History Faculty Building  

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#00575
Basic Information

Name: History Faculty building
Location: Cambridge University, England
Architect: James Stirling
Construction: 1964-1968
Materials: glass in steel frames, concrete with brick cladding
Style: Modern [7]
Award: Royal Institute of British Architects Gold Medal, 1970[13]

Purpose

The building is used for higher education. The building houses a library with book stacks and a reading room for students to conduct research and study in[8]. It’s home to offices and conferences rooms for the Cambridge history faculty[13]. The building is also an architectural landmark, for people from around the world visit it for its architecture during restricted hours[8].
Building plans

Third-floor plan: seminar rooms
Grundriss des dritten Obergeschosses: Seminarräume

Fourth-floor plan: staff offices
Grundriss des vierten Obergeschosses: Personalbüros

Bookstacks, control and catalogue area, and research room
Bücherregale, Kontrollpult, Katalog- und Forschungsraum

Diagram of interior environment controls
Schema der Kontroll des Innenklimas

North-south section – Nord-Süd-Schnitt

This book was very technical and mostly just explains the nitty gritty of the plans and construction. As the winning design of a competitions, the building features several distinct aspects. The library has entrances for use by students and by library staff, and the layout was intended for students and faculty to coexist in one building. There is a steel truss roof covered by a glass skylight. The use of materials is appropriate for the climate and environment [11].


The building is split between a large reading room and private staff rooms on the upper floors, with seminar and common rooms in between. There is a quote featured from an Architecture Review journalist who commented that the building inspired awe. There are more quotes both criticizing and praising the building [1].
I tried to capture the overwhelming glassiness of the building. The sheer amount of blue-green transparency and reflectivity is integral to its design and modern style.
Grand view of the reading room The big main reading room, which can fit 300[8], is lit by a glass ceiling. **Look at those blinds** Even with the extensive installation of venetian blinds, the building still suffered from poor temperature control. **Truss-worthy** The glass ceiling over the reading room is supported by a complex system of steel trusses[11]. **Rhythm & books** Around the perimeter of the reading room, the book stacks echoes the tight rhythm of the vertical glass sheets on the outside of the building. **Dazzling view from the bottom** A shot taken from the reading room demonstrates the beauty the glass ceiling can create with the right light. The tight rhythm is also repeated in the gallery windows and small vertical slits.
The building is in a semi-rural setting. It’s nested among other buildings of similar size in the University of Cambridge, an English university sprawled out across a quaint town surrounded by farm fields and trees. It’s located about 50 miles north of London.

**Video: James Stirling - Faculty of History**

This is somewhat of a random note, but red brick is very vibrantly red. According to the video, the enormous library can be seen from every floor of the building. The exterior of the building on the back side exhibits an off sense of balance due to the stair and lift towers that protrude out and up; it’s asymmetric[3].
The building exhibits modern technology by following the aesthetic pioneered by the Schroeder House; the underlying construction is concrete and steel, and the expansive glass sheets and exposed trusses show that off. The exterior exhibits a very constant and tight rhythm with long swaths of vertical glass. With the wall taken at an angle, the rhythm and leading lines produce an almost-trippy effect. There are few colors on the outside. In fact, the red brick is the only pop of saturated color, which stands in contrast to the crisp white railings and glazed glass.
Controversial Cambridge history faculty becomes a listed building
The Independent

The building was so controversial it was on the brink of demolition in the 1980s. Instead of being torn down, air conditioning was added. In its heydey, the glass roof trapped sunlight and made for a greenhouse effect, and leaks threatened to damage books. In 2000, it was granted a Grade II listing by the government.

Rayner Banham’s essay on the History Faculty, Cambridge

An important thing I learned was the level thought went into the design of the building and how the building feels when it’s experienced in real life. For instance, the author describes how the main reading space is heated and ventilated. He delves into some of the strategies employed to keep the air warm, cool or fresh. Unlike most others, Banham places blame on mechanically uninclined users for the temperature complaints, for the “excellent basic environment … require(s) some skill and intelligence.” The author analyzes how the natural and artificial florescent strip lighting look in different settings, and how the building appears from the outside. For instance, he notes that the pyramid-like glass over the reading room isn’t visible.

It’s difficult to say whether I agree with the author or not because he attempts to assert so many points that his essay resembles a lentil stew of half-formed ideas. However, his overall tone regarding the building seems positive. At the end, he claims that the building rises above some of the superficiality of other Cambridge buildings that strive to pay homage to the university’s legacy. According to Banham, Stirling ignored the existence of the school’s “tradition” and pushed the envelope in the quest to capture Cambridge’s “living body.” I agree that Stirling approached the task with an overt irreverence to any strain of tradition, though I question if he does so successfully given the knowledge we have now that Banham didn’t. Given all of the practical issues the building has faced over the years, the building seems like something that’s haphazardly being kooky for kooky’s sake.

Spotlight: James Stirling
ArchDaily

James Stirling, born 1926, was part of the Modern Movement. His influences spanned a large time period — he liked Le Corbusier, but also Italian Renaissance architects. He’s seen as a nonconformist. Knowing the issues the History Faculty building has faced, it’s unsurprising that Stirling has a reputation for designing buildings that break.
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