In the third decade of the twentieth century Leeds City Council made some forward thinking proposals regarding its provision of education in Leeds; an ambitious plan was formulated to bring together the city’s colleges of Art, Commerce and Technology onto one encompassing site. Keith Rowntree conveys the tale which takes us from the aspirations of planners and architects through the seven stages that created Leeds Central Colleges.

The colleges had emerged during the 1920s, evolving from schools of art, commerce, science and technology, whose guiding principles had their roots in the artisan, industrial, trade and commercial life of the city. By 1936 the Council were considering the proposition of a “new college” bringing together existing colleges on an island site just off Woodhouse Lane that would incorporate land occupied by Leeds Mechanics Institute, Thoresby High School and City of Leeds School. A new building was proposed bounded by Vernon Street to the north, Woodhouse Lane to the east, Great George Street to the south and Cookridge Street to the west. These plans were abandoned at the outbreak of the Second World War.

At the end of the war the idea was resurrected to establish a Further Education College, this time on a site north of Vernon Street, off St James’s Street (now known as Portland Way) and included the land occupied by the old St James’s Lodge and Cankerwell Lane. In the late 1940s much of this area was waste ground, housing had been demolished in slum clearances as had the many warehouses and warrens of little squares, closes and courts. The Masons Arms stood at the top of St James’s Street near the junction with Woodhouse Lane, a solitary reminder of a once bustling community. Architects York, Rosenberg and Mardall were commissioned in July 1951 and preliminary plans were approved by Leeds City Council the following year. This ‘campus, to be known as the Leeds Central Colleges, was anticipated to take several years to build in seven distinct stages with ancillary buildings to be built as required towards the end of the project. It was originally envisaged that the college site would cover a much larger area than the eventual build. A central block of three nine-story buildings would form the spine of the complex with smaller blocks adjoining at right angles, planned features included a sculpture court and rooftop garden. A separate gymnasium and swimming pool were considered which would have occupied the space roughly where the Dry Dock pub stands today. Woodhouse Lane was anticipated to be re-routed a little to the north of its present position allowing this sports complex to be within the college envelope. From the outset the architects attempted to provide the Central Colleges with a sense of community similar to that of a University. Over the next twenty years only a fraction of these buildings were actually built while others were modified to meet the changing economic conditions and requirements of the colleges.

Stage one was the Mechanical Engineering block for Leeds College of Technology, which was begun in 1953 and completed in 1956. This later became known as ‘A Building’ and was demolished in 2007.

Stage two and three, accommodation for the College of Technology, were completed in 1958 and 1960 respectively. These buildings still exist, with renovations, and are known today as Portland and Woodhouse.

Stage four, now known as Calverley, was built primarily as accommodation for Leeds College of Commerce. Architectural notes written in 1967 proudly announced that this building contained a suite for “the recently acquired computer.” Even with this structure complete the College of Commerce had to use several other buildings around the City Centre including 43 Woodhouse Lane, the old United Methodist Chapel that had become the home of the College in 1934.

Stage five was completed in 1967, accommodation for the Yorkshire College of Education and Home Economics which moved from its home in nearby Vernon Road. In 1966 a Housecraft student described their bemused reaction to the extensive building works (which included the great ditch created by the construction of the Inner Ring Road), “…just across the debris we can watch the new building, next to the College of Technology, painfully and slowly rising.” In 1967 as plans were developed for a Polytechnic in Leeds, representatives of the ‘Pud School’ registered their opposition to inclusion in the proposed Polytechnic. Of particular concern was any impact inclusion would have to their association and relationship with Leeds University. This building, for many years designated ‘F Building’, has now been refurbished for use, coincidently, by Leeds University.

Stage six was planned as a communal area for all the centrally located colleges and included a Refectory which was linked to the main entrance concourse, which was actually part of Stage four. The use of the term Refectory by the Central Colleges/Polytechnic is interesting in that it again signals the planners’ intent to emulate Universities; a refectory was an academic/ecclisiasical term for a place of restoration, in this context a café or cafeteria.

Stage seven was built to house the original Leeds College of Art and included state of the art studio spaces situated to take advantage of north light. The Art College vacated Vernon Street and took possession of its new home in 1969. This building became known as ‘H Building’; until recently it housed the Gallery and Studio Theatre, and has since been converted for use by Leeds University; the adjacent Art College studios were demolished in 2011.

In 1966 the White Paper “A Plan for Polytechnics and Other Colleges” began the process of Polytechnic creation, with Leeds at a great advantage having worked on the concept of a central college for around 40 years. In many ways the aspirations of the planners and architects of the Central Colleges concept coalesced with the formation of Leeds Polytechnic and finally came to fruition with the creation of Leeds Metropolitan University in 1992.

The seven stages of Leeds Central Colleges