

Balancing act

The challenge of Cambridge

Emma Adams

explains why designing for Cambridge, one of Britain's oldest and best loved cities, demands a careful touch.



Top: The Divinity School at St John's College 'Triangle' site
Above: Exterior of Newnham College's Rare Books Library on Sidgwick Avenue

Cambridge is a thriving city, its urban fabric historically generated by distinct sectors that have found architectural expression in very different ways. The University with its collegiate structure came to dominate what was originally an East Anglian inland port and market town. As academia expanded, parts of Cambridge's agricultural fenland became absorbed into its architectural make-up and reinterpreted within it, generating the city's present unique urban character. A visitor today finds the development of the University's faculties and residences represented by architectural riches from medieval to modern, many of which are set in beautiful landscapes fringing the river.

While 'gown' came to thrive primarily west of Trinity Street and Kings Parade, 'town' was left historically to consolidate around the Market Place and beyond, to the East and South. The prosperity of the city, which had little or no early manufacturing base, has been fuelled in recent years by the burgeoning high technology and biotech industries fostered by the University's pre-eminent research position. Its physical expression is a necklace of technology and business parks that have sprung up around the city, along with huge demands for housing in the surrounding villages. Today, the schism in the city centre between

'town' and 'gown' is as evident as ever, and threatening to increase, as the pressure created by Cambridge's status as a regional shopping destination forces the main areas of retail expansion further South and East.

Since their foundation, the University and colleges have been directly responsible for the commissioning of many of Cambridge's most significant buildings. The tradition continues to this day. They retain their reputations as enlightened patrons, who have allowed modern and more established architectural interpretation of new developments in equal measure. The older colleges were built as a series of courts on a monastic model, containing individual rooms together with focal community spaces: the Chapel, the Dining Hall and the Combination Room. In the twentieth century the designers of colleges, such as Churchill, New Hall, Fitzwilliam and Robinson, have sought to develop this model in various directions to accord with changes in institutional life whilst reinforcing a critical link with the historical ideal of college structure.

Not only are architects faced with the challenge of employing the most appropriate style, they must also address issues of substance. How is it possible to deliver an outcome which satisfies both the modern

structural requirements of a building whilst sitting neatly alongside the surrounding developments in such a historically endowed site? How can a building be developed to genuinely enable its residents to participate fully in the modern world through, for example, adequate provision of information technology and security, without upsetting such a sensitive architectural environment?

One firm meeting these challenges in Cambridge is van Heyningen and Haward Architects, who have completed several buildings for individual colleges in recent years. The earliest – and smallest – of these buildings is a rare books library designed for Newnham College in 1981. The small, casket-shaped building stands proudly on Sidgwick Avenue, subtly 'stitched in' behind the nineteenth-century range of college buildings by Sir Basil Champneys. Whilst the new building contains echoes of past forms, it responds entirely to its modern brief: a secure repository with onerous environmental requirements for valuable books and manuscripts that had to be built quickly and economically over the summer holiday. It was awarded a Civic Trust Award in 1984 and was made the subject of a film in the BBC *Building Sights* series.

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Interior of Newnham College's Rare Books Library on Sidgwick Avenue

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Two more recent projects have presented different challenges: new student residences for Fitzwilliam and Lucy Cavendish Colleges have had to integrate into 'modern' colleges with fundamentally different environments. Fitzwilliam is one of several new colleges conceived in the 1950s and built in the 1960s in the north of the city. The original brutalist brick buildings designed by Sir Denys Lasdun sought to rethink the college court and established an orthogonal spiral enclosing

communal buildings. This grand plan had been modified by new residences in the mid-1980s and a new large court was consolidated by van Heyningen & Haward's Wilson Court buildings in 1994. The development of Wilson Court was symptomatic of a new era in the economics of a Cambridge College: it was funded by Peter Wilson of the Estates Gazette for the benefit of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS). The new buildings on land granted by the college provide 48 study bedrooms and modern conference facilities for use by the college during term, whilst the Wilson Centre for Post-Graduate Studies in Surveying operates in the same buildings during the university vacations. The buildings are designed and fully equipped to meet these complementary requirements and their layout reflects their ambiguous relationship with the college as a whole – they not only complete the corner of the larger college court, but also, using the isolated corner pavilion, emphasise the group as an 'enclave' with its own identity.

At Lucy Cavendish College, van Heyningen & Haward Architects have integrated three new buildings into an informal collection of Edwardian ('Arts and Crafts') houses linked by large gardens that constitute this college for mature women academics. The new

on a strategic masterplan for a historic city site, 'The Triangle' for St John's College in Cambridge. The site, wholly owned by St John's College and immediately opposite their gates, presents an entirely different set of challenges to its architects and strategic consultants. The quarter was one of the earliest parts of the city to be settled and has been continuously occupied since 600 AD. It is a dense patchwork of academic, domestic and commercial buildings that date from the eighteenth century, built on the foundations of earlier settlements (the most interesting period being its time as a focus for the Cambridge Jewry in the thirteenth century).

The Triangle Site is in a Conservation Area and although none of its individual buildings is greatly distinguished, each of the necklace of perimeter buildings is listed. It is within only a few metres of St John's and Trinity Colleges, yet it lies at the northern fringes of the shopping district of the city. It is not readily accessible by car, nor is it large enough to contain parking; servicing of the site will be limited. The slow decline of the area is becoming more apparent and can only hasten when ambitious schemes for the city shopping centre to the south are fully realised.

In formulating a strategic planning brief for the site, a raft of issues affecting Cambridge



The dining hall at Lucy Cavendish College

buildings seek to respect the details, scale and character of their neighbours. Vernacular allusions have, however, been made contemporary by fragmenting roof structures, breaking up and playing off the symmetry of the traditional buildings. The new buildings form a new social focus for the college, housing the formal spaces of the dining hall, bar and common room. These interconnect in three dimensions in an exciting and flexible way and can be used variously by students and conference delegates throughout the year.

In addition to their work at Lucy Cavendish College, van Heyningen & Haward have also recently prepared a Master Plan for the completion of New Hall, a women's college built in 1962–6. The college has the last partially developed college site in Cambridge and was seeking to extend the identity of the college across the whole site, to improve security and status, to be able to house a changing student population, and also to appeal to the ever-more important conference trade in the city.

Currently, van Heyningen & Haward are working with Locum Destination Consulting

as a whole inform the process. Cambridge has to cope with over 3.5 million visitors per year. It has a high quality built environment that is rigorously protected. Land values are high. Additionally, with high employment in the city and almost no access by car to the city centre, unusually high numbers of pedestrians need to be taken into consideration.

It is the aim of van Heyningen & Haward Architects and Locum Destination Consulting to respond positively to those pressures and provide a coordinated and sustainable development which will subtly enhance and reinvigorate the quarter, whilst preserving its unique historical value.

Emma Adams is an architect with van Heyningen & Haward