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ACADEMIC LIBRARIES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD: CONTEMPORARY IMPLEMENTATIONS IN A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

BIBLIOTEKI AKADEMICKIE UNIwersYTETU OKSfordzkiego: WSPÓłczesne Realizacje W Historycznym Kontekście

Abstract

The spatial development of the University of Oxford's library system has been shaped by the need for research spaces, academic community, and expanding collections. For over 400 years, the system has centered on the Bodleian Library, now comprising 26 libraries that form a network of around 100 academic libraries at Oxford.

The article focuses on the architecture of two projects that expanded this system:

- Weston Library, WilkinsonEyre, 2015: A transformation of the New Bodleian Library from book storage into an academic library with public and visitor spaces.
- The Investcorp Building, Zaha Hadid Architects, 2015: A curving, metallic form that creates a “bridge” between Oxford's historic buildings.

Based on literature and on-site research, the article explores different strategies for designing and renewing academic libraries in a historical setting.

Keywords: academic libraries, library architecture, Bodleian Library, contemporary architecture, Zaha Hadid, WilkinsonEyre

Streszczenie

Rozwój przestrzenny systemu bibliotecznego Uniwersytetu Oksfordzkiego związany był między innymi z potrzebami tworzenia miejsc pracy naukowej, wspólnoty akademickiej oraz gromadzenia ciągle rosnących zbiorów. Od ponad 400 lat system tworzy Biblioteka Bodlejańska, która obejmuje 26 bibliotek i współtworzy sieć około 100 bibliotek akademickich w mieście. Artykuł skupia się na architekturze dwóch inwestycji, które rozbudowały ten system:

- Weston Library, arch. WilkinsonEyre, 2015.

Adaptację Nowej Biblioteki Bodlejańskiej, która służyła jako magazyn książek, na bibliotekę akademicką z przestrzeniami publicznymi oraz obsługą turysty

- The Investcorp Building, arch. Zaha Hadid, 2015.

Nowa metaliczna, krzywoliniowa forma tworzy fizyczny i symboliczny „most” między historycznymi budynkami uniwersytetu.

Artykuł, oparty na badaniach literaturowych i *in situ*, ukazuje różne strategie tworzenia i odnowy wartości architektonicznych w historycznym kontekście przestrzennym oraz instytucjonalnym.

Słowa kluczowe: biblioteki akademickie, architektura bibliotek, biblioteka Bodlejańska, architektura współczesna, Zaha Hadid, WilkinsonEyre

1. INTRODUCTION

Oxford is a historic university city with around one hundred academic libraries distributed across its urban fabric. These form a complex system that includes central university libraries, faculty libraries, and libraries affiliated with colleges and research institutes. Some are housed in dedicated buildings, while others occupy spaces within larger facilities. At the center of this network is the Bodleian Library, one of the oldest and most significant academic libraries in the world. It comprises 26 libraries serving the entire university community and collaborates with the broader Oxford library system¹.

Efforts to establish a university library at Oxford date back to the 14th century, though early collections were dispersed or destroyed. In 1598, alumnus Thomas Bodley initiated the restoration of the institution and its library building. Reopened in 1602, the library steadily expanded its holdings. Today, the building is named the Bodleian Old Library. A key innovation came in 1610, when Bodley secured an agreement with the London-based Stationers' Company to receive a copy of every new book published in Britain. From the 17th century onward, Bodleian Library catalogs set standards for libraries across Europe². Over the next four centuries, the growth of collections, student numbers, and the university itself required additional storage and study space.

As noted by Brian Edwards, library collections are inherently dynamic. Their continual growth necessitates spatial changes, which can be grouped into three main adaptive strategies:³

- expansion or reconstruction of library buildings,
- off-site storage and relocation of materials,
- digitization, replacing physical holdings with electronic resources.

Academic libraries experience these changes most intensely during periods of higher education expansion (such as the 1980s in the United States and the 1990s in the United Kingdom) and in response to technological shifts (like the printing press after 1650, the rise of academic journals from 1840, and digitalization from the 1980s onward)⁴. In the ongoing search for more space⁵, major Bodleian investments have included an early 20th-century underground storage facility near the Old Bodleian Library, the so-called New Bodleian Library, completed in 1946, and the Book Storage Facility built outside Oxford in 2010⁶.

2. METHOD AND SCOPE

This article examines the architecture of two buildings developed within the broader library system of the University of Oxford, not necessarily affiliated with the Bodleian Library. Both

¹ *Libraries* [in:] University of Oxford, www.ox.ac.uk/research/support-researchers/information-and-data-services/libraries (access: 5.07.2025); A. Pettegree A. der Weduwen, *Biblioteki. Krucha historia*, Sopot, Smak Słowa 2022, pp. 171–176.

² *Ibidem*.

³ B. Edwards, *Libraries and learning resource centres*, Taylor and Francis, Milton 2009, p. 186.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ See S.E. Thomas, *Background* [in:] M. Heaney, C. J. Cannon (eds), *Transforming the Bodleian*, De Gruyter Saur, Berlin 2012, pp. 5–22, DOI: 10.1515/9783110289398.5.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

projects were carried out in a historic architectural and urban context and illustrate different institutional and design approaches to library space:

- Weston Library (formerly the New Bodleian Library), originally by Giles Gilbert Scott, 1946, renovated by WilkinsonEyre, 2015;
- The Investcorp Building, designed by Zaha Hadid, 2015.

The buildings were studied on site in May 2025 through interviews with librarians, guided visits, photographic documentation, and the use of library materials in literature-based research. They were selected due to the availability of source material, accessibility for in-situ study, and the fact that both were completed in the same time period, allowing for comparison. Although other architectural projects within the Oxford library system have been undertaken since 2015, they were not accessible for research. The study was funded by the National Science Center, Miniatura 8, project no. 2024/08/X/HS2/00882.

3. WESTON LIBRARY

Giles Gilbert Scott (1880–1960) designed the New Bodleian Library building adjacent to the historic Bodleian Library and the Sheldonian Theatre. Although officially opened in 1946, the building had already been used for military and intelligence purposes during World War II⁷.



Ill. 1. Weston Library (formerly the New Bodleian Library), originally by Giles Gilbert Scott, 1946, renovated by WilkinsonEyre, 2015. Photo by author, May 2025

The building functioned as a book repository with reading rooms and offices, designed to accommodate the growing collection for the next hundred years. Materials were

⁷ R. Ovenden, *The creation of the Weston Library* [in:] M. Heaney, C.J. Cannon (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 175–190, DOI: 10.1515/9783110289398.175.

transported between the New and Old Bodleian libraries via a conveyor system running through an underground tunnel. The storage area was partially below ground and built as an eleven-story steel structure resembling a ziggurat, anchored to the building's masonry frame. The steel columns lacked fire protection, and there were no systems for temperature or humidity control. In the 1970s, attempts were made to safeguard valuable materials by installing climate control and fire suppression systems but placing them within the storage areas posed risks to the collections⁸. By the early 21st century, the building had become overcrowded. Usable spaces were converted into storage areas, and books were stored not only on shelves but also in corridors⁹.



Ill. 2. Foyer *Blackwell Hall*, view of the café and the glazed gallery on the first floor. Photo by author, May 2025

In 2006, a competition was announced to redevelop and expand the functions of the New Bodleian Library, won by the architectural firm WilkinsonEyre. The adaptation, completed in 2015, involved removing much of the original interior while preserving the historic form and the listed Art Deco façade (Ill. 1). Three new functional zones were introduced¹⁰:

- an underground storage facility,
- a public area on the ground floor (Ill. 2),
- reading rooms and collection access on the upper levels.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ S.E. Thomas, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ R. Ovenden, *op. cit.*, p. 183; R. Bevan, *Weston Library by Wilkinson Eyre*, “The Architects’ Journal”, 17.04.2015, www.architectsjournal.co.uk/buildings/weston-library-by-wilkinson-eyre (access: 15.05.2025).

The original book stack was demolished and replaced by two reinforced concrete cores. Between them, a concrete volume containing reading rooms was suspended above the foyer. The entire structure transfers its load to the existing foundation slab¹¹. On the ground floor is the foyer, known as Blackwell Hall (Ill. 2), a 13.5-meter-high atrium lit by natural light from above. On the first floor, above the entrance area, a glazed gallery allows visitors to observe library activity. A book gallery with dark wooden shelving is visible from this level. Above the gallery sits an enclosed volume housing work and meeting spaces¹².

The layout of the atrium and gallery echoes the classical courtyard typology of an Oxford college. The form of the book gallery draws inspiration from the 17th-century expansions of Duke Humfrey's Library in the Old Bodleian Library¹³. The lower part of the atrium serves as a public space, housing a café, a shop, a visitor information point, and exhibition areas¹⁴. Thanks to the library's rich holdings, exhibitions attract significant interest, such as one dedicated to J.R.R. Tolkien that displayed his handwritten notes, drawings, and personal items, some shown publicly for the first time¹⁵. Blackwell Hall features the historic 17th-century Ascott Gate, which leads to the reading rooms. Adorned with a Latin inscription *Si bonus es intres, si nequam ne quaquam* (*If you are good, enter; if wicked, by no means*), the gate was once kept in museum storage and now highlights the continuity of the library's tradition¹⁶.

Weston Library covers approximately 18,600 square meters and houses special collections, including archives, manuscripts, rare books, maps, and prints. To accommodate 1.4 million items, the library provides 39 kilometers of shelving and 2.5 kilometers of open-access shelves for frequently used materials. The renovation included the construction of conservation laboratories¹⁷. On the first floor are two reading rooms: the Rare Books and Manuscripts Reading Room and the Sir Charles Mackerras Reading Room. Upper floors include additional reading areas, workspaces, and a rooftop terrace with views of the city¹⁸.

The project was preceded by consultations with the academic community and a conservation analysis of the building's architecture. BIM technology was used throughout the design process, employing Revit, AutoCAD, and 3D Studio Max¹⁹. To protect the collections, the upgrade introduced new fire zones, reinforced the steel structure, and installed a localized water-mist system²⁰.

The building received several awards, including the Architect's Journal 2016 Retrofit Award, RIBA National Award 2016, RIBA South Award 2016, and RIBA South Building of the Year 2016.

¹¹ R. Ovenden, *op. cit.*

¹² *Ibidem*; WilkinsonEyre, *Oxford University's Weston Library* [in:] Archello, archel-lo.com/it/project/oxford-universitys-weston-library (access: 15.05.2025). In situ, May 2025.

¹³ R. Ovenden, *op. cit.*, p. 183; R. Bevan, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ In situ, Jakub Świerzawski May 2025.

¹⁵ *JRR Tolkien artwork on display for first time* [in:] BBC News, 1.06.2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-44306276> (access: 15.05.2025).

¹⁶ Bodleian Libraries (ed.), *New Bodleian: Making the Weston Library*, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, in association with WilkinsonEyre and Mace, Oxford 2016, pp. 133–136.

¹⁷ R. Ovenden, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Bodleian Libraries (ed), *op. cit.*

¹⁹ M. Chatzis, *Engineer's View* in: R. Bevan, *op. cit.*

²⁰ R. Ovenden, *op. cit.*

4. INVESTCORP BUILDING

The Investcorp Building (Ill. 3), designed by Zaha Hadid and opened in 2015, was built for the Middle East Centre Library at St. Antony's College, between two Victorian buildings of the institute's library. The library collaborates with the Bodleian Library but is not formally part of it.



Ill. 3. Investcorp Building, Middle East Centre, arch. Zaha Hadid Architects, 2015. Photo by author, May 2025

Founded in 1957, the Middle East Centre Library is an international research and teaching institution focused on the modern Middle East. Its library offers specialized collections in the humanities and social sciences related to Turkey, Iran, Israel, and Arab countries from the late 17th century to the present. It serves scholars from the University of Oxford as well as researchers from around the world²¹.

The Investcorp Building runs parallel to the street, filling the space between two historic structures. It features an elongated, curvilinear form with varied height. Its footprint was shaped to avoid a mature sequoia growing on the site. The façade is clad in stainless steel, and its smooth, curved surface distorts reflections of the tree and surrounding buildings (Ill. 3). A glazed ground floor gives the impression of a metallic bridge floating above the ground. Visually, the building connects to one neighboring structure, while a glazed structure separates it from the other. The Investcorp Building has a floor area of approximately 1,127 square meters, comprising one underground and three above-ground levels.

²¹ *Middle East Centre Library* [in:] St Antony's College, www.sant.ox.ac.uk/middle-east-centre/middle-east-centre/middle-east-centre-library/ (access: 8.05.2025) and in-situ research, May, 2025, Jakub Świerzawski.

Below ground are a 120-seat auditorium located beneath the lawn, and an archive beneath the plaza in front of the building²².



Ill. 4. Investcorp Building, reading room. Photo by author, May 2025

The ground floor houses a foyer and a garden-facing gallery equipped with a kitchen and storage hidden behind wooden acoustic panels. Stairs from this level lead to the adjacent historic building, which also holds part of the collection. On the first floor is the library reading room (Ill. 4). Some materials are stored on open wall-mounted shelves, while the rest are kept in electronically controlled compact shelving, accessible from the reading area. Curved walls and ceiling blend seamlessly, and the interior is illuminated by teardrop-shaped skylights. The reading room connects to the archive and provides access to the older building. The second floor contains the archivists' office, a tall, climate-controlled space with large windows and two skylights identical to those in the reading room. Stable temperature prevents damage to materials removed from the chill archive below²³.

From the outset, BIM modeling was used to analyze and coordinate design and construction processes. Digital coordination ensured consistency across all stages on a small and complex site²⁴. The building structure is made of reinforced concrete and glued laminated timber. The lecture hall on level -1 consists of precast reinforced concrete slabs spanning approximately 10 meters between retaining walls. On the ground floor, V-shaped columns support the slab above. Braced and stiffened glulam frames are fixed to this slab and form

²² *Investcorp Building* [in:] EUMies Awards, <https://eumiesawards.com/heritageobject/investcorp-building/> (access: 12.07.2025) and in-situ research, May 2025, Jakub Świerzawski.

²³ *Middle East Centre*, *op. cit.* and in-situ research, May 2025, Jakub Świerzawski.

²⁴ M. Emmer, *Introduction* [in:] M. Emmer, M. Abate (eds), *Imagine Math 6*, Springer International Publishing, Cham 2018, pp. 6–7. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-93949-0_1.

the structure of the double-curved shell that houses the library. An orthogonal frame system was used to mount the steel cladding, with dimensions adjusted to match the building's shape²⁵.

The Investcorp Building received multiple awards, including the 2016 World Architecture Festival prize for the best educational and research building. The jury noted: "Zaha Hadid expressed an architecture and form that allows the interior of the spaces to enjoy the view of the urban setting while cladding the building in a material that say 'I am the future'"²⁶.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Over the centuries, the expanding library collections, evolving academic needs, and advancing technologies have shaped the spatial development of Oxford's library system through adaptations, renovations, expansions, and new constructions. The Bodleian Library demonstrates that academic libraries can remain in service for decades or even centuries, and that structural durability and spatial flexibility are not the only factors enabling them to meet changing demands.

The buildings presented in this article were designed within the historical urban context of the city and the institutional framework of a complex university structure. Their architecture does more than fulfill practical and functional needs, such as access to different study modes and types of resources. In both cases, the combination of contemporary architectural elements with a historical setting gives the buildings a character that reflects the legacy of the place and institution, while introducing new aesthetic and functional qualities:

- At Weston Library, new secure storage areas were created and historic elements were restored around a central, contemporary, and publicly accessible courtyard. The façade, form, and views of the book gallery reference the character and history of the site.
- The Investcorp Building features an expressive, curvilinear, and striking form set among Victorian structures. Its modern architectural language does not conflict with the traditional role of an academic library focused on storing collections and providing space for study and research.

Additional functions introduced in the described examples focus on creating welcoming spaces for social interaction and time spent beyond study, such as galleries, an auditorium, and a café. These additions have made previously restricted buildings partially accessible to the wider public²⁷. Both projects were also designed to be admired as architectural statements within the long-standing and distinguished academic setting of the University of Oxford and the Bodleian Library. At the same time, they reflect the evolving role of the Bodleian in a changing world, as described by its former head librarian Sarah E. Thomas: "Before Google, before Amazon, before Wikipedia, and before the British Library, there was the Bodleian Library"²⁸.

²⁵ *Investcorp...*, *op. cit.*

²⁶ *Named the world's best higher education and research building* [in:] University of Oxford, 18.11.2016, <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2016-11-18-named-world%E2%80%99s-best-higher-education-and-research-building> (access: 8.05.2025).

²⁷ see J. Świerczawski, *Academic libraries, architecture for science, education, and the city. Case study of two Riba Stirling Prize Winners* [in:] A. Mielnik (ed.), *Defining the architectural space*, vol. 4, Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, Wrocław 2023, pp. 93–101, DOI: 10.23817/2023.defarch.4-9.

²⁸ S.E. Thomas, *op. cit.*

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