

# BASIL SPENCE



Architectural Design and the  
Study of the Humanities at the  
University of Sussex

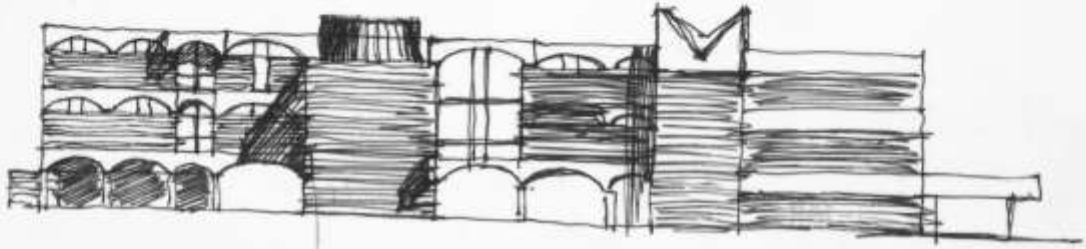
US

University of Sussex  
English

Dr Alistair Davies



11



kanon through

windows used out.



DA 12623 | ACC NO. 2002/10/SP/0010/02/2/0/1

© Dr Alistair Davies 2014

Booklet Design: Dr Michèle Harrison



# **Basil Spence**

Architectural Design and the  
Study of the Humanities at the  
University of Sussex

**Dr Alistair Davies**

## The 1960s: the University of Sussex as a New University

In the late 1950s, the Conservative government of Harold Macmillan decided as a matter of urgency to expand the system of higher education in Britain. The economy needed more graduates to fill vacancies in business and the public services in a period of prosperity and growth as Europe recovered from the destruction of the Second World War. In 1961, the government set up the Robbins Committee, chaired by an economist and made up of leading academics from the humanities and the sciences, including the Renaissance scholar Dame Helen Gardner, to advise on the nature of the expansion of existing and the building of new universities.

Sussex was the first of the new universities – one of seven in England, along with East Anglia, York, Lancaster, Essex, Kent and Warwick – established during the 1960s, all of them set in parkland sites on the edge of towns or cities and named after the towns or counties in which they were set. Sussex received its Royal Charter in 1961 and its first students in 1962 before the Robbins Report was published in 1963. However, its founders shared the views set out by the Robbins Committee that university places should be open to all qualified by ‘ability and attainment’ and that the modern university should have four main objectives: ‘instruction in skills; the promotion of the general powers of the mind so as to produce not mere specialists but rather cultivated men and women; to maintain research in balance with teaching, since teaching should not be separated from the advancement of learning or the search for truth; and to transmit a common culture and common standards of citizenship.’

In a lucid and beautifully written restatement of the traditional view of British education held since Matthew Arnold, the Robbins Report envisaged study at the new universities as a period of individual development and critical discovery. The pastoral setting of the new universities helped reinforce the sense that the world of the university should be removed from the pressures and compromises of the everyday world and that it should be a rich world of leisurely contemplation in which the individual student might grow and develop.



## The Stanmer Estate Site

Brighton Council had acquired Stanmer House and its estate, once the home of the earls of Chichester, in 1947 following the death of the heir to the estate in the Second World War. It was here, in the grounds of a Palladian mansion built in 1722 by the French architect Nicholas Dubois, that the new University of Sussex was built.

Basil Spence, who had gained renown for the building of a new cathedral at Coventry to replace the medieval cathedral destroyed in the blitz, won the commission to build the new university. 'To be given a two-hundred acre site four and a half miles from Brighton,' he wrote, 'in a beautiful down land valley, rich in mature trees, and then to be asked to build a university on it – this must be the dream of every architect.' Spence's design is famed for the way in which he accommodated the new buildings of the University to its site, preserving the layout of the existing landscape, incorporating its mature trees into his plan and ensuring that no building breached the level of the horizon of the valley in which the University was set. 'The picture I had in mind in my mind's eye was not an aggressive one of buildings thrusting themselves on the unsuspecting visitor but of brick enlivened by white paint on window frames peeping through trees with a broad rhythm of arched frames, harmonising, I hoped, with the rounded forms of the hills and trees. But the trees would dominate – even in winter without their leaves.' He used in his design materials sympathetic to the location: 'a Sussex brick, concrete, knapped flint, copper, timber and white paint.' 'Sussex is famous for its bricks: this would be a red brick university.' The down land valley site has ensured that Sussex remains a small and intimate university in tune with its natural surroundings.

The first phase of the campus for which Spence was directly responsible is, despite his sensitivity to its pastoral setting and his commitment to the use of traditional materials, a complex exercise in modernist architecture in which the guiding and distinctive ideas of the new university were made visible in brick, concrete and stone.



In building the new cathedral at Coventry, Spence was concerned to make visible the links between a past and a present disrupted by the mass bombing of what had been one of the finest medieval centres in the country. In order to do this, in the spirit of creative reconstruction of those commissioning the project who were dedicated to European reconciliation and renewal, he incorporated parts of the old cathedral into the new modernist cathedral – the remains of the old cathedral and the new building were placed in dynamic relation to one another so that visitors could think of the relationship between a past and present so deeply disrupted by war and violence and find in the new building a commitment to a new beginning after the war. ‘I saw the old cathedral standing clearly for sacrifice, one side of the Christian faith and I knew my task was to design a new one which should stand for the Triumph of the Resurrection.’ Spence invited leading modernist artists to produce work for the new cathedral – Graham Sutherland designed a huge and eye-catching tapestry of Christ behind the altar, John Piper designed the stained glass windows and Jacob Epstein produced a memorable sculpture. Benjamin Britten was also commissioned to write an oratorio for the dedication service of the new cathedral in May 1962 and he produced one of the most startling modernist pieces of music of the post-war period, *The War Requiem* in which the poems of Wilfred Owen were interwoven into the traditional Latin Requiem Mass. To emphasise the spirit of post-war reconciliation, Britten wrote parts specifically for the English tenor Peter Pears, the German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and the Russian soprano Galina Vishnevskaya (who in the event was not allowed to leave the Soviet Union for the performance, given the tensions in 1962 between the Soviet Union and the West).

In designing the University of Sussex, Spence deepened his preoccupation with the links between the present and the past. Falmer House, the first of the buildings to be built, was for all of the seeming modernity of its modular concrete modelled in its array of arches after the Colosseum in Rome. ‘I spent many hours wandering around this magnificent ruin which was in its heyday, dedicated to the masses – mass enjoyment, mass hysteria, mass lust for blood. But I now saw it in a different light: centuries of decay had bared the structure, which was based on the arch. Many arches, covered with the spectators’ terracing in Imperial times, were now exposed, framing the individual and reducing the scale to the single person. This was a great transformation and interested me.’



Spence's interest in the Colosseum was in part formal and aesthetic: 'The geometric form of this Roman monument in its heyday could not have been more rigid and was almost solid in its unity, but now it was casual, informal and, as I have explained, cossetted the individual in spite of its vast size.' But he also wanted to remind those who used the university that the new University would have as its central function a reflection on the classical architectural origins of European civilisation. 'When Mies van der Rohe came to London to receive the Royal Gold Medal, he made a significant remark to me. He said: "I never look at modern buildings, only old." This great architect, known for his pure, classical approach to a modern architecture which he has fathered, was expressing a deep fundamental truth. By looking at old architecture of great quality one can begin to discern architectural truth.' If Spence modelled Falmer House after the Colosseum, he also modelled the Physics Building after the Athenian Stoa of Attalos, the Library (usually seen as resembling an open book) after the style of a Mycenaean treasure-house and the campus square after the Athenian Agora – used since the 1960s by generations of students as the meeting-place for discussions and demonstrations within the university community.



If the Colosseum was the founding idea for Falmer House, Spence also incorporated other stylistic elements into his design. The high vaulting of the main rooms in Falmer House and the ground floor system of cloisters echoed the structure of the medieval cathedral and reminded lecturers and students of the monastic origins of study. An early photograph of the refectory shows the first generation of students eating together below a large-scale painting with the biblical title 'Day's Rest, Day's Work' donated by the important Sussex modernist artist Ivon Hitchens. In 1966, the Meeting House, 'whose form,' the architectural historian Louise Campbell notes, 'suggests chapter house and baptistery, oasthouse and dovecote, a theatre of debate and modern liturgy' was built as the result of a private donation and reminded lecturers and students that Judaism and Christianity were also key components of European culture. The Meeting House, with its honey-comb design, is also a hive and a candle and its multiplicity of suggestiveness was very much in keeping with Spence's overall principles of composite stylisation. John Piper was invited to design a tapestry – an imaginative interpretation of the biblical text 'Be still and know [that I am God]' which is the University motto. Here again we see the distinctive fusion of modernist design with a sensitivity to tradition.



The aesthetic appeal of Falmer House's combination of vault, arch, quadrangle, cloister and water from the pool which skirts the quadrangle and is filled with medieval-style spouts draining rain from the roof was also a crucial aspect of his plan – to create a transformative living space: 'The level of aesthetic appreciation usually marks the standard of achievement of a civilisation. It should not be necessary to emphasise this, for during the great civilisations of Greece, Rome and the Renaissance, or our own 18<sup>th</sup> century, education was incomplete without a thorough grounding in aesthetics.' In his design for the first phase of the campus, Spence emphasised rounded arches, stark verticals and drum shapes so that those walking around the completed site would be aware of the unity and coherence of its overall patterning. As well as conveying echoes of past styles, the beauty of the architecture had for Spence an over-riding purpose – to civilise those who inhabited it. Spence explained that he had insisted on robust Arts and Crafts-style furnishing and internal fittings for Falmer House in anticipation of the robustness of the young who were, he noted, in need of civilising.

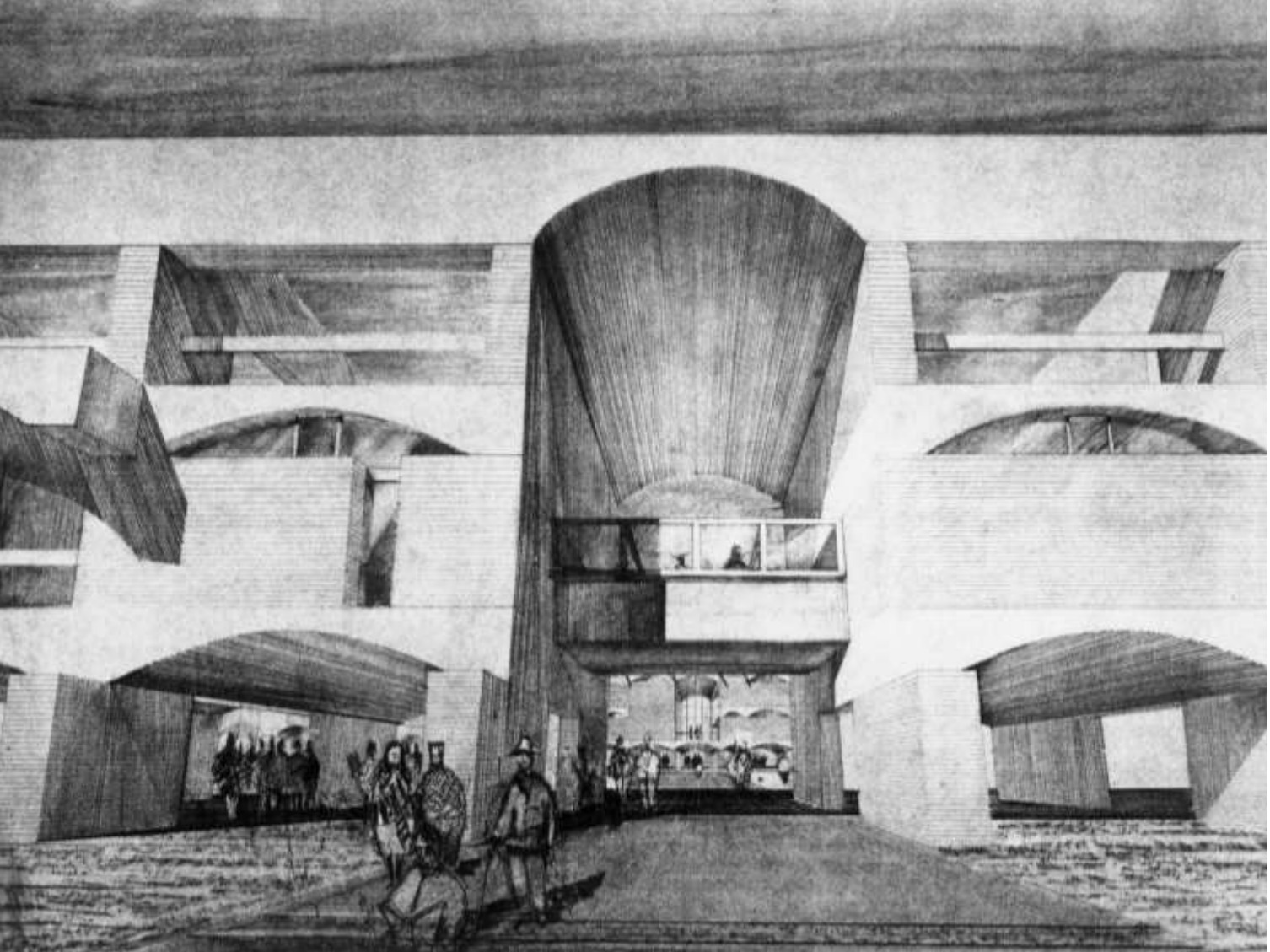
Spence, who had received a first-class traditional education in Scotland, repeated what had been the conventional view of the university since the Greeks and mediated to the twentieth century by the writers and scholars of the Renaissance and Romanticism: the idea that a university should have as its primary function the inculcation of the higher faculties at the expense of cruder and more violent ones. To a man who had taken part as a soldier in the D-Day landings, the idea that individuals and masses could be destructive and violent would not seem so surprising. In designing Falmer House and the first stage of the university, Spence brought into play the basic assumptions of the educated elite of the immediate post-war period, that same elite which planned the new University, designed its innovative syllabus, established its distinctive interdisciplinary 'map of learning' and set up its distinctive Schools of study.

## Falmer House: Modernism, Reconstruction and Ruin

T.S.Eliot: 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins' *The Waste Land*, V, 430

The design of Falmer House, the Library, the Physics Building, the Meeting House, the Asa Briggs Lecture Theatres, Library Square and the Gardner Centre (now the Attenborough Centre for the Creative Arts) is at once a reminder of the classical and Judeo-Christian origins of European culture and of the need to return to them; but as a modernist site, in keeping with the work of the leading modernist writers and intellectuals of Spence's generation, it is also a questioning of them in the light of the horrors of European history in the twentieth century: the First World War, the rise of communism and fascism, the Second World War, the Holocaust and post-war totalitarianism.

One of the most striking features of Falmer House, given its subtle and deeply considered combination of elements (including the façade overlooking the campus which resembles a camera) is



its sense of incompleteness. There are sections in the upper stories of the façade through which the visitor enters the University and the façade on the right hand side which are empty, braced by girders and open to the elements. Spence suggested that his design was provisional to allow for later developments but the effect of the design is to add to the new building an echo or anticipation of its ruin. Spence limited his discussion of the design of Sussex to questions of function and of aesthetic effect and we need to speculate on the unvoiced purposes behind his design. There is indeed something remarkable about building a new building in the form of a ruin and the reason is not hard to fathom. In building a new university aligned in large part to the public spirit of post-war utopianism, Spence wanted to remind its users of the rift of violence which runs through European history as surely as it does through the Colosseum and through his own Falmer House. If it is a mnemonic structure, echoing the architectural origins of European culture, it is also a reminder of the fragile basis of civilisation, of the violence which may lie within its origins or which may threaten it from outside. The Library was developed from the design of a Mycenaean treasure-house, the most famous of which is Agamemnon's tomb, Agamemnon being King of Mycenae and instigator of the Trojan War. Spence bases his principal design on the Colosseum, site of imperial triumphalism and brutality, but able, as a ruin, to be used as the inspiration for a building shorn precisely of those values. We see similar acts of transformation where the arts of war are turned into the arts of peace: the water feature in the quadrangle of Falmer House is a moat, the defensive feature of the medieval castle, but is turned by Spence into a decorative feature, a means of inducing reflection and calm. Spence designed the new University during the most anxious years of the Cold War and Sussex admitted its first students as the Cuban missile crisis broke out and it seemed likely that Europe would be annihilated in a nuclear exchange between Russia and the United States.

The University was also planned and designed at a time when Britain was undergoing epochal change as the British Empire was being dismantled and many in all political parties favoured a European future for the country through accession to the Common Market, forerunner of the European Union. Those founding the new universities were aware that they had to acknowledge the changed geo-political order of the post-war period. No one expressed these ideas more cogently than Martin Wight, first dean of the



School of European Studies, in *The Idea of a New University: an Experiment in Sussex* (1964), edited by the English scholar David Daiches. Wight, an expert in international relations and as well-versed in German Romantic poetry as in global politics, emphasised the novelty of the University in establishing a School of European Studies, the first in the country. 'Europe is the seat of our own civilisation,' he insisted. Yet he was conscious – as a result of the shifts in geo-political power during and after the Second War and in the light of the self-destruction of Europe during that period - that the notion of European culture was profoundly under question. The very use of the term European was, he argued, a signal that Europe was now a relative rather than a central power. He suggested that Europe had become aware of itself amidst destruction, ruin and reconstruction, its culture one amongst many, now set in significant but no longer dominant relationship to American, African, Asian and other non-European cultures.

'Early press articles commented on the University's resemblance to an American liberal arts college,' Campbell reminds us, 'but at Sussex there was also a persistent assertion on the importance of European cultural roots.' In the wake of European fascism, the Second World War, the Holocaust and post-war totalitarianism, the assertion of European cultural roots could hardly escape critique. How had the richest and culturally most developed continent in the world also produced barbarism on an unimaginable scale? This was the question underlying the ambitious course the first students of humanities at Sussex took in their final year, the *Modern European Mind*. Marx, Darwin, Freud, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Joseph Conrad, D.H.Lawrence, Thomas Mann and Jean-Paul Sartre: how had these reflected on emotions and ideas which had been so destructive to European culture? How had they themselves contributed to that



destructiveness? Nor were such questions reserved for those studying the humanities. Standing opposite Falmer House on the campus square (although built at a later date) is a tuning fork at the entrance to the original, combined lecture theatres for the arts and for the sciences, symbolic of the ancient harmony of the arts and the sciences. The School of English, with its scholars concerned with the medical humanities in the Renaissance and the impact of eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century scientific thinking on writing and culture, maintains the University's crucial inaugural link between the arts and the sciences.

When Europe faced the possibility of nuclear destruction and scientists were actively involved in debating the ethics of science, scientists at Sussex in the 1960s, like the philosophers of the Stoa of Attalos, were to be involved in debates about truth, justice and the good life. The University of Sussex has been unique amongst British universities in not accepting research funding from the Ministry of Defence, one of the most generous donor of funds for scientific research in Britain during the Cold War. Its scientists and scholars of the humanities maintain a tradition of debating the links between ethics and scientific research.

## Architecture, Memory and Forgetfulness

The façade of Falmer House overlooking the campus is strikingly at odds with the design of the rest of the building. The drum on top of the left side of the building is a camera button; the triangular shape in the middle a viewfinder. This façade is in many ways the most intriguing and elusive aspect of Spence's architectural thinking. For some it is his celebration of the new which places Sussex at the heart of the design culture of the 1960s, the decade of fashion, consumption and eye-catching style. It has, of course, other possible significances. A camera is an instrument of representation, of record, of memory – and it perhaps symbolises what will be fixed on the mind of the students who traverse and inhabit a building full of echoes of European culture from the classical period to the contemporary. But a camera is also an instrument of forgetting, disconnecting us from contexts, creating forgetfulness as much as it counteracts

it. It is as if Spence built into the structure of his own modernist mnemonic structure a poignant reminder of how a culture needs to remember its past and a warning too of how quickly its cultural memory fades.

## The School of English and the University's Distinctive Intellectual Legacy

With its Centres for Early Modern Studies, Modernist Studies, Sexual Dissidence, Visual Fields and Creative and Critical Thought and its close association with the Centre for American Studies, the Centre for German-Jewish Studies and the Centre for the Study of History and War, the School of English builds upon a unique intellectual legacy. Its degree programme, with its wide-ranging engagement with the literature of the past, including that of ancient Greece, the medieval and early modern period and its equally wide-ranging engagement with the literature of the modern and contemporary remains committed to the critical spirit of interrogation and recollection. 'A university which is concerned only with the communication of existing knowledge,' Asa Briggs wrote in 1964, outlining the uniqueness of Sussex's new 'maps of learning', 'is not really a university at all. The pursuit of new knowledge is a necessary part of its work and a guarantee that it will take its place in the international comity of universities.'

Under the guidance of internationally renowned scholars, students in the School of English can study the literature of conflict and of empire from the Elizabethan period to the present, including courses on Irish literature and on Islam and the West; they can study medieval and modern travel writing, the literature of education, the representation of the medieval and the modern body, the literature of slavery and the Romantic writers opposed to slavery; they can study the influence of economic thinking on the writing of the eighteenth century and of religion on the writing of the Victorian period; they can study the writing of the First World War and post-1945 writing reflecting upon the moral and intellectual consequences of the Second, including the Holocaust. They can, in courses on fiction, drama and poetry, engage with questions of political, social and cultural change and revolution, with questions of sexual identity, feminism and queer culture, with the postcolonial and the effects of European imperialism; with the impact of new technologies, photography, film, radio and the mass media; with psychoanalysis and the works of modern

and contemporary European philosophers; with American writing of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century; with past and current European and American traditions of conservative and radical thought; with the literatures of Europe, Africa, Asia and the Caribbean and with contemporary world literature; they can write creatively and be part of the University's large and vibrant culture of the creative arts. They can, in tune with the University's modernist architectural heritage, return interrogatively to the origins of European and English culture and be critically alive to the present by reading contemporary writing concerned with the challenges of environmental crisis, genetic manipulation, human engineering, social inequality, globalisation, the rise of the new superpowers and the powers of capital and of the surveillance state

Dr Alistair Davies  
School of English  
University of Sussex  
2014

## Image credits

### Cover

View of Model (Falmer House) 1961-1966

Anthony Blee

Sir Basil Spence Archive

### Inside Cover Page 3

Sketch elevation of Falmer House 1961

Sir Basil Spence Archive

### Page 7

Stanmer House 2012 used by kind permission of Dr Paul Cecil

### Page 10

Colosseum, Rome 2011 used by kind permission of Louise Winters

### Page 11

Sketch perspective of Meeting House. 1965-1966

Sir Basil Spence Archive

### Page 12

Falmer House, University of Sussex. Falmer: the dining hall with mural by Ivon Hitchens 1962

Henk Snoek / RIBA Library Photographs Collection.

### Page 14

Falmer House. Sketch of N entrance. 1961

Sir Basil Spence Archive

### Page 16

Campus images, University of Sussex

### Page 21

Sketch perspective of Arts Building. 1962-1963

Sir Basil Spence Archive

### Back cover

Falmer House (vignette of sky) University of Sussex

