

THE CHANGING FACE OF OXFORD



View across the ROQ site from the new Mathematical Institute

In 1857 a fountain boasting a statue of Triton was placed in the middle of the quadrangle outside the Radcliffe Infirmary. It stood guard for more than 150 years until tests revealed that the statue could no longer survive exposure to the elements. Having bought the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter (ROQ) site in 2003, the University rehoused the statue and commissioned a replacement Triton, which was put back in the original location and turned on in October this year.

‘Although this is the University’s most significant development in more than 100 years, the newly developed ROQ will still honour the site’s history,’ says Mike Wigg, Head of Capital Projects at the University’s Estates Services. This continuity with the past is clear in the physical design of the Radcliffe Humanities building, formerly the Radcliffe Infirmary, whose refurbishment was completed this autumn. Mr Wigg explains: ‘The project has largely taken the building back to the layouts that were in place when the building was first constructed. The end wings, which were ward blocks, have been converted into open-plan office areas, so in many ways we have kept the original concept of the design.’

The Humanities divisional offices, the Faculty of Philosophy, and the Philosophy and Theology libraries have already moved in. ‘I’m very much enjoying having a great 18th-century room as my office, and it’s terrific to have the board room as the Philosophy Faculty’s new Ryle Room,’ says Dr Daniel Isaacson of the Faculty of Philosophy.

The renovation was also well-received by the public during Oxford Open Doors weekend and by guests at the official opening in October.

There is also a continuity of spirit in the thinking behind the ROQ. The new Blavatnik School of Government building is an illustration of this – the design by Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron was described as ‘startling’ and ‘stunning’ in The

Oxford Times and will, if approved, be an innovative and exciting addition to Oxford’s skyline. But it may nonetheless feel familiar to anyone who knows Oxford. ‘The building pays tribute to features of Oxford’s skyline – its circular shape evokes the Radcliffe Camera and the design is squared off on one side like Christopher Wren’s distinctive Sheldonian Theatre,’ says Paul Goffin, Director of Estates Services. The layout of the ROQ has also been planned so that it maintains key views of the Observatory from which the site takes its name.

But while the physical site evokes the past, the academic vision looks far into the future. Oxford University’s Mathematical Institute is world renowned but currently dispersed across three separate locations in Oxford. A new building on the ROQ site will bring all of these together and cater for 500 mathematical researchers and support staff and 900 undergraduates. The new building was designed specifically to cater to academic needs, with breakout areas and common rooms to encourage and facilitate discussion and collaboration. ‘It will be a magnificent building and, crucially, it will bring the whole department together in one place for the first time in its modern history,’ says Professor Sam Howison, Head of the Maths Institute. ‘From next year, a new chapter in the history of the subject will begin.’

The Humanities building will also help researchers take advantage of new possibilities for interdisciplinary and collaborative work. ‘Radcliffe Humanities is a crucial first step in developing the Humanities presence on the ROQ site,’ says Professor Shearer West, Head of the Humanities Division. ‘Over the coming year, the Humanities Division and the Bodleian Libraries will be opening up a wide-ranging debate about how best to realise the original vision for the site.’

But it is not all about academia. Given the ROQ’s location in the heart of Oxford, the University also planned the project with the community in mind. Two public walkways will be opened between Walton Street and Woodstock Road and public art displays will be installed on the site.

Thousands of patients are already benefiting from New Radcliffe House, which has rehoused three GP surgeries. The initial feedback from doctors and patients is positive. ‘Patients are complimentary about the light interior waiting room,’ says Dr Judith Bogdanor. ‘There is commissioned artwork to be installed, which will be exciting and will enhance the impact of the entrance.’

A time-lapse camera has been set up to document the progression of the site. It has already watched the construction of the Somerville accommodation buildings, New Radcliffe House and Radcliffe Humanities. In years to come, the camera will follow the completion of the Mathematical Institute – due to open in autumn 2013 – and then the Blavatnik School of Government and the Humanities building. To say ‘blink and you’ll miss it’ would be an exaggeration but the camera is recommended viewing as the jigsaw of the ROQ starts to fall into place.