John Devlin's Nova Cantabrigiensis is out now, published by Island Editions.

OUTSIDER ARTIST RETREATS TO HIS CANADIAN CAMBRIDGE

A man-made island in the muddy waters of the Minas Basin in Canada is the unlikely setting for a radically reimagined Cambridge. Fuelled by nostalgia for the university he was forced to leave, John Devlin's Nova Cantabrigiensis drawings are his attempt to recreate the intangible "Cambridge essence" at home.

Devlin studied theology at Cambridge in 1979, but a mental breakdown forced him to go back home. After several stints in hospital, he moved in with his parents in rural Nova Scotia. "I was without a job, I had no prospects, I had to retool my whole life's direction," Devlin remembers. "It was so overwhelming that I invented this imaginary city." He spent six years drawing 367 sketches that recreate the architecture and atmosphere of Cambridge. "It would be a floating island, a lily pad city. I could live in Cambridge in the Minas Basin and on the weekends I'd cycle home."

Devlin expanded existing buildings in Cambridge, adding his own flourishes – rotating fountains, a reflecting pool, lasers and a lot of Canadian flags. Cryptic symbols and diagrams are scattered throughout the sketches, evidence of his attempt to find the "ideal ratio" of building proportions in Cambridge, with which he hoped to recreate the atmosphere. "I thought that if I could capture that ambience as a mathematical formula, then, I wouldn't have to go to England."

Devlin sketched on the back of unemployment letters and job notices and consistently tucked in several small figures and a dog, often drawn with halos. "My friends and I lived vicariously in my own imaginative and poetic Cambridge."

In 1990 Devlin moved to a group home and stopped drawing. "They made changes to my medication, and I was re-entering the real, unimaginative world," he recalls. "I had less inspiration. I was getting bored of sketching." Devlin now spends his time volunteering at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia and has recently started working on the geometry of his King's College expansions again. His work has been receiving renewed attention with the recent release of a book collecting 30 of his drawings, Nova Cantabrigiensis.

INSIDE JOHN DEVLIN'S NOVA CANTABRIGIENSIS

CAMBRIDGE BRIDGE
I designed an extravagant Cambridge Bridge, so that when you went to my city, you could walk across the bridge it was named after. I liked the way everything in Cambridge is marked off with iron railings. Spaces are finite, it's different from Canada where space is vast and unbounded.

ORGAN CHAPEL
I wanted the Organ Chapel to be like Mont Saint-Michel, a place of cultural pilgrimage. The plan came to me in a dream – based on the Greek letter alpha. I joined the arms with cloisters, to form the infinity sign: \( \infty \). The building has intersecting flying buttresses over a revolving door, topped by a gilt sphere which is protected by a reflecting pyramid. The pyramid would catch the light and reflect across the surrounding farmland.

KING'S COLLEGE
I created a reflecting pool in front of King's College, added a banqueting hall to the Chapel and a long gallery to the Gibbs' Building to house a more impressive library. People in Cambridge are pretty anal about any changes to their chapel and by starting off with a clean slate, I could conceive schemes that are impossible in the UK. There's so much historical baggage in England, it bows you down and burdens the imagination.