

JAKUB ŚWIERZAWSKI
 ORCID: 0000-0003-3878-0500
 Academy of Silesia, Poland

ACADEMIC LIBRARIES, ARCHITECTURE FOR SCIENCE, EDUCATION, AND THE CITY. CASE STUDY OF TWO RIBA STIRLING PRIZE WINNERS

BIBLIOTEKI AKADEMICKIE, ARCHITEKTURA DLA NAUKI, EDUKACJI I MIASTA. STUDIUM PRZYPADKU DWÓCH LAUREATÓW RIBA STIRLING PRIZE

Abstract

The article focuses on academic libraries as places, which portray the relations between the city and the library building architecture. The contemporary development of information technologies results in the function of a library as a place for gathering and disseminating knowledge being a subject of discussion. The analysis of existing/newly erected academic libraries points to the forming of two distinct trends, which show the future development of such facilities: libraries that are easily and widely accessible to students and open to residents, as well as those which are targeted to be used exclusively by the academic community. Two libraries are presented in the text. Both are the recipients of the RIBA Stirling Prize in 2021 and 2022 respectively:

- Town House Kingston University, Grafton Architects, 2020,
- The New Library, Magdalene College, Niall McLaughlin Architects, 2021.

Each structure is characterized by a different method of usage and functioning in the city. Their distinctiveness is the subject of the article.

Keywords: academic library architecture, contemporary architecture, RIBA Stirling Prize

Streszczenie

Artykuł skupia się na bibliotekach akademickich jako miejscu, które obrazuje relacje pomiędzy miastem a architekturą budynku bibliotecznego. Współczesny rozwój technologii informacyjnych sprawia, że funkcja biblioteki jako miejsca gromadzenia i przekazu wiedzy jest szeroko dyskutowana. Analiza istniejących/nowopowstających budynków bibliotek uczelnianych pokazuje, że krystalizują się dwa kierunki, które ukazują przyszły rozwój takich obiektów: biblioteki, które są łatwo i szeroko dostępne dla studentów i otwarte dla okolicznych mieszkańców oraz takie, które są wyraźnie ukierunkowane na użytkowanie przez społeczność akademicką. Przedstawiono dwie biblioteki akademickie. Obydwie są laureatami nagrody RIBA Stirling Prize odpowiednio w 2021 i 2022 roku:

- Town House Kingston University, Grafton Architects, 2020,
- The New Library, Magdalene College, Niall McLaughlin Architects, 2021.

Każdy obiekt charakteryzuje inny sposób użytkowania i funkcjonowania w mieście. Ich odmienność jest przedmiotem artykułu.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura bibliotek akademickich, współczesna architektura, RIBA Stirling Prize

1. INTRODUCTION

The work aims at presenting two contemporarily developing trends in designing academic library architecture connected with the public space of a city and the accessibility of library resources. There are structures dedicated mainly or exclusively to the academic community, in which the useable area program is focused on silent learning, research, and academic discourses. At the same time, a second concept of academic libraries is developing, which integrate themselves with the public space of the city ensuring wide access to the library resources and becoming places that are open to the local community. This issue has been presented as a case study of two distinct academic library buildings. The first of these is the Town House Kingston University, designed by Grafton Architects and finished in 2020. This building represents the “open” concept of an academic library, which is accessible to city residents. The second example is The New Library in Magdalene College, designed by Niall McLaughlin Architects and completed in 2021. This building, “closed” to the residents is accessible only to the chosen academic community.

The structures were selected due to their distinct character of architectural form and useable area program. Their architectural quality was recognized as both were awarded the Stirling Prize RIBA in 2021 and 2022 respectively. In the work, the available literature was used pertaining to the architecture of these facilities as well as the justifications of the jury of the Stirling Prize competition. The structures were presented in the order they were completed.

2. AN “OPEN” LIBRARY: TOWN HOUSE KINGSTON UNIVERSITY, GRAFTON ARCHITECTS, 2020

The Kingston Technical Institute opened in 1899, in slightly less than 100 years was transformed into the present-day Kingston University, where on 4 campuses with libraries, approximately 19,000 people study¹, and out of which more than half is made up of first-generation students². In 2012, while plans for the development of the Penrhyn Road campus in the suburbs of London were being made, there was a concept of a new school library building, “The Town House”. The existing library did not meet the expectations of the students, and the school rented dance studios in the nearby local government building. In addition, space was needed for students to work, and spend their time productively between classes. The goal was to create an open and accessible place, with strong ties to the local community and the urban fabric. The new building as the school’s calling card in the city is to be a place conducive to both student and staff life, but also that of the local community. These needs and goals were at the basis of the architectural competition organized by the school and RIBA in 2013, which brought to the forefront the design of Grafton Architects. The construction lasted from 2017 to 2019³.

¹ Kingston University, *Facts and Figures*, www.kingston.ac.uk/aboutkingstonuniversity/factsandfigures/ (access: 21.05.2023).

² Kingston University, *Town House*, www.kingston.ac.uk/aboutkingstonuniversity/location/penrhyn-road/town-house/ (access: 21.05.2023), Grafton Architects, *Kingston University London – Town House* [in:] Royal Institute of British Architects, www.architecture.com/awards-and-competitions-landing-page/awards/riba-regional-awards/riba-london-award-winners/2021/kingston-university-london-town-house (access: 21.05.2023).

³ Kingston University, *Town House*, *op. cit.*

The name of the academic library “The Town House” is a reference to both the civic, democratic atmosphere of meetings (“town”) and is also to instill a sense of belonging and homeliness (“house”). The building was erected on the grounds of a former parking lot and it is to be a gate between the center of the district and the school. The concrete columns and balconies on the elevation visually connect with the space of the street – while the colonnade with a length of 200 meters is integrated with the green public area along Penrhyn Road. On the lower levels, the elevations boast an open character, so that the passers-by can see the interior, while the upper levels are more shaded. The concrete elements were made in a color reminiscent of Portland stone so that they would comply with the historical Surrey Community building, neighboring the Town House. Entering the library in the high foyer of the building there is the main staircase, while the lack of architectural barriers and visible access control emphasizes the open character of the building. In the main hallway, there is a café, a shop, a bike room, exhibition spaces, and a theatre. The area of the foyer due to movable walls may become part of the auditorium – known as the courtyard. On the courtyard with a rectangular plan, on three sides there are pre-fabricated stands for approximately 300 people. This area fulfills the role of a place of meetings, conferences, academic lectures, and theatre plays. The first floor is made up of a common space and six dance studios. Most students generally visit the library, which occupies the space from the first to the fourth floor, which additionally houses a café and a garden on the roof. From here we can get a magnificent view of downtown Kingston and the Hampton Court Palace⁴, in the past the home of Henry VIII⁵. The facility can accommodate 2,500 people, while the total number of students at the Penrhyn Road campus is approximately 7,000.

The principal finishing and building material is concrete. The prefabricated reinforced concrete column and beam system with a module of 7x6 meters supports the uncovered ribbed slabs. The main stairs are an exception since due to their weight and transport limitations they are made of steel and covered with concrete slabs. The structure received the BREEAM Excellent Certificate, for the use of elements such as photovoltaics on the roof, and a thermally active concrete frame which decreases total energy use for the structure⁶. To minimize the danger of sound reverberation special sound-absorbing materials were used on the concrete elements. The auditorium was covered with acoustic walls, while the dance instruction rooms were made as “a box in a box” to acoustically muffle them⁷.

The structure received the RIBA Stirling Prize in 2021 and was distinguished with the Mies van der Rohe Award in 2022. In their justification, the Mies Award jury emphasized the fact that it did not want to establish standards for comparison but rather show appreciation for the diversity of events, dance, meetings, and spending time together:

(...) It is rewarded for its remarkable environmental quality that creates an excellent atmosphere for studying, gathering, dancing and being together. The building creates an emotional experience from within and through the multi-level façade colonnade that creates a domestic atmosphere on different levels. It accommodates dance, library, and study spaces using layers

⁴ Kingston University, *Town House*, *op. cit*

⁵ Historic Royal Palaces, *Hampton Court Palace*, www.hrp.org.uk/hampton-court-palace (access: 21.12.2022).

⁶ Kingston University, *Kingston University Town House Virtual Tour*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-tORNzMmb4Q (access: 21.12.2022).

⁷ T. Mingoia, *Introduction* [in:] Willmot Dixon, *Brilliant Buildings. Kingston University Town House*, See Media, p. 2.

of silence and layers of sound which work perfectly well together. This is the first time that a university building wins the architecture prize, and it shows the potential of public educational projects with the quality of this one, which dignifies people's lives through education and togetherness and gives equal educational possibilities to everybody.⁸

The designers and the founders of Grafton Architects Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara were awarded the Pritzker Prize in 2020.

3. THE “CLOSED” LIBRARY: THE NEW LIBRARY, MAGDALENE COLLEGE, NIALL MCLAUGHLIN ARCHITECTS, 2021

The Magdalene College in Cambridge was established as a Benedictine shelter in 1428, and then once again in 1542 after its dissolution at the start of the 16th century. The medieval settlement located on the Cam River is situated around the courtyard with a chapel, a dining room, and residential spaces. A second courtyard was created in the 17th century, where a historical, Neoclassical Pepys Library building from the 18th century is located. It houses the private collection of Samuel Pepys (1633–1703), which includes approximately 3,000 books, which he gifted to his alma mater – Magdalene College in his will⁹. In the past, there was also another building with additional library rooms located nearby but it was torn down to make space for the new library. In 2014, an architectural competition was announced, which assumed that the new energy-saving building would function for the next 400 years. It was the first large-scale building investment in this location in the last 50 years. The competition was won by Niall McLaughlin Architects, while the building was opened in 2021. The building was placed in such a way that it would allude to the four-sided historical urban arrangements with the courtyards. The surrounding area along the wall between the reestablished Master's Garden and the more accessible Fellow's Garden is historical and protected by a conservator-restorer. The architects designed the structures in an original but at the same time reserved form, going with natural materials such as brick and wood. The inspiration for such a solution was the old brick buildings of the college with wooden floors, stone decorations around the windows, and gabled roofs, as well as distinctive chimneys. Formally, the new library uses a similar set of architectural elements, although wood was used in the decoration of windows, but in time it will turn silver and grey and look like stone¹⁰. The concept is a reference to the Renaissance painting by Antonello da Messina entitled *St Jerome in his Study*, which depicts a brick room with a rhythmical series of blocks and empty rooms, with the window facing a carefully constructed landscape. The protagonist of the painting sits in the center on a wooden chair, with a well-illuminated book, with the architecture organized around him¹¹.

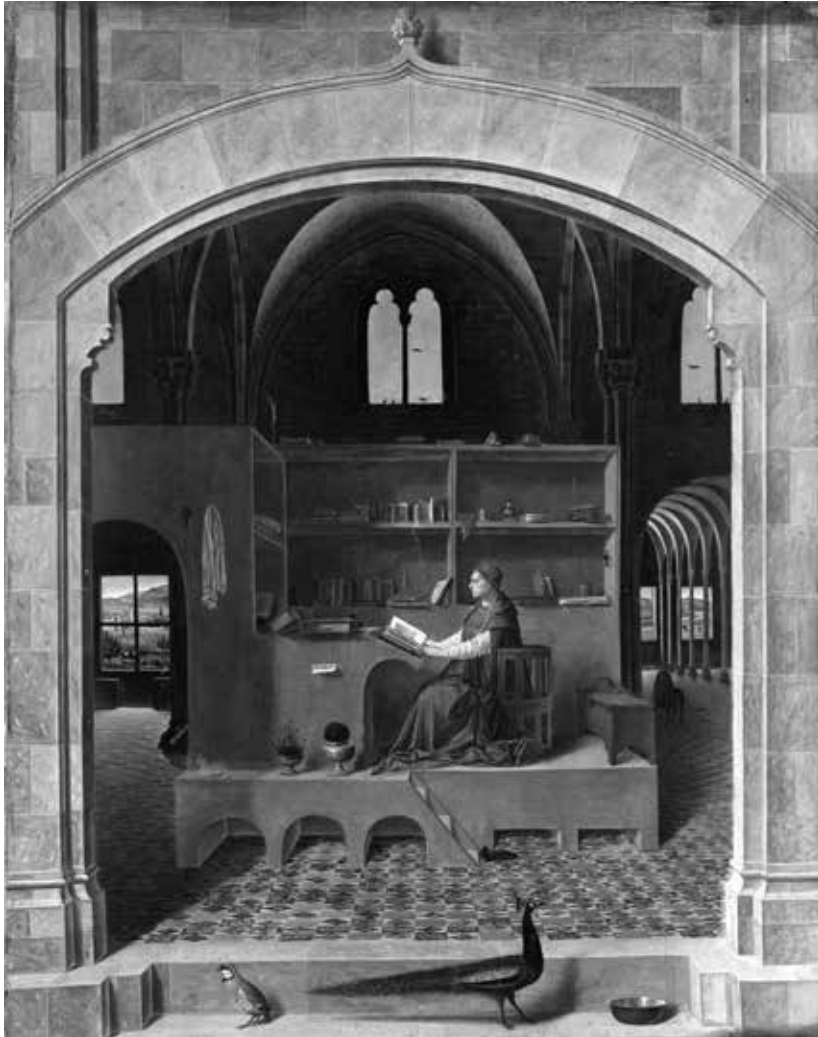
⁸ EUMiesAward, miesarch.com/agenda/2022/show/100 (access: 5.06.2022).

⁹ Magdalene College, *History of the Pepys Building*, www.magd.cam.ac.uk/pepys/building (access: 23.12.2022).

¹⁰ D. Shanghvi, *The New Library at Magdalene College Replaces the Historic Pepys Library Building* [in:] stir world, 18.10.2022, www.stirworld.com/see-features-the-new-library-at-magdalene-college-replaces-the-historic-pepys-library-building (access: 28.05.2023); J. Astbury, *Gables and Chimneys Inform Magdalene College Library by Niall McLaughlin Architects* [in:] Dezeen, 3.10.2022, www.dezeen.com/2022/10/03/magdalene-college-library-niall-mclaughlin-architects (access: 23.12.2022).

¹¹ *Building Stories: The Award Talks – RIBA Stirling Prize Winner 2022*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-jbKv2LnXlk (access: 23.12.2022).

The library is set on the pattern of a “tartan” mesh, in which there is one greater and one smaller dimension. The building consists of 12 large modules with hipped roofs, divided by 11 chimneys. The elements which repeat in the cross-section are the hipped roofs with glazed triangular skylights, inspired by the Pepys Library roof. The outline of the building in its northern part was adapted to fit in with the existing trees. The reading rooms finished off with skylights are filled with bookcases, and are connected by a network of corridors, from which a view of the garden and the river can be seen. The triple-height entrance hall leads to the central reading room with a double height, surrounded by smaller square rooms. Above, the enfilade along the eastern part of the building offers a view of the college¹².



Ill. 1. Antonello da Messina – St Jerome in his Study, public domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=147583> (access: 21.05.2023).

¹² J. Astbury, *op. cit.*; D. Shanghvi, *op. cit.*

The basic module of a single room with dimensions of 4.7 by 4.7 meters houses a table for six people and bookshelves along the walls with a passageway. The module is made of brick with wooden construction and wooden finishing of the furniture, floors, and joinery.

On the ground floor, there is a multi-functional social zone (Rowan Williams Room) with a small kitchenette, a five-modules-large art gallery, and a reading room (two modules). The remainder of the ground floor is devoted to workshops, archives, and auxiliary rooms. On the first floor in the center of the floor plan is the main reading room surrounded by smaller rooms for reading and work. The rooms have differing heights, the reading room on the ground floor is three stories high, while the reading room on the first floor is two stories high. There are passageways around them. At their intersection, there is a construction consisting of four separate columns. They bear the weight of the roof and the wooden ceilings. These columns are connected with the gravity ventilation chimneys of the building. They soar high above the roof, where they release warm air. Cold, fresh air enters the interior in the lower part of the elevation¹³.

The chief designer Niall McLaughlin says that while reading the designing guidelines, he first thought of the reader, and a place to read: “It’s a simple thing of you go and take a book from a shelf, where do you want to sit and what sort of relationship do you want to have with the things and people around you (...)”¹⁴. The diversity of the workstations, of which there are 90 devoted to individual and group work, also played an important role. These are comfortable seats, places by the window, by the open space of the reading room, or more distant places with a more intimate character. The library is open every day, all day, although access is limited to people currently associated with Magdalene College, while persons from outside the school may enter the reading room only after previously arranging an appointment. The facility is designated for quiet study, loud conversations, e.g., on the phone may take place in the social room or outside the building¹⁵.

The design received, among others, the Greater Cambridge Design and Construction Award 2022 and the RIBA Stirling Prize 2022. The building was praised for its modern character, but one that was designed taking into account the tradition of the place. High marks were given to the energy-saving approach, which was adapted to the tradition, such as the gravity ventilation system and the natural lighting of the interior and natural materials – brick and wood¹⁶.

4. CONCLUSION

Making the entire facility accessible to the public is connected with designing the work and reading space for a greater number of potential users with varied needs and demands. In addition, the usability of the structure may be expanded by functions that are not typical for

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ RIBA Stirling Prize 2022: *The New Library, Magdalene College*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIBXv5PaKzk (access: 23.12.2022).

¹⁵ Magdalene College, *Library Overview*, www.magd.cam.ac.uk/college-life/library/overview-and-inductions (access: 23.12.2022).

¹⁶ Niall McLaughlin Architects, *The New Library, Magdalene College* [in:] Royal Institute of British Architects, www.architecture.com/awards-and-competitions-landing-page/awards/riba-regional-awards/riba-east-award-winners/2022/magdalene-college-library (access: 23.12.2022).

a library, but which allow integration with the local community, while the spaces around the building are accessible and attractive for users. These are aspects valued by Lord Norman Foster, a member of the jury of the Stirling Prize 2021:

Kingston University Town House is a theatre for life – a warehouse of ideas. It seamlessly brings together student and town communities, creating a progressive new model for higher education, well-deserving of international acclaim and attention. In this highly original work of architecture, quiet reading, loud performance, research, and learning, can delightfully co-exist. That is no mean feat. Education must be our future – and this must be the future of education.¹⁷

As is pointed out by Jefferey T. Gayton, social functions should not play a dominant role in libraries, which are not only places of collecting and storing books, but their potential is much greater as a common space of quiet learning and meetings with books and the academic discourse¹⁸. These classic aspects of designing libraries in a city are highlighted by the President of RIBA Simon Allford, who justifies the decisions of the jury of the Stirling Prize 2022 in the following way:

Creating a new building that will last at least 400 years is a significant challenge, but one that Niall McLaughlin Architects has risen to with the utmost skill, care, and responsibility. The result – a solid and confident, yet deferential new kid on the college block. The light-filled, warm-wood interior lifts spirit and fosters connections. Students have been gifted a calm, sequence of connected spaces where they, and future generations, will be able to contemplate and congregate, enjoying it both together and apart. The overarching commitment to build something that will stand the test of time can be felt in every material and detail, and from every viewpoint. This is the epitome of how to build for the long term. Well-designed environments hugely improve student success and well-being. They should be the rule for all students and teachers in all places of learning, not the exception. As universities across the world work hard to position themselves in an ever-growing higher education marketplace, investment in great buildings is essential. This is an exemplary model to aspire to.¹⁹

The decision of whether an academic library is accessible or not for the local residents is dependent, among others, on the goals and concepts of a given academic facility. The diversity of characters of Kingston University and Magdalene College is visible in the architectural form, usability, and accessibility of these libraries. The architecture of both buildings draws inspiration from the local urban context. The building of the Town House open to the diversity of contemporary life creates a place of potential integration between students and residents, while the New Library Magdalene College is a place of calmness, and learning, one that in a contemporary way references the tradition of an old academic town.

Awarding the prestigious architectural Stirling Prize to very different academic libraries for two years in a row may be a testimony to the fact that in the contemporary world of digital information technology, academic libraries can still play an important role in the life of students and scientists, as well as city residents.

¹⁷ Grafton Architects, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ J. Gayton, *Academic Libraries: “Social” or “Communal?” The Nature and Future of Academic Libraries*, “The Journal of Academic Librarianship” 2008, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 60–66.

¹⁹ Niall McLaughlin Architects, *op. cit.*

References

- [1] Antonello da Messina – *St Jerome in his Study*, public domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=147583> (access: 21.05.2023).
- [2] Astbury J., *Gables and Chimneys Inform Magdalene College Library by Niall McLaughlin Architects* [in:] Dezeen, 3.10.2022, www.dezeen.com/2022/10/03/magdalene-college-library-niall-mclaughlin-architects (access: 23.12.2022).
- [3] *Building Stories: The Award Talks – RIBA Stirling Prize Winner 2022*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjbKv2LnXlk (access: 23.12.2022).
- [4] EUMiesAward, miesarch.com/agenda/2022/show/100 (access: 5.06.2022).
- [5] Gayton J. *Academic Libraries: “Social” or “Communal?” The Nature and Future of Academic Libraries*, “The Journal of Academic Librarianship” 2008, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 60–66.
- [6] Grafton Architects, *Kingston University London – Town House* [in:] Royal Institute of British Architects, www.architecture.com/awards-and-competitions-landing-page/awards/riba-regional-awards/riba-london-award-winners/2021/kingston-university-london-town-house (access: 21.05.2023).
- [7] Historic Royal Palaces, *Hampton Court Palace*, www.hrp.org.uk/hampton-court-palace (access: 21.12.2022).
- [8] Kingston University, *Facts and Figures*, www.kingston.ac.uk/aboutkingstonuniversity/factsandfigures/ (access: 21.05.2023).
- [9] Kingston University, *Kingston University Town House Virtual Tour*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=UtORNzMmb4Q (access: 21.12.2022).
- [10] Kingston University, *Town House*, www.kingston.ac.uk/aboutkingstonuniversity/location/penrhyn-road/town-house/ (accessed 21.05.2023).
- [11] Magdalene College, *History of the Pepys Building*, www.magd.cam.ac.uk/pepys/building (access: 23.12.2022).
- [12] Magdalene College, *Library Overview*, www.magd.cam.ac.uk/college-life/library/overview-and-inductions (access: 23.12.2022).
- [13] Mingoia T., *Introduction* [in:] Willmot Dixon, *Brilliant Buildings. Kingston University Town House*, See Media.
- [14] Niall McLaughlin Architects, *The New Library, Magdalene College* [in:] Royal Institute of British Architects, www.architecture.com/awards-and-competitions-landing-page/awards/riba-regional-awards/riba-east-award-winners/2022/magdalene-college-library (access: 23.12.2022).
- [15] *RIBA Stirling Prize 2022: The New Library, Magdalene College*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbXv5PaKzk (access: 23.12.2022).
- [16] Shanghvi D., *The New Library at Magdalene College Replaces the Historic Pepys Library Building* [in:] stir world, 18.10.2022, www.stirworld.com/see-features-the-new-library-at-magdalene-college-replaces-the-historic-pepys-library-building (access: 28.05.2023).

Author’s Note

Jakub Świerzawski, PhD, Arch.

Works and serves as dean at the Faculty of Architecture, Civil Engineering, and Applied Arts at the Academy of Silesia (Katowice, Poland). His doctoral thesis titled “Curvilinearity in Architecture. History. Contemporary. Ideas. Examples” supervised by Nina Juzwa and Jan Salm, was awarded by the Minister of Investment and Development in 2019. He curated the exhibition “Transformation. Katowice 1989–2018” as part of the exhibition series “Identity. 100 Years of Polish Architecture”, organized by the National Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning. Together with Nina Juzwa, he’s the co-author of the book “Polish Architecture in Contemporary Innovation: Thoughts, Dreams and Places” published

in 2021. The book was awarded both, the Vitruvius Prize 2022 by the Architecture and Urban Planning Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Minister of Development and Technology Award for the best publications in the fields of architecture and construction, spatial planning and development and housing. Since working with architectural design studios, he's been continuously interested in the problems of designing public utility buildings.

jakub.swierzawski@akademiaslaska.pl