

## *AKC Essay Competition - Coversheet*

- Complete all sections of this form and ensure it is the first page of the document you submit (either copy and paste this page into the front of your work, or begin your work on subsequent pages of this form).
- **DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME ON YOUR WORK.**
- Pages should be clearly numbered.

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|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Degree Programme (where applicable) | Philosophy BA            |
| Department (where applicable)       | Department of Philosophy |
| AKC Year (1, 2 or 3):               | 2                        |

|                              |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| Essay question number:       | 3. Visit one of the buildings discussed in this AKC series virtually (through, for example, a virtual tour and/or the building's website). Using material from the lectures, write a reflection on your visit. |
| Essay Title:                 | "The Juxtapositions of the Barbican Machinery"   |
| Deadline:                    | <b>23:59, Sunday 26 April 2020</b>   |
| Date Submitted:              | 22.04.2020   |
| Word Count (max 1500 words): | 1499   |

### **DECLARATION BY STUDENT**

By submitting this essay, I declare the following:

This assignment is entirely my own work. Quotations from secondary literature are indicated by the use of inverted commas around ALL such quotations AND by reference in the text or notes to the author concerned.

ALL primary and secondary literature used in this piece of work is indicated in the bibliography placed at the end, and dependence upon ANY source used is indicated at the appropriate point in the text.

I confirm that no sources have been used other than those stated.

**I understand what is meant by plagiarism, including self-plagiarism.**

**I understand that plagiarism is a serious academic offence that will result in disciplinary action being taken and may result in my withdrawal from the AKC programme.**

**I understand that essays which do not include references and a bibliography will not be read.**

**My word count is accurately stated above and I understand that essays which are more than 10% over the word limit may not be considered by the AKC Steering Committee.**

3. Visit one of the buildings discussed in this AKC series virtually (through, for example, a virtual tour and/or the building's website). Using material from the lectures, write a reflection on your visit.

## **The Juxtapositions of the Barbican Machinery**

Whenever I visit the Barbican I am struck by its juxtapositions and seemingly incompatible properties. The towering physical structure embodies a flat public hierarchy with modern and archaic ideals side by side. This time, I walk into the Barbican from Golden Lane, noticing how the walkway gradually lifts me into the complex concrete machinery.

The first thing I notice is the size of the Barbican. It is not merely a building, but an estate that took almost 20 years to build.<sup>1</sup> However, the design does not reveal this. Instead of different architectonic styles clashing together with no overarching plan I am confronted with a sleek and holistic design down to the smallest details. I turn to one of the vast concrete pillars supporting the houses near me. Underneath there is a pond whose teal colour is almost as artificial as its squared shape, yet this artificial structure still accommodates flourishing water plants and a duck looking perfectly at home.

My eyes travel back up to the pillar, and I am reminded of the construction process. How the recognisable rugged concrete had to be chiselled by hand, causing lasting damage to the workers hands. In fact, the project pushed the workers to such an extent that they went on strike for a whole year.<sup>2</sup> As much as I admire the architecture and engineering of the Barbican, I cannot ignore the impact it made on the people involved. There is an historical juxtaposition here in that the hard work of the people of the past allows us to explore the modern and streamlined beauty of the estate. Perhaps one could even say that the brutalism is not only the architectural style of the Barbican but pays homage to the brutal work involved as well.

I walk towards one of the edges of the terrace, allowing me a better view of the whole estate. Again, there is the coldness of concrete in beautiful juxtaposition to the greenery. And there is a lot of greenery in the Barbican, as the estate embodies several ideals held by the innovative architect Le Corbusier. He based his work on his five principles of architecture, namely that a building should be built on stilts, contributing to freeing up space underneath, ribbon-shaped windows allowing for both privacy and light, free and open plane structure similar to the core idea of functionalism, and finally a vertical facade with a roof garden.<sup>3</sup> The architects of the Barbican - Chamberlin, Powell & Bon – took these principles and ran with them, allowing them to manifest Le Corbusier's idea of housing being a machine for living.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barbican, the "Our Architecture", retrieved 16.04.20 <<https://www.barbican.org.uk/our-story/our-building/our-architecture>>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Sun, Danting "Analysis on Formation of the Design Philosophy of Le Corbusier" *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, volume 233, pp. 706-709, Atlantis Press 2018

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

There are a lot of stilts in the Barbican. Most of the structure is elevated, and there is even a busy traffic road underneath the open terrace. However, even though I am standing right above this road in the middle of the City, the terrace is quiet and peaceful. The stilt structure also allows for ponds and waterfalls, something that becomes even more noticeable as I walk towards the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and see what can only be referred to as an artificial lake in the centre of the estate.

As I look up from the water and to the surrounding houses, I realise exactly what a ribbon-shaped window is. The windows and concrete base of the balconies run in alternating lines down every floor, perfectly meeting in every corner to emphasise the rectangular structure. This streamlined structure is deliberately contrasted with curved windows on the upper floor, creating a juxtaposition of hard concrete and soft curves.

I walk across the lake via a footbridge that allows me a stunning view in both directions, a perspective that emphasises the open space principle. I can see how open the Barbican is in terms of literal space, as well as its spaces whose architecture is reminiscent of council estates. However, the idea behind the Barbican is detached from any council estate-philosophy. The Barbican was initially built to accommodate a middle-class renting market in the City of London.<sup>5</sup> It seems that some of Le Corbusier's egalitarian ideas can be easily transferred to an exclusive middle-class context. Despite being an estate for private housing, however, it is simultaneously a place for the public and I am free to walk around the majority of the area. These public spaces are of considerable value, and we find a juxtaposition not only in the physical attributes of the Barbican, but also its combination of private and public.

From the footbridge I can also see the characteristic towers of the Barbican. These embody Le Corbusier's principle of a vertical facade. Building in height is a necessity in most city planning as it frees up street level space and can accommodate a large number of flats. But the towers of the Barbican allude not only to the future of modern city living, but also to the past Roman days of London. The Barbican is located right by the London Wall, which provided fortification around Londonium,<sup>6</sup> something that is intentionally reflected in the fort-like structure. This history is also reflected in the name of the Barbican which derives from the Latin 'Barbecana' referring to a fortified outpost.<sup>7</sup> With this, the Barbican manages to embody the juxtaposition of both past and future.

While there are no rooftop gardens like Le Corbusier envisioned, Chamberlin, Powell & Bon ensured that the Barbican community would still have plenty of access to green spaces. From where I am standing, I see palm trees gently blowing by the white tiles of the Arts Centre, creating a Southern European atmosphere amidst the concrete. At the end of the lake I see a park for the residents in full bloom. The air is fresh, full of

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<sup>5</sup> Lee, Nicola "The Barbican Was Never 'Social Housing'", retrieved 22.04.20 <<http://www.nicolalee.co.uk/never-social-housing>>

<sup>6</sup> English Heritage, "London Wall History", retrieved 18.04.20 <<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/london-wall/History/>>

<sup>7</sup> City of London, "Barbican Estate History", retrieved 18.04.20 <<https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/services/barbican-estate/Pages/barbican-history-architecture.aspx>>

spring, and I become certain that while the rooftop garden of Le Corbusier is not literally implemented, the philosophy behind it is. The open, green spaces make a beautiful juxtaposition of nature and concrete, encouraging human living beyond the walls of a house.

I try to make my way back to my starting point, but it is easy to become lost in this machinery with its mysterious passages and footbridges. More importantly, however, one can get lost because the Barbican never ceases to fascinate. This fascination causes me to seek what I believe is the heart of the Barbican: the Arts Centre. On my way I walk past the conservatory, the second biggest in London after Kew Gardens. Again, I observe the juxtaposition of green and concrete, a contrast that is amplified by the light shining through the conservatory. The concrete is dark, but the Barbican is designed to facilitate a lot of natural light. The conservatory is located at the top of the Arts Centre and is yet another open, public space. I return to street level and see that the conservatory is clearly visible from there as well. From outside the Barbican fortress, the conservatory acts like a flag signalling that while the entrance may seem closed, the inside is open.

I approach the Arts Centre by walking down a tunnel gently urging me to enter the machine engine. There are big staircases leading both up and down, and people are using the space with such eager that they remind me of working bees. A fascinating aspect of the Arts Centre is that the architects took Le Corbusier's vertical principle and literally inverted it: the centre was built downwards as well. By building downwards the Arts Centre can accommodate two theatres, a music hall, a cinema and more, an astonishing feature that cannot be seen from the outside. Apart from the actual entrances to the theatres and halls, this too is public space. And the public is using it to its full extent by working, catching up, eating, I have even seen people sleeping in some of the less buzzing lower floors. They are making the Barbican a part of their everyday life, something that is very much in tune with Le Corbusier's philosophy.

The Barbican is indeed a machine *for* living, that includes green spaces, public spaces, arts, culture, food and drink. When you enter the machine, you have everything you need in a space that feels secluded enough to offer comfort yet is still located in the middle of the City of London. The Barbican is also a *living machine* with a heart consisting of the people making it alive. Perhaps the Barbican is even analogous to London itself, in that it may feel harsh and intimidating from the outside, but the people within know that both London and the Barbican has everything to offer once you enter.

#### *Bibliography:*

Barbican, the "Our Architecture", retrieved 16.04.20 <<https://www.barbican.org.uk/our-story/our-building/our-architecture>>

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