

Visit to Recent Academic Buildings in Oxford: March 2016

Weston Library (*George Gilbert Scott 1924 – Listed Grade II: Remodelled by WilkinsonEyre 2015*)

Our group of 25 from HEDQF met in the morning at the Weston Library on Broad Street and were hosted by Toby Kirtley (New Bodleian Libraries) and Geoff Turner (Wilkinson Eyre), client representative and project architect respectively. Following a talk and slide presentation we had a guided tour where we were told this project was “all about the books”. We learnt how a state of the art archive (in the form of a floating book stack) was created by hollowing out the steel frame of the building and then reassembling it. Below the floating stack is a new public access concourse, with exhibition space, café and shop adjacent. This design simultaneously reinvents the academic study space while also creating public access to a world-famous library that was previously not possible.¹

Exeter College

Hosted by Professor Sir Richard Trainor, who is also the Rector, the group stopped for a light lunch in the College and had a talk about its history and the plans for a new residential accommodation at Cohen Quad on Walton Street, designed by Alison Brooks Architects and due for completion by the Autumn Term of 2016.

Blavatnik School of Government (*Herzog and de Meuron 2015*)

Our next stop was a topical visit given the almost concurrent publication of the Architects Journal review of the scheme in the same week. It was great to see this new building in its relatively early days – it opened in November 2015 and is still filling up with staff and students. The build quality of fair-faced concrete and oak slats is in no doubt, but the strong architectural form divided opinion (externally at least) amongst the group. The circular stacking and cantilevered shapes are certainly striking. Rather than respond to the college quad precedent (as described by the AJ review), this is an object building that creates its own context with a confidence in a way that James Gibbs (designer of the circular Radcliffe Camera in 1737) would have recognised.

Internally the circular void space is impressive, looping up from lower ground floor to roof. The openness of the spatial planning promotes an open government narrative – a theme established by Foster + Partners Greater London Authority and Reichstag buildings with central open spaces, and seems to work as a powerful force to establish new ways of working. The school recruits with bursaries and equipment to enable students from parts of the world where good government is not the norm to come and study here. It will certainly be interesting to see how they inhabit the space.²

Department of Mathematics (*Rafael Viñoly 2013*)

By way of contrast to the Blavatnik School of Government, this recent building is reticent in its compliance with the ROQ masterplan and polite in its façade articulation. It breaks either side of a low entrance atrium to allow diagonal views to the Radcliffe Observatory. The café and teaching spaces are contained in a lower ground floor, with academic offices running along galleries either side of a linear atrium above. Mathematical shapes are manifested in the glazed lanterns, which divide the lower ground concourse from the atrium above and in the Penrose pattern paving in front of the entrance.

St Antony's College (*Zaha Hadid Architects 2015*)

¹ Both the Blavatnik School of Government by Herzog and de Meuron and the Weston Library by WilkinsonEyre were subsequently given RIBA awards and shortlisted for the Stirling Prize.

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We made full use of the clusters of 1960s vinyl seating during our tea break at the Hilda Besse building at St Antony's College (HKPA 1970), and were charmed by the sixties bush-hammered concrete and shiny parquet floor. We were then given a tour of the Middle East Centre. The internal spaces are beautifully sculpted and organic, with the staircase and lecture theatre being particular triumphs. The centre director Dr Eugene Rogan explained that after being refused planning permission with a more contextually modest scheme, the College reconsidered and proposed a bold planning strategy with a radical scheme by Zaha Hadid that prevailed through the planning process. Being one of only 5 of Hadid's buildings in the UK, it may well now gain cult status.³

Department of Biochemistry (*Hawkins/Brown 2008*)

The day concluded with visits to recent buildings in the Oxford science area. An exemplar in successful collaborative science space-planning, the Biochemistry building was buzzing with life in the late afternoon. We were shown the open plan write up space adjacent to the atrium with an outer layer of laboratory space to the perimeter – a model also employed at the new Francis Crick Institute.

Department of Earth Sciences (*WilkinsonEyre 2010*)

By contrast the brief here was for a science research building that didn't feel clinical: facades are made of different Jurassic limestones selected by the department and internally the heavily-serviced laboratory wing is deliberately separated from the naturally ventilated office wing to ensure occupants move about the building during the day. Undergraduate teaching and a departmental library on the ground floor as semi-public spaces contrast with the rooftop pavilion with terrace as a senior common room for quieter social gatherings.

Conclusions

The day provided a good overview of how new buildings to suit modern academic priorities can successfully be slotted in to a historic city. From literally coring out historic facades and radically reinventing an old building's insides, to placing bold new forms cheek by jowl with historic fabric, the full range of current debate about architectural sensibilities was on display. It may be hard to draw too many common themes, but quality of construction and materials was evident in all. Many of the buildings had large teaching spaces on lower ground floors (thereby maximising use of each site), however due to a clever introduction of daylight, none of them felt like basements. All of the teaching spaces (bar the Middle East Centre), had a roof terrace, offering a high level amenity space and many different perspectives of the impressive Oxford skyline.

Stafford Critchlow
Director
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³ Zaha Hadid died unexpectedly 1 month after our visit. This being one of only 5 of her buildings in the UK it will now no doubt be even more cherished.