

HEDQF Reference Visit to the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire at Birmingham City University on Wednesday 3rd April 2019

1. Presentations:

- Professor Lamberto Coccioli, Head of Music Technology at Birmingham Conservatoire and Associate Principal (International) BCU
- John Plumridge, Director of Estates and Facilities, BCU
- Elliot Sellars, Deputy Director of Estates and Facilities
- Colin Cobb, Associate, Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios
- Michael Whitcroft, Senior Associate, Hoare Lea Acoustics

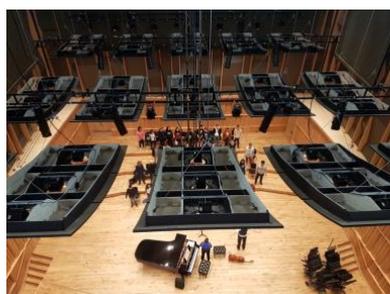
2. Royal Birmingham Conservatoire



It sounds almost an impossible task. You need to relocate and build a new building for one of the world's leading music conservatoires, with extremely rigorous acoustic specifications for music and recording, in just three years, as your current site is being compulsorily purchased as part of a major city redevelopment.

This was the task ahead for Birmingham City University, the architects Feilden Clegg Bradley Studio, the services and acoustic consultants Hoare Lee and, under a design-build contract, the contractor Galliford Try.

The Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, one of the world's leading conservatoires, was established in 1886 as the Birmingham School of Music, the first professional music school in England outside London, though its history goes back to 1800 when the [Birmingham Philosophical Institution](#) started holding music classes. It was one of the founding institutions of Birmingham Polytechnic in 1971, which then became the University of Central England in 1992 and, in 2007, to Birmingham City University.



The previous building in the centre of Birmingham was to be compulsorily purchased as part of the £500 million Paradise Square regeneration project. While this provided the benefit of a capital receipt towards a new building; it only allowed a short timescale of three years in which to design and construct the new Conservatoire ready for the students and staff to move in.

The University had the foresight to plan relocation of the Conservatoire and other faculties to the area around Millennium Point, the multi-activity project designed by Grimshaw & Partners and opened by HM the Queen in 2002. At the time, this area was a bit of an urban desert, a little distant from the city centre, but the

University has been able to acquire land to enable further expansion and consolidation and the new £2 billion HS2 station will be on the doorstep. This will be one of the new vibrant areas of Birmingham, with the University and the Conservatoire at the centre of it.



Members of HEDQF were given presentations on the vision, the briefing, the design and the delivery of the Conservatoire, which, to add to the complexity, was to be delivered by a design and build contract. The Governing Body was understandably risk-averse, but conventional advice would be not to use such a contract on a highly sophisticated building.

We were privileged to experience the spaces in use by musicians as we toured the building. It is a credit to all that such a high-quality building - architecturally and technically - was achieved. Over and over again, we heard an emphasis on team work and on determination to succeed. It may help that the key academic client had studied architecture, while the architect and acoustic consultant were both musicians.



Professor Coccioli outlined what had gone well and where, if he was ever to do it again, there could be improvements. At the start of the project he interviewed every member of staff to pull together information on agencies, what should be included in the building and, crucially, as it turned out, what need not be in the Conservatoire itself and could be shared with other university departments or located nearby. The brief focussed on the key roles of a conservatoire – to provide a professional musical environment for world-class musicians, and to provide a venue that links into other areas of the university and invites the academic and city community in to hear world class music, the latter providing a security challenge for the university. A third part of the brief was technology. This was going to be a 21st century conservatoire and therefore

had to be technology-rich at all levels.

Conservatoires are space-hungry with a space standard of 12.5 m² per student, a low staff/studio ratio, and, with academic members of staff being world class musicians, their office needs are different to a normal academic department. A challenge for the team was therefore how to achieve the optimum solution from a tight site, and some activities such as lecture theatres, the library and administrative offices had to be shared or located elsewhere.

Design parameters:

- Different acoustic zones from jazz band to solo performance
- Experimental character (spaces and linkages)
- Responding to Place, both within the university and in Birmingham itself
- Security strategy – different to the University – more open, especially on the ground floor
- Resource intensive building – 120 grand pianos, 12.5 m² per student

Lessons learnt:

- The academic client should have been engaged earlier, ideally at Feasibility Stage where the technical and acoustic complexities were not fully understood and the net to gross ratios were too optimistic for a highly serviced and technically-complex building where corridors have to be wide enough to move a grand piano (70% was assumed; with a great deal of effort, 50% was achieved). This meant that the costs were

underestimated, also the amount of accommodation that could be squeezed into the building. Tight space planning has also resulted in relatively small public areas in comparison to grand concert venues, but this does reinforce the academic nature of the Conservatoire;

- Greater transparency on decision-making would have been helpful so that academic staff were involved in design and value-engineering changes;
- Acoustic tests were carried out as the project came to conclusion, but did not include the users and there were some issues, in particular problems with the glazing to the recording studios which had to be replaced to meet the acoustic requirements;
- In reality, the project moved too quickly, but it is a credit to all that such a high-quality building was achieved;
- The University's room booking system does not suit the multi-use activities of a conservatoire – they have to use 3 systems (Conservatoires elsewhere use Azimuth)
- The location has not been ideal from today's perspective in terms of audience access, but will be much improved with HS2, and the Masterplan also seeks to improve access by public transport and also provide taxi and car enable drop-off points.

3. The Future

Looking forward, BCU has an ambitious masterplan at its two main campuses, with new buildings (Parkside, Curzon A and B) already having been constructed adjacent to the Conservatoire and having been able to acquire land nearby. The University's finances are in good shape, demand for its courses is increasing, and it has outline planning for the next stage of development of 100,000 ft² which will include the new generation of learning and teaching spaces and is well connected into the planning for the new £2 billion station for in 2026 and the Commonwealth Games 2022. Birmingham is a city on the up and UCB is playing a pivotal role in its future. It is also a test bed for 5G.

4. Learning environments of the future: Update on recent research initiatives by HEDQF

Presenters:

- Eleanor Magennis, Head of Space Planning, University of Glasgow
- Caroline Paradise, Head of Design Research, Atkins Global and Co-chair of HEDQF Research group
- Hiral Patel, Co-founder, Exigo Consultancy and Teaching Fellow, University of Reading

The visit concluded with an update on different aspects of research carried out by HEDQF, including an update on the contribution of HEDQF to the HE Learning Spaces Toolkit which has been developed in partnership with other higher education professional organisations, including SCHOMS, UCISA & AUDE. The session also covered the publication of the results of [a recent student survey on Social Learning Environments](#) the charity has undertaken working with Youth Sight, an independent insight consultancy. There was also a presentation from Hiral Patel on the most recent research initiative looking at the barrier presented by the understanding of curriculum and terminology to describe learning and teaching by different stakeholders. Part of this initiative has been to draft a toolkit that tries to bridge that divide, something that HEDQF is keen to trial on current and upcoming building projects from across the sector. Further information about this research will be shared at a follow-up event but in the meantime those interested in supporting the research can get in touch via admin@hedqf.org

Thanks to BCU, Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios and Hoare Lee for their support of this event.

