

Denys Lasdun, architecture, city, landscape. By William R Curtis. Phaidon Press, London, 1994. 240pp. £39.99.

Whereas most surveys show that the great majority of patients is satisfied with their doctors, most people are very unsatisfied with architects. Architects have two problems to contend with which doctors do not. Firstly, the obsession with novelty in the arts means that they have to innovate to be respected, and it is not enough just to produce a good building. Really creative people are few and far between. Secondly, the cost of labour has risen much more than the price of materials, so this has imposed financial limits on detailing.

The modern movement in architecture started in the second half of the 19th century, in reaction to the then existing ornate wedding cake style. Under the slogan of '*less is more*', the pendulum swung from excessive decoration to no decoration at all. But our senses like regularity with variations—cf. Johann Sebastian Bach.

So what with *less* being *de rigueur*, and decoration expensive, boring boxes result, and *less* becomes a *bore*. I often ask people to name six new buildings they really like, and most of them cannot. But a building by Denys Lasdun is usually among their favourites, and it is easy to see why: he is creative, and he pays great attention to detailing. For this he has needed rich clients, and he has usually found them. His only building which is not entirely successful is the National Theatre; perhaps the GLC was not quite rich enough.

The first building of his I saw was built as long ago as 1937, and I was taken there just after the war by an architect with whom I was in love. The house was the start of my love affair with modern architecture. My architect did not last as long as architecture did, but I fear that I too have difficulty in naming six modern buildings I like. However Lasdun's are at the top of my short list.

When the new College was mooted, I doubted that the right architect would be chosen. Hospital architecture until then—and indeed to the present day—did not give ground for hope. I was delighted and surprised when Lasdun was selected to build the College. The College can congratulate itself on its choice; the building is a delight, and has been maintained in showroom condition. William Curtis, the art-historian author of this celebration of Lasdun's career, says that the College is the building in which Lasdun became fully himself.

Roughly one third of the book's 240 quarto pages is text, and very small print at that. This constitutes a wide-ranging and interesting essay on Lasdun, his formation and development, the influences on him and quite detailed descriptions of his 30 buildings, the first a student work in 1934; 60 years of activity which are not yet ended. There are descriptions of some of his

projects which were never built, and some of Lasdun's own writings on architecture. The rest is photographs and plans. The book is nicely produced but some of the photographs are too grainy and old, and some of the snaps too small to be of much value.

Lasdun's work is easy to recognise because of his trade marks. Strong horizontals project over windows giving interesting contrasts of light and shade. Equally strong verticals emphasise the horizontality; even his first student work shows this diagnostic physical sign. The careful selection of wooden shuttering, into which his concrete is poured, leaves the grain of the wood and the image of the large dowels imprinted on the concrete and relieves the boredom of smooth concrete. Though he is not obsessively innovative, he has the imagination to be interesting.

Perhaps the key to his success is that he is a humanist before he is a functionalist. His buildings fit into the landscape, rather than dominate it. Like Palladio, his work is on the human scale, even though some buildings—the University of East Anglia is an example—are, of necessity, monumental. He is our most successful monumental architect; and you do not feel like an unconsidered trifle in any of his buildings.

DAVID MENDEL
Retired Physician

Western diseases: their dietary prevention and reversibility. Edited by Norman J Temple and Denis P Burkitt. Humana Press, Totowa, 1994. 480pp. \$49.50.

This book is Denis Burkitt's final publication. The publishers' endorsement describes the book as a scientific bible, authoritative and comprehensive, documenting how diet has become one of the leading modern killers in the Western nations. The philosophy of the book is an extension of the writings of Cleave and McKeown. McKeown attributed chronic non-infective diseases to factors in the environment. Cleave's major contribution was to identify that the single factor that most characterised Western diets was that carbohydrate foods are refined.

Temple, in his conclusions to this book, recalls a letter from Cleave 'I fear it will take you many years to think things out in terms of simplicity . . . I am terribly sorry but if you want to achieve salvation, you will have to think more simply than you do at the present'.

The message of this book is simple. Western diet is the cause of many contemporary premature deaths. A reversion to the diet of our prehistoric ancestors would prevent these diseases. The simplicity of this concept is beguiling if unappetising. Having said that, the great medical truths have often been simple, particularly those of Harvey, Withering, Lind, Lister, Simpson, Fleming, Watson and Crick. From these insights and revelations have developed the pillars of the science of medicine. Alternative and erroneous