

O'Hanlon House: From Revolution to Evolution



In 1997 ideas were first put forward that resulted in the major rebuilding project that created O'Hanlon House. These ideas grew out of efforts to improve the existing Victorian school, then used as the Night Shelter, in line with rapidly increasing demand, the need for better facilities and the introduction of more stringent regulations.

Before the school was built in 1879, the site had been undeveloped. In pre-historic times it was probably in the channel of the River Thames, while maps of 1578, 1675 and 1750 show the land to be between areas of settlement and occupied by what appears to be orchards. A map of 1793 shows the land now occupied by O'Hanlon House to have been part of a large area of well organised market gardens. During the mid-1850s, the area began to be developed along with whole of the St Ebbes area. The Night Shelter moved into the school in 1985, after being housed in various temporary locations, including the railway sidings near the station.

In the first moves towards modernising the building, major improvements were proposed for the gents' and ladies' toilets. However, the architects who examined the building in April 1997 found many potential problems which made alterations positively dangerous. There were also concerns about how to keep the building open while work was going on – estimated at about two months; for security, the architects recommended complete closure of the Night Shelter for the whole period.

On top of this problem, space was still very limited. The building had poor insulation, four dormitories – there were no single rooms, so little if any privacy – and was described as 'uninviting ... with an institutional feeling'. Any worthwhile changes made were clearly going to have to be drastic and sweeping.

September 1997 could be described as the starting point for the new build. Paddy O'Hanlon, then director of Oxford Night Shelter, wrote a paper entitled 'What is Oxford Night Shelter For?', which was first discussed by committee on 12 September 1997. A working party was set up and met several times under the chairmanship of Michael Wright, eventually submitting an interim report to the committee on 1 May 1998. This recommended that the existing school 'should be demolished and that a new three storey building be erected to cover the whole site which should be about 20 per cent larger than the area of the current building.'

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What is particularly notable is how many of these original ideas were incorporated and how they work so successfully now. A working party meeting held on 12 March 1998, identified a number of needed facilities, including a lift (large enough to take a stretcher or coffin!) to service all floors, provision for dogs, separate dining area and lounge, and the second floor to have its own office, baggage store and laundry. It was undecided at that stage what 'wet' facilities would be available.

Sleeping accommodation was also an area which required much more discussion and research. Initial thoughts were that rooms should be a mixture of singles, doubles and four-person rooms.

Dormitories were very much a debatable feature – it was felt that privacy was important but that some residents would prefer to share with friends. As time went on and further discussions were held, there was a definite swing away from dormitories. At this time, a national homeless sector magazine published an article stating that 'Dormitory sleeping could be scrapped within a year'. A client study carried out in August 2000 showed that 70 per cent of clients who used the Night Shelter (or Drop-in Centre) preferred single rooms;

11 per cent didn't mind; 17 per cent preferred a room of no more than three people, while only 2 per cent preferred large dorms of up to 20 people.

The first feasibility study design combined double rooms, and rooms for three and four occupants. This initial design had three floors; this was modified later, showing four floors (including ground) with more single rooms. There was no central area of clear space as we have today, but a larger quantity of small rooms. There were some local objections raised to the new proposed design. Oxford City Council also questioned it, described it as 'quirky' and requested that the overall height should be a 'more modest 2.5 or three storeys maximum' as it would otherwise appear 'massively overbearing'. This was despite the fact that it would be, as pointed out in the reply, still significantly lower than the height of the adjacent BT building. Most of all, the council had serious reservations about the number of shared rooms, which would prevent any new proposal being accepted. Minor amendments were made – and outline planning permission granted on 4 August 1998.

It is one thing to plan new designs and another to raise the required funds. The original feasibility study estimated the cost at about £2 million for the three-story building. With four stories the cost was closer to £3.5 million. Obtaining this sort of funding was not going to be easy. A concerted fundraising effort began, with applications sent off and unfortunately rejected, including by the National Lottery. In January 2001 negotiations were started with Stonham Housing Association; by the end of that year, it was agreed that Stonham would be the owners and landlords of the new building, with the Oxford Night Shelter as managing agent. Prior to the Stonham negotiations another building design was produced, this time by the MEB Partnership in conjunction with Ridge and Partners. This design conformed to Oxford City Council requirements, while introducing some new ideas to radically alter the building. Internal space based around a large central atrium ensured good visibility and audibility, meeting a lot of health and safety requirements. The building was intended to look as non-institutional as possible.

The building has some very modern features. The roof is inflated under air pressure (the same as the Eden Project) and therefore needs no internal columns to support it, while at the same time providing good insulation and light. The heating system uses a weather station to gauge when to work and when to open external louvres based on carbon dioxide levels, wind levels and sun temperature. Underfloor heating pipes supply heating for the main hall, as well as built in air heaters to warm ventilation air. Rainwater is also channelled to refill the tank which supplies all of the toilet flushing water for the building.

With funding finalised, building work could start in earnest. A temporary night shelter was constructed on the car park of the Magistrates Court in Albion Place. The internal designs for the new building continued to be changed and improved until the building work commenced, with minor amendments continuing as the building went up.

The internal designs of September 2002 are essentially how the building looks now. This is not to say that building work has finished. Under the directorship of Lesley Dewhurst, O'Hanlon House is continually evolving and improving to meet new needs. The courtyard at the front of the building was re-designed and re-built in early 2009 to form an outside safe space for our clients; at the same time, the whole of the reception area was re-built and improved to feel less institutional, and the entrance doors were replaced.

Interior works continue all the time. Currently we are looking to obtain funds to carry out further improvements to the shower and toilet areas on the ground floors. Maintenance is a never-ending issue. A building of this nature needs constant care, and sometimes innovative solutions are required. We are learning all the time how to recognise faults and potential faults and we are now quick to know what will work and what definitely won't!

Jason Buckingham
Facilities officer, 2004 to present day