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## HEDQF 2009 Conference: Delivering Projects in Uncertain Times

The day was themed on the journey we take when developing buildings; inspirational or even unobtainable destinations, learning lessons from previous journeys as well as the realisation that building high quality buildings in these challenging times, “...*is not about waiting for the storm to pass but learning how to dance on the rain...*”. Each session was followed by a panel discussion with audience question and answers. Special thanks go to our Chair Ian Caldwell but also guest panel chairs Miles Delap and Tom Taylor.

### Big picture

There is no one size fits all solution for the sector, each University finds themselves in a very different place. Certainly the challenging financial times offer new complexities outlined at the start of the day by Murray Fraser (University of Westminster) giving a fast track overview of; monastic (Oxbridge) foundation of the sector, moving to grandiose Civic Institutions (Birmingham, Bristol), through post war systems built (Robbens – UEA etc) to the 1980’s corporate buildings and campus. He argued that the last great depression of the 1930’s caused the arts, culture, society and economy to react and respond. He laid down the gauntlet to Universities and Architects to invent or reinvent themselves as places which were; world class ecologically, open and integrated with the host community and city, and proposed that it was time to move away from the corporate office as a model for new buildings in the sector. A further challenge came from schools and innovation in the design of learning spaces for the sciences, (DCSF’s Faraday project, DEGW et al).

### Fill your boots and manage risk (carefully) & realise there is no silver bullet!

We are not in just a slow down but a wholesale stop, for much of the commercial construction sector. Does this mean Government funded projects are what the construction industry want? So it seems, but for consultant teams to contractors bidding and competition for projects has soared which comes with risks. Miles Delap (Partner of Gardiner & Theobald) gave a succinct overview of the position we find ourselves in, with the downturn, low and negative inflation there may be bargains to be had when developing buildings. However if the economy follows government, EU or wider predictions then over the course of a building project prices will start to go up again, this may cause buying problems for contractors on tight margins, some may go bust, some will claim from their clients by investing in legal teams. The one sure thing is the sector needs to have its eyes open to the possible risks. All the risks need to be carefully considered, contractors may be looking to ‘buy’ work by discounting prices. Consideration should be given to bankruptcy bonds, over the last few years performance bond have been common place, but it was suggested that we have entered different times. Whilst times may still be busy (for HE Clients) it is much more competitive and there is not enough work to go around for everyone in industry, some will loose out so the sector’s workload is not a universal panacea for the downturn.

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Get good LOCAL advice, understand your context and place, this applies both to issues of planning and gaining consent (which can be long and drawn out) for buildings but also what form of procurement and tender process to follow. Things change quickly and good, detailed, local knowledge is essential which may even suggest that in Cities and towns with thriving Universities the economy will not drop as far as elsewhere before bouncing back and where the future could be brighter, maybe? So fill your boots and enjoy the ride its going to be bouncy!

### **Quality, flexibility, sustainability and the student experience**

Anne Bell from Warwick, presented a phased approach to the renewal of a Universities library provision and proposed the way forward was through small steps, as opposed to single multi-million-new-flagship-library buildings as ‘icons’. Certainly the evolution and improvement out of the slower; develop, build, use and test which offers a full feedback loop, suggests a much deeper and meaningful understanding of student needs and progression of the service model to support broader ways of learning – so it looks good from here. Intuitively this feels right and it leads to the simple conclusion that there will more refurbishment over the next few years, rather than big-new build which in itself feels more sustainable. Less impact but more effect. Various questions over why the buildings we built over the last 50yrs don’t seem to last as long as ones built 50-100yrs ago, again questioning the lack of flexibility and robustness of the system built buildings which were designed and constructed to respond to the lean post war times. Do we need to act now to stop this happening again? LSE’s new Academic Building, a major refurbishment perhaps suggests we are already learning lessons, (Ingrid Bille, Grimshaws). It will be a battle for refurbishment to maintain attention away from its more glamorous and conspicuous peer, perhaps this is the chance we need to change our view?

Broader still the momentum from Universities of China and India are raising the bar on competition for undergraduates and researchers, Eeva Bergland (editor of Building Futures’ publication, ‘Growing by Degrees’) gave a very coherent picture of the changing sector and uncertainty ahead. The UK needs to focus more on the student experience which has always been a strength, and by doing so, market itself to the aspiring graduate’s lifestyle and academic fulfilment, not just a-degree-for-a-job strap line. The UK’s ever-young fresher cohort will become more and more ecologically savvy, so the University will need to pro-actively manage its estate and activities. Liz Darling (Bio-Regional one of the UK’s leading environmental charities) reminded the audience sustainability is about more than the energy use of a building, sustainability is a holistic approach to our lifestyle. If we are to change to live within the earth’s ecological footprint, surely a university campus is a great place to start?

### **Listen carefully, offer insight and take a journey with your team...**

The importance of time to carefully listen and develop ideas with our team certainly came through and perhaps the opposing position of ‘fill your boots’ - the rush for the bargain against getting it right! Paul Williams (Stanton Williams) talked us through the briefing process and vision of the Millennium Seedbank, West Sussex. Taking time to build relationships, gain trust and be educated – by your client. Perhaps this is the antidote to the ‘white elephant’ buildings littering of Cities? Williams suggested *“New insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works ... images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting...”* (Peter Senge of

MIT), if responding to changing needs of society is the challenge for a design team and client when developing new buildings and spaces, we all need to take this idea to heart and join our client on a journey to find those new 'Internal Images'. Similar themes were highlighted in the design of the Biochemistry building for University of Oxford, Architect Russell Brown reminded us that major projects are a team effort and intensely collaborative. From the other side of the table Neil Cameron (Director of Estates, Sheffield) painted a picture of the changing faces and spaces within the University, who calls the shots (and who doesn't but thinks they do), architects who listen (and those who don't) and places that students enjoy using.

Rod MacAllister ended the day, by looking at the entrants for the recently launched RE-SOLUTION exhibition by HEDQF, including the 5 most used words in the submission information. What better mirror on the sector than the words being used to describe the activities that need to be found homes on the campus around the UK; HUB, BREAK OUT, INTER-ACTION, HEART and SHOP WINDOW!

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