



Pushing at the ceiling

Architecture is often seen as innovative and progressive, possibly even an art-form. Irrespective of whether the end results are described as ‘paradigms of beauty’ or ‘carbuncles’, buildings from any era can often inspire leading-edge discussion.



Nigel Marcoolyn
Director of Architecture,
Cowan Architects

But does building design innovate? Innovation is described as “the process of translating an idea or invention into goods or services that creates value or for which customers will pay”.

What is key here is that it is the application of ideas that are novel and useful, rather than the idea itself. Indeed, one of our most visually impressive projects recently has involved the application of a product and technology that has been around for more than a century.

Back in 1887, Canadian company, Sprung, developed a “fabric structure like no other” that was a uniquely tough canvas for chuck wagons and pioneers’ tents. Decade upon decade has seen improvements until now the tents have become high-performance, portable building structure that is currently finding its use in a growing number of new and varied applications. After designing and constructing the NASA Space Shuttle housing facility in the early 1980s, these portable structures began to gain a good reputation. More recently, the high-quality materials that are individually tested have proven their durability in some of the most extreme climates on earth, from the hottest desert to the windiest arctic tundra

and coldest mountain highland. The only building left standing in Buras, Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was a Sprung tensile structure.

Cowan Architects, working with Sprung’s UK partner, Paragon Structures, has recently applied this engineering masterpiece in the development of two new, world-class sports and teaching facilities for cricket and golf at a top public school that is world renowned for its sporting heritage. Here, we have designed the new structures to fit alongside existing, extensive internal and external facilities and sports areas.

These advanced, fabric tensile structures are meticulously engineered to allow total design flexibility, all-weather performance, strength, long-term quality and cost-effectiveness. But it is the speed in which they can be designed and constructed that really impresses – as does the relative cost value. Their modularity also makes them easy to re-locate but the patented technology and construction features have additional advantages that extend their applications.

Paragon Structures largely uses this product in the sports hall and recreational facilities market but it can span a multitude of opportunities from warehousing to logistics, military to industrial units, educational buildings to hospitality events and even aircraft hangers – very Gatwick-relevant.

For an independent school, the attractions are numerous. It has versatility as the

design can be tailored to meet any school’s specific needs. The speed of construction is also particularly appealing as it will keep the disruption to the rest of the school to a minimum.

Many clients will also find that the progressive look and feel of the buildings work well to reflect an aspiration to be ‘leading the field’.

Time savings are significant. Where it might take 2 – 3 months for an architect to design a conventional building, I can do a Sprung structure in as many weeks and it then takes only a matter of 2-4 weeks to erect (at a pace of 500 – 1500 square feet per day), compared to 9 – 12 months.

Other benefits include a 20% saving in energy running costs, an air-tight envelope, high ceiling, BREEAM Excellent rating, the need for fewer light fittings due to the Sports England compliant daylighting panels, and its easy re-location – should the need arise.

We may all see the old prefab hut as a thing of the past, but it’s a lesson to us all not to reject old design as irrelevant to today’s marketplace. By reimagining these icons and applying a bit of modern-day technology, something remarkable can be achieved.

I’m certainly looking forward to seeing where these beautiful structures will take us next.