

# BRILLIANT BUILDINGS

KINGSTON UNIVERSITY TOWN HOUSE

## Top of the class

Delivering a RIBA Stirling Prize-winning student experience

## 1. INTRODUCTION



**Tony Mingoia**, senior operations manager, Willmott Dixon

**There were always** great expectations for Kingston University's Town House – both in terms of its contribution to local growth and to the quality of new buildings at UK universities. However, winning the 2021 Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Stirling Prize surpassed even the highest hopes for the project.

The RIBA Stirling Prize is the highest accolade in UK architecture – the equivalent of literature's Booker Prize or the art world's Turner Prize. And winning it puts Town House in the same league as the Scottish Parliament building in Edinburgh, the Sainsbury Laboratory at the University of Cambridge and Bloomberg's new European HQ in London.

But how do you deliver a world-class architectural triumph, ensuring that it not only leaves a legacy, but is achievable and affordable in the first place? Brilliant Buildings explores this by telling the amazing story behind the creation of a new national treasure, and how the relationship between Kingston University, Grafton Architects and Willmott Dixon was pivotal in putting the university on the world map of architecture.

**“Kingston University Town House is a theatre for life – a warehouse of ideas. It seamlessly brings together student and town communities, creating a progressive new model for higher education, well deserving of international acclaim and attention.”**

Lord Norman Foster, chair, 2021 RIBA Stirling Prize jury

## 2. AT A GLANCE: WHAT'S INSIDE THE TOWN HOUSE



### Roll of honour

Winner of the 2021 RIBA Stirling Prize

Named by The Guardian as one of its “buildings that inspire” in 2020

Selected in Dezeen's Top 10 of British Architecture in 2020

Top five finalist for the 2022 European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture – Mies van der Rohe Award



### Dedicated space

Library and quiet study space, plus meeting places for students



### Performing arts facilities

Including a fully acoustically sealed studio theatre and teaching studios



### Covered courtyard

Designed for daily, informal student use as well as innovative learning and experimentation, civic engagement and creative enterprise opportunities



### Flexible atrium space

Featuring a contemporary art display on the ground floor, as well as providing opportunities for events



### Amenities

Two cafes, a roof garden and a reading terrace, providing spectacular views of Kingston and Hampton Court Palace



### Green-first approach

Integration of sustainable building technologies, including passive heating and cooling, and solar panels for energy generation

### 3. THE VISION



“Imagine a place where reading, dance, performance, lectures, exhibitions, research and learning happily co-exist, under one roof, and the door is open to everyone.” This was the vision for Town House, says Seán Woulfe, director – estates and sustainability at Kingston University.

When Kingston conceived the brief, the vision was for a building that would be open and inclusive, while also fitting with the university’s aim of being “sought after”. With more than half of its students being commuters, and many being the first in their family to attend higher education, the goal was to create a welcoming and all-encompassing building, where students feel that they belong, and inspire an air of anticipation on entering the campus.

#### Positive transformation

“Town House is a place where study, friendship and performance come together in harmony,” explains Seán. “Our vision initially began through practicality – we needed a building to host a new library, which had outgrown its current space. Also, our dance studios, a key part of our performing arts programme, were housed in a temporary facility, leased from Surrey County Council. We wanted to house all this in a new home that would announce Kingston University on Penrhyn Road – that’s where the ‘landmark’ came from.”

The university saw an opportunity to combine these two needs into a vibrant learning space. Town House needed to work as an active hub for students to use productively

during breaks between timetabled lectures. On the one hand, this meant providing a library, quiet study areas and access to IT equipment; on the other, there would be two cafes and a rooftop terrace with space to socialise and collaborate with friends and colleagues on projects.



**“TOWN HOUSE IS A PLACE WHERE STUDY, FRIENDSHIP AND PERFORMANCE COME TOGETHER IN HARMONY.”**

SEÁN WOULFE, DIRECTOR - ESTATES AND SUSTAINABILITY, KINGSTON UNIVERSITY

**Above and below:** The ground-floor courtyard is a space for students to meet, but its high-quality acoustic design means that it can also be used to stage performances.

### 4. THE DESIGN

The blueprint for Town House came to life through a RIBA design competition in 2013, won by Dublin-based Grafton Architects.

#### Changing the rules

Matt McCullagh, director at Grafton Architects, explains: “We were inspired by the progressive educational vision presented by the client. Engrained within the brief was an open-door policy for a building that would not only provide an open and supportive environment for students and visitors, but would connect with the community and town surrounding it.”



**New public realm**

The project also included the creation of a 200m linear park for students and the local community to enjoy.



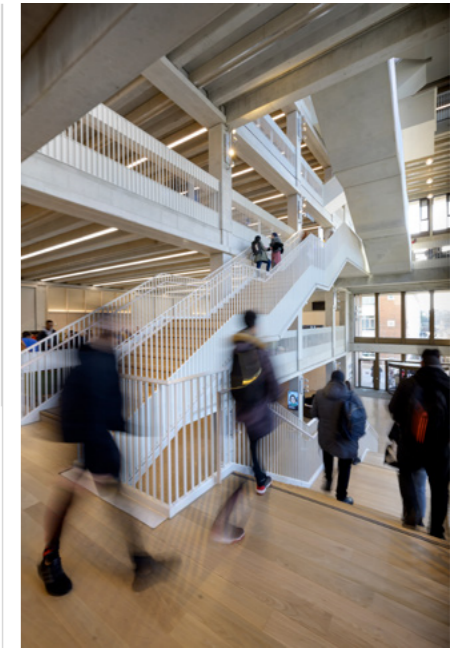
Using the brief, Grafton Architects was able to change the rules on how a university building would traditionally be used. The result was a design in which the juxtaposition of contemplative and active performative functions allows education to be a process of engagement and discovery.

One focal point is the space for contemporary art at the building entrance; this has been used to display The Asset Strippers, a major installation by Mike Nelson that started life at Tate Britain. The entrance space opens onto a covered internal courtyard, where students can gather and socialise, and performances and films can be staged in an acoustically excellent setting. A studio theatre is also accommodated on the ground floor, rising in volume through the first floor, and visually connected by a large, glazed opening so that activity can be viewed from above.

The four upper levels provide collaborative learning spaces and quiet study areas. Each floor is linked by a generous feature staircase, allowing students to circulate while keeping conversations flowing. The colonnade and roof gardens were integrated into the design to provide numerous opportunities for indoor-outdoor connections and include seating, with views out to Hampton Court Palace, Kingston and the River Thames.

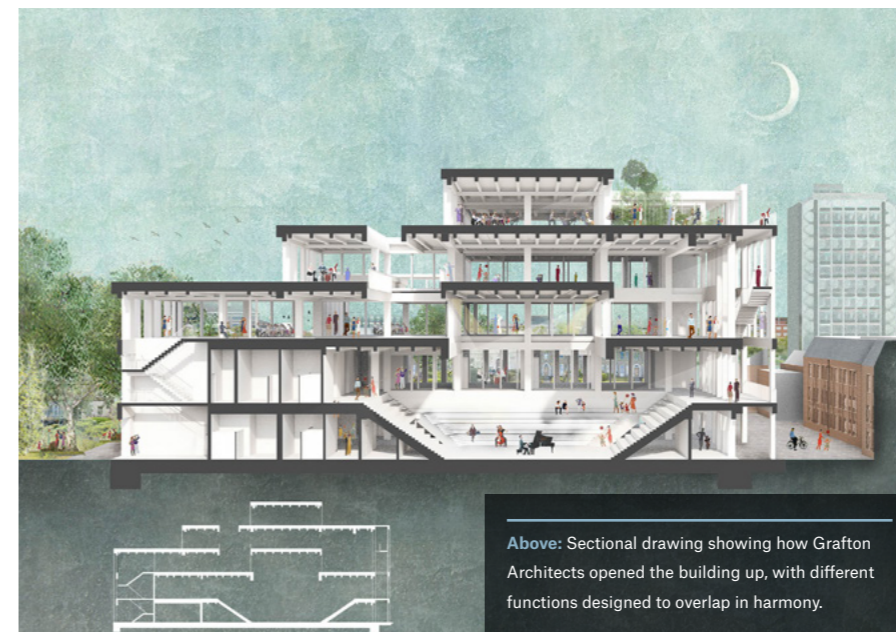
#### Delivering sustainability

Town House has a BREEAM Excellent rating and features a range of sustainable building technologies, including passive heating and cooling, as well as solar panels for electricity generation.



**Above:** The social spaces extend into wide feature staircases, which rise through the heart of the building.

Grafton Architects’ design included the conversion of a car park next to Town House into a 200m linear public park – an amenity for the university and town to share, which included a collaboration with the borough on a new cycle path. The university gave up a strip of land to enable this part of the project to be realised and it has become an important contribution to the area’s sustainable transport options.



**Above:** Sectional drawing showing how Grafton Architects opened the building up, with different functions designed to overlap in harmony.



**“AS ARCHITECTS, WHEN WE RECEIVED THE BRIEF FOR TOWN HOUSE, WE WERE INSPIRED BY THE PROGRESSIVE EDUCATIONAL VISION PRESENTED BY THE CLIENT.”**

MATT MCCULLAGH, DIRECTOR, GRAFTON ARCHITECTS

## 5. THE DELIVERY

**Willmott Dixon** was chosen to build Town House for its track record in delivering highly sustainable projects of national importance. Kingston University was particularly impressed with the WWF Living Planet Centre in Woking, which set new standards for sustainable office buildings.

### Close collaboration

To deliver Town House, Willmott Dixon undertook a two-stage contract, with senior operations manager Tony Mingoia forming a close relationship with Grafton Architects. "Seamless communication and decisive decision-making were vital," Tony explains, "so we had open-plan site cabins where we worked together with Grafton and our supply chain partners. These close relationships helped the project to flow and overcome any design challenges."

### Changing to precast concrete

Town House was modelled to BIM Level 2 protocols and the design was built around an exposed concrete frame, which would be on show throughout the building. This posed the challenge of hiding all of the building services from public view, while maintaining a sleek, consistent finish.

To enable this, the decision was made to switch from an in-situ concrete solution to a precast approach, with the structural elements designed to be easily assembled on the tight site. By manufacturing the structure under factory conditions, the finish could be closely controlled and essential building services, such as electrical cables and cooling ductwork, could be concealed within the precast units.

### Outstanding acoustics

With its programme of performance and social spaces alongside areas for quiet study – all within an open-plan building – it was essential for Town House to be acoustically excellent. The covered courtyard and dance studios were soundproofed, preventing the cross-transfer of noise. Meanwhile, the danger of noise reverberation being amplified by the exposed concrete was averted through the extensive use of specialist sound-absorption materials across the six open-plan floors.

**This page:** The extensive use of sound-absorption materials allows a mix of performances, collaborative projects and quiet study to take place within the open-plan environment.



**"WE DEVELOPED A VERY CLOSE RELATIONSHIP, WITH REGULAR DESIGN MEETINGS AND VISITS TO OUR MANUFACTURERS."**

TONY MINGOIA, SENIOR OPERATIONS MANAGER,  
WILLMOTT DIXON



## 6. THE LEGACY



Above: Kingston mayor Sushila Abraham (left) celebrates alongside the Town House team as the building is awarded the 2021 RIBA Stirling Prize.

### The route to the RIBA Stirling Prize

In October 2021, Town House received the accolade of winning the world-famous RIBA Stirling Prize. Speaking on behalf of the judging panel, Lord Norman Foster said: "Kingston University Town House is a theatre for life – a warehouse of ideas. It seamlessly brings together student and town communities, creating a progressive new model for higher education, well deserving of international acclaim and attention.

"In this highly original work of architecture, quiet reading, loud performance, research and learning can delightfully co-exist. That is no mean feat. Education must be our future – and this must be the future of education."

### A social value legacy

Willmott Dixon's social value programme was able to make a difference in the local community while Town House was under construction.

For two years, it ran a Building Lives Academy in Kingston, teaching entry-level construction skills to 58 local people who were not in employment, education or training. This provided them with the opportunity to gain a CSCS card – a gateway into the industry.

The company also worked with local supply chain partners to generate employment opportunities, and hosted a

variety of work experience placements. In total, a social return on investment of more than £600,000 was delivered by the company during the Town House project.

### Shaping the future of higher education

The design of Town House is playing a key role in a joint research project between the Association of University Directors of Estates (AUDE), the Higher Education Design Quality Forum (HEDQF) and Willmott Dixon.

Launched in 2021, the project is addressing two key questions: how to measure the value of the higher education built environment in terms of impact on students and

student outcomes; and what types of campus and facilities deliver the most benefit for students.

The next stage of this important study will focus on case-study buildings. It is hoped that Town House will be one of these, and that the impact of its visionary design on educational outcomes can be understood and measured for the benefit of future university buildings.

**Below:** The Building Lives Academy in Kingston gave 58 local people the opportunity to learn vital skills for success in the construction industry.





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