

Commonwealth landscapes in post-war London

This paper is concerned with ideas of the modern Commonwealth and the ways in which these ideas became associated with particular architectural and institutional landscapes in London in the post-war period. The idea of the ‘modern Commonwealth’ was born in 1947 after India and Pakistan became independent and joined the British Commonwealth, making it multiracial for the first time. Though the Commonwealth today is often considered to be a peripheral international organisation, in the years after 1945 it was seen by many as providing a real possibility for genuine international cooperation. Published in 1962, the Labour MP Patrick Gordon Walker’s treatise on the Commonwealth provides a good illustration of the optimism with which Commonwealth was discussed by enthusiasts. Walker wrote that ‘it will by its nature set upon the ending of race discrimination...transfer aid...act as a spur ... for disarmament... extend personal freedom... [and] national freedom.’¹ Thus the Commonwealth post-war was the subject of much optimism. However it was also unavoidably associated with the violence which marked the end of the British Empire; by arguments surrounding Britain’s declining role in world affairs after decolonisation; and by nostalgia for the imperial nation. Commonwealth was alternately seen as a way of continuing Empire under another name or the greatest opportunity for multiracial cooperation in the modern world. As a result Commonwealth became a struggle between nostalgia for the past and optimism for future and this paper explores the ways in which these intertwined and played out in London’s landscapes.

Recent work on the imperial city has explored ‘the ways in which experiences of empire and urbanism intersect’ and highlighted the spectacular and the vernacular aspects of imperial display, landscapes and identities.² Following this work, Mark Crinson has been amongst the first to examine the city in the period of decolonisation. He argues that ‘in the post-war metropolis, amongst the effects on the built environment of decolonisation within the empire, there were occasional acts of name changing of buildings and streets and even the occasional breaking of symbols, though in the main

¹ Patrick Gordon Walker, *The Commonwealth* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1962), p. 381.

² Felix Driver and David Gilbert, ‘Imperial cities: overlapping territories and intertwined histories’ in *Imperial cities*, eds. Felix Driver and David Gilbert (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 3.

the overt traces of imperial history and the image of the ‘heart of empire’ remained (and remains still) remarkably unaltered and unchallenged.’³

‘Empire’s have a way of coming to an end, leaving behind their landscapes as relics and ruins.’⁴ This paper asks how these relics and ruins, these landscapes marked by imperial history, worked in the post-war world in which Britain was struggling to come to terms with decolonisation. Specifically it considers how these landscapes were active in, challenged through and altered by Commonwealth ideas, people and institutions. It examines the ways in which they ‘acted back’ on different discourses and events surrounding the Commonwealth.⁵ The late 1950s and early 1960s was the period in which ideas of the modern commonwealth, their institutional formations and new Commonwealth communities made their mark on London’s landscapes alongside empire’s relics and ruins. The following discussion focuses on three different landscapes in London which became associated with ideas about Commonwealth during this period. It begins with a description of the Commonwealth Institute, a modern building completed in 1962; the focus then moves to Marlborough House, a Royal Palace given over to Commonwealth use in 1965 before finishing with a discussion of the Royal Commonwealth Society, an imperial building which continued to be used in the post-imperial period. In each case the concept of landscape is used to refer to the interiors and exteriors of individual buildings, their settings within the wider fabric of the city, and the ways in which they evoked, contested and themselves affected Commonwealth discourses and communities.

The Commonwealth Institute was founded in 1887 as the Imperial Institute and based in South Kensington in a building ‘designed to glorify Victorian imperialism.’⁶ Initially a forum and centre for trade and industry, by the 1950s the emphasis of the Institute was on education. On the 6 November 1962 the Queen opened the rechristened *Commonwealth* Institute (Figure 1), ‘the first major public building to be completed in London since the Royal Festival Hall was erected in 1951.’⁷ It was a

³ Mark Crinson, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire* (Aldgate: Ashgate, 2003), p. 109.

⁴ William Mitchell, *Landscape and Power, second edition* (London: Chicago University Press, 2002), p. 19.

⁵ James Duncan *The city as text: The politics of landscape interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 181.

⁶ ‘The future of the Imperial Institute, a memorandum from the Board of Governors to the Minister of Education, 12th May 1954’ *National Archives Series ED121/808*, p. 6.

⁷ Michael Brawne, ‘Criticism: Commonwealth Institute, South Kensington’ *Architectural Review* April (1963): pp. 260-266, p. 261.

conscious attempt to create ‘a physical expression in London of all that is most constructive in the Commonwealth Association.’⁸



Figure 1. The Commonwealth Institute (2006)
Photograph by the author

The *Architectural Review* commented at the time that there was ‘a premium on up-to-dateness’ in the overtly modern design chosen for the Commonwealth Institute.⁹ The Review continued with the observation that ‘only the consciously latest would be in the spirit of the project’; technical innovation in the plans ensured that optimistic modernity was built into the design.¹⁰ The roof, a hyperbolic paraboloid, was a first in Britain. The building was, according to the Institute’s Director Kenneth Bradley, ‘certainly *avant-garde*’ and he added ‘I think it is exciting which is just as it should be, because it must look forward to the exciting future of a young Commonwealth.’¹¹ Bradley linked the modernity of the Commonwealth idea to that of the Commonwealth Institute and its

⁸ Kenneth Bradley, ‘The New Commonwealth Institute’ *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* April (1963) pp. 403-411, p. 403.

⁹ Michael Brawne, ‘Criticism: Commonwealth Institute’, p. 261.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kenneth Bradley, ‘The New Commonwealth Institute’, *Commonwealth Journal* 4:6 (1961) pp. 285-289 p. 287.

new building. The plan was to create ‘a new Institute which should reflect in its architecture’ to use Bradley’s phrase, ‘the Commonwealth of today and tomorrow.’¹²

However, within the building, the main exhibits exhibited the Commonwealth countries in the same format as the old imperial possessions had been displayed at the old Imperial Institute. The Institute constructed the landscapes of other countries within the Commonwealth, each represented by an exhibition. Each exhibition – or court - still aimed to ‘give a coherent picture of the country concerned. History, geography, scenery, the peoples and their way of life, the economy and the social services [were all to be] shown in their proper sequence’, echoing imperial ways of seeing distant territories from the core of Empire.¹³ The whole Commonwealth was arranged for the British public to gaze upon from the old imperial heart.

This distanced imperial gaze, encouraged by the internal architecture, could however be destabilised by the increasing number of visitors from Commonwealth communities who utilised the Institute. Throughout the sixties the Commonwealth Institute became a part of the ordinary museum landscape of London, a destination for visitors from within and outside the Capital, with visitor numbers of 612,000 in 1963, 12,000 a week.¹⁴ As the population of London increasingly took in citizens from Commonwealth countries, the people looking at the displays and using the facilities were increasingly mixed. The Institute’s ‘programmes of education, culture and the arts were hugely successful and attracted the support, in particular, of new communities from the Commonwealth who settled in Britain.’¹⁵ Geographically, the Commonwealth Institute was close to these new commonwealth communities, sited in Holland Park close to Bayswater and Notting Hill, some of the largest areas of settlement by people arriving from the colonies and Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth in London has often been linked to landscapes of decay and decline both in the popular and institutional imagination. The post-war ‘Race Relations’ sociological agenda ‘produced a more overtly racialised definitions of the urban environment, where districts, streets, houses and even rooms were marked by the problem of colour’ and these problematic locations were linked to decline in both moral

¹² Kenneth Bradley, ‘The New Commonwealth Institute’, p. 285.

¹³ Kenneth Bradley, ‘The New Commonwealth Institute’ pp. 287-8.

¹⁴ *Commonwealth Institute: A Handbook describing the work of the Institute and the exhibitions in the galleries* (1966).

¹⁵ Patsy Robertson, ‘Common memories’, letter to *The Times* 19 June (2006).

and urban fabric.¹⁶ The run-down residential landscapes of Notting Hill and Bayswater were held up as the archetypal landscape of decay and appeared in what Mort describes as 'chiaroscuro' in dramatic contrast with the exhibitionary, official spaces of London - like the Commonwealth Institute - which appeared in 'vibrant Technicolor.'¹⁷

The Commonwealth Institute provided one of the few spaces in the capital in which ideas of Commonwealth, and indeed Commonwealth communities themselves, were associated with positive, official, disciplined and unthreatening landscapes. The addition of the Commonwealth Institute to the London landscape added a modern progressive vision of Commonwealth and a space where the connections between Britain and new Commonwealth immigrants were made explicit, providing a rationale for their arrival in the old imperial heartland.

Marlborough House (Figure 2), the Headquarters of the Commonwealth Secretariat since its creation in 1965, is the focus of the second part of this paper. The Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth's main intergovernmental agency, was set up to facilitate communication between member governments and as 'a visible symbol of the spirit of cooperation which animates the Commonwealth.'¹⁸ Before its creation, 'in the fifties, the central machinery of the Commonwealth was conducted from the Commonwealth Relations Office of the British Government' so although the shift to Marlborough House was only a short geographical hop, the new administrative machinery was now international rather than British.¹⁹

¹⁶ Frank Mort, 'Scandalous Events: Metropolitan Culture and Moral change in Post-Second World War London' *Representations* 93 Winter (2006) pp. 106-137 p. 128.

¹⁷ Frank Mort, 'Scandalous Events' p. 122.

¹⁸ *Final Communiqué of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting*, July 1964.

¹⁹ Derek Ingram, *The Commonwealth at work* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1969), p. 22.



Figure 2. Marlborough House (2006) Copyright: The Commonwealth Secretariat

However, the setting remains distinctly British with Marlborough House standing just off Trafalgar Square. The Square, built in the 19th century to commemorate Nelson's victory at the Battle of Trafalgar has become the main site in London for public gatherings, political protests, and celebrations of sporting and military success. In the years after World War II it was central as a place in which Britain's international policy could be challenged and the Square was the site of protests about Suez, nuclear disarmament and colonial freedom. But Trafalgar Square also worked as an instantly recognisable symbol of London itself as an imperial power and the centre of empire. People newly arrived in the Capital often invoked these monumental landscapes in their writings to those elsewhere. For example, the Trinidadian novelist Sam Selvon used this location to muse on what it meant to live in London, exclaiming at the possibility of writing a 'casual letter beginning: "Last night, in Trafalgar Square.'"²⁰ Standing five minutes walk from Trafalgar Square, with its entrance on Pall Mall and its gardens overlooking the Mall, Marlborough House is located right in the symbolic centre of London. The Mall itself, the parade route that runs between Buckingham Palace and under Admiralty Arch to Trafalgar Square is the route along which royal celebrations parade and nervous Prime-Ministers are escorted

²⁰ Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (Harlow: Longman, 1956) p.121; see Philip Carter, 'Trafalgar Square in history', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online ed., Oxford University Press, Oct 2005; online ed., Oct 2007 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/theme/94299>, [accessed 11 Oct 2007] (para 1 of 11).

on their way to a royal audience. The Mall provides the ceremonial link between monarch and government.

Marlborough House was originally built for the Duke of Marlborough by Christopher Wren in 1711 and in the years that followed became the residence of many minor Royals; its last Royal resident was King George V's widow, Queen Mary, who lived there from 1936 until her death in 1953.²¹ In September 1959, Queen Elizabeth II placed Marlborough House at the disposal of the United Kingdom Government as a Commonwealth centre and when the idea of a Secretariat was mooted, it provided a suitable location. The Royal pedigree of Marlborough House can be seen in the opulence of its public rooms which are decorated with many frescos and paintings depicting the military victories of the Duke of Marlborough and the many royal occupiers of the Palace. When the Secretariat took over Marlborough House in 1965, one of the few visible changes to the landscape was the construction of flag poles in the garden backing onto the Mall, to fly the flags of each Commonwealth country (Figure 3). The gardens retained their 18th century layout of gravel walk and grass lawns, with a raised promenade walk along the boundary wall to the Mall and the House was mostly unchanged.



Figure 3. Flags flying in the garden of Marlborough House (2006)
Copyright: The Commonwealth Secretariat

Designating this building a 'Commonwealth centre' had a particular resonance in the context of associations with royal, governmental and imperial power which were crucial to the ways in which Marlborough House functioned. The architecture of the house

²¹ *Marlborough House* (London: Jarold Publishing, 2002).

itself, the ways in which it was used and its location amongst wider familiar symbolic landscapes affected the way in which the presence of different people at Marlborough house was read. In addition, these presences also destabilised, contested and reactivated certain discourses associated with the landscape.

Commonwealth as a Euro-Asian community including Indian, Pakistani and Ceylonese (Sri Lankan) populations had been widely accepted by the mid-1950s. However, when the Gold Coast became independent Ghana in 1957, the appointment of Kwame Nkrumah as the first President 'created a sense of shock at the prospect of a black premier at No.10.'²² Nine years later, at the first Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting after the setting up of the Secretariat, many new Prime Ministers from newly independent black African countries joined Harold Wilson at Marlborough House. Figures four, five and six show Commonwealth Heads of Government arriving for these meetings captured both formally and informally. The cooption, as legal, democratically elected statesmen, of these new independence leaders into the symbolic landscapes of power in central London worked in different ways. Photographs of newly elected heads of government being welcomed with a handshake, enjoying a tea party in the gardens and sitting round a table, helped to produce narratives of progress and civilisation and to pacify the threat of savage and uncivilised insurgencies and nationalist movements in the colonies. Their presence in the landscape helped to strengthen narratives of progress towards civilisation through imperialism. Britain is a dominant figure in these images as the elder statesman, welcoming but in control.

²² David McIntyre, 'Britain and the creation of the Commonwealth Secretariat' *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 28,1 (2000) pp. 135-158 p. 136.



Figure 4. President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia arriving at Marlborough House for the first day of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers conference, London, UK, 7 January 1969. Copyright: the Commonwealth Secretariat



Figure 5. Meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers at Marlborough House, London. Harold Wilson, Prime Minister of Great Britain receives Hon Sir A.M Margai Prime Minister of Sierra Leone. (1966) Copyright: The Commonwealth Secretariat.



Figure 6. Commonwealth Heads of Government at Marlborough House for the Opening Session of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers Meeting (1966) Copyright: the Commonwealth Secretariat

However the impact of these new faces in the landscape also acted back on the meanings of the landscape itself, rewriting and inverting the discourses of power through which they normally worked. In Britain, the image of all the different Commonwealth leaders sitting round a table together could help to legitimise the Colonial project as an evolution towards democratic government, but it could also highlight the rapid and unruly nature of the changes which took place. Critics of the British Government and its stance on Rhodesia, South Africa and its continuing empire could utilise their presence in this diplomatic landscape to embarrass the government with criticism. Even worse, they could refuse the hospitality of the British government's invitation to join heads of Government meetings in protest, as Kenneth Kaunda, newly elected Zambian President did in 1966. In these ways, by refusing hospitality or by acting improperly in criticising their hosts, delegates could destabilise the dominant discourses of progress, order and cordiality, bringing to the fore the tensions and fissures in this symbolic landscape and uncovering a darker side of London's and Britain's history which is not acknowledged in the built form of the symbolic landscapes around Marlborough house.

The Royal Commonwealth Society is the final Commonwealth landscape considered in this paper. The Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) began life as the Royal Colonial Institute in 1868 based on Northumberland Avenue, just off Trafalgar Square. The RCS was an imperial organisation which was both a learned society and a social club and it only changed its name to the Royal Commonwealth Society in 1958. The RCS building was part of the wider symbolic landscape of central London described in the discussion about the Commonwealth Secretariat. Again, it was close to Trafalgar Square, Whitehall and the Royal parade grounds of Horse Guards Parade, the Mall and Buckingham Palace.



Figure 7. Empire medallions designed by Herbert Baker mounted on the façade of the 1937 building (2004) Photograph by the author

The RCS building was designed by the renowned imperial architect Herbert Baker who had worked with Edwin Lutyens on the designs for New Delhi. Figure seven illustrates the way in which Empire was literally carved onto the façade of the RCS building, creating ‘a symbolic constellation of the Empire.’²³ The RCS continued to inhabit this building and location imbued with imperial grandness deep into the post-war period. There were no dramatic changes to the structure - architectural and institutional – of the organisation into the 1960s. The post-imperial life of this architectural landscape is what is of interest here. Throughout the 1950s and sixties the RCS suffered funding crises and falling membership figures and the RCS building took on the aesthetic the post-imperial picturesque.²⁴ This aesthetic is exemplified by the author VS Naipaul in his invocation of England’s landscapes in his novel *The Enigma of Arrival*.²⁵ In this book the pleasures of loss, ruin and decay are described as the author arrives in this country to find not the grand imperial heartland of which he had read, but, rather, a decaying urban and rural environment.

Inside the RCS building were the Australia Room, the South Africa Room and the Rhodes Room, decorated with panelling of empire timber and with paintings on the walls displaying the roots and great victories of empire. By the 1960s these rooms were in desperate need of refurbishment. Unlike the Commonwealth Institute which was

²³ Herbert Baker, ‘Baker’s Symbols: Symbolic constellation of Empire’ *United Empire* 28 (1937) pp.561-564 p.561

²⁴ Ian Baucom, ‘Mournful histories: Narratives of post-imperial melancholy’ *Modern Fiction Studies* (1996) pp.259-288

²⁵ Vidiadhar Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival* (London: Penguin, 1987)

willing and able to make a clear architectural break with the past, and the Commonwealth Secretariat which was itself a new institution imbuing an old building with new meanings, the RCS remained unavoidably attached, both emotionally and practically, to its imperial architecture.

The Royal Commonwealth Society hosted regular lectures about Empire and Commonwealth, past present and future, and the architecture and atmosphere of the club undoubtedly acted back on the discussions, debates, imaginations and possibilities of events held there, affecting who was willing to speak, how they could speak, and how these discussions were reported. However, it would be a mistake to grant these landscapes a determining control. Despite the continuing imperial setting and the atmosphere of post-imperial picturesque which contributed to a certain nostalgic discourse about imperial heroics now past, in demeanour, this space was often more complex. The RCS provided a location in which optimism, modernism, and newly realised nationalism could be put forward, alongside and contending with traditionalism, melancholia, and visions of decline. Since the 1950s the RCS has continually provided the spaces which, though encased in the Rhodes Room for their official welcome, newly elected African leaders were welcomed and given a platform to speak, even if, in the words of Derek Ingram, a journalist who attended a lecture there in 1965 by Kenneth Kaunda advocating the use of force in Rhodesia ‘the walls almost trembled!’²⁶

This paper has opened up questions about the ways in which different landscapes affect, and are integral to, different discourses about Commonwealth and empire. At the Commonwealth Institute, the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Royal Commonwealth Society, architecture, atmosphere and geographical setting worked in different ways to facilitate and contest different visions of Commonwealth past, present and future. Different landscapes were called upon to tell different stories.

Sometimes these landscapes worked to hide the violence and difficult nature of empire and its dissolution, but the relics and ruins of empire, alongside new architectural and institutional formations were also utilised, contested and remade by different actors in order to tell other stories about empire and Commonwealth. London’s landscapes in the 1950s and 60s were put to work by, and active in producing many different Commonwealth stories. London should be seen not as a landscape showing

²⁶ Derek Ingram, *The Commonwealth at work* p.75

only signs of imperial decline, but one in which different features, buildings and locations were invoked in support or rejection of different stories of Britain's and Commonwealth's past, present and future, stories which were told not just in Britain but world-wide.