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Lost 'Glory' of the RNCM roofgarden

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In 1968, when the first plans of the new building of the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) were published in the context of the then ongoing development of the modernist Manchester Education Precinct, the brief requested a 'visual attraction to the west across the major open space', that was marked 'Green Space' on the plans. This vaguely named space was supposed to serve most of the communal rooms of the college to the west of the building's ground floor bounded by Booth Street West and Higher Chatham Street, yet was not served by any entrance or exit to the building. (Official Architecture and Planning, 1968) As the wider RNCM building, at the time known as the Northern College of Music was intended to serve a 800 capacity theatre, a 500 capacity concert hall, a 250 capacity recital hall, large lecture theatre, library and refectory, the garden was intended to serve a large variety of users and guests. Eventually the 'green space' was dropped from the project with all design efforts focusing on the creation of the new college building. However, a few years later, several articles mentioned a new, previously unplanned feature, that 'nobody would now wish to do without'. (Brown 1980:785). This was another 'green space' that was now integrated into the building footprint, a new roofgarden, that spanned two floors and became a popular space for both students of the college and concert visitors with its enclosed room-like spaces, views to the city and carefully design plantings, pergolas and water-feature.

The L-shaped roofgarden consisted of an upper and lower terrace with skylights integrated into the flooring creating a visual connection with the lower internal levels of the building. A range of varied function rooms spilled onto the roofgarden, from the Library, Practice Rooms, Offices and Conference Rooms that required clever use of space to allow both privacy and communality as required. The roof garden created a multifunctional space that catered to the diversity of its users from a space for entertainment and social gatherings to quiet study spaces for students. As the designer of the garden later described, the creation of the green spaces on the roof was an 'afterthought'.(Brown 1980:785) It was commissioned, when the building, designed by Bickerdike, Allen & Rich Architecture was almost finished, as a gift to the College by the Chairman of its board, Dame Kathleen Ollerenshaw in memory of her daughter. The designs were created by architect and landscape architect Michael Brown, in collaboration with his wife, ceramic artist Joan Brown. Brown was a key - although yet barely researched - landscape architect of the time, who was trained as an architect in Edinburgh College of Art, and landscape architect at the University of Pennsylvania. Brown's educational and design experiences included working with key figures both in the UK and in America, including Sir Basil Spence, Eric Lyons, and key figures of the evolving new landscape theory and design of the post-war American professional scene, most notably Ian McHarg and Dan Kiley. He was well-known in both educational and professional circles, and was regularly invited to give seminars and lectures throughout the evolving landscape and planning courses in the UK, including Manchester, where photos of his completed projects were deposited in the University Library. His very sensitive approach towards the context of each of his designs and his highly thorough

understanding of the materials and structures resulted in many award winning designs, that were acclaimed both in the UK and abroad. His article for the RNCM roofgarden was the only UK contribution to the special, 60th anniversary celebratory edition of the across Europe widely read and cited journal, *Garten und Landschaft*.

The timing of the decision about the roofgarden meant that Brown had to deal with serious restrictions. On the one hand, he had to take into account; a very limited loading capacity, that impacted the depth of soil allowed and therefore planting style; and the extreme microclimate, with high wind turbulence, solar radiation, drought, glare that at once severely limited the range of plants while necessitating their use to control the climatic conditions. The 'L-shaped' roofgarden also had to fulfill several - sometimes even contradictory - requirements. One of its main functions was to create a pleasant view from the offices from the building. The two different levels and skylights meant that views from various heights had to be accommodated. A bridge over the roofgarden also served as a key circulation route for the building while at the same time it aimed to create enclosed sitting spaces from students throughout the day and an open, freely accessible space for concert visitors. Several various desire lines had to be taken into account as well, to link all the different entrances to the buildings at all levels. As such, the small garden (in comparison to the original 'green space' plans) had to accommodate stillness and movement, quiet and loud, individual and communal uses within a restricted space. Brown's simple, but highly effective organisation of the space meant that he successfully fulfilled all these challenges through a series of room-like spatial sequences. This idea of a spatial sequence that lead the visitor through these enclosed areas, similarly to a journey through the building, was a very much modernist idea of the use of space, that Brown's previous employer, Dan Kiley mastered.

The garden had a sculptural quality as a result of its enclosure by the building and bridge access that mimicked deck access seen in the wider educational precinct. A series of stepped levels and raised planters further enhanced this quality which was particularly appropriate to the building and its use. At the junction of L-shape, a water-feature was placed, designed by Edinburgh and UPenn educated ceramic artist, Joan Brown. The fountain was designed out of independent supported and suspended ceramic pots with a stainless-steel structure, placed on a raised pedestal. The dark brown colour of the high fired clay contrasted well with the pale white and silver foliage and the concrete background and paving slabs, while at the same time the used dark pebbles and bricks created a continuous colour coordination, that likewise the spatial arrangement, enhanced the harmony between the building and its open spaces.

His pergolas on both the upper and the lower levels created enclosures, further strengthened by climbing plants. At the same time, these green surfaces also created pleasant views while softening the effects of the wind and sun. The changing levels and the enclosures created by the pergolas, further enhanced the spatial definition and sequence of room-like spaces while dealing with the climatic extremes. With the use of pavement materials - concrete slabs enriched by brick and dark pebbles - Brown not just 'reduced the glare', but also created a richness of textures and colours, while also playing with heights and levels. The raised planters, carefully placed on top of the building's structural columns also assisted the creation of more

intimate spaces. The thorough understanding of the building structure made it possible for Brown to play with the depths of soil, even finding space for small trees. The planting of the garden was kept simple, partly as a result of the wider restrictions, mainly only allowing white and yellow flowers with a dominance of silver grey foliage, but with the use of mainly evergreen species, it remained an interesting feature throughout the year.

Today the roofgarden area is in a transitory state. Past building development and major repairs to the roof structure resulted in the majority of Brown's garden being dismantled. The remaining elements do not come together as an overall concept anymore and are lost in the context of the building's levels, fire staircases and walls, as new service requirements for the building have eaten into the space. Encouragingly the College's new draft masterplan includes plans to develop the roofgarden area and to create new publicly accessible green space within the building. Brown's original intricate design that created a green oasis in the newly built University precinct may be gone, but his ideas about creating a total environment by designing a continuous spatial sequence and detailed climatic considerations to link the indoor and outdoor areas of the building are still today valid.