

Chamberlin, Powell and Bon

Peter Hugh Girard Chamberlin (1919-78), was always known as Joe, and he seems to have had that larger than life quality typical of the great Victorian politician. Powell described him as “a lovely man, who combined a gentleness of voice and manner with a powerful will”. The engineer Anthony Flint quoted Joe Chamberlin as having a philosophy that “he wanted to try something new every day”. He attracted strong likes and dislikes from those who knew him. The son of an Australian or Australian-based army officer, he was born at the Waldorf Hotel in the Aldwych, where his mother died giving birth, and he was brought up by an aunt, at 60 South Edwardes Square, Kensington. He spent two years at Oxford, studying Philosophy, Politics and Economics, before declaring himself a conscientious objector and undertaking work on a farm in Wales. He subsequently moved to London to dig people out of bombed buildings. In 1940 he married Jean Bingham, seven years his senior. It was she, always a strong influence on his career, who encouraged Chamberlin to register as a student at Kingston School of Art, near their home. The course at Kingston was set up by Eric Brown, and had grown out of his practice, which he combined with teaching. In 1945 Chamberlin became his assistant and in 1948 his partner, with whom he executed ‘Seaside’ for the Festival of Britain in 1951.

Geoffrey Charles Hamilton Powell was born in 1920 in India, the son of an army officer. He studied at Wellington College and was expected to enter the army, before contracting tuberculosis, which left him with only one kidney. Unfit for the army, and with a talent for drawing, architecture was suggested as an alternative career, and he entered the Architectural Association in October 1939. He is thus of that AA generation, with Philip Powell and Jacko Moya, who were evacuated to Hadley Wood, and shared digs in Monken Hadley, north of London, the so-called ‘Taliesin’, christened by the small group after Frank Lloyd Wright’s home. Geoffrey Powell had a similar public school wit to Philip Powell, perhaps more so. They all moved to 16 The Little Boltons and worked for their old tutor, Frederick Gibberd. Geoffrey Powell stayed with Gibberd until March 1946 and may have worked on the Somerford Estate, a dense pattern of houses and flats in squares. A common feature of Gibberd’s housing, of Powell and Moya’s, and early Chamberlin, Powell and Bon is the use of brilliant colour. Powell then worked for Brian O’Rorke, and began teaching at

Kingston School of Art in 1949. He is credited as the most elegant designer of the three, working mainly on his own with a handful of assistants. John Honer describes how each partner had his own team, but Chamberlin and Bon worked in tandem.

Christof Bon was born in 1921 at St Gallen, Switzerland, and studied at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. His father and uncle were restaurateurs, and Bon was noted for his culinary skills. He came over in 1947 and worked briefly for William Holford and Myles Wright on the City of London Plan, then went to Milan to work for Gianluigi Banfi, Lodovico Belgiojoso, Enrico Peressutti, and Ernesto Nathan Rogers (BBPR). He came over for a Summer School in late 1949 and applied for a teaching job at Kingston through Alfred Roth. He moved in temporarily as the Chamberlins' lodger. Bon contributed the grid and the detail to the very big schemes. All had a taste for foreign travel and very large, fast cars - these trappings of champagne socialism at odds with their conservative clients in the City, and in the 1960s with the difficulties of strike action. It is important to stress that CPB expanded and contracted fairly heavily, but when involved in the main phases of the Barbican housing and arts centre they employed about 70 people, so their organisation was easily twice as big as that of Powell and Moya.

The Chamberlins and Bon divided their lives between three homes:- 60 South Edwardes Square, the mews-like house where Chamberlin had grown up; Mill House at Sonning, set on an island in the Thames; and a farmhouse, [Mas Gougé](#), at [Bourdic near Uzes](#), in the South of France. An understanding of the Mediterranean and of ancient architecture is important to all three of them, informing their understanding of history and classicism as it did Le Corbusier's work. It comes out in their Christmas cards, sent from the office every year, mainly of Italy in the early years, while later ones get more exotic. Powell was also keen on archaeology and a coin collector. When I asked the Taliesin architects - like Philip Powell and Neville Conder - about their stylistic influences I'd generally be told "it all comes out of the plan". But Geoffry Powell recalled, "We were all into Le Corbusier, rather".

CPB decided to enter the Golden Lane competition in 1951, on the basis that three entries had a better chance than one. Powell's scheme won in March 1952 - a mixed development of courtyards of much higher density than that of Gibberd. Powell

explained that as the surroundings were so rotten he designed the scheme to look inwards. He was living at 16 The Little Boltons, so his scheme was drawn up on the same table as Powell and Moya used for designing Churchill Gardens in 1945. Powell also recounted the story that he hadn't got it quite finished when he handed in the scheme, and the assessor, Donald McMorran finished the cross hatching for him. At Golden Lane, the brief was for 940 mainly small flats; Powell got in 1400. It deliberately excluded car parking, a laundry and drying areas, but asked for a community building and children's playground. It suggested that the existing road pattern be disregarded but that the 100-foot height limit should only be exceeded if a special case could be made. McMorran considered Powell's scheme economical, with "a village like character in the planning of the central piazza and "village hall". It set the smallest flats in an eleven-storey tower, bright golden curtain walling Pilkington's muro glass, with tank on top by Chamberlin. The central block provided an eye catcher, while closing vistas were in the manner of Gordon Cullen's contemporary 'townscape' studies. The final design was approved in April 1955, when the tower, Great Arthur House, was raised to fifteen and then sixteen stories, as height controls were relaxed, making it briefly Britain's tallest residential block. From the first the estate attracted a high percentage of young professionals, including doctors, clergymen and married students. Paying the rent by cheque, as these tenants did, was newsworthy in 1958.

At Golden Lane the spaces and the relationship between the buildings are as important as the buildings themselves, so that the whole estate is a single piece of architecture. In April 1957 Powell claimed in the *Architectural Association Journal* that "There is no attempt at the informal in these courts. We regard the whole scheme as urban. We have no desire to make the project look like a garden suburb." In this article he suggests that it would have been nice if all the tenants had the same curtains, but even in the 1950s this couldn't be done. Golden Lane straddles the boundary between the picturesque and the formal, its rectilinear plan and hard landscaping – so much tighter than that at Churchill Gardens - eased by the changes in level, natural materials and contrasting bastion, its roof garden conceals the lift motor room and water tank.

The same curtain walling appears at CPB's contemporary Witham seed warehouse, a scheme for Jean Chamberlin's family that was demolished in 1987, and Bousfield School from 1954-6, a job brought in by Chamberlin from the London City Council through Leslie Martin but largely the work of Geoffry. He described the water feature as being for keeping out school inspectors, and how the cladding was a simple lesson in colour theory for the children – yellow, blue and green where they meet. It is the firm's most joyous building. Powell reminded me of the difficulty of sourcing suitable fittings and the joy at finding a decent roof light that they could safely specify.

Other works from the late 1950s show a change in style, with a growing interest in the new concrete techniques coming from Europe. This mid-period CPB is the most eclectic. In London concrete is well represented in another school, Two Saints School, near the Elephant and Castle, and what was the Geoffrey Chaucer School (now the Globe Academy), built in 1958-60. As a practice CPB brought together new technology - here gunnite, and early hyperbolic paraboloid - but always kept them subservient to the desire for architectural good looks; their buildings are always expressive of a great many ideas. The engineer Dr Anthony Flint thought that Chamberlin had come up with the idea of a hyperbolic paraboloid roof to span the pentagon block as expressing the big space surrounded by little ones. The five-sided plan of the hall is explained by the fact that there were five house or year rooms, where each child would assemble in the mornings, and eat their lunch (food came from the kitchen alongside). The timber hyperbolic paraboloid roof existed at Axminster, by Robert Townsend, but the use of hypars was then very novel in Britain, and this is more novel because it adopts a sprayed gunnite system, the concrete being sprayed on to metal formwork.

Shipley's Salt School was designed by Geoffry between 1960-3, and has subsequently been demolished. The West Riding City Council decided that only a one-off design befitted the model village of Saltaire. Geoffry Powell set classrooms, assembly hall and gymnasium around a courtyard containing a small, circular hall – now the library - reminiscent of the dining room at New Hall, Cambridge. Alterations and the pinched circulation demonstrate the limitations of school budgets, but it marks a

logical progression from Hunstanton, with exposed steel girders, glazed tiles and pick hammered concrete.

Casson and Conder were appointed to do a master plan for Birmingham University in 1957, bringing in a series of young architects. The Munrow Sports Centre was begun in 1963 to the designs of Chamberlin, Powell and Bon, but never completed. Phase One contains a sports hall and gymnasium, with the curious shell roofs in which the practice delighted – this was abandoned in 1966. Not built was a curious design for a graduate hall of residence as an A frame, published in 1961.

New Hall College was founded in 1954 to improve Cambridge's quota of one woman to eleven men. It was renamed Murray Edwards College in 2009.

In 1958 the warden Rosemary Murray asked Leslie Martin for help. Martin suggested Kenneth Capon of the Architects' Co-Partnership, Eric Lyons, Denys Lasdun, Chamberlin, Powell and Bon, Bill Howell, and David Roberts. Murray considered other Cambridge architects 'a bit utilitarian'. A letter inviting Capon for interview asked for his choice of materials and a verbal indication of the layout, but not for plans. This was also sent to Lasdun, Chamberlin and Sheppard and then Chamberlin was appointed in December 1958. CPB produced at least three schemes in 1959-60. The first, an informal plan of an asymmetrical cross of buildings was rejected as too simple and unglamorous for 'new women', and it was with the second detailed scheme, made in November 1959, that the building assumed its present shape. The key was the dining hall, the centre of the college's activities, which assumed a circular form in November 1959. The formal quadrangle with the corresponding facing block of the library appeared in April 1960. P. D. James said it had the style of a harem, "too distractingly pretty to be conducive to serious study". It was built with *ferro cemento* – precast layers of fine steel mesh sprayed with concrete - again as a series of courtyards at different levels. The dining room was developed as a cruciform plan extending from a central dome, creating deep alcoves to give intimacy when there were only a handful of diners, while in the centre a heated servery rose from the kitchen below - "like a Cornucopia", claimed Chamberlin. The concrete structure and brick walling were chosen to give a pure whiteness that is stark even in a city noted for its Gault brick. The dining hall dome is of pre-cast *ferro cemento*, as perfected by Pier Luigi Nervi for shell structures from the 1940s onwards, but not previously used

in Britain. The quadrangle was slightly sunk so its big spaces did not dominate the smaller quads of study bedrooms - the corridor is truly beautiful.

New Hall can also be considered post-modern, in that the principal spaces exhibit classical forms in modern materials, rather as the Italian Rationalists of Gruppo 7 had proclaimed fifty years before and Evans and Shalev were to do at their similarly planned library for Jesus College in 1996. Evans and Shalev inspired Chamberlin's solution to the Churchill College competition, wanting to link New Hall and Churchill as a whole mini-centre serving that part of Cambridge, with shops. The round-arched roof is a much repeated feature of the time.

The later blocks of Golden Lane, especially Crescent House along the curve of Goswell Road, mark the firm's transition towards a tougher concrete aesthetic.

CPB were again selected by interview for the Leeds Development Plan of 1960, with Chamberlin winning out against Denys Lasdun. Members of the Committee to Consider Action to be Taken on the Resignation of Dr T. A. Lodge were asked in May 1958 to suggest possible candidates. Leslie Martin and J. M. Richards, Hoffmann Wood Professor at Leeds, offered advice. Richards wrote of CPB that "they are first rate designers, with an extremely intelligent, analytical approach to each new problem that comes along". That Chamberlin, Powell and Bon were employed as master planners rather than as designers partly explains their initial approach to the site. They were the first architects to publish a detailed Development Plan for a British university, with maps, flow charts and comparisons with historic buildings elsewhere. The style was reminiscent of their Barbican Report a year earlier, but was influential on the ideas and presentations made by subsequent university architects. They called in Colin Buchanan and Anne McEwan, and the report has some similarities in style with Buchanan's *Traffic in Towns* - the influential report and popular book on urban and transport planning policy produced in 1963 for the UK Department of Transport. CPB were thorough. They recalculated projected student numbers, and estimated that they would need to build for 8,500 students, far exceeding existing estimates, and looked at the relationship between departments, sending every member of staff a questionnaire about the kind of accommodation required. From this they determined that few departments operated in complete

isolation, but provided 'service' teaching for each other, particularly in subjects such as mathematics. This enabled them not only to determine the size of building required, but its location in the overall plan, the type of facilities needed and whether any of these could be shared.

In 1984 they wrote of 'a romantic enthusiasm for the cities of Italy and the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, we have been concerned to bring together buildings and related elements to make places with strong identities of their own. If the greater part of our work has been on large projects this has been partly accidental; our approach is to avoid specialisation as we welcome and enjoy fresh opportunities of any size and type. In a difficult period culturally and economically we believe that architecture is still far more than a technology and that some buildings have a magic that others conspicuously lack.'