

Response to Comments on the Grafton Architects Design for Christ's College Library by the Victorian Society

The Bodley Library at Christs College was modernised and extended between 1895 and 1897 by the Gothic Revival Architect George Frederick Bodley. The main interventions evidenced by this work on the south end of the west range reflect the late 19th century period. The Library's current inadequate extension constructed in the 20th century presents a largely blank brick wall to Christ's Lane and is connected at first floor to the existing Bodley library via a pedestrian bridge. The ground floors of both libraries are set partially below street level which reduces the appearance and scale of their elevations along Christs lane.

The new Library proposal sets out to respect the character and scale of the Bodley library in a number of ways allowing Bodley space to 'breathe' while also setting up a dialogue with this existing historic building. Apart from the chimneys, a feature of the new library, the general height, informed by the student needs and numbers of study spaces is very much in line with the previously granted scheme of 2016. The extent of the volume at this height is extended for a further part along Christs Lane to accommodate some of the area that was otherwise housed in a basement of the 2016 scheme. Considerable effort has been made to accommodate, reduce and conceal from view the detrimental impact of current plant, equipment and services, to preserve the setting of the historic building ranges.

Where the new library is situated on Christ's Lane, the current architecture presents a largely unarticulated and restrained character. The new library makes an addition to this part of the fabric of Christs lane by using the same materials, predominantly in brick, with a similar matching tone and texture. In this manner the new library sets itself apart from the existing Bodley, just as the 1970s library chose to do giving a certain primordial importance to the Bodley's 19th century stone Gable. This approach was discussed and agreed with the Conservation officer at Cambridge City Council.

The New Library follows the same pattern as the existing library by connecting to the Bodley at first floor level, fixing the height of the first floor of the new library and the floors above which are low, in the order of 2.5 m in height to maintain a human and intimate, almost domestic scale.

The new library, is set at a greater distance away from the stone gable of the Bodley Library amplifying the importance materially in terms of one over the other. The widened gap between the turret of the gable and the lantern lit stairs of the new library opposite, create a sense of 'gateway' into Bath Court which will be articulated with a new transparent gate, replacing the solid gate at present, visually opening up Bath court to Christs Lane. To the right of the gateway is a stone seat, an element of street furniture, part of the façade which in addition to the changes to the gate adds human scale, interest and dimension.

In terms of the façade treatment, while materially different and distinct in terms of scale, the new library establishes a dialogue with the Bodley gable as follows:

The string course of the upper bay window of the Bodley is drawn across the new library façade at intervals at cill level of the first floor windows. These cills are made of stone, of a type and colour to match the Bodley Gable.

The third level floor is articulated with a broken string course /cornice (broken by the chimneys) to align with the top of the turret of the Bodley gable. Above this level the lantern of the new library stairs is deliberately set back to integrate the higher scale of the new library and set up a satisfactory dialogue with the Bodley gable. These articulations of the form of the new library and the increased distance between both buildings, in our opinion addressed the desire for the Bodley library to remain independent as part of an overall street composition.

The façade of the new library has a dynamic impact, as the lane is not wide and so is appreciated much more from an oblique angle as one moves along its length. There is also a bend in the façade of the college wall which establishes another dynamic in the experience of the passer by walking past the façade.

This experience allows certain alignments to be more appreciated, such as the cill levels and the cornice levels previously described. It is also in this context that set backs are provided at third floor level to allow the chimneys to become more distinct, released from the brick surface, the set-back reinforcing a visual line with the string course of the Bodley library upper string course. This contextual approach was informed and inspired by a deep assessment of the richly articulated college walls of Cambridge, their scale and height in proportion to the street width and the unique pattern of boundary edge chimneys common to many colleges.

The articulation of the new library façade is in our view not consistent with the term 'brutalist' an era of architecture confined to the 50s and 60s. The building is responding to the restrained brick built architecture of the Christs College buildings along the lane, upping the tone somewhat to express the formal presence of the new library. In so doing careful attention has been paid to the articulation and distribution of windows, turning what was once a mute blank façade into one that is richly detailed and full of architectural interest. The windows of varying scales, responding to the interiors behind, are detailed with stone surrounds, a stone that will match that of the Bodley library, the chimneys, a necessary component of the sustainable ventilation strategy are articulated to match the chimney at the junction of the west and south ranges. The existing brick facades of the 19th century buildings adjacent to upper Hall, along with the upper Hall façade are integrated into the overall composition.

In our judgement, these components of material, articulation and distribution of openings along with the low floor to ceiling heights effectively respond to human scale. The material character and the elements of the façade at street level add further to engage with the public realm to enhance the experience of the passer-by.

Grafton Architects