

The Newnham Architecture Essay Prize 2016-17 Question

Choose a building you have visited and that you love and write a description of it, analysing why you like it.

Described as representing ‘better than almost any other building... the spirit of English architecture in the 1930s’¹, the Barber Institute of Fine Arts is an impressive art deco building designed by Robert Atkinson, functioning as an art gallery, concert hall and school of art history. The Barber Institute occupies a triangular two acre site at the East Gate of the Birmingham university campus.² The building consists of simple cubic forms; art deco features are evident on its facade: for example the rounded corners³ and the horizontality of the stonework.



Figure 1 Approach to the Barber Institute

The ground storey is faced in Darley Dale stone offsetting the reddish brick façade of the first floor galleries which blends harmoniously with the other brick buildings of the university. A decorative banding of stone runs around the building, echoing the clean lines of the structure. On approaching the Barber Institute, you will come across an equestrian statue of King George I situated on a plinth, erected at an angle to the building. The statue acts as a focal point and draws the passer-by’s eye onto the entrance of the building itself.⁴

¹ www.barber.org.uk

² Richard Verdi, “The Barber Institute of Fine Arts: The University of Birmingham” (2005)

³ Atkinson was influenced by the work of Sir Giles Gilbert Scott and the horizontality and rounded corners of the Barber Institute reflect Scott’s design for the Weston Library (completed in 1937). Paul Spencer-Longhurst, “Robert Atkinson, 1883-1952” (1989) p. 13

⁴ <http://www.institute-of-traditional-architecture.org/focal-points-framing-mechanisms/>

The Barber Institute occupies raised ground, although it is part of the university campus, it stands separately⁵, visible to the general public. To enter the building, you ascend shallow stone steps to reach the monumental art deco entrance. Sculpted shields flank the doorway and the name of the building is inscribed in golden lettering above your head. The glass doors are noticeably weighty, designed with a symmetrical grillwork in typical art deco style.⁶

Inside the building, the foyer is warm and well lit: both artificially and naturally by sunlight which floods in through the floor length windows on the right hand side. The art deco ceiling fixtures are inverted bowls that cast light upwards⁷ and at first glance appear like UFOs suspended in the air. Lighting is a key element in the design of the building, fluctuating throughout the year and changing with the time of day. In the winter, you are grateful for the shelter and the welcome warmth the foyer provides. In the summer months, light casts geometric patterns of shadow from the window frames across the floors. The windows act as a frame for the outside world creating a distinction between the inside and the outside. Groups of circular tables and seating are placed down the foyer, allowing the foyer to take on the role as a gathering place as well as functioning as a transitional space. The foyer is the ideal place for people watching: you pick up snatches of people's conversations, you can smell the comforting scent of coffee, at some point you catch the eye of a stranger.

The Barber Institute is designed in such a way that you feel compelled to discover the building. Upon first stepping in, your line of sight is focused on the winding travertine staircase at the opposite end of the foyer. The curving path of the stairs arouses our interest (as we cannot see where the route leads to) and you are drawn instinctively down the longitudinal axis to the stairs.⁸

⁵ Simon Unwin, "Analysing Architecture" (2014) p. 122

⁶ Alastair Duncan, "Art Deco", (Thames and Hudson 1988) p. 181

⁷ Alastair Duncan, "Art Deco", (Thames and Hudson 1988) pp. 66-70

⁸ Simon Unwin, "Analysing Architecture" Geometries of Being-Lines of Passage p. 201



To guide the visitor's journey, a statue by Rodin: 'The Age of Bronze' is positioned at the base of the stairs. His face and torso are twisted towards the staircase, drawing the eye up the steps. In Rodin's own words, the statue represents the transition 'from the unconsciousness of primitive man into the age of understanding and love',⁹ a fitting choice for the building which houses the department of art history. The marble plinth of the statue acts as a turntable, allowing visitors to observe the statue from all angles, reflecting the founder: Lady Barber's instructions for the institute to 'be used by the university for the study and encouragement of art and music'.¹⁰



Figure 2 Music Auditorium

The concert hall seats 364 people. The colour palette is dark walnut for the walls, a lighter maple for the proscenium and pale ginger gold for the drapes. The ceiling is coffered and stepped, painted in a muted blue, white and cream. Dark wooden panelling envelops the seats, decorated with a lighter crescent pattern looping along the ceiling of the wall. The use of stage lights and the lighter colour of the stage in comparison to its surroundings causes the stage to appear to glow. The walls of the hall dip in and out, helping to improve the acoustics which are known to be some of the best in Europe, ideal for performances from

⁹ <http://barber.org.uk/auguste-rodin/>

¹⁰ Richard Verdi, "The Barber Institute of Fine Arts: The University of Birmingham" (2005)

soloists and chamber choirs. The padded rows of seating go right up to the stage and the gentle slope of the hall means that your view is never restricted. Although the hall is sizeable, the soft tan lighting creates a sense of intimacy, the dark walls cocoon the audience and music fills the air, reaching the listeners with clarity.

One of Robert Atkinson's unconventional layout decisions was to nestle the concert hall in between the two corridors of offices and art libraries in a square all of which is reached by the foyer. The art library is simple in design, furnished with wooden desks and chairs. Extensive bookshelves run around three of the walls and natural sunlight spills through the French windows on the fourth, illuminating the spines of the old books and the oak surfaces. The lower ground floor is unadorned and discreet, accessible only to the staff and music students wishing to use the rehearsal rooms. Rooms are compact, designed for storage and functionality. The caretaker's flat has been converted into whitewashed offices; however, the use of spacious windows again allows inhabitants to enjoy the natural sunlight as well as a view of the grass expanse in front of the building, preventing staff from becoming enclosed in their rooms.

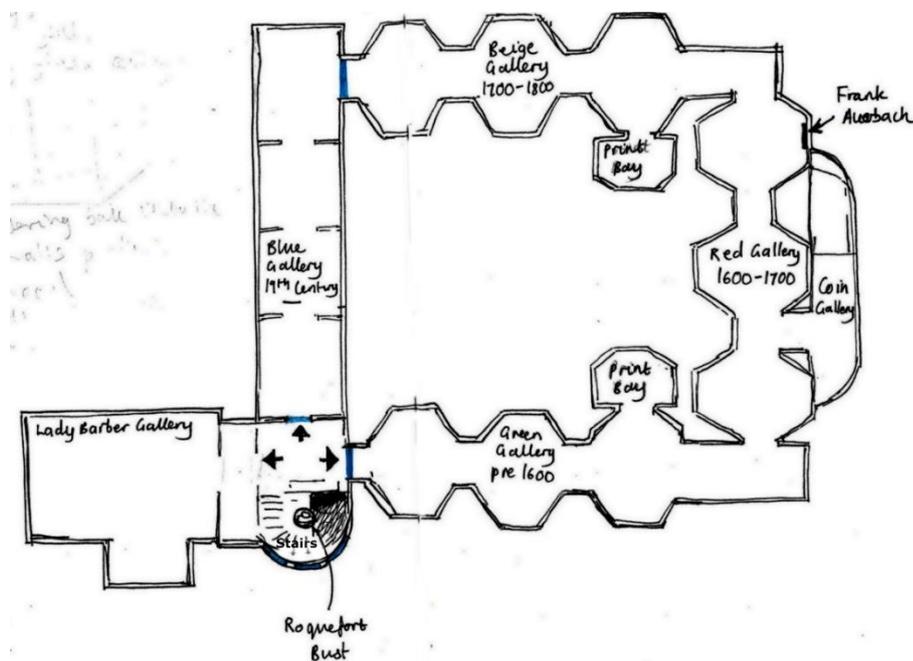


Figure 3 Sketch of the first floor layout

On the first floor, you are greeted by a large Roquefort bust by Rodin, marking the entrance to the galleries. The heavy glass doors echo the impressive doors of the foyer; the metal handles feel cold in contrast to the room temperature. Visitors are free to wander: to enter through the glass to the galleries directly ahead (the natural choice), or the glass doors to the galleries on the right, or to browse the smaller Lady Barber Gallery on the left. The layout of the first floor consists of four interconnecting galleries arranged in a square. From two of

the galleries, there are two small dimly lit bays dedicated to delicate prints and drawings. The choice of materials creates warmth: light warm oak is used to line the lower walls and for the parquet flooring. When moving between the galleries, the colour of the wall changes: a visual indication of the change in era of the artworks displayed. Design decisions are often practical: paintings framed in gilt frames are suspended from the ceiling on sturdy wires and displayed in a sequence of bays which increases hanging space. Due to the nature of the artwork, the galleries are illuminated artificially. Top-lighting is used which prevents visitors from being faced by their own reflection in the glass frames.¹¹ Wooden benches are provided at regular intervals, encouraging the visitor to sit and linger in the galleries. The placement of artworks can be surprising: a scene by Frank Auerbach is thoughtfully placed in the Red Gallery alongside a landscape by Rubens and a pastoral scene by Claude Lorrain, encouraging the visitor contemplate the messages of and question the relationships between the paintings. Likewise, the galleries are architecturally interesting: archways and alcoves are used to break up the visitor's journey so that visitors are not confronted with endless wall of paintings.

The galleries are often so still that you feel conscious of your whole being: you become aware of all of your surroundings and you hear the sound of your footsteps, the rustling of your clothing as you move. At times, the distant sound of a piano slips into the room, at other instances the wind howls through the building. Travelling through the galleries is both an auditory and visual experience.

As you approach the staircase, you are orientated towards the view through the windows of the campus outside; a frame not seen when one ascends the stairs. Descending the steps, your gaze is once again drawn down the corridor, as the entranceway slowly comes into view. You can see the world outside the glass panes and once you exit through the doors, you are hit with the sound of vehicles, students laughing and you find yourself back in the rush of the university campus.

To me, the building acts as a place of peaceful refuge. You are invited to stay and explore the building and contemplate its contents. On every visit the building feels both familiar and unfamiliar: the people moving through the building are never quite the same, the lighting alters the appearance of the interiors through the seasons and the art on the walls changes, but some elements remain constant through time: sensations like the coolness of the metal

¹¹Thomas Bodkin proposed a system of top lighting based on the Seager method used in the Courtauld Galleries in the Fitzwilliam Museum.
Paul Spencer-Longhurst, "Robert Atkinson, 1883-1952" (1989) p. 67

door handles, the warmth inside the galleries and the noble manner the building looks onto its visitors.

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