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Eight terraces of Passivhaus-certified townhouses in generous shared gardens provide new student accommodation on the edge of the leafy West Cambridge conservation area. Commissioned by St John's but for use by several of Cambridge's Colleges, the houses accommodate a total of 245 student rooms.

The new student community at Hinsley Lane comprises 39 townhouses arranged in a succession of terraces in a verdant landscape. At two and a half to three storeys, the buildings have a scale commensurate with their context. Their careful positioning on the site both preserves the landscape setting and optimises building orientation to support exemplar environmental performance. Facing north-south, in winter the buildings capture solar gain while in summer, built in shading via bay windows and openwork screens reduce overheating. Heat pumps and PVs provide additional heating, cooling and power.

Low operational energy is complemented by low embodied carbon, with an all-timber structure. Red brick, hung clay tiles and reconstituted stone characterise the building facades, all locally familiar materials that will age gracefully. Pitched roofs, gables animated with windows, and large chimneys housing ventilation, create an articulated form and silhouette.

Entrances are arranged off a new lane that runs through the site, to which the terraces are perpendicular. Prioritising pedestrians and cyclists, the lane connects Wilberforce Road to Herschel Road and is a popular route for students and local residents.

The setting was already rich with mature trees, hedges and patches of woodland, while areas of green open space pepper the West Cambridge conservation area. Preserving this rhythm of natural heritage and habitat-rich biodiversity, and managing rainwater were key



drivers for the gardens designed by our landscape studio. A neglected orchard is retained and revitalised, the landscape traces of a Roman Road are enhanced, and integrated sustainable drainage swales are made a feature.

Each house provides accommodation for between four and seven students. Quiet private study bedrooms are complemented by bright, shared living areas around a dining table generous enough for everyone to use at once. Every house opens onto its own private terrace, which steps down to a shared garden.

Max Kettenacker, Director at Allies and Morrison said: “Hinsley Lane is a project where sustainability shaped every decision from the outset, influencing orientation, layout, form, facades, and landscape. Yet you wouldn’t necessarily guess it from the finished buildings, which sit gently within West Cambridge’s red-brick vernacular. We championed Passivhaus, which wasn’t part of the brief at the start, proving through rigorous analysis that it was both technically and financially viable.

“The project is quite unusual because St John’s moved away from a conventional corridor model, choosing a townhouse typology, because the house-share model proved so popular with students. With generous shared living spaces, abundant natural daylight, outdoor terraces, and the warmth of exposed timber and natural materials, the houses are truly homely and convivial places to live.

“For us, Hinsley Lane embodies everything we love about college projects: environmental ambition, contextual sensitivity, and student comfort and wellbeing.”

Suzie Wood, Head of Investment Property at St John’s College added: “St John’s College takes a long-term view and therefore it was important from the outset that the designs for the student scheme reflected the high quality and longevity expected of Cambridge college buildings. The College is delighted with the end result which embraces our ambitions to create cost effective accommodation that supports student wellbeing whilst also being as sustainable as possible.

The Allies and Morrison team embraced the initial brief and has created a neighbourhood truly embedded in its local context: from the intimate new lane framed by stepping townhouses to the verdant gardens in between, it is a place that feels like it has grown out of West Cambridge, rather than being imposed upon it.”

Location	Cambridge , UK
Uses	Education, Housing
Client	St John’s College
Status	Completed
Size	8,600 sqm
Expertise	Architecture, Landscape
Environmental	Passivhaus
Collaborators	Structure, Smith and Wallwork; MEP, Calfordseaden / Munros Building Services; Sustainability, Calfordseaden; Fire, The Fire Surgery; Passivhaus, Max Fordham/Allies and Morrison; Acoustics, Ramboll; Cost, Accertum; project Manager, Ridge; Planning, Shrimplin Planning and Development; Transport, Stantec; Contractor, Cocksedge.

ABOUT ALLIES AND MORRISON

Allies and Morrison is a practice of architects and urbanists based in London, Cambridge, Manchester, Dublin, Jeddah and Toronto. We design beautiful buildings that have long life and can adapt over the generations. We also shape enduring places, new pieces of city or settlements at any scale. All our projects are concerned with the crafting of detail and an appreciation for the uniqueness of each context.