ELLIS WOODMAN ON ARCHITECTURE

Wringing cuts to government spending introduced in 2010 made their impact felt this year, with the commissioning of new schools, libraries, sports facilities and arts buildings all but grinding to a halt. Praise be then for higher education. Uniquely among public sector clients, universities have not only maintained but also escalated their building programmes. Over the next five years, the 24 Russell Group universities alone are planning to spend £9 billion on capital projects, a figure comparable with the cost of the 2012 Olympic Games. And not only is the quantity increasing. As was suggested by the presence on this year’s Stirling Prize shortlist of two major university buildings, quality is improving hugely, too. The motivation for this sudden wave of investment is not complex. Increasingly reliant on income from student fees, Britain’s universities are operating in a highly competitive market, where, for better or worse, architecture serves as a key brand differentiator. A recent survey by RIBA’s Higher Education Design Quality Forum revealed that more than a third of undergraduates had been put off applying to an institution by the quality of its buildings. In light of the fact that UK students now typically pay an annual fee of £9,250, Britain’s universities are beginning to accept that they can no longer afford to operate academic slums. Indeed, those with ambitions to retain or increase their student intake need higher fee-paying foreign students — a sector that now accounts for more than one in 10 undergraduates — and are realising that their campuses have to match the most attractive in the US, China and continental Europe.

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge continue to dominate the UK’s 180-odd universities. A recent survey by RIBA’s Higher Education Design Quality Forum revealed that more than a third of undergraduates had been put off applying to an institution by the quality of its buildings. In light of the fact that UK students now typically pay an annual fee of £9,250, Britain’s universities are beginning to accept that they can no longer afford to operate academic slums. Indeed, those with ambitions to retain or increase their student intake need higher fee-paying foreign students — a sector that now accounts for more than one in 10 undergraduates — and are realising that their campuses have to match the most attractive in the US, China and continental Europe.

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge continue to dominate the UK’s 180-odd universities. A recent survey by RIBA’s Higher Education Design Quality Forum revealed that more than a third of undergraduates had been put off applying to an institution by the quality of its buildings. In light of the fact that UK students now typically pay an annual fee of £9,250, Britain’s universities are beginning to accept that they can no longer afford to operate academic slums. Indeed, those with ambitions to retain or increase their student intake need higher fee-paying foreign students — a sector that now accounts for more than one in 10 undergraduates — and are realising that their campuses have to match the most attractive in the US, China and continental Europe.

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge continue to dominate the UK’s 180-odd universities. A recent survey by RIBA’s Higher Education Design Quality Forum revealed that more than a third of undergraduates had been put off applying to an institution by the quality of its buildings. In light of the fact that UK students now typically pay an annual fee of £9,250, Britain’s universities are beginning to accept that they can no longer afford to operate academic slums. Indeed, those with ambitions to retain or increase their student intake need higher fee-paying foreign students — a sector that now accounts for more than one in 10 undergraduates — and are realising that their campuses have to match the most attractive in the US, China and continental Europe.

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge continue to dominate the UK’s 180-odd universities. A recent survey by RIBA’s Higher Education Design Quality Forum revealed that more than a third of undergraduates had been put off applying to an institution by the quality of its buildings. In light of the fact that UK students now typically pay an annual fee of £9,250, Britain’s universities are beginning to accept that they can no longer afford to operate academic slums. Indeed, those with ambitions to retain or increase their student intake need higher fee-paying foreign students — a sector that now accounts for more than one in 10 undergraduates — and are realising that their campuses have to match the most attractive in the US, China and continental Europe.

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge continue to dominate the UK’s 180-odd universities. A recent survey by RIBA’s Higher Education Design Quality Forum revealed that more than a third of undergraduates had been put off applying to an institution by the quality of its buildings. In light of the fact that UK students now typically pay an annual fee of £9,250, Britain’s universities are beginning to accept that they can no longer afford to operate academic slums. Indeed, those with ambitions to retain or increase their student intake need higher fee-paying foreign students — a sector that now accounts for more than one in 10 undergraduates — and are realising that their campuses have to match the most attractive in the US, China and continental Europe.

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge continue to dominate the UK’s 180-odd universities. A recent survey by RIBA’s Higher Education Design Quality Forum revealed that more than a third of undergraduates had been put off applying to an institution by the quality of its buildings. In light of the fact that UK students now typically pay an annual fee of £9,250, Britain’s universities are beginning to accept that they can no longer afford to operate academic slums. Indeed, those with ambitions to retain or increase their student intake need higher fee-paying foreign students — a sector that now accounts for more than one in 10 undergraduates — and are realising that their campuses have to match the most attractive in the US, China and continental Europe.

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge continue to dominate the UK’s 180-odd universities. A recent survey by RIBA’s Higher Education Design Quality Forum revealed that more than a third of undergraduates had been put off applying to an institution by the quality of its buildings. In light of the fact that UK students now typically pay an annual fee of £9,250, Britain’s universities are beginning to accept that they can no longer afford to operate academic slums. Indeed, those with ambitions to retain or increase their student intake need higher fee-paying foreign students — a sector that now accounts for more than one in 10 undergraduates — and are realising that their campuses have to match the most attractive in the US, China and continental Europe.

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge continue to dominate the UK’s 180-odd universities. A recent survey by RIBA’s Higher Education Design Quality Forum revealed that more than a third of undergraduates had been put off applying to an institution by the quality of its buildings. In light of the fact that UK students now typically pay an annual fee of £9,250, Britain’s universities are beginning to accept that they can no longer afford to operate academic slums. Indeed, those with ambitions to retain or increase their student intake need higher fee-paying foreign students — a sector that now accounts for more than one in 10 undergraduates — and are realising that their campuses have to match the most attractive in the US, China and continental Europe.

University challenge

Project better exemplifies this cultural shift than the Ssewe House project, Centre, the London School of Economics’ first newbuild in 60 years. When it issues the competition brief for the new building, the LSE insisted that it was to be the best student centre in the world and that British universities can no longer afford to operate academic slums.

Winning architects, the Dublin-based O’Donnell and Tuomey, have delivered a project that more than satisfies that ambition.

Taking the heart of the university’s central London campus, it looks more like a geological outcrop than a conventional work of architecture. Faced in brick, its facades raise back sharply so as not to overshadow the lower buildings around the street. Inside, an extraordinarily diverse set of functions is accommodated over nine compact storeys, snaking from a nightclub to a multi-faith prayer space, a radio station and a gym.

Lied in by a gregariously meandering staircase, if they combine to give the building the character of a city in miniature. The LSE is following up this bold piece of communicative with a 300 million social science centre designed by Richard Rogers’ practice and planned to launch another competition for a building of equivalent scale in the new year.

The student centre was joined this year’s Stirling Prize shortlist by Fellows’ Clive Bradley’s expansion of Manchester School of Art, while the new building for Glasgow School of Art, designed by the American architect Steven Holl, looks certain to secure a place on next year’s list. Its completion this summer was overleafed, all too literally, by the fire that consumed the art school’s principal building a couple of months later. As the scowl felt throughout Glasgow at that disaster made clear, higher education buildings have the capacity to embody the identity of not just universities but whole cities. Indeed, at a time when universities face considerable pressure to find alternative funding streams, there is an increasing trend to design new buildings with the aim of meeting the needs of the wider community, doubling up as venues for conferences, weddings and a range of educational outreach programmes.

It has taken an economic crisis to awaken Britain’s universities to the value of investing in architecture and bring a welcome change not just for students but for the rest of us, too.

BEST OF 2014

1 Boddle in Bodo
Two of the best buildings by British architects were a Library and concert hall 60 miles north of the Arctic Circle

2 Haworth Tompkins’
The Stirring Prize-winning Everyman and expansion of Denmark’s Royal National Theatre were triumphs.

3 Ouse Pegw Down
Three diminutive office blocks designed by David Chipperfield is the standout among the REDependence behind King’s Cross station in London.

4 Maggie’s Leicester
Now in its 10th year, the charity Maggie’s continues to work towards realising a cancer care centre to support every oncology department in the country. Its latest building by Edinburgh’s Reach and Hall is among the strongest yet.

5 Tanya Fletton in Pasing
Flett’s new houses present an exciting alternative to the suburban character of much new rural development.

WORST OF 2014

1 Glasgow School of Art fire
Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s 1909 masterpiece was spared complete destruction, but the damage was still extensive.

2 The City of London skyscraper’s unfortunate hit of falling cars has now been remedied, but there are still plenty of reasons to object to this overhearing monstrosity.

3 Queens’ Bridge
The budget of Thomas Heatherwick’s planned Thames crossing rose to an eye-watering £175 million. In addition, £25 million will be needed each year to cover running costs.

4 Library Walk, Chelmsford
One of Manchester’s most charming public spaces has been blocked off.

5 Shoreditch Shambles
In a quid pro quo for encouraging building in London, Boris Johnson has taken over overlooking local authorities’ objections to some particularly awful developments.

SNAP VANAMAKER PLAYHOUSE

Breathtaking performances from
Phil Daniels and Pauline McLynn

THE PERFECT FESTIVE TREAT!

CHRISTMAS & NEW YEAR PERFORMANCES

DECEMBER 11, 2013
SUNDAY 23, 31 DECEMBER & 7 JANUARY
THURSDAY 12, 19, 26 DECEMBER & 3 JANUARY
SATURDAY 14, 21, 28 DECEMBER & 5 JANUARY
SUNDAY 15, 22, 29 DECEMBER & 6 JANUARY
BOOK NOW: 020 7401 9919
"SHAKESPEARE'S GLOBE"