

# Campus focus and city landmark

LEARNING RESOURCE CENTRE, JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY

## Appraisal

Liverpool hides its architecture away, relying on the extravagance of two cathedrals to dominate the skyline and three great river buildings to maintain the reputation of the pierhead. The newly created Liverpool John Moores University is no exception to this rule. It is concealed behind the uncompetitive façades of a converted convent just down the hill from the University of Liverpool's 'dream campus' where a clutch of famous architectural names fought a game of style wars in the 1960s.

The new university is not taking a back seat. Its recently completed learning resource centre now sits glistening in the convent garden like something from outer space. This is no exaggeration: the Austin-Smith:Lord vision of a square white pavilion pirouetting amongst an array of inner-city styles plays, UFO-like, with the imagination. Such an apparition may be alien to a culture beset by slate and brick, but is probably manna from heaven to Liverpool's current bid to be City of Architecture & Design.

The resources centre does for this area of town what the Lloyds Building did for the City of London – it takes its courage in both hands and goes wholeheartedly for the stuff that student architects dream of. If the fashion for tubes, glass, exposed services and primary colours is on the wane, then this kind of more calmly defined qualitative Modernism might allow Liverpool to approach the millennium with an architectural bravura that would have been impossible during the stylistic doldrums of the last decade.

The resources centre is a fine effort by any standards but, more than that, it is an expression of confidence – a combination of the perception of a lecturer in architecture (Geoff Hackman) who persuaded an institution that architecture could be excellent, an understanding client, and a practice with the experience and savvy to let a determined and enthusiastic young team run the whole course.

But enough polemic. A close encounter with the building finds it enigmatically positioned behind a collection of façades, some of which have been derelict for years. It has no public face and is almost always approached at an angle. From nearby Rodney Street, we get only a glimpse. The best view to be had is from the back of the converted convent which houses many of the university departments.

Being such a simple concept, the centre is one of those buildings where you don't have to examine every detail – you like it (or, I suppose, hate it) immediately. Its qualities are self-evident – space, light, order, detail – its negative points more elusive, perhaps needing a second, more critical visit. Students (the main users) are certainly going to like this building if its freshness can be maintained. Let's hope that computers don't totally dominate, forcing the 160,000 books to be simply stacked away. The words 'electronic campus' are on every academic committee's lips these days, but the reality could be somewhat dour. Most PCs look identical, whereas a space well stocked with books can be full of life and vigour.

So why is a simple white building full of contemporary design references so easy to accept, when the carefully wrought achievements of British post-war Modernism excite such invective at the nearby University of Liverpool? Maybe it's to do with old prejudices overshadowing the logical planning and cubist forms of these idealistic projects. One hopes that the resources centre will not suffer the same fate of fashion in 20 years' time. In the meantime, the Planar glass, space frame, rationalist windows and low vaults over the axis neither detract from nor substantiate the style on offer. What is seen is from a kind of well-mannered European palette (it is a tribute to the sophistication of the design that it manages to avoid being clichéd). The suspended balconies and glass

blocks don't actually make this building, they merely enhance it. The whole is homogenous and well proportioned.

This does not imply that the resources centre is in any way low-key. On the contrary – the design shows an urge to experiment. The project has managed to encapsulate so much in a modest area without losing the original form. Details of the glazing, the space frame, the door handles, deserve to be analysed in full.

John Moores seems to be embarking on a course which is particularly sympathetic to Modernism. Liverpool University is perhaps a little more conservative. But a little friendly rivalry may be good for the city as well as for the institutions. The universities are potential patrons of fine architecture and, if the resources centre is anything to go by, most of the lessons of the 1960s have now been learned.

I asked the architect what influences had been at play. Aalto was mentioned in terms of library space, but I was thinking of another stream – more like the lively hand of Europe on the cold architecture of the New York Five. The dematerialising whiteness of Meier is there (very successfully), but the plan remains essentially rational, playing very few intellectual games with split grids and layers. One is forced to return to Northern Italy, Ticino, Berne and Zurich, and conclude that this building did not descend from outer space, but travelled in a civilised fashion from the continent, British schools and the ongoing path of Modernism. It did not stop at Deconstruction, Neo-Warehouse or Superstore. The design of the John Moores University's Learning Resource Centre signals, above all else, courage – those who are able to travel to Merseyside to see it will understand what I mean.

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