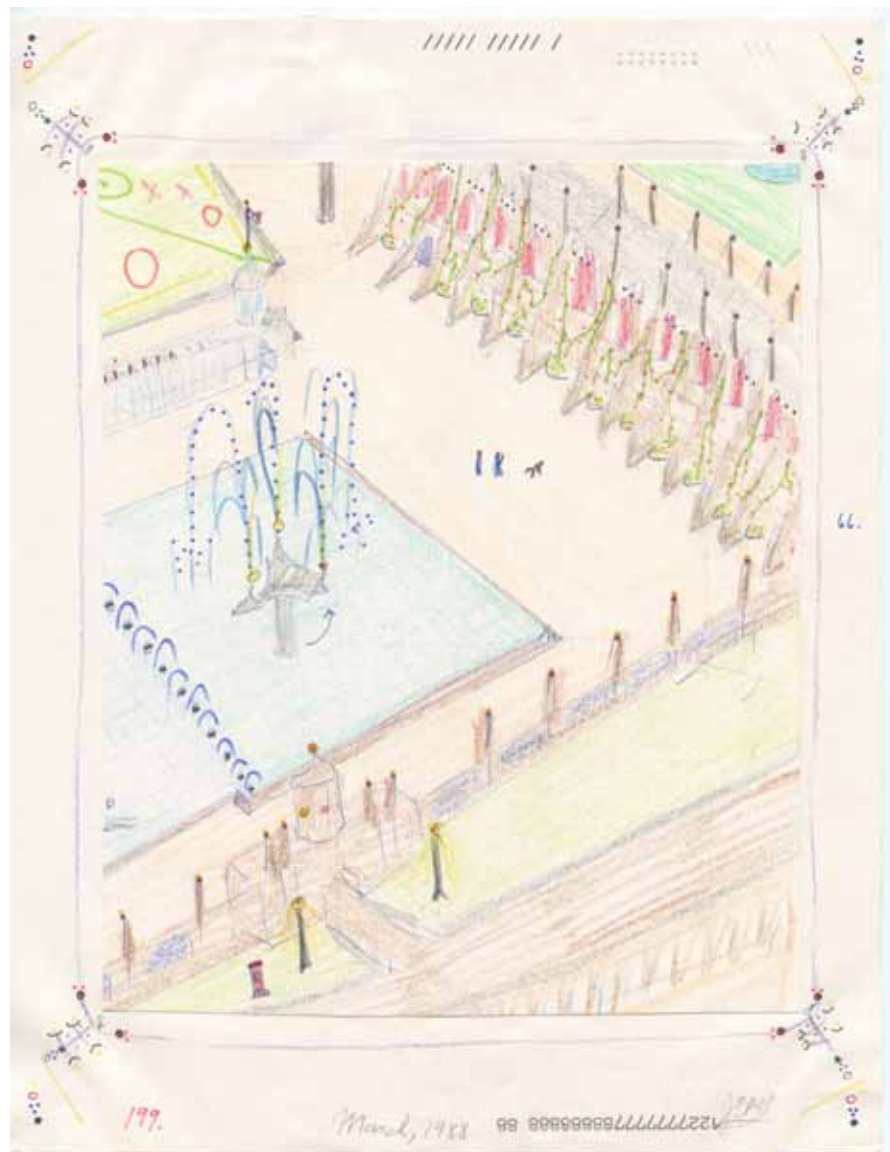


John Devlin

Across several decades and many hundreds of drawings, John Devlin created an ideal and imaginary rendering of the University of Cambridge located on an island in Nova Scotia, Canada. Comparison can be made with the abstract illustrations of the Surrealists or the folly-strewn plans of the Romantic Neo-Gothic architects, but Devlin is increasingly being recognised as an important 'Outsider' artist.

by Andrew Spyrou



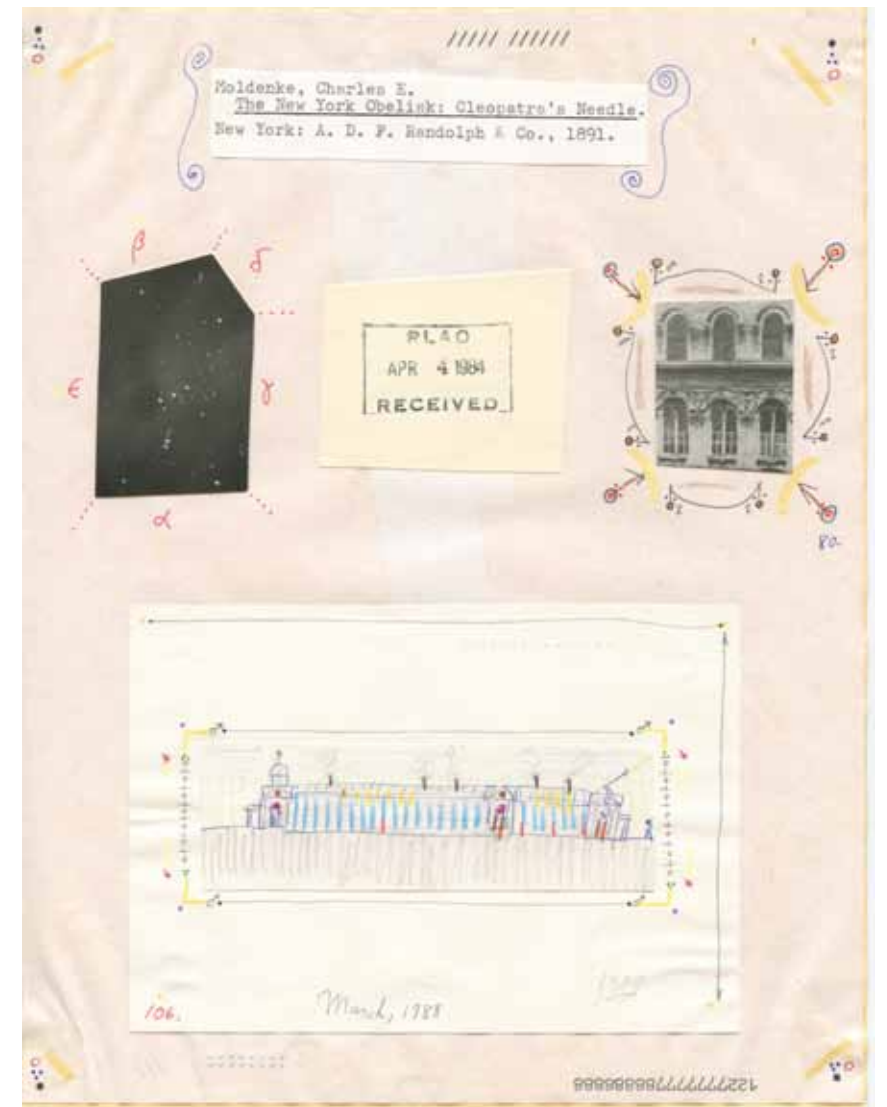
Untitled (aerial perspective of fantasy King's College, Cambridge), 1988, mixed media on paper, 21.6 x 27.9 cm, courtesy of the artist

Beginnings

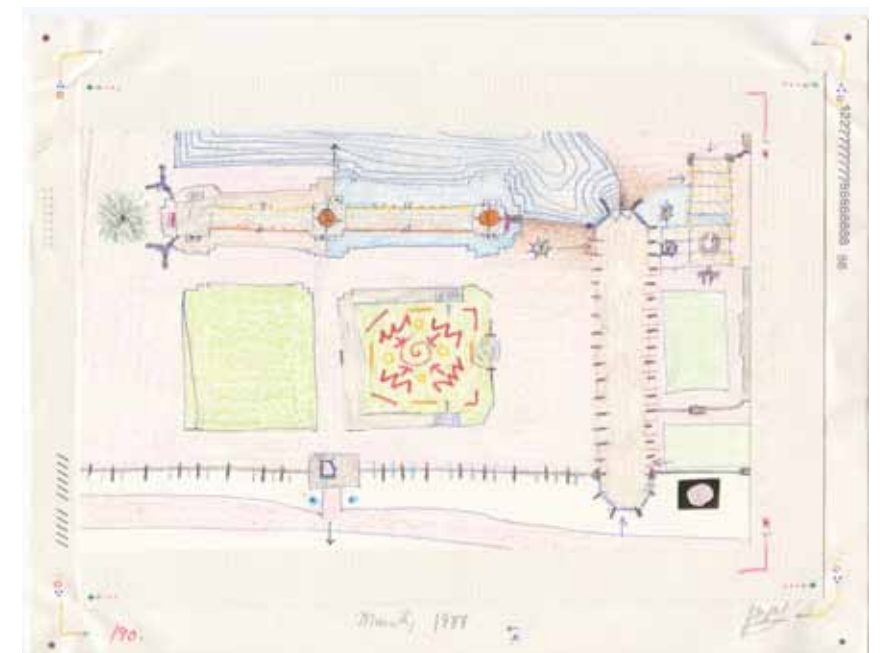
In Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1972, many beautiful buildings were under threat of demolition by developers. This threat to beauty, a man-made beauty, compelled me to enrol as an architecture student at the Technical University of Nova Scotia with the aim of eventually practising as a restoration architect. I consequently became very interested in conceptual sketches – the sort of things architects scratch on the back of envelopes, encapsulating with a few lines an entire building. I loved doing these sketches – elevations, sections, plans and axonometrics: thumbnail drawings, done very quickly and picked out in colour, and realised that these could be works of art in themselves. I had no interest in producing large presentation drawings for clients and found the technical plans particularly dry. So I dropped out. Although I suppose it is possible to draw some sort of distinction between art and architecture, I don't feel that such a distinction is valid in describing my work, simply because my time studying architecture was such a necessary formative element of the artistic practice that was to come. I now call myself an artist who produces outsider architectural sketches, with the term 'Outsider' is being increasingly absorbed into the mainstream, which is perhaps a good thing.

Nova Cantabrigiensis

In 1979 I made the move to Cambridge to read Theology and again dropped out shortly after. Cambridge and its architecture had had a profound effect on me and all my sketches centred upon this subject: the university was slightly altered, transported to Canada to a place within cycling distance of where I was living at the time and formed an imagined world to which I could retreat when back in Nova Scotia, having undergone overwhelming situational turmoil. Sorting out your life is the same as sorting out the universe; they're just as baffling and art ought to be baffling. I appreciate now that the concept was completely megalomaniacal, but these old sketches remain, perhaps as beautiful things, records of states of mind now obsolete and left behind.

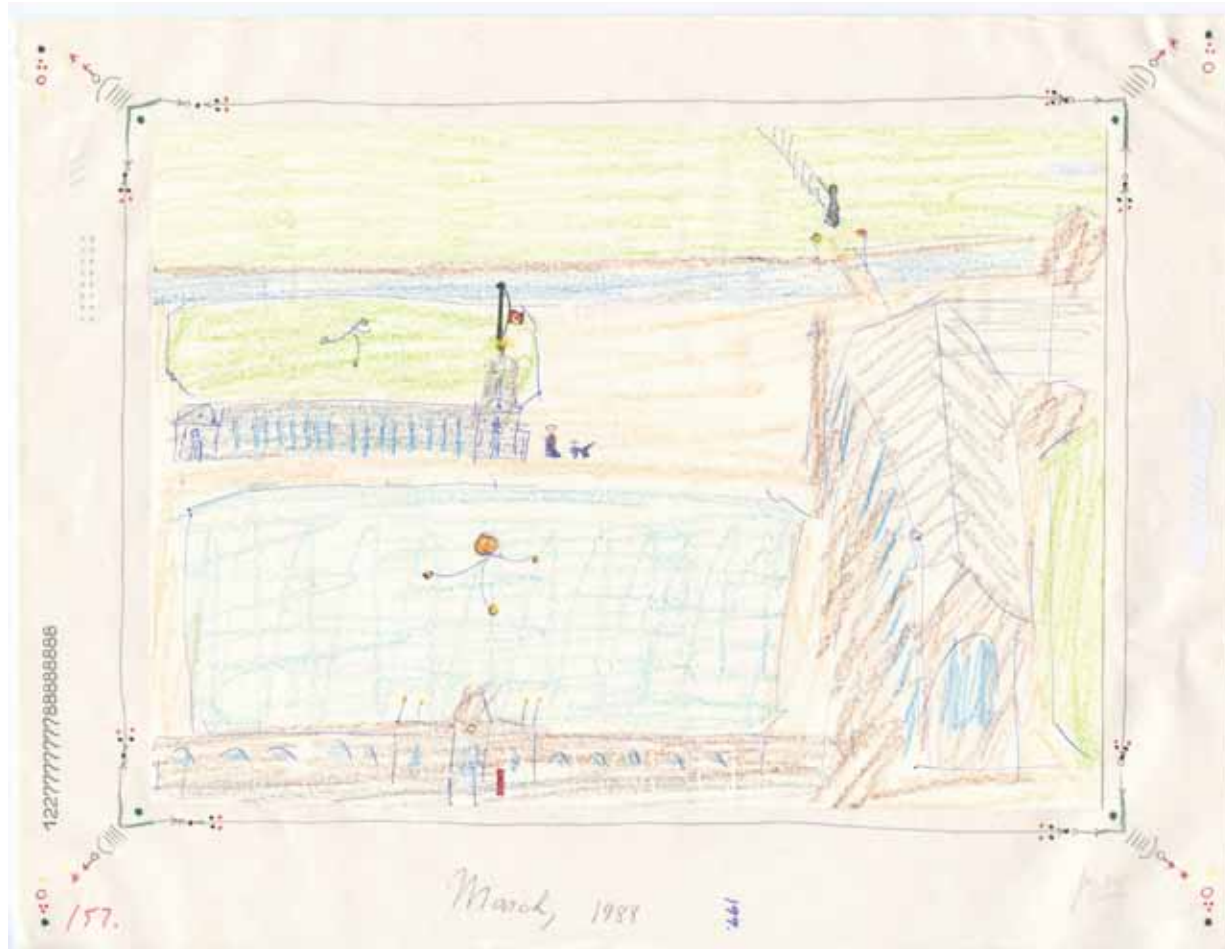


Untitled (elevation of fantasy Gibbs Building, Cambridge), 1988, mixed media on paper, 21.6 x 27.9 cm, courtesy of the artist

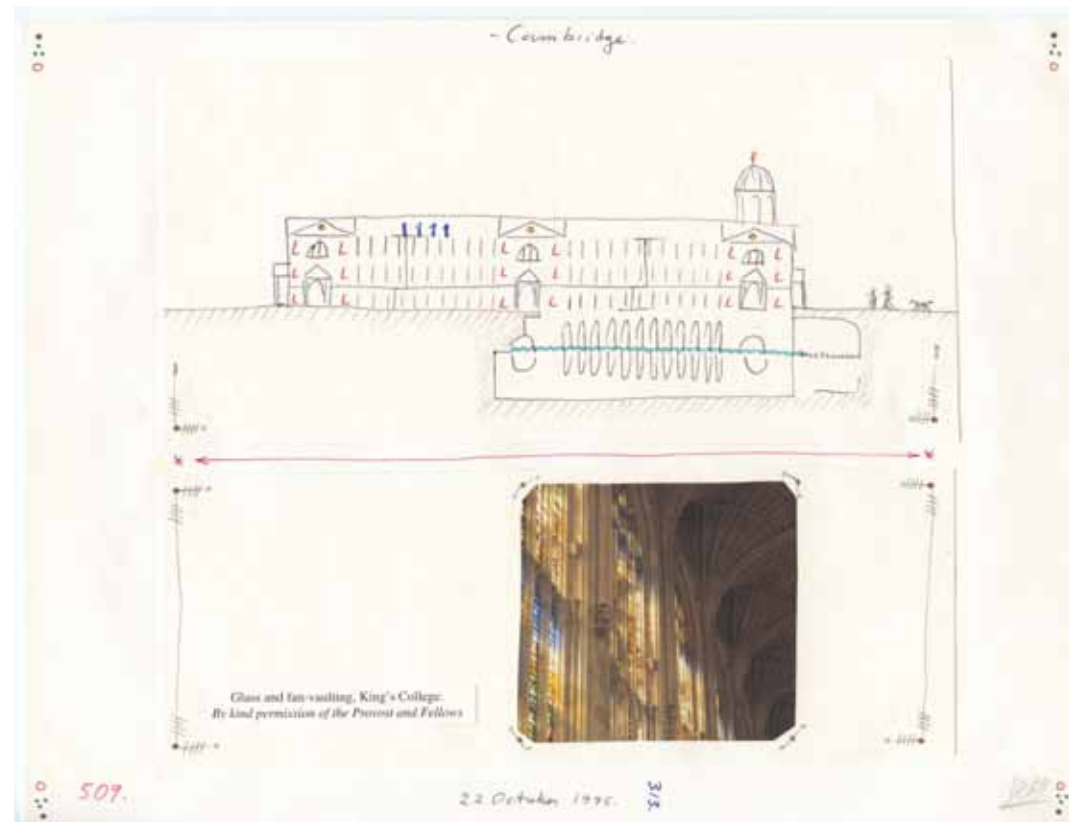


Untitled (plan of fantasy King's College, Cambridge), 1988, mixed media on paper, 21.6 x 27.9 cm, courtesy of the artist

Untitled (aerial perspective of fantasy King's College, Cambridge), 1986, 21.6 x 27.9 cm, courtesy of the artist



Untitled (elevation of fantasy Gibbs Building, Cambridge), 1995, mixed media on paper, 21.6 x 27.9 cm, courtesy of the artist



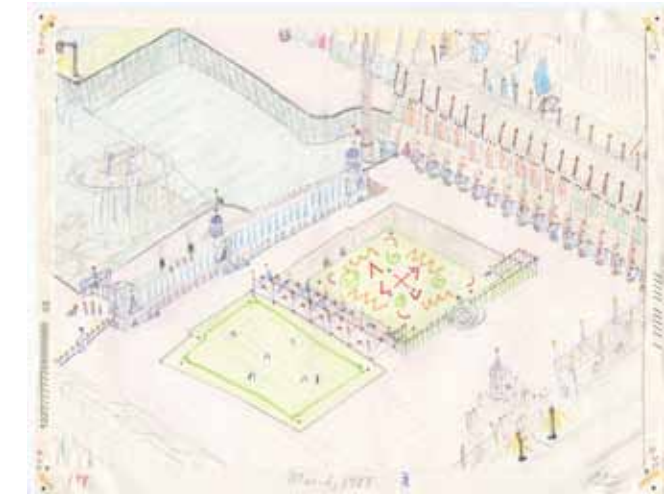
Hypomania & Decipherment

The type of sketching to which I was driven around 1984 was done in a state of hypomania. Although I am still fairly obsessed with King's Chapel and Cambridge in general, constantly trying to decipher its cryptic messages, it's funny: I have no desire to visit. You can't go back, so I don't. After making many hundreds of sketches on the subject, I have since acknowledged that Cambridge is fine just the way it is, where it is, without the extraneous banqueting halls, sub-fluminal tunnels and light-emitting fountains.

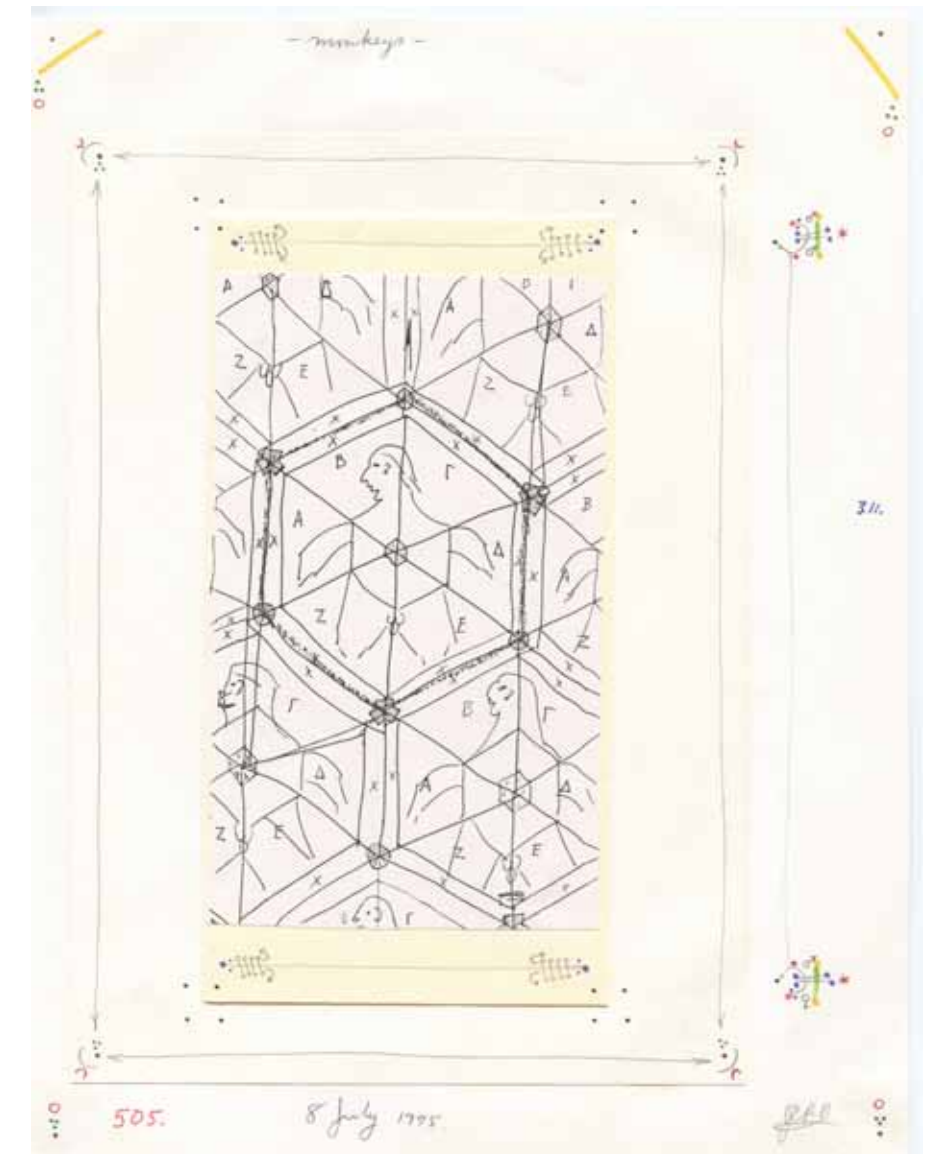
Delayed Recognition

Recognition for my work has picked up in recent years, with an exhibition in Cambridge in 2010 being a significant milestone, and other shows this year in North Carolina and Paris. But, maybe because I'm 59, the recognition hardly turns my head. Although the drawings I have sold are inherently personal, to move forward I had to get rid of them – they were holding me back. The main thing is to continue to work, even though the drawings I am doing now, a few faint crayon marks on a piece of cheap paper, I am sure will interest no one for another 25 years, if ever. I don't believe I'm defined by my past art, but rather by my total corpus of work. What matters is the 'τέλος': the last term in the series of drawings that will give conclusive meaning to all that has gone before.

John Devlin is represented by Henry Boxer Gallery, London



Untitled (aerial perspective of fantasy King's College, Cambridge), 1986, mixed media on paper, 21.6 x 27.9 cm, courtesy of the artist



Untitled (monkeys), 1995, mixed media on paper, 21.6 x 27.9 cm, courtesy of the artist