

Commentary by Dr Alistair Fair - Creating a university townscape: the experience of the Sidgwick Site

Development on the Sidgwick Site, the home of many of the University's Arts faculties, began in the 1950s and has continued into the twenty-first century. The original masterplan, devised by the architects Hugh Casson and Neville Conder in 1951-53, represents one of the earliest post-war attempts to plan university development comprehensively, not only in Cambridge but also nationally. Infused by the 'townscape' philosophy that was favoured by the *Architectural Review* in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the plan proposed a permeable sequence of spaces and buildings. The site was carefully considered to create interest and diversity; particular attention was paid to the choice and juxtaposition of materials, and the ways that they were detailed. As the University undertakes a major masterplanning and construction project in North-West Cambridge, it is worth revisiting the circumstances in which Casson and Conder were appointed, the key features of their proposal, and the Sidgwick Site's subsequent history.

The idea that the Arts faculties might be concentrated in a single location first found concrete expression in the mid-1940s. The university's central science sites were cramped; the removal of non-science departments from them would allow reconstruction on more efficient lines, a key goal given that the Barlow Report of 1946 had emphasised the need for Higher Education to produce the scientists and engineers on which Britain's place in an increasingly technological world depended. At the same time, the centre of gravity within the University had been shifting from the colleges towards the faculties since the 1920s. Those in the Arts looked enviously towards the laboratories, libraries and offices of their colleagues in the Sciences. Many of the Arts faculties had cramped libraries, while Arts teaching staff without a college affiliation were often forced to supervise in their own homes.

The University resolved to buy the former Corpus Christi cricket ground in Sidgwick Avenue in 1948, and was also able to secure an option on the adjacent houses, then owned by Gonville and Caius College, that fronted West Road. This area, adjacent to Selwyn College, had first been considered for university development in the 1920s, when it was one of several locations examined for the University Library. Its proximity to the site on which the UL had since been constructed, on the other side of West Road, was one attraction. A second advantage was that this location would not worsen traffic movements. Arts and Science students and staff would be moving in different directions, a key consideration before the narrow Silver Street bridge was reconstructed.

Earlier in the twentieth century, the University had begun the development of the central Downing Site according to a block plan. This plan had, however, been rapidly abandoned in the face of changing needs, and there was a sense that the Sidgwick Site should avoid the 'variegated architecture' that had resulted. The committee was 'anxious not to prejudge questions of architectural treatment, nor rigidly to bind the architects of thirty or forty years hence to a strongly marked style'. What was required was not a definitive plan, but rather a framework that could be adapted in the future as required. That this was the brief is significant, reminding us that masterplanning as a discrete activity, carried out without any expectation that the planner might go on to produce detailed designs for actual buildings, was a relatively new activity in post-war Britain. Expectations in Cambridge were high. Nikolaus Pevsner, then Slade Professor, hoped that an 'ideal campus' might result. He had

earlier expressed his frustration with recent Cambridge architecture, which in his view was often characterised by excessive stylistic conservatism.

Two architectural practices were commissioned in 1950 to prepare proposals. The first, Robert Atkinson, produced a Beaux-Arts scheme, with formal quadrangles laid out to either side of a dual carriageway leading from Sidgwick Avenue to West Road. The elevations of Atkinson's buildings were variations on a 'stripped classical' theme, not unlike the architect's earlier Barber Institute at Birmingham University; several featured grand colonnaded porticoes. In contrast to Atkinson's rather prescriptive proposal, Casson and Conder's submission was far less rigidly defined. It drew on 'the carefully balanced combination in the layout of the formal and the picturesque, of the spacious and of the intimate [...] emphasised and enriched by the architectural character of the buildings and in particular by the materials to be used.' A loose series of quadrangles recalled collegiate precedent as well as contemporaneous housing projects such as the work of Tecton, Drake and Lasdun at Paddington. The report offered not detailed designs but rather a series of basic blocks, the area and height of which was based on faculties' estimated spatial requirements. For each, massing, materials and texture were suggested – a dark and rough building here, a light and smooth structure there. The centrepiece was to be the 'Raised Faculty Building', intended as an almost monumental anchor for the new part of Cambridge that was emerging. It would be a foil for other buildings that could be more economically designed and less formal in character. Faced in stone, its ground floor was to be left open, evoking the Corbusian idea of pilotis in its massive dark concrete columns but presented by Casson in terms of allowing vistas across the whole site. Such vistas would be more informal than the grand axial prospects of Atkinson's scheme.

No record appears to survive of the decision-making process by means of which Casson and Conder's scheme was selected. However, from subsequent correspondence and minutes, it seems that their success stemmed from the informal and adaptable nature of their proposals. Also important was the way in which they related the site to its surroundings. Although both the Casson/Conder and Atkinson proposals treated the site as a permeable piece of city in a way that contrasted with the introverted nature of previous developments in Cambridge, Casson and Conder paid particular attention to the Sidgwick Site's relationship with its surroundings. For example, the Economics building was conceived in terms of its relationship with Selwyn College's gardens, with the result being likened to the way in which Clare College directly overlooks King's College on the Backs. No doubt also significant in ensuring Casson and Conder's victory was the fact that Casson was in the early 1950s the most famous site planner in the country, having overseen the Festival of Britain site on London's South Bank in 1951. His work there was a particularly apt preparation for the Sidgwick Site, as it had required him to co-ordinate the efforts of a galaxy of designers, creating a coherent experience from their individual contributions.

There was no commitment subsequently to appoint Casson and Conder to design any of the buildings indicated on their plan. However, in the event, the initial structures on the Sidgwick Site were all executed to their designs. The Raised Faculty Building, the Faculty of Economics and Politics, and Lecture Block A, constructed between 1957 and 1961, form a coherent ensemble that demonstrates especially well the Masterplan philosophy of incident and variety. The buildings are raised on a paved podium above their surroundings, partly because it was felt that the slight level change would dignify them, partly because it was thought that the three-dimensional experience of moving up and down would add interest, and partly to stop cars and bicycles penetrating the area. Cobbles are juxtaposed with paving slabs; nearby they are arranged in swirling patterns around trees. Concrete bollards

with integrated lighting provide useful visual incidents, as do benches, while the planting of the quadrangle softens the texture of the whole. Adding to the idea of the site as a piece of city, certain iterations of the scheme included a number of small shops as well as a refectory.

Casson and Conder continued to work into the 1980s on the southern part of the Sidgwick Site, which retains a particular consistency as a result. However, disquiet with their approach in certain traditionalist quarters of the University came to a head in 1960 when the initial design for the Lady Mitchell Hall was rejected in the Senate. Meanwhile, for the new avant-garde of the 1960s, Casson and Conder's designs increasingly seemed rather pedestrian. At the same time, the original development plan was undermined by Caius' decision to retain one of the West Road houses which the University had believed would be available for development, and by the college's insistence on acquiring another part of the site as a condition for the sale of the remaining West Road houses. In these circumstances, it was decided to revisit the development plan, and to change designer for the History Faculty, the commission for which was given in 1962 to the practice of James Stirling and James Gowan. Their proposal, which uniquely combined the teaching and administrative rooms with the Faculty library, was welcomed by the academic staff. Stirling and Gowan soon split, with the development and execution of the design falling to Stirling, its principal author. Whilst the design accorded with a revised Casson/Conder masterplan, the History Faculty set a trend for a more individualistic approach.

In concluding, how should we assess the Sidgwick Site, and what can we learn from it? In judging the scheme, we might note that the area that best exemplifies the principles of the masterplan was developed by the planners themselves. The area fronting Sidgwick Avenue remains a particularly cohesive experience, a real fusion of buildings and setting that is characterised by careful juxtapositions and felicitous detailing. The northern part of the site is more varied. Is this the inevitable product of many hands working over several decades? Should we criticise the original masterplan for failing to accommodate changing needs and architectural fashions? Is the problem that revisions to the masterplan were never fully followed through? Or should decision-makers have followed the original framework to the letter? It is, however, perhaps churlish to ask these questions. The buildings may deviate from the principles laid down by Casson and Conder, but the results – largely by leading practices, and of considerable merit in some cases – remain compelling in their contrasts, and their compact inter-relationships. Furthermore, though it was not wholly executed, the act of commissioning a Development Plan in itself was a novel move, and particularly the wish that it function as a loose, permeable framework rather than the kind of rigid, introverted layout that had been tried (and had failed) on the Downing Site. As a framework that simultaneously attempted to engage with the broad context of site planning and the detail of materials, it not only resulted in an immersive panorama of key ideas and moments in post-war British architectural history, but also offers a compelling philosophy on which to plan in North-West Cambridge.