

Even before spaces are inhabited, they are given life, meaning, and purpose with the possibility to change and evolve, sown with seeds of immense potential to create dreams, find paths to the known and unknown and even to get lost. In the academic year 2016-2017, Keystone Academy was fortunate to have created one such space on campus – the High School Library. The Keystone Magazine caught up with the furniture designer extraordinaire, Luke Hughes, who brought this space to life with his intricate weaving of historical and cultural traditions of the east and west. As a much sought-after designer who has been commissioned by 54 of the 68 Oxbridge colleges, this British craftsman tells us that the Keystone High School Library project was the dream job he has been waiting for. In addition to nurturing a professional and personal penchant for all cultural things Chinese, it is the vision of the school that drew Hughes to Keystone. In this conversation, he talks about the vision, meaning and purpose for the library here and now, and in the future.

Sowing Seeds Of Imagination On The Path To The Unexpected

‘Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?’ asked Alice

‘That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,’ said the Cat.

‘I don’t much care where -’ said Alice.

‘Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,’ said the Cat.

‘so long as I get SOMEWHERE,’ Alice added as an explanation.

‘Oh, you’re sure to do that,’ said the Cat, ‘if you only walk long enough.’

Alice in Wonderland, by Lewis Carroll

Alice is ready and willing to explore and embrace the unexpected, to embrace her imagination in Wonderland. Every library must be a Wonderland; they are “places of imagination,” as James Campbell portrays in his book on the world history of libraries. It is such a wonderland that Luke Hughes, renowned designer of bespoke furniture, hopes the recently opened Keystone High School Library will be:

“I don’t think you can teach imagination. But what you can do is to encourage people to go down the root of the unexpected. This is really important,” said the British furniture tsar with a knowing





smile, “A lot of people don’t go down this path because of the fear of failure. I think failure should be celebrated sometimes because it is through failure that you find different ways of thinking. And having a tramline way of thinking is a tremendous counterpoint to imagination. Sometimes you stumble across a book when you were looking for something else and when you get used to that and feel comfortable stumbling across the unexpected. This sows the seeds of imagination and the art of the possible. One of the most gratifying things about all the school libraries we have designed or redesigned is that each has had a jump in its rate of usage, and it stayed up because they have become good places to work.

FOURTH FLOOR ARCHWAY TO THE FUTURE

Thanks to Luke Hughes and his team,

Keystone Academy has a special good place to work, a unique wonderland among the many good workspaces on campus. The High School Library welcomes its students and every other visitor through a Chinese-style arched doorway on the fourth floor of the middle school building. The red portal transports you to a wonderland of books, worlds, and unexpected possibilities in a setting that blends the traditions, cultures, habits and habitus of the east and west, which is in line with the school’s mission and ethos. Hughes explains the meticulous care that has gone into the design details, and the passionate commitment that has enveloped the building of the library to ensure that it not only enables the framing of meaning and identity for students in the present but also continues into their future paths, wherever that might be. He starts with all the practical aspects that went into the deliberations, and then moves on to what he



calls “the big themes.”

“What do the students absorb by osmosis, and not just because it is a lesson or a lecture... this is about values and messages within the furniture itself. What we have tried not to do is to imitate the past, but we have tried to reflect some of the virtues of the past and prove them relevant to the future. Now one can do this in a lot of different ways. But for 16-18 year olds, they absorb their interiors; they are like sponges. They will absorb values from the quality of the materials, color – it carries a lot of meaning, especially in Chinese culture through its ceramics, paintings and architecture – and these things carry meaning...”

Constructing and imbibing meaning is both individual and collective. While, it is designed as a space for dreaming and discovery of the self, it is also a “social space with a sense of ritual in a shared sphere.” So though the High School Library is unique in many ways, it is part of a whole – spatially and programmatically. Its layout enables quiet study, and encourages mutually supported group work and teamwork, which is essential to the International Baccalaureate curriculum used in Keystone’s middle and high school years.

He leans forward and continues, “The big prize will be when they move on from Keystone,

will they feel comfortable about using a university-style library of the kind you might expect in America, or in the UK or anywhere else and feel immediately at home. Because if they don’t feel at home, then they will always be slightly behind in their first year of study. The crucial thing is when they leave this place, they have absorbed a lot of this meaning, and the messages and they also feel comfortable about going on to the next stage.”

INDIVIDUAL TO INSTITUTIONAL FUTURE

Hughes’ craftsmanship not only acts as a launching pad for students as they venture into college or university in another part of the world, but it also sets the tone for the evolution of the place itself. Drawing from his experience in the European tradition of a thousand years, there are three principal rooms that form the central core of any major building or establishment of learning: they are the library, the dining hall and the prayer hall. Hughes hopes the library will be the soul of Keystone’s academic fulcrum and also pivotal to its community. “In two to three decades, the library will speak of something much bigger than just a collection of books. It is not just for the current high school students, but it will also be setting a standard for the students growing up to that age and stage as well.”

Institutional identity is an important





element of the birth and development of a space. Structural and spatial life-givers, such as Luke Hughes, are aware of this need and purpose, and strive to provide this or create an enabling environment for it. In Hughes's experience of designing and building school and university, or even Supreme Court, libraries, each projects a different identity. He says, "Cambridge has a different culture, or Yale has a different culture. But what they are all doing is telling the world something about their values through the architecture they have chosen to build. Sometimes, the wisdom of institutions is rather greater

than the wisdom of the individuals that comprise them. I have picked up some of these echoes, a few seeds to plant here at Keystone."

Decades from now the becoming and re-becoming of the Keystone individual and institution will mesh together along a continuum of identity and structure, and the nexus between them. Visitors to the Keystone High School Library will come with pathless dreams and be led along many paths, and if they are lucky enough some may find these seeds of imagination to the unexpected.



ABOUT THE DESIGNER

With over three decades experience, Luke Hughes is one of the most accomplished furniture designers in the UK. This Cambridge graduate has designed and produced furniture for over 900 boardrooms, 80 churches, over a dozen cathedrals, over 50 Oxbridge colleges, 20 major academic libraries, 19 major public schools, seven national museums, five royal palaces, two supreme courts, just to name a few from his long list of projects. Hughes began in the early 1980s as a one-man workshop designing for private clients, which expanded into a more commercial venture by, and has grown since 1985. In 2010, he was shortlisted for a Walpole Award for British Luxury Design Talent for 'outstanding achievement in design, craftsmanship, business and culture.'

He has also contributed to his field of expertise, as the former Chairman of the Grants Committee of the Crafts Council, and of the Art Workers Guild – both British entities. Amongst his other passions are

teaching and writing about his craft with a focus on sustainability and environmental responsibility, and mountaineering. He has climbed the North Face of the Eiger and, over 25 years, explored much of the unmapped central climbs of Tibet. Hughes was also the Chairman of the Mount Everest Foundation until 2015.

While in conversation with The Keystone Magazine, he said, "I dreamt of a mountain and was lucky enough to make that dream come true." It is this passion and purpose that he brings to all his works. For him the deepest fulfillment comes from being an inspiration for others, as he recollects: "I remember a library I designed a couple of years ago for a school and I met the student 6 months after it had officially opened. They said, 'It is such a cool place to be seen!' And then followed it with, 'can I come and do work experience for you?' If that was the reaction from a pretty cynical 16 year old... it is worthwhile."