

Furniture befitting the learning space of the future

Eminent British designer Luke Hughes' latest project takes him to China. The team was tasked to design a library that melds modernity with history and heritage.

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Engineering furniture that fits the 'now' into history, that bridges east and west, and that respects a clients' artistic and practical needs has always been challenging.

But Luke Hughes' latest project for Keystone Academy, a Beijing-based international school, seems to have checked all the boxes. The firm was commissioned to design the school's new library, a space that would not only enable inquiry-based learning but also function as an extension of the school's cultural identity.

"Famous libraries have captured the imagination of writers for millennia, especially those that have been ruined, burnt, or in other ways destroyed," Malcolm McKenzie, the school's principal, said. "One of the main things we have learnt about school libraries is the importance of preparing students for the next stage of university learning."

Keystone Academy was founded in 2014, on three key principles: bilingual immersion in Chinese and English; building character and community; and promoting Chinese culture and identity. Classrooms and offices are designed to be conducive for learning: High ceilings, large windows, and intelligent layouts.





A pair of bronze dragons—one Welsh, one Chinese—for the library's door handles, designed by British sculptor Jill Watson



Calligraphy by Dong Han

Luke Hughes approached the project with function, space planning and provision for robust use in mind.

He said, "The library can be as eye-catching and striking as you like but if it does not work for those who have to use it on a daily basis - the staff, the students, the occasional visitors - it will be abandoned within a few years."

The visionary British designer also believes in designing for 50 – 100-year life expectancy in favour of "the possibility of locking up carbon for long periods."

His firm has fitted the interiors of well-known buildings around the world, including the UK and Scottish Supreme Courts, five royal palaces in the UK, Oxbridge colleges, as well as the new chairs for Westminster Abbey, on which the royal couple was wed in 2011.

THE APPROACH

The aim was to create a library that not only conveys the values of university libraries in the west, but also projects Keystone Academy as a Chinese institution with an international outlook.

The new library would also have to keep up with the evolution of reading habits. From hallowed, whispery sort of places to social spaces where people can access electronic resources and work comfortably in well-lit surroundings.

"From the start, we wanted to make the library a place where students want to go, where it's cool to be seen, conducive to work, easy to gain online access but also somewhere to browse, ponder, graze and stumble on the unexpected," Mr Hughes said.

“ My agreeable task has been to [create] somewhere to work and study, which imbues them with the essence of western university libraries whilst also respecting their own traditions. This has been less about imitating the past but more about proving the past’s relevance to the future. ”

– Luke Hughes

"It should also be an environment that stimulated imagination, through colour, historical reference and selection of artworks. These are important for stretching young minds, as are subjects such as music, design, drama and sport."

The end-result reflects the best of both worlds: a work-study-and-rest environment that encompasses the essence of western university libraries whilst also respecting Chinese tradition.

In total, 24 tonnes of furniture, 85 per cent of which were made in the UK, was installed by the end of August 2016. Apart from the usual shelves and reading corners, the new library provides for temporary exhibitions, specialist teaching rooms and a rare books section. Spaces can also be reconfigured to host events.

Art installations created by British artists also has a place in the library, such as the bronze door handles—a Welsh/Chinese pair of dragons—by sculptor Jill Watson and calligraphy in

stone by Caroline Webb. A signage designed by Brian Webb displays a hundred quotations in Latin, English, and Chinese, attesting to the cultural value of libraries over the last two millennia.

"We have also consciously taken some of the furniture forms illustrated in silk paintings from the Ming and Song dynasties and given them a contemporary twist," said Mr Hughes.

Song Jingming, Director of Libraries, also helped address questions on Chinese and Western cultures.

THE RESPONSE

The Qing dynasty poet Tao Yuanming wrote in 'The Peach Blossom Land' about a fisherman who stumbled on a magical village where, on entering, visitors lose their sense of time and forget to leave.

"That is what the library feels like," Ms Song, remarked. She was a vital member of the library's design and development team. "One of our G11

students commented 'there must be magic glue on the carpet - I can't seem to want to leave!'"

Not all learning takes place in the classroom and the library should be where students can explore areas of interest, make connections and enjoy unexpected discovery, Mr McKenzie added.

"When we talk about student life at Keystone Academy we talk about the heart and soul of our school community. Luke Hughes has turned our vision into a beautifully conceived, versatile, studios and stimulating environment," he said.

Reflecting on the design principles of the East and West, Mr Hughes concluded that while there may be stylistic differences, the values and intrinsic merits are very much the same:

"First, something you like the look of; second, something that is well-designed for its purpose and context. If it looks easy and inevitable, you know it has taken a lot of effort." **WIA**



The library captures the essence of western university libraries, with brightly-lit spaces for working and studying.