

# 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

AJ  
ROUND  
TABLE



By James McLachlan

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

'We are all working with less income every year. We have seen something like an 8 per cent decrease in real terms of income over the last three years. Because of fees students think we are like any other business on the high street. They are much more demanding about what they want.'

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

Ian Taylor, managing partner at Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios – whose Ulster University campus completes in 2018 – asked whether this approach means different academic departments

are forced to share space, consequently affecting how they are differentiated from each other. Holmes replied it was the staff who struggled with co-use of space rather than the students.

Director of estates at the London School of Economics Julian Robinson agreed, saying that academics were 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 looser fit, flexible spaces. Where you can get more innovative is in the research spaces, because if you have a young researcher they will typically want to work in a more Google-type environment.'

According to Justin 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 embeds 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 similarities with private-sector office space are growing stronger. 'The needs of business are changing,' said managing director Michael Olliff at Scott Brownrigg, whose Spark building at Southampton Solent University is under construction. 'We are actually finding that businesses are looking to education for inspiration in how to design their spaces.'

However, the biggest challenges to innovation according to Olliff are the stakeholders and academics. 'We develop an innovative vision through discussions with the estates team, and they will come

## Delegates

Greg Callaghan, partner,  
Peter Breitt Associates

Lyle Chrystie, director,  
Reiach and Hall Architects

Sue Holmes, director of estates,  
Oxford Brookes University

Fergal Kelly, LLP director,  
Peter Breitt Associates

Justin Nicholls, partner, Make

Michael Olliff, managing  
director, Scott Brownrigg

Daniel Parker, projects director, AHR

Julian Robinson, director of estates,  
London School of Economics

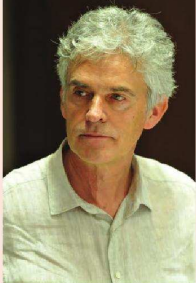
Ian Taylor, managing partner,  
Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios

James McLachlan,  
AJ publications editor (chair)

**'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 embeds it much more into the city'** Justin Nicholls



**'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' Fergal Kelly**



**'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' Daniel Parker**



**Above** The Stirling Prize-nominated Saw Swee Hock Student Centre at the London School of Economics, designed by O'Donnell + Tuomey

**'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 briefs they set and thereby deliver a building above what was expected. But Lyle Chrystie, director at Reich and Hall Architects, which is working on a new campus for City of Glasgow College, sounded a note of caution: in delivering the grand vision architects should also pay close attention to the minutiae. Poor detailing, he said, was the best example of architects not getting the 'whole ticket'.

Olliff 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'.

Nicholls 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 so 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 arrive at offsite manufacturing which delivers much higher quality.'

Fergal Kelly, LLP director at Peter Brett Associates said: 'We're working on a project where we are designing the precast panels in Revit, which are sent to a factory and then assembled on site. It's a really big step forward and will become the norm.'

The architect-client relationship needs to extend until well after the building is finished, argued Taylor. 'I would welcome universities saying that part of the contract is that you stay with us for three years afterwards.'

Holmes countered that cost was the biggest difficulty in sustaining a relationship of this length, which prompted Taylor to respond: 'It would pay for itself because if you could

have a proper post-occupancy evaluation with a frank "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 Parker, projects director at AHR, whose clients have included the University of Glasgow, echoed Taylor's point, saying architects need to have the integrity to stand by their designs but to 'put our hands up if it hasn't worked'. Parker continued: '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.' Collaboration between the various disciplines involved in a project is rising, according to Olliff, who said that engineers and architects are 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 almost indefinite lifespan if they're 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 have re-clad some of the 1960s towers, but we have gone for a new set-piece building with a 100-year life that will compete with Stamford 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 if the rest of the estate is bog-standard D&B, then we are just kidding ourselves.'

