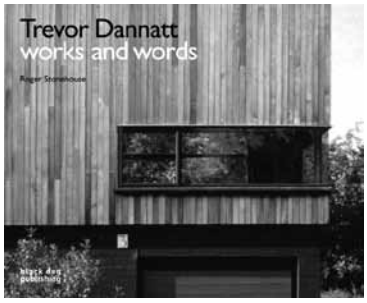
Trevor Dannatt
Interviewed by
Charles Rattray
and Ivor Richards

Subject and object



The Laslett house, featured on the cover of Trevor Dannatt: Works and Words, *fuses the architect's influences of Aalto and the cubistic tradition of Le Corbusier*

Trevor Dannatt is a rare witness to architectural events that few in the profession can now recall. The architect celebrated his ninetieth birthday at the Royal Academy in January 2010 and this year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the opening of London's Royal Festival Hall (RFH) on which he worked with Leslie Martin and Peter Moro. Trevor Dannatt: Works and Words, *by Roger Stonehouse – a sort of collected works – was published in 2008 (Black Dog Publishing, London). He studied at the Regent Street Polytechnic in London under Moro and began in practice after following Moro's advice, to 'try Leslie Martin and try Jane Drew'. It was, he recalls 'like a seminar going to an interview with Leslie' but the work, on LMS railway stations, didn't interest him. So he decided to see Jane Drew who gave him a job right away after interviewing him, rather bizarrely, on a Marcel Breuer chaise longue.*

I wanted to get into the real world – not that the Jane Drew world was very real, considering what was going on. We were fiddling around with six, I think it was, wartime agricultural cottages and then Jane got this famous job of Kitchen Consultant to the Gas Council. She was appointed to do kitchens because women architects were supposed to know about kitchens.

In the book you remark on these small kitchens with women working in them and their male partners waiting to be fed.

Yes, it was strange; Jane was quite a feminist, I guess, but the brochures all had this message that that was the structure of the family.
With Dannatt, Jane Drew edited the first volumes of The Architects' Year Book *(AYB), published by Paul Elek in ten volumes between 1948 and 1962: 'I suppose I was fairly literate and Jane liked me, so I got involved'. From AYB 4 (1952) he was sole editor.*

In the first AYB of 1945 it says: 'It is our hope that this book will give help and inspiration to war-weary architects once more starting the joyous task of creation'. Was the feeling of the time very optimistic?

I'm sure Jane wrote that, a modern humanitarian architect; I can just see her saying that.

So did she see the AYB as making a contribution to architecture generally?

I should think so, yes. She took the book *Circle* [1937, edited by Naum Gabo, Leslie Martin and Ben Nicholson] as a model.

It wasn't published every year, was it?

That's why it was called the architects' *last* year book. They never got it out on time. It was eighteen months between them for all sorts of reasons, one of which was that Elek never paid his contributors. I instituted the idea of not passing over the page proofs until he had paid the last year's contributors – and paid me.

That first volume of the Year Book is relatively UK-centred while later ones were more Scandinavia-influenced. Scandinavian design has been a big influence on your own work presumably since your first visit to Sweden just after the war, in 1946.

Yes, I went with my friend Gordon Bowyer who was two years behind me at the Poly. We had this

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wonderful experience of going down to Tilbury from St Pancras, through burned-out docklands and then into this pristine Swedish boat, the M. V. *Saga: [adopts Swedish accent]* 'Ah, the *Saga*, she is a good ship, yes'. We got through all this grot and there was this white ship and in it the smorgasbord laid out for dinner. That was an architectural experience in itself. In Gothenburg we saw the concert hall, which is very interesting because it has a foyer that goes right the way under the auditorium – a sort of prototype for the Royal Festival Hall. I got introductions from the Year Book.

Through your friendship with the architect Finn Juhl you went to Denmark the next year, 1947. Had you met him through the Jane Drew office?

Yes. Max [Drew's husband, Max Fry] came into the office and said: 'Trevor, there's this Danish architect wants to talk to me about hotels; would you entertain him?' Not that Max had done any hotels, but he was the sort of man a progressive architect in Denmark would have suggested Finn Juhl called on.

The Fry Drew office [it was known as Fry Drew from 1946] seems to have been a sort of magnet. Was that because of Fry's connection with the MARS Group [Modern Architecture Research Group]?

Yes, and CIAM [the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne]. He was the leading English Modernist, I suppose – in those simplistic terms; he had quite a lot of published work from before the war, from working with Gropius.

Impington [Village College, Cambridgeshire] was an important project. Returning to Finn Juhl, his house was published in AYB 2.

It was a white-painted house, built during the war, with very limited means in a way – but by English standards very good means. Ove Arup did the translation for me; he was very supportive and he had time then to talk to me and help me with the presentation of several Danish buildings. It was through Finn that I got to know Edgar Kaufmann Jr, which was my connection with America. He was a wonderful man.

The son of the man who commissioned Falling Water.

Yes, we called him the midwife [of the project]. He had been in the Wright atelier for about a year or so and was very much persuaded by him. I met Wright of course when he came to see the Festival Hall: *[adopts an American accent]* 'All right for a dance-band'.

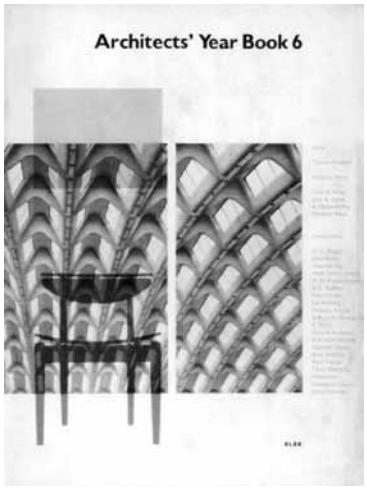
The auditorium?

Yes, he had a mad theory about blowing in the sound with the air-conditioning. He thought the air movement should be going with the sound. There was a party for him, which I went to. Everyone else was so shy that I thought well, I'll go and talk to him – and he was really very nice, very expansive and he empathised.



Trevor Dannatt standing in his own architecture of flowing public space: the foyers and stairs of the Royal Festival Hall, London, after refurbishment in 2007 (photo by Steve Speller)

'Leslie lent me a Ben Nicholson'



Scandinavian influence: the cover of *The Architects' Year Book 6*, with furniture by Finn Juhl overlaid on the architecture of Pier Luigi Nervi

Wasn't he usually very condescending?

I didn't find that at all.

Not to you, perhaps, but when he came to see the Festival Hall ...

... oh yes, he was very much the grand master.

He had worked with Sullivan on the Chicago Auditorium, of course. Did he really say to the Royal Festival Hall team: 'have any of you boys ever done an auditorium before?'

Absolutely!

You've said elsewhere that there was a wish to enrich modern architecture at that time, 1948–51. What happened to that idea and what did it mean?

I certainly think that when we were doing the elevations (if you can put it that way) we were intent on a richer sort of architecture. There had been an article in *The Architectural Review* about modern decoration or the enrichment of buildings and there might have been an element of that seeping into the Moro consciousness. I'm not sure whether Leslie approved of it or not but we did it and it looked damned good.

Internally?

I think we all thought that a concert hall should have some of the qualities that traditional concert halls have and, as someone remarked, timber and concert halls go together.

Like a wooden instrument.

It's probably a false analogy, but a lot of good art comes from false analogy. I think it was a strong operating thing and Peter was a very good architect in that enrichment. His house at Birdham [1938–40] was very enriched for its day and at his Nottingham Playhouse [1963] he was concerned about the feeling of the theatre, trying to produce a modern equivalent to the rose fabric and shaded lights of a Baroque theatre.

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The RFH is an important project but, perhaps because of your modesty, there's not as much about it in your book as one might expect. You worked on the RFH staircases and galleries. How did that work: did you propose details?

There was an implication in the general eighth scale plans of the pattern of the staircases; I took that and developed it, working with engineers to cantilever things out.

These are some of the finest stairs to use …

… they are jolly good …

… because of those marvellous continuing handrails and an ease about the proportions of tread and rise that is very beautifully held. They contribute to a great sense of occasion.

I certainly like to claim them; they were inherent in the design but the actual development was left to me, which was rather marvellous. It's a bit like: 'what did you do in the Great War, Daddy?' 'Well – I was an ambulance-driver'.

The balusters were very fine, too. Were you the originator of those?

No, that was Peter Moro – he liked that shape very much. You can see it in a Peter Moro painting I have that I'll show you …

Was he the person controlling the design?

Oh yes, absolutely. The carpet, for instance: he invented that design and then Leslie added the circle dot, which came from Leslie's interest in Ben Nicholson.

The original exterior was …

… was Leslie. We knew all the parameters of the river front – all the levels were worked out, the extent of glazing that we felt was necessary – and we all struggled with this. And Leslie came, one splendid morning with this sort of 'beak' idea [the drop at the top level], which was a fantastic moment. It was a brilliant solution and I think it's tragic that they let it go along with the chequerboard patterning. [The exterior was changed when the hall was extended in 1962.]

You designed an amazing canopy at the south side …

… which was based on discussions with Leslie: 'we have to do something about this door' – you know. He was always there, originating things. The canopy is a very Festival of Britain thing.



The central 'beak' – the downstand at the top level – of the original Royal Festival Hall river front, LCC Architects (Leslie Martin et al.), 1951

'Wright had a mad theory …'



Ben Nicholson inspired: floating planes at the Tea Bar, the Festival of Britain, 1951

Were things like the Copenhagen panelling that surrounded the auditorium mainly acoustical?

Yes. We got acoustic information from Hope Bagnall and Peter Parker – we've got to have that there and that there, more absorption, less absorption. In the event we got too much absorption.

The positioning of the building was unfortunate because it was next to the railway bridge. What about the original idea for overcoming the acoustic problem – the 'egg in the box'? Where did Robert Matthew make a contribution?

I have no idea. I always thought it was Leslie. But maybe they did it together; I don't know. I see it as a Leslian hallmark.

Bernard Levin wrote in *The Times* that the hall's galleries and stairs were so successful that attendants had difficulty in getting the audience to leave after a performance.

There was a film made of the recent refurbishment [by Allies and Morrison, 2007]. They interviewed me, and the chap who came challenged me and said 'why do we bother about it? – it's only a building'. I said: 'Scientists tell us that people are only carbon – but we fall in love'. I thought it was a complete answer.

One of your best early projects is the Tea Bar at the Festival of Britain.

It was absolutely Ben Nicholson inspired – the floating planes: three ceiling planes and one was semi-transparent.

Was your interest in Ben Nicholson coincidental with Leslie's interest in him?

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That's an interesting point. I went to see Leslie about writing an article on the Festival Hall [in the AYB] and we had become a bit more intimate I suppose, and Leslie lent me a Ben Nicholson which I could buy if I wanted to. I didn't, I regret to say. It was one of the flat abstract ones, just planes. So I think yes, Nicholson was very much part of my consciousness.

In 1956 you went to Finland for the first time; what buildings of Aalto did you see?

There was a piece I did for *Architectural Design* on that. Among other things I saw Otaniemi, the Pensions Building (which had just been completed) and Rautatalo, which was the most significant one, I thought. And then we went up to Jyvaskyla; we saw the University, Saynatsalo Town Hall, went to the summer-house, met Elissa Aalto and swam in the lake.

Has Scandinavia been your major influence?

Yes, in the broad sense. I think it offered a humane sort of architecture, which was Modernist if one can use the expression. But I'm also a colossal admirer of Corbusier; I had the first volume of the complete works in 1941.

The Laslett house in Cambridge (1958) is dealt with in depth in the book. But it seems to be different from most of your other work as a cubic pavilion. Was it related to Aalto's own house at Munkkiniemi?

What set the Laslett house going was the rough piece of land that they had and their brief. It's true to say that I was aware of Aalto's house because I had the Museum of Modern Art publication on Aalto. I think the vertical boarding might come from there. But also there was a sort of rationality about it because the dip in the site indicated a possible half level for the living room with a double height or very high ceiling. Then I got the idea that if you had a timber wall you'd get a larger floor area at the upper level, which was a nice thing.

Pitcorthie House in Fife (1966) always seemed like the making of a complete place.

There had been a house there that had burned down and an inherent courtyard. The Balneils came to me – I may say on the recommendation of Denys Lasdun, who had recommended Stirling, the Smithsons and me – and I got the job; it was going to be their weekend house. I had had this idea of a gallery with an office that you could shut off.

The living room has one column that gives you a kind of secondary space and then the fireplace stack rises with light coming from two directions. As one of your monopitch houses it seems very characteristic since it recalls something of the Scandinavian influence. It is also a fabulous plan with a wonderful sense of flowing space and you have things happening on section that work very gracefully.

I really enjoyed doing it and there was the bonus of staying in the old house with the old Lord Crawford, who was such a charming man.

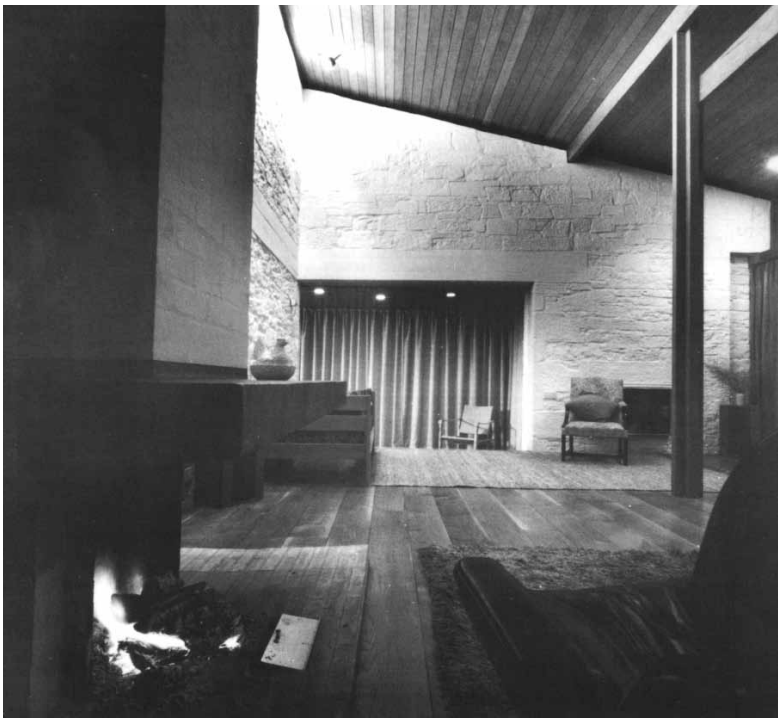
It is surprising that there are no details of any of your buildings in the recent book; it is not just the concepts but the very high quality of detailing that you were well known for.

Well I rather liked Roger [Stonehouse] being the writer and my being detached. The emphasis was then on what came from his



Pitcorthie House, 1966. An unprecedented plan: planar discipline in a fluid spatial composition. The gallery can be compartmented by sliding panels

'Lasdun recommended Stirling, the Smithsons and me – and I got the job'



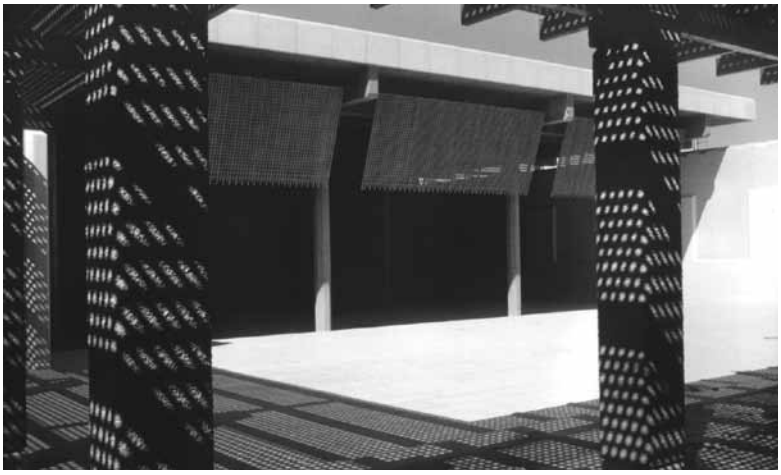
Hearth and home: Pitcorthie House, fireplace and living room. Monopitch roofs that introduce light are a central theme of Dannatt's domestic architecture

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The integration of structure, services and form: Riyadh Conference Centre, foyer, 1975

'Ted Happold and I thought we'd like to demonstrate British integrity … and never got any more work, of course'



Orchestration of shade and light in the entry courtyard of a modest sacred space: Riyadh Mosque, 1975

intellectual perception of what the work was about.

Your talk in the 'Architect's Approach to Architecture' series, given at the RIBA in 1969 was reproduced in the first book on your work but is only referred to in this new book. In it you talked about monument and matrix in the city and the merits of 'prosaic buildings'.

I do still hold that view very strongly, that it is better to make a modest building rather than an ambitious one unless you've got the right subjects. For example I feel that in Denys Lasdun's Royal College of Physicians the architecture and the subject are absolutely completely integrated and then express the honour and dignity of the medical profession. Some people may see it as pompous or overdone; I don't agree – I think it is Denys's greatest building, a complete accord between subject and object.

Your conference complex in Riyadh (won in competition and completed in 1975) is an interesting reflection on that. It was a great breakthrough for a British architect to build in Saudi Arabia then.

It was unique in that Egyptian architects had designed everything before then. Ted Happold [the engineer, then at Arup] and I thought we'd like to demonstrate British integrity; we never took any bribes or anything like that – and never got any more work of course!

There's a use of geometry there that is very important and some of it seems reminiscent of Wright. Did you have some of his disciplines in mind, such as the 30/60 geometry?

I don't think it crossed my mind as having anything to do with Wright. The generative theme was in two words: the 'temple' and the 'residential hill', which we carried out in terms of white and earth colours.

And the tartan matrix? – you'd not used that before.

No – it's the same as Stansted [Airport] …

… but twenty-five years earlier. It deals with servicing and does away with the need for suspended ceilings.

The generating thing there, like a lot of things in architecture, is an idea about one issue, which you solve, and then that idea runs on into the building – but the problem doesn't exist any more. That heavy structure was designed in relation to rooftop car-parking …

… which was then eliminated.

Yes, but we'd already got this idea of bringing the air handling through the ducts and then up the four columns with glass enclosure.

Things change.

The mosque was interesting on that. I learned something from it, because we had it aligned with the road (the direction of Mecca was exactly parallel to the road) but the local imam said it wasn't right. He came with his old-fashioned compass and we had to change it – and of course that improved it immensely. It made me think that we build everything too quickly, and too much at the same time. One of the nicest things that happened on the job was that I arrived one evening and Peter Woodward, who was Arup's engineer in charge of the project, met me as usual. We drove to the site and he took me into the mosque, through the pergola and courtyard. They had just finished it and it was lit; it was absolute magic.

Ivor Richards is Emeritus Professor of Architecture at the University of Newcastle. From 1969 to 1990 he was a principal collaborator with Sir Leslie Martin. A long-time friend and colleague of Trevor Dannatt, he collaborated on the refurbishment of the Laslett house in the 1970s

Charles Rattray worked with Ivor Richards in the studio of Sir Leslie Martin and is Associate Editor of **arq**

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