



· INSTITUTE · OF · HISTORIC ·
BUILDING · CONSERVATION

SOUTH BRANCH

"YEARNING FOR TIMELESSNESS" – a conference exploring modern architecture in historic settings

at the Maths Institute, University of Oxford

26th October 2018

Our Autumn CPD event, usually combined with our AGM, would normally be held in an historic building. This year, since our theme was 'Modern Architecture in Historic Settings', the venue was very modern, the Andrew Wiles Building completed in 2013, which houses Oxford University's Maths Institute. Thanks are due to Alison Davidson who suggested a quote from Frank Gehry – "yearning for timelessness" – as our title, to Gill Butter who arranged the line-up of brilliant speakers and to Jonathan Clarke for co-ordinating and chairing the event. We are grateful to staff at the Maths Institute as well as to all our speakers who gave time from their busy working lives to make our day so interesting and informative. The speakers' biographies are at the end of this report.

Geoffrey Tyack set the scene by giving us a comprehensive illustrated round-up of examples of buildings recently erected in Oxford. Most of them are extensions or additions to college buildings, some new buildings for the University and others "town", not "gown", commercial or residential buildings. Large increases in student numbers have driven the need for extra accommodation and facilities. Geoffrey showed us how some colleges and institutes have embraced modernism whilst others have built in historic styles. Colleges on the edge of the historic city generally have more room to expand. For example St. Catherine's designed by Arne Jacobsen (1960-64), described by Pevsner as "wonderful architecture", with significant additions by Hodder Associates and Wolfson creating a "total work of art", or Wolfson College with a 1974 Powell and Moya building extended by Berman Guedes Stretton in 2016. In these cases one of the challenges is to harmonize the new with the landscape as well as the existing buildings. At the other end of the scale are the colleges with more confined sites within the old city, such as Pembroke where a bridge was built from the college to a new quadrangular development across the road. We were told there is a strong competitive element between colleges. Ideas catch on and wealthy alumni are able to fund new buildings, often named after them.

Auditoria in particular are in vogue. Worcester College with its large grounds was able to erect a beautiful free-standing pavilion designed by Niall McLaughlin. By contrast, comparatively tiny Corpus Christi College has an imaginative auditorium built into a bastion, part of the medieval city wall, designed by Rick Mather. Where possible, architects take the opportunity for "place-making". The expansion of the library at Magdalen College (Wright & Wright 2016) has created a new communal space whilst the raising of the bastion wall at Corpus Christi has provided a terrace for entertaining.

The University's Science Area, farther away from the historic centre and next to the parks, has been redeveloped and here there is more freedom for modern designs. An opportunity for large new development arose when the Radcliffe Infirmary was closed. Large modern buildings such as the Maths Institute and Blavatnik building contrast with the Grade I listed Radcliffe Observatory and the remaining restored neo-classical Infirmary buildings. No doubt opinions are divided on the sensitivity and success of the resulting combination.

Next, architect **Alan Berman** treated us to a most thought-provoking presentation entitled "Modern Architecture in Oxford The Cambridge Approach". Alan began by recommending "The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture" by Colin St. John (Sandy) Wilson, which he described as a wonderful book. The theme of his talk was to contrast two of the many different approaches to architecture; the 'heroic' tradition of Corbusier, where architecture is seen as a fine art and the architect as hero, with that of Aalto who saw architecture as a practical art with form following need and where the architect is more like a midwife.

Sandy Wilson and Leslie Martin studied under Aalto at Cambridge and developed what Alan called 'the Cambridge approach'. Alan showed us lists of modern architects within each camp. Some stand in-between the heroic and practical but there are also many other camps! We were shown examples of buildings which exemplify aspects of the practical, 'midwife', holistic approach. Important factors include the positioning of the building within the site, for example is there unused space around the building or has "negative" space been utilised as part of place-making? Does the building look like it is part of the landscape or standing proud within it? How legible is the building? Does it invite us in or keep us out? To quote Alan "the experience of movement determines the form" so staircases and ramps are of great importance. So are details such as handrails and door-handles since we experience a building with all our senses, not least the sense of touch. The Cambridge approach is exemplified by Leslie Martin's Law and English libraries in Oxford. However Alan finished by showing us a photograph of Martin with Corbusier, one of his great architectural heroes!

In our next talk **Sandy Wright** of Wright & Wright Architects demonstrated how recent buildings in Oxford display both change and continuity. The need for additional and/or updated student accommodation has prompted differing approaches. He showed us examples of work at Worcester and St. Hilda's Colleges and the Florey Building. Sandy stressed the importance of corridors, but they do pose a threat to the traditional Oxford system of staircases where a small stair serves a small 'set' of student rooms. In the Sainsbury Building at Worcester College (1963 by MJP) stairs and corridors are treated as communal spaces. There a perimeter corridor was adopted, but the Thomas White Building at St. John's, a perimeter theory development, uses a traditional type of small stair. 'Town meets Gown' in some cases such as Kendrew Quad at St. John's College requiring the architect to engage with the local streetscape.

Stuart Cade of MICA Architects (a new practice launched by Rick Mather Associates (RMA), of which Stuart was a partner) then gave his presentation entitled "Inside Out-Outside In". He advocates an holistic approach; is the building activating the street, making space, does it work inside and out? Stuart told us about several RMA projects. The Ashmolean Museum, an "inside-out" project, bringing in more light (unusually for a museum) and "worked out" with terraces. At Corpus Christi College a music room and open air entertaining space have been created in a bastion, part of Oxford's medieval city wall. When Keble College wanted ensuite accommodation and conference rooms the result was the Arco Building, a corridor scheme like the original Butterfield designed building. At Mansfield College the quad was lowered to increase the number of storeys for a new building comprising lecture rooms, an Institute for Human Rights and student accommodation. Cross-laminated timber (CLT) was used and ensured a quick build. The additional accommodation has helped improve the community feel since previously many students had to live off-site. An ingenious solution was found for extending the Grade I listed library at The Queen's College. The extension, powered by ground-sourced energy, runs underneath the lawn with a roof-light cleverly hidden by a newly created slope in the lawn.

Stuart was our last speaker before lunch which was followed by our branch AGM.

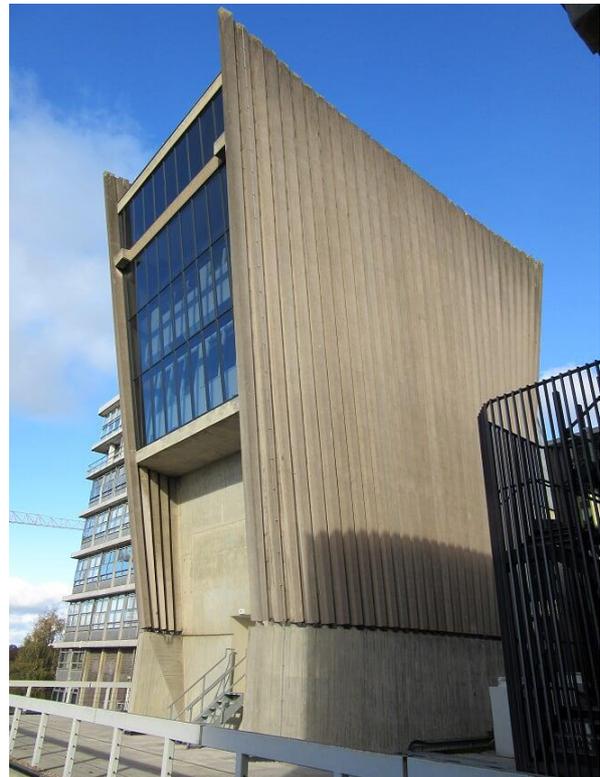


Jonathan dividing the delegates into groups for the walk. We are standing on the Penrose tiles with their non-repeating pattern.

Fortunately the weather was fine, but cold, for our walk around the Keble Triangle led by Charles Hendry and Glen Williams from the University's Estates Services. Here we were able to learn about some of the practical issues involved in conservation of concrete buildings as well as admiring, or not, their design!



< Inspecting the crumbly concrete



The Nuclear Physics laboratory – there was a reason for the shape.

Back at the Maths Institute and fortified by a welcome cuppa we were treated to our last presentation of the day by **Debbie Dance**, Director of the Oxford Preservation Trust (OPT). Her theme was "Listed Buildings of the Future" and with the quality of modern architecture on display in Oxford there seems to be no shortage of candidates. The OPT has been giving its annual awards since 1977 and in 2017 it ran a competition called "40 in 40" jointly with the Oxford Times to find the favourite award-winner. The renovation of Oxford Castle, and OPT winner in 2007, was chosen. Debbie showed us pictures of many of the award winners which have potential for listing in the future, although opinion may well be divided over the merits of some of them! The vast majority are college buildings and so generally private, although our venue, the Maths Institute, has a café which is open to the public. The OPT is also concerned with planning matters. Oxford has a high-buildings policy with a maximum height of 18.2 meters which is designed to preserve the city's key views. This rule has been re-interpreted to allow spires and towers exceeding that height.

We have had good feedback from this conference. The calibre of the speakers as well as the relevance of the key-topic made for a particularly successful day.

Speaker Biographies

ALAN BERMAN M.A. (CANTAB) / DIP ARCH / FRSA / RIBA After graduating from Cambridge and University College London, Alan joined the pioneering practice of Maguire & Murray Architects. He set up practice in London in 1984 with Pedro Guedes and in 1996 he teamed up with Roger Stretton to form Berman Guedes Stretton architects in Oxford. He has been responsible for both multi-million pound projects and smaller schemes. He focuses on realistic building strategies to ensure economy and practicality are not sacrificed to imaginative design. He is a Unit tutor at the University of Liverpool and has lectured at London Met, UEL, Oxford Brookes University School of Architecture. He is the author of several books on design, including *Jim Stirling and the Red Trilogy: Three Radical Buildings* and *Stirling and Wilford: American Buildings*. With BGS Architects he established the AJ Writing Prize and has been a judge on a number of writing and design panels. He is an accredited CABE advisor and active member of the 20th Century Society.

GEOFFREY TYACK grew up in London, where he first developed an interest in the history of architecture by exploring the city's buildings, and he went on to read history at St John's College, Oxford, and to gain a PhD from the University of London. He has taught architectural history and the history of urban planning for many years, both in Britain and the United States. He is an emeritus Fellow of Kellogg College in the University of Oxford, a Trustee of the Oxford Preservation Trust, and President of the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society. His books include *Oxford: an Architectural Guide* (1998), *Modern Architecture in an Oxford College* (2005) and an edited volume on *John Nash: Architect of the Picturesque* (2013). He is editor of the *Georgian Group Journal* and he co-edited the revised volume on *Berkshire in the Pevsner Buildings of England series* (2010). He is currently writing a book on the history of the British urban landscape.

SANDY WRIGHT: Sandy studied at the Mackintosh School of Architecture where he was taught by Isi Metzstein, whom he went on to work for at Gillespie, Kidd & Coia. While there Sandy was exposed to the studio's unusual expertise in design, detailing and understanding of how buildings are put together. This has informed Sandy's work since and the influence is felt throughout Wright & Wright's buildings. Sandy and Clare moved to London from Glasgow in 1979. Sandy joined and became partner with Sir Richard MacCormac at MJPW. While there he was partner-in-charge of the Faculty of Arts for the University of Bristol and Blue Boar Court for Trinity College, Cambridge. In 1994 he and Clare founded Wright & Wright. Early projects included the library for the Royal College of Art, the Women's Library, the V&A/RIBA Reading Rooms and Archives, followed by Taylor Library for Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, the National Gallery, London - Lower Galleries, Oakfield SEBD School in Hull, Newlands SEBD Academy in Southwark and Hull Truck Theatre. Longwall Library at Magdalen College is the most recently completed building. Sandy has lectured

and reviewed at over 20 schools of architecture, was a visiting critic at the Mackintosh and a Visiting Professor at Newcastle University. He has been external examiner for three schools and a competitions assessor for both the RIBA and the RIAS. He is currently working on the new study centre for St John's College, Oxford, the new Lambeth Palace Library and the Geffrye Museum, London. Sandy lives in north London with Clare. They have two grown-up children.

STUART CADE is a Director of MICA and Rick Mather Architects, bringing over twenty years of experience working in heritage, cultural, masterplanning, education and mixed use strategic projects, with a particular expertise in contemporary additions to complex, historic settings. Stuart has overseen all of the practice's projects in Oxford, including the Stirling Prize nominated Ashmolean Museum. Currently Stuart is leading the practice's work in Oxford for Keble and Jesus Colleges; the regeneration of Hay Castle in Wales and the extensive redevelopment at the Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn.

DEBBIE DANCE, Director of Oxford Preservation Trust OBE, MSc, HonDUniv, FRICS: Debbie Dance has been the Director of Oxford Preservation Trust since 1999. She was brought up locally and has spent her career in the built and natural environment working as a chartered surveyor in the commercial market before being awarded a distinction in her MSc Historic Conservation from Oxford Brookes University. She has worked in London, Birmingham and Oxford, and has completed a number of award winning conservation projects including OPT's regeneration of Oxford Castle. Debbie has held a number of honorary national roles, and is currently Chair of the Historic Chapels Trust. She is also a Director of the Oxford Playhouse. She has been past Chair of the Historic Towns Forum, UK Association of Preservation Trusts and a former Trustee of the Churches Conservation Trust, Heritage Lottery Fund South East and conservation judge for International RICS Property Awards. Debbie was awarded an OBE for her services to Heritage in 2013 and an Honorary Doctorate from Oxford Brookes University in 2018.