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AA School of Architecture
36 Bedford Square
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A Note on the Display Initials
Drawn by Adrien Vasquez of the John Morgan studio, and featured in the twin texts on or by Colin Rowe, the display initials in this issue are an adaptation of a slab-serif typeface developed in the first half of the nineteenth century by the English punch-cutters Bower & Bacon and by the Fann Street Foundry, bought in 1820 by William Thorowgood with a large sum of money he had just won in the lottery. Thorowgood was the first to use the term ‘grotesque’ to describe a sans-serif typeface. Similar letterfaces were used in the 1940s in the pages of The Architectural Review – the journal that first published Rowe’s ‘The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa’ in March 1947 – whose characteristically English vernacular typography also seems fitting given Rowe’s idiosyncratic, spoken and resolutely English prose. These letterfaces are printed in the antique madder lake of this issue’s inside cover – which, alongside the cover colour, reference the signature pinks and apple greens of Hieronymus Bosch, whose works have recently been on display at the Noordbrabants Museum in Den Bosch, Netherlands.
The Lost (First) Chamber of the House of Commons

Henrik Schoenefeldt
On 28 October 1943, two years after a Heinkel bomber from the Luftwaffe destroyed the House of Commons, parliament held a debate on its debating chamber. The issue was whether the new House of Commons should adhere to the Victorian model or base itself on an entirely new plan. Prime Minister Winston Churchill spoke passionately about retaining the ‘traditional character’ of the original chamber, but at the same time pushed his fellow MPs to agree on updates to its ventilation system. George Duckworth, MP for Shrewsbury, backed the argument, stating that ‘although we may greatly regret the old chamber, with all its associations, it is my view that its destruction has presented us with a great opportunity. Now that it no longer exists, we may as well face the fact that it had many serious defects... It suffered from a system of ventilation which was antiquated and calculated to give everyone cold feet and a hot head.’ No doubt in agreement, Churchill promptly appointed an exploratory select committee, which would release a report the following year recommending a ‘thoroughly up-to-date system of heating, ventilation and lighting’, with mechanical ventilation and air-conditioning approaches proposed by the engineer Oscar Faber as the ‘best which modern science can devise’.

Conceptually, if not technically, Faber’s idea for an air-conditioned space was not unlike the first environmental system installed inside the original Victorian chamber by the Scottish physician David Boswell Reid (1805–1863). Brought into being by a similar catastrophic act of destruction (in this instance, the Great Fire of 1834), a special committee had invited Reid to testify on possible arrangements for a new chamber. Reid, who had been testing various heating and ventilation approaches in his purpose-built laboratory in Edinburgh, proposed a sealed debating chamber, with controlled lighting, climatic and atmospheric conditions and an early non-mechanical approach to air-conditioning. This was initially tested inside a model debating chamber, erected in Edinburgh in 1836. He was then invited to further test and refine his principles under real-life conditions, first in the Temporary House of Commons and then the Temporary House of Lords.

In 1839, following the success of these tests, Reid was appointed ventilation engineer of the new Houses of Parliament – one of the very first instances of the appointment of an expert consultant to advise on the design and construction of a building (pre-empting the modern tripartite division of labours between the architect, engineer and hired consultant). It was in this capacity (as ‘ventilator’, as he was referred to) that Reid was invited to collaborate with Charles Barry, architect of the Palace of Westminster, who by then had already completed his design of the building, which he had worked on since winning the competition three years earlier. It was not long, however, before tensions began to emerge between architect and ventilator. Reid, whose training was in medicine not architecture, insisted that Barry and his team adapt their architectural plans to accommodate his system – an assertion he defended through the immutability of his research, citing several textbooks he had written which illustrated the science behind the natural movement of air induced by atmospheric pressure, gravity or thermal buoyancy, or what modern science now calls fluid dynamics.

Various scholars have used these differing skill sets – between architecture and science – to explain the souring of Reid’s relationship with Barry. This critique, however, detracts from the discernible influence that Reid’s medical background had on his working method – not just in terms of the ventilation system he was advocating, but more fundamentally through the empirical methods he employed in its development. For example, letters and drawings exchanged between the two offices show how Reid drew on research methods pioneered in the fields of chemistry and medicine to evaluate the performance of environmental technologies from the perspective of human physiology and perception. In this sense, Reid was responsible for the conceptual design of a system – providing drawings and descriptions to Barry that were schematic and largely scientific, and which therefore required Barry’s engineers to implement them at a required technical level.

This process of translation in turn prompted Barry, ten years Reid’s senior, to question his new colleague, suggesting that Reid did not ‘profess to be thoroughly acquainted with the practical details of building and machinery’. Nevertheless, the design of the Palace of Westminster had become a cross-disciplinary endeavour, and between 1840 and 1846 ‘miles of pipe and thousands of valves and stopcocks were installed’, with new heating and cooling shafts designed to fit inside the existing Clock and Victoria Towers. At the same time, Reid’s lack of design expertise did not stop him from proposing a new central tower to contain huge volumes of hot smoke and exhaust gases – a £50,000 expense to which parliament eventually agreed, with even Barry conceding that a third tower actually improved the original design.

By 1846, however, the already strained working relations between architect and ventilator had become recalcitrant – Reid’s involvement, Barry argued, was slowing down construction and pushing the project significantly over budget. He went on to complain that all of the new shafts were compromising not just the building’s fireproofing but its very solidity. In an effort to regain design control, Barry therefore enlisted the help of the chemist Michael Faraday to develop an alternative system using a steam jet. As a result the original ventilation project was discarded in the autumn of 1846 following a full parliamentary enquiry into difficulties arising from the collaboration between Reid and Barry’s office. To further minimise Reid’s involvement, all ventilation projects, including the scheme for the House of Lords, were transferred to Barry and his engineers, Faraday, William Jeakes and Alfred Meeson, with Reid’s area of responsibility now restricted to the boundary of the House of Commons. With this change in personnel, the concept of a single up-cast shaft was abandoned and replaced by a centralised system, composed of an array of local shafts for different sections of parliament, including a stone shaft for the House of Commons. A scaled-down version of Reid’s central tower was eventually built, but the structure never fulfilled its intended purpose, functioning merely as a local outlet for air from the central lobby.

And yet this reassignment of control did little to prevent the slowing of any decision making. Because parliament’s ventilation was now based on Barry’s system, Reid had to adapt his own system (by this stage, at least six years in the making) to function independently and with no access to the central air supply and exhaust outlined in his original plans. Accordingly, in April 1847 Reid submitted a new set of drawings to Barry’s office outlining his adapted scheme, even if the detailed design of a number of its important features, including the fresh air supply, was not agreed upon until after several months of often intense negotiation. In some way attesting to its dual authorship, the resulting arrangement featured two air inlets. The main vent constituted manually adjustable cast-iron louvres, built inside the roof facing the river, which could be closed...
Elevation of the House of Commons
square ventilation shaft, 1848
© National Archives
when the air pollution or stench of sewage became too severe.\(^6\)

A second inlet functioned as a backup and was placed on the opposite end of the site, inside one of the corner turrets of St Stephen’s porch – an architectural feature previously introduced by Barry but lacking any obvious practical function. This reserve supply comprised part of the ceiling system, which was equipped with its own up-cast shaft, steam-powered fan, heating and humidification.\(^7\)

Drawings show that fresh air was conveyed into the House of Commons through passages under the roof. On the north side of the central tower air passed through a fan and was then warmed inside a passage lined with steam pipes, terminating in the fresh air chamber above the central row of ceiling panels. Next, the air filtered into the debating chamber through gaps between panels and openings inside hollow ornamental beams that were manually regulated by sliding valves.\(^8\) The vitiating air chamber situated above the side panels was connected to the new up-cast shaft on the west side of the Commons Lobby. Air came up through the base of the shaft and was exhausted through cast-iron valves at the top, which could be adjusted with the aid of pulleys. The current produced by the buoyancy of the hot air, boosted with the aid of coke fires, drove the vitiating air out of the debating chamber. But because the shaft was not strong enough to ventilate all spaces simultaneously, valves were used to switch between individual spaces, such as the Commons Lobby, the Ladies’ Gallery and the Strangers’ Gallery.\(^9\) During votes, for instance, when the debating chamber was busier and therefore in need of more ventilation, the pull could be redirected from the house to the division corridors.\(^10\)

The reasons for building two simultaneous air supplies, and parliament’s approval of such a project, belie a purely functionalist analysis. Instead, the arrangements of the inlets can be seen as the outward expression of a political process that resulted in a physical, political artefact, and one that Reid considered a serious compromise to his original plans: inside the Central Tower was a diagonal wall, which not only served to isolate the fresh reserve of air for the House of Commons from the vitiating air entering the tower from the House of Lords, but also physically represented a contested border between Reid’s and Barry’s spheres of influence. This border was mirrored by another wall introduced by the architect inside the central air chamber at basement level, which physically isolated the air supply passages within the two territories.

Reid would actually challenge Barry’s intervention, arguing that it compromised the effectiveness of his air supply. In fact, the House of Commons already had two pairs of inlets. Apart from the pair that served the downward supply through the ceiling, another set was provided for the upward supply through the floor of the debating chamber. The Central Chamber, which was connected to four court yards, was intended as a spare inlet for the floor-level supply and could be deployed whenever the atmosphere around the main inlet at the top of the Clock Tower was polluted. Barry’s partition, however, cut off the two courts on the south side of the Central Chamber and prevented Reid from using it as an effective backup supply.\(^11\)

Yet Reid’s concerns about air pollution entering into the chamber were not entirely unjustified. His earlier observational studies had given him an understanding of how wind conditions affected the movement of atmospheric pollutants around the site. The use of switchable inlets was therefore part of Reid’s plan to enable the building to better respond to the level of external atmospheric pollution.\(^12\) The use of windows was not viable due to the severity of local atmospheric pollution; inside the Temporary House of Commons the supply air had to be filtered in through canvas screens and water sprays.\(^13\) Reid’s earlier experiments had led him to determine that air was purer when pulled in from a higher elevation. His plans developed between 1840 and 1846 show air being taken in via inlets built high up in the Clock and Victoria Towers, whose positioning on opposite ends of the site allowed the fresh supply to be switched when pollution levels on one side were too severe.\(^14\)

In a letter dated 7 July 1840, Reid wrote that these high-level inlets gave access to ‘an atmosphere at least equal to that of Hyde Park, and often one as pure as it is possible to obtain within some miles of London for the dull, lifeless, languid and heavy air which I have so often experienced around the present house particularly on the side towards the penitentiary’.\(^15\) In the mid-nineteenth century, however, Hyde Park was on the edge of London, and so its atmosphere was considerably less polluted that Westminster, in the centre of the city – a geographical detail that enabled Joseph Paxton to utilise direct natural ventilation in his glasshouse for the Great Exhibition in 1851.\(^16\) In contrast, parliamentary staff logbooks kept during this period mention several instances when attendants were unable to protect the interior from smoke pollution, even with access to multiple inlets in different locations. On 6 March 1854, for instance, staff reported the atmosphere as ‘very foggy and charged with smoke’ and that air was ‘taken from central hall as that from the Clock Tower very smoky’. One week later it was reported that switching the supply from the Clock Tower to the Central Chamber made the air ‘better but not good’. On 18 March, a ‘foggy atmosphere loaded with smoke of the neighbourhood penetrated the building’, and in early April, attendants wrote ‘the supply from the tower feeling close and unwholesome’.\(^17\)

Such unwholesome feelings were largely due to the detrimental effect coal-fired technologies were having on the atmosphere immediately outside the Houses of Parliament, which the system relied on as a source of fresh air. At the same time, the same system was also greatly influenced by the impact of internal sources of heat and air pollution, such as the radiant heat generated by the interior gas lighting, or even the body heat of all the MPs in the chamber and the public in the galleries above (a figure that reached as high as 800 for particularly popular debates). Anticipating these problems, Reid envisaged a fully integrated system capable of filtering in clean air from outside while alleviating the various pollutants within the chamber – a concept he had first demonstrated with his model debating chamber. This was a completely sealed space, without natural light, in which air was supplied and extracted entirely through the perforated surfaces of the floor and ceiling. Temperature, humidity and velocity of the supply air were tightly regulated. Diagrammatic cross-sections published in Ventilation in American Dwellings and Brief Outlines Illustrative of the Alternations in the House of Commons show the level of detail involved, with gaslights concealed behind sloping glass panels that ran along the edges of the ceiling, so as to isolate the bulbs from the atmosphere of the chamber.\(^18\) The use of coal gaslights in a sealed chamber was a particular challenge – only 0.04 per cent of the energy they produced was visible light. The solution was to contain this unwanted heat and noxious fumes inside cavities above the ceiling, behind walls and under the raised floor before extracting it through the central ventilation shaft of the laboratory.

Overleaf: Sketch plan and section of the House of Commons ceiling system air supply, 1848 © National Archives
For the Permanent House, Reid proposed a different lighting system compatible with the downward air supply provided through the ceiling. A set of drawings submitted to Barry on 1 March 1848 shows the insertion of conical light reflectors covering the whole of the ceiling panels, which were also designed to function as hoods for the extraction of gas fumes. Each cone terminated in a flue connected to the up- cast shaft. Fresh air was supplied downwards, through gaps around the edges of the ceiling panels, and fumes were instantly expelled before they could contaminate or overheat the incoming air. Although it followed the same extraction principles Reid had used inside his private laboratory for extracting fumes released during chemistry experiments, Barry rejected the proposal on aesthetic grounds. And so while the architect, assisted by Faraday, was embracing current gas-lighting technology, fittings in the House of Commons and Lords were designed as medieval chandeliers to harmonise with the gothic character of the interior.

Reid, on the other hand, had proposed a radically different approach, which bore a closer resemblance to the lighting of twentieth-century office buildings – such as Eero Saarinen’s 1950 General Motors Technical Centre in Warren, Michigan – than a candlelit hall. Just as the fluorescent ceiling fixtures of the Technical Centre cast a perfectly even light over GM’s drawing studios, Reid’s intention was to create a more ‘equal’ and ‘homogeneous light’. He therefore proposed covering the entire ceiling of the chamber with 336 small ‘burners’ in order to cast a soft and uniform light throughout the space, ‘imitating the equal and diffuse light of day’, and protecting the eye from the intense glare of strong lamps. Direct light was then diffused by placing these gas burners inside white cone-shaped reflectors, thus illuminating the chamber using only the ‘mild luminous surface’ of the ceiling. External fixtures were also proposed to make stained glass windows visible after sunset, creating a daylight effect.

Despite its modernity, Reid’s proposed lighting scheme was rejected on aesthetic grounds because it interfered with Barry’s own more ostensibly gothic plans. Yet in implementing his own lighting model, without any involvement from Reid, Barry, in turn sabotaged Reid’s ventilation system – in particular, the ceiling air supply that Reid had built into the system, which was rarely used at night because it pushed hot air around Barry’s beloved chandeliers and into the depths of the house. In order to achieve better acoustics, the architect also lowered and remodelled his own ceiling design (an original scheme that had formed the basis for Reid’s design). These obstacles meant that Reid’s system could not address the myriad of environmental problems of the house (temperature, circulation, visibility, humidity, pollution, acoustics) in an integrated way, and prompted Reid to exclaim, in his 1852 interview with the select committee, that ‘it is utterly impossible ... to carry out a perfect system of ventilation whilst [Barry] was liable to have it deranged by violent cold currents’. He went on to argue that the ‘existing evils in the ventilation’ could not be remedied without inspecting the architectural drawings, and which Barry consistently refused to supply.

Certainly the souring of his relationship with Barry was one of the reasons Reid found himself constantly trying to solve the ‘evils’ of the house. Another was that, compared to the straightforward ventilation system developed for the Temporary House, the Permanent House was far more complex. Here, ventilation followed a mixed model, combining a stack-driven ‘plenum’ model for the extraction of hot air with fan-powered ‘plenum’ ventilation for the air supply. From the basement air rose through adjustable shutter valves inside the vaults and up into the heating chamber on the ground floor. It then passed over the pipes of a hot-water apparatus before continuing its ascent through another set of valves and into an equalising chamber. The heating chamber was also surrounded by a cool-air compartment, through which unheated air could be conveyed directly from the basement using a set of circular valves, meaning that the chamber could respond quickly to fast fluctuations in temperature (essential for a space that would quickly alternate between heavy and light occupancy, as one debate ended and another began). Fresh air was monitored using a hygrometer and 20 separate thermometers before it was admitted into the same chamber. Once inside, temperature and humidity could be adjusted using a non-mechanical form of air-conditioning that involved running cold water through the heating pipes (ice, which was used for brief trials in the Temporary House, was not deployed). In addition to his attempts to lower the actual temperature, Reid also sought to lower the perceived temperature by exploiting the cooling sensation of air currents as they passed over human skin. At the same time humidity was raised with the aid of steam or by evaporating water and lowered by unspecified ‘absorbsents of moisture’.

In order to facilitate the workings of this system the floor in the Temporary House of Commons had been completely perforated, allowing conditioned air to be uniformly supplied across the entire space, but in the Permanent House Reid introduced a more elaborate arrangement, which permitted a greater degree of local control over the climate and air supply. This was because in cases where there was a uniform supply of air, attendants reported difficulty getting MPs, who all sat in different areas, to agree on a set temperature. There was ‘scarcely a meeting of the house at which there are not some members who would like the temperature to be at 55ºF, and others at 70ºF or 72ºF’, Reid reported. The new concept of personal control was first trialled in the Temporary House of Lords from 1838 to 1847 in order to investigate whether user satisfaction could be increased by providing microclimates in different parts of the chamber and by responding to differences in the number of people per zone. But data collected during this time revealed that the new approach did not increase the level of satisfaction. However, the problem was not the system, Reid argued, but that the lords did not provide attendants with enough personal feedback. These difficulties notwithstanding, Reid continued to develop the concept for the Permanent House, dividing the chamber into different climatic zones and increasing the level of control by allowing climate and air supplies around each bench to be individually adjusted.

Reid had first outlined his concepts for the permanent chamber during interviews with the select committee between 1844 and 1846. His aim, he said, was to ‘give all who are tied down to official seats a ventilation in unison with their own feelings to a certain extent, while the general ventilation is arranged for the house’. Such a system was an attempt to reconcile the tension between central control strategies, in which environmental systems are managed anonymously following a set range of climactic conditions, and personal control strategies, where users are able to adjust the environment to suit their needs. As if anticipating the modern concept of cybernetics, Reid then designed a system that responded not only to internal and external environmental conditions, but also to personal preference.

Original working drawings show that the attendants inside the equalising chamber used over 60 sliding valves to individually
New Palace at Westminster. No. Com: Ventilation

Proposition for Supply of

& Proposition for the removal of

The Pink Tint indicates supply of fresh air. The Blue Tint indicates device of dilution. The Black Tint indicates the smoke channel.

Section on line E. E.
Looking Eastward.

St. Stephen's Hall.

Works 29/29/10
Fresh air to be conveyed from the N.W. Tower of St. Stephen's Tower and also from the East face of the Reef over the Centre portion of River Front.

Smoke shaft from the E. end of St. Stephen's Hall, to the S.E. angle of Westm. Hall.

Scale 20 feet an inch.

Section on line A-B. on plan.
adjust the air supplied to each bench. The conditioned air passed through the valves into a horizontal duct under the bench and entered the house through the perforated floor. Separate supplies were provided for the speaker and sergeant-at-arms, the floor area between the table and bar, and the risers of the steps between the benches. Air was extracted through the ceiling and downwards through different sections of the floor, including the area immediately in front of the benches, before being drawn into a vitiated air chamber below the floor and exhausted through the boiler chimney, which terminated in the octagonal turrets in the northwest corner of the Central Tower.

Such an elaborate ventilation scheme required a monitoring system of equal calibre. From February 1852 to April 1854 climatic conditions inside the chamber were routinely checked and recorded in logbooks that in many ways resembled proto-Excel spreadsheets. Each log sheet contained columns for readings from four thermometers on the main floor. These were located near the speaker’s chair, at the bar end and on the government and opposition sides of the central floor. A fifth thermometer, for which there was no separate column, was placed on the table. Additional columns showed readings from four other thermometers located inside the galleries. Humidity was measured inside the equalising chamber before the fresh air was admitted into the house, but not in the debating chamber itself.

Yet the continuous recording of temperature in logbooks was neither new nor unique to Westminster, as it was a practice then widely used in horticultural and public buildings. For example, temperatures were systematically recorded inside Smithfield meat market, several galleries in the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Royal Albert Hall, and twice-hourly readings were taken inside the Crystal Palace over the entire duration of the 1851 Great Exhibition. But according to reports by doctors Neil Arnott, John Leslie and Goldsworthy Gurney, these measurements could not account for the full range of environmental factors – such as radiant heat, air currents, humidity, etc – known to affect perceived thermal comfort. Therefore in the Houses of Parliament, along with aggregating column after column of quantitative data, the messenger of the sergeant-at-arms, Lord Charles Russell, gathered personal feedback from MPs, which Russell reviewed before passing it on to the office of the ventilator. Russell saw himself as the ‘usual medium of communication, as respects the ventilation, between Dr Reid and the members’. He was, however, not passively transmitting data but actively moderating the subjective feedback process and engaging with conflicting views – what he called ‘the war of lowering or raising the temperature’.

Though all of this predated computerised building systems by more than a century, and incorporated some of the biggest technological advances of its time (steam-powered fans, warm-air central heating, etc), the day-to-day management of the ventilation in the House of Commons was more akin to the honing of a craft than the operating of a well-oiled machine. Reflecting in 1846 on the system Reid trialled in the Temporary House, the engineer Morrill Wyman wrote:

_The changes in the various circumstances in and out of the house are so frequent and so extensive, that the attendants must be constantly upon the watch to detect them; indeed, it is said that the same attention is required to give a good atmosphere, as is required of ‘the sailor in steering a ship’. _

Unlike today’s systems, characterised by their automated, anonymous processes and limited human involvement, the environmental control of the House of Commons was a question of human organisation. Its success relied on tight coordination, and the ‘steering’ of large quantities of environmental data was extremely labour- and time-intensive. In addition to various monitoring procedures, attendants were responsible for adjusting clocks to regulate the temperature of the hot water and steam pipes and managing the 60 individual air valves that regulated the air supply in different sections of the chamber.

The monitoring of personal comfort was another matter, since this was impossible to define using only quantitative climatic parameters. Comfort is a fluid, ever-changing state of being. Because of this, the direct involvement of people and the documentation of self-reported experience had been integral to the methodology Reid used in his early laboratory experiments, which used sealed rooms with controlled environmental conditions to investigate how climate and air purity affected everything from levels of concentration and a physical sense of well-being to appetite. And in demonstrating a methodology by which the perceived reality could be continually ‘metered’ alongside the measurement of physical stimuli, this monitoring system can be seen to represent an early example of psychophysical principles when applied to architecture. Indeed, Reid’s approach closely resembled what the German physicist Gustav Fechner later described as äussere psychophysik (outer psychophysics), a scientific field concerned with the correlation between physical stimuli (äusserer reiz) in the environment and the sensations (innere empfindung) they produce. While his approach was more informal and less systematic than Fechner’s method, Reid saw this type of feedback loop – between scientist and occupant – as a central part of his design of the House of Commons.

Like Russell, Reid was aware of the war over the thermostat and saw MPs functioning as the ‘instruments’ needed to qualitatively measure perception, allowing him to gather ‘information as to the ever-changing feelings of members, of which no one can possibly judge but themselves’. At the same time he knew that satisfying every individual in the chamber was impossible. He did, however, set basic parameters for temperature and humidity, if only so as to minimise disgruntlement. ‘As far as I have been able to observe’, he stated, ‘a temperature of 65ºF, with an atmosphere moving in a very gentle stream, so as not to be perceptible, is most agreeable in rooms that are not overcrowded’. In 1852 he added that ‘when there is a difference of 5ºF between the dry thermometer and wet-bulb thermometer next to it, I have the least number of complaints’.

Yet between February and March of that same year Reid and his team fielded continuous complaints from unhappy MPs, and the issue of universal comfort became the subject of several ‘heated’ parliamentary debates. For example, on 4 February, Joseph Hume, MP for Montrose Burghs, reported having to leave the chamber because he could no longer stand what he considered its sweltering temperature. Captain Fitzroy added that the situation was more complex, stating that MPs were exposed ‘to puffs of alternate hot and cold air’. In another debate on 10 February it was suggested that the atmosphere felt too hot but also suffered from ‘tremendous draughts’. The gallery was particularly warm due to rising hot air and the strong radiant heat of Barry’s gas chandeliers, which produced ‘a burning sensation, such as if I were exposed to a red-hot...
that allowed the equilibrium between the quantity of incoming
promptly assured members that he did not require any drawings of
of a politician, and distancing himself from his predecessor, Gurney
were transferred to the engineer Alfred Meeson, who, with Gurney,
were lost during the air raids of 1941. Reid, too, faded from London.
In 1856, following his hostile and public dismissal, he moved to the
United States where he taught for a year at the University of Wiscon-
sin-Madison and served as a medical inspector for the national san-
itary commission before his death in 1863.

Despite his fall from grace, and the dismantling of a system for
which he had made his name, Reid had still developed something
radical – although not so much in terms of the mechanics of his
invention, but in his pioneering of the idea that an architectural
environment should respond to individual perceptions of real-
ity. Yet the irony of his successes is that in exposing himself to an
especially modern concept of comfort, he left himself vulnerable to
an equally modern concept of peer review. As a succession of MPs
complained of differing degrees of discomfort, Reid was ultimately
derailed by the same system he originated. This in turn exposed
certain character flaws when he came to defend himself. Indeed,
the physicist was known for his difficult personality, and many
times throughout the select committee's 1852 transcript he seems
to crumble under pressure, skirting the blame for his failed inven-
tion in the House of Commons, evading questions and even disre-
mentative debate. As house physician John Leslie noted, 'thermom-
eters tell one tale, the body another'.

Driven by the discontent of many MPs, a select committee was
appointed in March 1852 and Gurney was commissioned to examine
the internal conditions. The committee also conducted interviews
with the speaker, sergeant-at-arms and several MPs on their expe-
riences. In an effort to quantify the physical conditions described,
Gurney, with engineers James Mather, James Hann and John Hutch-
inson, measured air speed, atmospheric pressure and humidity
inside the chamber. 46 They found that internal currents arose when
the volume of hot air extracted through the up-cast shaft was greater
than the quantity of fresh air rising through the floor. In order to
regain equilibrium, gusts of air were then forced into the chamber
via open doors and unsealed air valves below the floor and above
the ceiling. Reid's inability to satisfactorily address these currents,
he told the select committee, was less a matter of technicalities than
politics: neither architect nor ventilator had communicated directly
with the other since 1846, and six years later Reid found himself in
a long and drawn-out embroilment over who ultimately controlled
the climate of the House of Commons. Although on paper he had
free reign to apply his principles to the chamber, Reid's design was
not self-contained and was therefore left, by and large, at the mercy
of Barry. The architect, Reid told the committee, had built doors
that greatly impacted on the air currents in the house, had installed
glass chandeliers that undermined his own integrated system
and refused, throughout the entirety of the project, to furnish Reid
with plans. 47

Nevertheless, between April and May 1852 Reid made a series
of technical alterations in a final attempt to improve comfort. 48 Fore-
most among these was his introduction of a new lighting system,
to reduce the perceived temperature inside the gallery, and the
reorganisation of the ventilation arrangements above the ceiling
to allow cool air directly into the gallery. However, recorded figures
suggest that the maximum temperature difference between the
floor and gallery was only marginally reduced, from 6ºF to 3ºF. 49
A steam-driven fan was then installed to counteract the low air pres-
sure and boost the air supply, but logbooks covering this time report
that currents remained an issue, largely due to the difficulties of
synchronising the fan-powered supply with the stack-driven extract.

In November 1852, following the failure of these corrective meas-
ures, Reid was dismissed from his post. Day-to-day operations
were transferred to the engineer Alfred Meeson, who, with Gurney,
administered further tests to try to alleviate the rising currents, but
to no avail. After a brief operational life of two years, the house then
commissioned Gurney to remodel the entire system. Perhaps more
of a politician, and distancing himself from his predecessor, Gurney
promptly assured members that he did not require any drawings of
the chamber to develop a successful system. The solution he came
up with adopted a purely stack-driven approach with local inlets
that allowed the equilibrium between the quantity of incoming
and outgoing air to be naturally maintained without mechani-
cal aids. 50 Logbooks do not give any readings for this period, but
interviews with MPs between May and July 1854 suggest significant
improvements in climate. The sergeant-at-arms also reported that
temperatures were more tightly managed and draughts markedly
reduced. 51 According to Robert Smith, MP for Northampton,
the atmosphere was fresher and did not become oppressively hot. The
MP for North Riding noted that draughts occurred only occasion-
ally and Edward Bouverie, MP for Kilmarnock Burghs, found that
the attendants were able to adjust the temperature with more effi-
ciency. In its second report, dated 26 May, the commons committee
formally concluded that Gurney's interventions had been success-
ful in improving thermal comfort and recommended the perma-
nent adoption of his system.

Over the next 90 years the system became the subject of a con-
tinual process of technical fine-tuning, incrementally erasing Reid's
original design. Except for the fragments of the air supply channels
in the roof and basement of the Palace of Westminster, none of the
original physical features have survived – the last remaining traces
were lost during the air raids of 1941. Reid, too, faded from London.
In 1856, following his hostile and public dismissal, he moved to the
United States where he taught for a year at the University of Wiscon-
sin-Madison and served as a medical inspector for the national san-
itary commission before his death in 1863.

Ultimately, however, it is not the struggle between dust and
smoke that can be seen to define the rise and fall of David Boswell
Reid, but the other, and even more fearsome Scylla and Charyb-
dis of the architect and the consultant. Reid, in these terms, is not
victim to monstrosity but is one of the monsters himself. Having
been hired to provide an environment and a system, he soon found
himself battling Charles Barry who in many ways had been tasked
with the same thing. That their ensuing rivalry played itself out
in the middle of the world's most famous debating chamber only
enhances its mythology, as much as the control they were fighting
over – not just over ownership and representation, but for the sci-
cence or artfulness of their discipline – shows Reid and Barry as pro-
genitors of the most modern kind of architectural practice.
Plan and section of Reid's proposed House of Commons lighting system, 1848
© National Archives
Air inlets around the bench seats in the House of Commons, Reid’s original schematic drawing, 1847 (above), construction drawings from Barry’s office, 1850 (below)

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11. Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the progress of the building, HC 1846, 73; Report from the Select Committee on Westminster Bridge and new palace, HC 1846, 177; Second report from the Select Committee on Westminster Bridge and new palace, HC 1846, 574.


13. Letter from Charles Barry to H M commissioners for the completion of the New Palace of Westminster, 20 February 1849, National Archives, work 11/3 no 476; letter from Meeson to J Thornbrough, 11 August 1855, National Archives, work 11/14 no 804.


15. Letter from David Reid to H M commissioners for the completion of the New Palace of Westminster, 29 June 1848, National Archives, work 11/2 no 373.


17. Plan and section of ceiling supply with heating pipes, 5 April 1847, work 29/3966; heating apparatus in the air chamber in the roof over commons lobby, 22 January 1859, work 29/3983.

18. David Reid’s statement explaining the arrangements for ventilation of the New House of Commons, 5 April 1852, in Second Report of SC 1821, pp 354–8; ‘Dr Reid’s Arrangement for Ventilation and the Ventilating the New Houses of Commons’, Civil Engineer and Architect’s Journal, 22/15 (September 1852), p 324f. The valves are shown in several drawings, including ‘Longitudinal section, 1851 (undated) of National Archives, work 29/2905; ‘Ventilation and ventilation – plan of roof’, David Reid, 5 April 1847, National Archives, work 29/3037.


20. Transcript of interview with David Reid, 30 April 1852, ibid, 30375.


22. Letter from David Reid to Viscount Duncannon, 7 July 1849, National Archives, work 11/2; letter from David Reid to Department of Woods and Forests, 28 April 1851, National Archives, work 11/2, no 45.

23. Report from the Select Committee on Smoke Prevention, SC 1843, 583.


25. Letter from David Reid to Viscount Duncannon, 7 July 1849, work 11/2, no 34.


29. Accompanying a copy of David Reid’s letter to the Commissioners of Woods, 10 March 1848, National Archives, work 11/3 no 376.

30. Interview with David Reid by the Select Committee of 1852, 20 April 1852, SC 1852, 30375.


33. Third report from the Select Committee on Westminster Bridge and new palace, HC 1846, 574, 9/35.

34. Ceiling above equalising chamber with supply tubes, valves and flaps, 28 June 1851, work 29/3000; section through central gangway, raised platforms and seats, 10 January 1851, National Archives, work 29/3093.

35. Interview with David Reid, 20 April 1852 in Second Report of Select Committee, 1852, 30375.


37. Ibid.


42. Temperature at the House of Commons, taken by the messenger of the sergeant-at-arms, 22 March – 4 May 1852, HC 1852 (402).

43. First Report from the Select Committee on Ventilation and the New Houses of Parliament, SC 1854 (149); letter from Works to Gurney, 7 April 1854, work 11/4 no 850; letter from Gurney to Works, 7 April 1854, work 11/4 no 842; letter from Gurney to Office of Works, 10 April 1854, work 11/4 no 847.

44. Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords, appointed to enquire into the possibility of improving the ventilation and the lighting of the House, HC 1854, 384, 6839–81.

45. Second report from the Select Committee on Ventilation and Lighting of the House, HC SC 1852 (361). Twenty years earlier, in 1831, Reid had been involved in an equally fractious enquiry, having a very public falling out with the chemist Richard Phillips, who had pointed out a number of inaccuracies in one chapter of Reid’s The Elements of Practical Chemistry. Reid responded by publishing a 20-page pamphlet titled An Exposure of the Misrepresentations in The Philosophical Magazine and Annals, denouncing Phillips’ critique as that of ‘an intufated, and, unaccountably, timidly and grossly ignorant person’; Phillips in turn retorted that: ‘You have appealed to the public, and expressed your willingness that your book should stand or fall by their decision. I also stand or fall by their decision. I also wish that your book should stand or fall by facts.’ See Richard Phillips, ‘A letter to Dr David Boswell Reid’, 1851, p 28.
Contributors

Emma Letizia Jones is a doctoral candidate at the University of Zurich, where she is researching the relationship between project and city in the drawings of Karl Friedrich Schinkel. She is also co-editor of the London-based journal EROS and works on design, exhibition and education projects as part of the Zurich architecture collective TEN.

Sibila Micheli is a lecturer at the University of Queensland and writes frequently on postwar, postmodern and contemporary Italian architecture. She has co-authored Storia dell’architettura italiana 1985–2015 (2015) and co-edited Italia 60/70: Una stagione dell’architettura (2010), and in 2015 she coordinated the international seminar ‘Italy:Australia: Postmodern in Translation’ on the circulation of Italian design ideas and theories abroad.

Max Moya is a Peruvian architect and a graduate of the AA’s MA in Histories & Critical Thinking. In 2013 he travelled to Sri Lanka to see the last leg of a global, and grand, architectural tour, where he visited a number of works by local architect Geoffrey Bawa.

Daniel Vierge is an architect and associate professor at Iowa State University. A graduate of the AA and Yale, he wrote his doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Mary McLeod and Joseph Rykwert at the University of Pennsylvania. His writings on Le Corbusier and architectural photography have appeared worldwide, and his Letters of Colin Rowe is forthcoming from Artifice in 2016.

Colin Rowe was born near Bolton-on-Deanne 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. He completed a year-long Fulbright scholarship at the University of Liverpool (1950–52), the University of Texas-Austin (1953–54), the University of Cambridge (1953–61) and Cornell University (1952–54) before retiring briefly to London (1957–64) 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 Slatkowski, Italian Architecture of the Sixteenth Century, published posthumously in 2002. Rowe died in Washington, DC in November 1995. His ashes are scattered at the Temple of the Four Winds, Castle Howard, Yorkshire.

Peter St John is a partner of Caruso St John Architects, whose completed projects include the New Art Gallery Walsall, Chiswick House Gardens Café, the Millbank project at Tate Britain and Newport Street Gallery. He is also currently a guest professor at London Metropolitan University, and has previously taught at ETH Zurich, Bath University, Harvard GSD and the AA.

Irène Scuibert is an architecture critic and historian based in London. She taught at the AA between 1995 and 2008 when he coordinated the undergraduate History and Theory programme. He has been a visiting design critic at the GSD, and a visiting professor at Paris-Malaquais and at the Tokyo University of Fine Arts. He currently lectures at the school of architecture of the University of Limerick in Ireland, and is a visiting professor at Politecnico di Milano.

Paolo Berdini was an art and architectural historian who taught at Stanford and Columbia University. He received his PhD from Columbia with a thesis on Jacopo Bassano, which served as the basis for his subsequent book, The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano: Painting as Visual Exegesis (1997) and was the author of a wide variety of essays and books on subjects as diverse as Walter Gropius, Caravaggio, the architectural patronage of Cardinal Richelieu and Michelangelo. He was the first to translate Colin Rowe’s Mathematics of the Ideal Villa into Italian (1999) and to write extensively in that language on the contribution of the English critic. Berdini received his architectural training both at the University of Rome and Cornell, where he graduated with Rowe as his thesis advisor in 1985, with a proposal for a new project envisioning a branch of the Warburg Institute in Italy.

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.

Hubert Damisch is emeritus professor of the history and theory of art at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris. He has also held academic posts at Cornell University, Columbia University and the Centre for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts, Washington, DC, and is the author of numerous books, including Théorie du nuage: pour une histoire de la peinture (1973), L’origine de la perspective (1987), Le jugement de Pâris (1992) and Skyline: La ville narcissi (1996).

Thomas Daniell is head of the department of architecture and design at the University of St Joseph, Macau and a visiting associate professor at the University of Tokyo. Widely published, his books include FOBIA: Buildings (2005), After the Crash: Architecture in Post-Bubble Japan (2008), Houses and Gardens of Kyoto (2010) and Kiyoshi Sey Takeyama + Amorpha (2011). His book An Anatomy of Influence is forthcoming from AA Publications.

Moritz Gleich is a doctoral candidate at the ETH Zurich, working on the history of machines and operative thinking in nineteenth-century architecture.

Iisaku Hasegawa is a Japanese architect. A graduate of Kanto Gakuin University and Tokyo Institute of Technology, she spent a number of years working for the metabolist Itsuko Hasegawa before setting up her own atelier. She is also co-founder of the Zurich architecture collective ten.

Emma Letizia Jones is a doctoral candidate at the University of Zurich, where she is researching the relationship between project and city in the drawings of Karl Friedrich Schinkel. She is also co-editor of the London-based journal EROS and works on design, exhibition and education projects as part of the Zurich architecture collective TEN.

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Henrik Schoenerfeldt is a lecturer in sustainable architecture at the University of Kent, and currently leads a research project investigating the design, development and performance of the original Victorian ventilation system of the Palace of Westminster. His writing, on environmental practice and sustainable architecture, has been published in Architectural Research Quarterly, Architectural History and Engineering History and Heritage.

Daniel Sherr is an architectural historian, critic and theorist who teaches at Columbia University and Yale School of Architecture. He is the author of numerous essays on Italian Renaissance, modern and contemporary architecture and art, and is the translator of Manfredo Tafuri’s Interpreting the Renaissance: Princes, Cities, Architetti (2006). He is currently working on a collection of essays on the historical roots of modern architecture – The Historical Sense of Modern Architecture – which will be published in the MIT Writing Architecture series in 2017.

Davide Spina is a PhD student at ETH Zurich, where he is exploring architectural exchanges between the US and Italy in the postwar period. Prior to this he completed the architectural history MA at the Bartlett, UCL.


Léa-Catherine Stzack is assistant professor at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design, where she also coordinates a pedagogical project for the 2016 Oslo Architecture Triennale. She studied at the Université de Montpellier and suo before completing a PhD in architectural history and theory at the Bartlett School of Architecture. Her research focuses on the history of architecture exhibitions and postmodernism and she will soon publish Exhibiting the Postmodern: 1980–2016 Venice Architecture Biennale (2016). In 2014 she presented her research project, ‘Effemero, or the Postmodern Italian Condition’ at the 14th Venice Architecture Biennale.

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 Territoria, the journal of the school of architecture at the Politecnico di Milano.

Nicolás Kemper has recently completed his masters at the Yale School of Architecture, where he co-founded the student architecture weekly Paprika! and hosted an annual Burns Supper.