

## NEW GRAFTED ON THE OLD (FOUR ADDITIONS TO OXFORD COLLEGES)

A condensed travel guide may tell you baldly that Oxford is a town in the South Midlands of England with a population of 105,000, on the confluence of the Thames and the Cherwell rivers, 100 kilometres north west of London, the seat of a University and of a Bishop, and that it makes cars, agricultural implements, books and marmalade.

Earlier in the century it was much smaller—a compact market and university town. Then came the explosion—the founding of a new Institution, the huge motor car factories in the City's outskirts at Cowley—England's Detroit—ugly and with sprawling but prosperous suburbs, forcing a new vigour into what was sometimes an introspective and snobbish enclave, but forcing too its shiny products into and through the middle of the city with a roar and a smell which insult and obscure one of the most beautiful man-made monuments in the world. "The two old road bridges", in the words of that biographer of cities, James Morris, "are nozzles through which, like a reluctant dentifrice, the impetus of the Midlands must be squeezed." Soon, we are told, all will be better and the traffic will be pushed away. Meanwhile we must penetrate behind those palace-bordered motor arteries to realize that the marvels of Oxford and of its University have survived.

Nobody appears to know when this University was born but it was certainly there before the end of the twelfth century. By the end of the next there were 1,500 students living in lodgings and communal houses known as Halls which in turn developed into the now-famous Colleges—autonomous bodies with their own incomes derived largely from land-ownership, choosing their own instructors and students, developing their own scholastic and architectural traditions and owing only a tenuous and ill-defined allegiance to the central body of the University. In terms of building they express themselves collectively as one of the greatest and most consistent monuments to Medieval and Renaissance architecture.

For the architect of to-day it is daunting to have to graft anything on to this monument. He must start with humility by loving and respecting it; then he should know why he does so. Why is it a delight to walk in, work in and live in? It may be a "monument" but is seldom monumental in scale. On the contrary its excitement lies, not in the "grand manner" of a Rome or a Leningrad, even of a Cambridge, but in that domestic intimacy and intricacy in the treatment of the buildings themselves and in the way in which they enclose space which English builders, eschewing the dramatic, seem

to have been able to understand and express. A narrow lane hemmed in by the rough stone walls which separate one College from another may lead into an even narrower arched passage in which a sunlit lawn of brilliant green is framed—the core of a quadrangle, a mere 20 or 30 metres square, bordered by mellow walls pierced by two or three tiers of windows; then at the far side another archway revealing perhaps something grander, a spire or a pinnacled chapel—an ever present mingling of the element of excitement and surprise with a feeling of fitness for purpose, of buildings enclosing spaces which today, as much as when they were first built, offer peace without isolation, a sense of living and learning in a community.

To be loved and respected too are the ingredients from which this place is made, the smoothly-worked yellowish-grey limestone from the nearby quarries or the whiter, fossil-rich Portland stone from further afield, rough local rubble stone for humbler structures like garden walls and roofs of stone, lead and slate. We are conscious that time seems to have given them the extra dimension of history, that erosion of centuries of rain, sun and dirt and of generations of students who have pushed past and rubbed against them.

We might feel that a love affair with such pervading beauty must inhibit to-day's architect when he is called upon to interfere with something so fragile and vulnerable; that it must be more difficult for him to design a new building and wedge it into the centre of a city like Oxford than to place it, an isolated piece of sculpture, on a dull site surrounded by other dull sites. Yet this may not be so. Sympathy with the scale and character of a beautiful and historic scene must act as an inspiration, yet it properly narrows the range of the architect's decisions. In the end site, surroundings and client's needs seem to act upon one another to tell him what the inevitable design must be. For him it is at first almost relaxing to feel released from the seemingly infinite and thus bewildering choices offered by featureless surroundings, until he reminds himself that wrong decisions leading to a bad or indifferent building will be more devastating in the middle of Oxford than, for example, in the middle of London's already devastated Oxford Street.

This paper discusses briefly four Oxford buildings for which Powell and Moya were the architects—three are residential, mainly for students—for Brasenose College, for Christ Church and for Corpus Christi College—and the fourth, a Picture Gallery, also for Christ Church. They are, fortunately I believe, not so much isolated

new structures, imposing their bulk on the surroundings, as extensions of the existing pattern, squeezing into what was hitherto a College's back-yard, its workshops, bicycle sheds or its 19th-century bath-house and lavatories.

Brasenose had such a back-yard in the shape of a squashed "L", the upright of which was 20 metres square in which the students' many bicycles were scattered, and the base about 35 metres long and only 10 metres wide filled with decomposing lavatories and baths for which at last another home had been found. The surrounding buildings, stolidly planted at the site's boundaries, presented that profusion of styles which so often enlivens the Oxford scene—stately 17th-Century Classical in stone, 18th-Century domestic Georgian, stuccoed, late 19th-Century mock Gothic in stone again and the styleless vernacular of great rough stone walls. The College's requirements, typical and rational for such a site, were simple—fit in, squeeze in, as many rooms as you can without being anti-social about it. To us, the problem appeared to be not that of stylistic imitation, too often a colourless and defeatist attitude, shared by few of our pre-19th-century predecessors, but that of scale and of responding with sympathy and imagination to the eccentric opportunities the site offered—a constricted and oblique view of a spire, of a

churchyard, of the next door College's garden, of a spiky, romantic skyline. The materials, the scale and the texture of the neighbouring buildings should be respected, yet their styles not parodied.

Standard solutions for empty sites, born of rules on how to design student accommodation, are not enough. The result must also be a reflection of the spirit of the place, of the genius loci. At Brasenose the intimate scale of Oxford's quadrangles and alleyways was easier to respect and perpetuate than might have been the character of a more grandiose and formal setting. In the upright of the "L", where the taller of the new buildings reaches up to Oxford's rooftops, the tradition of an intricate and exciting roofscape with its domes, spires, pinnacles, towers and chimneys is carried on as a fragmented series of terraces and sloping roofs (Fig. 1). Below them the walls, tilted on plan, allow windows to steal slanting views of a minute churchyard, instead of staring across at other windows. In the base of the "L" a labyrinth of rooms in low pavilions, with their cobble-covered roofs and their lawns, appear not so much as recognizable buildings as an extension to a network of stone-walled alleyways and secret gardens (Fig. 2). The new walls are clad in Portland stone, rather white at first but already mellowing, the sloping roofs are lead-covered, the windows have dark metal

Fig. 1. — Brasenose College, new building, 1964. New rooms for students squeezed into the College's old back-yard.

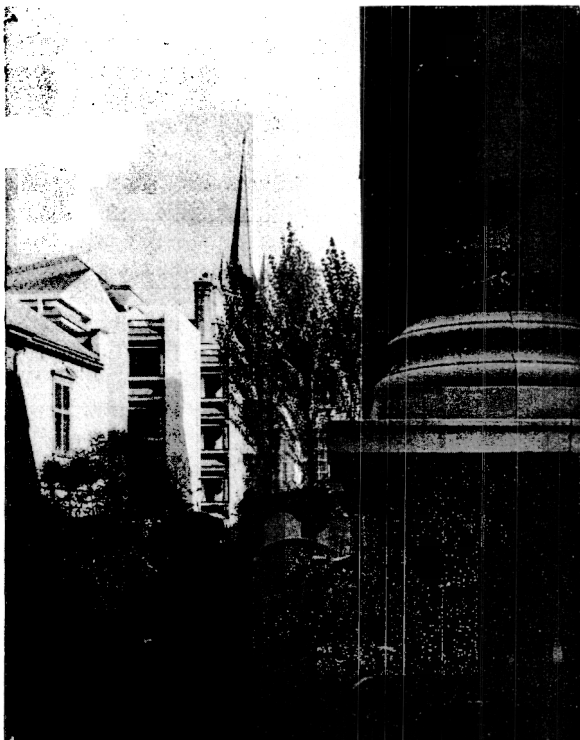


Fig. 2. — Brasenose College, new building. Looking down from the taller block on to the pavilions—a network of stone-walled alleyways and secret gardens.

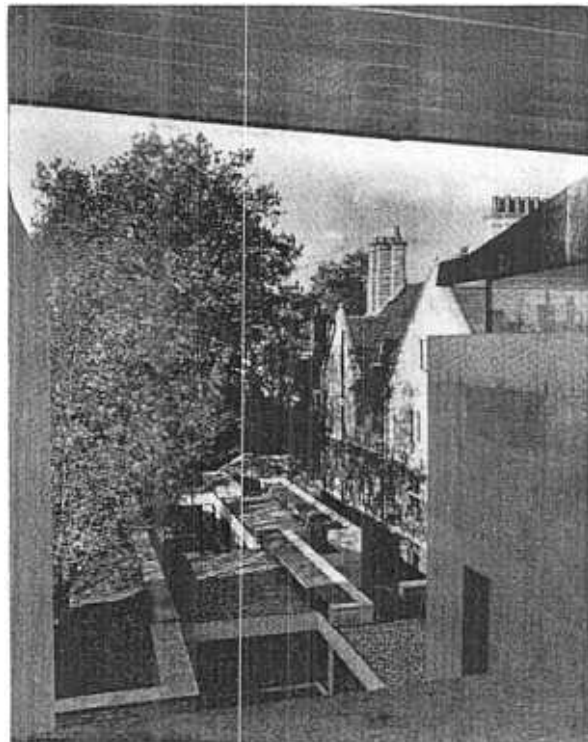


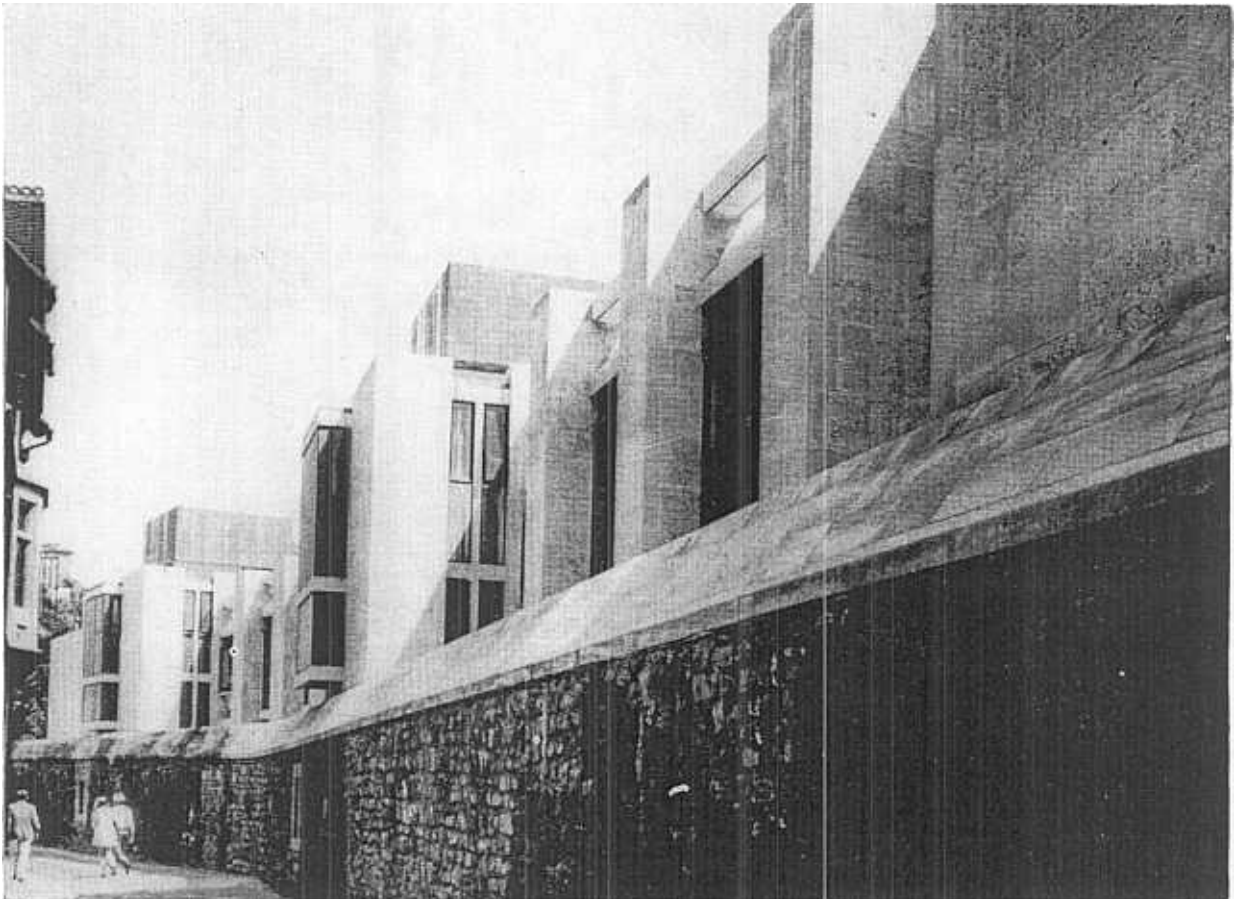


Fig. 3. — Christ Church, aerial view. Tom Quad in foreground. Blue Boar Quad in centre.

frames and those walls which carry only their own weight are lead-covered, like the roofs. But the stone predominates. Most of to-day's materials, from bricks to steel and plastics, are inevitably highly standardised and repetitive and the architect's duty must often be to accept their limitations and use them sensibly and sensitively. Stone can support a different way of thinking. Each one must in any event be individually cut and worked and there is therefore little incentive to design within a module of standard sized and regular shaped blocks. The stones can thus be sized, shaped, battered or chamfered to respond to the physical and visual needs of the wall they create.

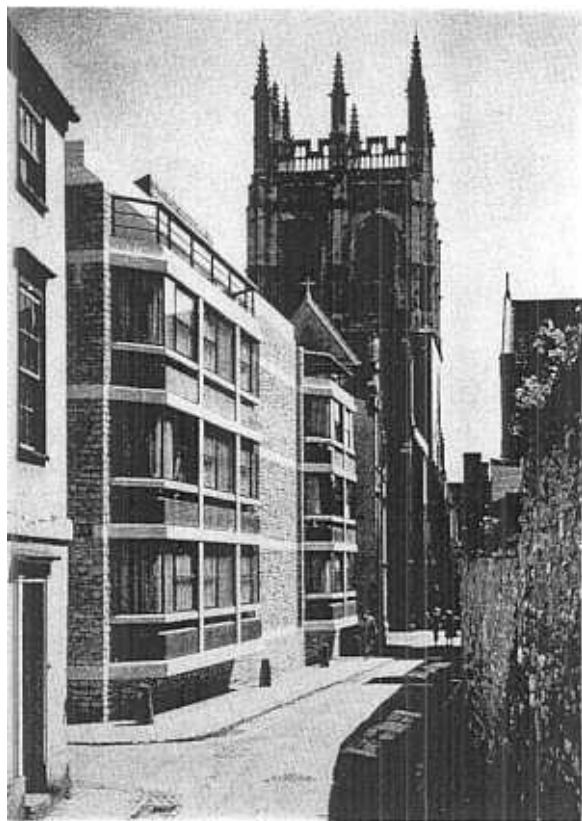
Many of Brasenose's problems in 1961 and some of the answers to them repeated themselves three years later at Christ Church where a new building was wanted for students and graduates. Christ Church is the largest of the Colleges. With its great quadrangle, called

Fig. 4. Christ Church, Blue Boar Building, 1964. The old street wall becomes a podium for new students' rooms.



Tom Quad, its late 17th-Century Tom Tower inside it, by Sir Christopher Wren, its Cathedral and its Library, it has a grander, more formal scale than that of the other Colleges; yet it too has its more intimate corners and it too had a spare back-yard—its old car park—no building on, fronting on to a curving narrow street, called Blue Boar Lane, which forms one of the frontiers of the College and from which the new building derived its name (Fig. 3). Here was a problem of linking and harmonizing with two scales in the town pattern, on the one side the scale of a narrow street flanked by low buildings and a wall; on the other, the College's side, that created by taller ranges of buildings with, free-standing in their midst, the intrusion, surprising in most places outside Oxford, of a building in the local farmhouse style, the College's 17th-century Brewhouse. Within the College's precincts, Blue Boar was designed to extend Christ Church's procession of quadrangles linked together at their corners by narrow archways. On the other side, however, the street takes over. Pressures from the traffic planners were resisted, luckily with success, to pull down the old rough stone wall to give road-hungry cars a street widening, mis-named in the technical jargon of modern English "improvement".

Fig. 5. — Corpus Christi College, Magpie Lane Building, 1969. A new building fitted into a typical Oxford lane.



Instead, the wall remained imperforate and was used as a podium for a low superstructure of north-facing staircases, landings and bathrooms following its curve but broken up into small "towers", a kind of castellated coping (Fig. 4). Here is a setting of street, not College architecture, yet with a hint of collegiate life behind—a common event in Oxford and an event repeated three street corners away with the 1969 Corpus Christi College building (Fig. 5); again, the steep perspective of a narrow street, again a rough stone wall which here guards the opposite side of the lane, the frontier of the next door College. Students' rooms had to be inserted as a new element into a group of pleasant domestic buildings with short and varying frontages. An unbroken linear façade, 30 metres long, would have set up a horizontal emphasis alien to the narrow street fronts and contrasting styles. The new block was therefore broken up in its length into three sections, the central presenting a blank wall, masking bathrooms, pantries and lavatories, in rough stone like that of the wall opposite; the two flanking sections made up of three tiers of study-bedrooms in glass, concrete and lead, their windows thrusting themselves forward and becoming part of the street, looking up and down the lane as well as across it.

Both the Corpus Christi and the Christ Church buildings are reached not from the street outside but, College-fashion, from the inside, through another building. The trick of surprise and change of scale is played again; at Christ Church's Blue Boar, some steps down and a hole cut through a ground floor reveal first the green carpet of impeccably kept Oxford lawns, then a new quadrangle, a new episode in the journey through the College (fig. 6).

The use of the word "journey" is deliberate. The inner core of the University gives only seldom the sensation of architectural vistas statically observed. You must move through what is the history of the College and of its architecture. The story, the journey, unfolds its secrets in a series of scenes (the Quadrangles) linked by preludes or epilogues (the archways and lanes).

There may too be a sudden diversion, a more extreme surprise in that journey—a handsome but discreet door in Christ Church's great quadrangle, Tom Quad, opens into no study nor lecture room but bursts into the nave of the great church which serves both as the College's Chapel and Oxford's Cathedral and, two quadrangles away from this which must be the world's most reticent West Front, a still smaller door leads to the College's new Picture Gallery.

Christ Church has a magnificent collection of pictures and drawings, mostly Italian, and a new gallery was needed for them. Part of a fine private garden of tremendous trees, crumbling walls and lawns belonging to the Dean of the College and overlooked by the great North flank of the Cathedral was the only site free. It appeared to offer no means of entry to the public—worses till, the crude invasion of a gallery might

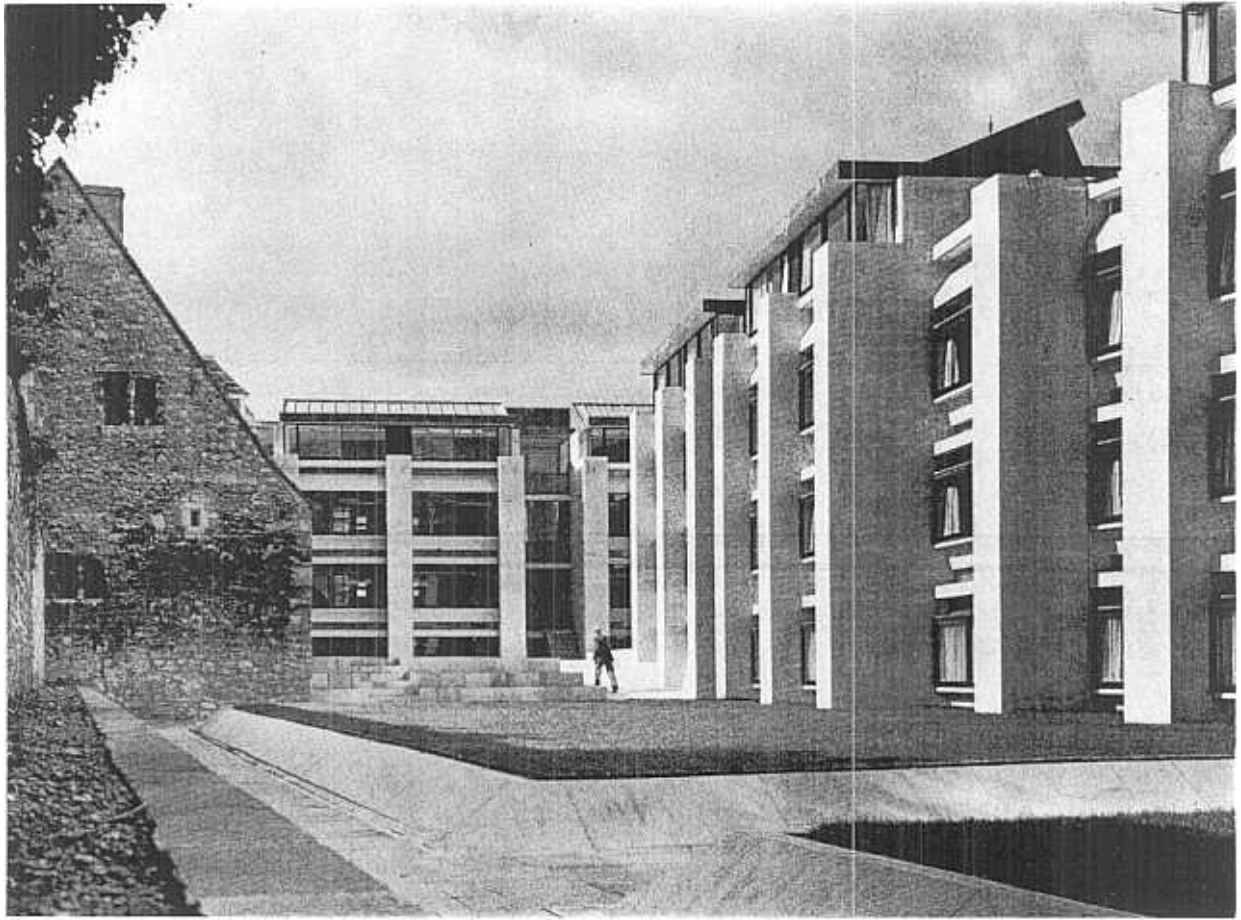


Fig. 6. — Christ Church, Blue Boar Building, forming with the 17th century Brewhouse a new college quadrangle. The Portland stone is used not as a veneer but as weightbearing masonry, suppressing the dominance of window over wall.

ruin it. A route, an approach by stealth, had to be found through another building—in the quadrangle named Canterbury. The insignificant door gives on to a downward flight of steps and a tunnel burrows its way through the basement, suddenly revealing a glassed-in cloister around a lawn and the interior of the main Gallery itself, half-sunk into the Dean's garden, white, top-lit and of stone, plaster, concrete and wood.

Outside and unseen by the public the lowered Gallery is a rough stone wall no higher than the garden walls which surround it. A series of sunken, ramped and elevated lawns, weaving their way around and over the Gallery, give the Dean all his garden back, a garden still dedicated to its lawns, walls and trees, still cathedral dominated (Fig. 7).

Resuming the journey through Christ Church's Blue Boar, such reticence or camouflage, such "non-building", could hardly be the solution for the new quadrangles, where room had to be found for 61 students and 8 graduates. The surroundings here are more massive than on the street side and this aspect of

the new building aims too to respond to this change of scale. To this end, the ground was lowered by more than a metre to its original, pre-18th century level and, on top, what is apparently an extra storey was added—a storey recessed on the other side and lost in the perspective of the narrow street.

The compulsion to retain the old Brewhouse within this quadrangle was welcome and the configuration of the new ranges of rooms allowed it to assume a pivotal position, breaking the large enclosed space into two arms of an "L", a constant confrontation of old and new (Fig. 6). In such a confrontation the new, we felt, should reject that ethereal, mirror-like quality associated with much modern building in favour of the substantial look which robustly-designed masonry can give. The stone was used, therefore, not as a veneer, but generously as a weight-bearing material in buttresses and piers expressing the noise-resisting walls between each room but suppressing the dominance of window over wall. This suppression may prevent too that meanness of scale resulting from present-day pressures



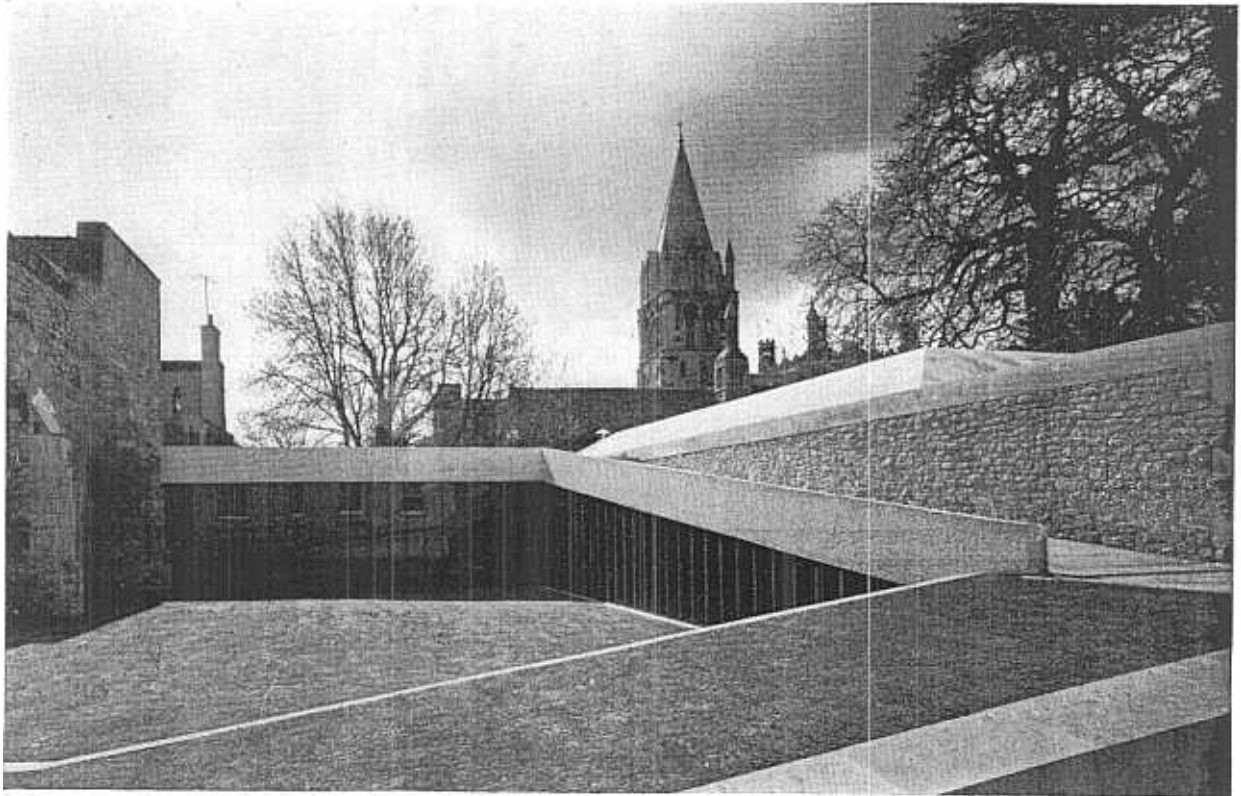
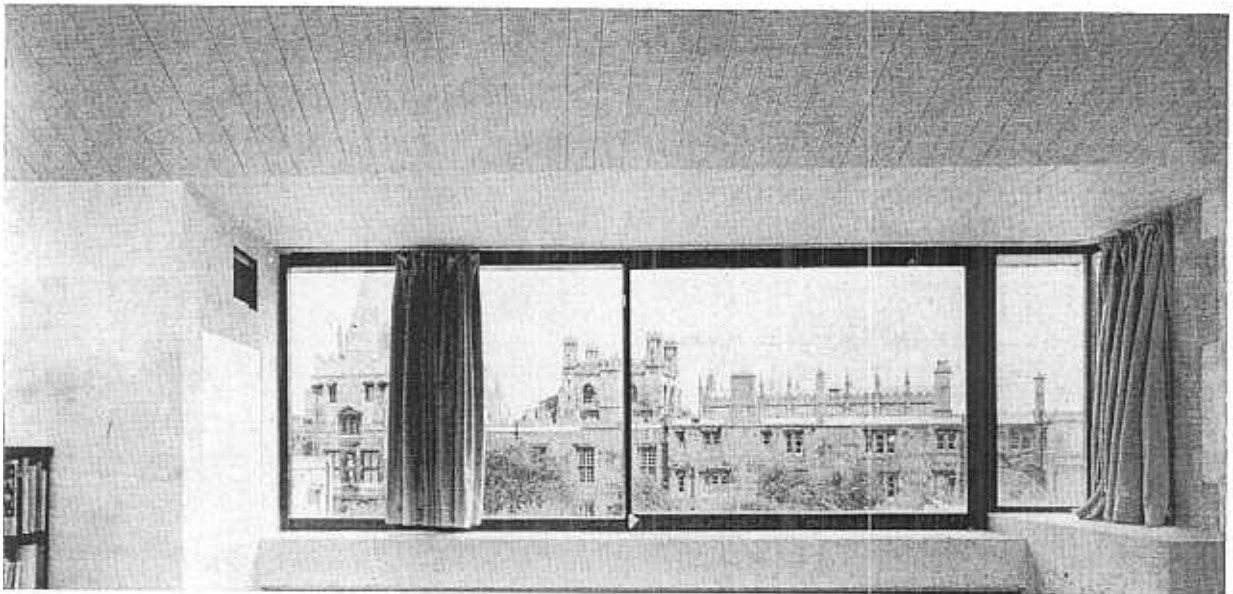


Fig. 7. — Christ Church, Picture Gallery. The cloistered enclosure and the ramped and flat roofs of the Gallery become part of the Dean's walled-in garden.

Fig. 8. — Christ Church, Blue Boar Building. The students' rooms look into the old College, not on to the town street. Large windows, but designed to give a feeling of privacy and enclosure.



for low cost and high density of living where two lofty storeys of an earlier age may equal three of today's. The prevailing element—the stone wall—still permits generous windows and, seen from inside, protects them and frames the view. Here is indeed a conscious departure from tradition, for one of the most inspiring powers which modern techniques have offered to the architect is the ability to create large windows. You cannot easily enlarge a mean hole in a wall but, with a generous window, you can screen unwanted areas of glass with louvres, blinds or curtains or, pushing them aside, magnify the space inside by extending it outwards, creating a setting where the transparent wall and its window seat, its transome and the buttresses outside, all treated literally in depth to give a feeling of privacy and protection, allow you at one moment to retreat from the outside world, at the next to become part of it (Fig. 8). Then, leaving the shelter of the

room and ending this journey, you may walk up to reach, not the traditional attic, but a rooftop of terraces and belvederes—a new panorama of one of the world's great skylines, the roofs and towers and spires of Oxford.

Philip POWELL

- Fig. 1. — Collège Brasenose, nouveau bâtiment, 1964.*  
*Fig. 2. — Collège Brasenose, nouveau bâtiment, les toits.*  
*Fig. 3. — Christ Church, vue aérienne.*  
*Fig. 4. — Christ Church, bâtiment Blue Boar, 1964.*  
*Fig. 5. — Collège Corpus Christi, bâtiment Magpie Lane, 1969.*  
*Fig. 6. — Christ Church, bâtiment Blue Boar, la cour avec la brasserie.*  
*Fig. 7. — Christ Church, galerie de peinture.*  
*Fig. 8. — Christ Church, bâtiment Blue Boar, chambre d'étudiant.*