

Design in mind

A Powell and Moya building signalled fresh thinking on mental healthcare in the early days of the NHS, writes Christina Malathouni

Powell and Moya's Admission and Treatment Unit at Fair Mile hospital near Wallingford was probably the first new hospital building to be completed after the launch of the NHS in 1948. It was not the first to be authorised by the government – that was the Princess Margaret Hospital in Swindon by the same practice – but, due to its smaller scale, it was completed first, in 1956.

Charles Henry Howell's original asylum building at Fair Mile (then known as Moulsoford Asylum) was completed in 1870 and extended in 1878. Initially designed for fewer than 300 patients, this number was far exceeded in later decades. During World War II, it accommodated more than 1,400.

The lack of an Admission Unit at the hospital was flagged up within weeks of the NHS's official launch. In July 1948, the Visitors' Committee noted that 'the treatment of early cases is impeded by the lack of an admission hospital and convalescent villas', and similar concerns were voiced three years later, when the lack of a proper treatment centre was also noted: 'We hope that financial restrictions will not in the long run stand in the way of providing these types of buildings which are essential to a Mental Hospital of this size.'

The new Unit had beds for 23 men and 30 women, and was hailed as a significant development in the history of the hospital. In April 1956, the Commissioners of the Board of Control described it as 'original in design and... admirably suited to its purpose'. It was named the George Schuster Hospital, after the chairman of the Oxford Regional Hospital Board from 1951 to 1963.

As Kenneth Powell notes in his monograph on Powell and Moya, the architecture writer Sherban Cantacuzino was particularly impressed by the new Fair Mile building, grouping its boiler house with two other structures by the same architects as 'truly poetic statements': the Festival of Britain Skylon (by Philip Powell, Hidalgo Moya and Felix Samuely) and the Accumulator Tower (built to make use of waste heat from Battersea Power Station) at Powell and Moya's extensive Churchill Gardens estate in Pimlico (1948-62).

The Unit won an RIBA Bronze Award in 1957, and Derek Stow, who worked on the project with Bob Henley, recalls that when the retired general who opened the facility ventured some critical remarks about the architecture, there was a spirited response in its favour from some of the hospital staff present.

The new Unit's plan was cruciform, with separate male and female wings and a third treatment wing which also catered for outpatients. The fourth wing housed a common room for both male and female patients. Both the *Architects' Journal* and *RIBA Journal* commented on the size of the building, so much smaller than the main building at Fair Mile (and indeed most other Victorian asylums), which was seen as a decisive shift away from 'institutionalisation'. So was the use of windows without bars, as the *AJ* remarked: 'The general atmosphere of this admission unit is

reassuring and optimistic, to be in line with the modern conception of much mental illness as a curable condition.' The aim, said the *RIBA Journal*, had been to design a building 'which is not only efficient but which has a pleasant and cheerful atmosphere – not normally associated with mental institutions.'

The *AJ* saw it as fortunate that 'a building of this quality, without an institutional atmosphere' has been erected so soon after the war, as 'while medical work in this field has advanced greatly, architectural expression has not generally been of a very high order, and this building is therefore of particular significance.'

The architects themselves clearly considered this a significant project. During the 1960s Philip Powell lectured regularly on their early hospital designs. He also referred back to Fair Mile in later decades: in a 1980 lecture, he underlined the importance of users' experiences and perceptions, and noted that he had given 'a talk about Hospitals as Architecture/Art – not Architect's Ambition but as people see & feel it' with the 'flippant conclusion: Fair Mile temporary boiler house – "Skylon?" '

The Fair Mile Hospital was closed in 2003, and, although the Victorian building has been listed and converted to a new use, the Admission Unit was demolished. It had certainly been poorly maintained, and a pitched roof had been added to address problems with the flat roof that were not uncommon with buildings of the period, but that hardly seems to justify the loss of a building of such historic and architectural significance.

ends