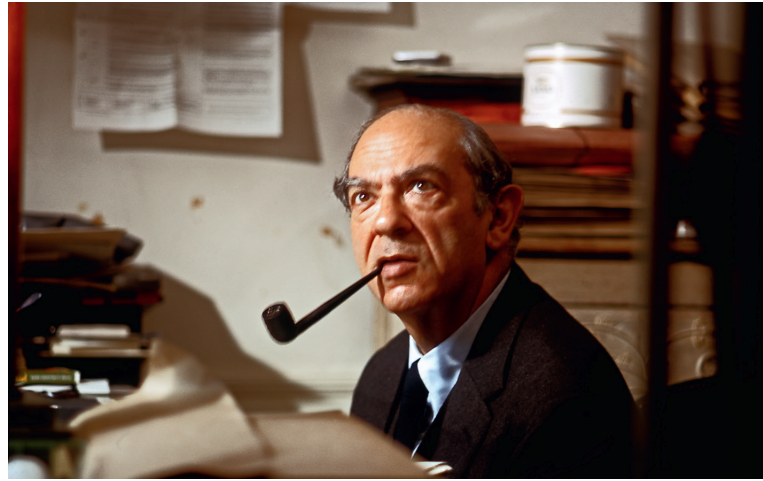


The Hideous Duty of Isaiah Berlin

Nicolas Kemper



Isaiah Berlin, *clockwise from top left*, on the beach at Paraggi, Italy, c 1972 (© Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust); in his study at Headington House, 1971 (© Noel Chanan); in the garden of his house in Paraggi, Italy, 1969 (© Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust); in Oxford, 1977 (© Bernard Lee ('Bern') Schwartz / National Portrait Gallery, London)

'My head is swimming in architects. I am slowly being driven mad by this fearful problem, particularly when I observe architects exchanging glances in my presence as if to say: "Who is to have a cut of this large and foolish figure, who does not know his own mind"?'¹ This 'large and foolish figure' was one of the most significant political thinkers of the twentieth century, Isaiah Berlin. At the time he wrote these words – in a letter to a friend in December 1966 – he was feted on both sides of the Atlantic. Instrumental in the development of 'Oxford philosophy', and renowned for his conversational brilliance, Berlin claimed he had to talk to think. And how he could talk, seeming to 'bubble and rattle like a samovar on the boil' as his words attained a velocity 'courting the speed of light'.² Born in 1909 in the Baltic seaport of Riga, Berlin grew up knowing Russian, Hebrew and German. To this he soon added English, when his affluent family fled the Russian Revolution and washed up in Surbiton in 1921, and then Latin and Greek, when he attended a London public school, St Paul's.

'I am an intellectual taxi; people flag me down and give me destinations and off I go', Berlin once said.³ John F Kennedy, for example, had hailed him on the eve of the Cuban missile crisis, seeking his advice. And his range extended far beyond the political: Pablo Picasso, John Maynard Keynes, Albert Einstein and Boris Pasternak were among the multitude who found themselves 'lifted up into the vertiginous climb of a Berlin conversation' – a mass swollen by his popular radio broadcasts on BBC's Third Programme and by his Mellon lectures in the US.⁴ Yet, in the mid-1960s, this formidable intellect was badly bruised by an encounter with the mother of all arts. 'The thing about architects is confusing, bewildering and frightening', he confided to the legal scholar Ronald Dworkin.⁵ A letter written to another friend, the historian Jack Hexter, spells out the particular source of this bewilderment: 'But if there is anybody interested in architecture in your vicinity do ask them, for upon me lies the hideous duty of building a college and the choice of architect is agonising beyond all belief. Nobody agrees. It is a world more filled with stabs in the back, double crossings and general skulduggery than even those of archaeology or art history, and believe me, that is saying something.'⁶

It hadn't seemed such a skulduggerous prospect the year before, when Berlin had taken on the responsibility for building a new college at Oxford. Student numbers at the university had leapt by around 40 per cent since the end of the war, in line with the general principle – backed by increased government funding for higher education across the UK – that university places 'should be available to all who were qualified for them by ability and attainment'.⁷ While some 3,000 extra undergraduates had been effectively squeezed into tacked-on extensions or subdivisions of existing quarters, it became clear that Oxford's fast-multiplying population of graduate students and scientists would need new homes of their own.⁸ In 1965 Oxford's Congregation therefore founded two new colleges, Iffley and St Cross, to accommodate dons who were not attached to existing colleges as there was insufficient demand for undergraduate teaching in their subjects. The first of these, Iffley, was a community with few resources, in contrast to most Oxford colleges. It had been allocated some funds to help with running costs in the early years, but no money at all for the construction of a new building. It needed a capable leader. Being mainly scientists, the fellows turned first to Charles Coulson, an accomplished mathematician and theoretical chemist, but he was unwilling to take on the challenge. Rebuffed,

they approached Berlin, perhaps not the most obvious choice, as he was neither a scientist nor, evidently, a keen administrator – in 1953 he had turned down the opportunity to become the warden of another new Oxford college, Nuffield.

Confounding expectations, Berlin told Oxford vice-chancellor Kenneth Wheare he would consider accepting the post.⁹ In his eyes Oxford needed to reform if it was to avoid the 'Salamanca syndrome' – so-called after one of the great universities of the medieval world, which had declined into irrelevance when it failed to adapt and keep pace with its peers. He had even attempted to persuade his own college, All Souls, a rich and exclusive institution, to use its ample resources to bring in graduate students; later, he also proposed a merger with St Antony's to create a Princeton-like Institute of Advanced Study at Oxford.¹⁰ But these efforts had come to naught. In the prospect of overseeing a new college, however, he saw an opportunity to create an institution in his own mould – international, democratic, egalitarian. And so after bonding with a delegation of fellows from the new college led by Frank Jessup, Berlin officially agreed in November 1965 to become Iffley's founding president, provided that he managed to raise the funds for constructing the new building within six months.¹¹

Tapping a friendship that dated back to his teaching days at Harvard, Berlin approached McGeorge ('Mac') Bundy, Lyndon B Johnson's former national security advisor and the recently appointed president of the Ford Foundation, then the largest charitable foundation in the world. Within a month Bundy had promised the new college \$4.5 million (*c* £1.6 million), on the condition that matching funds be secured from a British donor. Berlin, the 'most respected Jewish figure in British intellectual life',¹² saw a likely candidate in the retailer and philanthropist Isaac Wolfson and his son Leonard, but encountered some stiff resistance from the board of the Wolfson Foundation, and specifically from Solly Zuckerman, the government's chief scientific advisor, who saw Oxford as the 'graveyard of British science' and thought the money would be better spent on one of Britain's 20 new universities, such as, for example, the University of East Anglia, where he himself happened to teach.¹³ In the end, the Zuckerman problem was neutralised by Bundy, who clearly did 'not mind walking over corpses', as Berlin once noted (adding that was fine with him, so long as the corpse wasn't his own).¹⁴ At a dramatic meeting of the Wolfson board in June 1966 Bundy declared Ford's unambiguous support for the project and got Leonard Wolfson to confirm the donation of £1.5 million he had discussed with Berlin, at which point everyone around the table had the pleasure of seeing Zuckerman gather up his papers and storm out like the 'moustachioed villain of a melodrama'.¹⁵

Isaiah Berlin now had all the money he needed to build his new institution, which was renamed Wolfson College in recognition of its British benefactors. Thus someone who had previously demonstrated no great interest in architecture – music, art, ideas, politics and gossip were much more his thing – suddenly found he'd become an architectural honeypot in possession of a purse of £3 million and a prestigious programme. Architects came swarming.

Leading the charge was Philip Johnson: 'I read by the public prints as well as hearing from Jayne Wrightsman that Wolfson College is going to become a reality', he wrote on 13 July 1966. 'I am wondering if you still have in mind talking the project over with me. I still would consider it the greatest honour of my career to be able to work with you, and I can come to England to see you any time.'¹⁶

The two had met in 1944, during Berlin's time with the British diplomatic service in Washington DC. Though they were firm friends, Berlin still had some reservations (perhaps understandable, given Johnson's dalliances with Nazism in the 1930s). 'He is a great man of a kind, of course', he confided to another friend, 'but I feel slightly nervous about him'.¹⁷ All the same, he wrote back to schedule a meeting for 17 September 1966, taking the opportunity to warn Johnson against 'fearful difficulties about building licences, opposition to "foreign" architects; colleges are democracies in deed as well as word, and my colleagues are most jealous of their rights'.¹⁸ Unperturbed, Johnson replied within the week, 'I am not a bit worried about the local architect question. Of course it would be a joint venture with a distinguished British firm, such as Basil Spence, Hugh Casson or James Cubitt. That will be a political question we can settle when we meet'.¹⁹

Berlin was not so optimistic. In a letter of 18 August to Lionel Robbins he wrote: 'Here I sit with my mountain of gold, brooding about an architect. I wish English architects were better. If a foreign one is invited to build Wolfson College, what fearful obloquy will be heaped again upon my poor old head. And yet, I suppose, one must think about absolute values, posterity, etc.'²⁰ Quietly, he pursued his own enquiries – later that month he was going to Paraggi, where he hoped, through introductions made by the historian Bruno Zevi, to meet some Italian architects. He also sent a note to Kenzo Tange in Tokyo.

Both of his benefactors, the Wolfsons as well as Mac Bundy, also sent him suggestions for architects. While the former's were 'not v interesting', Bundy forwarded him a note from Kevin Roche – with whom he'd worked on the new Ford Foundation headquarters in Manhattan – assessing the English scene. The assessment was somewhat gloomy. Other than two established practices, Alison and Peter Smithson and James Stirling ('unquestionably the most talented designer working in England today'), and two younger architects, Colin St John Wilson and Patrick Hodgkinson, 'I do not know of any other English architects that I would care to recommend to you', Roche wrote.²¹

The master of Trinity College Oxford also chipped in with a suggestion: Robert Maguire and Keith Murray, the architects of a recent addition to his own college. But Berlin was not so easily swayed. Another new Oxford college, the starkly contemporary St Catherine's (St Catz), designed by the Danish architect Arne Jacobsen, had won a great deal of praise, but Berlin remained unconvinced. Writing to Yakov Talmon on 7 September 1966, he asked:

*Tell me, have you seen a single modern building built in England in the last 20 or 30 years or even longer which caught your imagination and made you think that it was not merely not ugly, or not unsatisfactory, but positively beautiful, noble, thoroughly worthy? St Catherine's is the only building that is even a candidate for such a status in Oxford, and that I feel [is] a positive, full, powerful answer to a question, but the wrong one ... for it is certainly a building with a strong and definite personality, and not simply a feeble compromise between styles, or a piece of half-hearted imitation of the modern. Nevertheless, I think it ugly, and even repellent, as one often does with powerful, positive personalities which one cannot stomach.*²²

To Mac Bundy that same week he went on to complain that 'my colleagues write me cautious letters about someone interested in domestic architecture, and not merely great monuments: I feel they are simply humouring the old man – I am obviously some empyrean

with thoughts of Philip Johnson and Mr Tange, whereas they are thinking more practical and more homebound thoughts which in the end will prevail. I rather hope not.'²³ And to one such colleague, H B Parry, he wrote:

*I feel that with this large sum of money at our disposal, and so marvellous a site – it would be as well not to make too much haste: we have the opportunity of putting up a better building than any other educational institution has yet done; it would be a source of pride and prestige to us as no other; would it not be an excellent thing if we could rise above the merely inoffensive, decent, competent, and ultimately conventional, into something as original as St Catherine's, but more beautiful and more pleasing to us all – or as many of us as take a genuine interest in these matters.*²⁴

Though beset at this point by solicitous architects, Berlin continued his independent investigations. With his meeting with Philip Johnson now imminent he reached out to a friend at Harvard, the magisterial Elliott Perkins:

*What would you recommend in the way of an architect for Wolfson College? Patriotic considerations apart ... have you a view about Philip Johnson? Or anyone who has built at Harvard? I have a feeling that our views as to what might be desirable, neither pure pastiche, nor brutal modern just for the sake of it, might well coincide. Our architects seem to me to be conscientious imitators, who have no originality of vision, or anything else whatever. I wonder if this hideously unpatriotic sentiment is merely the product of a certain lack of visual aesthetic, which I acknowledge myself to have. Or alternatively is the truth.*²⁵

Three days after sharing his doubts with Perkins, Berlin would send a letter that prompted a decisive turn in his search. 'May I presume on a very slight acquaintance to ask you for a very considerable favour?', he wrote to Nikolaus Pevsner, then at the height of his reputation as Britain's foremost architectural historian.²⁶ Though their acquaintance might have been 'slight', Pevsner and Berlin had a surprising amount in common: both were academically accomplished from an early age, both were exiles who would infiltrate the heart of the British academic establishment. While Berlin defined and defended the ideas upon which the country's liberal tradition rested, Pevsner, through his Buildings of England series, defined and documented its architecture. But there were marked differences in their personal circumstances. Berlin was an indulged only surviving child; Pevsner spent his youth in the shadow of his more charismatic older brother. Berlin did not marry until he was past 30, and then married into wealth. Pevsner married his wife, Lola, before entering college, and supported two children through his studies. Berlin arrived in England as a child, won a scholarship to Oxford and in 1932 became the first Jewish fellow of All Souls. Pevsner came to England in 1933 as a last resort, after his budding career was cut short by Nazi anti-Semitic laws. While Berlin spent weekends with the Rothschilds, researched Marx and debated analytical philosophy in his rooms overlooking the Radcliffe Camera at All Souls, Pevsner lived as a refugee, eating packed lunches in Regent's Park and walking 10km a day to save on bus fares – he had other priorities, needing to raise the money to bring his family over from Germany. Yet it did not take long for Pevsner to establish his reputation in Britain with his 1936 survey history *The Pioneers of Modern Design*, a relatively brief account that presented modernism as the culmination of a progression as inevitable as that from the carriage to the car – a new paradigm that would endure 'as long as this is the world and these are its ambitions and problems'.²⁷

When Berlin wrote to Pevsner for advice he expressed his dread of the kind of RIBA competition that had 'led to Churchill College, which does not seem to me (I only hope you agree!) a very fortunate example of contemporary British taste'.²⁸ He confessed that he was 'thrilled' by Kenzo Tange and mentioned that Philip Johnson was coming to meet him. While Oxford's postwar buildings 'varied in quality', he said, none of them seemed to him of 'overwhelming excellence'. 'A young genius would be very nice – not perhaps easily found.'²⁹

Pevsner took a while to formulate his reply. In the meantime Elliott Perkins wrote back to relay rumblings of discontent from the other side of the Atlantic. Reporting on the efforts of Harvard president Nathan N Pusey, he quoted H M Jones's verdict: "He found Cambridge harmonious, and left it *moderne*". The tasteless bastard.³⁰ He warned Berlin to avoid towers: Harvard's 'Leverett Towers were built "high rise" as a matter of principle, and they have proved to be inimical to the growth of a sense of community'.³¹ He had to admit, however, that Saarinen had done a good job at Yale.

On Berlin's next trip to New York at the end of September 1966 he and his wife Aline had dinner at the Blackstone Hotel with Mac Bundy. He also had lunch with Kidder Smith at the Century Club, who told him 'Pevsner's a very great friend ... but a man of very poor judgement. They all say this about each other, without fail. It is a strange world', Berlin reported to his vice president and bursar, Michael Brock.³² Kidder Smith even suggested he host an architectural competition, but Berlin was reluctant to relinquish control of the process. If it came to that, he told Brock, 'I would have to see' that not just Pevsner but J M Richards and even the endorsement of the RIBA 'could be easily outvoted'.³³

On 18 October 1966, more than a month after Berlin's initial approach, Pevsner finally wrote back. He made it quite clear that he was not impressed with Berlin's candidates:

*You say 'worthy', and I agree. You say 'Philip Johnson', and I do not agree. You say 'Kenzo Tange', and I emphatically do not agree. Philip could be guided. He has a protean character, intent on surprising his public by ever-unexpected turns of style, but he is ready to accept a client's character and wishes, if they are unequivocally expressed. Kenzo Tange is much too strong to be guided and his style would, to my way of thinking, be a disaster in Oxford.*³⁴

Pevsner naturally had some less wilful characters in mind: the English architects Powell & Moya, as well as the Dane, Arne Jacobsen, and the American, Gordon Bunshaft. 'You will see from this that what I am trying to dissuade you from is a style which I consider too personal for collegiate buildings. For a college, Pevsner said, 'nothing sensational should be permitted'.³⁵ Noting his displeasure with Ronchamp and Chandigarh, he also advised against what he saw as England's Corbusian imitators, Denys Lasdun and Leslie Martin. As his one wildcard 'genius', he threw in Charles Eames: 'He has never built a big building, and he might be helpless at the practical tasks, but he would, I am sure, love to design for Oxford, and would have a lot of feeling for an Oxford college.'³⁶

At the beginning of November 1966 Berlin dutifully drew up his first list of possible English architects, complete with their ages. While there was no Powell & Moya or Leslie Martin on the list, it did include Alison and Peter Smithson (42 years of age), James Stirling (43), Brian Henderson (40), William Howell (40) and Alan Fletcher & Colin Forbes (45). Pevsner's disapproval notwithstanding, he

scheduled a meeting with Tange in New York on 20 November. On the same trip, with Jack Hexter, he arranged tours of Harvard and Yale, as well as meetings with I M Pei and Paul Rudolph. It was Tange, however, who inspired the most admiration. In a letter after their meeting Berlin wrote:

This is only to say how much I enjoyed our luncheon – that I shall do nothing until you come to England toward the end of January or the beginning of February, no matter what forces I have to hold off, and if there is anything in England that I can possibly do for you I shall be glad to do it.

*An architectural masterpiece is something that England has not been favoured with for at least half a century, and although masterpieces do not come about by being deliberately aimed at as such – poets must not set out to be poets only to write poetry – architects cannot set out to be geniuses only to build buildings – yet you will know without my saying it how wonderful it would be if this came about.*³⁷

On this trip to the US Berlin also discovered that 'all the architecture experts, architects, etc are violently anti-Pevsner, & regard him as an erudite pedant, with no knowledge of, or feeling for, contemporary art of any kind. So where are we?', he wrote to Michael Brock on 11 November. Turning to Noel Annan, at the time provost of University College London, Berlin expanded on his complaints, 'I have now had a letter from Pevsner denouncing more or less all modern architects except Jacobsen, whose building in Oxford I think pretty hideous.'³⁸

But in replying to Pevsner himself that same day, 11 November, he chose a more diplomatic tack, 'I see that you have strong views on this matter, and am duly influenced by them... I see that perhaps an obstinate, uncompromising piece of Japanese-Kahn-influenced design might be appallingly dissonant in Oxford'.³⁹ At the same time he admitted to a new interest in Gordon Bunshaft and said that he planned to see his Hartford Life Insurance building. ('Am I to avert my eye from the Beinecke Library at Yale? I suppose so.')⁴⁰ However, he refused to take any further Pevsner's suggestion of Charles Eames, insisting he no longer built anything,⁴¹ and most of all took issue with Pevsner's perception that he was inspired by brutalist architecture, 'the bleak and the brutal, eg, the new Whitney Museum in New York, in which Breuer glowers very menacingly over the public'.⁴² Still, he had to admit, he was drawn to drama: 'So the difference between us is not great; it is only that I still feel a certain Drang towards those, to me, very thrilling photographs of Tange's cathedral in Japan, irrelevant as this may turn out to be.'⁴³

Anyway, that is what Berlin told Pevsner. What he told the economist Lord Kahn was that the moment he mentioned an architect he got 'a letter from some central authority like ... Pevsner saying, "I have heard that you are thinking of a Japanese architect – no greater tragedy could befall England – I should regard this a disaster of the first magnitude and shall spare no effort in etc, etc".'⁴⁴

Berlin continued his tour of America. He had dinner with the head of the National Gallery and his wife, who, just back from Japan, raved about Tange.⁴⁵ He went to Yale, where he found Rudolph very 'brutal',⁴⁶ was impressed by his meeting with Roche, but 'contrary to all advice I liked the Beinecke Library much more than anything by Rudolph (or even Johnson)'.⁴⁷ He visited the new Metropolitan Opera House, designed by Wallace Harrison, a 'disappointment both to those who believe in the most bleak modern architecture (which is meant to attack the observer and force him into the

consciousness of the ferocious forces abroad to break through his philistine crust – this is a conception behind the architecture of Mr Rudolph and Breuer) and those who really like Corinthian pillars and sweetness and elegance. It is neither one thing nor the other, and much regretted by many persons.⁴⁸ And he went to Cambridge, MA ‘to inspect the labours of Aalto, Sert, Pei, etc.’⁴⁹ He went to see I M Pei, who sent him a postcard to say that he’d enjoyed their meeting and that if he did hold a competition, he should be sure to include Stirling and van Eyck.⁵⁰

The pace of correspondence with Pevsner was also hotting up, for the ‘central authority’ had decided the time was ripe to push the case for Arne Jacobsen. ‘To enter St Catherine’s’, Pevsner wrote to Berlin on 15 November 1966, is to find yourself in heavenly peace, and this is the mood I think a college should convey.⁵¹ For Berlin this seems to have been the final straw, even if to Pevsner he maintained but a small protest: ‘I love the master of St Catherine’s; and I like its fellows particularly; about the building itself I do not think I agree, but this need not divide us about the notion of the function of a college – heavenly peace is quite right’.⁵² To his colleagues he let rip: ‘I have now had a letter from Pevsner saying that he regards St Catherine’s as by far the best building in Oxford, and “a haven of heavenly peace” or something to that effect, complaining that he has not had an answer to his letter to me – which I have now in fact answered – it took a month to reach me somehow – and wondering whether I do not agree with him that St Catherine’s is a marvellous masterpiece ... if St Catherine’s is his ideal college, and he more or less says so, he is not the man for us. About that I am now quite clear.’⁵³ From now on, Berlin concluded, he would continue to correspond cordially with Pevsner, but would ignore his opinions: ‘no matter how great an authority on the history of architecture he is, his own taste is deplorable’.⁵⁴

More sure now of his own architectural tastes and predilections, by 22 November 1966 Berlin had a draft shortlist for his invited competition: ‘Bunshaft, Roche, Tange, Pei, Johnson and any three English architects you like. My God, we should have to pack the jury’, he told Michael Brock.⁵⁵ He continued to resist the advances of the British architectural establishment, demurring when pressed by Wolfson to meet Lord Esher, president of the RIBA: ‘I wish to avoid this for obvious reasons’.⁵⁶ He also failed to rendezvous with Philip Johnson, who nevertheless helpfully sent him at the end of December a plot plan of Wolfson College and suggested ‘if you are looking for a “far out” architect’, then visit Jim Stirling’s buildings at Leicester and Cambridge.⁵⁷

Barely two weeks after Berlin had decried Pevsner’s ‘deplorable taste’, he seems to have had a sudden change of heart. ‘This will give you a clearer indication of my views’, Pevsner had said when he sent Berlin the text of a talk, the ‘Anti-Pioneers’, that he had just broadcast on the BBC.⁵⁸ In his lecture, Pevsner had denounced a new trend of ‘expressionism,’ calling for a return to orthodoxy: ‘to let forms detract from function is a sin, today as 30 years ago, however thrilling the forms – a sin against the users, committed for the sake of self-display of the architect’.⁵⁹ And he provided a roll-call of ‘sinners’, among them Saarinen and Bunshaft in America, Utzon in Sydney (‘I want my emotions to be created ... in the opera house by the power of music – not by the architect’s mood’⁶⁰) and Tange in Japan.

Berlin responded to ‘Anti-Pioneers’ with enthusiasm:

I read it with absolute fascination and think that it is a most brilliant piece with which (for what that is worth, and it is worth almost nothing)

*I agree entirely in the sense that my whole natural penchant is towards the permanent symmetries of the Natural Law – and not towards expressionism, wild individual vagaries however exciting and overwhelming in the short run – deviations which in the end become not only superseded, but seem mere meretricious self-indulgence of a trivial kind to the stern critics of the future.*⁶¹

Where Berlin had sent Pevsner kind words before, only to complain bitterly behind his back, this time the conversion seemed genuine. No more disparaging comments about Pevsner emerged. This may have been a matter of collegiate etiquette, too, for when Berlin returned to Oxford in February 1967 he learned that Pevsner would be one of his peers, as Slade Professor for 1968–69.

At the outset of his search Berlin had been determined not to ‘be got down by difficulties – passions for compromise’.⁶² He had dreamed of commissioning Tange to build something that would be ‘a source of pride and prestige to us as no other’.⁶³ But more and more he had to face up to the logistical difficulties this would entail: ‘is it possible to have an architect who lives in Tokyo, who will never come here, so that the work will be in the hands of some remote British agent?... It all is very worrying’.⁶⁴ At the end of February 1967 he wrote to Pevsner: ‘This, if ever, is the time when I ought to write Tange, inviting him to come. I have not written, and shall, I suspect, not write. Verb. Sap.’⁶⁵ Tange was off the list.

That same month he made plans, reluctantly, to go and see the new British universities for himself:

For am I not bound to look at all modern academic buildings in England, praised extravagantly by our architects, commended in the press, awarded prizes for their beauty, originality, appropriateness, conduciveness to study and contemplation, and, as a rule, of an aggressive bleakness and hideousness which few other modern buildings – in America, France, Finland, Brazil, wherever modern buildings are – can match? Why is it that we have not one architect of first class distinction – only men of second-rate order, of various degrees? Do you admire Coventry Cathedral? The Royal College of Physicians in Regents Park? The new Times Building (& do you know Mr Rees-Mogg? I shd be deeply interested in your view of him. What is thought in Oxford I know) the universities of Sussex, Essex, East Anglia, Warwick, York, etc, etc?’⁶⁶

Wryly, he then imagined their progress as some kind of Pickwickian farce:

*To all of which my colleagues and I, in some comical vehicle, will be bound during the next ten days or so, like the journeys of the Pickwick Club: up & down the land we go, entertained by vice-chancellors and bursars, wearily trudging from building to building, with mechanical praise on our lips for the brutal looking curves of concrete stained by rain in great ugly streaks, for the tiny bedsitting rooms designed to punish their inhabitants by the University Grants Committee: admiring the freedom with which sexes, colours, ages mix in some: & admiring equally the rigid walls between these same groups imposed in others. I must stop. This is like a piece of pseudo-Nicolson prose written to be published. I am sorry. But that is where I shall be on the 8th March & for weeks & weeks & weeks.*⁶⁷

Yet the tour was not the complete rout Berlin had anticipated. In Cambridge he found the new Peterhouse College underwhelming, but was taken with Powell & Moya’s Cripps Building at St John’s: ‘It seems to me that they are the best British architects now working’, he wrote to the historian Hugh Brogan, then a fellow at St John’s. ‘If you know how much your building cost per square foot – that is how I think now – I should be very grateful indeed.’⁶⁸

In March 1967 John Summerson wrote to recommend both Peter Smithson, 'the only man of genius in architecture today', and Denys Lasdun.⁶⁹ Berlin wrote back to say a source he would not name had complained about the Smithsons' 'interior arrangements most severely... Dare I put up a beautiful shell – a work of art – or at least be responsible for it and leave later generations to curse and reform? Perhaps I dare.'⁷⁰ And he found Lasdun's University of East Anglia, in which he had spent a night, too 'strong' – 'It is a magnificent building, menacing, powerful, with great battlements and deep dark staircases leading to dungeons; huge gunwales directed on to invaders from the valleys all round.'⁷¹

On 4 April 1967 Berlin was travelling again, this time with Stephen Staples, who took him on a tour of the Montreal Expo before it opened to the public. Berlin offered a potted review of the experience in a letter to George Ignatieff, the noted Russian-Canadian diplomat (and father of his future biographer, Michael Ignatieff). He was not keen on Moshe Safdie's Habitat: 'The dwelling places by that Israeli architect seemed to some bold, hideous and a token of what is to come – the whole world will probably go like this in about 20 years' time so we must learn to live with it, though you and I, I dare say, never will learn.'⁷² He did like Frei Otto's pavilion – but Otto was disqualified on account of his nationality: 'I fear we cannot employ a German. We would run into too many snags.'⁷³ Buckminster Fuller's geodesic US pavilion was deemed quite appealing – 'a sphere composed of other smaller bubble-like spheres, very gay and arresting' – though it was 'not frightfully useful from our point of view.'⁷⁴ But both the British and the French pavilions proved hugely disappointing: 'a huge Union Jack on top staring at a very showy French building opposite – the competition for the soul of Canada is obvious.'⁷⁵

Berlin's next site visits took him to Finland, on the advice of Irwin Miller, 'who thinks that Aalto is preferable to any American architect',⁷⁶ and contrary to the advice of J M Richards, who thought Aalto 'a great man', but too old. Richards suggested younger Finnish firms – Kaija & Heikki Siren and Aarno Ruusuvuori – but also put Powell & Moya at the top of his list of recommendations.⁷⁷

On 4 May 1967, a day after his return from Helsinki, Berlin then produced his final wish list: Alvar Aalto, Heikki Siren, Philip Johnson, Gordon Bunshaft, Kevin Roche, Powell & Moya and Ahrends, Burton & Koralek. On 11 May, Berlin told *The Times* art critic John Russell 'the hour for choosing an architect draws near'⁷⁸ – though he still had time to fit in one last quick architectural day-trip to Newcastle on 15 May.

By 26 May 1967 everything was about to come to the boil. But to say that Berlin was overbrimming with excitement would be an exaggeration. Writing to the Harvard history professor Myron P Gilmore, he explained:

I expect the result will be anti-climactic, in some way. At present we are vacillating between one American, two British and a Finn; none of them are great masters. The great master Aalto would be ready to build for us, but he is 70, and in Finland, which we visited, it is constantly whispered that he is not any longer in the top of his form, that he is not always sober (so we are told, but do not repeat this – it is plainly libellous) and he is obviously highly dictatorial, unapproachable, and we would not get in a word edgewise, and so while we might get a distinguished building, the comforts of the inhabitants within would surely be sacrificed (as if they are in the graduate buildings at MIT).'⁷⁹

At this point Berlin seems to have entirely given up his aspirations of working with an architect of genius:

As for me, I shall get there in July, I suppose, if I can get away from the chosen architect and the beginnings of a lifelong association with someone whom initially I am sure I shall not be too enthusiastic about; it is a sad situation; why cannot one find a man in whom one can wholly believe, if only at the beginning, even if only to be disappointed at the end, which almost invariably happens? Apart from men over 70, what architects are there? Whose academic buildings one could possibly anticipate with excitement? Certainly not Mr Pei, nor Philip Johnson, nor Rudolph, nor Breuer. I like Mr Bunshaft's Beinecke Library in Yale, and yet when one looks at his banks and his galleries, they are so chilling, impersonal, machine-made, even though marvellously efficient, elegant and peaceful. It is all very terrible.'⁸⁰

Terrible or not, the final decision – for Powell & Moya – was made on 1 June 1967. Of those involved in the search, only Frank Jessup seemed reluctant to agree. Recognising his resistance – 'After all the thought of P&M was probably, at times, literally unbearable to you'⁸¹ – Berlin nevertheless asked him to serve on the building committee. Jessup agreed: 'Who knows, P&M may produce a good building – there must be a first time – although I did like their 1951 Skylon!'⁸²

Berlin's correspondence with Leonard Wolfson makes it clear that the architects' nationality was a key factor here: 'this is only to tell you that after much gestation, to-ing and fro-ing, journeys to Finland and elsewhere, we, ie, the college, have settled on a British architect – we knew this would give you much satisfaction, and this was not an inconsiderable factor, believe me, in determining the choice'.⁸³

Berlin then made peace with Pevsner, Bunshaft and Johnson, offering each one of them in turn a different account of how the selection was made. With Pevsner he characterised the outcome as a predictable failure of democracy: 'Large bodies, democratically governed by plebiscite, always tend to seek safety so we decided precisely as you predicted we would'.⁸⁴ His Bunshaft story expanded on this theme: 'We are, in the end, for better and for worse, a democracy ... not the best organisation for the encouragement of original works of genius – as they are found in Florence, Venice and elsewhere'.⁸⁵ And he offered a personal note of apology: 'I feel like someone who was expecting champagne, and found a pleasant glass of cider awaiting him; but I do beg you not to reveal the contents of this letter to anyone, for why should the architects in fact selected be subjected to these perhaps altogether unjust pleasantries. They are gifted people, and will doubtless do an excellent job. Still, I wish it had been you – so do the committee: most of them were won over by your buildings and your personality.'

Writing to Philip Johnson, he struck a similarly despondent tone: 'You were perfectly right – only too right – I say with gloomy exultation in human mediocrity – rather like De Maistre. In the end, as you correctly predicted, the English won, slowly, persistently, and by attrition. There were some objective factors which could be regarded as not irrelevant – the fact that we are less rich than we thought we should be; that the buildings have to go up quickly, and with as little expense as is compatible with not having low-priced University Grants Commission pre-fabs – that grim, ever-growing chain of barracks that our modern universities are slowly becoming.'⁸⁶ For Johnson, Berlin marshalled a whole list of culprits: the budget and the British, the RIBA, the Wolfsons, architectural journalists: 'If we had unlimited resources, or at least as much money as even St Catherine's had, five or six years ago, if the Ford Foundation

were not so frightened of being dragged into this as a form of American pressure – which one can understand – if taste, imagination, courage, could be made to prevail over the great craving for mediocrity and philistinism by which this country is consumed, things might have been otherwise. But things are what they are, and the consequences will be what they will be, as Bishop Butler once said, so why should we seek to be deceived?’⁸⁷

An ‘excessive anxiety to please’ was how Isaiah Berlin judged his own greatest weakness.⁸⁸ And in choosing the architect for his new college, Berlin’s concern with pleasing others seems to have come at the expense of pleasing himself. ‘I see myself choosing some very safe and unenterprising figure and being rightly condemned for it’, he wrote to Stephen Spender on the eve of making the decision, ‘but all the unsafe enterprising figures seem to be no good for one reason

or another. It is rather like preferring Graham Greene or Angus Wilson to say Ginsberg or *The Naked Lunch*.’⁸⁹ And yet at the same time, Berlin’s disappointment with his first and last architectural commission could be attributed not only to his own inherent desire to please, but ultimately to an inherent weakness of postwar architectural practice, even of the entire species of architects. Berlin’s summary of the current scene serves as an *apologia* for the building of the new Wolfson College: ‘we are in a curious universe filled with hatred and fanaticism. In the old days there were two schools: the Bauhaus, all of whose admirers loved one another, and the Corinthian Pillar school, all of whom in their turn loved one another and that was that, and you could choose. Now everybody hates everyone and there are no accepted values. Except that Tange is acclaimed by everyone other than Pevsner.’⁹⁰

1. Isaiah Berlin to Francine Gray, 16 December 1966. The Berlin correspondence referred to in this essay is held in the Catalogue of the Papers of Sir Isaiah Berlin, 1897–1998, with some family papers, 1903–72, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.
2. Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, 1998), p 3. The ‘speed of light’ comparison was made by the poet Joseph Brodsky.
3. *Ibid.*, p 7.
4. *Ibid.*, p 268.
5. Isaiah Berlin to Ronald Dworkin, 23 December 1966.
6. Isaiah Berlin to Jack Hexter, 14 November 1966.
7. This was the ‘Robbins principle’, as formulated in *Higher Education: Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins 1961–63* (London: HMSO, 1963).
8. In 1946 Oxford had 6,680 undergraduates, whereas in the academic year beginning 1965 it had 9,800, an increase of 42 per cent, from ‘Notes on the Post-War Growth of British Universities’, author unknown, 1966. Post-graduate numbers increased by about the same percentage between 1961 and 1965 alone.
9. Michael Ignatieff, *op cit*, p 260.
10. *Ibid.*, p 261.
11. *Ibid.*, p 260.
12. *Ibid.*, p 263.
13. Noel Annan, *The Dons: Mentors, Eccentrics and Geniuses* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p 227.
14. Michael Ignatieff, *op cit*, p 263.
15. *Ibid.*, p 265. Berlin’s words again.
16. Philip Johnson to Isaiah Berlin, 13 July 1966.
17. Isaiah Berlin to Lionel Robbins, 3 August 1966.
18. Isaiah Berlin to Philip Johnson, 4 August 1966.
19. Philip Johnson to Isaiah Berlin, 11 August 1966.
20. Isaiah Berlin to Lionel Robbins, 18 August 1966.
21. Mac Bundy to Isaiah Berlin, 19 August 1966. The Bundy correspondence referred to in this text is held in the McGeorge Bundy Personal Papers, John F Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston.
22. Isaiah Berlin to Yakov Talmon, 7 September 1966.
23. Isaiah Berlin to Mac Bundy, 2 September 1966.
24. Isaiah Berlin to H B (‘James’) Parry, 5 September 1966.
25. Isaiah Berlin to Elliott Perkins, 6 September 1966.
26. Isaiah Berlin to Nikolaus Pevsner, 9 September 1966.
27. Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Pioneers of Modern Design* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), p 163.
28. Isaiah Berlin to Nikolaus Pevsner, 9 September 1966.
29. Isaiah Berlin to Nikolaus Pevsner, 20 September 1966.
30. Elliott Perkins to Isaiah Berlin, 16 September 1966.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Isaiah Berlin to Michael Brock, 5 October 1966.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Nikolaus Pevsner to Isaiah Berlin, 18 October 1966. The papers of Nikolaus Pevsner are held in the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. Isaiah Berlin to Kenzo Tange, 11 August 1966.
38. Isaiah Berlin to Noel Annan, 11 November 1966.
39. Isaiah Berlin to Nikolaus Pevsner, 11 November 1966.
40. *Ibid.*
41. He would be more disparaging in a letter to Michael Brock on 18 November 1966, asserting that Eames’ furniture was ‘of a conventionality difficult to exaggerate’ and, as for buildings, ‘what he has built proved terrible (except for his own little house)’.
42. Isaiah Berlin to Nikolaus Pevsner, 11 November 1966.
43. *Ibid.*
44. Isaiah Berlin to Lord Kahn, 16 November 1966. Kahn was bursar at King’s College, Cambridge.
45. Isaiah Berlin to Michael Brock, 18 November 1966.
46. Isaiah Berlin to Frank Jessup, 29 November 1966.
47. Isaiah Berlin to Jack Hexter, 22 November 1966.
48. Isaiah Berlin to Garrett Drogheda, 2 December 1966.
49. Isaiah Berlin to Michael Brock, 29 November 1966.
50. IM Pei to Isaiah Berlin, 18 November 1966.
51. Nikolaus Pevsner to Isaiah Berlin, 15 November 1966.
52. Isaiah Berlin to Nikolaus Pevsner, 23 November 1966.
53. Isaiah Berlin to Michael Brock, 22 November 1966.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*
56. Isaiah Berlin to Michael Brock, 28 December 1966
57. Philip Johnson to Isaiah Berlin, 28 December 1966.
58. Nikolaus Pevsner to Isaiah Berlin, 5 December 1966.
59. Nikolaus Pevsner, ‘The Anti-Pioneers’ in *Pevsner on Art and Architecture*, p 303. The talk was first published in *The Listener*.
60. *Ibid.*, 304.
61. Isaiah Berlin to Nikolaus Pevsner, 9 December 1966.
62. Isaiah Berlin to Michael Brock, 27 August 1966.
63. Isaiah Berlin to HB Parry, 5 September 1966.
64. Isaiah Berlin to his private secretary Pat Utechin, 22 February 1967.
65. Isaiah Berlin to Nikolaus Pevsner, 20 February 1967.
66. Isaiah Berlin to Ava Waverly, 24 February 1967.
67. *Ibid.*
68. Isaiah Berlin to Hugh Brogan, 28 February 1967.
69. John Summerson to Isaiah Berlin, 21 March 1967.
70. Isaiah Berlin to John Summerson, 30 March 1967.
71. *Ibid.*
72. Isaiah Berlin to George Ignatieff, 4 April 1967.
73. Isaiah Berlin to F Jessup, 4 April 1967.
74. *Ibid.*
75. *Ibid.*
76. Isaiah Berlin to Mac Bundy, 9 March 1967.
77. JM Richards to Isaiah Berlin, 13 March 1967.
78. Isaiah Berlin to John Russell, 11 May 1967.
79. Isaiah Berlin to Myron P Gilmore, 26 May 1967.
80. *Ibid.*
81. Isaiah Berlin to Frank Jessup, 1 June 1967.
82. Frank Jessup to Isaiah Berlin, 7 June 1967.
83. Isaiah Berlin to Leonard Wolfson, 5 June 1967.
84. Isaiah Berlin to Nikolaus Pevsner, 7 June 1967.
85. Isaiah Berlin to Gordon Bunshaft, 7 June 1967.
86. Isaiah Berlin to Philip Johnson, 7 June 1967.
87. *Ibid.*
88. Nicholas Shakespeare, ‘Two Books on Isaiah Berlin: Review’, *Daily Telegraph*, 17 July 2009.
89. Isaiah Berlin to Stephen Spender, 30 May 1967.
90. Isaiah Berlin to Michael Brock, 22 November 1966.

Contributors

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Alexander Brodsky is a Russian artist and architect. In the 1980s, together with Ilya Utkin, he produced a series of celebrated architectural etchings which were exhibited worldwide, and now form part of the permanent collections of the V&A and Tate Modern. He moved to the US in 1996 to work as an artist, and returned to Moscow in 2000 where he has continued to balance architectural commissions for restaurants, apartments, galleries, museums and most recently an Austrian bus shelter, with artworks and sculptures. He is currently preparing an installation for the Russian pavilion at the 2016 Venice architecture biennale.

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Colin Rowe was born near Bolton-on-Dearne in South Yorkshire in 1920 and studied architecture at the University of Liverpool, architectural history at the Warburg Institute and at Yale with Henry-Russell Hitchcock on a year-long Fulbright scholarship. He taught at the University of Liverpool (1950–52), the University of Texas-Austin (1954–56), the University of Cambridge (1958–62) and Cornell University (1962–92), before retiring briefly to London (1993–94) and ultimately to Washington, DC. His books include *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa & Other Essays* (1976), *Collage City*, with Fred Koetter (1978), *The Architecture of Good Intentions* (1994), the three-volume *As I Was Saying* (1996) and, with Leon Satkowski, *Italian Architecture of the Sixteenth Century*, published posthumously in 2002. Rowe died in Washington, DC in November 1999. His ashes are scattered at the Temple of the Four Winds, Castle Howard, Yorkshire.

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Mario Tedeschini-Lalli is a journalist and scholar whose long journalism career includes 40 years as a reporter and editor, mostly on foreign affairs; he later served as editor for various digital and multimedia news outlets, primarily with the Gruppo Editoriale L'Espresso, of which he is now deputy director for innovation and development. His scholarly publications include essays on the history of the Middle East, Italy and the media. His further research on Steinberg's architectural and interior design work will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Territorio*, the journal of the school of architecture at the Politecnico di Milano.