



Senate House: Utopia, Dystopia in Charles Holden's Architecture and its Place as London Literary and Visual Landmark

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The original plan was for Senate House to open in time for the University of London's centenary in the summer of 1936. The idea for a new, centralised, headquarters for the University had been first proposed in 1921. It was hoped that the "existence of a striking block of academic buildings in such a central position might be expected to provide an appeal to the imagination of Londoners," but due to a combination of financial challenges, issues with the purchase of the land from the Bedford estate; protracted negotiations with the Colleges and various internal politics it was not until 29 December 1932 that ground was cut (Harte 200-21). The initial work progressed well with the foundation stone laid by King George V in June 1933. It was a memorable occasion, although as Harte notes it could have been more so: "The Union proposed that the students should sing the Lutheran hymn 'Eine feste Burg ist unser Gott' [A Mighty Fortress is our God]. The Vice-Chancellor did not see the joke, and wrote to the heads of schools to ensure that 'All People that on Earth do Dwell' would be the appropriate hymn" (Harte 221). There followed a rapid progress during the first year of construction; however, building delays accumulated on what is a complex structure with the site still a work in progress by June of 1936. It had been intended that Senate House would be opened by King George V but he had died in the January; regardless, the celebrations of the centenary went ahead between 27 June and 3 July. The administrative move from Imperial took place in the August with the Senate meeting for the first time in November. It seemed to herald a new age for the University of London under its newly knighted Principal Sir Edwin Deller. Sadly, he would be killed on 27 November when, during an inspection visit, a 5cwt builder's truck fell down a temporary lift shaft on top of him.

Those who use the building may have taken it for granted over the years; indeed there may be a certain wood for trees aspect to any impression of both the structure and its location within Bloomsbury. Maybe the presence across Montague Place of the British Museum tends to overwhelm the younger building; the

landscaping of the last fifty years also helping to obscure some of the initial impact Senate House presented when opened. Yet, this building has managed to both fashion a history and project a presence over the last eighty years across the visual and textual fields which does bare critical examination. It has more often than not been employed as a symbol of state dystopia or inertia, a space where for nearly six years it housed one of the more unique Government institutions this country has had cause to create: the Ministry of Information (Telegram address MINIFORM) and it is this initial tenant which serves as focus of this article. This chapter will therefore discuss how the building has been described, perceived and imagined across its initial decade by three major novelists of the period and how they negotiate the role that the Ministry would occupy both as employer and agent of Government policy.¹ What then are the features that define Senate House as an active space; the elements of time, movement and orientation that make it a literary and literal space? This building may have been designed as a symbol of an educational utopia, where "lies infused the most indestructible soul of democracy, the love that yearns that to bring the common heritage of culture to all the children of the land" (Harte 216), but could such a concept: of creating something different and/or better; a place to be desired actually be sustained in the wartime state (Hodgson 4)? Would not the uneasy alliance of the capitalist and the socialised show up such hopes as naïve or unfeasible, a reflection of the original Greek root of Utopia: a place that does not exist.

Some consideration of the architecture and design of Senate House is required to understand the building's narrative and historical development. The design was awarded to Charles Holden in 1931, his most recent project having been the London Underground headquarters at 55 Broadway; a design which in some way anticipated that of Senate House. The initial concept was for a much larger construction that would have run north from Montague Place through to Torrington Street, some 370m. This would have comprised of a central spine with a series of wings linked to the façade with an enclosed set of courtyards. There would have been two towers, the taller at the southern end. Financial constraints and building delays meant that this scheme was rapidly cut back and the spinal scheme was abandoned in 1937. The one element that was completed would be Senate House, rising 66 metres above Bloomsbury with main fronts facing east and west.

The building is designed of a smooth Portland stone above a base of Cornish granite on a concrete base designed to help counter the volumetric properties of the bedrock London clay. Piles were sunk some 10 metres into the ground to reinforce the stabilising elements of the building. The external effect was intended to be powerful, Holden's biographer Eitan Karol has described the façade of Senate House as "extremely sophisticated, with subtle setbacks employed for optical correction, or simply to provide an accent at an appropriate place" (7). For Holden it was a building that appeared with a "quiet insistence" (Karol 7), a comment that

¹ Nicholas Blake (pen-name for Cecil Day-Lewis) would also write a novel about the ministry, *Minute for Murder*. I have made a brief mention of it here, but for reasons of length have omitted it from this particular study except where it does serve to reinforce points made in other texts.

serves as both admiration for and defence of a building that has more than once been compared to the structures being raised in National Socialist Germany or Soviet Russia, criticised for its lack of proportion to the area around it or for its 'questionable' aesthetic choices. (IMAGE 1)

Critical reaction was mixed. Pevsner described the style of the building as puzzling calling it "a strangely traditional, undecided modernism" which lacked the vigour of Holden's underground stations being built concurrently (276). He described it as being of the Twentieth century but with Georgian elements clearly meant to fit in (or appease) the overall design aesthetic of the Bloomsbury estate around it. The east and west buttresses were described as odd and broad with baffling small balconies. He was particularly critical of the steel window frames which he regarded as "unpleasantly mean" but was somewhat more complimentary about the interiors, "spacious public areas, finished with dignified restraint" (276). Its marble floors, bronze fittings and railings, generous processional stair-hall, sizeable conference rooms (the Macmillan and William Beveridge) all complemented what Pevsner called the "administrative dignity of the lavish panelling of the suite ending in the Senate Room and Court Room" (276). Another architectural critic, Arnold Whittick, would describe it as a "static massive pyramid [...] obviously designed to last for a thousand years", but noted that the interior was far more pleasing than the exterior with an "atmosphere of dignity, serenity and repose that one associates with the architecture of ancient Greece" (515). (IMAGE 2) Even Holden had some understanding of the mixed message his building sent out noting it was "not quite in the fashion and not quite out of it; not enough of a traditionalist to please the traditionalists and not enough of a modernist to please the modernists" (Karol 7).

For an all-too short period Senate House enjoyed a passing but magnificent period of glory with its modern interior décor, artfully arranged floral displays, white-gloved pageboys and lift attendants. Topped out in August 1937 it was floodlit for the first time before the presentation of an honorary degree to then Queen Elizabeth. The original 1932 plan for the entire complex had been described as something akin to a battleship; the finished product was more of a Cunard liner. In use, but uncompleted by 1939; it is worth noting that not only was Senate House unfinished (the north-east corner of the North block remains open) but has never been formally opened.

Within days of the outbreak of war Senate House had been requisitioned by the Ministry of Information (MoI) who would remain tenants for almost the duration of the war. Why it was chosen is open to some debate. The first Minister for Information, Lord Macmillan, was Chair of the University Court, although he would only remain for four months resigning in January 1940 and replaced by Lord Reith (McLaine 38-41). Some UCL departments remained initially but these were gradually moved, along with the colleges, to various institutions in the Midlands and Wales over the course of the next twelve months. One of the first writers to be employed was Graham Greene who was offered the post managing the Author's Section of the nascent Ministry. The appointment of a major novelist and critic such as Greene might have expected to create some impact. Yet, in May 1940,

shortly before Greene left, one section head (R.A Bevan) wrote to the Director General: "I am pressing for some change which will enable people who have experience either in politics, *journalism, authorship* [My Italics]," suggesting either that Greene's appointment was not widely discussed or became lost in the system then being established (McLaine 39). Greene's stay may have been brief, some eight months, but it would produce two pieces of work; both of which offer an insight into the nature of work within the MoI.

Richard Skate is Greene's surrogate in the short story 'Men at Work', written in 1940 and originally published in *Nineteen Stories* (1947). Skate is another of Greene's slightly-failed, middle-aged men like Anthony Farrant from *England Made Me* (1934) or Arthur Rowe in *The Ministry of Fear* (1943) just trying to make their way in a world which has passed them by. In this time of war Skate is working as a Civil Servant, serving as secretary to the Book Division, based somewhere on the first floor in Senate House. This is not a comfortable building. In this "high heartless building with complicated lifts and long passages like those of a liner and lavatories where the water never ran hot and the nailbrushes were chained like bibles" the propaganda war was fought (*Nineteen Stories* 159). The nautical analogy of the pre-war years is again employed but is now less Cunard liner, more Merchant Navy where the "central heating gave it a stuffy smell of mid-Atlantic" except for where "windows were always open for fear of blast and the cold winds whistled in" and the messengers "carried round minutes like soup" (159). Skate's room is "built of plywood in a passage" and corridors rapidly become offices with the minimum of space left to manoeuvre in (160). On his way to a meeting he passes "an odd little procession of old men in robes, led by a mace bearer" passing towards Chancellor's Hall "like humble ghosts still carrying out the ritual of another age" (161). In the surroundings designed for their use the academics have now become a strange sideshow, their spectral presence a parallel to the reputed presence of Deller's spectre across the site.

It is a description reflective of both the University's diminishing status within its own building as well as an ironic comment on the new administrators of this proto-information age. McLaine notes that "none of the chief planners possessed specialist qualifications or experience in the field in which he was working" (15). They may have been experienced and patriotic Civil Servants but none of the initial intake of senior staff had any experience in the fields of propaganda, censorship or news production, as R A Bevan, quoted above, noted. It would be this initial lack of understanding of what was required in the fields of propaganda and its management that for the first year or so of the Ministry's existence would affect its credibility. This was not helped by the fact that the press room, in the William Beveridge Hall, was very well set up, enough to have delighted its users (McLaine 35). (IMAGE 3)

Day and night there is a clatter of typewriters/ and a babel of different tongues. [...] On a dais extending right round the room are fifty to sixty telephone boxes, most of them with direct lines to Fleet Street offices. Some of them have pilot lights overhead, after the style of police boxes, so that amidst the clamour of several bells ringing simultaneously the man who cannot hear the particular

bell favoured by his own office can still tell when his own bell is amongst those demanding attention. [...] At the peak of the day there are upwards of a hundred journalists in the room - British, French, Japanese, Italian, Dutch, Swiss, Roumanian, Liberian, Indian, Swedish. About half a dozen of them are women. Many of them speak four or five languages. [...] The room holds row upon row of tables specially made and supplied for the job. A large proportion of the correspondents do all their work at the Ministry, to be near the cable sensors and the Continental telephones. Each man has his own table, with accommodation for locking up important documents. [...] Facilities of this kind were provided in a few hours after the war was declared. They were a real triumph of organisation for one section of the Ministry, particularly when it is so obvious that appreciation of the nature and size of the job on hand was never general amongst the bureaucrats appointed to it. (Riley 43-45)

For Greene the propaganda war was not engaged in as a necessary function of the country at war but more as a "means of passing the time: work was not done for its usefulness but for its own sake - simply as an occupation" (*Nineteen Stories*, 161). Old advertising men are bought into to help with advice on direction; the Treasury and the Stationery Office see to it that these come to nothing for reasons of cost or departmental ego. This early incarnation of the MOI is perceived as a hobby environment where people may be co-opted onto committees just because they are thought to be agreeable; for instance, asks one character, is Priestly available? Policy is to do as little as possible in order to attract the least attention. A pamphlet on the Empire is subject to revision as almost every dominion has an objection: "India objected to a reference to Canadian dairy herds, and Australia objected to a phrase about Botany Bay", etc. (163). Such a sclerosis of effort has taken only months to achieve. At the same time above London the Battle of Britain is being fought and as the old and failed wile away their day in the white sepulchre of the Senate House the few of 11 Fighter Group engage in seminal conflict: "far up in the pale enormous sky little white lines, like the phosphorescent spoor of snails, showed where men were going home after work" (165). Whether these are RAF or Luftwaffe is left unstated; it is the juxtaposition with what has occurred in the committee rooms that tells, the phrase 'going home' an ironic reflection on those whose effort has been so necessary and those whose role seems far less relevant.

Both Greene, and Malcolm Muggeridge who would also work there in the early days, never regarded the work they did for the MoI as making any great impact or having any major point. Greene would recall minutes on a pamphlet about the French military effort initially circulating after the invasion of Belgium and Holland and still being discussed as Paris was being occupied as an example of his disillusionment. Yet Muggeridge would recall that Greene "took a highly professional view of what was expected of us" (Sherry 36). He attempted to persuade Howard Spring to do a pamphlet of 7,000 words on a theme of 'Life under the Nazis', Spring offered to produce the work for free. Storm Jameson and Dorothy Sayers were also approached by Greene for respectively a book on women at war and pamphlet featuring a Lord Peter Wimsey short story.

Greene's second piece about the MoI was an unsigned article in 'The Spectator', published on 9 August 1940 which described some of the problems the new Minister, Duff Cooper, faced. Quite apart from the fact he was the third Minister in eight months, taking over in May from Lord Reith, Greene characterised a lack of urgency in the dissemination of positive news and suggested that the MoI was trying to replicate the efforts of Goebbels's RMVP* in "moulding public opinion at home and endeavouring to create this or that state of mind among the people. There is not or should not be anything corresponding to that in a democratic country" (*Spectator* 136). For all Greene's disparagement at the time and in comments he would make in later years the article did offer a seed of hope for what the Ministry could achieve: "to release it [Europe] from the incubus of the subtle lies which the Nazis have planted and fostered and from the fears it has conjured up in millions of minds" (136). The MoI, he wrote, should be a 'clearing house' for positive information, and no more. Anything else would replicate the fully state-controlled media of the Axis powers. Any success through imitation, implied Greene, might be successful but would not be a moral victory. There remained a hope that the power of the word can be used as a positive and democratising force. Greene would have one further scheme for developing official war writers but this came to nothing, again drowned in the inertia of the Ministry's developing bureaucracy. Frank Pick was brought in as Director General in the August and a review was put in place to remove some of the motley crew Greene identified as swelling the ranks of the system; Greene being amongst them. "I was very relieved to be out of it because the job seemed such rubbish" (Sherry 38).

Such was the intent in 1940. The reality was somewhat different. From a staff of 999 in Sept 1939 the MoI, despite purges by new Ministers and/or Directors, had grown to 2824 employees by 1943 (McLaine 7). The telephone directories for this period, currently held by the UCL archives, had to be updated every four months or so to allow for the increasing staff numbers. Adjoining buildings such as the Institute for Education and Russell Square House were pressed into service to cope with the demand for space. In terms of efficiency the reputation of the Ministry improved somewhat in the period of 1941 to 1943. However, Senate House would remain the overwhelming sentinel of Russell Square and continued to represent a focus for any writer wishing to score points at the expense of the Ministry. In truth the Ministry did not help itself. Norman Riley writes that Senate House had become a "dumping ground [for people] never related to anything remotely connected with the general public, the Press and propaganda" (17). *The Observer* of 15 October 1939 describes the 'stupefying absurdity' of its staffing (8). Seven months later there were still concerns expressed in the media with the *New Statesman* suggesting that nepotism was the issue and the MoI was had been staffed in a "scramble of socially favoured

* Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda – Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda

amateurs and privileged ignoramuses in to the Ministry of Information" (May 1940, 611).

Evelyn Waugh's 1942 novel *Put out More Flags*, located in roughly the same time period as 'Men at Work', takes a similar tone in its treatment of the MoI. This is still the period of the Macmillan administration and a state of bureaucratic anarchy exists in the corridors of Senate House. The MoI is not a major location within the novel but Selina Hastings description of the novel's structure; an "ebullient and sophisticated comedy" moving into a "spirit of delusion" in the second part (432) does reflect something of the progress of the organisation. *Put out More Flags* is a novel about endings, the golden generation of the early 20s growing up and coming to terms with their gilded past and uncertain present: "a race of ghosts" (433) in this wartime state; an extended epilogue to an era. Some reviewers "found it ill-timed or even 'mischievous' during the dark days of 1942 to recall past mistakes" or satirise national leaders" (Patey 193). However, as Patey recognises, the contemporary critics missed the point that it was the narrative of the characters, many of who had appeared in other pieces by Waugh over the years, that was really under scrutiny, their previous mistakes recalled and their attitudes the real target of the satire. On a local level what begins as an amusing afternoon out for one character ends in a far grimmer way, redolent of Tony Last in *A Handful of Dust* (1934). Waugh admitted in his 1966 preface that for his knowledge of the MoI he "relied on gossip for my caricature". The evidence of the narrative suggests that the gossip was much better informed than he realised.

Ambrose Silk is the narrative guide to the workings of the Ministry. Flamboyant, half-Jewish, possessor of fashionable left-wing views, he is "a flashy amateur of modernism in all forms" (Sykes 207). He is in town with some time to kill and so goes to visit his publisher, Mr Bentley, now working for the Ministry. Crossing Tottenham Court Road and Gower Street he comes upon the "the vast bulk of the London University insulting the autumnal sky;" a consistent description in histories and description of Senate House (Waugh 66). Entry represents a challenge as "all the secrets of the services might have been hidden in that gross mass of masonry" (66). Exiting may also be a problem. An American journalist has lost his entry paper and therefore is now denied the right to exit (75-6). Late on in the text a Special Branch raid on the Ministry is challenged by the gatekeeper with an exchange that could have come out of the music hall:

'Is Mr Silk expecting you?'
'We hope not.'
'Then you can't see him.' (210)

In this Waugh all too accurately understands the construction of the Civil Service mind-set, its rules and rewards systems; the gossip network providing him with source material to reshape according to the needs of the text. As an example a Ministry of Information internal memo dated 10 January 1940 notes:

- (1) That admission to the building will be by passes issued by the Ministry who reserve the right to limit the number of such passes and to impose any form of control over the freedom of movement within the building which may be necessary.
- (2) [...]
- (3) That the Ministry reserves the right to withdraw at any time, without giving reasons, a pass which has been issued.
- (4) That the passes will not admit the holder to the Refectory.

As an incidental detail it is worth noting that the Deputy Catering Manager (and a designated First-Aider) was Joan Hunter-Dunne, who met John Betjeman when he worked for the Films Division in December 1940. 'A Subaltern's Love Song' was published in *Horizon* in February 1941. Walking to Mr Bentley's office he and Ambrose pass an example of the torpor that Greene had recognised. The narratives begin to echo here, the likelihood of characters from one text walking into or passing by the scenes of the other offering a possibility of interesting metafictional conjunctions. Ambrose and Bentley pass two men involved in a random discussion with what seems no discernible point, with little effect and no great recognition in one of the corridors:

They rose in a lift and walked down a wide corridor, passing on the way Basil who was talking a foreign language which sounded like a series of expectorations to a sallow man in a taboosh.

'That's not one of my personal friends,' said Mr Bentley bitterly.

'Does he work here?'

'I don't suppose so. No one works in the Near East department. They just lounge about talking.'

'The tradition of the bazaar.'

'The tradition of the Civil Service.' (66-7)

Elsewhere in the building Basil Seal is explaining a plan for the annexation of Liberia. First encountered in *Black Mischief* (1932) he is a much less sympathetic character than Ambrose, a man for whom the war represents a series of entrepreneurial challenges. He engages in a series of rackets throughout the narrative with varying success. His experience of the MoI is his only real failure. This is the bureaucracy of wartime Britain and the classical Waugh anti-hero may be out of his element here. Only when he starts to invent details (for the War Office) does Basil begin to make any progression. The embryonic MoI may offer a space for those who work there to define themselves, and indeed what they actually do, but has no place for the more independent minded such as Basil. The official from the Near East department is clearly not interested in what Basil is offering:

"You ought to see Mr Pauling."

"Mr Pauling sent me to you."

"Did he? I wonder why. I'll ask him." The unhappy official took up the telephone and after being successively connected with Films, the shadow cabinet of the Czechoslovaks and the ARP section, said "Pauling. I have a man called Seal here. He says you sent him."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Well you sent me that frightful Turk this morning."

"He was child's play to this."

"Well, let it be a lesson to you to send me any more Turks." (71)

"It's not a place I'd care to spend the rest of the war in" is Ambrose's initial judgment on the Ministry (76). Yet he is taken on by the organisation as the Atheism representative in the religious department. Ambrose, a self-described "cosmopolitan Jewish pansy" understands that something needs to be done (77). He knows he comes under the National Socialist definition of degenerate and therefore should try and do his bit, somewhere. Silk is recruited during the late autumn of 1939 making him a fictional analogue to the concerns expressed by The Observer, as noted above. However, having spent the majority of his life as an 'aesthetic' has left him with little understanding of what the general public understands or requires. In his new role he serves a "small but critical public" trying to define Nazism as "at heart agnostic with a strong tinge of religious superstition" (117). There is a little intellectual rigour involved here; this is a copy and paste job; a clearing house, as suggested by Greene, but not of positive information but rather a continued vilification of the enemy.

Within Senate House it has taken less than four years of operation for the 'common heritage of culture' to be replaced by a spirit of institutional survival and one-upmanship. The rapid expansion of the MoI has resulted not in an efficient aspect of Government but an ineffective group of mutually exclusive competing departments and individuals; what they do is less important than protecting the space where they work. The war has created a series of bureaucratic chambers, representative of the type of group-think someone like the aesthetic Ambrose would rebel against.

Mr Bentley understands the nature of the game far better. A publisher before the war he talks at length of the challenges the bureaucratic life presents as if it were a continuation of the publishing world: "If it was not for the journalists and the civil servants [...] everything would be easy" (73). For Bentley the challenge of working for the Ministry is to make himself as comfortable as possible. His office is furnished with "carefully chosen pieces of empire furniture" and a pair of Nollekens busts for "we have to rough it you see" (67). Such individualism provokes the irritation of the civil servants who begin an exchange of memos: 'Furniture, Supplementary to Official Requirement, Undesirability of,' is met by Bentley with 'Art, Objets d', conducive to spiritual repose, Absence in the quarters of advisory staff'. The Estates office is not done yet and responds with 'Flowers, Framed Photographs and other minor ornaments, massive marble and mahogany, Decorative features of, Distinction between' (67). Mr Bentley seeks to create the

most desirable space that he can, one which is superior to those around him. There is no recognition of progression, no awareness of the wartime situation, rather a notion that only by looking back can be found a state harmonious to one's state of mind.

In a real-time context this is the period of establishing the rules of censorship, developing connections with the armed services for the dissemination of information and evolving a theory and practice of propaganda. Within the fictional narrative it is about a game of chairs with departmental memos exchanged like artillery. Nicholas Blake offers a similar example to Waugh in his 1947 novel *Minute for Murder*. In Chapter II there is an exchange of memos between the insider Billson and the drafted-in artist Squires over what is, actually, not very much. The Civil Service lexicon is all well and good unless played against a civilian who may just understand the rules of the game as well as they do. The divisions and subdivisions of reference become ever more detailed and obtuse in a perverse corollary of the spatial demands the establishment faced. The narrative is concurrent with that period when the Ministry was seen to be "powerless to relieve the irritation and boredom of a public starved of real news" (McLaine 40). As with 'Men at Work' there is reflection here of an institution which is run for itself rather than the social good; the assessments made in *The Observer* and the *New Statesman* reflected through a fictional prism. As such, the recruitment of someone like Ambrose seems typical of the period. If he represents an aspect of the old-boy network then that is because at this early stage of the war it was still the dominant paradigm for developing a management structure.

Bentley's latest project involves putting together a series on 'Why We Fight' from a "retired admiral, a Church of England curate, an unemployed docker, a negro solicitor from the Gold Coast and a nose and throat specialist from Harley Street (68). Such a range of talent may seem eclectic but was not untypical. An edition of the BBC programme 'The Brains Trust', broadcast from the Macmillan Hall in May 1943 included a former Australian sheep station hand, an American composer, and a noted Arabist. All had connections with the MoI or the BBC which is not unexpected, but increasingly there was less dependence on the charming amateur such as Ambrose and more of the experienced professional. Over the winter of 1939-40 the BBC would be brought into the fold, professional newspapermen were employed in senior positions and there was a streamlining of the production process which brought such publications as *Picture Post*, or distributors like Foyles into the system. There was an increasing attempt at professionalism but in many ways the damage to the MoI's reputation was already done.

Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) is a post-war novel, not just in terms of its period of creation but also in its depiction of a regulated and war-exhausted society. The hot war against Germany has segued into the cold war against the Soviet Bloc with the CIA and Comintern fighting various proxy battles across Western Europe. In the east India and Pakistan have achieved independence but partition has brought widespread bloodshed. The British withdrawal from Palestine leaves the new state of Israel surrounded on three sides by countries that don't

want it to exist. This may not be the state of perpetual conflict suggested within the narrative between the three warring continental alliances, but it would not have taken much to make any of these cold fronts hot. In addition there is still rationing, with bread and petrol only having recently come off the list; meat and sugar would continue to be rationed into the mid-50s. The British economy continued to be dire and the housing situation in London remained shattered. The dystopian London that Orwell describes is only a fraction different from the real city at this period. The optimism of the 20s and the uncertainty of the 30s have crashed into the anxiety of the late 40s. There is little time for the florid or the witty observation when the social infrastructure remains shattered. Satire itself can seem redundant when the likelihood of social failure remains possible, and if one of the definitions of a dystopia is a society that has experienced or believes it is experiencing a cataclysmic decline then this period, 1945-1951, is one of those. For Orwell the dominant structures of his city in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are the ministries, not just the Ministry of Truth building; "vast and white [...] an enormous pyramidal structure of glittering white concrete" (5) but also those of Peace, Love and Plenty "of similar appearance and size" (6).

In the texts discussed above Senate House is perceived as an anomaly within the surrounding topography, a place experienced not just through cultural differentiation but also displaced from both the actual Bloomsbury and its fictional alter ego due to its height and size. * For example, Waugh and Greene's employment of Senate House can be regarded as representative of Lefebvre's concept of abstract space; that is it offers a representation of space: that space which is planned, which takes over from the historical, a form of super-signification, becoming the dominant form moulding the space it dominates (Lefebvre 49). Yet this abstract space is also dependant on a 'logic of visualisation', wherein the visual is the dominant sensory response, an aesthetic organisation of supremacy through design, architecture and planning. This is the space which Waugh and Greene employ; their understanding of Senate House a literary development of the original Holden Plan. The structure is not just part of the local area but commands it. These earlier texts employ the space of Senate House for the demands of the narrative but do not wholly reimagine it. With Greene in particular there is a situation chosen, which is then described; the short story going no further and certainly making no attempt to engage on an emotional level. However, by the summer of 1940 this choice of style, detached and sardonic, was already compromised by the demands of the war upon the social, emotional and physical fabric of the country and the people.

Orwell, liberated by the opportunities afforded by the peace, could afford to be more expansive in his imagination and appropriation of the London spaces. In the case of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Senate House is used as a representational space: the imagined space, creating symbolic and artistic constructions. This building is higher than the landscape around it because it needs to be. Minitru

*At eighteen stories Senate House would have dominated this part London at the time of construction

needs to be the principal physical presence in order to underline its implied message – we are watching you! It is a “representation which passes itself as a concept when it is merely an image, a mirror, and a mirage” (Lefebvre 287). This reflection, suggests Lefebvre, is merely the result sought. For Ingsoc the result is the impression of a public being constantly watched; Minitru must dominate the skyline as a symbol of force; a phallic signifier if you like, its brutality of political power dependent on the means of constraint to maintain its will. “It fulfils the extra function of ensuring that ‘something’ occupies this space” a signifier of plenitude of force, an object “bearing a heavy cargo of myth” (287).

The physical structure of Senate House may be adapted and modified for the purposes of representing this fictionalised political domination but some of the actual practices of writing described by Orwell within do bear an ironic resemblance to those described by Greene and Waugh. For example in the run-up to Hate Week it is the Fiction Department that is required to produce a series of ‘atrocious pamphlets’, with other departments coining slogans or circulating rumours. Writing has become the property of the bureaucrats, “the immediate enemies of truthfulness,” and the now entrapped intellect, tied to the demands of the organisation and its needs, means that the writer “fabricates[s] imaginary facts and feelings” (Orwell *Prevention* 331). This deployment of Minitru offers a fictional correlative to the actual industrialisation of the creative process within the real MoI. One pamphlet, ‘Make Your Home Safe’, was distributed to 7 million homes in the summer of 1940 and on average that year there were 737,500 despatches of images and articles (McLaine 54). The systems featured in the earlier stories has not changed; they have just become better managed; both in the historical and narrative perspective. Within Minitru there is also the need for distraction, i.e. Porn for Proles, general media revision and all-purpose propaganda. In 1946 Orwell described writing as now consisting almost entirely of prefabricated phrases bolted together like the pieces of a child’s Meccano set” (*Prevention* 335). To produce something original would require plain, vigorous language, in turn requiring a writer to be politically unorthodox; to be able to kick against the grain of conventional thinking. What we may underestimate seventy years on was just how much control the Government was capable of taking. When he wrote *The Lion and the Unicorn* Orwell could still believe that “if the common people [feel] that the State *is themselves*,” then, “[t]hey will be ready to endure the sacrifices that are ahead of us, war or no war (177). Eight years later and with the experience of the war to draw on Orwell seemed less sure.

The MoI as a part of the Government machine possessed the tools to suppress, invent (if and when required) news and generally control the dissemination of information. The act of censorship became more tacit in its approach as the war progressed. As Orwell notes “it is safe to let a paper like Peace News be sold, because it is certain that ninety-five per cent of the population will never want to read it” (*Lion* 149). The subtlety of control lay in the fact that things were ‘suggested’, no explicit advice or demand was made, but the

implication was made clear – that non-compliance would involve time-consuming and expensive litigation against a wartime government. *

Under the Emergency Powers Act the Government could do what it liked with the freedom and property of any citizen simply by issuing the appropriate regulation. Censorship was imposed on overseas mail and telephone trunk lines, the public of course not knowing they were tapped (this was run from Offices on the 1st Floor of Senate House). By October 1939 a National Register of all citizens had been completed. Everyone received a buff-coloured identity card with a personal number of six or seven digits. There were observation reports of public morale; wire tap records, lists of undesirable elements, plans for black propaganda and all other points in-between.

Angus Calder notes of this time that “[t]he double-think exhorted by patriotism on the one side and stern facts on the other combined with the despondency which saw signs of inefficiency and corruption everywhere to produce a hysterical, almost suffocated, climate of political debate in 1941 and 1942” (280). During the period of the war there were some who began to be concerned about the extent to which the Government was exercising its powers. Even a major industrialist like Samuel Courtald would note: “Government control has come to stay [...] No Government can tolerate the existence within its borders of an organised and completely independent power with a radius of action as wide as its own” (2). Winston consequently feels a “twinge of panic” (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* 20) when he opens his diary for the first time. He is performing an action that cannot be assessed by the Party. It is a personal act performed at a time when there should be no ‘personal’. The system of clubs which members of INGSOC are supposed to attend such as the Anti-Sex League, the Community Centre, or the block committees do not just organise the party members but also afford the Party an opportunity to observe the people via their central management, i.e. Minitru.

When William Beveridge became Vice-Chancellor in 1926 he intended that the University of London be “for the nation and the world”. It would require a centre that would be no imitation of the traditional University building, “no replica from the middle ages” but the type of modern structure that could only be found in London. He wished for Senate House to be an “academic island [...] a world of learning in a world of affairs” (Hill para 6). Beveridge’s model of how things could be offered a tacit critique of the current system, i.e. Oxbridge, both of its medieval structures and physical remove from what was, at the time of writing, the capital of the Empire. These were elements, he suggested, which made the classical system not fit for purpose in the Twentieth century. Perhaps Beveridge should have remembered that the concept of Utopia can be something of a moving decimal point; a fluid state with the idea that it can be constant and not subject to the laws of entropy being “unrealistic, naïve and unfeasible” (Milojevic 442). Equally, dystopia is not an automatic destination and it may have varying degrees

*In a 1944 article Orwell noted that of the, for example, 100,000 tons of paper issued to the H M Stationery Office a quarter went to the War Office, which was more than was allocated for publishers for novels (22,000 tons). (Tribune 20 October 1944)

of emphasis, as does the idea of the Utopia. Arthur C. Clarke recognises this dichotomy in *The Forgotten Enemy* where Professor Millward remains as guardian of the knowledge held in the libraries, but from the height of the tower can also see the oncoming devastation of the city.

One such comparison for Senate House can be made with the Olympiastadion in Berlin, commissioned and built during the same time period as Senate House. The collision of ideals between the NSDAP's political and Baron de Coubertin's humanist philosophies even today provokes an uncomfortable sensation, a knowledge that something here is not quite right. The mass of the neoclassical colonnaded structure with its shell limestone façade, throws a continual shadow over the lower walkways, this contrasting with the open space of the Maifeld and the positioning of the respective towers around the site suggest a squat malevolence. The lower tiers and track are recessed into the ground, ostensibly for wind protection, but it also has the visual effect of looking into the pit. The ground was remodelled in the early 2000s for the 2006 World Cup but still remains that essential shape and presence it was when, as Pol notes in *The Quiller Memorandum*, "certain well known personalities used to stand just over there" (Pinter 141). It may have spent longer as a part of the British Army Garrison of West Berlin than it did as National Socialist cultural site but the immediate impression one has of it, especially if you have travelled there by the U-Bahn, is that there is still a presence about the structure. However much it tries to assume a modern presence something of its past always remains.

Senate House may not have quite the same history but there is still an impression that it sits somehow wrong with the environment about it. This physical difference is the first suggestion that it may not act as quite the Utopian space envisaged when first conceived, rather than being representative of progression to the best its architecture suggest a complete break, a space that sits alone answerable to no one but itself. This then is the abstract space: "glass and stone, concrete and steel, angles and curve, full and empty" (Lefebvre 49) or in the case of Senate House marble floors and spacious public areas, bronze fittings and railings. An academic institution it may be but it is still one closely associated with the structure of capitol around it. It may not exactly mould the peripheral space around it as a means of domination, but it still suggests a "bureaucratic and political authoritarianism" similar to anything planned by Speer or what can be seen in the EUR district of Rome even today (49).

The Civil Service mentality as represented by Waugh and Greene may be partly played for satirical effect but this is satire with a very hard basis in fact. The regulations could be that petty, the sense of self-entitlement that fixed within certain individuals. The work practices and purpose of the MoI were rapidly brought into public scrutiny throughout the autumn and winter of 1939-40 and by association the image of Senate House would also slowly suffer; the concept of the early 1930s shifting from that of academic island to governmental fortress. The nature of wartime government and the need to control the national war effort, especially in the pre-Soviet/American phase of the war of 1939-1941, is complicit in this need to control what was essentially a siege state.

As its first decade demonstrated such a simple narrative as Beveridge wished for Senate House was never likely to be practicable. A perfect storm of history, architecture, Civil Service incompetence and the powerful imaginations of two key writers of the 30s would skewer the organisation within it and the structure overall by default. After the war another powerful imagination would again reimagine the structure as something contrary to its initial intent. This time the image remained and has become shorthand, both textually and visually, for an example of a dystopic society or totalitarian structure. Yet, it is still here. We still come to this building as a space of learning, a place of conference. It still possesses a fine library and has developed an academic reputation. Does the image of how it was once seen remain, except as a palimpsest beneath the cover of the Portland stone? Maybe we need to reassess the history of Senate House, to move beyond its formative, childhood phase and consider it for what it now is. Or does that image of the MoI and by default Minitru remain present; a ghostly presence similar to that which permeates the Olympic site in Berlin? The story of Senate House is far more complex, its external image far more ambiguous than ever Beveridge or Holden might have planned for.

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1. Senate House, Circa late 1930s
(Unknown)



2. Main Hall
(Author's own)



3. Press Room
(William Beveridge Hall)
of Ministry of Information
(University of London
Archives)