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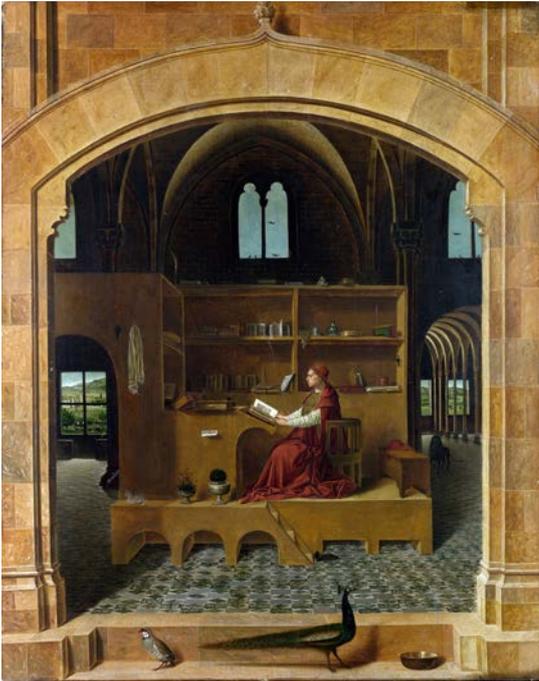
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What's a library in the digital age?

Wright & Wright Architects consider two
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What's a library in the digital age?

Tommy Jay of **Wright & Wright Architects** considers two Oxford projects and what students want from libraries in the digital age

What good is a library for students today? Online, they can attend seminars, research projects, revise for exams, or simply browse for inspiration without even leaving their bedroom. Indeed, a decade ago, it seemed inevitable that the library would become a digital entity. However, in stark contrast to these expectations, universities are facing increased demand from readers for physical space. Leading UK universities are each committing tens of millions of pounds to library development projects. At Wright & Wright Architects, our work for Oxbridge Colleges tells a very similar story: that library facilities are a major factor in attracting the best students. The real issue now is how libraries address their needs and aspirations.

As they say, the further back you look, the further forward you are likely to see. Within Oxford's colleges, learning environments have adapted over time, from the original monastic tradition to the development of subjects beyond medieval traditions, to the arrival of the printed book, through the Reformation, and now into the digital age. As an architectural practice working in this historical context, we understand the library as a building type of remarkable versatility. When printing was invented and the printed book 'went viral', libraries adapted and endured as places that housed knowledge. Today, rather than evaporating into the digital ether, the diversifying resources of

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the academic library still require anchoring and embodiment - a place where digital technology, hardcopy media, stimulating scenery, and proximity to one's peers are brought together in an enriching confluence: a house of knowledge.

For colleges seeking to develop their library facilities, there is the immediate dilemma of where and how to build within an estate that is characteristically dense, occupied and protected.

Transforming a Grade II* listed building, our completed library at Magdalen College increased the number of reader places from 48 to 120. When we started the project we found that the roof of the neo-Gothic New Library (the former Magdalen School building overlooking the bottom of the High Street) leaked, a floor plate cut across windows blocking light and ventilation, accessibility was limited and the building suffered from noise

and air pollution, with overheating in summer and freezing temperatures in winter. Latent qualities within the building were activated to help resolve these problems passively by utilising the thermal mass of the stone walls, restoring the generous windows to full height and introducing air through low-level windows with an attenuated route to inhibit street pollutants. The building's triple-storey volume was opened up to facilitate natural air paths across all floors, as was the original eaves ventilation, chimneys and spiral staircase so that no cavity was left unused. To this

Left: St. Jerome in His Study by Antonello da Messina, 1475 National Portrait gallery, London

Front page: Longwall Library, Magdalen College, Oxford

we added openable roof-lights, concealed behind the parapet; insulation to the roof and under the floor, with secondary glazing carefully composed behind the existing windows.

Over on St Giles, our library project for St John's College required a broader perspective. The success of various developments around the College's residential fringes, such as Kendrew Quad, had drawn the social heartland of the college away from its historic centre, the Grade 1 Listed Canterbury Quad. One of the most celebrated examples of Baroque architecture in

Britain, the quad is home to three phases of college library development: the Old Library (C15th), the Laudian Library (C18th) and the Paddy Rooms (C20th). To bring these considerable resources back into more intensive use, the library expansion forms a new route between Canterbury Quad and the lively residential fringes of the College. Due for completion in 2018, this new building will append Canterbury Quad from the peaceful garden enclave of the President's Garden, providing 90 additional readers' seats, a new seminar room, teaching rooms and flexible study spaces, as well as zero-carbon basement archives for the College's special collections, all in close proximity to the existing library network.

We have worked with artist Susanna Heron to create facades that reinterpret the stone relief of Canterbury Quad in Clipsham stone, celebrating the character and thickness of masonry construction.

Supporting the chapel, dining hall, common rooms and gardens, the College library offers proximity to one's peers. It is important for undergraduates, many living away from home for the first time, to have these places for gathering formally and informally - libraries being a peculiar combination of both. If the JCR bar promises a partying atmosphere, the library imparts that motivating feeling of belonging to the common enterprise that defines an academic community.

In gestures of welcome, our libraries extend this gregarious spirit outside. The landscaped forecourt of our library at Magdalen has transformed the quad in which it sits into an outdoor common room. At St John's, the yawning portico and staircased forecourt of our library will reach through the neighbouring glade with stone seats perched beside a water feature and nested around a tree, signalling the new route back into the heart of the College.

The entrance and foyer spaces of our libraries are, like the Roman forum, lively hubs of information, where students can meet their peers, find out the latest news, and orientate themselves. Acoustically and visually separate from the reading rooms, these are deliberately intense and stimulating, social spaces. Students then peel off to an individual study space, to settle down to work.

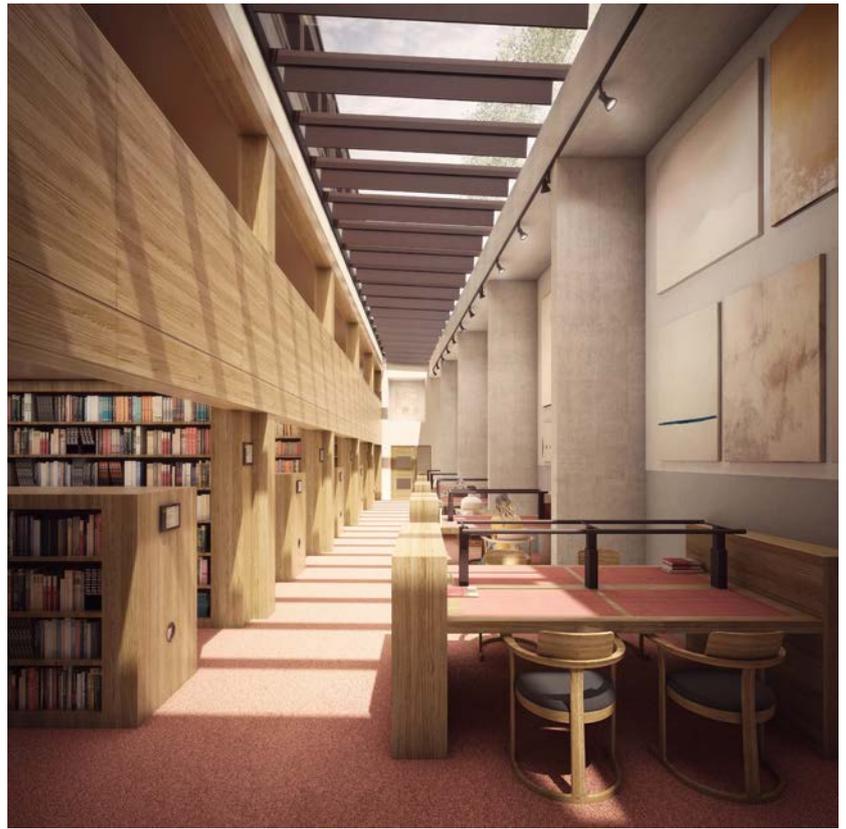
Student surveys confirm a preference for not working endlessly in bedrooms, common rooms or coffee shops. That fad has already run its course. What they want in return for their tuition fees is a space that designates and promotes seriousness, as it always did in the past. Students describe the importance of leaving behind the domesticity of their living quarters, passing through thresholds that signify decorum and settling down at a desk

Right: Model of proposed new study centre at St John's College, Oxford

Below: Stone artwork by Susanna Heron for new study centre at St John's College

Bottom: CGI of foyer to new study centre at St John's College





and chair that suits their type of study. Of course, everyone has a slightly different preference, and this is reflected in our library designs. Some students want silence, others prefer a social buzz in the background. Some want a desk, others a sofa; some a room with a view and others prefer to face a wall. Some like open, top-lit spaces and others prefer to nest in cosy bays. The design of each of these spaces has to be carefully worked through.

At the scale of the building this is about maximising natural light while inhibiting external noise and ensuring a stable temperature is maintained in an energy-efficient way. Re-using existing buildings at Magdalen and Corpus Christi (Cambridge), we exploited their thermal mass, acoustically sealed the street facades and introduced three-storey voids that bring light deeper into the plan and enable natural air-circulation. Resolving these external factors in turn dictates where best to locate different types of study space. In the leafier site of St John's, reading bays were configured to sit either beneath leafy canopies or almost within them. On the top floor, a set of day-beds are nested behind bookcases with roof-lights above to stir inspiration or reverie among sky-bathers and star-gazers.

Beyond optimising the location of every study space, we cherish the distinct qualities of materials and how they might characterise spaces that resonate at the very heart of the student experience. Our assembly of Clipsham stone walls, oak joinery, sculptural light fittings, richly-



Left: Forecourt of Taylor Library, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge

Top: CGI of reading room to new study centre at St John's College, Oxford

Bottom: A reader's seat at Longwall Library, Magdalen College, Oxford

coloured upholstery and carpets of plush wool is intended to soften or stimulate the reader's mood to suit the type of study environment. Working with any pallet of materials in any context, designing a space to think is about searching for a beauty that inspires learning.

In a world where the average commercial office block is built to function for about twenty years before being 'guttled' or replaced, it is a great privilege to be asked to make working environments that will last. Whether adapting existing buildings or creating new ones, the needs of past, present and future inhabitants inspire our designs. This perspective, among others things, is why we enjoy working for ancient universities.

Wright & Wright Architects has built up an award-winning portfolio of work over the past 23 years, typically characterised by sensitivity to historic sites, including St John's College, Oxford; Magdalen College, Oxford; Corpus Christi College, Cambridge; The National Gallery, London; The Geffrye Museum of the Home; and Lambeth Palace Library.