the leisure review
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Building a city: the Leisure Review study tour

Inspired by some hoardings, a bicycle and the prospect of lunch, the Leisure Review's recent architectural event brought together a group of experts, enthusiasts and innocents to discuss current trends affecting the public realm. Jonathan Ives reports on a rolling discussion that covered a myriad of topics, including investment trends, the concept of place and the demands for big-name buildings.

Given that Oxford is the Leisure Review's home town and architecture is one of the Leisure Review's ill-concealed passions, Rowan Moore's article in the Observer at the end of last year [Observer, *Dreaming Spires and Hard Cash*, 15.11.15] was always going to grab our attention. Moore's piece discusses the recent additions to the city's notable landmarks and explored the connection between the University of Oxford's fund-raising requirements and the structures that now bear the names of some of the university's biggest benefactors. The premise was that big money now requires both big buildings and big-name architects, and, while there may be much to celebrate in Oxford's new architectural movement, there is a danger, Moore suggests, that "expensive lures for rich donors" may not be the best use of architectural ambition.

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It is easy to see Moore's point. These new landmarks include buildings by Rafael Vinoly and WilkinsonEyre, who are among the most respected names within the world of architecture. Also on the Oxford map are projects by Hertzog and de Meuron, and Zaha Hadid, names with a celebrity cachet that reaches far beyond the confines of architectural interest.

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Of course Oxford has always had big-name architects and funds to indulge them – after all, the whole conceit of the Leisure Review's Christmas lecture is the ability to view the work of Wren, Hawksmoor, Gibbs and Gilbert Scott without leaving the front bar of the King's Arms – but the move towards the commissioning of buildings that stand out so obviously from their surroundings is a recent development; or perhaps a rediscovery.

During the 17th and 18th centuries Oxford acquired and assimilated shocks such as the Sheldonian theatre and the Radcliffe Camera but the University of Oxford subsequently spent a quiet couple of centuries settled into a more careful approach to design. Towards the end of the 20th century it experimented, like everyone else, with modernism and post-modernism, and then had a couple of decades either side of the turn of the 21st century mulling it over. Most things take time in Oxford and while the university may by now have accepted Wren's decision to cut a door through the medieval tracery of the windows of the Divinity School, mention of Stirling's Florey Building can still prompt shudders in certain circles.

So why has the University of Oxford embraced the new so wholeheartedly; and why now? As in all the best mysteries, the answer probably lies somewhere in the combination of motive and opportunity. Perhaps the most obvious motive is the university's need to compete for funding in a political environment that has seen higher education finances in the UK reviewed and reformed into turmoil. In addition, while

the world of philanthropy has always played a significant part in the lives of the world's biggest universities, the stakes in this already very difficult game have been raised by the emergence of a thin stratum of super-rich international benefactors who are looking to be persuaded of a suitable home for their largesse. There may be plenty of people with plenty of money but competition for their attention is fierce.

Along with motive comes opportunity. In a crowded city the University of Oxford has space. Despite the density of population, the footprint of a great many of the university's colleges are of such a size that room could often be found for a new building if the figures stack up. Then came the opportunity of the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter, a ten-acre site in the city centre that was until a few years ago a major hospital. Purchased by the university, it provided the luxury of a large, central brownfield site for development. If big-name architects were to be involved, here was space in which they could work.

In recent years the university set about creating new landmarks for a city already heavy in architectural heritage and, as the final hoardings were coming down from around some of the biggest schemes, the Leisure Review invited some architects, some leisure professionals and others interested in the general aesthetic to explore these additions to the public realm. With an agenda comprising only the most basic of architectural questions – is it any good; is it fit for purpose; and has it made for a better place? – we set off to explore what we hoped would be the best of this new age.

Our first stop was a university rather than the University: the Oxford Brookes University JHB building. Situated on the Gypsy Lane campus at the top of Headington Hill, the site was familiar to some of our party as the home of Oxford Polytechnic's school of architecture. The architecture school is still here but the new JHB (designed by Design Engine and named in honour of the university's founder, John Henry Brookes) represents a radical departure from the original.

A wide plaza fronts the building and provides an obvious entry point from the street, as well as retail space for a bookshop, coffee shop and food outlets. The main elevation is glass, which means lots of light inside, an asset maximised by high ceilings and internal windows. It is home to the library but there is a lot of flexible, informal space, a recognition not only of new ways of working but the impact of Wi-Fi and headphones in creating new definitions of privacy.

The connections between the old buildings and the new create gallery spaces, walkways and bridges, as well as internal vistas and the all-important sources of light. The lecture theatre forms a central mass within the building, suspended at the building's core so that its exterior can be viewed in the round. Never was the pedagogic principle so clearly at the heart of a educational building.

Signs and displays offering details of the building suggest a pride in the new facility but also perhaps an awareness of the importance of the new in the modern university. The general consensus among our party is overwhelmingly positive: a scheme of imagination and innovation that also manages to deliver practicality and energy.

The next stop, a ten-minute pedal down the hill and into town, was the Bodleian Library's new Weston Gallery. Readers of the Leisure Review will already be familiar with this building but it was new to some on the trip. The key discussion points as we wandered were that the Weston offers a public face to what was previously a closed and exclusive institution, welcoming visitors with displays, a café and views of the working library. Investment in the luxury of space and light is immediately obvious, and outside the building meets the street positively, a stark contrast to the original building in its original form.

Only five minutes' ride away from the Bodleian is St Anthony's college, now home to one of the biggest of architectural reputations, that of Zaha Hadid. The new Investcorp building stands out as one of the last Hadid completed before her death and with its stretched skin and bulbous curves it serves as a display of her signature style. From the street it is sinuous and striking, reminiscent in size and form of an Anish Kapoor sculpture, but our assembled architects notice some of the awkward connections and interfaces with the existing buildings, not least the way in which traditional windows are sliced into by the new structure.

Moving round to stand within the college, we find a different building altogether. Such is the contrast between the street view and the college view that at first it is hard to connect the two elevations as two halves of the same building. From here, the college quad perspective, there is the suggestion of an interior function that is hidden from the other side. However, the huge windows perhaps hint at some of the compromises involved within the brief, the vision and the site. The consensus of our panel seemed to be that this is a troubling building. It is striking, bold and exciting but somehow it lacks coherence. Was someone desperate to have a building that shouted Hadid that such issues were overlooked; and what will they think of it 20 years hence?

Just across the road is the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter, in which the original buildings of the Radcliffe Infirmary have been retained (along with the observatory building) and reinvigorated. Glass has been used to bring light and life to a side of the original quadrangle not associated with activity and purpose, at least from the outside, for decades. This elegant, classically inspired hospital building has been a centre of medical industry for centuries but it has been re-energised by new people, new purpose and new neighbours.

One of these new neighbours is the Andrew Wiles Building, home to the university's Mathematical Institute. The Andrew Wiles Building is all glass and angles, with a central quasi-pyramid at the entrance and bold squares and blocks around the rest of the exterior. However, the entrance strikes an odd note. The theme of our tour so far had been height and space but here there is a feeling of confinement despite the extensive glass. There is height but it comes from below, a result of below-ground rather than above-ground construction. The expanse of floor at the entrance makes for a rather cramped feel around the atrium and the lower floors, despite these below-ground spaces being extensive and spacious.

Walking behind the AWB, the visitor's attention is drawn by the recently restored observatory building, along with a plaque commemorating an award for the development of other buildings. There are some nice details but also evidence of the prosaic realities of architectural practice, for example the carefully recessed lines traversing a building's elevation that are having to be clad or covered to stop birds roosting or nesting. It is an unfortunate run-in with nature that nature seems to be winning.

Our final stop is the Blavatnik School of Government. In a city of architectural statement pieces, this is one of the most striking buildings. The first and overwhelming impression is created by its circularity, like a series of glass cake tins stacked in a carefully haphazard fashion. In plan and planes it is at odds with its surroundings, which are dominated by the Oxford University Press building across the road and the deconsecrated church building next door, both classically porticoed sandstone constructions of the oldest of old schools.

According to the business school's own leaflet for visitors, Herzog and de Meuron's building is designed "so that it subtly reflects its historic surroundings while ensuring that the work and activity of the School is open and visible to all". Reflect it certainly does but few would think of it as subtle. This is a building that does not so much meet the street as happen to have a door that opens near it; it seems more likely to have

landed than to have been built.

It is a building that has already provoked great debate around the city and it is perhaps a comment on the building that as a group we were initially reluctant to approach. We tried the door with little expectation of anything other than the opportunity to grab a quick look at the interior before being ushered back through the door. However, we were to be pleasantly surprised.

The interior belied many of our initial perceptions. First, the interior makes sense of the exterior. The discs and circles create a remarkable, captivating flow of spaces, shapes and lines. Where the exterior seems like a carapace, the interior is about openness and visibility.

Second, the staff at the entrance were welcoming and clearly used to the casual enquirer. A brochure is available and was offered, another example of the university becoming rather more aware of its public-facing role and the opportunities created by connecting with those outside the academic world.

Third, our interest struck a chord with a member of the estates team, who, having noted our architectural enthusiasms, gave a text-book conspiratorial glance over both shoulders before ushering us through the barrier for an unofficial guided tour. His own enthusiasm for the building was evident; with his grasp of the architectural and structural details, this was as informed and passionate a tour as we were going to find in any building in the city.

Among the highlights were the sight lines and the role of the building as a presentation space. At its opening (and in future) the speakers and guests were at the bottom of the building among a seated audience. Above and circling round the galleries were many other audience members, all able to see and hear the presentations. The automatic temperature control features, including the screening of the exterior glass and the natural air flows, were demonstrated, while the idiosyncrasies of the building, including a delightfully hidden spiral staircase, were lovingly revealed. In the basement we saw the lecture theatres and their elegantly recessed room dividers, along with the intricately tubed wood panelling that continues into the lifts. The roof terrace is one of the city's most desirable spaces and what was once (and may still be) Europe's biggest glass window was almost an afterthought of the tour.

On our way to lunch, the consensus on this concluding building of our tour was that the Blavatnik is a building transformed by its interior; or rather it is a building the perception of which is transformed by having access to its interior. We could discuss at length the ironies and contradictions of a school of government funded by and named after a Russian oligarch that will house 120 students in an expensive, exclusive building designed to be transparent but which remains steadfastly opaque despite its glass walls but we must acknowledge that this is undoubtedly a spectacular building. Is it a great building? The measure of its the architectural achievement is defined and explained by and from the inside, which means that those who pass it without having a need or an opportunity to go inside are unable to see it at its best. As ever, and perhaps in this case more than most, it is a matter of perspective.

Over lunch the discussion was as lively and as fluid as the buildings we had seen. How seductive is the luxury of space, but how expensive. How can buildings be expected to serve so many functions when so many of the functions they will be expected to serve are as yet unknown? Where should the line between the architectural vision and the requirements of the client be drawn; and who should draw it? Can the practical and the beautiful exist in harmony? And what of the public realm: to what extent does the building have a responsibility to its

surroundings, the interior to the exterior, its function to its form? And what of all the buildings we passed but didn't explore; or didn't seek out and could explore?

In the manner of most Leisure Review events, the outcomes may be rather difficult to define but the process was certainly rewarding. The only firm conclusion was that readers should be advised to give their bikes a clean and prepare for details of the next event.

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