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Author

Casson, Sir Hugh

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Albertland

Sir Hugh Casson

“Albertland” is a campus—a complex of museums, colleges, and institutions lying immediately south of Kensington Gardens in West London.

It contains within its 87 acres perhaps the most spectacular serious-minded, ambitious, and elaborate set of mid-Victorian public buildings (1850–1900) to be seen anywhere in the world. Striped and pinnaced, glittering and multicolored, crawling with sculpture and symbolism, they are caged like sumptuous birds within a strictly rectangular and axial street plan imposed upon an area of West London, which 150 years ago was mostly market gardens enlivened with a few private houses and cottages.

The hero of this astonishing transformation, its indefatigable and much criticized impresario, was Sir Henry Cole. He had left school at 14, was director of the South Kensington Museum of Science and the Arts, had master-minded the 1851 Exhibition, and was a dedicated believer in the encouragement of living artists and of improving public taste by giving pleasure to visitors. His principal patron and supporter was the remarkable Prince Consort. His most inventive and indispensable “architect,” Francis Fowke (1823–1865), a member of his own

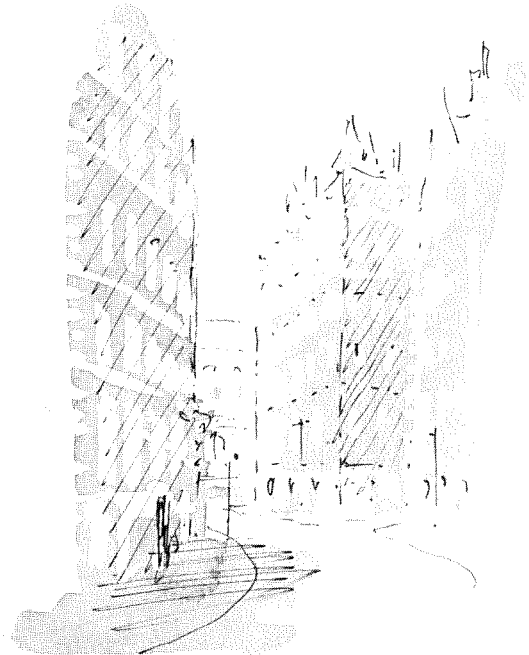


1 An equestrian statue of General Lord Napier guards the entrance to Queens Gate. Trees line the road and conceal the stuccoed architecture.

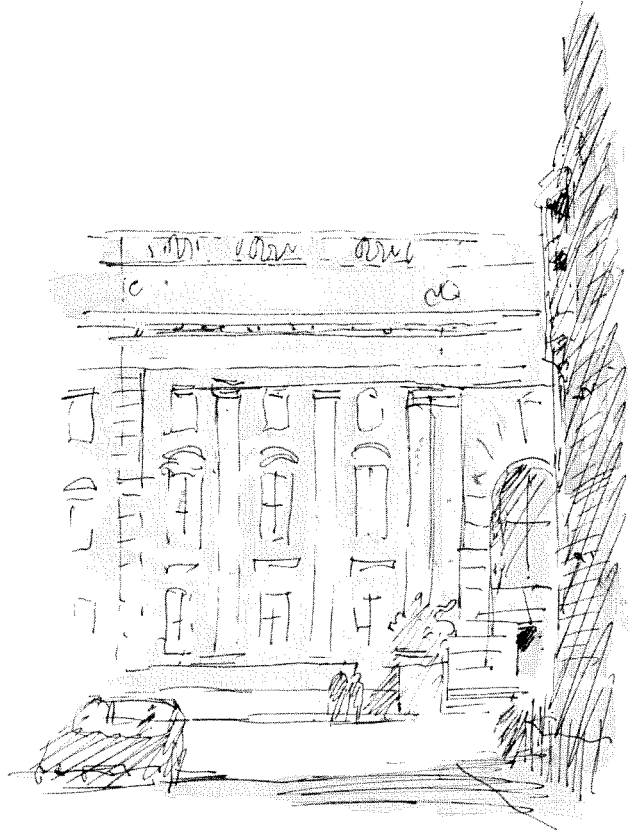
2 Prince Albert on his flight of steps is separated from the axially placed tower of the Imperial Institute by the red-brick Royal College of Music placed athwart the vista in 1890.



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museum staff. Fowke, most of whose work has disappeared, was ingenious, quick, unconventional, a modest and loyal colleague.

These three, Prince Albert, Henry Cole, and Francis Fowke (all amateur generalists), created “Albertland.” The professionals—among them architects Shaw, Webb, and Waterhouse, and builders Cubitt, Kelk, and Freake—contributed some fine work but the true glory must go to the professional amateurs.

After the 1851 Exhibition, the Royal Commissioners decided to purchase this area for institutions that—in the words of their president, Prince Albert—would “encourage the application of art and science to industry.” Prince Albert drew up the first plan himself, a symmetrical arrangement in which a National Gallery presides over its inspirers art and science and its hand maidens, the Museums of Industry and Invention. Like Cole, he believed strongly in the physical contiguity of teaching institutions and of illustrative collections.

The scheme was paid for partly by funds voted by Parliament, partly from the profit of the 1851 Exhibition, and partly by high-class residential developments along the fringes of the estate.

The scheme was not popular with the institutions. There were disputes at high level and long delays. The National Gallery wished to stay in Trafalgar Square, and the Royal Academy preferred Piccadilly to South Kensington. (Queen Victoria was so cross she refused for a long time to confer a knighthood on the president, Francis Grant.)

But events took over. In 1855 Queen Victoria paid a triumphant visit to the Paris Exhibition and the new South Kensington road layout, which was rectangular, axial, and formal, had consequently a strong Parisian flavor. The names chosen were equally formal: Prince Consort Road, Queens Gate, and Exhibition Road. In 1858 a central exhibition ground and garden was devised for the 1862 Exhibition.



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On 14 December 1861, Prince Albert died. The architectural consequences were dramatic.

A memorial committee was immediately set up, funds collected, and a site chosen in Kensington Gardens, on the axis of “Albertland.” The first idea, an obelisk, found no favor, and in the end nine architects were asked to submit proposals. The winner was Sir Gilbert Scott, with the only Gothic design submitted—an elaborately enriched polychromatic tabernacle building flanked by groups of symbolic sculptures. In 1872 it was completed and met with respectful praise from the British people, if not from professional critics. After a period during which the memorial was regarded as a tasteless joke, it has returned completely to public affection and is today never without its circle of perambulating admirers.

Henry Cole seized the opportunity of Prince Albert’s death to push forward the other great monument to the Prince Consort, the Albert Hall. It was conceived as a

3 Albert again but looking north to the Albert Hall. His statue was moved up the steps to make way for the Royal College of Music.

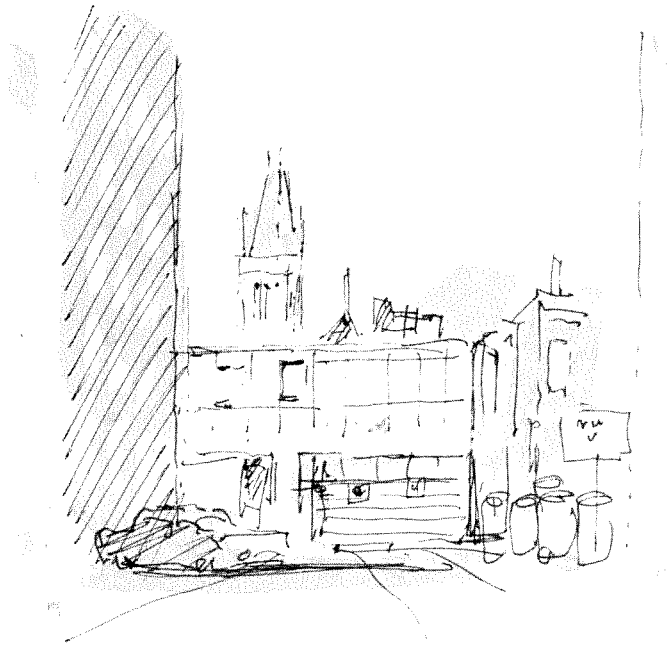
4 The Albert Hall glimpsed through the red-brick curving apartment blocks.

5 Edwardian “pompier” (the Royal School of Mines) revealed by the red and white striped flats that confront it. Another obstacle to the through-views originally planned by Albert.

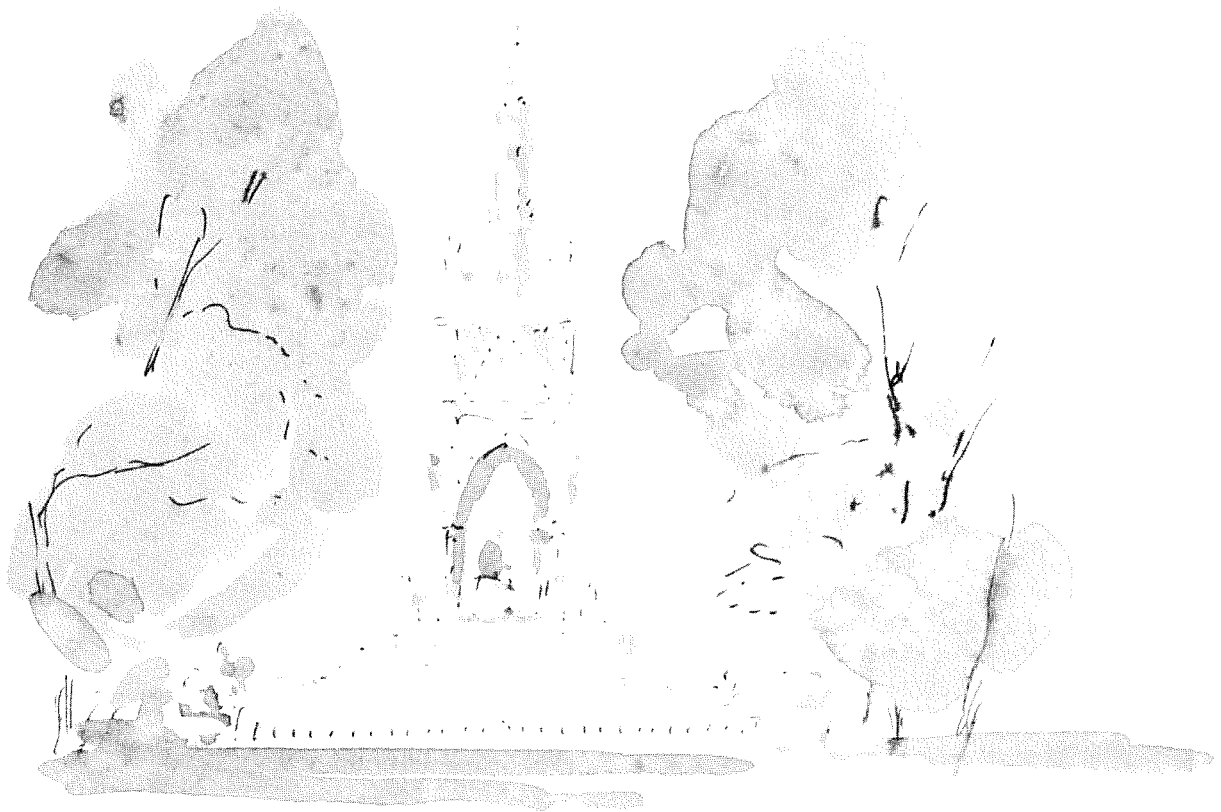
6 Porticoes sometimes rise two floors and the shadows of foliage flicker across the stucco.

7 Behind these stately mansions lies the mews—stables and servants’ quarters lining a cobbled yard and approached through grand pillared gates.

8 A typical “Albertland” house—pillared porch up steps above the lofty basement. First floor drawing room running full-depth—sometimes up to 80 feet, two or three floors of bedrooms and nurseries above. They have proved splendidly adaptable to conversion.



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conference center and concert hall. Money was short—most of it had gone to Scott’s memorial—but Henry Cole made a brave decision. “The only way to get it built,” he wrote to Queen Victoria’s secretary, “is to build it.” The Commissioners presented the site, and the design, an ellipse on the north/south axis, was by Fowke, and finished by a colleague called Scott, after Fowke’s death. The monument took the form of an arena girdled by a ring of boxes and public promenades, staircases, and bars and supported on a sub-structure of stores and workshops. It was opened in 1871 by the Prince of Wales; the Queen was too moved to speak. Again, despite a troublesome echo and management problems, public reaction was initially favorable; later the response changed to affectionate contempt. Today the Albert Hall is safely embedded as a Yorkshire pie within public taste.

Natural History Museum

By now the institutional drift to South Kensington was gathering strength. In the 1850s the zoological, botanical, and geological collections of the British Museum were still in Bloomsbury and were being fast crowded out. It was decided to move them to South Kensington. Another competition was mounted and won by Captain Fowke, who died shortly afterwards. Its design was brilliantly

reinterpreted by Alfred Waterhouse and is now regarded generally as the masterpiece of “Albertland.”

The Natural History Museum was followed by the Imperial Institute. It had been conceived as a teaching museum but suffered from lack of purpose. In 1887 a fund to pay for it was launched. A limited competition was won by T. E. Collcutt with a single symmetrical plan dominated on the axis of the Albert Memorial and the Albert Hall by a fine tower. In 1960 the Institute was all tragically demolished, except for the tower.

By now the site was filling up and the original concept of an open space guarded by great buildings was being eroded. The central north/south axis was still retained but could only be recognized from the air as, one after the other, new buildings were placed astride its path. Late arrivals included the Royal College of Music (1883), the Royal School of Needlework (1890), the Royal College of Science (1900), followed later by the Science and Geological Museums (1914 and 1929), and the Royal College of Art (1962).

Victoria and Albert Museum: 1899–1909

One of the largest, if architecturally least successful, of “Albertland’s” great treasure houses is the Victoria and Albert Museum. This marks the southeast corner of

“Albertland.” It fronts, and to some degree replaces, the old South Kensington Museum that straggled over part of the site, containing a mixture of collections and training schools—all directed by Sir Henry Cole (1808–1882). Various attempts were made to expand the museum—one of them a charming cast-iron “pre-fab” in 1856, another a Hansel and Gretel stuccoed and stencilled refreshment room—but eventually yet another competition was mounted to make a proper job of it. The assessor was Waterhouse, the winner, Aston Webb. It was opened in 1909.

Meanwhile, the great builder-developers, Aldin, Jackson, and Freake, were building to the southeast and west of “Albertland” an almost continuous range of vast Italianate mansions, stucco-faced for the most part, but after 1870 assuming the red-brick romanticisms of the domestic revival. They were five stories high above the basement, on plots about 25 feet by 80 feet. These houses were, for the most part, identical in plan and built for the wealthy, with mews at the rear for stables and servants. They were grand with their pillared porches, elaborate iron railings, marble chimney pieces, five servants bedrooms, and lofty staircases. Façades lacked a major order and depended upon string courses and elaborately modeled window

surrounds. The occupants were mostly middle-aged, middle-class, and prosperous. One of them was the Liverpool shipowner, Frederick Leyland, who owned Whistler’s *Peacock Room*, which is now in Washington. Most of these houses still exist, although now they enjoy multi-residential use. “Albertland” is a conservation area and a great success story. As with all “university type” buildings, those imposing façades conceal areas of temporary shacks, service yards, and car parks. And the trees are rilled in rows marching tidily down the streets. National collections sometimes fit uneasily into such grand operatic settings, and a miasma of Victorian complacency still hangs over those deadpan stuccoed mansions. Nevertheless, Prince Albert, sitting beneath his jeweled canopy in Kensington Gardens and gazing southwards over his modest empire, which is dedicated to scholarship and the arts, might justly feel proud of this monument to his vision and his labors.

9 Today behind the façades lie the service yards, and car parks and temporary huts and stores that gather round the skirts of university buildings.

10 The Albert Memorial where “Albertland” begins.