UNIVERSITY CHALLENGE

As educational institutions rush to revamp their campuses, how do we ensure we are designing quality buildings? An expert panel of architects and estate managers debated this question in an AJ roundtable in collaboration with Peter Brett Associates at MIPIM UK.
By James McLaughlin

Director of estates for Oxford Brookes University Sue Malin opened the discussion by stating that although there has been greater investment in campuses in recent years, universities are faced with ever-increasing rebates, owing to the capping of tuition fees.

“We are all working with less income every year. We have even something like an 8 per cent decrease in real terms of income over the last three years. Because of free students, there are single students who can’t afford to pay for a postgraduate degree. They are much more demanding about what they want.”

Holmes said that one of the key measures she looked at in her role was how much income was generated per square meter.

Ian Taylor, managing partner at Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios — whose UCL King’s Cross campus project completes in 2018 — asked whether the approach to revive different academic departments are forced to share space consequently affecting how they are differentiated from each other. These were facilities that were well-used, staff who struggled with co-usage of space rather than the students.

Director of estates at the London School of Economics Julian Robinson agreed, saying that academic space was naturally conservative and that in his experience new buildings play a role in leading changes in pedagogy.

The buildings we are trying to produce will include less lecture theatres and more casual, flexible spaces. Where you can get more innovative in the research spaces. Because if you have a young researcher they will typically want to work in a more Google-like environment.

According to Julian Nicholls, partner at Make, universities have embraced the commercial world, resulting in greater engagement with the cities in which they sit.

“I think it is interesting how spin-off companies coming out of research institutions bring in private equity money. It changes the front door of a university and embed it much more into the city,” he said. Make has previously undertaken several projects for the universities of Oxford and Nottingham.

“Indeed, increasing commercial awareness among higher-education institutions means design capabilities within print and sector-specific offices are growing stronger. The norms of business are changing, and the mainstream in universities are changing, and the mainstream in universities are changing.

We are actually finding that businesses are looking to office design to create a workplace that both enhances their design and their spaces.”

However, the biggest challenges to innovation according to ODA are the stakeholders and academics.

“We have a set of stakeholders and academics. We develop an innovative vision through discussions with the estates team, and they will come
“If you have a proper post-occupancy evaluation with a frank “no blame culture” then everyone learns” Ian Taylor

“Existing buildings have an almost indefinite lifespan if they have flexibility designed in. The education sector could benefit from the same approach” Nick Yarrow

“There is a duty of care which is about not just delivering a building, but making sure when you hand it over to a client they understand how it is used” O’Dowd & Tunley

“Students think we are like any other business on the high street. They are much more demanding about what they want” Sue Holmes
In and say, “Show me where it has been done before.”” Both Holmes and Robinson said they look to architects to challenge the ISH and set them and thereby deliver a building above what was expected. But Lisa Christensen, director of Research and Half of Kim in Chicago, draws upon her new campus for City of Gisborne College, sounded a note of caution in delivering the grand vision or “vision it should also pay close attention to the minutiae. Poor detailing, he said, was the best example of architects not getting “the whole picture.”

ODH was in agreement but argued that architects are hampered by Design and Build contracts. “The frustrating element is the human interaction between person and building and that is where the hand of the contractor is felt most.”

Richards argued there are lessons to be learned from volume housebuilders. “When you work in housing you are given a one-inch-thick brief that tells you exactly what door ‘handle to use and on. Housebuilders have agreements with the supply chain and if something doesn’t work, it doesn’t get used again,” he said. “If you take the standardisation process further you drive the offsite manufacturing with it.”

Fergie Kelly, LLP director at Pilkington Associates said, “We’re looking at the projects where we are designing the principal panels in Revit, which are sent to a factory and then assembled on site. It’s entirely big step forward and will become the norm.”

The architectural relationship needs to extend until well after the building is finished, argued Taylor. “We would welcome universities saying that part of the contract is that you stay with us for three years afterwards.”

Holmes countered that coal was the biggest difficulty in sustaining a relationship of this length, whilst prompted Taylor to reiterate, “We would pay for it by itself because if you could have a proper post-occupancy evaluation with a hook ‘no blame culture’ then everyone learns. In the end, the best buildings are those where the users like them, understand them and actually engage with them.”

Daniel Pieters, project architect at CFA, added that clients have included the University of Glasgow, where Taylor is project architect and is now做一个 project. “There is a duty of care which is about ensuring delivering a building, but making sure when you hand it over to the client they understand how it is used.”

Collaboration between the various disciplines involved in project is rising, according to DSH, who said that engineers and architects were now working much more closely together owing to Building Information Modelling (BIM). “BIM is driving collaboration. It is prompting M&E engineers, structural engineers and architects to talk to each other because we are sharing the same model.”

The discussion closed by examining the merits of retrofit versus new build. In the office market people have realised that existing buildings have an intrinsic beauty that has been treated well and have flexibility inherently designed in,” Kelly said. “The education sector could benefit from the same approach.”

Robinson explained why the LSE chose new build. “We could not recite all of the 1960s towers, but we have gone for a new six-floor building with a 100-year life that will compete with Stanford and Harvard.” However, he warned that a large scheme needed a coherent overall plan. “Universities need a consistent approach with an overarching vision for their estates. It is all very well having a world-class building, but the rest of the estate is key—standard 2 to 5, then we are just building ourselves.”