ANNMARIE ADAMS

North Oxford

Tanis Hinchcliffe

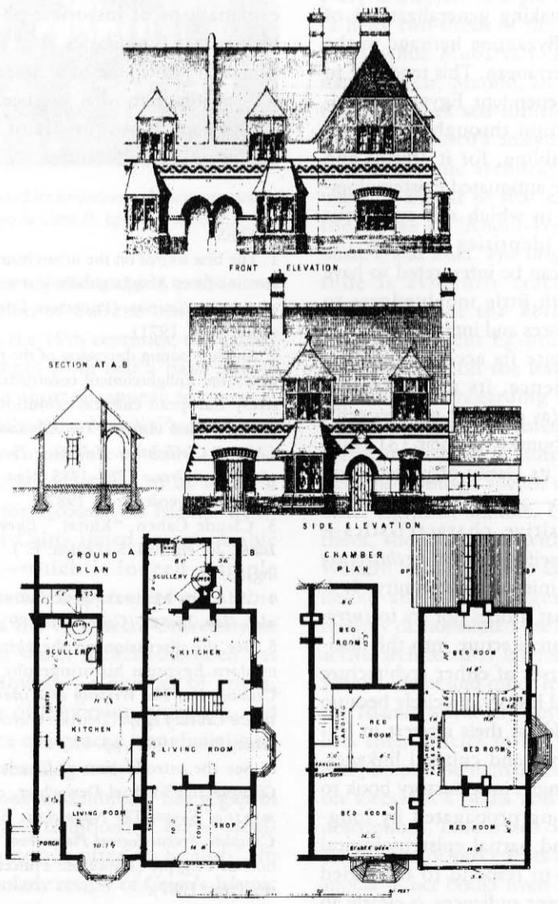
As architectural historians, we often think of Oxford, England, as a stunning array of university colleges, libraries, churches, and museums, designed by the "great masters" of English architecture: Christopher Wren, James Gibbs, Thomas Deane, and Benjamin Woodward, among others. The buildings surrounding Oxford, however, designed by unknown architects or anonymous builders, have received much less scholarly attention, overshadowed by the stature of their monumental neighbors. Tanis Hinchcliffe's recent book, *North Oxford*, addresses this imbalance, while at the same time providing a skillful analysis of one of England's most significant Victorian suburbs.

In eight chapters, ordered largely thematically, Hinchcliffe traces the complex relationship of St. John's College, the owner and developer of the extensive property, to the romantic, Victorian domestic architecture and the various religious and educational institutions constructed between 1850 and 1930. Drawing on the methods of John Summerson, Donald Olsen, and H. J. Dyos, whose pioneering work in the 1960s laid the foundations for the history of suburbanization in England, Hinchcliffe sees the development of North Oxford as a product of dynamic social forces.

Indeed, one of the most important contributions of the book is its refreshingly interdisciplinary approach. In addition to the relevant secondary sources in urban and architectural history, such as those suggested above, the author is well versed in recent theoretical debates in the histories of women, real estate, and banking, all of which have strengthened her multifaceted analysis of North Oxford architecture.

In the first two chapters, Hinchcliffe outlines the early history of St. John's College since its founding in the 16th century. She also points out the unique relationship of "town and gown," marked by a focus on luxury goods, the seasonal nature of university services, the absence of a substantial middle-class population because the colleges prohibited both their students and faculty from marrying, and the general slow growth of Central Oxford due to the large land holdings of Oxford University. The railway, for example, was initially opposed by the university, greatly retarding the growth of manufacturing in the city.

Hinchcliffe's unique perspective becomes more obvious in chapter three, which traces the beginnings of the urban and architectural development of North Oxford in the period 1860–83. Rather than seeing the history of the suburb wholly through the intentions of architects commissioned by the college, or the middle-class inhabitants attracted to the place, or the reforms instituted by the college, which permitted dons to marry after 1871, Hinchcliffe explains North Oxford architecture through the availability of investment capital, the rise of a middle-class housing market, and access to labor. Her succinct explication of the complex English leasehold systems, the roles of building societies, speculators, architects, and builders operating within the system, and the relationship of the construction industry to changes in styles of banking is a tremendous addition to our understanding of late-19th-century domestic architecture.



Hincliffe examines the plans, materials, and styles of North Oxford houses, revealing the cultural meanings within the social and political contexts of the community. A home on Kingston Road; Clapton Crabb Rolfe, 1870. (From *North Oxford*.)

In terms of formal analysis, the fifth chapter, "The Architecture of the North Oxford House," offers a solid examination of Victorian house planning and the cultural meanings of various architectural styles within the social and political contexts of the Oxford community. In this part of the book, the author's explanation of changes in middle-class preference from Italianate models, to Gothic Revival, Queen Anne, and Neo-Georgian styles is bolstered by superb technical descriptions of the houses and their materials. Particularly interesting in North Oxford was the number of houses designed for academics or entrepreneurs with political interests, expressed in the common inclusion of a separate study for these purposes.

Later in the book, Hinchcliffe uses census returns and leases to ascertain who lived in each house during which time periods, concluding that the extraordinary number of female heads of households impacted the architecture of North Oxford and encouraged the establishment of several women's institutions in the area. It is hoped that this comprehensive social map of the suburb will inspire more work on the relationship of family structure to domestic space.

Hinchcliffe's attention, however, is not restricted to life inside North Oxford's houses. The book's final two chapters concern social life in this middle-class suburb and the construction of institutions in North Oxford. Churches, schools, collective dwellings, and even other colleges were constructed and closely controlled by St. John's to conform to the residential character of the neighborhood. According to Hinchcliffe, these institutions were largely the result of social changes in middle-class life, including an increasing pluralism and tolerance within the Church of England. In this way, the author paints a picture of the middle-class suburb as a place of relatively experimental activity, rather than a den of conservatism, where new institutions flourished because of the opportunities and access to property offered in suburbia. "The suburb became a sort of Forest of Arden," Hinchcliffe explains, "where what could not find space at that time in the colleges was allowed to flourish."

Keble College was also among these relatively revolutionary institutions. Designed by William Butterfield in the 1870s, the new college was constructed for students of modest means, otherwise unable to attend Oxford. This attitude was reflected in the plan of the college, as Hinchcliffe remarks, whose circulation was based on the use of corridors, rather than traditional stairways, intended to encourage a more communal lifestyle. Butterfield's distinctive treatment of brick, in marked contrast to the fine stonework used in other Oxford colleges, expressed the political convictions of the new college and smoothed its acceptance in its suburban setting. As an example of the enormous amount of control exerted by St. John's College as developer, Hinchcliffe also notes the conditions of the sale of the site to Keble College. If the new college were to fall into the hands of the Church of Rome—a strong possibility, given the Tractarian leanings of the Keble group—the site would return to St. John's.

North Oxford is a significant model for other detailed studies of individual suburbs. It has one hundred illustrations, including many site and building plans and twenty beautiful color photographs. In addition to students of architectural and urban history, the book will interest anyone drawn to the histories of women, domestic life, real estate, and economics. It will also inspire the thousands who flock to Oxford each year to admire the city's architecture to notice the buildings between the monuments. They, too, have stories to tell.

NORTH OXFORD, Tanis Hinchcliffe, Yale University Press, 1992, 261 pp., illus., $45.00.