

# Making Oxford buildings function



## FIRST PERSON

**LUKE HUGHES**  
does not run  
for cover like  
he used to

**W**hen asked what I did for a living, I used to say "I'm a furniture designer" to which people would say "how nice, now I've got this table I inherited from my grandmother..." and I'd run for cover.

Now, it would be truer to say, "I'm a social anthropologist. I spend my life looking at the way people inhabit various kinds of spaces and then trying to improve them."

Institutions like Oxford and its colleges have more variety in their spaces than can be imagined and I've designed the furniture for a few. In fact, since our first college project (for St Cross in 1990), we have now completed well over 400 projects in Oxford and Cambridge for more than 50 of the 68 colleges in the two universities.

I am an interloper: five generations of my family have attended Oxford and although I studied at the other place, I've retained a soft spot for Oxford's golden stones and gleaming spires since, aged eight, my father, who had been at Keble in the 1930s, dragged me around his favourite haunts.

From the age of 12, I worked during the school holidays for a maker of harpsichords, complicated wooden objects requiring a high degree of skill. I seemed to have an aptitude for it but initially found it a challenge to combine this with the expectations associated with receiving a first-class education.

I won a history scholarship to Cambridge (although I changed to read history of architecture for my finals). My tutors thought I was nuts to go off to do something with my hands. Their problem, not mine; I've had more fun and found more fulfilment than many who have pursued other professions.

Since architecture plays such an important



Luke Hughes with the Prince of Wales

role in academic settings, few will argue with the premise that most buildings cannot function without furniture, yet inappropriate pieces grossly undermine great architecture. The challenge lies in meshing the two.

Social and economic pressures bring about change. Over the last 25 years, in the pursuit of the lucrative conference trade, college dining halls have become 'profit centres' and en-suite accommodation is now seen as essential in attracting the commercial users. All this has had a direct bearing on the furnishings. Dining halls needed tables that could be reconfigured to allow for buffet receptions, wedding parties, theatrical or musical events. They also need stacking chairs (rather than benches) for delegates. What might work in a Gothic Revival dining

hall (like Merton) or a Tudor one (like Christ Church) is unlikely to work in a modern one (like St Catharine's).

And 'work' means not only looking appropriate, but also being easy to handle by the staff, and capable of sustaining the inevitable bumps and scrapes without looking tatty within a few years. Similar factors are at work on libraries, accommodation blocks, lecture theatres and multi-purpose conference rooms.

What about the future? It's all very uncertain: what is certain is that, after nearly 800 years, the colleges will survive, with their traditions of architectural splendour. The choice of furniture will still be what helps to make those buildings elegant, efficient and inhabitable.

It's been a great privilege to design for some of the finest rooms in the city. One of my favourites is the former University Library, where books were stored before being moved to the Bodleian in the early 17th century. This Medieval room, above the vaulted cafe of the church of St Mary the Virgin, is now available for hire for meetings and conferences.

Another is the new extension, designed by Stanton Williams, for Lincoln College, adjoining another commissioned more than a century ago when my great-great-grandfather, the Rev W W Merry, was Rector. Funny how the wheel of time rolls.

■ Luke Hughes will be giving a talk, *25 Years Designing For Oxford Colleges*, at Lincoln College on September 22.