

BUILDING ■ Town and gown: Niall McLaughlin at Somerville College, Oxford

A student residence draws on picturesque planning traditions to make a new street for the city.
Report by **Tom Holbrook**.
Photographs: Nick Kane.

After the Enlightenment, city authorities sought to confine those sections of society considered 'other' to institutions on the urban periphery. By the nineteenth century these colonies of the insane, the sick and the criminally inclined were joined by women desiring a university education.

At Oxbridge, women's colleges were established on the edge of town: Girton College, Cambridge (1873), and Somerville College, Oxford (1879), were isolated from the universities that they were part of, as a prophylactic against moral corruption.

As these universities grow, these peripheral colleges (now mixed of course) find themselves enveloped by the institutions that once marginalised them. Girton is adjacent to a major north-west expansion of the university, while at Somerville, the transplantation of the Radcliffe Infirmary creates the conditions for a major piece of university infrastructure.

Behind its original Palladian ensemble, the Infirmary – Somerville's northern neighbour – expanded in that ultra-contingent manner peculiar to hospitals, bringing a series of lean-to backland services (mortuary,

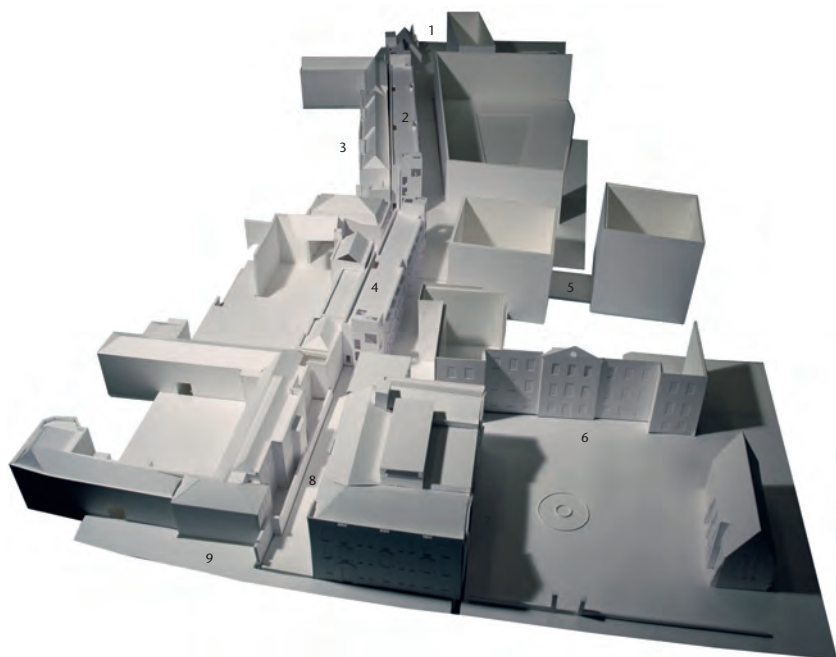


laundries, brewhouse) to the boundary wall with the college. The Infirmary's spasmodic expansion was halted by the decision of the hospital trust to move out to the suburbs, and the sale of the four-hectare site to the university in 2003.

The University commissioned Rafael Viñoly Architects to masterplan the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter (ROQ) in 2005. The resultant beaux-arts plan was widely criticised, its formal approach being a curiously suburban response to a site where the essential opportunity is to become more urban. Viñoly's gestural planning imagines new faculties as a series of self-referential figures arrayed around boulevards. The Mathematical Institute, designed by Viñoly, is currently on site; this will be joined by the School of Government (Herzog & de Meuron) and others in a phased realisation that is highly dependant on private donors.

Left, right The two student accommodation buildings make one whole side of a new street, and a new northern entrance into Somerville College. Key: 1 Walton Street, 2 West Building (NMA), 3 Somerville College quadrangle, 4 East Building (NMA), 5 proposed Mathematical Institute, 6 Radcliffe Infirmary, 7 outpatients building, 8 East West Link, 9 Woodstock Road.

Above Four stair cores are capped by timber-framed lanterns.







For Somerville, the hospital's removal brought the opportunity of a fourth side. The college negotiated with the university on the creation of a frontage to the street proposed by the masterplan, winning a few metres of space alongside a largely blind north wall. In a joint selection process, the college appointed Niall McLaughlin Architects to develop plans for a new range of student rooms, while the university appointed the practice to supervise the realisation of the new street.

The college's brief for the resulting 175-metre-long by six-metre-wide site was for 68 undergraduate rooms, with eight rooms on a corridor sharing a kitchen.



For my journey to Oxford I was lent Pevsner's posthumously published *Visual Planning and the Picturesque*. The book visually plots three sequences through Oxford, in support of Pevsner's thesis that a particular strength in English planning draws on and adapts ideas of the picturesque, and is open to a certain sort of responsive pragmatism, rather than the dream of overall control implied by a 'masterplan'.

McLaughlin's approach to planning represents a subtle corruption of the original masterplan's bombast, drawing on careful observation of local conditions. Taking inspiration from the same Oxford sequences as Pevsner, McLaughlin planned the new street as a



Left Current Raddcliffe Observatory Quarter plan; location plan showing visual links; East Building typical floor plan. The 6m-wide by 175m-long parcel of land ceded by the University was just wide enough to allow one student room and a connecting passageway. It was not possible to make individual entrances into the new building from the north. The student rooms will connect back into existing college buildings as the phased project progresses. Key: 1 House Building, 2 Darbshire Building, 3 courtyard, 4 proposed link to Somerville College, 5 study bedroom, 6 kitchen, 7 stair tower, 8 corridor, 9 East West Link.

series of episodic spaces, each one set up on significant juxtapositions, framed and denied views and surprises. The rooms are arrayed in two buildings – three storeys to the east, four storeys to the west – each book-ended by tall stair towers which terminate in glazed lanterns. The buildings are separated by a new northern gate, linking the college with the Observatory Quarter.

McLaughlin’s work is doubly anticipatory: to the north, the range creates one edge to what will eventually be a street, steering later phases of the masterplan towards greater

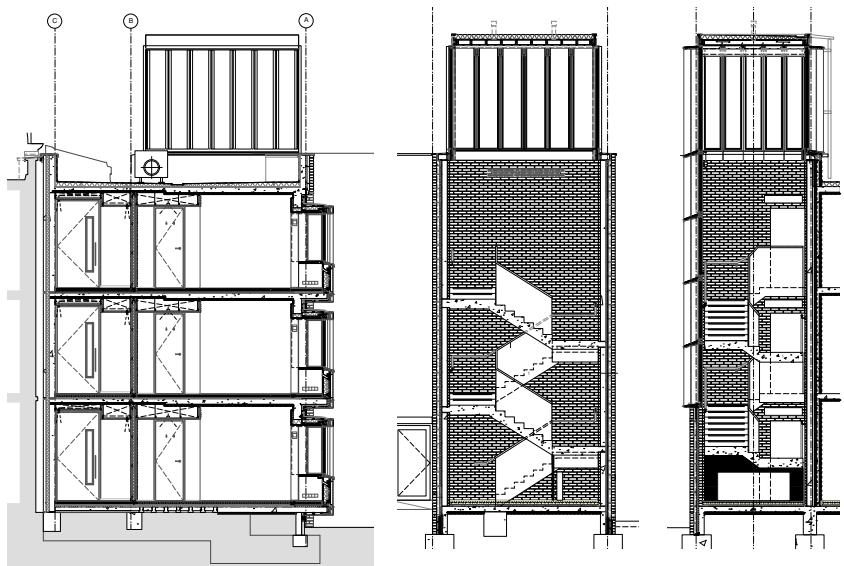


engagement with the city. Towards the college the architect has aligned the floors of the new buildings with those across the flank wall, allowing the potential for connection. The practice has built soft spots into this wall for easy removal: McLaughlin calls these ‘time-bombs’ and they are located in the college stock most likely to require future change. This anticipation of the future while paying close attention to what exists brings an insightful dynamic – both to the scheme, but also to the very idea of a masterplan. In contrast to Viñoly’s specificity, this mode of planning offers something more contingent, capable of both responding to changing need while revealing and drawing on what is already there.

Somerville has impressive form in defining and enriching its perimeter. In the 1960s, the college commissioned a triad of buildings from Philip Dowson at Arup Associates. The first pair, the Fry and Vaughan buildings, establish graduate housing above an arcade of shops along Little Clarendon Street, helping to create a busier, more urban street from what was something of a backwater.

Above The oak-clad bay windows are ‘a contemporary restatement of the themes of Phillip Dowson’s Wolfson Building at Somerville’. Much of the envelope was prefabricated to achieve a high level of airtightness (phs: NMA).
Below Sections through East Building accommodation and stair core.

These two blocks, together with the later Wolfson building on the western boundary, are developments of Arup Associates’ research into college rooms (culminating in the wonderful Sir Thomas White Building at St John’s College). Typological research from this period evolved an understanding of a





students and the conference trade – more like hotel rooms, and more comfortable for that, this nevertheless results in less interesting and variable typological possibilities.

The new rooms are generous and well-made, benefitting both from early liaison with the college maintenance team, and from the practice's own experience with timber construction. The combination of a heavy brick frame with rooms articulated by timber bays references Louis Kahn's library at Exeter, New Hampshire, imported from New England to Oxford via McLaughlin's tutor Shane de Blacam, who worked with Kahn. The reference works well here, particularly from the inside, where rooms benefit greatly from the bay's carefully made outlook, where a window seat and desk, view and ventilation, are combined in a sophisticated piece of joinery. Externally, the lit and occupied study rooms will enliven and overlook the street in a way that the faculty buildings on the other side probably won't.



student room as a four-part entity, operating between the demands of work, sleep, storage and a bay window, where – by stepping beyond the building line – the individual could connect with both the totality of the building, and with the quad or the street beyond. This thinking derived from contemporaneous concerns about student loneliness and self-identity within the institution.

The bay window is a motif in McLaughlin's work too, allowing students to have an oblique relationship with the new street while letting sunlight to reach these north-facing rooms. Unlike the Arup buildings where, for moral fibre, students were coerced into sharing common bathrooms, these rooms are ensuite to suit the expectations both of today's



The use of brick at Somerville stems from the high Victorian fascination with brick institutions. Redolent of hearth and home, it alludes to the domestic: the correct province of even highly-educated ladies. This Victorian alliance of morality and material is clearest at Waterhouse's Girton, but Somerville too has its share of red brick, which McLaughlin has carefully matched. Loadbearing masonry is used as a framing exoskeleton, referencing both the broader Oxford gothic tradition, and the structural rationalism of Dowson's precast concrete structures for the college.

The practice's eye on the larger-scale play is also evident here – the new buildings line a

Above, left Circulation spaces, in which electrical and lighting loads are minimised by the use of occupancy sensors.



street that will connect Jericho, the red-brick former working neighbourhood, with Keble College (whose high Anglican architect, William Butterfield, claimed that he had ‘a mission to give dignity to brick’), a red thread through this northern part of town.

Curiously, the relationship between building project and the broader setting seems

weakest at ground level, where projecting study rooms have an uncomfortable relationship with the street – an alternative treatment might have been more robust here, perhaps in the manner of Kahn’s Centre for British Art at Yale, or indeed Dowson’s buildings for the college.

Opening an Architectural Review from the Higher Education boom of the mid-1960s, the sheer invention of that generation is evident and remarkable, particularly since so many were attempting to synthesise modernism with older traditions in cities like Oxford. The new buildings at Somerville could not be said to be radically experimental in comparison – and they may well look almost wilfully traditional next to what may be built across the street – but they are nevertheless quietly radical in their longer-term, and wider-scale ambitions.

The materiality and attention to detail of the new buildings will ensure that they age well, and help the college as a whole grow into a more engaged condition, close to the heart of the university. The careful restatement of the qualities of an Oxford street is a sensitive and bold enrichment of the ROQ masterplan, forming a strong foundation for the rest of the site to develop in a responsive way. Both the college and university have greatly benefitted from the careful and intelligent work of Niall McLaughlin Architects.

Tom Holbrook is a director of architecture and urban design practice 5th Studio, whose projects include a graduate hostel at St Catharine’s College Cambridge and the design of the Lea River Park, south of the London 2012 Olympic site.



Project team

Architect: Niall McLaughlin Architects; project architects: Bev Dockray, Simon Bishop; project manager: PDCM; qs: Gardiner & Theobald; structural engineer: Price & Myers; m&e engineer: Hoare Lea; CDM co-ordinator: HCD Management; planning consultant: Tumberry Consulting; contractor: Laing O Rourke; client: Oxford University Estates Directorate, Somerville College.

Selected suppliers and subcontractors

Joinery: Panel Edged Products; steelwork: Gascoyne & Beever; facade cladding, stairs: Explore Manufacturing; brick: Ibstock; glass: Pilkington; bathroom pods: Bathsystem; ground source heat pump: TCS; PV panels: AEE; plasterboard partitions: Knauf; rooflights: Vitral.

