

## Final Reflection S.A.M. Dingen

### ***The Cambridge School of Tailoring & St Homobonus College***



*Figure 1; Original collage that became the starting point for this project*

#### Research & Methods

During a period of study at the University of Cambridge in England, I was fascinated by the traditional clothes that are still actively being worn. Their very particular relationship to specific buildings, as well as the city as a whole, have inspired this research and design project. As I got immersed in the still current culture of dress in Cambridge myself, I realised that various types of traditional clothing are, and have indeed been, an integral part of Cambridge's visual identity and student culture, for a long time. This seemed true in the case of academical dress, which I had been wearing myself, but also for formal dress and traditional sports clothes, which I regularly saw around town. This notion is perhaps best reflected in the representation of Cambridge in a number of publications and moving pictures, which are being read and watched by a worldwide audience. Deliberately or not, clothes play a very visible role in these renditions too.

Charles Darwin's granddaughter Gwen Raverat may be one of the most explicit authors in regards to local fashions, as she devoted an entire chapter of her 1951 memoirs about growing up in late nineteenth century Cambridge, to clothes. For comparison, traditional student garments also play less obvious roles in such diverse books as Whipplesnaith's *Night Climbers Guide to Cambridge* (1937), E.M. Forster's *Maurice* (1971), and Laura Barnell's *The Versions of Us* (2015). A classic example of Cambridge

in cinema would be *Chariots of Fire*, the 1981 Academy Award winner for Best Picture, which shows Cambridge's undergraduate sports culture most visibly through the wearing of sports blazers and straw boater hats. In recent Cambridge films, such as *The Theory of Everything* (2014), and *The Man Who Knew Infinity* (2015), the regular appearances of students and academical staff in gowns, bow ties and tails, similarly support the notion that different types of dress are important visual markers of the University of Cambridge's culture.

The idea that clothes carry meaning beyond merely covering our bodies goes back to the late nineteenth century, when figures such as Thorstein Veblen, Georg Simmel, and later John Flügel started theorising fashion. They related modes of dress to social structures, time and place, and their theories have been built upon in subsequent decades. Clothes as such, become reflective of society over time, and they can thus be an interesting starting point for researching a place as charged with tradition as Cambridge. Ultimately, for all of the socio-cultural symbolism of clothes, they are also just commodities. Clothes as such have economic meaning, and thus carry the potential to assert a physical presence wherever there is a specific demand. Understood like this, spaces of production and consumption become more obvious physical manifestations of clothing's embodied meanings. Hence, in Cambridge's case, dress customs ingrained in local student culture, e.g. formal hall dining, have meant that tailors and robemakers have historically dominated Cambridge's central shopping streets. Resultingly, the distinctly English trade of bespoke tailoring bloomed in a provincial town famous for its academic performance.

This research and design project aimed to highlight Cambridge's culture of dress, specifically considering British bespoke tailoring, by researching the viability of a new institute dedicated to the craft. To be able to answer the question '*Is there a future for a School of Tailoring in Cambridge?*', multiple sub questions needed to be answered. Firstly, to understand the embodied meanings of dress, and therefore what aspects are important to take into account along the way; '*Why do clothes matter?*' Secondly, in an attempt to understand the specific local context better; '*How did Cambridge's culture of dress develop?*' Historical developments at the University are linked to notable changes in types of dress and dress customs, and the culture's current state is evaluated as well. Thirdly, production and consumption of British bespoke, both in Cambridge specifically and in London, the epicentre of the trade, are focussed on, by asking '*How did the British bespoke tradition develop?*' Finally, recommendations of various industry professionals, economic and socio-cultural trends, and local constraints in Cambridge, help answer '*What should a Cambridge School of Tailoring be?*'

Literature provided the means to provide a framework of fashion theory, as well as a historical and sociocultural background to the University of Cambridge and its customs of dress. The latter is enriched by (non)fictional accounts of student life over time. As the University of Oxford shares many of the same characteristics with its rival in Cambridge, sources covering dress and the collegiate tradition in Oxford, or more generally Oxbridge, have been employed when necessary as well. An image of the state of Cambridge's culture of dress and the tailoring business today, and their respective potential futures, is painted through (digital) observations, site visits and interviews with a variety of industry professionals, including salesmen, tailors, an apprentice and a teacher, in Amsterdam, London and Cambridge. My own experiences on key locations, like London's Savile Row, are audited by comparing it with other people's insights in written sources.

The Cambridge School of Tailoring project aims to create an understanding of the possible implications of dress upon space, by looking into a very specific case in Cambridge, England. It touches upon its direct effects on the physical context, as well as our perception of it, and within the private, communal and public realms, as the production, consumption, and wearing of garments are

taken into account. This project takes notion of the cultural, economic, and social developments of the fashion industry at large, and tailoring specifically, as well as local issues in Cambridge.

### Conclusion

As my research argues, clothes matter, and both Cambridge's unique, local culture of dress, and the distinctly British trade of bespoke tailoring, are clear examples of that notion. Both have had a major impact on contemporary fashion, e.g. piped blazers, college jumpers, and sharp suits, and both are reflective of a range of on-going social, economic, and cultural issues regarding class, gender, and race, among other things. As dress and architecture tend to share a history and culture that has informed the way they look and function, they tell a collective story of their origins and developments as well. The University's ecclesiastical origin thus is reflected in both the traditional gowns being worn by students and academic staff alike, and colleges' monastic set-up. Similarly, Savile Row's workrooms look virtually like they did a century ago, as making methods have hardly changed. Many of the front house shops however are reflective of modern consumption patterns, and have indeed adapted to that new reality accordingly.

The University of Cambridge and bespoke tailoring, as most fully executed on London's Savile Row, are historically connected and similarly emblematic of British excellence. The academic community's big demand of academical robes, boat blazers, suits and more, was responded to, with an equally big amount of quality tailors and robemakers, which eventually dominated Cambridge's streets. Similarly, Savile Row could develop on its specific place in Mayfair, London, because the area had become popular among aristocrats, who created a demand of all kinds of luxury products, including tailored garments. As a result, the public spheres of both Cambridge and central Mayfair were heavily influenced by the commodities local inhabitants desired to buy.

That public realm is especially interesting in regards to clothing in Cambridge, as it is where members of 'town' and 'gown' meet. Colleges are static elements of the University's presence, that most of the time physically separate students and staff members from local townspeople. Their closed architecture, once intended to keep students and academic staff safe, became a physical manifestation of these powerful institution's elite positions. Although more dynamic, rather than static in nature, clothing worn by the academic community essentially is – and definitely was – perceived almost the same. That separation of 'town' and 'gown' is thus not as simply definable as colleges' perimeters, for large quantities of students populating central Cambridge, appropriate public space through their clothing. This clash may not be as apparent as it was decades ago, but still one can regularly run into students in gowns on the streets, right before dinner time, or boat blazers in local pubs later at night. Instances like these highlight an institutionalised difference between people. The sense of equality connected to these clothes, essentially uniforms, by insiders within colleges walls, is replaced by a sense of inequality outside of them.

Although clothing is dynamic, in that it can easily move beyond certain borders and simply because it is relatively easy to put on or take off again, traditional student dress in Cambridge is in a different way very static. It is in fact exactly what Simmel would call anti-fashion, and what Flügel would describe as fixed clothing. In that sense, traditional student clothing is remarkably similar to centuries old, static collegiate architecture. Although they both reflect outdated ideals of masculinity, socio-economic status, and ethnicity, they are now being used and worn by an increasingly diverse group of people. These traditional garments and buildings may have hardly changed in form, but they have arguably acquired a new, more democratic meaning in recent times. They are no longer symbols

of the old-world upper classes per se, but rather emblematic of a diverse, meritocratic elite of men and women. As such, their futures seem relatively safe.

Taking notion of all this, Cambridge's culture of dress, and the British trade of bespoke tailoring, seem valid bases for the project I am proposing here. However, to be able to come to a proposal, which is rooted in reality, multiple conditions still need to be taken into account. Firstly, Cambridge as a site for this project. Various locations within the historic city centre have been considered, but they all have one thing in common; they are University sites that will almost certainly vacate in the near future. As such, the context has informed a starting point for this project; research and education should be at the heart of this proposal. With that central idea in mind, the proximity of local partners, the recommendations of industry professionals, the public's interest in fashion and craftsmanship, and relevant predicaments regarding tourism in the city, subsequently provide the reasoning behind a) the choice of the eventual site, and b) the different programme components that should constitute what I call St Homobonus College.

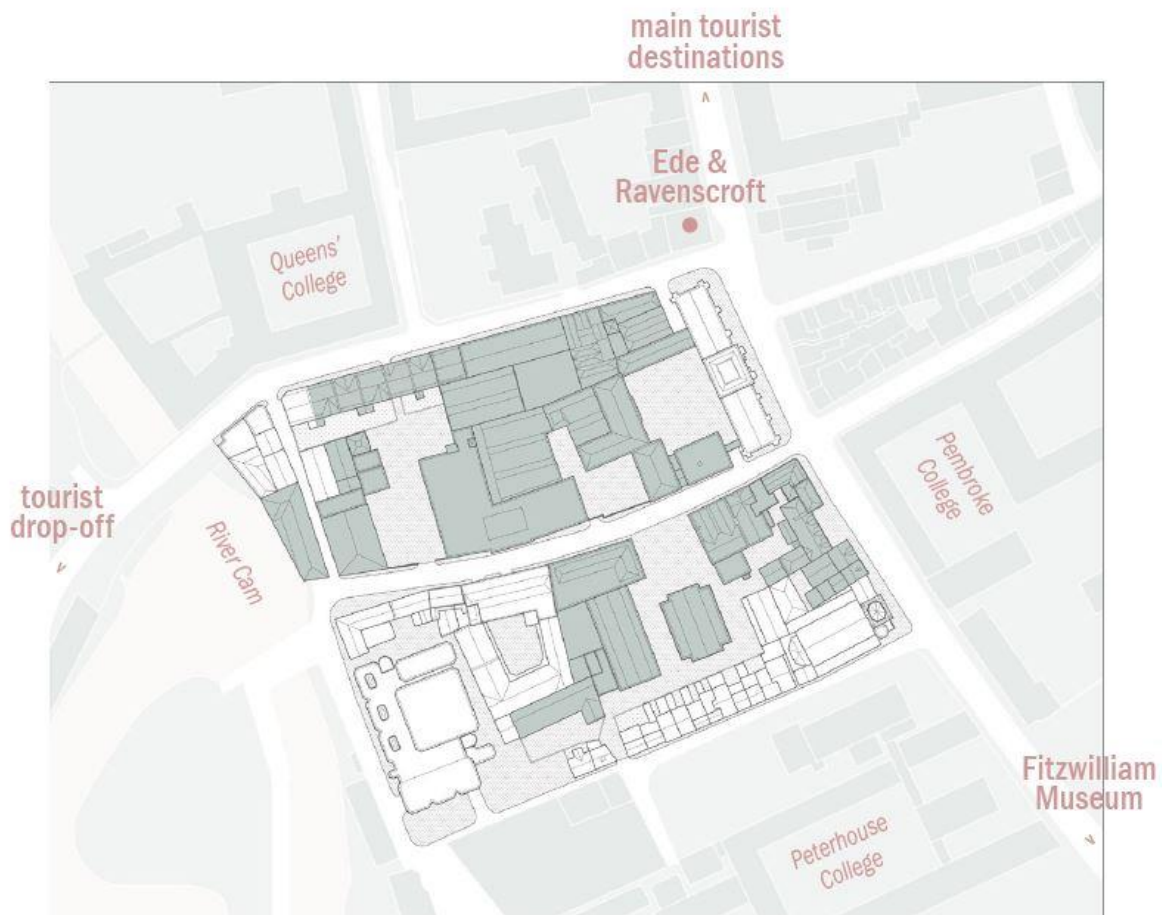


Figure 2; chosen site for St Homobonus College

### Proposing St Homobonus College

I dare to answer the question asked earlier, 'Is there a future for a School of Tailoring in Cambridge?' with a resounding yes. As industry professionals were happy to emphasise, the tailoring business is booming, and expertise is in demand, while Cambridge has a historical connection to the trade, all of which seems to be in favour of this proposal. However, I will add immediately, that St Homobonus

College should be more than just an institution which provides vocational training to students. To ensure a successful future for a tailoring school in this specific context, it is valuable to involve existing, local partners, and to take into consideration various user groups in and around the site that will house the Cambridge School of Tailoring. Those local partners would be Ede & Ravenscroft, the University of Cambridge, and the Institute of Visual Culture at the Fitzwilliam Museum, while the user groups of interest would involve, among others, students and teaching staff of both the University of Cambridge and the Cambridge School of Tailoring, day-trip tourists, overnight tourists, and local inhabitants. Based upon its proximity to local partners, as well as its position on arguably the most important route into the city for day-trip tourists, the Mill Lane / Old Press Site is the chosen location for the Cambridge School of Tailoring. Both considerations are conformable with industry professionals' vision for what this cluster could be, while also answering to some of the City Council's wishes and visions for the city and this specific site.

Education and research are at the heart of the Cambridge School of Tailoring, as that fits in Cambridge's DNA of excellent education and research, and particularly for the old University site that will be transformed to create this cluster. A vocational tailoring school and a research centre, which studies the production and consumption of (local) dress, thus form the basis. A new bespoke salon for the existing Ede & Ravenscroft branch in Cambridge will be added to introduce real business. Some of students' training will also be provided for in these workrooms. A fashion museum related to Cambridge's specific local culture of dress answers to a growing public interest in craftsmanship and fashion, while also responding to some of the city's difficulties with tourism. The larger masterplan will similarly also include a hotel, various crafts-related shops, a punting station, and some places to eat. Inspiration for the organisation of the masterplan as shown and described here, involving multiple courtyards, colonnades and even a tower, is taken from the site's direct surroundings amidst some of Cambridge's oldest colleges, i.e. Peterhouse, Queens', Pembroke, and Corpus Christi, on the one hand, and Victorian shopping streets and arcades, particularly in London's Mayfair, on the other. Using familiar elements like these, help creating a college-like site, albeit much more public in character than actual colleges. St Homobonus College prevents extra disturbance of the University's students and staff, while still giving visitors a sense of the Cambridge experience of mystery and intrigue.

### Reflection

Looking back on the research I did, I think the link between research and design is in fact more obvious than it may have seemed at first. Assessing clothing in a broad way, following lines of production, consumption and wearing of specific garments, made it possible to relate them to specific places, periods, and times, thus making it a starting point to analyse various spatial, material, and functional ideas as well. As such, it has very directly given me input to come up with a functional programme on the one hand, and a spatial and material design of a cluster of buildings as well.

Combining a literature study with information taken from interviews and observations made it possible to find relevance generally, in terms of the value of elements of visual culture to analyse a certain place, but also more specifically, that is clothes' impact on the city of Cambridge. It has also helped to directly link research to design. Essentially, the research started from a design proposal that was rooted in my own subjective experience of Cambridge, as well as a single paragraph I had read in some book on Cambridge's history. I suppose that a link between research and design has always been there. I researched the themes that seemed necessary to support a very basic proposal, and to elaborate

on it to be able to define an extended programme. Input by actual people, that busy themselves within the field I had read about so much, was absolutely vital.

As I have just touched upon, I expect that similar projects could be done for many different places and crafts around the world. Expressions of culture, such as fashion, but no doubt also countless other applied arts, are reflective of a society in a way that buildings also are. Again, things like these touch upon relevant social issues regarding class, gender, and ethnicity among others. Simultaneously applied arts (and design) are in a way just commodities and thus tend to have economic impact as well. Although not taken into account for this research, as it was not overly relevant in this specific case, almost certainly most of them have environmental effects as well. The fashion and textile industries for example, are some of the most polluting industries in the world. In any case, I suppose that seeing architecture in a wide perspective of different design disciplines, socio-economic realities, and cultural values, can help architects firmly root their ideas into their context.



*Figure 3; early sketch of one of St Homobonus' courtyards*