

OUTSIDE THE SENATE HOUSE: REFLECTIONS ON TIMELESSNESS AND LAW

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Senate House: photograph by the author.

The Senate House is the administrative centre of the University of London as well as the home of a 14-storey library. The art deco building, situated in Bloomsbury, London, was constructed between 1932 and 1937. Looking for a word to capture its impact on me, a pedestrian walking on Store Street towards the Senate House, I venture through mixed feelings. Is “imposing” the word I am looking for? Senate House is neither the tallest nor the largest building I have faced. But it does make me feel small. After all, I am very tiny compared to it. I have to “look up” to see it. Yet “imposing” is not the word I am looking for.

“Timeless”. This feels better. The architectural historian Arnold Whittick described the building as a “static massive pyramid ... obviously designed to last for a thousand years” (1974: 515). Although the art deco design



Signs of decay on the Senate House building: photograph by the author.

of the building gives away its “time” as in the period the building was planned and constructed, the first impression of an observer is that they are in front of a monument that was intended to be there for centuries to follow. William Beveridge, then the vice-chancellor of the University of London, put forward an ambitious task for the architectural design of the building:

the central symbol of the University on the Bloomsbury site can not fittingly look like an imitation of any other university, it must not be a replica from the Middle Ages. It should be something that could not have been built by any earlier generation than this (1928: 6).

The timelessness is not literal. A closer look gives away signs of decay on the surface of the building. But it is the ambition in its making that freezes an observer. The timelessness of knowledge, perhaps, or the desire to be a symbol like the Great Library of Alexandria, are too big of an ambition to see its fruition in a single lifetime. It is the building’s “permanence” as opposed to my temporariness that makes me feel small.

The Senate House was used by the Ministry of Information during the Second World War. The governmental department responsible for publicity and propaganda during the conflict inspired two British literary works. The first of these is Graham Greene’s *The Ministry of Fear* (1943), where a spy network built by the Nazi regime in London gathers information on citizens and blackmails them into co-operation. The second is George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eight-Four* (1949). Orwell’s wife, Eileen Blair, worked for

the Censorship Department of the Ministry of Information at the Senate House during the Second World War. The Ministry of Truth in Orwell's novel, which is responsible for providing the official narration of historical events that is in line with the party's agenda, is based at a grandiose pyramidal structure of white concrete, rising 300 metres (980 feet) into the air, containing over 3000 rooms above ground.

It is clear that the Ministry of Information's activities in gathering, controlling, and manipulating information inspired both Greene and Orwell in fictionalizing totalitarian regimes. However, I cannot help but wonder if the architectural features of the Senate House did not play a role in reinforcing the power those fictional regimes claim in regulating people's lives. Notice Orwell's choice of a "pyramidal" structure as a base for his Ministry of Truth and Whittick's description of the Senate House as a "static massive pyramid ... obviously designed to last for a thousand years" (1974: 515). It is the connotation of timelessness that likens the Senate House to the Egyptian pyramids that have survived for millennia. At its core, legal systems share the same ambition of timelessness. The notion of timelessness has a role to play in the theories of natural rights. Aquinas's natural law theory centres the notion of "eternal law", which he defines as God's rational purpose and plan for all things. As rational beings, humans partake in eternal law, according to Aquinas. And the said participation is natural law. For Aquinas, the timeless quality of all human legal systems, however transient they may seem, is that true law derives from this eternal and natural law, whereas law which lacks these timeless qualities is classified as a "perversion" or "corruption" of law—or even no law at all (Aquinas 1915 [1274]: Q 92)

The idea of timelessness plays other, equally significant, roles in legal positivism. For Hobbes, sovereignty is a right bestowed by people upon the sovereign. While it is possible to create a time-limited monarch, the "power" is retained even when the sovereign is "very thoroughly asleep" (Tuck 2016: 91). For legal positivism, timelessness does not refer to eternity but to permanence. The French jurist Jean Carbonnier states that: "Continuity is one of the postulates of positive law: permanent as well as general, legal rule is a sun that never sets." (2001 [1969]: 61) H L A Hart, in his work *The Concept of Law* (1961), also emphasizes the continuity of law, despite discontinuity in terms of the human beings who make and follow it, as one of the essential features of law as such. It is this continuity that (partly) justifies the rule of recognition—Hart's master meta-rule underlying any legal system that defines what counts as law within that system. Continuity and permanence could also be observed in Kelsen's "*grundnorm*", translated to English as the "basic

norm” (2008 [1967]: 193-195). Kelsen structures the legality of rules in a chain of authorization, where the validity of a legal rule derives from another, higher legal norm, which eventually leads to the *grundnorm*. The legal validity of the *grundnorm*, the first, historical constitution of a given legal system, is presupposed. And, hence, a necessary form of permanence is established for the legal system’s validity and continuity.

After your visit to Senate House ...

... check out the University of London website’s entry on the [history of the building](#).

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