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Bennetts Associates delivers next step to Cambridge University modernisation of student services

Architecture practice Bennetts Associates has completed a new Student Services Centre for The University of Cambridge. The Student Services Centre significantly improves access to student welfare services, provides highly flexible teaching spaces and rejuvenates an important historical site.

Student well-being and more flexible teaching space are two of the pressing issues that universities face. The University of Cambridge wanted to significantly improve access to both, while also reinvigorating a historical urban site that had been vacated by science faculties moving to the west of the city.

The 6720m² project co-locates seven student support services from across the city into a single, easily accessible location. Located on a historic site in the city centre, the development combines new build accommodation and refurbished Grade II listed buildings. By working with potential users and carefully analysing the existing fabric Bennetts Associates brought clarity to what was an extremely complex project.

Each of the services has a clear entrance and identity, with a new atrium space providing a focal point. Weaving the circulation of the three buildings interconnects the different uses, while allowing several discreet approaches to sometimes sensitive services. The newly built column-free examinations space can be easily reconfigured to form flexible teaching and social spaces, which complements a refurbished 210-seat lecture theatre. Three floors of further accommodation provide adaptable space with plenty of natural light. The proportions of the new building relate to the neighbouring historic buildings and use an enduring palette of brickwork, concrete and timber that will age with dignity. The original Examination Halls portal has been re-used as an entrance to the new building, preserving memory of the site's significance in the evolution of the university.

The former Arts School has been refurbished to provide a range of facilities for students and University services, including the Disability Resource Centre and Careers Service. The renovation brings life back to the Arts School through minor alterations that are sensitive to the original design while undertaking a major reconfiguration of the spaces to meet the needs of a modern Student Services Centre.

The project also implements the second phase of the New Museums Site masterplan, which will greatly improve the surrounding public realm through the creation of a series of urban courts with better connections to the city and wider university. As part of the wider restructure and regeneration of the area, a new passageway has been created through the Old Cavendish building which improves access to the site from the north forming the main gateway to the New Museums Site from the medieval core of the city centre.

Sustainability has been central to the design of both the new and refurbished buildings. Natural ventilation plays a key part in enhancing environmental efficiency – the spaces have a high degree of exposed thermal mass which acts as a natural cooling system for the building. The life of the building has also been extended through the use of a robust concrete frame which ensures future adaptation as well as thermal modelling that takes into account possible future climatic conditions.

Bennetts Associates has a strong commitment to sustainability and track record approaching thirty years as pioneers of sustainability in large projects and is a founding member of the UK Green Building Council. The

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practice recently became the first architect to have approved Science Based Targets and to sign up to UN Climate Initiative.

Peter Fisher, Director at Bennetts Associates, says: 'We are absolutely delighted to have been able to work so closely with the university, to help improve access to student welfare services and to rejuvenate such an important historical site. It is nevertheless a building that can continue to adapt to changing welfare and teaching needs well into the university's future.'

"Our original brief was for a flexible, future-proof design which is sympathetic to both its role as a Student Services Centre and the fabric which will be retained. Whilst being sensitive to our requirements Bennetts Associates has been able to challenge our thinking to great effect both in terms of the big picture for the overall scheme and the small details. Throughout the process, they have remained patient and professional, whilst also bringing stimulating ideas to the project." Alice Benton, Head of Education Services, University of Cambridge.

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Project Team

Client: The University of Cambridge

Architect: Bennetts Associates

Structural: AECOM Structures

Services Engineer: BDP / Munro Building Services

Project Manager AECOM PM

Heritage Consultant: Beacon Planning

Cost Consultant: Edmond Shipway

Contractor: Kier

Fire Engineer: Fire Ingenuity

Landscape: Wynne Williams Associates

Acoustics: Applied Acoustic Design

Photography: Peter Cook

About Bennetts Associates

Bennetts Associates creates sustainable and enduring architecture that is more than skin deep. As one of the UK's leading practices, their diverse portfolio has been celebrated with more than 150 awards over 30 years and covers cultural, workplace and education projects in both the public and private sector, ranging from masterplans to small historic buildings. Bennetts Associates is an employee-owned trust of 70 people with studios in London, Edinburgh and Manchester, and has recently earned Building Design's Higher Education Architect of the Year 2019 Award.

The practice is responsible for many prominent projects, most recently both the Royal College of Pathologists and the London Borough of Camden headquarters in London, Storyhouse in Chester and the Bayes Centre for the University of Edinburgh. Bennetts Associates is currently working on Facebook's London HQ in King's Cross, the Design and Engineering HQ for Jaguar Land Rover in Warwickshire, the Woolwich Creative District in London and the University of Edinburgh's Edinburgh Futures Institute.

Bennetts Associates leads their field in sustainability - in April 2019 they became the world's first architects to secure Science Based Target approval and commit to the UN's Climate Neutral Now campaign. The practice is a founding member of the UK Green Building Council and the first architecture practice in the world to report company impacts using the GRI Guidelines.

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