

Marshall McLuhan once pointed out that a modern army needs more typewriters than it does artillery pieces, which is perhaps why the US Department of Defense, just before Pearl Harbor, began to build the world's biggest office – the Pentagon, with 3.7 million square feet of floor space. Its architect is not as interesting as its project manager, Colonel Leslie Groves, who finished the job in 16 months and then moved on to oversee the Manhattan Project.

The Pentagon and the Ministry of Defence offices on Whitehall are in many ways similar. At one million square feet the MOD is also a very large building. Like the Pentagon, it is a framed structure with concrete floors, cross-ventilated through light wells and lit by tall windows in a stone clad wall with some neo-classical detail. One difference, however, is that the MOD took 21 years to build. On site from 1938 to 1959, it became by default the last classical public building in Britain and was so slow in coming out of the ground that it became known as the Whitehall Monster. Even before it was finished Nikolaus Pevsner insulted it freely and at length before adding stoically 'it is too late to complain'. Possibly it took so long because, unlike the Pentagon (which may actually be an office), the MOD doubles as the entrance to a secret subterranean citadel and has embedded within it a series of spaces that seem to have more to do with sympathetic magic than functional architecture.

Faced with the onset of war, Britain had begun putting up new offices for its armed forces in 1936. Unlike the US, which when its turn came, threw up colossal system-built offices, laboratories and factories that integrated production over multiple sites and deployed scientists and managers in flexible teams, the MOD planned something different. In combining three military services in a single building on a large floorplate it followed the ruthless American path, but it did not go the whole way. If the Pentagon is in some ways like the Big Science laboratories of the Manhattan project, the MOD certainly is not, it is more like those older type of laboratories in whose collections of objects and curiosities we find the origin of the modern museum. Like Sherlock Holmes' study on a grand scale, the MOD is a place of power and imagination suited to fundamental rather than applied research.

Very little has been written about its architect, E Vincent Harris as he liked to style himself. An unfashionable figure today, he is chiefly remembered for powerful pre-war civic buildings especially his cylindrical Manchester Central Library, 1934, which with his Town Hall extension of 1937 forms a curved passage leading to the Manchester Cenotaph. In the *Dictionary of National Biography* Gavin Stamp describes him as 'short in stature and taciturn... respected rather than liked'. A dinner held in

## Interior Design Goes to War

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appreciation of his RIBA Royal Gold Medal was attended by just 18 people, who read messages from those overseas or otherwise unable to attend. Harris won the medal in 1951 (a year after Saarinen and two years before Le Corbusier) and his acceptance speech was just 35 words long – 'Look, a lot of you people here tonight don't like what I do and I don't like what a lot of you do, but I am proud and honoured to receive the Royal Gold Medal.'

He could please himself because he was gifted enough to win open architectural competitions that did not call for social skills or patronage. But it was a hard road. After early success he had a run of a dozen failures that would have broken many others, and in 1915 found himself in France on active service with the Artists' Rifles when he learned he had won the Board of Trade Offices competition, first out of 170 entries. This was the competition that made him, but even then there were complaints that he had bent the rules and it was another 20 years before the project got the go-ahead. Financially at least it was worth the wait. By 1936 the commission had tripled in size and become worth £1,750,000. His design, much changed from his 1915 scheme, was portrayed in the press as utilitarian with no unnecessary decoration. As will be seen, this was not strictly true.

Since 1964 the official name of the resulting building has been the Ministry of Defence Main Building. Today its Portland stone facade still looks much as it did on Harris's drawings. On the ground floor the windows have Gibbs surrounds, followed by seven plain floors something like the Shell Centre, topped off with a classical arcade ('above the snow line', in Pevsner's mocking description. He goes on – 'not only do the pediments look like two-storey houses stranded high up but also they are facing the wrong way'). Harris had his reasons. He wanted a processional route but his axe-shaped building filled the site so the route had to bisect three internal courtyards and be parallel to Whitehall. This meant that the entrances and the pediments had to face north and south. A model made in 1936 shows the building without windows looking like a power station. With high walls and a clerestory arcade, it appears that a classical temple was the principal architectural reference. Most likely it was the Temple of Janus in the Roman Forum, in which stood a two-faced statue overlooking the gates of war, one at each

end. These legendary gates were closed in times of peace, something that occurred only five times in the entire Roman era. In a further classical gesture Harris placed muscular statues of Earth and Water over his north gate. Their companions over the south gate, Fire and Air, were never executed. The huge coffered doors are made of lightweight alloy from recycled airplanes. They close every night when the workers go home.

An early indication that all is not quite normal here can be seen from the street. Incredibly, the northeast corner of the building is actually by Christopher Wren, so the whole thing can be seen as an extension of something first laid down by the great man. This is because the Monster stands on the site of the old Whitehall Palace, destroyed by fire in 1698. Attached to this corner are steps that once led from the Queen's apartment to a river terrace. Today they are a crooked staircase leading nowhere.

Once inside the MOD's gates, lobbies allow staff and visitors to mingle with armed police before they go through an air lock. There is a reassuring feeling of industry and determination, and with so many people in uniform these busy spaces have the cosmopolitan atmosphere of a space-ship loading bay. Internally the MOD is a fortified modern office, which in response to contemporary thinking on the ideal work environment, and in parallel to a similar transformation of the Pentagon, has been converted to open plan.

Passing through the lobby, the processional route lies before you. On a floor over your head, though you might not know it, are five very fine eighteenth-century interiors transplanted from buildings pulled down in 1938 to make way for Harris. One of them, Pembroke House, was a Colen Campbell villa from 1723 containing work by Sir William Chambers and Roger Morris. Misgivings about demolishing the building – which would be difficult to do today – led to entrants to the 1915 competition being asked to incorporate some of its spaces into their proposals. Their awkward shapes fouled the plans of many of the competitors. Up to that time interiors had only ever been preserved in museums, but when they were eventually crated up in 1938 it aroused little interest. Curiously they do not appear in any published plans of the actual building and, as if they had never been moved, are still referred to by the numbers they had when part of Pembroke House. They flagrantly break one of the unwritten rules of industrially produced flexible American workplaces – that panelled offices for the director or anyone else should be avoided. Here we have chandeliers.

Harris's Hall of Columns is positioned in the middle of this processional route. Like the Hall of the Mountain King it never receives direct sunlight and is lined with coupled Doric columns, octagonally faceted in black marble from an exhausted quarry that makes them now

impossible to repair or copy. Used for many years to store furniture, the hall has been redecorated with rich creams, browns and blacks. With the hiss of the air ducts turned up to discourage eavesdropping, this Teutonic space now teems with officers in braided uniforms moving between leather armchairs and adjacent conference rooms. On each side of the route are internal lightwells which were once open to the sky but have recently been enclosed with planar glass roofs. Some are used for circulation and cafes but two of them are inaccessible. Their floors have been covered with raked gravel, creating silent voids like Japanese Muromachi dry gardens. They make a serene contrast to the busy offices that look into them. Below and to one side lies King Henry VIII's wine cellar, a stone-ribbed brick-vaulted Tudor room. When, in 1951, this fragment of the Palace of Whitehall interfered with the new building, hydraulic rams were used to relocate it *en masse*, nine feet to the west and 19 feet deeper, reputedly to please Queen Mary. Following a very long staircase down through the MOD's cellar you can pass into a Gothic crypt. Deeper still beneath your feet are citadels connected to nearby buildings, supposedly including 10 Downing Street, by tunnels. The greatest of these Cold War kremlins, PINDAR, a communications bunker and ops room, was extended between 1984 and 1994 at amazing expense. Lying 200m below the south end of the building, it can house 500 people and withstand a hydrogen bomb. Exactly what goes on there is secret – we only have Doctor Strangelove's lewd description of underground social conditions to go on.

When a new post-apocalyptic Adam and Eve eventually leave PINDAR and emerge from the earth, up the staircase, their first decision will be whether to exit from the ruins north or south along Harris's processional route. If they leave via the north gate they will pass under a multi-faith prayer room. Looking like a Sunday school, it is furnished with easy and upright chairs alongside a cupboard containing prayer books next to a lectern and a table with a cloth. Whether its explicit Christian character has influenced other groups to seek their own space I cannot discover, but the corresponding room over the south gate has become a Muslim prayer room. With its off-axis entrance it is well suited to the role. Prayer areas for men and women are separated by green office screens, runners are laid at an angle over carpet tiles; it is ad hoc, economical and, like other such rooms in private houses, rather homely.

Teutonic halls, Japanese gardens, a Cold War Kremlin – is it not odd that Britain's foes contemporary with this building can also all be said to have their own spaces in a tableau of interior design that matches them with King Henry, Wren and the historic rooms? In the past military planners have used models of the built envi-

ronment for training purposes and for testing methods of destruction, but here we have something different. Note that these representations occur at the scale of a room unlike, say, the Venice Biennale, where nations meet at the scale of buildings, or the Imperial War Museum, where they meet at the scale of objects. Many of the spaces are incomplete in the way theatrical sets are, for example the Hall of Columns has a flat ceiling, but by careful framing it ought to be possible to make a film here without the action seeming claustrophobic, something that would be impossible in a simpler building.

This thematic richness extends beyond the building itself. The MOD can be seen as an interface between the civilian and the military worlds inhabited by heroes, real and imaginary – James Bond and Richard Hannay live at this frontier, along with mortals whose statues surround the building; standing along the Whitehall side are Allanbrooke, Monty, Slim and Raleigh. Close by is the Cenotaph that may be the hilt of Excalibur in stone (as was shown in *AA Files* 34). Presented in context, the MOD stands in a precinct of statues and temples to compare with the Roman Forum, with Whitehall leading to Westminster Abbey just as the Via Sacra led to the Temple of Jupiter. This is holy ground.

Such things endure. When buildings embody narratives like these they are to some degree immortal because they are transformed rather than destroyed by acts of war. We know the story of the Temple of Janus even though today nothing remains of that building. A modern example is the State Secretariat of People's Defence (1954–63) in downtown Belgrade. This elegant piece of urban design by Nicola Dobrovic is in two parts, with matching stepped ends that recalled the Sutjeska Canyon in Bosnia where the Partisans enjoyed a famous victory in 1943. It was bombed, very accurately (taking out both halves), by the Pentagon in 1999. Today it is preserved as a ruin; it is only the story that keeps it standing. Two years later the Pentagon itself absorbed and was transformed by a deadly blow. When its damaged section was rebuilt following the 9-11 attack, a memorial was inserted at the point where American Airlines flight 77 struck the building. Room 1E438 has been fitted with a pentagonal stained-glass window and has a new life as a chapel shared by many religions, including Islam.

Commonly found in controlled public facilities such as airports, shopping centres and hospitals, in multi-faith spaces, different religions share a single space sometimes leading to surprising conjunctions of religious artefacts. Are such places genuinely sacred? Not believing in the concept of a multi-faith room can lead to the demand for an individual worship space. At the MOD, in contrast to the unified American example, faith has been split into three parts: Quiet Room, Multi-faith

Room, Muslim Room. The same tripartite division was used in the Millennium Dome. Its secular space was a giant plywood egg called the Chill-out Zone, a sound-proofed room called the Prayer Space held daily Christian worship, while a Muslim room stood on its own outside the canopy to avoid the taint of the National Lottery, which was paying for the whole thing.

At the MOD it is the Quiet Room that is set apart. A 2007 *Times* article attacking the refurbishment of the building as a waste of money depicted it as a refuge for stressed civil servants. The other prayer rooms were not mentioned. These invisible interior spaces are at opposite ends of the building, like a particle and its anti-particle that have created each other from the vacuum. Coupled places of worship, such as the twin churches in Rome's Piazza del Popolo or *Simultankirchen* (German double churches in which two naves share a single tower), are very unusual; however the joining of Christianity and Islam in an axial relationship may be unique. The two rooms are not even mirror images. They are identical except for this detail – outside the windows of one are colossal stone figures and outside the other is empty space. The presence of non-existent statues of Fire and Air over the south gate is surely beautiful. Here, perhaps, we have representational art acceptable to Islam – an *objet non-trouvé*, a spontaneous piece of non-art, the sculptor's finest work.

Interestingly, the MOD mosque over the south gate is now the closest place of worship to 10 Downing Street. For obvious reasons it is difficult to visit or photograph – in fact, being out of bounds and unrepresentable, it is easier to inspect a duplicate room with different furniture in which no Muslim may be found. This space is a floating signifier if ever there was one. What does it all mean? Do the Cabinet cross Whitehall by the tunnel to make submission to Allah or is this a Zen move by the masters of deception? Asking questions like these is like asking what is the best sort of film to make at the MOD. Sword and sandal, mystery, sci-fi, costume, war, art, horror or comedy – almost anything can happen where themed rooms cluster alongside the avenue to a tomb where the last man on earth will be buried alive with his retina. There is nothing to be surprised at here. You ought to expect drama when interior design goes to war.

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