





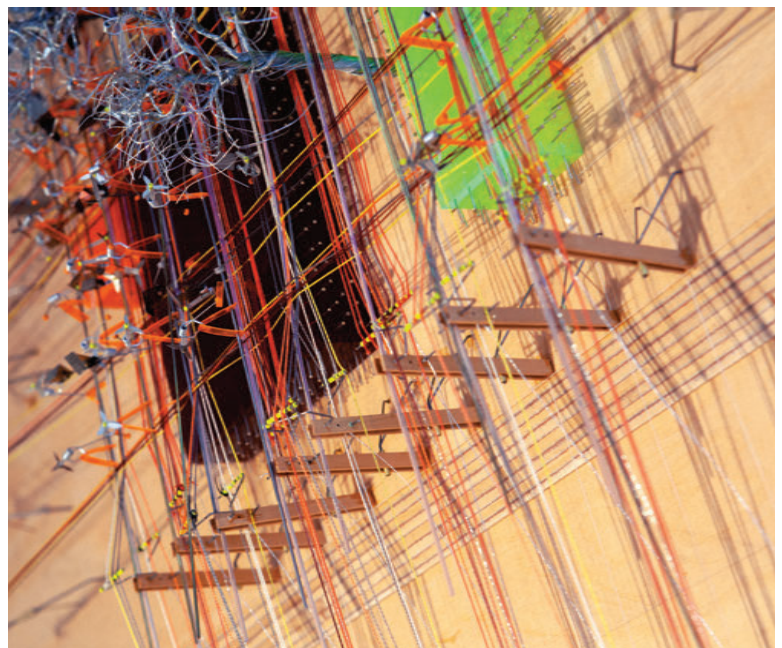
BUILT *to* LAST

— STIRLING PRIZE-WINNING
ARCHITECT NÍALL MCLAUGHLIN
tells ALYN GRIFFITHS how he crafts
timeless buildings
that will be used
FOR GENERATIONS.
Photographed by
BEGUM YETIS



I have a curious sense that you experience architecture in your belly as much as in your eyes," says Irish architect Níall McLaughlin, whose London-based practice designs buildings that are highly contextual and exquisitely detailed. He is speaking about his belief that architects need to engage with the physical qualities of a building throughout the design process, rather than relying too much on computers. His bright and spacious studio on Camden High Street is filled with models created to test ideas in three dimensions and to understand how users will feel in a space. "It's just an instinct I have that I want to be at eye level with the building and to look at it as a physical thing," he adds. "I'm trying to understand in my water what it's really going to be like."

This focus on creating buildings that are a pleasure to use, not just to look at, has stood McLaughlin in >



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good stead throughout a career spanning more than three decades. In that time he has completed dozens of projects, ranging from a small cabin for storing boats and fishing tackle on a lake in Hampshire, to a £100 million mixed-use scheme in London’s King’s Cross for developer Argent. This year, after being shortlisted on three previous occasions, he finally scooped the RIBA Stirling Prize – Britain’s highest accolade for an architecture project – for the New College Library at Magdalene College Cambridge. The award is well-deserved recognition for one of the country’s most gifted and underrated architects, but with typical humility, McLaughlin points out that the project’s success is the result of a collaborative effort involving numerous stakeholders.

“Good architecture always requires lots of different factors to align,” he claims, adding that a committed client, a skilled contractor and a receptive planning authority in Historic England all contributed to the prize-winning project. “I can point to other buildings that we’ve put as much energy, heart and imagination into that just didn’t get over the line in every one of those respects,” he says.

The Stirling Prize is awarded for a building rather than an architect – something McLaughlin agrees with

wholeheartedly – and although he claims the New College Library isn’t particularly representative of his studio’s recent output, it displays characteristics that recur in many of his projects. It’s a confidently contemporary reinterpretation of the college’s existing heritage-listed buildings that responds directly to the needs of its users, providing a range of spaces suited to different types of study. Speaking on behalf of the 2022 RIBA Stirling Prize jury, RIBA President Simon Allford described the library as “sophisticated, generous architecture that has been built to last.” This commitment to longevity is a key reason for the practice’s continued success, as its projects transcend temporary trends and instead focus on delivering a timeless sense of style and versatility of use that guarantees lasting value.

McLaughlin’s approach to architecture has evolved over the years but retains influences from the 20th-century modernist masters he admires, such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Louis Kahn and Alvar Aalto. He studied architecture at University College Dublin between 1979 and 1984 before working for local firm Scott Tallon Walker for four years. In 1990 he set up his own practice in London and spent the first decade working mostly on his own, alongside teaching at The Bartlett and Oxford Brookes University. “I think of architecture as being something you develop through an apprenticeship,” he says, recalling that in those early years the private clients who commissioned him would rightfully challenge his ideas at every stage of a project. “A lot of my practice is shaped by the notion that architecture is a discursive activity,” he adds. “For me, that constant dialogue with clients reinforced the idea that there isn’t some kind of self-evident architectural >

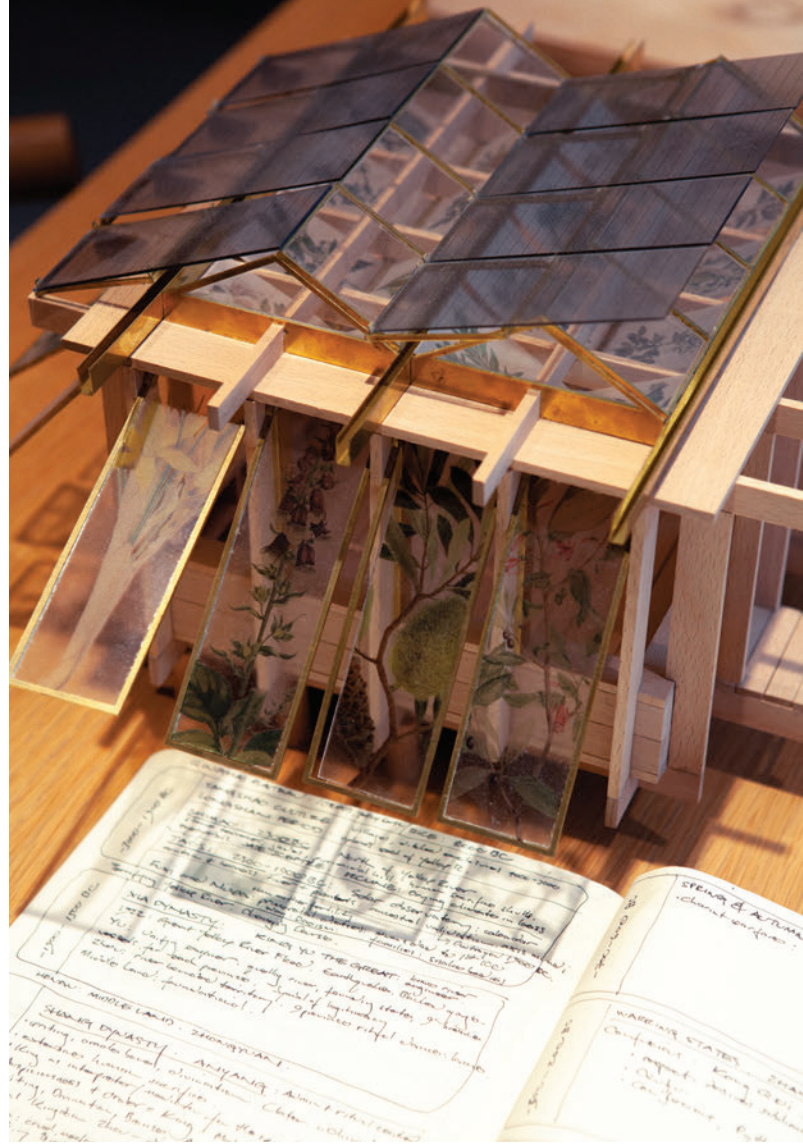
ON THE LEFT: AVENHAM PARK PAVILION’S MODEL (2005). THIS MODEL WAS FOR AN ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITION FOR A NEW CAFE AND COMMUNITY SPACE IN THE PARK. THE LOCAL AREA IS PARTICULARLY WET AND THIS CLIMATE HELPED FOSTER THE GREAT LINEN AND WEAVING INDUSTRIES NEARBY. HERE, A DELICATE CANOPY ROOF WAS CONCEIVED AS BEING LIKE GIANT LOOM. IT HAS AN INTRICATE STRUCTURE THAT CELEBRATES THE RAINFALL IN THIS WETTEST PART OF THE UK BY CAPTURING WATER AND ORCHESTRATING IT AS IT CASCADES OVER ROOFS AND GUTTERS ON ITS WAY BACK TO THE RIVER. THE SOUNDS AND SIGHTS OF RAIN TAPPING, SLUICING AND GUSHING ARE PART OF THE ACOUSTIC EXPERIENCE OF THE BUILDING.

"I'm quite exercised by THE FINE TAILORING OF THINGS which is very difficult to do WHEN YOU'RE WORKING WITH PRE-DESIGNED COMPONENTS"

ideology that everyone else should be expected to understand. Architects have to be able to explain and justify why their ideas are relevant to the context they're working in."

He speaks with fondness about a 2009 project he worked on for the Alzheimer Society of Ireland, designing a new respite and care centre in Dublin. "They said, 'You teach us about architecture and we'll teach you about dementia'," he recollects. The result was a new building situated within the original perimeter walls of an 18th-century kitchen garden that includes communal areas and easily navigable circulation routes with attractive views of the garden. "The client for that project was really aspirational in terms of what they wanted to achieve," McLaughlin explains, "and it resulted in one of the most enjoyable and meaningful projects I've ever done."

Many of McLaughlin's early projects involved working collaboratively with builders and craftspeople, which helped strengthen his appreciation for how buildings are made. He still prefers to use natural materials that can be manipulated and honed rather than incorporating prefabricated products or systems, even if it brings added complexity to the construction process. "I'm quite exercised by the fine tailoring of things which is very difficult to do when you're working with pre-designed components," he explains. "That level of precision is easier to achieve with



ROOF STUDY, MODEL (2013). THIS IS A PRIVATE STUDY THAT SITS ATOP THE REAR RETURN OF AN EDWARDIAN TOWNHOUSE. THE CLIENT, A COLLECTOR OF DRAWINGS, WANTS A GARDEN ROOM FOR ONE WHERE HE CAN SIT AND READ. A CLEARLY ARTICULATED TIMBER FRAME SUPPORTS A SERIES OF GLAZED SCREENS ON THE WALLS AND ROOF. THE SCREENS CAN BE OPENED AND CLOSED WITH PULLEYS AND WINCHES. THE GLASS DISPLAYS LATE 19TH CENTURY BOTANICAL PRINTS WHICH CAST SHADOW AND COLOUR.

stone, timber or bespoke steelwork because you can control the exact scale of a window mullion or how the edge of a roof tapers to give a sense of lightness. It's more complicated because these materials are not standardised and they're more likely to react to external conditions, but the results are far more satisfying."

Around a decade ago, McLaughlin's studio was nominated for the Stirling Prize for an elliptical stone chapel with a wooden crown that it designed for Ripon College Cuddesdon near Oxford. It didn't win but the project attracted a great deal of praise and led to numerous, subsequent commissions from colleges in Oxford and Cambridge. McLaughlin is keen that his studio doesn't become defined by these historically informed institutional buildings, as its output is actually extremely varied. Today, it is involved in a broader range of projects than ever before, around half of which are based outside of the United Kingdom. >





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There’s a visitor centre for the International Rugby Experience in Limerick, Ireland, a museum in the Netherlands and several projects in Canada. He is also working with various faith groups in Britain, which he says consistently challenges his views on the world and his work.

McLaughlin points out that all of these projects were underway well before the announcement of the Stirling Prize win and are therefore unrelated to the award. However, he acknowledges that the prize has brought some potential benefits. “It’s nice to have validation for the work that we do and this recognition can certainly make a difference,” he says. “It gives you an opportunity to work with clients who have good aspirations, but I think one shouldn’t exaggerate it; there are lots of good buildings made every year.”

It’s clear from our conversation that McLaughlin’s focus remains steadfastly on the people and processes that make great architecture happen, rather than on himself or his own achievements. Receiving one of architecture’s most prestigious prizes certainly isn’t going to change him or his studio’s dedication to creating exceptional buildings that are made to last for generations. “I’m aware that what we’re creating is just a small part of a process that pre-exists all of us and will continue well after we are gone,” McLaughlin concludes, humbly. “That for me is the joy and the challenge of architecture.”

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STIRLING PRIZE

Since 1996 — THE STIRLING PRIZE IS AWARDED ANNUALLY BY THE ROYAL INSTITUTE OF BRITISH ARCHITECTS TO THE ARCHITECT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE BEST UK BUILDING OF THE YEAR. THE AWARD WAS FOUNDED IN 1996 AND IS CONSIDERED TO BE THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE AWARD IN THE UNITED KINGDOM. IT IS NAMED AFTER THE INFLUENTIAL ARCHITECT JAMES STIRLING. PREVIOUS WINNERS HAVE INCLUDED 30 ST MARY AXE (ALSO KNOWN AS THE GHERKIN) BY FOSTER + PARTNERS AND THE EVERYMAN THEATRE, LIVERPOOL, BY HAWORTH TOMPKINS.