

# The Royal Festival Hall : New Spaces

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Some years ago, I had the good luck to be asked by the publisher Maritz Vandenberg to study this building. After many vicissitudes, it resulted in publication of two long, overlapping, studies. So there's much I could say, - and it won't be easy to stick today to my allotted half hour!<sup>1</sup>

I stuck my neck out a bit - particularly about the acoustics - in the essay that became a special issue of *The Architects' Journal*<sup>2</sup>, and this generated much interesting correspondence. But even to talk about the design process - in other words, inevitably, to try to uncover who did what - raised the continued ire of Robert Matthew's heirs and retainers; among whom were included *The Architects' Journal's* columnist Astragal (in handwriting suspiciously like that of its one great post-war editor Colin Boyne), all somehow believing that Matthew's architectural genius produced the Festival Hall's form. But why? Why such protest when they are so obviously wrong?

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The cultural formation of architectural history is always rich in myth. The Festival Hall, as the beacon of post-war English modernism, cannot escape being tightly caught up in these.

Some of the myths were well known at the time - the hatred of the Carnivores (as Michael Frayn famously put it<sup>3</sup>) for the Herbivores' Festival of Britain and all that it stood for. Thus carnivorous Churchill, on regaining power late in 1951, destroyed the Festival with a vengeance and ruthlessness unmatched by the efforts of the Luftwaffe - as the Prince of Wales would say - leaving this great civic location in the centre of our capital city to become, for a generation, largely bomb-site, and part colonised as headquarters of private capital.

(I should note: My obvious sub-text is a concern that this building resists its transformation from our active, social instrument into a comfortable 'heritage' - a process already begun, I guess, with its Grade One listing. And that if this process is unavoidable, then my concern is that, at least, the myths don't overwhelm - not only our understanding of the building to date - but also our ability, into the future with the skill of new designers, to keep it alive and active.)

Anyway, the Hall remained among the ruins. Thirty-five years later, even Thatcher's vindictive venom could only take it from the people of London who had built it, scratching the proud GLC/LCC badge off the pediment facade.

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<sup>1</sup> This was a 30 minute talk, in a symposium at the RFH, 28 October 1995 and about its past, present and future. Trevor Dannatt and Bill Allen looked back to the late 1940s, Bob Maxwell to the late 1950s, and Richard Rogers and Graham Morrison forward to the end of the century. The chair was Gavin Stamp for The Twentieth Century Society.

<sup>2</sup> *The Architects' Journal*, 9 October 1991, p. 22-47; also leading article p. 5, comments p. 6-7, cantilevered stair working detail p. 51-53

<sup>3</sup> Michael Frayn, 'Festival', in Sissons and French (editors), *The Age of Austerity 1945-51*, Penguin, 1964

And that reminds us importantly that, if there is one hero in this story, one enabler of this building, it is the London County Council - which designed and built this hall for Londoners.

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In many ways the Festival Hall is untypical of post-war architecture; but in one way it is the epitome - it marked a major shift in the story of building production: nationally and locally, in research teams and in building projects, the state was now not just the client or the patron, but the provider; the direct employer of leading architects.

At the time when Phaidon published my other study of the Hall<sup>4</sup>, it was their rather bizarre house style to name the building's designer rather than the book's author on the cover. Phaidon suggested "Sir Leslie Martin", or then, when I explained the team effort (as discussed in the book ), "Sir Leslie Martin and associates".

Martin was most put out. I returned to the publisher with my own suggestion: "The London County Council" - which of course, in the days of designer labels (to sell books about buildings as much as anything else), would never do. Eventually, a compromise was reached, the book's cover stating: "London County Council, Leslie Martin and Peter Moro." Sir Leslie remained unhappy, saying first that it should be the author's book, just as it was the architects' building; but second that, if any architects were named on the cover, the list must include the LCC architect himself, Robert Matthew. But it was too late.

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The Royal Festival Hall was not just commissioned but *designed* by the LCC itself. It was to be a touchstone of public office architecture. Certainly not faceless; but equally certainly a team effort, the co-operative work of a public body.

In this, as in so much else, the Festival Hall was coming from quite a different place than the picturesque festival of Hugh Casson and the Herbivores which surrounded it with spindly grace; humane and informal charms.

But in much of the myth, all festival and concert hall have been rolled together, all seen as 'searching for the fool's gold of the international style,' as our Prince puts it.

Mythmaking tends to obscure vision.

'In 1951... monstrous constructions appeared on the south bank of the Thames...but there was little popular exuberance among the straitened people.' Such is the carnivorous myth, here in Evelyn Waugh's grumpy pessimism and nostalgia for pre-war social certainties<sup>5</sup>. To them Modernism, particularised in the Festival Hall, not only had democratic social goals (thus verging on bolshevism), but was betraying our national identity. It was new.

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<sup>4</sup> John McKean, *Royal Festival Hall*, Phaidon, in the *Architecture in Detail* series, London, 1992

<sup>5</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Unconditional Surrender*, 1961 (reissued, Little Brown & Co, 2012)

'The most brutal aspect of modernist ideology was its attempt to sever man from the traditional forms of the past. A fiction was invented of a modern man who needed a new architecture with no resonances of the wisdom of the past, no references to anything that had defined the familiar historical environment.' David Watkin - in many ways a fine scholar of the past, but when dealing with his own lifetime a cunning mythmaker - continues: 'Karl Marx's vision of a technological future lies at the centre of the Modern Movement.'<sup>6</sup>

If this is weak history (about Marx, to go no further) it is easy myth (about architecture as a battle of styles, English nationalism, and so on). But this central power of technology was continually stressed by the Festival Hall's designers - though it was to enable designers to achieve their desired goals, not to set them. And not just by designers, of course; the young President of the Board of Trade in 1951 (Harold Wilson), noted how the hall 'symbolises the application of scientific principles to building with a purpose.'<sup>7</sup>

What the designers didn't talk about was what they were really doing: their great artistic concept of new social spaces. And this I want to pause on briefly; looking at the foyer, the auditorium and at their connection.

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The strength of Leslie Martin and Peter Moro's conception of architecture was its nourishment in a far richer culture of Modernism than just science and technology. They stood apart from the picturesque empiricists on one side, (whose masterpiece might be said to be Basil Spence's Coventry Cathedral), as they did from those safe behind the emblem of science on the other (whose masterpiece might be said to be the generation of prefabricated schools which became the envy of the world). Martin and Moro were, naturally, keen to work alongside genuine scientific expertise; but from a position which had been clearly articulated by Leslie Martin before the war: 'it is simply this: that science can produce the facts but that art must show us the way in which they can be used.'<sup>8</sup>

As one of the first native-born Englishmen to argue for an architecture based neither on style nor on arid functionalism, Martin joined the European intellectual tradition conspicuously brought to this island by Berthold Lubetkin. Lubetkin, describing architecture as 'an art based in reason', simply said that 'art shows us what we want and science enables us to get it.' These depictions of Lubetkin's approach - so close to Martin's - I have from Peter Moro, his assistant in the '30s and thereafter lifelong friend.

Let us now pause on the foyer.

By 1948 - 9, when Martin and Moro were working on the hall, Lubetkin (we learn from John Allen's biography<sup>9</sup>) was deeply concerned with the architecture of 'those moments at which the private individual becomes a public citizen.'

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<sup>6</sup> David Watkin, from his essay on Robert Adam in *Classical Design in the Late Twentieth Century*, Winchester, 1990, p. 12

<sup>7</sup> Harold Wilson, 'Introduction' to *Festival of Britain 1951*, Association of Consulting Engineers, London, 1951

<sup>8</sup> J. Leslie Martin variously; see his 'A Note on Science and Art', *Architects' Yearbook Two* (AYB2,) London, 1947; 'Architecture and the Painter', *Focus* No 3, London, 1939; and, first, Martin with Ben Nicholson and Naum Gabo (editors), *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art*, London 1937

<sup>9</sup> John Allen, *Berthold Lubetkin*, London, 1992, p. 379

Now, as I said, the Festival Hall's designers (rather like many fine designers - like the late James Stirling) rarely talk of their work other than in more prosaic terms. But the mood is clear. And the Royal Festival Hall foyers offer precisely a locus for such action as Lubetkin describes. Here is a place to see and be seen; but it is very different from the traditional spectacle of privilege and prestige, with each part of the hierarchy in its precise place - such as at the Paris Opéra. Charles Garnier's highly decorated machine, the Paris Opéra, had a physical role as tightly defined as the social strata of its users. Going to the Opéra was a play with only one script.

The Festival Hall is not a building for social exclusivity - indeed it is difficult to play-act here, to retreat easily into a Glyndebourne evening suit. Here the main foyer, reached from different levels and directions, is an informal, non-directional, landscape studded with its many slender trees supporting the forest canopy of the auditorium above. It suggests random movement and invites casual entry. In the open foyer, there is no escape from the democratic gaze, the mutual exchange of seeing; seeing which - as Adrian Forty subtly argued in a recent essay<sup>10</sup> - is not subjugated to some other purpose of the building owner - such as (in a shopping mall) to consume, or (in a station concourse) to travel - places where, therefore, we see others and are seen by them as less than complete.

At the Festival Hall, in Forty's words, 'the owner of the building is none other than the subject. Whoever you are, once you enter through the original main entrance at ground level, and stand with the space unfolding in front of you, beside you and above you, the volume is yours and yours alone. Of course exactly the same experience occurs for everyone who enters the building, and so the result is the sense of an equal right to the possession of the building, and an absence of any commanding authority.'

Despite the 1945 Labour manifesto declaring 'its ultimate aim..[as]..the establishment of the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain,' and Labour's overwhelming endorsement at the election, in the years up to 1951 the state inevitably allowed inequalities of wealth and income to continue. The important change for popular and national self-esteem was the new government's undertaking to assure the 'equal social worth' of all its citizens. To contain this in the face of the obvious, actual social difference, architecture - the setting in which life is lived - is uniquely important. And the Festival Hall, through the means of its new space, does just this.

If the National Health Service, inaugurated in July 1948 was the triumph of the new society; the spaces of this Hall, finally launched four weeks later are its strongest memorial.

Which is not to say that its design was a bolt from the blue. Though, once again, the Hall's architects would talk of 'programme' but never of 'precedent', not only was the 'egg-in-the-box' the obvious basic *parti*, there was already a real European tradition of such spaces for the new social democracy - in the humane final scheme for Göteborg's law court extension in Sweden, in the planning of the anti-hierarchical Århus town hall in Denmark, in the Aalto library in Viipuri (now Vyborg) or, closer to home, in the 'foyer' of the Lubetkin & Tecton health centre in Finsbury.

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<sup>10</sup> Adrian Forty, 'Architecture in Post War Britain', *Architectural History* 38, 1995; the direct quotation is from p. 31

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And now, second, to the space of the concert hall. Forty's essay which I quoted just now, suggests that there being an auditorium within this building is largely irrelevant; it might identically be the foyer to some other great public building. I find that - quite a common point of view among many critics, who often seem to have much better developed vision than hearing - quite wrong. The spatial form of the auditorium is the other pole of this essentially dynamic duality - and they are bound together by the linking promenades and stairs.

Just as, they said, the foyer's covering the site and being entered on opposite sides and on different levels was determined by site constraints and by the brief, so, they said, the hall was determined by acoustic science. That's what they said, and I'll leave Richard Cowell and Bill Allen to introduce acoustics shortly.

What interests me here is again simply to note the new space. It is formed by the central aim of providing an equally fine acoustic experience from every seat. It is so obvious as to be unspoken platitude that any concert hall's seat pricing will reflect acoustic quality. But at the Festival Hall, science allowed the designer to become benevolent democratizer, in contrast to an architecture of the social market-place.

At the Covent Garden opera, say, which is the nearest musical auditorium to here, each seat simply has the quality reflected in its price. The market forces 'even it all out', as they say. So no problem. The common sense of the 1990s.

At the Festival Hall, in 1951, they were able, through acoustic design, seriously to consider having all seats at the one ticket price. That they eventually decided against, is more to do with music also being a visual experience than with variation of sound round the hall. I well remember my first experience of this hall; coming as an architecture student on my first day trip to London, we got the only available seats, right at the back at the top; I could barely make out the distant performers in Dvorak's New World Symphony, but my astonishment at the clarity of the sound of the cor anglais soloist remains with me.

I've no space to make the argument that it is impossible to achieve a rich reverberance in a hall which could seat over 3000. That had been their brief and - interestingly, perhaps amazingly - no-one questioned it. Did this link with their sense for democracy and against elitism? Mozart in a Mozart-sized hall would reek of privilege; while a Mozart symphony performed by a classical band of around 35 musicians - like the London Mozart Players for whom this hall was ideal - playing to 3,000, all hearing with sparkling clarity - that would be a social advance. It had never been achieved, anywhere, before. Democratic aims in auditorium design are seen in quite a different way a decade later in Scharoun's slightly smaller Philharmonie in Berlin. There, and at many more recent halls, like Herzberger's in Utrecht, the democratic intent is to do with place and not just sound. There is a sense of local domain - a series of plateaux for 100 to 200 listeners, and audience engagement through visual proximity. Here, you are in a vast congregation, with no spatial elements to group around. But musicians (Pierre Boulez, to take one example) note that the different democratic intent here provides a much more uniformly good clarity and balance of sound than in Scharoun's Berlin hall. It only neglects the fact that these are not the sole criteria for quality in enjoying live music: even more essential, as we might stress today, is a sense of enveloping 'closeness' - both aural and, I would argue, visual.

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Finally, linking foyer and hall is a most subtle procession which, even though we are in the building, is worth articulating in words.

On our arrival, as we know, there was no threshold to invite us with a monumental flourish, no porte-cochere and its flight of steps, no portico to filter the superior few towards the grandeur within and thence, via the ritual of cloaks, foyers, bars, finally to the performance. The traditional threshold - with its additional role of sentry box to intimidate the uninitiated - is replaced by the great doorstep of the first floor foyer floor.

From the lowest entrance, the whole stair platform - in virtuosic reinforced concrete - floats upwards, unsupported, to the ballroom; and then back up to the main foyer floor. As we climb, the great auditorium hangs above, its keel at the tightest point coming very close, its 10,000 tonnes - the weight of a battleship - hovering only 3 metres above our heads. Here the whole sloping soffit, when approached from the original entrance below, appears to float in a bright glowing light.

On the main foyer, under the auditorium's hull, this forest floor is paved in two tones of marble, hard and clean, as a public forum. Emerging from under its shelter into the lighter peripheral areas, surfaces become gentler under foot, being laid in timber strip, (within a marble grid reflecting the structure farther above). When we start to climb higher, the promenade tightens as we more purposefully approach the auditorium; these main stairs seem to fold the slab up into a cantilevered half-landing - open to the river view - and back again to the next level, this 'wishbone' form letting the stair hang entirely free.

The treads, stepping up from the timber foyer, are of grey-green carpet, with parallel white stripes as it rises to the half-landing, where the pattern loosens into a less directional wave form. The handrail which, as we climb, is grooved at top and nearside for fingers and thumb, at the landing imperceptibly smooths out to become a surface for leaning on rather than for gripping. Then as we turn to rise again, the handrail tenses its shape in expectation of our grip, and the carpet pattern aligns itself again, its parallel lines leading us up to the next promenade where it opens once more into the even, non-directional pattern.

The whole journey, from the multipolar, public throng below to auditorium above, is unbroken - which we recognise only subliminally, like those utterly novel long 'takes' in the Italian neo-realist movies of the time - no partition comes between the bustle below and the quiet which is achieved above, as the carpets thicken, ceilings increasingly absorb, and in luxurious quiet we enter the auditorium.

It is deeply interior. Colours are rich and dark, warm and intimate, as sensual as 1950 would allow an interior which, even if not depicted as womb-like, is, after all, penetrated between the blood-red, soft-leather, padded doors.

The vastness of this space and its carefully modulated lighting remove any sense of claustrophobia within. Through the canopy of floating, wavy clouds sparkles a constellation of stars; there is focused brilliance on the orchestra and a variable background glow in the hall. The boxes - perhaps the building's most literal nod

towards Lubetkin and Tecton - are, as Corbusier said, 'a good joke'. The whole is a remarkable unity.

How this was achieved? This - perhaps its key achievement - is a brilliant balance of 'form' and 'effect', (to use the critical terminology of that hero of mine as well as of this morning's chairman, Alexander Thomson). The Festival Hall's enduring strength rests in an unusual and dynamic unity between the central concept and its detailed working out, at all scales. Round its strong formal armature, set in place by Leslie Martin, the architectural effect is built up by myriad design gestures and details of real quality. The carpet pattern, Robin Day's ply chair, light fittings, the profile of the bar, the walnut screen which frames boxes and organ in the auditorium - all share a family resemblance. It is echoed at varying scales in the splay geometry seen in both plan and section, the diagonal with rounded angle and columns within the frame. There is the insistent separation of layer from layer, the 'flash-gap' articulation, of columns whose sheathing stops just short of floor or ceiling. I could go on.

But all this effect is more than just a decorative idiom of the late 1940s. At its heart, it is always working to clarify the underlying formal order; and often quite rhetorically: Slabs run round columns without touching them. Columns support slightly separated platforms held on beams between. Derbyshire fossil-bed limestone clads the auditorium, whether indoors or out.

Leslie Martin, a dozen years ago, wrote about the 'glass of fashion' and the 'mould of form' in architecture, asserting that the latter is 'deeper and more lasting.'<sup>11</sup> At the height of post-modernism and the decade of 'designer-signature' architecture, his response was understandable. But in seeming to set up an antipathy between 'form' and 'effect', he falls into one of Modernism's deepest traps - yet one from which this building shows such a model escape.

For what gives the Royal Festival Hall classic quality is its demonstration of how the formal ideas are but a dry, intellectual skeleton until fleshed out by equally rigorous exploitation of the actual possibilities, within the available means. It is, inevitably, embodied in the language of the moment. But the skill of Moro and his team, far from providing a dress of fashion, is as much of the building's essence as is the formal control of Martin.

These two lead designers had not met before working on this project, and they never worked together again - moving apart to develop fine, important, and very different careers. Did Martin's later work ever achieve this essential charm, this articulation of surface, this appeal to the body - so well again? Did Moro's later work ever achieve this controlling intellectual idea, this cerebral appeal so clearly? Through good luck - and (but that's another story) against the most appalling odds - this essential dialectic, which all great architecture holds in balance, between form and effect, is in fine equilibrium at this building we are in today.

John McKean 28 October 1995

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<sup>11</sup> J. Leslie Martin, *Buildings and Ideas 1933 - 1983, from the studio of Leslie Martin and his Associates*, Cambridge, 1983