Bridging the Two Cultures: The architecture of the new British Library at St. Pancras

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Abstract

A victim of the backlash against modernism, in its planning and construction phases, between 1975 and 1997, the new British Library at St Pancras, London was widely criticised as a profligate and aesthetically inappropriate project. Yet since it was opened in 1997 the Library has won praise from users as a highly functional, comfortable and ‘social’ building. In addition, the Library has become an admired cultural landmark, a monument to Britain’s cultural heritage and a prominent part of London’s ‘experience economy’. Moving beyond these general, surface impressions, a close inspection of the Library’s built form reveals a marked duality in its design. Formed of two independent masses (one dedicated to science, technology and business, the other to the arts and humanities), coherence is given to the building by a central entrance hall atrium, at the top and rear of which are three footbridges, or crossing galleries (‘passerelles’ in formal architectural vocabulary). Both physically and metaphorically, these bridge the gap, between the Library’s two intellectual domains. This paper explores the origins of the Library’s duality and the bridging solutions for minimizing its effects. Primary attention is given to the “Two Cultures” debate, initiated by C.P. Snow in 1959, which pitched the sciences against the humanities in the planning of Britain’s future.