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Dream weaver

Níall McLaughlin's Cuddesdon chapel

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HAPPY ENDING

Níall McLaughlin wove together many stories to produce his Bishop Edward King Chapel near Oxford. The result is a lofty, sublime and utterly peaceful space of worship

Words Jan-Carlos Kucharek | **Images** Dennis Gilbert

ABOVE: The chapel from the south west. With the orthogonal sacristry, McLaughlin wanted to maintain the separation of the space of worship from the one serving it.

RIGHT: The simple logic of McLaughlin's plan and diagonal cross-beamed roof is only truly apparent when viewed on axis.

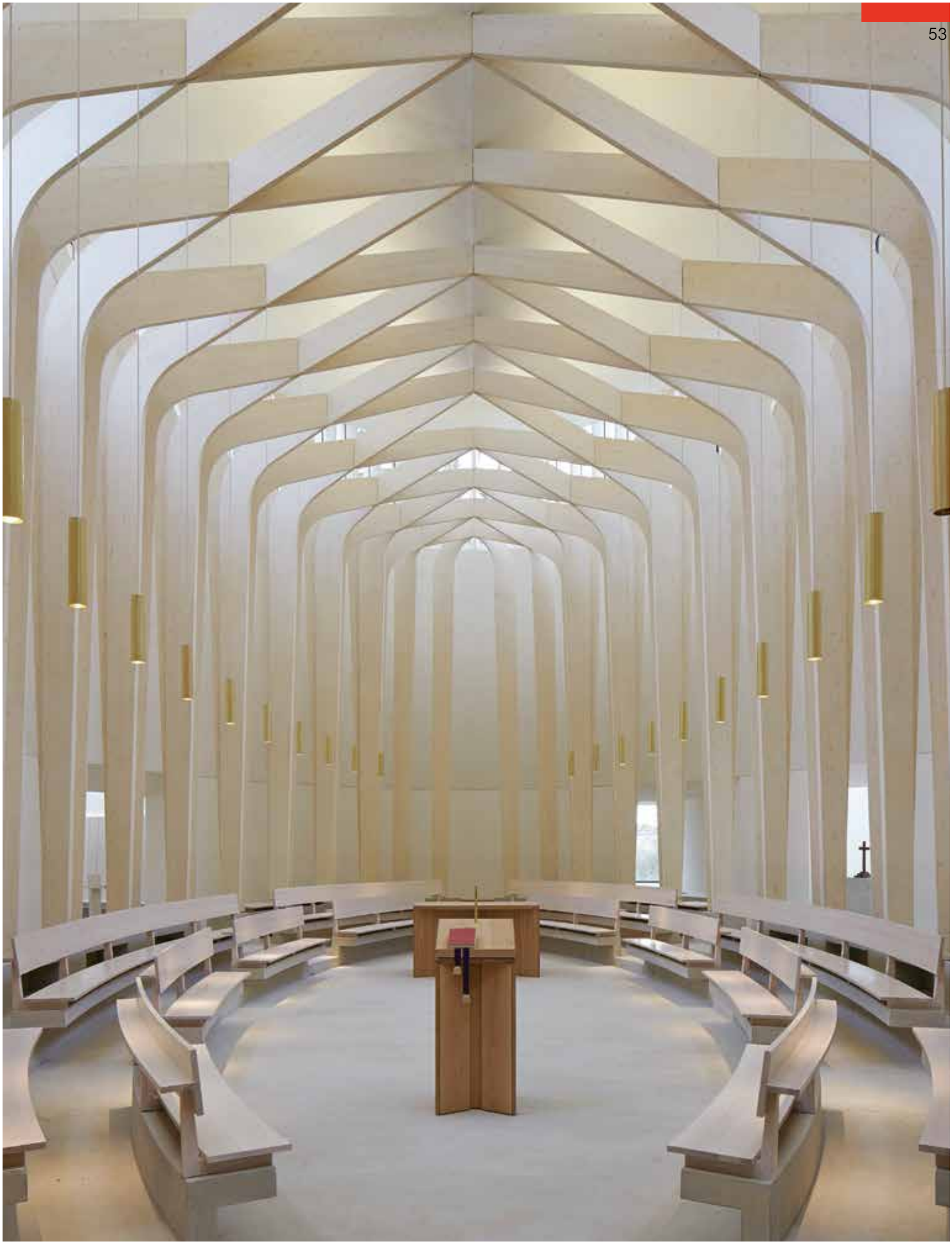
AT THE HEART of Ripon College's new Bishop Edward King Chapel in Cuddesdon, Oxfordshire, lies a steely pragmatism that belies the faith, poems and fables that gave rise to it. Sister Mary Stephen belongs to the venerable order of nearby Begbroke Priory, whose move to Ripon precipitated an RIBA competition for a new chapel in the 150 year old GE Street-designed Anglican seminary. She voices her only concern about Níall McLaughlin's completed design. 'There's no lock on his tabernacle, so we can't keep the sacrament in it,' she says, referring to the precious brass and oak cube that sits in one of two niches that protrude from the chapel's elliptical wall. 'Consecrated hosts have a high value with Satanists on the black market, you see.' I nod; although I didn't know. She attributes this to 'a specification oversight'. This woman with her eyes to heaven seems to have her feet planted firmly on the ground.

But there's no questioning the positive effect of McLaughlin's £2.6m chapel on the picturesque Ripon College, both functionally and aesthetically, which supplants its old first floor chapel to make it accessible for the six incoming Priory sisters. Its final form was the result of clear cognisance of the practical needs of congregation and worship, sublimated to higher levels via tales and metaphors generated by the architect himself. 'One needs stories to bring ideas into being,' says McLaughlin, with the proviso, 'but the resulting volumes have to work purely on their own terms.'

So what were the stories? From the client side at competition stage, an accessible 'Christ-centred and outward looking' space with 'gravity and mystery'; one that could promote 'personal prayer, communal worship and lesser offices by the sisters', with sacristy and storage. McLaughlin's first story came from an early visit to the client. Vice principal, the Revd. Dr Mark Chapman, described their desire for two centres to the chapel, 'one for the word and one for the sacrament' in an 'antiphonal arrangement' that resembled 'more a chancel than a church' ie with the faithful facing each other. 'In describing it, they gestured with their arms out in parallel and curved them in to touch at the ends, and it was a physical image I took away with me,' says McLaughlin.

This memory was crucial to the design. From these embracing arms were hung woven stories of fishermen on Galilee, poems of heavenly boats with anchors snagging on earthly altars, and intimations of gatherings in sunken spaces beneath a dappled canopy of trees. Revd. Chapman remembers how the submission stood out. 'Niall put in all this stuff about coracles and copses but beneath it all we could see this elongated oval shape,' he recalls. 'We could see the notion of gathering but with two distinct ends to the space with its lofty wooden arches that set it apart, giving, for us, the feel of a truly ecclesiastical space. With light coming in from the clerestory it seemed awe-inspiring.' It was unanimously declared winner.

As you enter the college – here a cluster of ashlar stone neo-gothic buildings set loosely around an ancient beech – a crisp elliptical form with adjacent orthogonal sacristy now closes the view to the valley beyond. McLaughlin first made the chapel's upper facade of 'woven' timber, referencing Gottfried Semper's 'enclosure' concept in his 1851 'Four Elements of Architecture.' But on revisiting, he saw this as too literal and opted instead for a curved wall of staggered dogtooth Clipsham stone, smooth on one face, broken on the other. Counterpointing the ashlar stone at ground level, this more sophisticated facade links directly to the

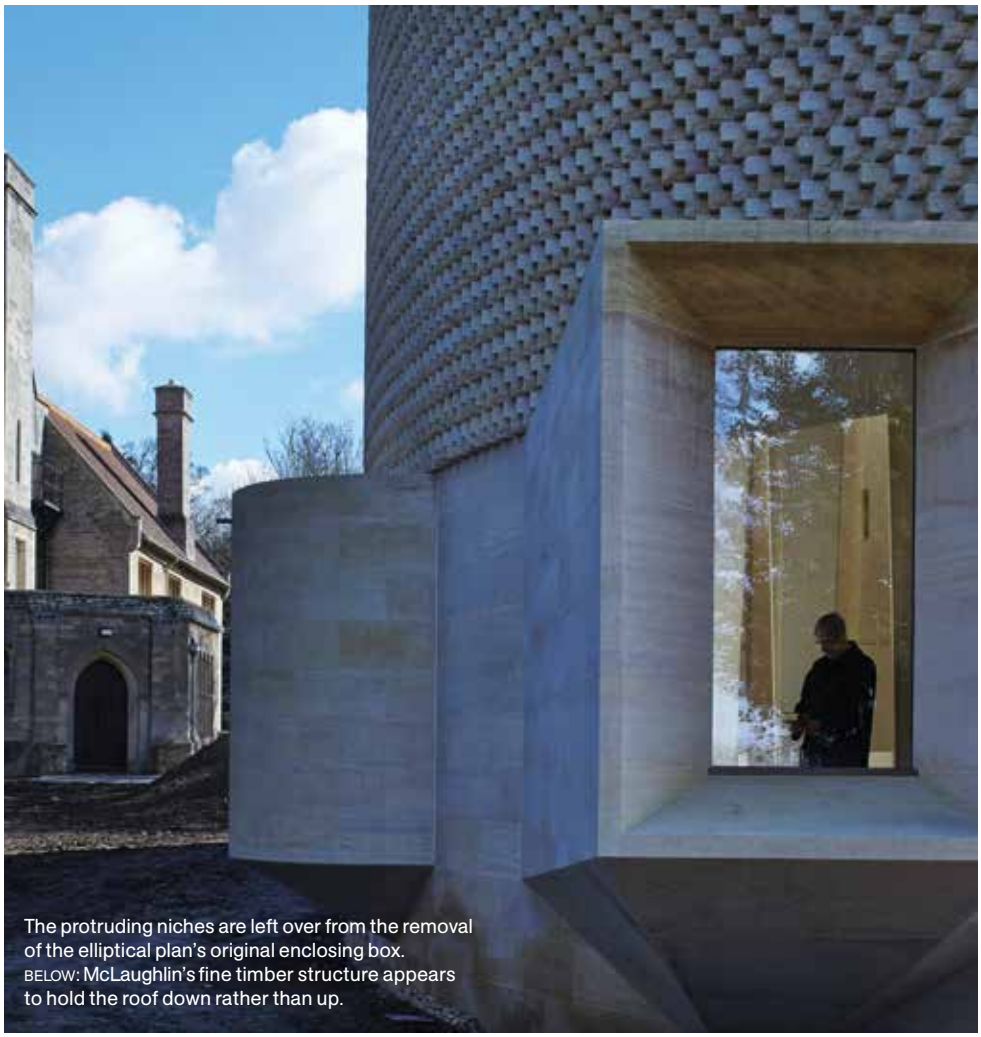


existing buildings, and allows shadows to play on its richer surface throughout the day.

The ellipse, on consideration, seems an obvious choice, given the dual focus the client had requested. I thought of Peter Zumthor's 1989 St Benedict Chapel, perhaps prompted by the timber belfry, but McLaughlin claims Rudolf Schwarz's 1954 Chapel of St Michael in Frankfurt as both his and Zumthor's precedent. He says Schwarz's design, with thin buttresses supporting its high walls on the outside, was almost nihilistically 'looking for the emptiness at the heart of the church's interior'. Zumthor, he claims, tried to make amends by bringing his timber structure back into the line of his timber walls. McLaughlin sees his move of bringing the columns inside the walls and supporting the roof independent of them as 'a natural progression' structure; back in the fold, so to speak; although he doesn't add whether it amounts to any reconciliation of Man and God.

It's strange to see an elliptical CofE chapel, the form being more associated with the great Catholic baroque works of Borromini's San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane and Bernini's Sant'Andrea al Quirinale in Rome. McLaughlin puts this down to the dual foci of altar and lectern but he tips his hat to them both: for dramatic effect, Borromini entered from the long axis, and Bernini from the short. Here, the architect enters deferentially between the two.

It is a master stroke. To enter a small, enclosed calm, white, light space of stained timber columns that morph into diagonal beams supporting a high ceiling above a tall stone clerestory is a pleasure, but to be denied the full joy of understanding by not entering on axis strikes me as more catholic than the Italians. Here, McLaughlin's 'clearing in the woods' is initially hidden by trees, the columns' trunks turning into boughs via a form of kinked entasis. Views are partial and eccentric, and it's only through moving on axis that the true simplicity of the thinking becomes clear, the columns symmetrically arranged around the space, the altar and lectern revealing themselves as its foci. Walking around the ambulatory behind the formed white concrete seating, the space morphs constantly as the structure, widens and narrows. The niches – a residue of the fact that the ellipse was originally enclosed with a box (how baroque is that?) – punch out the walls to create intimate prayer space for the sisters, light streaming down its walls, the contemplative picture window and seat facing out to the valley, and the niche for the tabernacle. In the silence, broken by nothing but the rustling of treetops through the stone fins of the clerestory, it's lovely to sit for a while and watch the sunlight play across the walls and columns. On occasion, the curved clerestory glass casts rainbows. Sound echoes up to the light.



The protruding niches are left over from the removal of the elliptical plan's original enclosing box. BELOW: McLaughlin's fine timber structure appears to hold the roof down rather than up.

Sister Mary thinks the rainbows are about the space 'giving back to those who helped create it'; and that the ambulatory around the pews was inspired, adding, 'We have families at Ripon and the kids can run around, it as they do, without disturbing the service'. Revd. Chapman notes how fine the acoustics are for singing and instruments, and appreciates that, depending which side of the altar he stands, the priest can address either a small tight group or a packed chapel. Set within the fine joinery of the vestry is a single seat for the priest with another picture window looking out south past the vicarage. A space for pre-service contemplation? 'Yes,' says Ripon's development director Sophie Farrant, 'Although there's a power socket beside it if you want to use your iPad...'

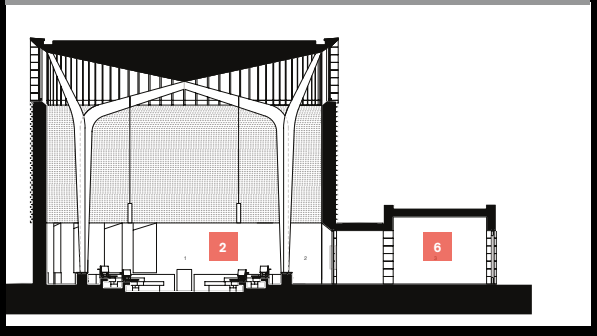
Ultimately, one has to ask if the client's needs for a larger religious space, allowing different modes of worship and providing for the equivalence of Word and sacrament, would have produced a comparable transcendent, sublime architectural volume without the metaphors that informed it. But I think not; and Jesus himself, with his parables, knew the value of a good story. 'It's what we dreamed of but didn't think we would get,' says Farrant. Ah, the power of prayer... ■

DATABASE

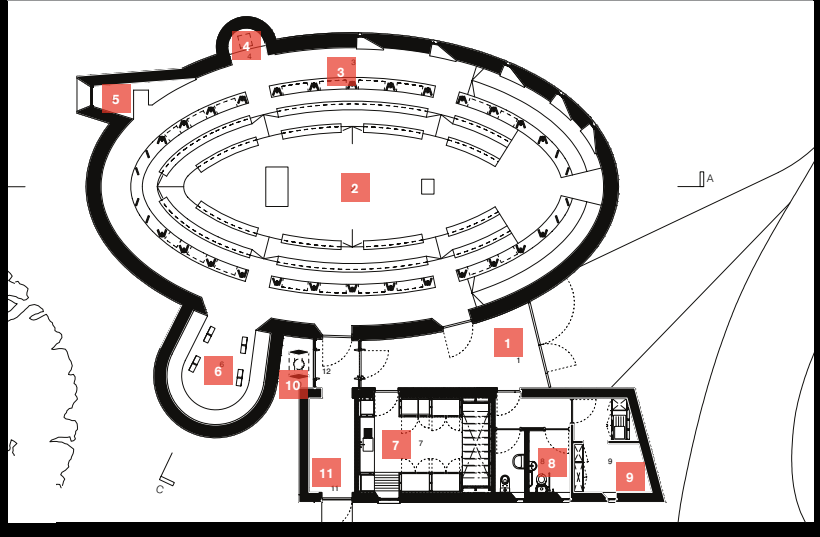
BISHOP EDWARD KING CHAPEL, CUDDESDON

WEST ELEVATION

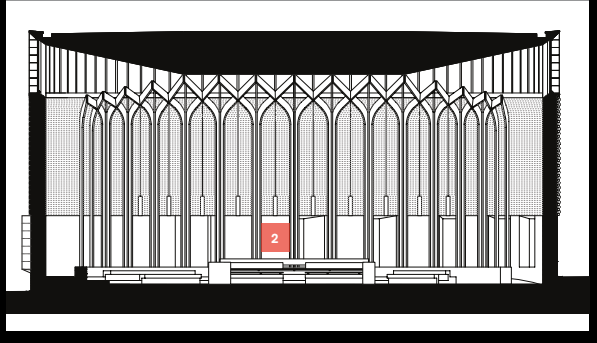
NORTH-SOUTH THROUGH SISTERS' PRAYER ROOM



GROUND FLOOR PLAN



EAST-WEST SECTION



KEY TO DIAGRAMS

1: Entrance lobby
2: Main chapel
3: Ambulatory
4: Tabernacle niche
5: Private prayer space
6: Sisters' prayer room
7: Sacristry
8: Toilets
9: Storage
10: Bell tower
11: Second entrance

IN NUMBERS: Contract cost £2.6m, cost/m^2 £7264, gross internal area 280m^2, column heights 9.5m, length of chapel 244m, width of chapel 13.5m, number of seats 80, expressions of interest 120, number of sisters 6

TIM MARCOT, associate at engineer Price and Myers, says that although the chapel is based in the real world and physical laws, the metaphors and stories that Niall McLaughlin wove around it had to be bought into. 'You can't just switch off when you hear them,' says Marcot. 'They help to understand what the architect is imagining, and inform your engineering solution.'

Part of the engineering challenge with the timber glulam structure was to maintain slenderness, especially at the confluence of four timbers in the centre of the ceiling, where metal dowels connecting them all are discreetly hidden within their 60mm thickness. These connections effectively create a continuous mesh of structure independently supporting the roof free of its enclosing elliptical reinforced concrete block wall. Marcot explains that the timber roof was originally designed to have exposed trusses, but that as the design developed, this was deemed too fussy. Instead, the trusses were placed above the lime plaster soffit, letting each tri-partite supporting column make its role clear and unencumbered.

Marcot adds that the elliptical wall, while not supporting the roof, is perfect for laterally holding the glulam structural mesh in place, saying, 'They're slim, and without it they'd flex from side to side. The wall and its stone clerestory are doing all the lateral tying work.'

As the columns converge at the long ends of the ellipse's perimeter, they would logically get smaller as support points concentrate around a locus, but the decision was made to maintain the same dimensions, Marcot explains, leading to an interesting structural approach. 'The columns here are becoming more redundant in terms of needing to take vertical load, but they're still necessary to provide lateral support to the long axis, so we decided to peel the columns' trusses away from the roof. They connect to each other and terminate each long axis,' he says. The effect is sublime, as the roof soffit seems in effect to float free untethered – yet another of the chapel's boating analogies. **CK**

CREDITS

Architect: Niall McLaughlin Architects
Building contractor: Beard Construction
Client: Ripon College and Community of St John the Baptist
Structural engineer: Price and Myers
M & E engineer: Synergy Consulting Engineers
Acoustic engineer: Paul Gillieron Acoustic Design
Quantity surveyor: Ridge and Partners LLP
Stone consultant: Harrison Goldman
Access consultant: Jane Toplis Associates
Planning consultant: Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners
CDM co-ordinator: HCD Management
Approved building control inspector: HCD Building Control
Construction consultant: Richard Bayfield

SUPPLIERS

Stone: Szerelmey
Windows: Northholt Glass
Flat roofing: Boothville
Electrical: GA electrical
Mechanical: MIH
Joinery: D Smith Joinery
Loose furniture: Westside Design
Structural timber: Cowley
Steel work: LJKimber
Bell foundry: Whitechapel Bell Foundry