

## THE EVOLUTION OF THE BARBICAN CENTRE

When preparing this paper, it quickly became apparent that, to include details of the individual elements making up the Centre - from Concert Hall to Conservatory, from Cinema to Sculpture Court - would make the presentation unacceptably long. Each of these elements has a story of its own and, collectively, they could perhaps provide the subject of another paper on another day. Thus, with few deviations, today's offering is restricted to the overall growth from "an acorn to an oak".

Compared with the subjects of the majority of the papers prepared by fellow-historians, the Barbican Centre is a very modern topic indeed. A mere nine years after its opening, it might be thought that its history had scarcely commenced. However, its evolution from an "amenity" among the requirements laid down by the Minister of Housing in his famous letter to the Lord Mayor in 1956, through to the huge complex opened by the Queen in 1982 is, undoubtedly, a piece of history in itself.

Even earlier, in 1955, architects Chamberlin, Powell & Bon had produced a preliminary feasibility study which included the following significant paragraph:

" We have given some thought to the possibility of providing for mental recreation. The entertainment centre of London is located in the West End and, although quite accessible, the several thousand residents of the Aldersgate/Cripplegate Estate might well find the need of something more local in character and nearer their homes. The inclusion within the estate of, for instance, a concert hall, a theatre or a cinema, (note the alternative) although ideal, could not be justified commercially". After expressing the thought that such facilities might be supported by the City's non-rates funds, the paragraph concluded with a reference to "an amenity characteristic of the City and desirable for the successful development of a residential estate". The seed was sown.

The accompanying plan showed a concert hall and a theatre to the east of St. Giles Church, conveniently available to the proposed new Guildhall School of Music and Drama, placed to the south and adjacent to Monkwell Square. Access was to be at the junction of Wood Street and Fore Street, the gateway still used to reach the church and the neighbouring Girls'

School.

In September 1957, the Court decided to accept the Minister's recommendations. The Barbican Committee was formed and C.P. & B. were appointed architects in 1959, following the submission of their scheme-design and accompanying report.

The comments of the consultant surveyors concerning the proposed amenity were hardly encouraging - "This comparatively small and isolated community is insufficient to justify the capital outlay, although a hall might be provided for spasmodic uses for concerts, amateur theatricals, dances and the like."!

Over the next five years a number of modified schemes appeared. The sites of the amenity elements varied, though remaining in the vicinity of the church. Additional facilities were included, not all of which were found to be acceptable. For instance, nothing more was heard of a plan showing the semi-circular block, to the north, framing an open-air theatre with seating in arena style. On the other hand, an art-gallery, first mentioned in 1955, and a lending library with "books and gramophone records" available on loan, both received support. It is interesting that one of the earliest theatre designs showed the seating without aisles, a revolutionary concept that was to be realised in the final scheme several years later.

Perhaps the most far-fetched idea produced in this period was that the semi-circular residential block might be used for hostel accommodation for the Music School students - surely the most expensive such hostel ever contemplated!

Up to 1964 there had been two constant factors - the buildings were at ground level and access was from the Wood Street-Fore Street junction. Now there was to be a fundamental and revolutionary change in the whole concept but, before turning the page, reference should be made to two earlier decisions, for each was to have a profound effect on the Centre's later development.

A problem which beset the whole Barbican project was the four-track railway running from Moorgate to Barbican Station. The lines, with their "cut and cover" construction, entered the estate roughly at the Silk Street/Whitecross Street corner, adjacent to the proposed halls. The architects had hoped that it would be possible to cover the existing tracks completely and satisfactorily but London Transport had expressed doubts and had proposed the construction of an alternative route. In 1959, the

Corporation's consultants agreed that the cost and difficulty in covering the existing lines made such a solution impractical and, in the mid-sixties, a new route was excavated, this running to the south of the existing route. When the track was laid it was set on special insulation and the tunnel was completely sealed in order to eliminate the possibility of sound or vibration reaching the halls.

The second of these decisions was the acceptance of a proposal that pedestrian movement throughout the estate would be over high level walkways, access being by way of stairs at a number of points round the perimeter, supplemented by a few ramps and small lifts.

The complete change to the original "amenity" concept came about in a most unlikely way. In March, 1963, a Mr. Anthony Besch was asked whether he would be interested in being a candidate for the post of director of what was now being called the Guildhall Arts Centre, in keeping with its relationship to the Guildhall School. It may be assumed that he was somewhat sceptical about the whole project, for his response was an offer to consult widely and to come back with recommendations on "design, finance and administration".

The outcome, the Besch Report, was received in May of the following year. Having stated that the original scheme, whereby the hall and theatre were physically part of the School, could never have been satisfactory and that the later proposals, for larger, independent facilities, seating 1300 and 800 respectively, were inadequate, he then put forward the revolutionary ideas which were to lead to the creation of the Barbican Centre.

In brief, his proposals were:

A Concert Hall seating at least 2000 with a resident orchestra. The hall would be made available for conference use and would include space for catering, canteen, instrument lift, parking, music library and dressing-rooms.

A 1000 - 1500 seat theatre. There would be need for large areas behind and to the sides of the stage - rehearsal rooms, scenery storage space and workshops. The theatre would be the home of a major theatrical company, perhaps with shared used by opera and ballet.

In support of these major changes, first-class restaurant facilities covering all price ranges were to be added as an essential requirement and independent consultants were to be appointed to advise on the Library and Art Gallery

proposals.

In passing, the report stated that the Centre would have an advantage over the South Bank "because of the excellent parking facilities". Not everyone would agree with this optimistic forecast.

There was a positive reaction to the proposals and, in due course, reports were presented on the theatre and hall respectively. Following discussions and consultations in various directions, the Royal Shakespeare Company had been invited to become the resident company and heads of agreement had been drawn up. The Company had stated that the theatre should provide a minimum of 1400 seats.

In respect to the Concert Hall, heads of agreement had been drawn up with the London Symphony Orchestra with a view to their becoming the resident orchestra. It was pointed out that conference use of the hall would demand extra building costs for the provision of a control-room, interpretation booths, offices, ancillary meeting rooms and storage space. The architects were now instructed to start again from scratch but omitting the conference use.

The problems were enormous, primarily because the greatly increased space necessary to meet the revised requirements had to be contained within approximately the same ground area available for the earlier modest schemes.

Three years elapsed before the response from the architects was received, the preamble reading "The site is very limited and its possible elevation above ground, controlled by the already established pattern of the residential lay-out, so the amount of building which has to take place below ground-level is greater than usual" - something of an understatement.

The plans showed what was effectively a building of nine storeys and, to quote the architects, "suppressing underground all the theatre, hall and cinema". Also below ground were the vast plant-room, large foyer areas and the service road with car-parks adjoining. It is here that the importance of moving the railway becomes self-evident for without it the scheme would have been impossible. Above ground were the library, considerably larger than originally conceived on the advice of the consultant, the art-gallery on two floors, further large foyer space and, on the south face, opposite St. Giles Church, a block providing the various qualities of catering, the top class being the top-most, known as the Garden Room, as

it adjoined the conservatory which had been included to mask the theatre-fly-tower, shown rising some 60 ft. above stage level. The concert-hall's large roof area was designated as a sculpture court. An item which must not be overlooked was a pub, set in the corner of one of the foyers with access from both the foyer and the lake-side terrace which ran along the entire south front.

In all, there were to be no less than 560 rooms of all shapes and sizes, scarcely one of which would be replicated.

While the Music School was a separate project, it was to remain identified with the Centre and direct covered connection between the two buildings was planned at walkway level.

The necessary space under ground required the excavation of a hole 400 ft. by 250 ft. and 80 ft. deep. To remove the soil and progressively build the perimeter walls would have created an unacceptable degree of instability affecting the surrounding buildings already under construction. The astonishing answer to this challenge was the insertion of diaphragm walling to the complete depth before the extraction of any of the soil.

The vast, complicated scheme was now put out to tender and, when these were received, it was obvious that the cost would prove extremely high. So great was the concern, that the Court agreed that an alternative use for the site should be considered and the City Architect was instructed to prepare a scheme for a hotel and conference venue, incorporating the library and art-gallery. This drastic step was taken with the hope that an outside developer or hotel group might take much of the financial burden off the City.

Plans, with a 400 bed hotel as the central feature, were presented in June 1970 but these found little support. This digression caused considerable delay in the decision on the Arts Centre scheme and it was not until April 1971 that the report recommending its construction reached the Court. After a very long debate, the recommendation was accepted and work commenced six months later.

For a long time there was very little to see, as the diaphragm walling was inserted deeper and deeper into the ground. At last and many months behind schedule, this initial and essential task was completed and the removal of the soil - affectionately known as the dumpling - could commence. When a never ending stream of lorries had taken away the last

load, the construction work began in earnest.

Meanwhile, changes in the original plans were already taking place. Thousands more were to follow - some from choice, some for reasons of economy and many to meet the statutory requirements, requirements that seemed to vary with every new inspector, apparently an inexhaustible breed. An early major change was a reversal of the earlier decision to omit conference facilities when, in late 1971, the importance of income from this use was becoming increasingly acknowledged. This led to the reinstatement of translation booths and other support services in both the hall and the cinema.

In the course of the construction period it became more and more evident that income from conference business was a high priority, so much so, that, in 1979 the title "Barbican Centre for Arts and Conferences" was adopted and it was planned that conferences should take priority over music for nine months in each of the first three years of operation.

Meanwhile a change had occurred that was to be a very important factor in the development of conference activity, this being in the use of accommodation in the semi-circular block, now known as Frobisher Crescent, and not then part of the Centre.

This key unit in the residential lay-out was programmed as one of the last to be built. In 1975 the prospective cost of construction had risen to a level which made residential use no longer viable and an immediate stop was ordered while possible alternative uses were investigated. Commercial offices were quickly ruled out and use was restricted to education or activity connected with the Centre. Various building options were also considered, the most drastic being to limit the height to two storeys. Such a radical change would have affected the appearance of the whole estate and it was quickly rejected. However, changes to the interior to allow for alternative use were approved.

At the time, the City University was seeking accommodation for its Business School and, after lengthy negotiation, agreement was reached in 1978 for the School to occupy the top floor and half the floor below.

While this was going on, it had become increasingly evident that restricting the Conference activity to the large hall and the medium size cinema was unsatisfactory in market terms and that smaller supporting accommodation was essential. The decision was taken to meet this need by using the

bottom two floors of Frobisher Crescent for small, fully equipped conference units. The two floors were to be made into one and at each end of the crescent there would be a lecture theatre with cinema facilities. Later in 1980, there was a proposal that these might be made available for public cinema use and the necessary permissions were obtained.

There was no direct access between the Centre proper and this new annexe and a covered bridge-link was constructed between the top floor of the former and the bottom floor of the latter, the sort of arrangement that was to make the Centre's geography so confusing!

It quickly transpired that even more support facilities were required. The conference industry was facing increasing costs and competition and, in an endeavour to meet the changing situation, the promoters were demanding related exhibitions to provide financial support. The possibility of adapting the void spaces in North Barbican, originally planned as "warehouse", was investigated and, in 1980, a feasibility study was found to be acceptable. The necessary work was completed in good time and this further extension to the Centre was opened at the end of 1981 with a small charity exhibition - some months ahead of the Centre proper.

Again, there was no direct link between the main building or Frobisher Crescent and this new addition, until, in 1982, a covered corridor was constructed over the roof of the Beech Street Tunnel.

Putting conference and exhibition uses on top of those for which the Centre had been originally planned put a great strain on the supporting services. In his first annual report the Administrator felt it necessary to state: "Catering facilities, in spite of every effort to stretch them, proved more difficult to operate than originally envisaged and it became apparent that the space for these facilities had been allocated more for an Arts Centre than a conference and arts complex". One result of this situation was that the Garden Room was restricted to private use and made available whenever possible for those involved in conferences and exhibitions; its planned use as a top-class public restaurant never to be realised.

Another shortcoming was office space. The designated area provided over the Silk Street Entrance for the entire administration staff was both inadequate and inconvenient. Prior to this permanent accommodation becoming available, temporary use was made of three flats in the adjacent Cromwell Tower and it was while there that further permanent accommodation became an urgent requirement. Initially, this was found by

obtaining change to office use of the shops planned on the nearby walkway.

The total space was still insufficient and eyes were now turned to Frobisher Crescent. Over the next few years expanding departments, particularly those connected with conferences and exhibitions, moved into the superior accommodation which this building provided. They were joined by the L.S.O., whose original space had proved quite unsuitable, and, ultimately, almost all the remaining rooms in the building were taken up. It is difficult to imagine how the conference and office problems would have been solved without the fortuitous availability of the crescent block.

An amusing consequence of abandoning the residential use was the arrival on the market of 96 purpose-made bath-room and toilet suites. The baths were never sold.

The final expansion was to provide additional parking space. It seems that the optimistic assumption that parking would not be a problem was based, unbelievably, on the concept that all cars would be left "on street" but the 1968 plans had, in fact, provided for about 300 bays below ground, spread over three separate parks, access to No.1 being by the Silk Street entrance and to Nos. 2 and 3 from the service road.

Following years of unsuccessful effort to find further space, in 1978, almost in desperation a deal was struck with the Residential Committee whereby Car Park 1 was taken by the residents in exchange for an area on two levels adjoining the west side of the Centre and duly designated Car Parks 4 and 5. Direct pedestrian access was subsequently provided by means of a narrow breach in the concrete lining of the service road. This exchange, producing a net gain of some 200 spaces, led to one of the Centre's enduring mysteries, for patrons continue to be bewildered by the non-existence of Car Park 1.

An endless list of difficulties, including strikes, faults, variations and statutory requirements, had led to a progressive postponement of the Centre's opening. As late as 1978 it had been the hope that this would take place in 1980 but nearly two further years passed before the great occasion arrived and, even then, with parts of the building incomplete. In August 1981, nature had done its best to cause yet more delay when a most unusual morning deluge caused the sewers to "back up" and water - dirty water - burst through a number of unsecured inspection covers. Only the fact that the plant-room equipment stood on substantial plinths prevented a disaster and there were anxious hours before the machinery was declared free of



irreparable damage. Elsewhere, a considerable area of the wood block flooring in the concert hall and the stage piano-lift were among the casualties. Happily the threatened health hazard, which could have been extremely serious, did not materialise.

A royal "spanner in the works" appeared when Buckingham Palace advised that the Queen could not be present on the date arranged for the opening. Hearts sank, for the detailed arrangements were already well advanced but, happily, almost all those involved in the programme, from artistes to ambassadors, were able to make the change to the preceding night - March 3rd, 1982.

Incidentally, the pub, christened "The Prompt Corner", never opened. Just one month prior to the Centre's opening it was turned into a royal retiring-room and has been used for this purpose and various forms of private hospitality ever since.

While all the changes and developments were taking place inside, approach from the outside was going through its own evolution.

The site of the Centre was just about the last that anyone would have chosen to build such a vast public complex but this had been effectively pre-determined when the architects selected the position of the original "amenity". Approach at ground level from the north, the east, including Moorgate Station, and the south was largely tortuous and generally unsatisfactory. From the west there was the dead straight Beech Street but adequate footways had not been provided.

The routes to be followed by vehicles did not seem to worry the architects, whose 1968 report stated, simply, "all road approach is below". Their solution for pedestrians was equally uncomplicated, "all pedestrian approach will be via the podium" - the Latin name given to the previously agreed walkway system and not a word commonly in use in the average vocabulary.

The bland assumption that pedestrians would follow this dictat led to their principal entrance being provided in the south-east corner of the building, giving immediate access to the lifts and stairs serving all floors, also the information desk, a large cloak-room and the box-office. Very deliberately, the library was sited immediated opposite the entry point.

This entrance was reached fairly easily from Moorgate Station, where there was an escalator to the walkway from the newly built station serving three

different lines. The architects were so wedded to the walkway theory that their design had included an escalator from Silk Street to carry coach passengers and others up to the same point of entry. In the event, the escalator was scrapped as one of the economies.

There were two main reasons why the theory did not work in practice. From the very first days that the public were admitted - they came in their tens of thousands - the large majority found their way to the one set of doors directly accessible from the street. These obscure doors were situated down the slope at the exit end of the service road and they had never been designed for such a use. For example, the lifts and stairs were some 70 yards and two flights of stairs away. Quite separate and completely hidden from the road there was a narrow, winding stairway to the walkway. The whole thing was a mess!

The second reason resulted from a move that had taken place many years earlier, when London Transport had been persuaded to put Barbican on the map by changing the name of Aldersgate Station. As a consequence, most travellers by Underground concluded that Barbican was the most convenient station when, apart from being less well served than Moorgate, it was remote from the planned entry point at the other side of the building. The approach offered the choice of a tortuous route on the walkway or a walk along the narrow footways of Beech Street, both preceded by crossing two busy roads.

The upshot was that the majority of pedestrians - and they far exceeded those coming by car - arrived at either a "side door" or a "back door", compounding the confusion already being caused by the inadequate and, sometimes, misleading direction signs and the absence of clearly defined and welcoming entry points at either level.

It is of interest that, within months of the opening, the obscure and unsatisfactory point of entry in Silk Street was already being described as the "main entrance" and efforts were being made to make it look the part.

As to road traffic, the predicted volume had been enormous and plans were prepared accordingly, not the least being a long one-way trek round the perimeter of south Barbican. In the event, the numbers of vehicles never approached the predictions and there has rarely been any troublesome congestion on-street or the dangerous over-crowding that had been anticipated in the service road. In short, the potential chaos never materialised.

Although the subject provided material for cartoonists and comedians for many a day, the difficulty of finding the Centre, finding a way round it and finding the way out again has never kept the public away. Despite all the problems and gloomy predictions, many millions of people have so far managed to find their way in - and out.

It would be safe to say that not one of them could possibly imagine that the whole vast complex has evolved from thought being given by an architect to the possibility of providing mental recreation for the Barbican residents. One can only hope that they appreciate the outcome!

There is a very brief post-script:

Only last week the Barbican Centre Committee gave its first consideration to a number of proposals for substantial structural and access improvements. Evolution does not cease!

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