

Outside the box: new architecture for business schools

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Counterpoint to tradition: Chapman Graduate School of Business at Florida International University in Miami

The architecture of the university has traditionally been required to create two faces or worlds. The first is the image presented to the public, a façade to address the city with the dignity to express the aspirations of the institution. The second is the interior, characterised by a fine delineation of public and private space.

This interior world is a microcosm of the city, a series of public spaces – perhaps a quadrangle or court, dining halls, corridors, libraries and places for communal study – so that the building both addresses the metropolis and creates it anew inside.

In those microcosmic worlds, you can occasionally glimpse the vision of academia, a simulacrum of the image in which the institution would remake the world outside. So what is the image that business schools project? Corporate ennui? The grimly repetitive glass of the global central business district? Until recently, that was exactly the universal business school aesthetic. Unlucky to coincide in their late-20th-century genesis with the nadir of the dumb corporate box, business schools' architecture was rarely – if ever – a key concern. The world's future business leaders emerged from the dimmest of buildings.

But recently things have been improving fast. A rash of new buildings by the starriest of "starchitects" is breaking out on campuses around the world, creating a compelling landscape of academic architecture quite different from anything we have seen before. Norman Foster, David Chipperfield, David Adjaye and Frank Gehry are involved in a movement that seems to suggest the business school has arrived as a type in its own right, not as an adjunct to an existing institution.

The trend arguably began early in the past decade with two English institutions – one in London, the other in Oxford.

Foster + Partners carried out major surgery on [Imperial College Business School](#) in the capital, adding a lofty portico supported on attenuated, slender columns and giving the understated modernism of the original 1950s building a flash of civic grandeur.

In Oxford, Dixon Jones (architects of London's revamped Royal Opera House and National Gallery) designed the [Saïd Business School](#) overlooking the railway station on the edge of the city. Its ziggurat-like tower created the kind of self-confident landmark that had been unfashionable in an academia dominated by self-effacing corporate buildings, while its generous quad similarly looked to tradition. It is possible to argue that its opening in 2001 was a pivotal moment in the realisation that striking architecture provided not only a conducive place for learning but also a kind of literal brand-building. Suddenly it was clear that the architectural language of business schools did not have to belong to the world of corporate campuses but could fly with the architectural icons of the blockbuster cultural institutions.

When David Adjaye's [Skolkovo School of Management](#) opened outside Moscow last year, it raised the bar again. Its fees of €60,000 (\$80,400) for an MBA are justified in part by a campus of oligarchical luxury, with its own helipad

and limousine parking spaces. The remarkable building was inspired in part – in a delicious irony – by motifs from the Russian revolutionary era and the architectural language of the constructivism of the 1920s. But it is a profoundly impressive building, boldly geometric and clad in striking, tessellated patterns of variegated parallelograms.

The world is awaiting an outbreak of top-end, elegantly conceived, well-designed business schools in a way that would have been unimaginable a little more than a decade ago. Lord Foster, who studied at Yale in the 1960s, is designing its new **School of Management**. In common with his work at London's Imperial College, the public façade is both announced and sheltered by a portico of slender white columns behind which the institution appears a model of transparency and efficiency. Its white columns, oversailing canopy and elegant proportions refer to the architecture of Athens, a slave-owning democracy, and combines it with the aesthetics of the socialist Bauhaus, concealing a delightful, certainly unintended inappropriateness beneath its technocratic façades.

Slideshow

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Chipperfield, another British architect, is now building a severely austere work for **HEC Paris**. This elegant design is characterised by a glazed façade delicately broken up by slender mullions, the structure appearing to dematerialise into its sylvan setting. There is always a danger with this kind of suburban topography that the landscape will evoke the sterile joylessness of the business park. To counteract this, Chipperfield has created semi-urban spaces within the long, irregular building – internal piazzas intended to foster chance meetings and mingling. Yet these spaces have an almost monastic sparseness that seems to suggest business Spartans being prepared for a life of austerity and self-denial.

In the US, it is Kohn Pedersen Fox, the global architectural practice, that has delivered the most accomplished designs of the new business school. Indeed, founding partner Gene Kohn teaches at **Harvard Business School** – an accolade suggesting the increasing recognition of architecture as a complex discipline with much to teach.

KPF has designed some of the world's most recognisable corporate landmarks (including London's fast-rising Pinnacle, IBM's world headquarters in the state of New York and Shanghai's World Financial Center) but its work in business education eschews corporate cliché. Its **Ross School of Business** at the University of Michigan is, like Lord Foster's designs, based around a porticoed, colonnaded entrance but the materials are earthier – terracotta, stone and slate. Here too the public spaces are grand and lofty, glazed roofs supported on slender columns creating open, visually accessible areas. The scale and style of the building contrast with the smaller, 19th-century brick blocks around it, seeming to announce a self-confidence in the importance and status of the MBA.

Radically different is the same architects' **Chapman Graduate School of Business** at Florida International University, Miami. The building's prow-shaped entrance pavilion juts into the landscape and leads to a palm-lined courtyard with open arcades in a tropical architecture that takes advantage of climate and greenery to create a counter-point to the traditional internalised school.

Among the most remarkable recent buildings elsewhere are Archimedia and FJMT's space-age **University of Auckland Business School** in New Zealand and Grafton Architects' **Bocconi School** in Milan, with its sculptured forms reminiscent of a revived Brutalism. This building also has one of the finest, most uplifting auditoriums of recent years, a space seemingly carved from a solid concrete structure. It has also just been announced that New York avant-garde architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro will design the business school at **Columbia's** new Manhattanville campus in Harlem.

Finally, you know the business school has arrived when Gehry builds one – and he is already on his second. The architect of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (often credited with regenerating an entire city) in 2002 designed **Weatherhead School of Management** at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio – one of the buildings that kicked off the boom. Built in his trademark sculptural style, it is a landmark in a city in shock from the decline of the manufacturing industry.

Now Gehry has been commissioned to design the business faculty at **Sydney University of Technology**. The designs, revealed last month, feature the architect's characteristic crumpled, sculptural walls, a structure that seems to have lost rigidity blowing around in the wind. Gehry says his highly modelled, free-flowing forms try to "humanise" buildings – an approach radically different from the more rigid and classically modern aesthetic of Lord Foster and Chipperfield.

Once it was opera houses and museums that put cities on the international map. Now, in an age of austerity, it is ironically the announcement of a starry business school that signals arrival. If the top echelons of business become used to fine, thoughtful architecture, there must surely be a promising contagion through the world's sterile business districts. That has to be good news.

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