



Jan Kaplický

The refugee who made his mark on English cricket

This essay by **Hugh Oxlade** was the runner-up in the BCSA's 2020 writing competition. Hugh is a history graduate, born and raised in the London suburbs, who now works as a researcher for the Ipsos MORI polling organisation.

I am reasonably proud of my collection of cricket autographs. Scattered unsystematically across the sheets of acid-free paper in two A5 notebooks are the signatures of players from a wide variety of eras, nations and degrees of popular recognition.

I have on occasion come to reflect on how I ultimately owe some of the gems of my collection, including former England captains Bob Willis, Michael Atherton and Nasser Hussain, international stars Shane Warne and Dale Steyn, and respected players turned respected commentators Ed Smith, Simon Hughes and Robert Key, to a man who fled Czechoslovakia during the terrible Soviet reprisals to the Prague Spring, and arrived in England carrying only £50 in cash, and two spare pairs of socks.

There are only two ways in and out of the Media Centre at Lord's, the ground in St John's Wood which styles itself as 'The Home of Cricket'. They are both lifts, and they both exit into an area in which ticket holders are free to mill around, or, as the case may be, hang in wait so as to ambush any writer, commentator or analyst who has made the trip down, thrusting pen and autograph book towards the eminence's midriff before they have had the opportunity to walk two paces from the shaft.

At every other international cricket venue in the UK, the media 'talent' can be easily be shepherded away from the public by production assistants, but not at Lord's, the most famous venue of them all. (Although the most famous English cricketer of them all, Ian Botham, has still succeeded in dodging my ballpoint on a few occasions through a clever human-shielding strategy.)

Those two so felicitously placed lift shafts, and the centre, which sits on top of them, are

the work of the architects Jan Kaplický, born in Prague in 1937, and his then-wife, Amanda Leveté. When they were commissioned for the project by Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), custodians of the Laws of Cricket and owners of Lord's, in 1994, no organised cricket match had yet taken place in the Czech Republic. The first, in 1997, was a six-a-side match played at a rugby ground.

The somewhat blunt-speaking Leveté noted that MCC must have been visionaries to have given the job to 'a bloody foreigner and a skirt'. Kaplický was indeed not only a 'foreigner', but a foreigner from a country with positively no cricketing heritage. With regard to the 'skirt', it was only in 1998 that women were first allowed to join MCC. For such an infamously conservative organisation to have entrusted the design and building of such an integral aspect of its headquarters to two such figures was unquestionably a bold decision, but one which equally unquestionably paid off handsomely, accompanied by nary a splutter from the club's old guard.

Having come to England with practically nothing, after a hair-raising scramble across Europe from the new occupiers of his homeland, Kaplický seems to have repeatedly found something he may not have been expecting: acceptance. Being handed the great responsibility of reshaping the omphalos of a very English sport was perhaps the apotheosis of this acceptance, an acceptance which repeatedly resulted in greater happiness for all.

During the 1970s, Kaplický was taken on successively by three of Britain's foremost modern architects: first Denys Lasdun, whom he helped in the creation of the South Bank's once seen, never forgotten, National Theatre complex. Then Richard Rogers, who involved him in the planning of the unparalleled Pompidou Centre. Then Norman Foster, who set him to work on what became the blueprint for the modern office building, the HSBC HQ in Hong Kong. The swish

tower whose third floor houses the desk at which I type away from nine to five each weekday certainly owes that HSBC skyscraper, and by admittedly rather long extension, Kaplický, a considerable debt of influence.

Like many great artists, as well as being bold, clear, and coherent, Kaplický's ideas were not the most 'conventional', and he was not shy about putting them across. After his time under the aegis of those three British heavyweights, indeed, he co-founded a practice which at the time described itself as a 'think tank', Future Systems, with the 'space architect' David Nixon. At this point the supply of 'acceptance' ran somewhat short as potential clients eyed high-tech proposals accompanied by steep costs; pitches were lost on a number of projects, including the Grand Buildings in Trafalgar Square, and Paris's Musée du Quai Branly.

Lord's Cricket Ground has occupied its present site since 1814; the Media Centre commission seems yet more remarkable when it is considered that Kaplický, on top of coming from a land without cricket, stared determinedly into a future space age, and tended not to compromise on this otherworldly (and expensive) vision. Commissioned it was, though, and the building continues to be a marvel of function and form, twenty-one years after its opening, and eleven after Kaplický's death.

Prior to the construction of Leveté and Kaplický's Media Centre, only one side of Lord's mattered. None of the aspects of the ground found in John Marshall's history Lord's (1969) or Aylwin Sampson's guide to first-class cricket venues Grounds of Appeal (1981) takes in the ground's 'nursery end'. All focus is on the pavilion opposite: a wide, squat red brick building with elements of a castle but not a quarter as imposing, noted chiefly for an internal feature, the 'Long Room', through which batsmen must stride, flanked by MCC members, to reach the wicket. This pavilion once housed the 'media', before their numbers multiplied and



their equipment complexified. The problem of where to put the proliferation of commentators, and their microphones and monitors, provided an opportunity to attend to the minor embarrassment of the unassuming nursery end. I suspect that the decision to appoint such an unlikely figure as Kaplický as one of the principal architects of the centre was partly motivated not just by a wish to spice up a dull corner, but to distract attention away from that pavilion, which, for all its history, is underwhelming when looked at from the outside. Spice up the ground as a whole Kaplický duly did, using his prodigiously talented outsider's view, which nonetheless took in practicalities, purpose and context.

Although it has always immediately brought to mind the command bridge of a space frigate from Star Trek or its ilk (no bad thing, in my book), Kaplický maintained that the centre's distinctive appearance was inspired by the front of a batting helmet, which offers only a thin slit between peak and grille through which to track the progress of that rock hard, inevitably fast-moving red projectile.

While those walking through its porthole-like interior doors are more likely to feel like cosmonauts than England's number 3, Kaplický's comparison with respect to the building's glass face is a valid one. The Centre's occupants peer down at the pitch through a wide, mullioned strip which pierces a white aluminium shell, whose sheen is redolent of the toughened plastic out of which certain articles of protective cricket equipment are made. Far from imposing science-fiction on cricket, Kaplický found the science-fiction that was already there in cricket, and in doing so created a building which is a source of wonder for spectators young and old alike.

A day out at the cricket is just that: play will typically last from eleven o'clock in the morning to half past six in the evening, with breaks for lunch and tea in between. The action in cricket is concentrated on a series of events, the bowler's deliveries, of which there are a mere 540 in prospect during the course of any particular day from a five-day international 'test match'. It is perhaps uniquely important among sporting venues that a cricket ground's architecture be stimulating, given the amplexness of the time dur-

ing which nothing would appear to be happening out on the grass.

My reactions upon first gazing up at the Lord's Media Centre followed, I reckon, the typical path of a young spectator's. First, generally being impressed at its sleek design and construction. Then, trying to work out how it is that people do not just slide out of the front of it, given that its roof overhangs its floor, and how steeply its interior appears to slope down. Thirdly, after the physics of the tiered seating have been reconciled to one's satisfaction, an anomaly is noticed in that glass front. Why is it that there is only one openable window across all those panels, positioned slightly to the left towards the top?

Eccentricity is a quintessentially British characteristic, and one particularly associated with the sure anachronism that is cricket. Nowhere is that sublime eccentricity perhaps better encapsulated than in the figure of Henry Blofeld, the gaudily attired, now sadly retired, commentator for the BBC's Test Match Special programme, best known for his remarks on pigeons and other passing birdlife, rather than events on the field of play. When Blofeld and his lot specially requested a hinged window for their earmarked nook in the Media Centre, some architects might have flatly refused or lamented the destruction of their symmetrical order. Leveté and Kaplický, however, in readily acceding to the request, showed good humour, and a fine understanding of the ways of Britain, of cricket, and of the institution that is Test Match Special.

In mounting the structure on two colossal pillars, and so achieving elevation over the pitch while still allowing the crowd to circulate underneath, Leveté and Kaplický cleverly solved a practical problem.

In having the glass front cut inwards, and employing a silver filter, thereby reducing the glare of the sun, Kaplický ingeniously used his understanding of aeronautical design to improve the lot of the cricket media and the paying public alike. In allowing that opening window effectively to deface the exterior of his work, however, Kaplický demonstrated that 'acceptance' flowed in two directions; the cricket 'establishment' had accepted the brilliant, if hardly 'safe' ideas, of a Czech refugee, and that Czech refugee had, in turn, accepted the just slightly batty architectural proposition of a cherished radio programme. The outcome was a building which could be admired just as greatly as it could be loved.

The Media Centre's receipt of the 1999 Royal Institute of British Architects' Stirling Prize, for the building that has 'made the greatest contribution to the evolution of architecture in the past year', would have caused many a chest clothed in MCC's striking 'egg and bacon' livery to swell with pride. The publicity for the 'home' of a sport seemingly in constant crisis over its imminent irrelevance was no bad thing, either. The Kaplický-cricket interface, bizarre though it might have seemed at face value, was one which allowed both parties to show off their best qualities, and one which has undeniably left the world of cricket a better place, and not simply for autograph hunters.

