

A Long View

Hodder & Partners' extension to an Oxford sixth-form college shows a commitment to enduring quality, finds Adrian James

Photos
Peter Cook



Twenty years ago, in his 'Notes from a Small Island', Bill Bryson was very rude about Oxford. His beef was that the burghers of the city and dons of the university had, in the second half of the twentieth century, bespattered its exquisite architectural fabric with crude carbuncles.

He had a point — there are some real clunkers — and yet for every 1960s block trying to be Brutal but just looking cheap, there is a masterpiece by Howell Killick Partridge & Amis, Powell & Moya or Arne Jacobsen. The dons are actually, surprisingly, excellent patrons of architecture and they continue to commission buildings by Zaha Hadid, Herzog & de Meuron, Rick Mather et al.

The question is, in another 50 years' time, which of these new additions will be seen as carbuncles and which as masterpieces? Tough call, but there are a couple of simple lessons from the precedents: first, spend good money on materials and quality; build to last. Second, avoid being overly stylised and avoid trendy tropes; the parti must be rigorous.

Number 121 Banbury Road, the site of Hodder & Partners' new quad for St Clare's, Oxford, is the city in miniature: the frontage is dominated by a fine Arts & Crafts villa by Henry Thomas Hare, a former president of the RIBA. It's a pretty building with ornate flourishes and subtle games with planes and symmetry; top heritage stuff. Then clumsily appended to this, until recently, there was a crude, cheap 1960s wing — exactly the kind of visual insult that Bryson skewered.

It is this wing which Stephen Hodder, also a RIBA past president, has thankfully replaced with two new wings and two new garden villas. And it is immediately clear that he and his client have heeded the first lesson above: spend enough money to ensure real built quality. St Clare's is not part of the university — it is a private sixth-form college — but it has not stinted on the budget. The buildings may only provide residential accommodation and an art block for schoolkids (not the most discerning or respectful of users) but the school has had the finance and the vision to go the whole hog on their behalf.

The new additions are finished in beautiful materials inside and out, but perhaps more importantly the sculptural and spatial experience throughout is finely wrought, rich and light-filled. The money has been well spent.

Walking through these buildings is an experience steeped in event and joy. There is compression and release, there is natural light from huge clerestorey windows, there is exquisite precast concrete and warm oak panelling. Bedrooms are generous, with glass galore and fine joinery. The detailing is shadow gap nirvana, and the builders have done a superb job — full marks to Benfield & Loxley.



Above

Location plan. St Clare's, founded in 1953, has 375 students, most of whom board. Hodder & Partners won a 2008 competition to redevelop 121 Banbury Road, its largest site, with a proposal for five buildings arranged around a quad, with a listed building at the head.

Left

View into the new quadrangle, with the Garden Pavilion flanked by the South Pavilion and the art studio.

Right

New warden's house next to Henry Thomas Hare's listed Arts & Crafts house (1903) on Banbury Road.



Right
Art block and colonnade.



Below
Ground- and first-floor plans (second floor not shown). The accommodation includes 36 study bedrooms, rooms for three wardens, two common rooms, and an art studio.

Key

- 1 Main entrance
- 2 Listed building
- 3 Warden's house
- 4 Art studio
- 5 Garden Pavilion
- 6 South Pavilion



Two highlights: first, the art studio. Just one big room, but what a room. High-ceilinged with not one but two clerestory ribbon windows flooding the space with north light. Huggably warm structure of meaty glulam beams and columns. A run of French windows opening onto the sunken central lawn. Walls and ceiling in raw, limed cross-laminated timber panels. What a delightful space to paint in. Everything working together; honest timber structure, height and light creating a place ideal for its use. This is the Modern tradition that evolved from Arts & Crafts done beautifully.

Second, the route. The cosy quad created by the two new wings dissolves into garden, with the fourth side pulled away. The route through is a raised pathway under the cantilevered roof of an implied cloister. Before the end of the art room the path gently ramps down and then the columns and roof continue on as an open colonnade. This gradual dissolution of the cloister turns the move from quad to garden into a Carlo Scarpa-esque rite of passage. Lovely.



Top
The art studio is built up to the existing north garden wall. "This mode of appropriation, building up to garden walls is quite typical to Oxford, evident in the outbuildings to several large properties along Banbury Road", says the architect. "Together, both wings enhance the near symmetry of the existing house, and frame its westward aspect towards the garden and the orchard beyond".

Above, right
The naturally-ventilated art studio has a glulam portal frame in oak. Its sectional profile allows it to sit behind the garden wall, while natural light permeates the space through a structurally-glazed clerestory window. The portal frames extend into the garden to define a 'cloister', accessed by large oak doors.



Below, right

The Garden Pavilion is sunk half a storey into the ground to reduce its visual impact on neighbours. A bridge link connects its two blocks at first and second floors.



Bottom

The South Pavilion sits roughly on the site of a chapel built in the 1960s, when the listed house was a hostel for nuns. Like the Garden Pavilion, it is constructed of oak-clad cross-laminated timber, and its cellular plan clearly expressed in the facade.



So what about the issue of style and the test of time? The building is straight old-school Modern, no frippery or squiffy angles, just orthogonal purity. The stylistic rigour gives the complex a cool, timeless distinction. All good, but the rigid orthogonalism does raise some niggles: the near-horizontal planes of glass could be a pain to maintain. When the language is so clean, anything that does not achieve the requisite simplicity sticks out: the zinc-clad parapets to the roofs appear as a thin line on the visualisations, but have become chunky and obtrusive as built. And then there's all that luscious oak cladding; it's going to take an awful lot of upkeep. The school is aware of the maintenance obligations; they just have to keep doing it for a century or two.



Where the real architectural interest lies here, though, is not in the execution, but in the idea, or rather the marriage between two Modern ideas. First there is the tectonic rigour of the system, the CLT framing which is a clear successor to Hodder & Partners' concrete-framed extensions to St Catherine's College, Oxford (which themselves derived from Jacobsen's meisterwerk there). And then there is the other strand, Scarpa's craft of architecture which makes every space and experience specific and special. Either through choice or necessity, Hodder has gone further than before here in setting up a strong tectonic parti and then manipulating it, pushing it, pulling it, even burying it.

The result is a composition which is actually quite fragmented: the CLT framing device does not appear on the front facade at all. It is almost more collage than order, but that does make it eventful and delightful. And for as long as the school looks after the buildings, it will add a light touch of contemporary class to the stodgy brick Victoriana of north Oxford. **A**



Project team

Architect
Hodder + Partners
Project team
Stephen Hodder, Claire Hodder, Claire Bandy
Structural engineer
Thornton Tomasetti
M&E engineer
Michael Popper Assocs
Quantity surveyor
Trogal Griffin Associates
Landscape architect
Planit – IE
Acoustic consultant
Sandy Brown
Fire consultant
Innovation Fire
Contractor
Benfield & Loxley
CDM coordinator
David M Eagle
Archaeologist
Oxford Archaeology
Arboriculturalist
Venners Arboriculture
Client
St Clare's, Oxford

Selected suppliers & subcontractors

Precast concrete
Minster Stone
Roofing
VM Zinc
Oak weatherboarding
Timbmet
Aluminium cladding
Industrial Hi Tech
Glazing
Structural Glass Solutions, Velfac
CLT
Eurban
Oak doors
D Smith
Aluminium handrails
Fletcher & Sons
Ironmongery
Williams Ironmongery
Bespoke joinery
ITAB
Bathroom pods
Taplanes
Blinds
Stansons
Granite, lino flooring
Hardscape, Forbo



Above, right

In the study-bedrooms of the South and Garden Pavilions, structurally glazed oriel windows provide generous views into the garden. Adjacent oak purge ventilation panels are set deep into the construction.

