Reports of the death of the library have been greatly exaggerated, it would appear. Amid genuine concerns about the daunting dimensions of this supposedly vulnerable and ambitious institution in an era of funding cuts and digital media, libraries seem to be making something of an unexpected comeback.

Shepherd_Spring_8010.jpg

Shepherd Squires’ award-winning reworking of Enfield Town Library has delivered increased visitor numbers, particularly among the young. Hereworth Tompkins’ rejuvenation of the London Library on St James’s Square has breathed new life and legibility into a revered, but previously disjointed, edifice; and GSOG’s Canada Water “super-library” opened late last year, complete with 40,000 new books and a theatre. New or refurbished libraries in Dalston, Deptford, Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester are also restoring the library’s 19th-century role as a stalwart beacon of municipal pride.

The latest addition to this illustrious roll call is nestled at the foot of the Malvern Hills in Worcestershire. Designed by Felden Clegg Bradley Studios, the Elmore Hive has been jointly developed by city’s council and the University of Worcester, making it the UK’s first combined public and university library.

Like an increasing number of library projects, including Liverpool Central, Newcastle City and Oldham Libraries, the Hive is a PFI scheme. But its unique dual-ownership structure is an example of the kind of innovation that will be required to secure the 21st-century library’s future.

Accordingly, the facility contains a ground-breaking, fully integrated set of joint services that is fully accessible to the public and students every day, for 90 hours a week. As well as the public lending library, the facility includes student reading rooms, a council services one-stop shop, a research centre, exhibition space, a café and a history centre that houses 20,000 records, including Shakespeare’s marriage bonds. This precious lower-floor cargo is protected from the floodplain on which it lies by a ring of waterproof concrete.

The Hive’s pioneering ambitions do not stop at its facilities. Outside, a timeline is embedded into the paving in recognition of the history centre within, and a sophisticated public realm strategy, which includes a new bridge into the town centre, integrates the development into surrounding pedestrian routes.

On the side overlooking the Severn, the development is accessed by a luxuriously

THE MODERN READER

Felden Clegg Bradley’s Hive library in Worcester is a bold reinterpretation of the area’s pottery heritage while leaving no one in any doubt that it’s ready for the age of the Kindle, says Ike Ijeh

THE ROOF AND CONES: REINTERPRETATION OF POTTERY KILNS THAT ARE STRONG PART OF THE LOCAL HERITAGE

Andy Cooling, Felden Clegg Bradley

landscaped plateaux crammed with flora such as willow, alder and birch, popular. This flood plain garden area is an ingenious green buffer to the perilous swelling body of water just yards at the southern profile of the majestic Malvern Hills beyond.

Defying convention

But it is not landscaping, procuremen
dual-ownership that best sums up the Hive’s last for library reinvention is its design. The building is conceived as a four-storey box surmounted by an oval cone. Although each cone springs from the same point at the foot of the roof, each is a different height, with a pitched profile that varies angles.

If this were not enough to amaze that this is a building determined to conventional library typology, it also provides the crowning glory. Above the ground-floor stone path, anchored landscape, the entire block is clad in tweed-like TEGU, gold-coated and aluminium alloy. The panels are in herringbone diametric pattern that perfectly reptilian skin.

“We wanted a 21st-century build:

a bold architectural style that leap

ed the local skyline,” says Iain Pawle, design manager at Worcester council.

“Worcester’s skyline is primarily

medieval, Georgian or Victorian are

the exception of the cathedral, and
two other notable features, it has

distinctive landmarks. We wanted

it a strong, modern beacon.”

Andy Cooling, partner at Felden Clegg Bradley, goes on to explain the con

front the cones and the distinctive

was about finding a physical expressi
THE MODERN READER

The roof and cones are a reinterpretation of the pottery kilns that are a strong part of the local heritage.

ANDY COULING, FEILDEN CLEGG BRADLEY

Defying convention
But it is not landscaping, procurement or even dual ownership that best symbolises the Hiva’s haust for library reinvention – it is its design. The building is conceived as a four-storey box surmounted by seven rectilinear cones. Although each cone springs from the same point at the base of the roof, each is a different height and breadth, with a pitched spout chamfered at varying angles.

If this were not enough to announce that this is a building determined to defy conventional library typology, its cladding provides the running surprise. Above a ground-floor stone plinth anchored into the landscape, the entire block is judiciously sheathed in TECTA gold-coloured copper-aluminium alloy. The panels are laid in a herringbone diagrid pattern that provides a scalloped repetition.

“We wanted a 21st-century building with a bold architectural style that improved the local skyline,” says Ian Paul, strategic design manager at Worcester council.

“Worcester’s skyline is primarily medieval, Georgian or Victorian and, with the exception of the cathedral, one or two other notable features, it has few distinctive landmarks. We wanted to give it a strong, modern beacon.”

Andy Cooling, partner at Feilden Clegg Bradley, goes on to explain the concept behind the cones and the distinctive roof. “It’s about finding a physical expression...”
that felt like it filled in Worcester. The roof and cones are a reinterpretation of the pottery kilns that are a strong part of the local heritage. They also evoke the undulating ridges of the Malvern Hills.

"The individual cones break up the scale of the roof and extend the local urban grain by expanding and contrasting like the surrounding rooftops. They also fill a gap and restore a firm edge to the city."

The conical nature of the roofs mimics the jagged profile poking defiantly over the quilted, historic Worcester skyline, certainly making for a provocative urban tableau and the building’s overall frame is an ineradicable addition to the local townscape.

While all the allusion to the Malvern Hills may not be instantly apparent, the kilns

CHIMNEYS THEY MAY BE, BUT WITHIN THESE PORTICOES CUPPED LANTERNS BEATS THE CAPTIVATING, ENIGMATIC SOUL OF THE BUILDING

from which the roof is inspired are more evident in the intricately cut and crafted cones. The building’s overall integrity is less convincing. While the matching cones create a restless dynamism, the external walls below form a much simpler, less eventful palette of flat plates tightly wrapped around the building frame like an inflexible aluminium suit of armour. Only one elevation is angled to express the individual spread and profile of each cone above. By shrouding the remaining façades behind an impervious flat plane, the opportunity for tension and drama presented at the joint between each cone above is actively suppressed below.

The unsatisfactory result is that, externally, the Hive appears to be two buildings – cones and walls. The continuous level of stone that runs between the two merely exacerbates this sense of geometric separation and slightly suggests that the cones could just as easily be sliced off and replaced by an unassuming flat roof. Of course, the uniform TKU cladding is intended to act as a unifying force. But in the absence of more convincing massing gestures it appears cosmetic and contrived, like a sequinned blistered flung over a car. Considered alone, therefore, the cones exhibit an esoteric, vernacular charm. But encumbered by the uneventful slab beneath them, they and the building as a whole, appear clumsy and misshapen.

The area where the solidity of the envelope is breached to replicate the voided animation of the roof performs little better.

At one corner the building is cut away to leave a gaping feature entrance. While this is a positive urban response to the new entrance forum here, the site is by no means underlined by the awkward proportions of the solitary stone that carollers over the recessed corner and the unperturbed march of the cones above it. The effect is both top-heavy and top-sided, and is uncomfortably reminiscent of a three-legged chair.

Soft boundaries

The inside tells a completely different story. Both Cooding and Paul say that a core aim was to create a softer, inviting and more humane feel that was based on intimate spaces and simple orientation. This simple aim has been realized with enormous sensitivity and skill.

Upon entrance, the hard, defensive character of the exterior is stripped away and replaced by a warm palette of white or soft colours complemented by natural materials and bathed in daylight. The gap is instensively drawn to the full-height atrium at the centre of the building, a soaring, spacious cavern framed by a sweeping single-flight staircase to one side and overlooked by a staggered flank of ash-slatted balconies to the other. "Soft boundaries" around the atrium and beyond enable spaces to flow into one another, with the community service crucially placed within easy visual and reading areas. Paul speaks of the "accidental encounters" that such a layout may encourage, key to building functional adaptability, spatial and social integration this new model of so desperately seeks. This sense of identity is further emphasised by the rich textures and individual spaces carved into the large, open-plan floor space, "rooms within as Paul describes them." One of the most memorable of the grid-like offices aimed at the council service block is a shop. A void is cut into the ceiling, a views up through the building, and by horizontally and vertically layered balconies designed to resemble the stairs that inspired the cones.

And it is these cones that once again the crowning glory inside, that they dominate the exterior. The end of each cone is supposed to form a seating area, timber shaft that is crowned cross-laminated timber lattices are glazed opening. Environmentally, this will provide daylight, natural ventilation shade and, along with the sky’s own and treated rainwater; help the building achieve an impressive 50% improved Pro L and an annual carbon footprint of 1,230kg CO2.

But, spatially, these giant funnels are even more important roles. With rooflight tiling across their smooth, natural surfaces and washing the spaces by an even, diffused light, they enrich the interior with an ethereal, almost spiritual element of tranquillity and repose. Their scale construction also provides a heavy, topographical texture to the interior affording a precious inverted gable to the corner.

Glimpsed obliquely from virtually any corner of the building, but particularly on the top floor where the and proximity provides a thrilling view, it is a rebellious escape from the rigidity of bookshelves, they weave a distinct personality and tone into different overall space. And yet the reality of this gives that the aesthetic quality of the enveloping landscape architecture. Grant Associates.

Q: Davis Langdon

projects / Worcester Library

BUILDING MAGAZINE
projects / Worcester library / 43

At one corner the building is cut away to leave a gaping feature entrance. While this is a positive urban response to the new entrance forecourt, here the act is wilfully undermined by the awkward proportions of the solitary storey that cantilevers over the recessed corner and the unperturbed north of the cones above it. the effect is both top-heavy and log-sided and is uncomfortably reminiscent of a three-legged chair.

Soft boundaries

The inside tells a completely different story. Both Couling and Paul say that a core aim was to create a softer, inviting and more humane feel that was based on intimate spaces and simple orientation. This simple aim has been realised with maximum sensitivity and skill. Upon entrance, the hard, defensive character of the exterior is stripped away and replaced by a warm palette of white or soft colours complemented by natural materials and bathed in daylight. The eye is instinctively drawn to the full-height atrium at the centre of the building, a soaring, spacious cavern framed by a sweeping timber single-flight staircase to one side and overlooked by a staggered flank of side-slatted balconies to the other. “Soft boundaries” around the atrium and beyond enable spaces to flow into one another, with the community services zone crucially placed within easy visual distance of reading areas. Paul speaks of the “accidental encounters” that such a porous layout may encourage, key to building the functional adaptability, spatial intimacy and social integration this new model of library so desperately seeks. This sense of intimacy is further emphasised by the rich array of individual spaces carved into the largely open-plan floor space, “rooms within rooms” as Paul describes them.

One of the most memorable of these is an office area in the council services one-stop shop. Avoid cut into the ceiling, allowing views up through the building, and framed by intricately routed and lacquered MDF balustrades designed to resemble the pottery that inspired the cones.

And it is these cones that once again become the crowning glory inside in the same way as they dominate the exterior. The undersides of each cone is exposed to form a soaring, tapering timber shaft that is crowned by cross-laminated timber latticework set beneath a pleated opening. Externally, the cones provide daylight, natural ventilation and shade and, along with the Pottery’s cooled slabs and trees planted recessed, help the building achieve an impressive 50% improvement on Part L and an annual carbon footprint of only 12.2kg CO₂eq.

But, spatially, these giant funnels play an even more important role. With cool daylight flooding across their smooth, natural surfaces and washing the spaces below in an even, diffuse light, they enrich the library with an ethereal, almost spiritual sense of tranquillity and repose. Their scale and construction also provides a heavy, topographical texture to the interiors, as if softening a precious mental glimpse into the imagined beauty of the hills outside.

Glimpsed obliquely from virtually every corner of the building, but particularly prevalent on the top floor where their scale and proximity provide a thrilling sense of rebellious escape from the regimented stacks of bookshelves, they weave a distinct set of personalities and tone into different areas of the overall space. And yet the reassuring sense of melancholy they provide throughout is a far more subtle and effective unifying gesture internally that the uniform application of orientational cladding is externally.

Chimneys they may be, but within those lofty, capped turrets hovers the captivating, enigmatic soul of the building. Here, too, lies the opportunity — so poetically crystallised in glass and wood — to capture the sense of wonder, exploration and possibility that, even in an age of Wi-Fi and Kindles, remains the library’s secret shielded against the relentless glass of the modern age.

PROJECT TEAM

Client: Worcester council / University of Worcester
Architect: Fielder Clegg Bradley Studios
Main Contractor: Galliford Try
Environmental consultant: Mia Fordham
Structural engineer: Cox Rayner
Landscape architect: Grant Associates
QS: Davis Langdon

IMNEY'S MAYBE, BUT THIN THESE PORTLY, UPPED LANTERNS BEAT THE CAPTIVATING, ENIGMATIC SOUL OF THE BUILDING

in which the roof is inspired are more out in the intricately cut and crafted cones. The building’s overall exterior is less enticing. While the soaring cones create a less dynamism, the external walls below is a much simpler, less eventful palette of planes tightly wrapped around the striking frame like an infallible aluminium of armour. Only one elevation is angled across the individualpressed and profiled asbestos above. By overloading the existing facades behind an impervious plane, the opportunity for tension and as presented at the joint between each above is actively suppressed below. The unsatisfactory result is that, externally, the building appears to be two buildings — one with the walls, the continuous line of edges that between the two merely exacerbates the sense of geometric separation and slidy plaster that the the cones just as easily fixed off and replaced by an unassuming roof. Of course, the uniform TECU cladding is intended to act as a unifying layer, but in the absence of more convincing signage it appears cosmetic and is, like a sequinned blanket wrapped around the building, the building is like a bagel, appear clumsy and misshapen.

In one area where the solidity of the slope is breached to replicate the voided section of the roof performs little better.