

Physicians in Regent's Park. The requirements of these buildings had brought wide cultural and historical issues to bear on the design process. Lasdun was unwilling to compromise his modern movement's position although there were pressures to historicize. At about this time he began consciously to extend the modern movement's theoretical basis.

Platforms or strata

The flats at 26 St James's were reduced simply to floors which were expressed as layers, or, as Lasdun prefers to call them, strata. These strata, he is keen to point out, were not merely balconies but devices to connect one visually with the outside views. In the case of flats it was with Hyde Park and later at the National with the whole Thames panorama. He suggests that it is this notion of platforms or strata which becomes a very important feature of the work in the office: "But it isn't just a superficial stylistic one. It has other characteristics which we haven't touched on—the public and private domains of public buildings.

"The strata, if I may put it this way, work on the practical level—they are floors. But they also work on the formal level, that is to say they give a language. And I believe in the case of the National Theatre, which is a rather unique affair in the sense that we're trying to make monuments out of modern architectural language, the strata can also be made to work on a symbolic level. So you can work on three fronts. Hence the preoccupation with strata."

The strata idea, which accepts the surrounding city, is argued out in the recently published book on Lasdun's work *A Language and a Theme* (RIBA Publications, 1976). This book shows the development of this central theme in Lasdun's work. East Anglia, "a key job in the office," according to Lasdun, brought about an orchestration of his ideas: strata, earth-moving and forming and the preoccupation with systems of precast building. The UEA scheme, the Royal College of Physicians' building and the National Theatre and Opera House scheme, which Lasdun says was "the best thing we have ever done" (it was scrapped in 1966), brought all the latent ideas together culminating in the maturity of approach observable at the final design for the National Theatre. The aborted scheme may well have been better but, as Lasdun is quick to point out, "evidence of what it might have been like is in the National Theatre".

THE NATIONAL THEATRE



DENYS Lasdun and his partner, Peter Softley, have been occupied with the National Theatre for the past 13 years. The preliminary project was for a combined National Theatre and Opera House. The building of a national theatre for Britain has been a dream for more than a 100 years; it now exists—a fulfilment of the national ambition to have a fitting showcase for our most prestigious art form. Denys Lasdun came to the project without any previous experience of theatre design, with a completely open mind but a well established method of designing.

Clearly the distinguished building committee (it included Olivier, Brook, Hall, St Denis, Devine, Gaskell etc) knew what sort of architecture they were buying. Lasdun, for his part, was not at all sure what they wanted.

The original brief was for an adaptable theatre. Lasdun recalls: "We analysed the problems of an adaptable theatre by studying American examples and looking at what they have done by way of adaptable theatres, and realised that intellectually it was not on. In a way you can sum that one up by saying that a national theatre must cater for a tradition of Greek or Elizabethan drama, which is roughly the open theatre condition, and for the post-Elizabethan drama, which is the proscenium condition. But these are merely labels. The real issue in spatial terms is what interests me as an architect, and what is there to be seen now, in the Olivier particularly, and in the Lyttleton, are the two visual and spatial relationships between actor and audience."

"In the Olivier room the action appears to be in your presence; you embrace it. In the Lyttleton you confront the action. They are totally different forms. Each of them can be very adaptable in their own form, but you can't change the one form into the other unless you are prepared to change the walls, the ceiling and the floor.

Idea and interpretation

Fortunately Lasdun was asked to design the National Theatre at a time when theatre ideas themselves were in a state of flux. Arena theatres, adaptable theatres and flexible theatre environments were very much in vogue and a lesser architect might well have been attracted to one of those ideas as the "with it" solution. Not so Lasdun. He encouraged the committee to erect a series of imaginative, hypothetical ideas which were interpreted in architectural terms by designing auditorium after auditorium until out of this process of idea