Ancient university buildings under threat

Ancient university buildings are iconic, but can they survive the demands of modern study?

Anthony Edwards wasn’t perturbed when he first saw the hole. Given its position in the Regent House Combination Room in Cambridge’s Old Schools, where for three centuries all the business of the university was conducted, it must, he assumed, have been dug to deal with a bout of woodworm, a plumbing problem, or something worthy of archaeological investigation.

It was a month later, as the professor walked down Kings Parade and spotted two friends with “faces like thunder”, that he found out the truth: the gap cut in the dais floor in the corner of room first used in 1400, revealing the concrete ceiling of the room below, was not simply for access to the pipes or dry rot but was to make way for the installation of a lift.

Appalled, he set about getting a copy of the plans. He was not impressed. "The Regent House is the oldest, the most beautiful and most important room belonging to the university," Edwards, a fellow of Caius college and former senior proctor, says.

"In fact, it is historically the most important room in the universities of the English-speaking world. It is the cradle of Cambridge’s democracy, our Westminster Hall.

"The lift enclosure is as big as four telephone kiosks, plastered tightly together in a square. Nothing will persuade me that this would not, in its effect, be a substantial alteration to the most precious room in the university. It would destroy the symmetry
of that beautiful room."

'Like a public loo'

His colleague and fellow protester Gill Evans is rather more plain-spoken: "It looks a bit like a French public loo."

The lift, Cambridge insists, must be installed in order to comply with the access requirements of disability legislation, and has been carefully designed to blend into its surroundings, being "unobtrusive and sympathetic". It has been created using the principles of "reversible construction", meaning it can even be removed in the future causing only minimal disruption to the existing building fabric.

"No alterations have been made to the original stonework, and the Combination Room floor through which the lift shaft rises only dates back to the 1930s," a spokesman says.

But the row throws a spotlight on the ongoing tension between the need to modernise universities' historic buildings, with their treacherous staircases, uneven floors and lack of IT infrastructure, and the desire to preserve their centuries-old beauty.

Although there are special considerations for how the access demands of the 2004 Disability Discrimination Act are applied to listed buildings, they are not exempt. Another reason for modernisation is simply the need to make older buildings fit for purpose, for instance so that the technology often central to learning today can be used.

Evans says the biggest threat to the Oxbridge buildings so familiar from postcards and guidebooks is actually from tourism, and attempts to accommodate the millions of visitors who flock to see sights like the Radcliffe Camera and King’s College chapel.

"In Oxford, it is war," she says, remembering a plan to cut a new doorway right through the Bodleian library's Great Gate that was abandoned after furious opposition.

But increasingly, say those in the field, it is environmental considerations that are prompting changes.

Matthew Slocombe, the deputy secretary of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (Spab), says there has long been a "difficult overlap" between disability discrimination legislation and controls on what can be done to listed buildings, but the ever-growing creativity of architects has solved many problems.

The focus now is increasingly on the need to "green" ancient structures, he says. "At the moment it's all very discretionary, but certainly the whole thrust of governmental thinking and legislation means that probably within a few years it's going to be far more mandatory.

"These sorts of conflicts and problems will probably come up more. Everybody's already thinking about solutions for how to achieve the carbon reduction changes that are necessary without causing harm."

That needn't be too hard, according to John Alker, of the UK Green Building Council, who believes there are plenty of ways to make a historic building kinder to the environment without sullying its good looks.
Green revolution

"No one's advocating slapping a load of external cladding on to Oxbridge colleges," he says. "There are going to be some buildings in the country where what you can do is limited, whether it's historic universities or the houses of parliament.

"But some relatively simple measures can be taken that will reduce carbon emissions and save energy, in even the oldest of our university buildings.

"Draught proofing, low-energy lighting, discreet forms of insulation and better heating controls will all help, without negatively impacting on the aesthetics of a building."

There are also opportunities for universities to cash in on the green revolution, Alker adds, by using the space afforded by their often significant landholdings to invest in renewables such as wind turbines. "Increasingly, they will be able to make money by supplying energy to the grid," he says.

Patrick Finch, chairman of the Association of University Directors of Estates (Aude) and director of estates at Bristol University, says adapting historic buildings to make them fit for purpose can be a huge challenge, quite apart from the rows that may ensue.

And the expense of running them is significantly higher than that for modern buildings, in many cases because of their lack of energy efficiency at a time of rising fuel costs. That pressure comes at a time when institutions are preparing to have to find new funding for the specialist upkeep of their historic buildings, as they face a planned £40m funding cut.

Oxford received £5.14m to help look after its landmark buildings this year, while Cambridge got £4.2m and King's College London £2.2m. King's College owns the Maughan library on Chancery Lane and a Grade I listed chapel, part of its campus on the Strand.

Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, Bristol and Newcastle also stand to lose more than a million pounds a year each in the cuts. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) is set to vote through government-backed plans within weeks.

Another problem with old buildings, says Finch, is that they just don't provide very much room in an age of ever-growing student numbers. In a modern rectangular "box" building, around 75% of the area is usable. In a historic building, you normally never get near that figure.

And even when vast sums have been spent on refurbishment, the running costs may still be up to 20% higher than for a modern building.

Such considerations mean it is increasingly difficult, as the years go by, to keep these buildings in full use, Finch says.

Ongoing challenge

"It's an ongoing challenge, and I suspect that as legislation increases in a whole raft of areas the challenge is going to get greater, not less. But the positive for us is that the best of our historic buildings are iconic. People universally associate them with the university."
And there are success stories. Greenwich and Kent universities' Drill Hall Library has won a clutch of prizes for the sensitive way its developers made use of a Grade II listed building in a former Royal Navy barracks.

The £8m refurbishment, based at Chatham Maritime, provides more than 4,000 students with state-of-the-art computing and study facilities, while preserving some of the original Victorian features of the red-brick building, including ornate wooden carvings. It has been completely rewired to cater for the computer equipment and other electrical appliances and, at 184 metres, is thought to be the longest library in Europe.

Andrew Smith, Hefce's head of estates, whose department regularly deals with university estate managers who are having difficulty adapting their more aged buildings, describes such structures as a double-edged sword. "They are both an asset and a liability," he says.

"They can be challenging and sometimes expensive. But they do give a huge sense of place and identity to the institutions that are lucky enough to have them."

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2009