This is the first major public building to be completed in London since the Royal Festival Hall was erected in 1951. It is thus of some significance as an architectural event. Its importance as a piece of architecture rests, however, not so much on any merit it may have as a built object as on the clarity with which it demonstrates a particular way of thought. This architectural thought process is moreover fairly widespread, there are examples all over the world, yet its workings can seldom be seen as clearly as in this instance.

Two starting points can be distinguished in architectural criticism: the first concentrates on the "how" of architecture, on the stylistic skill of the architect, style used in its literary sense of manipulation of the material at hand, in the case of architecture, that is to say, of space. The danger is that it may never consider more than the cosmetics of building, the glittering marks of the concrete or the attenuation of the million extrusion. Agreement on the approval or disapproval of such aspects creates the taste of a period—boarded concrete, dark brickwork, short skirts, blue eyeshadow.

The second emphasizes the 'what' of building, the content and the grammar of the architecture. It interests itself in reasons as well as visual results or, at any rate, it does not accept that the building as seen is purely the outcome of certain random and undefined hunches to be judged solely as an object in space. It shifts the emphasis from cosmetics to anatomy.

This is not to suggest a hierarchy of architectural criticism, but only to emphasize these two aspects since sociologists and historians writing as architectural critics tend quite properly to devote themselves to the second, architects themselves to the first. The interest of the Commonwealth Institute as a building to be understood critically is that both considerations can be analysed and can be shown, as they usually are, to be wholly emmeshed.

The Institute, opened by the Queen in November 1962, does a kind of visual public relations act for the Commonwealth in London. It replaces the Imperial Institute which had to make way for the enlargement and current rebuilding of the Imperial College of Sciences and Technology in Kensington. A good many of the exhibits mainly educational and aimed at school children—came over from the old building and could in many instances only be altered slightly to go into their new setting.

The move had, no doubt, certain symbolic overtones. There was thus, one suspects, a strong feeling that just as the word 'Imperial' was obsolete so was any form of architecture in any way reminiscent of the past. There was a premium on up-to-dateness; only the consciously intent would be in the spirit of the project. The solution was to some extent, therefore, prejudged by an attitude stemming not from analysis but from a need for a literal symbolism: in this case, the unity of the Commonwealth under a single roof. Yet symbolism of that kind is heady and dangerous stuff. Like crowns of thorns or birds in flight, a 'tent in the park'—as the architects have called the single roof—is a debatable starting point. Robin Boyd's warning on the dangers of the 'Engineering of Excitement' brilliantly made four-and-a-half years ago (AR, November 1958) obviously remained unheeded.

This is not to decry the value or importance of the symbolic quality of architecture. On the contrary, all architecture worth discussing has symbolic meaning. It is part of its make-up. But it must, like the symbolism of the Baroque dome, spring from conviction. In today's architecture such conviction is difficult to acquire and even more difficult to convey unless it is rooted in an analysis of the programme. Rooted what is more both emotionally and intellectually.

The tent had also to be up to date. At the time of its design, 1958, this certainly meant a thin warped structure and probably a hyperbolic paraboloid—no hyperbolic paraboloid had yet been built in London. Since then the warped structure has possibly been overtaken by the suspended roof in desirability. This is part
of an imagined hierarchy of architectural values which says 60 ft. spans are better than 40 ft. spans, 120 ft. better than 60 ft., 2½ in. thick vaults better than 4 in., wires in tension better than concrete in compression without consideration of the specific task to be performed. It places the emphasis on feats of construction rather than on performance in use.

In the Commonwealth Institute is a series of platforms, some of which deal with movement and hold objects on display while the remainder carry ancillary functions of administration, library, restaurant and so on. It is never a tent, that is to say, a single floor with a roof requiring structure and enclosure springing from the ground. It is a series of floors needing enclosure—whether transparent or opaque is irrelevant—between them and with a roof over the uppermost. As the size of the area to be covered and its use varies, so could also, of course, the shape and expression of the roof. And the structure of that roof could have sprung from the supports which already hold the floors. Given such an architectural expression, the awkwardness of the junction between the two blocks which has given rise to so much adverse comment would not have occurred. The architectural problem of such a junction is obviously not insoluble, yet the undoubtedly best solution is the annihilation of the problem itself, not least since the presence of such problems is frequently symptomatic of fundamental ambiguities.

The visual clash between the two buildings—what John Domat has called the crash of 'an express train hitting an engine shed'—is not only an unfortunate relationship between two forms but the clash between two modes of architectural thought. The low block is a series of decks holding variously sized cells the height of which in terms of use controls the levels of the decks and the scale of the enclosure. The supposition is that here is something specific and that out of its particular nature a visual order and form can be created.

The main square exhibition building is, on the other hand, judged at least from the outside, a single envelope over apparently undifferentiated space. Its only job, it would seem, is to provide enclosure for activities whose nature is either unforeseeable or devoid of any particularity. The assumption underlying such architecture is that given enclosure—given that is to say a kind of absolute space—an infinite number of activities can go on within. Enclosure, whether of Manhattan under a dome or of an exhibition under a roof, is, however, only the beginning and one aspect of the architectural problem. The remainder, and especially the manipulation of space related to purpose, still remain to be solved.

Fortunately they were not neglected in the interior of the exhibition hall. Similar spaces which had previously been used for exhibition purposes had hardly been successful and were, presumably, a warning. Both the Dome of Discovery at the Festival of Britain and the American Pavilion at the Brussels Exhibition, for instance, had tried to present display in the amorphous space left within the enclosure and failed.

The amount of information available within the field of vision at any one time was far too great and one's orientation in space impossible to judge. They probably failed because the vital place within a centralized space, the centre, was both barred to the public and neglected as a focus. The Commonwealth Institute completely reverses the situation. By a long and subtle progression from the street it leads
6. The inner part of the roof, resting on the concrete floor, is formed as a large concrete slab, continuous with the brick walls. The joint between the roof and the walls is hidden by the cantilevered roof of the exhibition hall and the black soffit in the exhibition area.

7. The surface is again concealed by a similar roof at the rear of the exhibition hall. The area is accentuated by a large wall and the cantilevered roof. This is glazed on the interior, creating an interesting sequence of spaces.
9, the cinema is immediately under the art gallery at the north end of the long block. It is, like the gallery, entered from the main exhibition space although it is also possible for it to be reached from a separate foyer opening on to the service road along the west. In either case the entrances are at the side of the cinema. Apart from this, the space is obviously unidirectional towards the stage or screen; yet paradoxically enough the main design effort has been expended on a multi-coloured screen at the rear.

10, the art gallery houses changing exhibitions of paintings and sculpture and is lit by a system of skylit roof lights. Each skylight also houses fluorescent lighting and a blind which can be drawn across the opening. The window at the rear gives a view of the rising ground of Holland Park, but because of its low position receives little of the light. The gallery is entered from the door at the right, roughly in the middle of its length, so that half the gallery can be shut off while the next exhibition is prepared. The attempt at limitless flexibility has in fact produced an environment of serious restrictions: it is extraordinarily difficult to create unique situations related to the nature of the exhibit.
The visitor to a platform in the centre of the exhibition space would see the routes radiate from the platform, direct to the central display in the exhibition hall. The visitor would thereby be able to appreciate the central display, which is the focal point of the exhibition. The layout is such that the display can be viewed from various angles, providing a dynamic and engaging experience for the visitor. The central display is an adaptation of the British Pavilion at the Exposition Universelle in Paris, and it is designed to offer an introductory exhibition to British institutions. The layout is designed to encourage visitors to turn again and again, thus experiencing the exhibition in a more comprehensive manner.
as far as that is possible, some attention being given to the item on view, it tends to isolate each display and makes serial viewing—the relation of objects seen in sequence—difficult. It also makes it a good deal less simple to change the range at which the exhibits can be viewed. They tend at the Commonwealth Institute as a result to be seen at very much the same distance and therefore to be making rather the same impact. This may have had something to do with the fact that exhibits had to be taken over from the old building and may well be changed if the display is ever reorganized.

The main hall has two important subsidiary spaces—a cinema and an art gallery. These have changing and thus public-attracting shows and are, like bread and butter at a supermarket, placed so that they must be reached by passing through the main display area. This to some extent influenced their location but should not have affected their character. Both spaces tend to be marked by ambiguities similar to those apparent on the outside. The art gallery is the more interesting of the two, not least since it raises the problem in a more fundamental way; it is there not only a matter of execution but of intention.

The gallery is a room about 95 ft. by 45 ft. on the top floor of the northern part of the low blocks. It is meant for pictures and sculpture and a great deal of effort has gone into the design of a system of natural lighting. The room is top-lit from a very deep egg-crate in which the light from each opening is controllable. At the northern end there is also a long window looking into the rising ground of Holland Park and with the sky obscured by a low window head. Technically the room is, like the thinness of a concrete hyperbolic paraboloid, a considerable achievement.

The gallery can only be approached from the main exhibition area which relies entirely on localized artificial lighting most of which is incandescent. The eye has, therefore, accommodated to yellow warm light concentrated on specific zones. It is now presented with diffuse natural light excluding the sun which, if necessary, is reinforced by fluorescent lighting. The shock is considerable despite the transition through the lowered corridor. This in itself might not matter had the change been a real gain.

The room has three outside walls and could, like the new wing of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, for example, have been lit without recourse to the elaborate system devised in collaboration with the Building Research Station. Sidelighting and views of the park would not only have given the visual change from the main hall which was obviously intended, but would also have provided an environment which, because of its variety, could have been able to provide more sympathetic, and in fact more functional, surroundings for the objects on view. Sculpture could have been seen so that its profile was visible against foliage and its modelling revealed by sidelighting. Paintings hung so that they were side-lit, or placed elsewhere and the lighting reinforced by artificial illumination whose strength and tonality would depend on the exhibit itself. Etchings do not need the same lighting as oil paintings and should not receive it. The possibility of creating a conscious relationship between space, lighting and exhibit was there, it existed both in terms of the site and the use within the space. It seems, however, to have been deliberately avoided.

The interest was elsewhere. This is, of course, true of a great deal of building. There is a preoccupation with the notion that given sufficient emphasis on the means of production the ends need little consideration since they will be achieved as a kind of natural by-product. The use of space appears to matter less than its manufacture.

The question which this room (like the roof of the Institute and like so much other building) therefore poses, is whether such an emphasis on technique alone can be enough to evolve an architecture. On present evidence, the answer is an emphatic no.