Drawing Out the Censors’ Room

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ABSTRACT

Psychoanalysts make a distinction between an actual space and the memory of a space; one’s house and the psychic construct of home. The latter, constructed from experiences of the childhood home(s), is a place that holds us, contains us, and is instrumental to functions of anchoring, identity and refueling and can be referred to as the ‘first house.’ A gap exists between the actual space and the ‘first house’ as the mind distorts the relationship between actual form and the space in one’s memory, although a childhood home may still exist; it is, at the same time, unreachably. Not only do buildings and particularly their interiors evolve over time through change in use and wear and tear but so too does the inhabitant. While there are conventions governing the drawing of the structure of a house, the topography of these other less tangible interiors is unstable to say the least and offers an absorbing but slippery territory for any attempt at representation. This paper attempts a description of a ‘first house,’ not of an individual but of an institution, the Royal College of Physicians, London, focusing in particular on a panelled interior known as the Censors’ Room. This paneling has moved with the Physicians over the years, being installed in three consecutive buildings. The proposition is that the ‘first house’ offers a useful analogy to interiority both as an intellectual construct and in the challenges it sets up in terms of representation.

INTRODUCTION

The Royal College of Physicians describes itself as a longstanding independent professional membership organisation representing over 27,000 physicians in the UK and internationally. The Grade I listed building at Regent’s Park, that houses them today, was designed for the Physicians by the architect Denys Lasdun and opened in 1964 to critical acclaim. The venerable institution, of the Royal College of Physicians is housed in a modernist masterpiece that both complements yet contrasts with the Regency Nash Terraces that surround it; the architecture, like the institution, embodying both tradition and innovation.

But this is just one version of the story. The Royal College of Physicians received its charter in 1518 from King Henry VIII and has moved location five times over its lifetime, Lasdun’s building being its fifth home. What attracted me to the case study was Lasdun’s description of a building designed from the inside out where ‘the most significant feature of the College design is the placing of its formal interior spaces; the Library, Staircase Hall, Dining Hall and the Censors’ Room.’ Before beginning to design, Lasdun ‘set about scaling the atmosphere of the college,’ observing the official functions, traditions and ceremonies. He did not start with how the building should look but rather with how it was used. The physicians recall that he never asked ‘What do you want?’ but always ‘What do you do?’ He then divided the spaces into two groups defined by use; those that were ‘fixed and unchangeable’ and contained all the ‘clutter of the ancestral memories’ and those that were susceptible to change such as offices and laboratories which he placed in structurally independent zones, so as to be altered, adapted and extended through a century of occupation.

Figure 1: Ro Spankie, New Fellows Day. The President and College Officers led by the College Bedell process from the Censors’ Room up the grand staircase to the Dorchester Library, 2012

Above

Figure 1: Ro Spankie, New Fellows Day. The President and College Officers led by the College Bedell process from the Censors’ Room up the grand staircase to the Dorchester Library, 2012

The College Officers follow
The President carrying his official silver caduceus
The College Bedell leads the procession carrying the silver-gilt College mace

17.00
Enter the Dorchester Library

16.55
Procession leaves the Censors’ Room

16.45
Gong sounds
The clobber that Lasdun mentions is not so much actual stuff but rather the tradition and ceremonies that are integral to the identity of the Royal College, in particular a ceremonial route connecting the Censors’ Room, where candidates take their viva voce before being admitted to the college, the Staircase Hall and the Library (Figure 1).

In a lecture entitled ‘The First House’ architectural theorist Mark Cousins explained that ‘first houses leave ineradicable traces of what spatial relations are, and what the body’s place in those spatial relations might be. They lay down an initial phantasy’ of what the first house is in respect to all subsequent houses.’ He suggested that this phantasy affects the arrangement of all subsequent spaces and every time someone moves ‘when they arrange the new room they manage to introduce a kind of patterned repetition which defies formal analysis… However differently the rooms are shaped and sized, however differently they have furnished it, there remains some mysterious repetition.’

In asking the Physicians what they did rather than what they wanted, Lasdun was not only exhibiting a modernist interest in function he was also attempting to separate function from form, retaining particular rituals and ceremonies while proposing a radically different architecture to house them. However, the spatial relations suggested by these rituals and ceremonies are more powerful than they might appear and thus his modernist plan, despite its seemingly open and indeterminate layout, contains the trace of a more hierarchical, classical plan and the sequence of autonomous rooms that implies. This paper suggests it is this trace, rather than the image or form of the previous homes, that is analogous to the ‘mysterious repetition’ described by Cousins.

**METHODOLOGY: DRAWING OUT**

‘It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.’ Sherlock Holmes

There was one piece of ‘clobber’ in particular that the Physicians were determined to keep: the Censors’ Room. This interior has moved three times; not fantastically in the sense of the Holy House nor programmatically in the sense one may have slept in many rooms in one’s house, nor even as a financial spolia such as the Robert Adam Room (1763) found in Richard Roger’s Lloyd’s Building (1986). This room, defined by the oak panelling that lines its interior surface (see figure 2), originates from the third of the physicians’ homes and was literally picked up and moved as part of the furniture and fittings each time the Physicians moved. In doing so, on two occasions it preceded its host building, subverting the traditional relationship between an interior and its architectural shell. Lasdun articulated the Censors’ Room significance by placing it in the glazed south facade, suspended between inside and outside, ‘seen and felt to be the unchallenged focal point of the building,’ its exterior defined by its interior.
So the investigation starts with the Censors’ Room, the most tangible clue to the Physicians’ first house. The word ‘detect’ stems from the Latin de-tegare, to unroof, and the original figure of the detective was the lame devil Asmodeus, the devil of observation, who took the roofs off houses to spy on the lives inside.\(^1\) The Censors’ Room is an autonomous room, a closed box that hides its identity until you enter it and I have chosen to approach this case study like Asmodeus, opening up the box to spy inside.

I started with conventional historical research. The Physicians own an excellent archive where the history of the College is well documented and accessible. Lasdun’s original drawings still exist in the Lasdun Archive, held at the RIBA Drawings Library. What is noteworthy is that, although the Censors’ Room is such an important reference, the panelling was never drawn. It is always referred to a specialist subcontractor through a system of notes and references, as if by already existing it does not need to be designed or drawn out. The name of the specialist subcontractor is not recorded, nor is there any reference to their drawings.

However Regent’s Park contains the original panelling, so the starting point was to measure up and draw out the room as it is seen today (Figure 3). I then researched and drew out the earlier reiterations of the room, believing the sum of these would suggest the arrangement of the ‘first house’ (Figures 6, 7 and 8). All the drawings are developed surface interiors, a technique that allows one to open up or unfold the box-like nature of the room.\(^2\) These drawings are analytical in the sense they make things visible that may not have been apparent in the narrative and text-based history/story, but they are also speculative because the lack of conclusive evidence means some things have to be estimated.

In addition to the archive, there is a less documented oral history that has grown up around the College. It should be clarified that this study is concerned as much with the story as the history. The objective is not to establish the truth as such but rather to understand why the story has grown as it has, and like the detective, consider what truths might be hidden in the fictions. In a search for an appropriate language with which to discuss interiors, the truth is not important in the sense it was to architectural modernists. Interiors have always contained secrets and gaps, veneers and concealed services, it is acceptable to lie. Likewise, the stories that have grown up around the space were constructed for a purpose and reveal as much about the Royal College of Physicians as the facts do.

While measuring the Censors’ Room, I overheard various fellows coming in with guests explaining the role of the room. Invisible until entered, and totally unexpected in its white modern shell, the guests express surprise at the room’s existence, its importance apparent in the patina and lustre of its surfaces. I overheard that the panels predate the Great Fire of London (one guest remarked that with its convector heaters, double-glazing and electric socket points, ‘it doesn’t look that old’), that they originate from the Physicians’ first house and that the great Sir Christopher Wren designed them. Although I later discovered none of this to be true, I understand these stories as important in providing authenticity through reference to notable figures and events and adding mystique to the Physicians’ ‘first house’.

**WHAT IS THE CENSORS’ ROOM?**

In architectural histories the interiors are often under described and a researcher will look to other sources. The following two descriptions use the conventions of the guidebook and the inventory as a reflection of this.

**THE GUIDEBOOK**

The word censor was the name of the Roman magistrate who was responsible for the Roman census, the Regimen Morum (the public morality), and state finances. At the Royal College of Physicians the Censor’s role was to examine prospective candidates and censure malpractice, an
The inventory of the furniture and effects

The Censors’ Room…has walls paneled ‘in the most elegant manner’ with fine Spanish oak, designed by Robert Hooke and carved by Thomas Young and William Sheffield. The panels originate from a building on Warwick Lane in the City of London constructed in 1676. In the seventeenth century, the word ‘seelinge’ was not used as it is today, but meant either the covering of the walls or ceiling of a room to make them draught-proof, or even the material used to provide such a covering, and was a luxury item. The panels should be understood as a ‘seelinge’ in this sense. In an inventory of May 1900 it is described as ‘The very valuable Antique Oak Panelling with fluted Pilasters, Carved Capitals and Frieze.’

In its present form it consists of four sections of oak panels, or wainscoting, measuring 19’6 ft x 27’1¾ ft x 15 ft high. It is constructed in paneled bays broken by recessed fluted pilasters with Corinthian capitals. In each bay hangs a portrait of a fellow censor starting with Henry VIII the founder. A plinth runs around the room at a height of 3ft, stepping forward in front of the double doors. At the time, with an important building such as this, the architect might design the chimney piece, some detail the interior elevations. The fact that the interiors were so carefully designed is unusual. The panelling should be understood as a ‘seelinge’ in this sense. In an inventory of May 1900 it is described as ‘The very valuable Antique Oak Panelling with fluted Pilasters, Carved Capitals and Frieze.’

In its present configuration after the viva the candidates were sent into the ante chamber, then handed a slip of paper which baldly said ‘yes’ or ‘no’. If ‘yes’ they became members of the College and went back into the Censors’ Room, if ‘no’ they had to exit ignominiously out of the side door.

The room has been described as the heart of the college and the inner sanctum. These metaphors underlie the importance of its role and it was this metaphorical role that Lasdun referred to as fixed and unchanged while describing more conventional architectural form as transient.

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There is also a narrow slit window at side door. At the opposite end there are three windows looking out to the herb garden. Not much was known about this building, until six of Webb’s drawings were discovered in Worcester. John Webb to build an extension containing a library, a repository for samples and rarities and a great parlour for the fellows to meet, beneath.

Not much was known about this building, until six of Webb’s drawings were discovered in Worcester College, Oxford, in 1790. These drawings are beautifully drawn out in ink and wash, describing in some detail the interior elevations. The fact that the interiors were so carefully designed is unusual. At the time, with an important building such as this, the architect might design the chimney piece, the door case and the window-surrounds and other fixed features but ‘the concept of an architect as a person of a superior intellect and status who could co-ordinate an enterprise to produce stylistic unity was still in its infancy, and this was particularly so with regard to the interior’. However, Inigo Jones had made his name as a maque and set designer at the court of Charles I and clearly understood the interior’s role as a backdrop to set the scene. The elevations show paneling and bookcases of fine books complemented by artifacts, portraits and statues, a display of knowledge, education and research.

A physicians practice was one of diagnosis based on knowledge. This was in contrast to the rival Company of Barber-Surgeons who welded the knife. The fact Harvey chose a library-cum-museum-cum-meeting room as an outward expression of the College as opposed to...
the anatomy theatre Jones had been asked to design for the Barber-Surgeons shows how interiors were used to embody the institution. The Museum Harveianum as it became known, was the first purpose-built building for the Physicians and once it became the reference point for each subsequent building.

VERSION 3: WARWICK LANE 1675 – 1825: INTERIOR AS MICRO COSM OF SOCIETY

Tragically, just ten years after it was completed the Museum Harveianum and most of its contents, including the majority of the books, were destroyed in the Great Fire of London of 1666. The Museum Harveianum was lost but the memory or phantasy that it embodied wasn’t. However, the original architect Inigo Jones was dead (1573-1652) and his assistant John Webb (1611-1672) was aging. In 1670 the College commissioned Robert Hooke to design a new building. A new site was secured a few streets north on Warwick Lane, near Newgate Prison from which many of its anatomical subjects came. 

Hooke was first and foremost a scientist, being both Curator of Experiments at the newly formed Royal Society and Professor of Geometry at Gresham College. Following the Great Fire, Hooke and his more renown colleague Christopher Wren had both been appointed City Surveyors and worked together on many projects including St Paul’s Cathedral (1677-1697) and The Monument (1673-77). Hooke’s role in these projects was that of surveyor and engineer and it is probably for this reason that for many years the Royal College of Physicians at Warwick Lane was accredited to ‘its great architect, Sir Christopher Wren.”

Hooke was, however, a fine draughtsman and when his illustrated book of observations through a microscope, Micrographia had first appeared, it had caused a sensation. Samuel Pepys records in his diary that it was ‘the most ingenious booke that ever I read in my life.’

‘The words platforme and platte were used in this period for plan, and the word model was used in the sense of design, which included certainly a plan and probably an elevation as well.’

There are no known drawings by Hooke of the Royal College of Physicians and the architectural drawings by him in RIBA Drawings Library are fine drawings done in brown ink and are curiously diagrammatic compared with the beautifully observed detailed drawings produced for Micrographia. To what extent Hooke, (who had a different sensibility to Inigo Jones), would have designed the interiors is uncertain as in the 17th century such tasks were often left to independent contractors who each had their own traditions and their own book of patterns.

Evidence that does exist shows Hooke’s design for Warwick Lane (now demolished) was more collegiate than the College’s previous two homes; the building wrapped around an enclosed courtyard that was entered from beneath an anatomy theatre. The main façade was onto this courtyard rather than to the street, its entrance leading directly into the Hall, and through to a much diminished Library. Going up the great stair one reached the first floor dominated by the Great Hall and passing through that was the Censors’ Room. On the second floor was a garret where herbs were dried for a dispensary. In the basement were the laboratory, the repository and kitchens. Accommodation for fellows formed the two side wings.

The most compelling evidence for the origin of the panels comes from a coloured print of 1808 that shows that the panelling found in the Censors’ Room today originally lined the Great Hall or grand public gallery on the first floor (Figure 5). Using the dimensions of the surviving oak panels at Regent’s Park, referring to the print and a sketch plan (c.1883) found in the archive, I drew out the developed surface interior of the Great Hall at Warwick Lane (Figure 6). Through a process of measurement, deduction and speculation one can estimate the Great Hall to have been 22ft wide x 61ft long x 15ft high.

The print is from Rudolph Ackermann’s The Microcosm of London: London in Miniature, a publication that portrayed London through the interiors of its establishments, institutions and places of entertainment. Ackermann’s proposition was that interiors could be understood as a microcosm of London and society as a whole. Key to his idea was that the illustrations would describe how the
This print connects the entrance examination to the panels, the Great Hall having the role of the Censor’s Room of today. The name is surprisingly fluid and the same room is known variously as the ‘Coenaculum, Ann 1676, The Great Room, Leaugh 1697, Great Hall, Hatton 1708.’ In 1808 Ackermann titles the print the ‘Long Gallery’ and from 1825 the panels line a room known as the Censor’s Room. There are strong echoes of the Museum Harveianum. The library was lost but the idea of a long gallery-style space, with busts of noted fellows, is resonant with it. As depicted, the Great Hall was arranged enfilade, with long windows with arched openings looking onto a garden and two fireplaces along one side. Whether this was a request from the physicians or Hooke’s possible personal knowledge of the Museum Harveianum is not known but what is clear is that by repeating the arrangement, the Physicians were also clarifying the role/layout of their institution.

**VERSION 4: PALL MALL EAST 1825 – 1964: ROMANTIC FRAGMENT**

The Royal College of Physicians remained at Warwick Lane for a hundred and fifty years, the longest it has remained anywhere. However, by the eighteenth century London had changed and polite society had moved out of the medieval city into new developments to the west. Warwick Lane had become an inconvenient location for clients and, added to this, having sold part of the garden in 1770 to the City of London, the latest Newgate Prison building was only twenty-four feet away from the back windows.

The president of the College at the time, a Sir Henry Halford, was physician to George III, George IV, William IV and young Queen Victoria. His position meant that he had the contacts to arrange the move to the fashionable West End, and a new building was commissioned on Pall Mall East, from architect Robert Smirke, a student of John Soane, who was working on the British Museum. The site was smaller than the previous one and the building Smirke designed had to play two roles, firstly to house the College and secondly (and perhaps more importantly in Smirke’s mind) to form one side of a fashionable new public square. Smirke combined the Royal College of Physicians with the Union Club, unifying the two institutions behind a single façade that formed the west side of John Nash’s newly planned Trafalgar Square.

The entrance to each institution was articulated on opposite ends of the block.

The role of the College had also changed. Smirke’s design did not include an anatomy theatre, laboratory or apothecary; these more public and practical functions were now being located in the newly formed medical teaching institutions. No longer a ‘house’, there was no courtyard and no garden. Despite these changes, the College prided itself on its traditions and on not being merely a gentleman’s club. Its neo-Hellenic Ionic colonnade (as opposed to the Roman orders preferred by Inigo Jones and Robert Hooke) expressed its more serious nature. These changes were reflected in the internal layout. The library, which had been substantially increased by this time, was on the first floor reached by a symmetrical double-stair, and formed the largest volume in the building.
There are no contemporary drawings for the Royal College of Physicians, Pall Mall East. The RIBA Drawing library holds drawings of other interiors by Robert Smirke. These are executed in pencil and wash and are concerned primarily with neoclassical surface decoration such as drapes, furnishings and fittings, wall coverings and plasterwork. Again, therefore, I drew a developed surface interior, based on measurements of the existing panels, photographs of the room at Pall Mall East, and plans found in a guidebook to the building in the Royal College of Physicians Archive.

CONCLUSION

This paper does not propose techniques such as the developed surface interior as a means to draw out interiority, rather as a means of presenting evidence of the fluidity inherent in it. The story of the panels is one of tradition and continuity, their value being placed on their authenticity and age in the history/stories of the physicians. But as the three developed surfaces reveal, the paneling has been altered and rearranged many times, unwittingly drawing out the shifting nature of a ‘first house’ (see figure 8). Lasdun, while emphasising tradition and continuity, made significant changes during the dismantling and reassembly process during the move to Regent’s Park: the fireplace went, the three doors were reduced to two and, in a poetic modernist twist, the corners of the room are cut away to form windows, perhaps a reference to Frank Lloyd Wright’s call for the destruction the box. This single act destroyed the autonomous nature of the room at its point of greatest strength, transforming the panelling from a seelinge into four freestanding planar entities. One could conclude Smirke and Lasdun cut their cloth to fit, altering the panelling to suit their purpose. But, conversely, they also cut their coat according to their cloth and the panelling dictated the size of the subsequent rooms, retaining the domestic scale and low ceiling of the original gallery. Looked at over a length of time one can see the interior of a ‘first house’ has a more symbiotic and powerful relationship to the architectural shell than conventional interiors are traditionally accredited.

Mark Cousins suggests that the phantasy of the first house affects the arrangement of all subsequent spaces leaving ‘ineradicable traces of what spatial relations are, and what the body’s place in those spatial relations might be.’ Looking back over the reiterations one can begin to see that the ‘Adjoining the library and facing eastwards across Trafalgar Square was the Censors’ Room, where officers of the college held meetings and oral examinations. Its walls are (were) panelled in the most elegant manner with fine Spanish Oak, which had been removed from Warwick Lane before the move in 1825.’

Photographs of the room reveal that in the move from Warwick Lane, the paneling had been ruthlessly cut down and the seven bays length reduced to three. Only one of the fireplaces remained and changes to the windows, dictated by the neo-Hellenic façade, meant the openings were now square rather than arched. Reflecting changes in society the room was no longer a thoroughfare. It could be entered through one of three doors: from the grand staircase, from the library or through a side door which lead to the back stairs, presumably for the discreet movement of servants and possibly for failed candidates. The height of the panelling resisted change, but the room that the panels now lined was more of a sombre and private study rather than a Great Hall or long gallery. While still the backdrop for the viva voce, on successfully passing the exam, a new fellow would go through the door to the far greater double-height space of the library with all its promise of knowledge and fellowship. This was a journey that Lasdun further dramatised with a symbolic ascension up the grand staircase to the library (Figure 1).
trace of the earlier interiors, not only to construct the physician’s first house, where the inter-relations of key elements, while built up of a number of functional systems whose inter-relations may be expressed in spatial terms, without reference, of course, to the anatomy of the brain.21 He describes this approach as the ‘topographical method.’ This paper concludes by proposing such a method for representing the Physician’s first house, where the inter-relations of key elements, while best expressed in spatial terms, function without reference to the orthographic representations of the respective architectures. Such a method makes sense of Denys Lasdun’s proposal that the ‘clobber of the ancestral memories’22 should be considered fixed and unchangeable while more conventional architectural elements are transient. Actual buildings are ephemeral, first houses last forever.

NOTES
5. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. When used in psychoanalytic writings in the English language, ‘phantasy’ (with the ‘ph’ spelling) generally refers to the unconscious psychic content of the dreams. Fantasies with an ‘f’ spelling is used to refer to more conscious psychic content such as daydreaming and products of the imagination.
12. Ibid.
13. When Lasdun trained at Architectural Association in the 1930s the curriculum was still modeled on the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris Lasdun later acknowledged that this classical training had left an impression on him.Samuel Calder Denys Lasdun's Royal college of Physicians, A Monumental Act of Faith (London Royal College of Physicians, 2008), 20.
15. The Holy House refers to the scene of the Annunciation, a house in Nazareth. It is claimed to have been miraculously transported by angels to various locations, i.e. Holy House at Walsingham in Norfolk UK and Holy House of Loreto in Italy.
16. Lasdun, “An Architect’s Approach to architecture.”
19. Due to the increase in the number of new fellows being examined the viva voce examination is no longer held in the Censors’ Room.
20. Calder,Denys Lasdun’s Royal College of Physicians; 40.
22. Ibid.