



Drawing by Jon Harris Red Meadow Hill from Wheat Cases Barn. Cotton reserve

architecture  
urbanism  
environmental  
issues • in the  
Cambridge  
city region

**A wildlife and farm reserve is currently being created by the Cambridge Preservation Society. Covering well over 300 acres of pasture and agricultural land, the reserve is located south of the village of Coton - just to the west of Cambridge. Dr. Barry Pearce, former Director of the CPS and a Senior Lecturer in Land Economy,**

**has been a driving force behind the project; as well as planning the new Reserve he has been instrumental in gathering support, funding and obtaining planning permission. Current Chief Executive Carolin Göhler describes the process behind this exciting new addition to the Cambridge environment. next page**

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Fitzwilliam College: Photo Dennis Gilbert





Cambridge is far from pedestrian friendly

## A CITY'S FACE IS ITS FORTUNE An American in Cambridge

Cambridge's good looks probably always mattered economically, but surely not with the urgency of today, when its university must compete with Harvard, its tech firms with Silicon Valley, and its tourism with every pretty town around the world. In this ruthlessly competitive, global age even the most attractive city must think about its assets and deploy them well. Enterprises are highly mobile and have many choices for location and relocation. As planner Peter Salins says, in a post-industrial era, a city's face becomes its fortune. And for few cities is this more relevant than Cambridge—big enough to be urban, but small enough to be seriously harmed by overly aggressive buildings and poor planning decisions.

And yes, agreed, what is a bad building to one person may be a beauty to another. This is probably particularly true of Modernist buildings—abundant in Cambridge—which in the 20th century were often embraced by intellectuals as progressive and liberating even as many citizens thought them just plain hostile and ugly. But the fundamental issue is not so much individual, controversial buildings as the urban fabric that they so often rend. After all, it's the urban fabric—the soul of a city—that ultimately matters, both to current residents and to those pondering a future there.

Yet Cambridge's soul is fairly difficult to grasp. It does not announce itself at its borders, American billboard style ("Welcome to Chicago," Richard J. Daley, mayor). It has no understandable centre, no one agreed-upon communal spot for public and political activities. Outside the colleges, Cambridge is far from pedestrian-friendly—no flâneur-like Parisian strolling here, as trucks and bikers barrel down on mothers and children. And immense swaths of property are off limits to anyone without university privileges. Cambridge is one of the least transparent of Western cities—rather as if its walled medieval heritage still dominated its conception of itself.

But it has one immense asset that helps compensate for these planning weaknesses: it has the Cam, which provides a unity and a comprehension of the city that would otherwise be elusive. Just as New York City is unthinkable without Central Park, Cambridge—at least for outsiders—is unthinkable without public access to the Cam. The Cam yields the understanding that the lovely fens lead to Grantchester at one end, or to Magdalene College and Jesus Green beyond at the other. Without the Cam, slicing through the exclusive territory of the colleges, crucial geographic markings are incomprehensible because so much property on the map cannot be walked. And nearly all cities, even automobile-oriented ones like Los Angeles, are best understood by the walker.

Cambridge's major streets—Queen's Road, Fen Causeway, even Trumpington and Sidney Streets—are more like highways than roads, distributing traffic and pedestrians

like commodities. (Cambridge's planners should seriously consider as their strategic motto the old 1960s rallying cry of lefty student demonstrators: Take back the streets. Or, at least planner Jane Jacobs's admonition to keep blocks short.)

But the Cam yields the hidden riches of Cambridge, beginning, if one heads out from Scudamore's, with the sublime Mathematical Bridge. The entire mythical story of 19th century engineers being unable to reassemble the 1749 bridge is, everyone agrees, hokum, but that Cambridge could even produce such renowned stories adds to its mystical allure. The bridge links a 1460 building, said to be the oldest on the river, to a parking area and Queens' Cripps Court—a jarring disjunction. Unrelieved by landscaping or any softening of its aggressive white exterior, the squat, flat-topped, concrete Cripps Court defies its surroundings. It could be sited in any mid-sized city anywhere. But it's not just anywhere. It's the assertively mundane quality that is so discouraging, especially since Queens' magnificent mid-16th century Cloister Court cannot be glimpsed. Knowing how disappointed their customers often are with this bleak landscape, the punt guides like to volunteer, incorrectly, that Queens' Cripps building is listed, and cannot be demolished or even substantially changed.

Then the treasures start passing slowly, revealing the Cam's origin as a highway of commerce and delivery that runs parallel to King's Parade—or so it must be if King's College is here. That the Cam and Trumpington Street are corresponding passages—much like New York's Hudson River and Broadway or Chicago's lakefront and State Street—only becomes clear on the Cam itself, rather than on the street, because so many links between them, for visitors, are blocked.

One quiet treasure on the Cam is relatively new: Trinity Hall's four-storey, many-windowed Jerwood Library, opened in 1999. It backs onto the river, but in the most charming way, rather like a ship that has just fastidiously docked. It fits cozily into its surroundings, and while it's clearly of its time, it defers—without sycophancy—to its far older neighbors. Its loveliness is impressive and unusual among major university and college libraries, whose undeniable needs for space have resulted in their being among the most antagonistic of new buildings in academic cities around the world, intimidating their neighbors with blocky, Brutalist designs supposedly justified by the demands of technology.

And while the Jerwood Library will only be seen by most visitors from the Cam, it signals profound hope for Cambridge's future. It demonstrates that a technologically advanced building can be erected in a tight space, on a historical site, meeting the needs of the 21st century, yet asserting a Cambridge uniqueness. Where else would it be built? It's of its time and place, and will age gracefully, respecting its past as it helps its college move into the future.

But what of the rest of Cambridge? Will it hold onto the historic qualities that make it so attractive—and economically competitive? Cambridge needs development—new housing, hotels, Class-A offices, and commerce to retain and expand its strong economic base—always a tenuous matter in today's world. Its huge urban renewal project has all the signs of dreary commercial modernism, especially if the 1980s Crowne Plaza, the last new building to be built in the area, is a forerunner of things to come. Squeezed gracelessly onto a tiny site that it shares with a public parking garage, the Crowne Plaza could hardly have been more poorly designed.

Some signals of market weakness in Cambridge have started. Library House, which tracks innovative firms for investors, just announced that growth in Cambridge's technology firms has stalled. Investment in the 973 companies that make up the Cambridge Cluster fell from 154 million in 2004 to 125 million last year. One culprit: competition from London, which is where many top management firms want to be. Cambridge can't compete with London head on, but it can compete on its own terms—quality of life, local beauty and heritage, celebrated university, and thoughtful development.

Jerwood Library or Crowne Plaza? The choices are clear.  
Julia Vitullo-Martin

*Julia Vitullo-Martin (pictured left) is a Senior Fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a Director of the Center for Rethinking Development and a visiting lecturer to Cambridge.*

