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Buildings that inspire: award winner and runners-up

Aston University has replaced a tired students' union building with multipurpose rooms bathed in natural light

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Winner: Aston University

Project: Aston's student-centred students' union building

Students at Aston University rarely chose to spend time in their old students' union - housed in a shabby 1960s building - unless they were running a society or asking for advice.

Many commented in the National Student Survey that it was an aspect of their university that badly needed to change.

Now change it has. The old building has been demolished and in its place is a two-storey, steel-framed construction with natural light pouring through its glass walls, a double-height reception, a cafe, bar and restaurant, pool tables, games consoles, giant beanbags, big screens and lots of students hanging out.

The new building, completed in February 2019, allows them to do lots of other things too. It has a dedicated prayer space, washing facilities, a kitchen for commuter students to cook or heat up food, and a bespoke space for mature students with desktop computers and lockers.

Multipurpose rooms support clubs and societies, while a mirrored, sprung-floor dance studio becomes a revision room in exam season.

Student involvement in the project, designed by architects Robothams and builders Clegg Construction, was key to ensuring the new building reflected the needs of a bigger, more diverse and modern student body.

Students' union officers met university staff, the architects and contractors monthly as part of a project team. A 3D visualisation of the space was put up on YouTube for other students to see, and regular updates about the building were posted on social media. Students were also able to suggest items to place in a time capsule buried on the site.

The building reflects the importance to students of sustainability and inclusivity. Made of sustainable wood, it incorporates a low-carbon heating system drawing energy from more than 100 solar panels. All toilets are gender-neutral.

The building was opened in May 2019 by Sir Dominic Cadbury, brother of the late Sir Adrian Cadbury, who left £250,000 in his will towards the cost of the £9.5m project.

After the opening, the students' union jumped from bottom of a 22-strong list of campus services rated by students to third. It also saw a significant jump in satisfaction in the 2019 NSS.

Nor is it just students who use the building. It has hosted BBC Radio Four Question Time, held public talks and debates for Birmingham's IKON gallery, and been used as a venue for National Citizen Service as well as a backdrop for BBC interviews.

Runner-up: London School of Economics

Project: LSE Centre Building

Despite its global reputation, the London School of Economics (LSE) has never had a landmark building. A jumble of inflexible and inefficient buildings near the Strand and Royal Courts of Justice, it has offered no focal point for students or academics to meet, and few places they would want to linger. In 2004-5, 57% of the LSE's estate was in the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors' worst two categories for condition and functionality.

The new LSE Centre Building therefore had to provide the university with a focus, as well as with more practical space. But the logistics of constructing a large building in a historic part of central London were not easy.

A single point of access, party-wall and right-to-light considerations, a restricted site, and the need to work closely with Westminster city council to mitigate noise, dust and vibration in a heavily built-up and historically important area presented challenges.

Acoustic screens were constructed to reduce noise and as much of the construction as possible was carried out off-site, earning the scheme one of the highest considerate contractors scores in the country in 2017 and 2018. The overall investment in the site was £125m, of which £78m was spent on construction.

The final 13-storey building - the highest and largest on the campus - was designed by London-based international architects Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, and delivered by the consultancy and construction company Mace.

It hosts five academic departments, a learning commons where students can study and socialise, four lecture theatres, more than a dozen seminar rooms, three roof terraces, study areas, and a new centre dedicated to visiting alumni.

An academic star cuts diagonally across the facade in a series of double-height glazed spaces designed to encourage dialogue between departments, institutes and research centres, and to provide extra informal areas for students and staff from different departments to interact.

More than 70% of the building relies on natural ventilation. It also harvests rainwater and uses a biomass boiler and solar power.

But its most significant feature is a new public square, giving the university a physical heart and significantly improving the way students and staff connect with each other and with their community.

In the coming months, the plan is for it to display public art, host markets, festivals and graduation balls and, the university anticipates, provide a base for student demonstrations.

Runner-up: Kingston University

Project: Kingston University Town House

Kingston University wanted to create a building that reflected the importance of its civic role within Kingston upon Thames.

It had to be a welcoming environment that would allow opportunities for collaboration between the university and local residents and businesses. It also needed to supply a library, dance studios, studio theatre and flexible learning spaces for students.

But in addition it had to be striking enough to provide an impressive physical symbol of shared learning experiences and community. Half the students at Kingston are the first in their family to attend university and the university wanted to use architecture to make students feel like they belong.

The university therefore launched a competition for a suitable design with the Royal Institute of British Architects.

It chose Dublin-based Grafton Architects, who have since received the RIBA gold medal for architecture and who created the 2018 Venice biennale. Members of the competition jury were retained to help adjudicate during the construction process, while Willmott Dixon was appointed to carry out the construction.

The result is the Town House, a multi-million pound six-storey building incorporating a covered internal courtyard, two cafes and a series of external balconies and walkways, culminating in a rooftop garden with views across Kingston and the River Thames to Hampton Court. An open staircase weaves through the building, and an outside colonnade provides a barrier-free area in which students, staff and community can mix and be drawn inside.

While more than half of the space is open plan, secluded corners allow for private study and group work. Sliding walls make for a flexible ground floor space with banks of seating that can be used for a theatre or lecture audience or more informally. The building is wheelchair accessible too.

It opened in January 2020 and saw more than 5,000 visits on the first day. Numbers using the building have remained high, as has the praise.

“I love it so much,” reported one student. “[We] don’t deserve this.”

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