Historic Context by Professor Peter Carolin

Historically, the sites of the University and its constituent colleges are introverted. They are in the city but not open to it. Like the religious houses that preceded them, they tend to be enclosed, protected communities. New, 20th Century colleges maintained this form. So, too, did the University sites (such as those on either side of Downing Street) until the mid 20th Century when, with the development of the Sidgwick and West Cambridge sites, the University created areas which form part of the city fabric, genuinely open to others. Citizens – as well as scholars – can wander round the Sidgwick site at any time of day or year and Stagecoach runs a regular service through the slowly filling expanses of West Cambridge.

So far, the results of this incursion into city-making have been mixed. Hugh Casson’s masterplan for the Sidgwick site was never followed through – subverted by buildings (History and Law) that pay scant attention to their neighbours. Masterplans should never be cast in stone – accommodation needs and academic priorities change and so, too, do local authority planning policies – but they should not be casually changed either. But here comes the difficulty for the University – it is an academic institution, not a developer. The academics on its committees are very busy people and committee membership frequently changes. In contrast to the colleges, where the institutional memory is usually strong, it is weak when it comes to the University estate.

Recent development of the Sidgwick site has benefitted hugely from the appointment, ten years ago, of Allies and Morrison as masterplanners. They not only demonstrated that the site’s capacity could be increased but deftly re-ordered it (as far as they were allowed). Their buildings and courts for English and Criminology, set a standard for a modest, appropriate architecture that has been ably followed by Nicholas Hare Architects’ recently completed Alison Richard Building.

Shortly after its inception, the Sidgwick was praised by Nikolaus Pevsner. West Cambridge, however, has never enjoyed a good press. At the time that the City rather grudgingly consented to its development, it was on condition that it should be at a low density. This and the combination of the Veterinary School and its paddocks in the centre of the site and other existing buildings at both the east and west extremities created a huge challenge to the potential masterplanners. One suggested that each building should be set in a walled enclosure or ‘garden’ arranged on a north-south axis and two followed the rural business park formula of buildings scattered in a landscaped ‘park’.

The winning proposal, by Richard MacCormac, was inspired by The Backs – with Madingley Road playing the part of Queens’ Road and the paddocks of the Vet School acting as a giant version of the open areas between the road and the colleges. The majority of the new buildings lie along the Coton footpath, overlooking the fields, rather than, as one might expect, along Madingley Road. Everyone agrees that the low density was a mistake and it is said that the City would be willing to reconsider this. But a key factor has been the lack of a long-term ‘design champion’ in the person of a senior academic with an awareness and interest in the site as a ‘piece of city’. Such a person should have supported the masterplan’s development through a continuing dialogue with the masterplanners.

The North West Cambridge project has benefitted from the lessons of West Cambridge. There is an awareness that this latest project is part of the never-ending process of making the city and a determination to create a community that is both distinct and yet part of a wider whole. Above all, the difficulty of the task has been recognised and a new structure developed to oversee it. The very fact that the Department of Architecture’s request to be able to use the project as the basis for a design charrette was instantly
welcomed and that its progress and outcome has been discussed with such openness and lack of defensiveness by all parties is an entirely new development in the creation of the University estate. So, too, is the intention to encourage a creative dialogue with and between the ‘site package’ teams.

Ultimately, it is up to the client (the University) to decide how to develop such a project – all designers (whether consultants or students) can do is to demonstrate possibilities (and, in the process, to enhance their own understanding and skills). What a pity that the Mill Lane area could not have been the object of a similar, design-led, exercise.