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## HOW TO KILL THE STREET WITHOUT DESTROYING THE BUILDINGS

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### JAK „ZABIĆ” ULICĘ BEZ NISZCZENIA BUDYNKÓW

#### **Abstract**

A discussion of the manner in which Oxford University institutions have modified the historic street structure and its character by acquiring whole blocks or by inserting new buildings, which ignore the street context, in the pursuit of promotional advantages.

**Keywords:** streets, university development, Oxford, loss of character

#### **Streszczenie**

Artykuł stanowi omówienie sposobu, w jaki instytucje Uniwersytetu Oksfordzkiego zmodyfikowały historyczną strukturę ulicy i jej charakter poprzez nabycie całych bloków lub wstawienie nowych budynków, których obecność bagatelizuje kontekst uliczny w dążeniu do korzyści promocyjnych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ulice, rozwój uniwersytetów, Oxford, utrata charakteru

## 1. Introduction

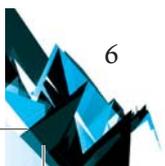
Architects trained in the 1960s were exhorted in the words of that icon of modern architecture and urbanism Le Corbusier, to kill the corridor street (*il faut tuer le rue-corridor*) [3]. In order to achieve this it was necessary to destroy all the buildings as le Corbusier (1930) so dramatically demonstrated in his Plan Voisin for Paris of 1925 where he proposed to wipe away the old city and replace it by free standing blocks in a landscape of motor roads and tree planted open space. This vision became the model for many of the post World War 2 housing projects in Europe and the United States until its validity began to be questioned before falling out of favour in Britain with the Ronan Point explosion in 1968 [6] and in the United States in the 1970s with the demolition of the Pruitt- Igoe apartments [5].

The last half century has been spent trying to reverse this approach and recover the street as the basis of urbanism in Europe and the United States [1, 4]. However, less destructive ways of destroying the street than those proposed by le Corbusier have been largely ignored in this quest to restore its importance as the prime element of the city. Recent examples in the historic city of Oxford, all the result of developments for the University of Oxford demonstrate how this has been achieved and are discussed in this article which describes four recent projects undertaken by colleges and university institutions. Two involve the acquisition and change of use of buildings while retaining intact the physical fabric and two involve inserting a free standing building into a street. The first two examples were undertaken by Pembroke and St. Hugh's Colleges, two of the independent thirty seven colleges which form the University of Oxford which functions as a federation with examinations and some teaching undertaken by central institutions. The last two cases considered, the Blavatnik School of Government and the Said Business School are both examples of privately sponsored new teaching and research facilities.

## 2. Pembroke College

This college of around 600 students has a central urban location and was founded in 1624. Surrounded by ancient streets it was difficult to expand by the construction of new buildings although it has managed to do this by building some new accommodation on an adjacent urban block linked to the old college by a pedestrian bridge over an existing street [5]. Another way it has expanded is by moving into adjacent old houses lining Pembroke Street running east west on the south side of the college. These dwellings are in the Central Oxford Conservation Area, which means that the fabric of the buildings is protected from major alterations. In addition to opening to the street these former row houses on narrow frontage burgage plots also had access from the narrow Beef Lane at their rear.

Having acquired the houses (according to Wikipedia in 2015 the College was reported to have an endowment of 46.9 million sterling ) they were linked to the college by entrances onto Beef Lane which was then closed to public access and its entire length incorporated within its property boundaries . In the interests of restricting access to the closely controlled single college main gate, the entrances onto the street were sealed and the former houses



were entered from the rear i.e. within the boundaries of the College.. Although the doors to Pembroke Street were retained, most of them were sealed but in some cases the door handles were retained. These false front doors are easily identified by the spider webs around the door handles. Thus the structure of the old houses has been conserved and the facade of the street has been retained which fulfils the objectives of the conservation plan even though the entrances are fake. The question arises as to whether a street with no entrances can be considered a street or it is just no more than a stage set.

### **3. St Hugh's College**

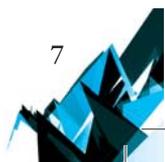
Originally founded as a women's college in 1886 St. Hugh's college is located in a square urban block in the suburb of North Oxford one kilometre from the city centre [9]. This is an area where the predominant form of development is large detached family houses with extensive private gardens. A number of these were initially purchased and demolished to enable the construction of new college buildings and a library. Subsequently over a number of years all the houses in the urban block of some 5.6 hectares were purchased and those which were not demolished were converted into accommodation entered from the inside of the block where a number of new buildings were constructed in the extensive rear gardens .

To access these premises a paved interior path with street lighting has been constructed. Three of the streets surrounding the urban block are therefore lined with what are single family detached houses but are in fact college buildings accessed from the rear. The only clues to their function are the metal plaques on the street side gate posts. Once again the buildings defining the street have been conserved but their function and ownership has been disguised. It is a piece of townscape, another urban stage set.

### **4. Blavatnik School of Government**

This building, named after its sponsor, was opened in 2015 and is located on Walton Street, a radial route from the centre of Oxford which runs through a former working class and industrial extension of the old city which has been heavily gentrified in the last forty years [2]. The site is adjoined by a former church in the form of a classical temple originally built in 1836 to serve the working class suburb and now converted to a night club. On the other side of the new building is an old urban house designed to face onto the street with its now exposed side elevations obviously a party walls which was never intended to be exposed.

The Blavatnik's existing neighbours were built as part of a street on the assumption their side elevations would be hidden by other buildings fronting onto the street. By setting back the new building the architects have exposed the side elevations of the existing buildings in a way to which they were never intended. This setting back has also resulted in a space along the street which is of very little use – neither shelter from the weather nor offering seating which might have justified its formation. The continuity of the street has been destroyed in order to



provide a space to view the new building. Together with the style of this building which does not seem to refer to anything in the context it suggests that the driving force for this building is a desire to market the new institution at the expense of every other consideration.

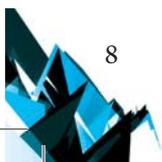
## **5. Said Business School**

This institution, also named after its benefactor, was completed in 2001 on the former site of a railway station near the city centre in an area that has and is still undergoing considerable changes to its fabric [8]. Its front elevation facing an important entry space to the city centre has a lofty portico over a flight of steps. The elevation to the station has been carefully considered even though it has no openings at ground level. The long side elevation facing a fire station is clearly the back of house where refuse bins are collected and service deliveries arrive. The rear elevation faces north at the end of a short residential cul de sac of two storey row houses which predate the University building. It is an important pedestrian and cycle link to the railway station. The new building towers oppressively over the small houses. Trees have been planted to screen the new building but they will take time to grow and the planting of trees to hide a new building cannot be regarded as a celebration of the quality of its architecture. The new building also blocks the southern sunlight to the residential street which is a problem in the winter when sunlight in England is a precious commodity.

## **6. Conclusions**

In all these cases the buildings have been retained but the nature of the street has been radically changed in different ways. In the first two cases the form of the street has been kept which accords with the tenets of the townscape school as set out by Gordon Cullen and his followers in the 1960s as a reaction to le Corbusier's exhortation. However these streets can be considered to represent a "landscape of deception" in that the buildings although looking like private houses accommodate other uses. Furthermore the logic of the street block has been reversed because the retained buildings are entered from their private side inside the blocks i.e. the fronts are not longer fronts. In the case of Pembroke Street the question arises as to whether a street whose doorways are obviously blocked and which do not allow movement from the public space to the private space inside the buildings can really be called a street. In both these cases a form of gated community has been created although it can be argued that they are following the typology of the monastery from which the Oxford colleges are of course derived.

In the last two cases the structure of the street has been disrupted in different ways. The Blavatnik has destroyed the enclosure of the street in the interest of the marketing of an expensive new facility. In the last case, the Said Business School, an out of scale intrusion has destroyed the amenity of a modest residential street of no great architectural merit but which represents the investment and aspirations of a dozen families.



Finally, these cases show how a city can be progressively taken over by powerful and wealthy organisations. In this case they are public charitable institutions which behave like developers in their search for space to occupy for their own advantage and use new buildings to promote their corporate image. As a result of pursuing these objectives they are contributing to the removal of non academic uses and the conversion of the city into a monoculture ... even though the buildings are retained.

## References

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## Pembroke College

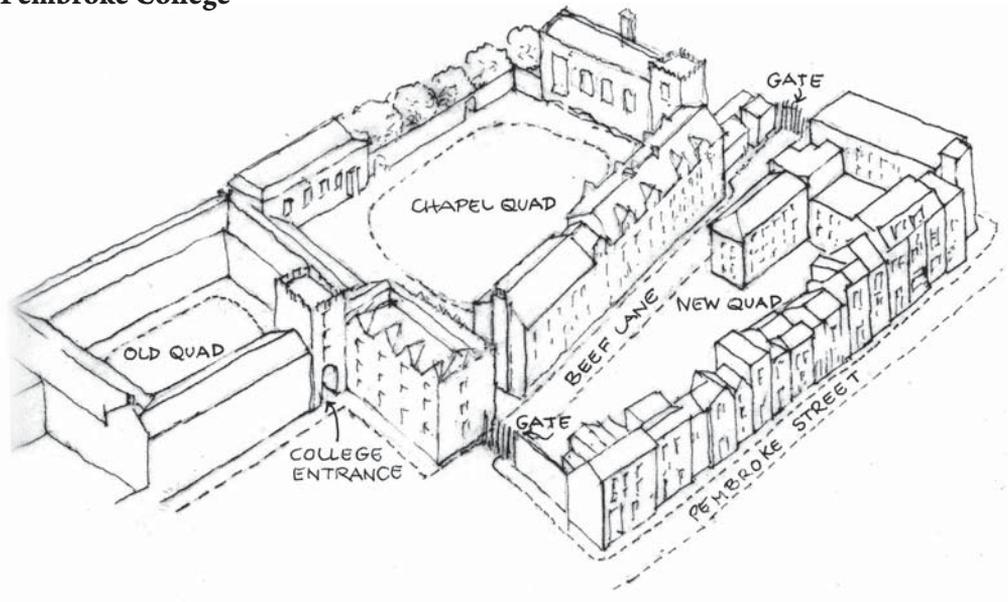


Fig. 1. Pembroke College showing the houses along Pembroke Street opening to the rear and Beef Lane now closed (drawing by I. Samuels)



Fig. 2. Pembroke Street houses all now part of Pembroke College and entered from the rear (photo by I. Samuels)



Fig. 3. Doors without handles on Pembroke Street (photo by I. Samuels)



Fig. 4. The locked gate to Beef Lane, now closed (photo by I. Samuels)

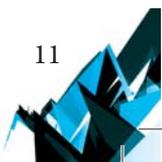




Fig. 5. The New Quad looking along the line of Beef Lane . On the right the backs of houses along  
Pembroke Street (photo by I. Samuels)

### St Hugh's College

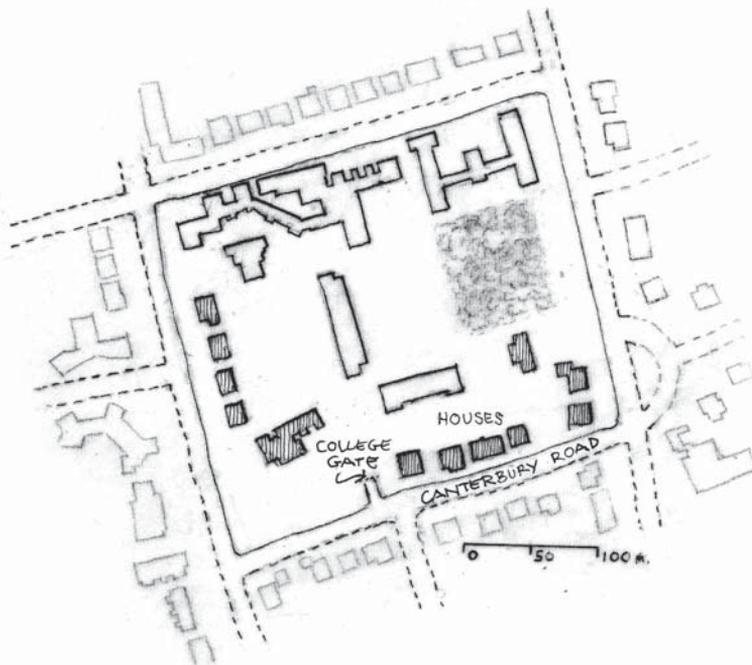


Fig. 6. Plan of the rectangular urban block owned by St Hugh's College showing new college buildings  
and existing houses (drawing by I. Samuels)

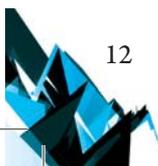




Fig. 7. New buildings inside the urban block (photo by I. Samuels)



Fig. 8. Houses owned by St Hugh's College on Canterbury Road (photo by I. Samuels)

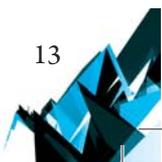




Fig. 9. Plaque indicating ownership of detached house (photo by I. Samuels)



Fig. 10. Gate leading to inside of block (photo by I. Samuels)



Fig. 11. Private internal street showing access to rear of houses on Canterbury Road  
(photo by I. Samuels)

### **Blavatnik School of Government**

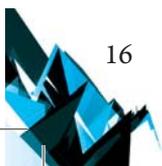


Fig. 12. The new space created is of little benefit - except to view the new building (photo by I. Samuels)





Fig. 13. and 14 Walton Street with the new School set back exposing the sides of neighbouring buildings (photo by I. Samuels)



## Said Business School



Fig. 15. The main Business School facade facing one of the main entrystreets to Oxford . The tower is a reference to the “dreaming spires” of the University of Oxford (photo by I. Samuels)



Fig. 16. A side elevation with only service doors facing the street (photo by I. Samuels)





Fig. 17. The north elevation dominating the small scale residential street (photo by I. Samuels)