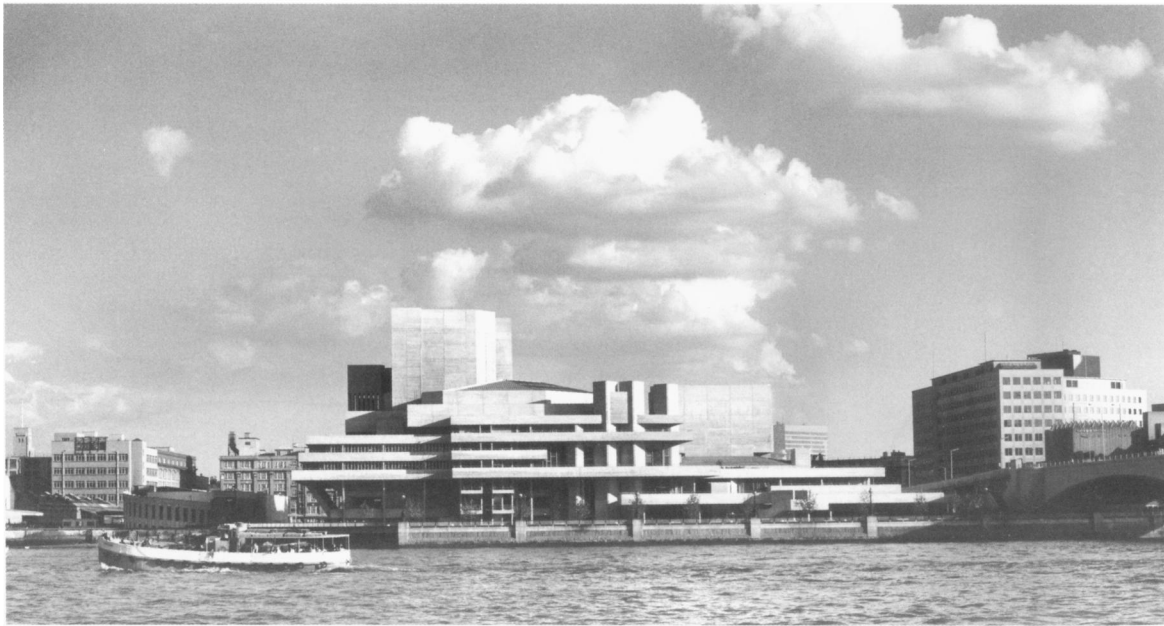
21. Jill Lever interview, pp.33 and 16.

Looking back to the 1930s from the perspective of the 1990s Lasdun found the roots of much which was later to develop in his creative process. There was of course the influence of Le Corbusier, acquired young and retained thereafter, shifting in the post-war period to accommodate the earthier style of the *Unité d'Habitation*, the *Maisons Jaoul* and above all *La Tourette*. Lasdun also acquired his admiration for Hawksmoor at the AA, producing a measured drawing of his Kensington orangery. Another influence which Lasdun acknowledged late in life was the role of S. Rowland Pierce at the AA in introducing him to the importance of Lutyens's connecting spaces – staircases, halls, etc.²² Combined with the Corbusian and Beaux-Arts notion of the *promenade architecturale*, the three-dimensional experience of moving through a building was to become ever more important to Lasdun in his post-war work, with 'processional routes' shaping the National Theatre foyers, the Royal College of Physicians and the European Investment Bank in Luxembourg.

His awakening with Coates to the potential of sectional sophistication in

Figure 13. Royal College of Physicians, 1959–63. (RIBA Library Photographs Collection).





design was also to lead to fruitful development in later work. At one level this was used in the way that Coates had used it – to achieve higher densities with a jigsaw-like ingenuity. This is clearest in the student room planning at UEA and Christ's, in which the complex interlocking floors were detailed by Ted Cullinan to pack a maximum of south-facing accommodation into a minimum rise.²³ At another level, Lasdun's skill in designing through several floors at once was to become a potent artistic tool. Although it was to be the late 1950s before this really bore fruit, the creation of his best buildings was done almost entirely through models, as drawings were inadequate to visualise the effect of complex spaces over several floors. In his later work, Lasdun would sometimes take a model outside covered in black cloth and peer in to see how the light would fall in the space when built.²⁴ In the later 1930s, however, he was still some way from this level of dedication to spatial effect. Newton Road is clearly a house designed on a drawing board: it has a flat façade, and a series of well-planned but relatively straightforward floors. It is instantly legible from four plans and one elevation, whereas to comprehend any of the major post-war designs from drawings alone takes serious time and effort.

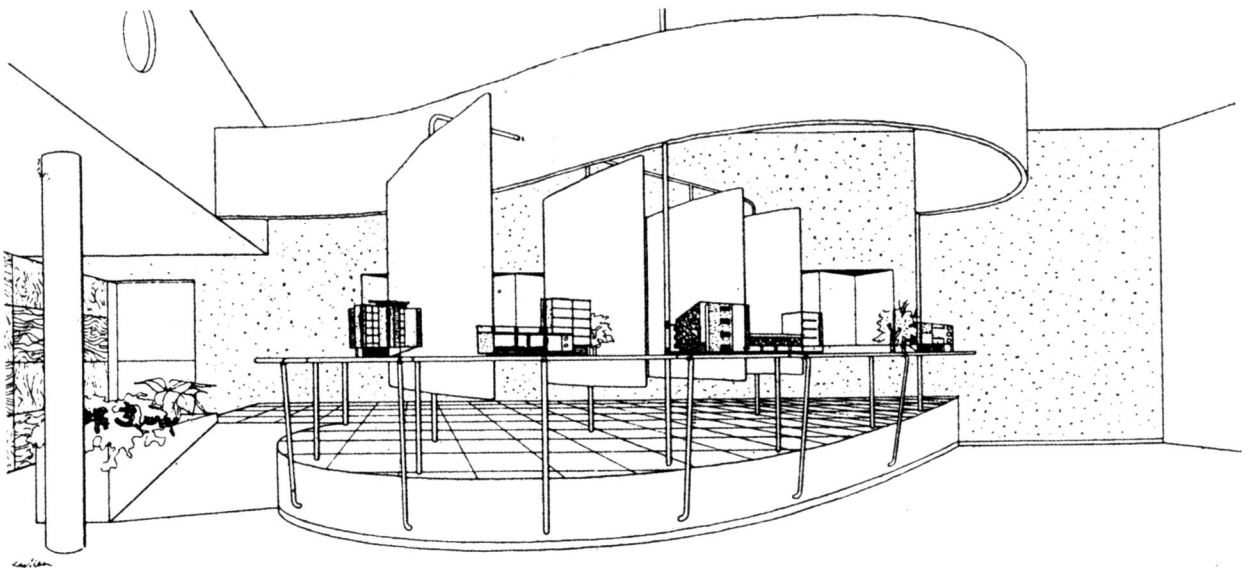
By the time he went to war, Lasdun had come a long way in a short while. He had acquired experience, ambition and skill as an architect, as well as reputation and contacts. After seven years of reflection on architecture during his army service, Lasdun returned to practice. He took a prominent role in the last years of CIAM, and gained more experience building both in London with Tecton, and in Ghana. With his experience, talent, skilful handling of committees, devotion to establishing a faithful brief through dialogue with the client, and sheer drive, he was poised for the highest success. Less than a decade older than Peter Smithson or James Stirling, and only 11 years older than Robert Venturi, he had had contact with a pre-war architectural world which for them was essentially history. When, in 1959, he established Denys Lasdun and Partners, he was for several years the most sought-after and respected architect in the country, landing within five years commissions for a new university, the Royal College of Physicians, the National Theatre, and a new college and other buildings for Cambridge, and turning down numerous other prestigious projects for lack of time. The 1930s were only the beginning for Lasdun – an education – but they were a good education.

Figure 14. National Theatre, 1967–76.
(RIBA Library Photographs Collection).

²² Lasdun talk given to Twentieth Century Society, 1999.

²³ Author's interview with Ted Cullinan, summer 2004.

²⁴ Jill Lever interview, p.56.



MARS Group exhibition 1938, drawing by Gordon Cullen