

Don't call me a 'conservation architect'!

By Richard Griffiths | 6 November 2019



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Architects working with old buildings are increasingly called “conservation architects” and treated as mere specialists in the technical aspects of repair and of achieving statutory consents for historic buildings, or in the functional aspects of converting old buildings to new uses.

In neither field does the idea of beauty get much of a look in, yet architecture has the ability to move people just as much as literature, music or art. As Vitruvius wrote, architecture consists of commodity (function), firmness (construction) and delight (beauty).

Functional and constructional considerations have largely shaped architecture since the early 20th century, yet the modern movement's emphasis on function and construction has too often been at the expense of beauty. “Conservation architecture” seems to be going the same way.



Source: Richard Griffiths Architects

Richard Griffiths

In my book, *Old Buildings, New Architecture*, I give an account of architecture that relates to old buildings rather than to new. Architecture is the same demanding mistress whether one is working with new buildings or with old, and the eternal verities of architecture – form, function, construction – apply when working with old and new buildings alike.

But old buildings also embody the attributes of age and of memory, and the architect has the challenge of understanding their history and significance, of engaging with all the historic layers that are already present, and of adding a new architectural layer aiming, as TS Eliot put it, to achieve “an easy commerce of the old and the new, the complete consort dancing together”.

Working with old buildings involves an interaction with buildings of all periods and all types, adding a new layer to all the historic layers that already exist. It involves detective work in discovering and understanding the history of the buildings, their memories and significance. It requires a creative interaction of old and new, providing for new needs through a creative dialogue between past, present and future.

Old buildings provide fertile ground for the creation of new architecture, enriching the lives of those living today and in the future. Two of our projects illustrate the potential.



Lambeth Palace

We created the glazed courtyard at Lambeth Palace by the selective demolition of post-war buildings built between the medieval chapel and Blore's early Victorian palace. The floor of the courtyard was lowered to reveal the windows of the 13th-century crypt chapel. In order to avoid undermining the shallow foundations of Blore's building we buttressed the foundation with a concrete ring beam clad in Ancaster stone, acting as a continuous bench in the manner of renaissance palazzi in Italy. The first-floor link was reinstated by means of a bridge of steel and glass with an oak handrail, with a new platform lift linking all levels around the courtyard. A further platform lift leads into the crypt chapel, artfully disguised with a glass door at the bottom and a hinged section of balustrade at the top. The weathered east wall of the chapel is revealed in all its multi-layered beauty. By these means the solution to functional and technical problems was turned to aesthetic ends.



Source: Richard Griffiths Architects

St Pancras new wing by Richard Griffiths Architects

St Pancras Hotel

We took over the design of the new wing of the St Pancras Hotel when Historic England took exception to an earlier contemporary design.

We designed a contextual response taking its cue from Scott's architecture on the Midland Road frontage, with two storeys grouped within a single arch, surmounted by a triple window and a further two storeys in the attic, and a further storey relocated on the oblique street frontage of Midland Road. The design thereby achieves the remarkable feat of turning what had originally been conceived as a seven-storey elevation into a three-storey elevation.



Source: Richard Griffiths Architects

St Pancras new wing skeleton by Richard Griffiths Architects

The new wing bridges the 30m width of the loading bay of the station below by means of a two-storey triangulated steel truss. The gothic arch-headed windows therefore have a fine functional justification since the window-heads fit tangentially within the steel frame. They are also a contextual response to Gilbert Scott's expressive brickwork, with a more elemental expression of planes of recession.

Our style is therefore a result of technical and functional considerations as well as a homage to Gilbert Scott, combining commodity, firmness and delight.