

**Accommodating tradition and ritual in the architecture:  
‘The Royal College of Physicians’ by architect Denys Lasdun**



## **Introduction**

In the year 1958, the architect Denys Lasdun was handed with the critical task of radically transforming a 500-year-old institution into a modern building. The architect Lasdun was commissioned for building the Royal College of Physicians which was known to be a traditional and conservative institution (Imani and Imani, 2021). The RCP was in search of an architect who would build a modern structure while embedding the history of the college throughout which would prominently represent the future of medicine for the years to come. The architect Lasdun accepted this incredible yet challenging task of establishing a modern building for a traditional heritage institution that will harmonize with Nash's terraces over its surroundings.

The Lasdun's approach to building this college was one of the most controversial and intriguing designs that translates a modern architecture. Denis Lasdun believed that the architecture of the Royal College of Physicians would be undeniably unique making an amalgamation of the modernist design of architects, creative solutions of engineers and embedding the touch of tradition and ritual defining the zeitgeist of 500 years ago (Laszlo and Riley, 2020). Hence, Lasdun focused on accommodating the tradition and ritual in the architecture of the Royal College of Physicians by showing controversial and intriguing designs. Opened in the year 1964, the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) is widely famous as a modernist masterpiece with the skilful integration of century-old traditions in it.

**Figure (1): Modernist Masterpiece of Royal College of Physicians**



*Ref: The Guardian (2014)*

The architect of the Royal College of Physicians, Denys Lasdun have not asked the opinion of their physicians, rather they formed a partnership that has created one of the most important post-war building of London for the Physicians located at the Regent's Park (Mindham, 2021). This building is graded number 1 Listed masterpiece. This piece of architecture by Lasdun is an amalgamation of contemporary influence with the tradition, rituals and empathy of the architect towards the inhabitants of RCP (Scotti, Tedesco and Sbattella, 2021). This report has encapsulated the structures, materials, and spaces in correspondence programs, and rituals in the designing of rooms by following a social and cultural phenomenon of architecture.

### **Cultural contexts (zeitgeist) of a particular time on the Architecture of RCP**

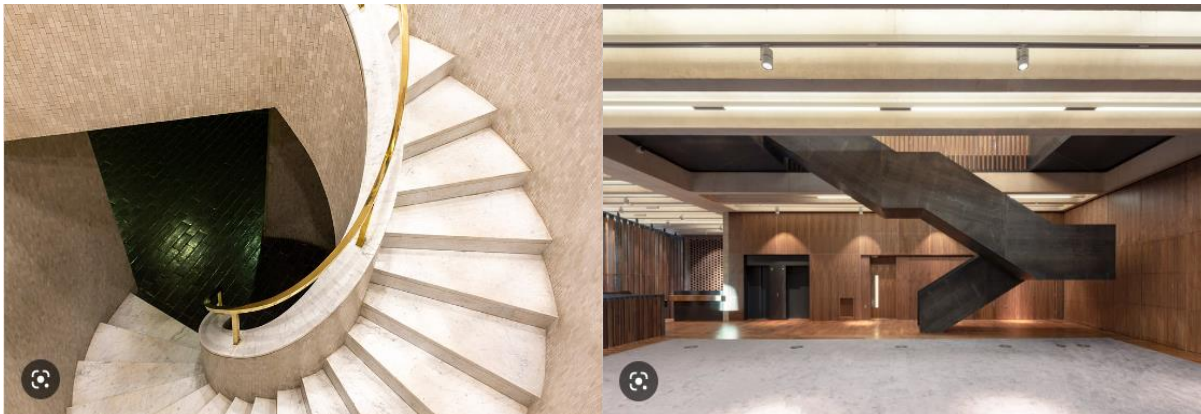
According to Crawford-Brown (2019), tradition refers to the handing over of inherited customs and beliefs from one generation to another. In the context of architecture, the traditional and cultural contexts are often given a physical manifestation in the form of ornamentation and

spatial arrangement. On the contrary, Rapoport (2019) opines that as the cultural and social conditions of society transform, so does its tradition, hence bringing subsequent transformation in the architecture. The shift in traditions is subjective and persistent to change. With the evolution of modernization, the inherent traditions and lifestyles of society have drastically transformed. Hence, to capture the traditions at the brink of its extinction, society focuses on moulding the traditions and culture in contemporary art and architecture.

The design of the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) brings together the architecture and the architect that encompasses his career who was perhaps known for the perennially controversial architecture of the Royal National Theatre as the radical practice to attain international influence and acclaim. Lasdun was strongly influenced by Le Corbusier who was a major continental master of British Architects (Clarke, 2022). Such admiration continued after World War II, as Lasdun exchanged the idea of purist geometries of International style that briefly embraced the sculpturing of massing, weathered concrete surfaces which is associated with the culture of Brutalism which is also inspired by the late work of Le Corbusier. However, Lasdun's work rejected the idea of urbanism and considered it flawed by refusing to acknowledge the architecture that forges necessary links with the traditions and raised critique which was complemented by his concept of urban landscape stating that a building's fluid and layered interiors must connect with the space of city mostly through the platforms or "Strate". Consequently, Lasdun designed the Royal College of Physicians by incorporating travertine, mosaic, lush granite, terrazzo, textured concrete and a rich tint of engineering brick adding vibrant colour and sensuality to the materials (Evans, 2015). This architectural approach binds together the cultural and historical context of tradition in the post-war work following the

articulation of asymmetrical composition of urban and rural concepts in the twentieth-century building. Lasdun's design traits had shifted to the dynamic, boldly massed and faceted shapes that can conceptually and visually link his work with the general postwar developments in the European Culture and explicitly cherish the English baroque traditions embodied in his architecture (Walker, 2013). As the Royal College of Physicians is renowned as the most admired building of Lasdun won him the Trustees RIBA medal in 1992 and a Grade 1 listing from the English Heritage as a signage for the best modern and cultural architecture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Figure (2): Modern and Cultural Architecture**



*Ref: The Guardian (2014)*

Lasdun was known to be an ardent modernist while he developed a solid professional modernist worldview which he translated into the design principles of the projects he worked on. Lasdun has defined his own theoretical constructs of architecture by stating that buildings must speak for themselves and are motivated by ideas (Laszlo and Riley, 2020). In turn, the buildings impose may impose their own laws to which the ideas must align appropriately. However, the ideas typically do not constitute any systematic philosophy, rather they may feel certain deep maxims



providing a foundation on which the architectural practices of modern building practices may rest. Consequently, in designing the Royal College of Physicians, Lasdun has subscribed to the maxims that have significantly converged towards the formation of a vision and espoused theory of actions in an over-arching sense to illuminate the task of contemporary architecture blend with the cultural and tradition in the design and structure (Clarke, 2022). He ensured that a design solution must maintain the harmonious at every scale, a combination of disparate elements that showcase the unity.

**Figure (3): Heritage Portraits in RCP**



*Ref: The Guardian (2014)*

In order to embed its cultural aspects in the design of the building, the RCP has preserved heritage portraits and paintings, medical artefacts, traditional ceremonials and documents throughout the previous centuries.

### **Principles and historical period behind the design**

The architecture of the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) by Denys Lasdun was designed in a modernist style with a multitude of interior elements that pay homage to the deep history embellished with classical paintings and furnishings. The building has a clear reflection of the previous RCP alumni paving the way through its architecture (Lewis, 2008). Lasdun's creativity has made a complex blend of art and engineering that elegantly encloses the ancient traditions and ceremonial history within a white-tiled casket of glass and concrete.

**Figure (4): Complex blend of art and engineering, traditions and ceremonial history**



*Ref: The Guardian (2014)*

**Figure (5): White-Tiled casket of glass and concrete**



*Ref: The Guardian (2014)*

According to the architectural theory of Realism, the approach to architecture by British Architects has aimed at emphasizing the real nature of building structures in the process of designing those (Tsiambaos, 2019). On the assessment of Royal College of Physicians (RCP) buildings, it has been reported as the most imaginative and striking work post-World War II architecture. Drawing on the theory of Postmodernism in architecture, it was underpinned by the reactionary movement that has encouraged opposition to the grounded mechanism of modern architecture. It has challenged the idea of realism which is adjunct to the social progress and rational design of the real nature of building structures (Hill, 2022). Hence, the theory of populism is well fitted in this context which is based on the architectural aesthetics characterized by bricolage and historical motifs in order to accommodate the tradition and ritual in the architecture of the Royal College of Physicians. Referring to the theory of socialism in architecture that indicates architecture is man-built structures, hence it is one of the spatiotemporal organizational forms of social processes (Malcovati, 2014). In close alignment



with the theory of socialism in architecture, Lasdun has continued his commitment towards socially oriented projects (Lash, 2016). For example, Lasdun used 14-storey cluster blocks in Bethnal Green, London which was referred to as user-friendly and innovative, even though the poor maintenance has a significant negative impact on its sustenance. Similarly, in the Royal College of Physicians (RCP), two separate sets of two-storey apartments are connected by bridges to the central core service on each of the double-height levels.

***Figure (6): The Royal College of Physicians – just what the doctors ordered***



*Ref: The Guardian (2014)*

Such asymmetrically varied orientation of each maisonette will afford privacy, the setbacks of individual facades are made from concrete frames whereas the spatial system provides the sun relief and balconies.

*Figure (7): The Royal College of Physicians – just what the doctors ordered*



*Ref: The Guardian (2014)*

This form of college is characterized by Cubism and empathy in its building structure. Empathy in architecture refers to the approach in which the designer places himself in the role of future dweller to test the validity of ideas through their imaginative exchange of personalities and roles (Torres et al 2019). Lasdun's architecture of RCP has emphasized its empathetic capacity to feel and understand how the inhabitants of this college will experience from their frame of reference by placing themselves on their position (Evans et al 2013). Hence, in this architecture, he integrated the sense of safety, inclusion and approachability of the building to engage with the inhabitants of it. In reference to emotional empathy amongst human beings, there are varied forms of empathy displayed within the architecture that tends to vary based on the culture,

context, and climate of the building that can blend with the people using the space (Zingoni, 2019). Compassionate empathy is rendered by actions that invoke the investment and opinions of the people for the greater efficiency of planning strategies and the development of urban public places such as the Royal College of Physicians (Brinkschulte et al 2021). The RCP building holds a great level of sentimental value, for example, the large windows on either side of the censor rooms have connected the College with the external world without any interruption to the outside views. This effect is aimed to maintain the contact of the people (inhabitants) with the nature and city beyond, instead of considering it as a separate entity. This is an empathetic approach by Lasdun where he made the effort to connect the inhabitants of the RCP building with the climate, nature and the external city with which the people are emotionally connected (Heylighen and Dong, 2019). In contrast, Torres et al (2019) opined that certain buildings generate opposite feelings where the inhabitants are exposed to a scenario where there they have to change their way of life and activities in order to adapt to the building. Lasdun ensured to neglect this feeling by designing architecture that has been the explicit reflection of the sentiment and emotions of the future inhabitants. On the contrary, Lasdun's empathy towards his clients was expressed by focusing on their needs as one of the key considerations of developing this building.

### **Western ideologies of the twentieth century**

Reportedly, RCP has been discovered as the most extraordinary art and building of modern culture. It exhibits the unique marking of visionary architecture by Denys Lasdun in his modernist masterpiece of Royal College of Physicians has turned 50 years in 2023 (Evans et al 2013). On the celebration of its centenary, the RCP remains to be a remarkable exhibition of

iconic architecture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that closely incorporates tradition and ritual owing to the theory of population in its architectural aesthetics.

Modernist buildings explore geometry in a way that shows more concern for the elements of the structure instead of focusing on the beauty of its design (Luxon, 2015). However, in the next half of the twentieth century, during the phase when Britain was rebuilt after World War II, this building of RCP evolved as a masterpiece of modernist architecture. The key theme that emerges out of RCP is the “urban landscape” in which the architecture is observed as the extension of landscape or city, connecting bridges, terraces and platforms thus capturing the zeitgeist of changing societies (Evans et al 2013). The RCP building has embedded the "whole of human experience" by emphasizing on relationships while creating a sense of participation and belongingness.

**Figure (8): Connecting bridge of RCP**



*Ref: The Guardian (2014)*



*Ref: The Guardian (2014)*

The display provides details on the development of the magnificent design of RCP by Lasdun that has projected him into the major league of architecture. Lasdun has drawn on the archive materials by the meticulous assembling of the secret memos, collection of letters, odd satirical Christmas cards, sketches, and draft plans that enable the visitors to observe how the architecture has emerged as one of the most beguiling buildings of London (Wilkinson, 2019). Lasdun has integrated impressive arrays of rarely-seen architectural models central to its architecture. For example, Lasdun's work of Keeling House flats, the University of London and Cambridge, the Royal National Theatre, and Bethnal green has a significant combination of historical and cultural contexts accommodating tradition into the design of twentieth-century buildings (Lewis,



2008). The largest of all his creations is the monumental scheme of the combined Opera House complex and National Theatre on the Capital Southbank.

The Royal College of Physicians is considered amongst the most brilliantly designed modern buildings in London providing signage and improved access, alongside the program of architectural events and tours. In criticism, Kelly (2023) argues that Lasdun's approach to the RCP architecture exemplifies his famous remark that states "our job is to deliver the client on time and cost, not emphasizing on what he wants because, rather what he never dreamt he wanted, hence when he gets it, he would realize it as something he wanted to attain out of his surprise".

Referring to the challenges, the requisition of distinctive private and public rooms, in which some of which will serve ceremonial and professional purposes, was found to be the main challenge of this architecture. Lasdun revealed the complications while clarifying the integration of essential designs to accommodate the intricate and multipurpose institutional programs (Calder, 2007). Simultaneously, Lasdun gave an effort to respect and colour and scale of the neighbouring buildings and maintain a vibrant interplay of nature in his architecture.

The design of the RCP building was established by setting the main building at the right angles to the line of Regent's Park terrace (Calder, 2008). This configuration is bounded on the fourth side by the wall of lecture theatres which creates a quadrangular collegiate medical zone. The most significant feature of College design is placed at the formal interior spaces such as Library, Dining Hall, Staircase, and Censors Room. The building has reinforced concrete structures with upper floors and columns designed with ivory-coloured vitreous mosaic (Lewis, 2008). Such colours of the materials have been selected to harmonize the building with the cream-painted

stucco and slate roofs of the Nash terrace. The internal structure of the RCP characterizes cubism which is exemplified by the designs of the Censor Room which has a focal position in the design of the College (Imani and Imani, 2021). The route starting from the Censors Room moves up to the stairs, from there to the Library mirrors, that has its progression to the Physician's room through the college, upward past the portraits of previous eminent physicians to the College pinnacle.

**Figure (9): The symbolic Censor Room**



*Ref: The Guardian (2014)*

The new extension comprises the lecture theatre, meeting room, dining facilities, and modern displays. The portrait wall was breached to construct the extension which has proven a major feat

of the engineering structure (Lewis, 2008). The extension placed in the central axis within the censor room, gives an overall symmetry to the college.

**Figure (10): The Dining Room**



*Ref: The Guardian (2014)*

The meeting room was renamed the censor room which was changed in the interests of democracy. This room was conceived as the contemporary transformation of a small-scale chapter house (Evans et al 2013). It has been envisaged as the place where great and lively discussion can take place, important decisions are made that help the College to grow and move ahead.

**Figure (11): Censor Room in RCP**



*Ref: The Guardian (2014)*

The new Lecture Theatre accommodates approximately 140 people which steeply makes a seating arrangement to ensure an excellent view for all the audience (Calder, 2008). The acoustics allow the sound to sufficiently travel without any aid of additional microphones, even though the audio facilities are adequately available.



**Figure (12): Lecture Theatre**



*Ref: The Guardian (2014)*

The Staircase Hall was designed to make it a lively place as people leave the extension and enter the main building which creates an exciting environment that matches up with the spirit of this college.



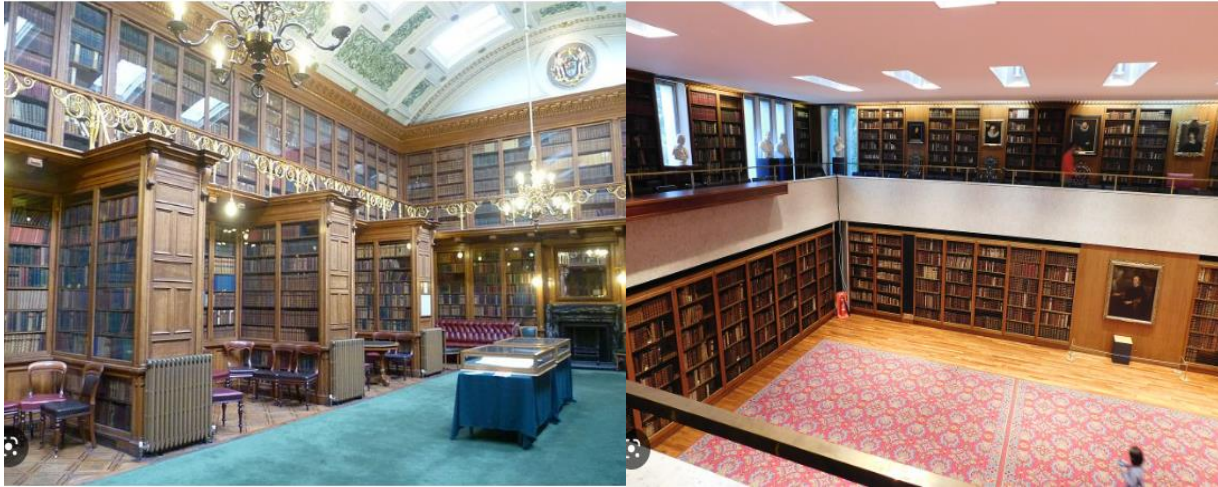
**Figure (13): Staircase Hall**



*Ref: The Guardian (2014)*

The main entrance to the building will be to the West that faces Regent's Park (Calder, 2007). The cars will approach directly from the St.Andrews place to the lecture hall, the frontage of RCP appears as the high-raked garden wall leading to the entrance. The College library is designed as planned on the upper floors immediately over the main entrance that can be reached by the main staircase rising from a spacious hall at the centre of this building.

**Figure (14): College Library**



*Ref: The Guardian (2014)*

The portraits from the college collection are displayed across the walls of galleries surrounding the staircase. The bookcases around the Library walls contain the collection of important historical books that were published by the College after the Great fire in London.

**Figure (15): Book Library of Royal College of Physicians**



*Ref: The Guardian (2014)*

RCP is a masterpiece built out of a combination of modernist and traditional architecture while manifesting a statement of miracles established with steel and concrete. The building is grounded on the three front pillars which are grouped at the centre with unsupported corners and narrow windows that tend towards the edges (Imani and Imani, 2021). The building has a hidden entrance behind its pillars which is mostly ignored. The building is clad with a white mosaic which gives it a temple-like appearance, such as Lasdun himself praising the RCP owing to its long history (Evans et al 2013). The dark blue-grey bricks are in 37 different shapes that give a representation of the upside-down image of the surrounding terraces, which gives a reflection that the RCP building is a “Picasso representation of Nash’s terrace”

## **Conclusion**

From this study, it can be concluded that the magnificent architecture of the Royal College of Physicians is ranked as the 1 listed masterpiece by Denys Lasdun. This piece of architecture has suitably merged modernist architecture with the 20<sup>th</sup>-century interiors that create a contemporary yet traditional identity for the Royal College of Physicians. This building has evolved as the statement of modern architecture which was developed using steel and concrete while defying physics with its intriguing advanced geometry and meticulously calculated engineering and luxury finish of white marble interiors and porcelain mosaic outside. On the contrary, Denis Lasdun has made remarkable expressions of empathy towards his clients with an intensive effort to satisfy their needs in the RCP building. The architecture of the RCP building is the perfect merge point of tradition and modernism where the building not only emerge as a collection of some rooms, but rather it portrays the identity and culture of its inhabitants.



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