

In practice

Níall McLaughlin





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In the AJ this week we feature the work of Níall McLaughlin Architects. *Rob Wilson* met Níall on site in Bishop Auckland. Photography by *Ben Blossom*

‘You mean what we call Blackpool Tower,’ said the taxi driver on learning our destination – the new visitor centre Níall McLaughlin Architects has designed for Auckland Castle in Bishop Auckland, County Durham. It is a timber structure, topped by a distinctive mono-pitched tower, almost 30m high and is, according to an Auckland Castle employee, considered ‘a bit of a Marmite project in the town’. Such comments probably reflect local reaction not so much to McLaughlin’s design, as to the activities of his client, Jonathan Ruffer, an investment banker who, having bought the castle and parts of the town, is looking to regenerate it as a cultural destination, ruffling feathers in the process. In any case, McLaughlin is phlegmatic about the initial responses to the tower. ‘Once it’s open, it’ll change. At present it’s this fenced-off “thing”.’

‘I’m interested in hearing people’s opinions when they don’t know I’m the architect,’ he adds and relates how, when visiting the project that first put the practice on the map – a housing block for Peabody in London’s Silvertown – he’d asked a little girl what she thought. ‘I think it’s really very silly,’ she said, referring to the iridescent film on its façade, a material suggested by project artist Martin Richmond.

‘The idea came from the site, which had been poisoned by a huge 19th-century chemical plant,’ recalls McLaughlin. ‘I loved that everything that had been immensely expensive in the 18th century – colour, lights, sweets – were suddenly made affordable by this chemical industry. I loved that sense of cheap glory, which this façade was meant to reflect.’

In the course of the Silvertown project, the material had indeed looked like a potentially questionable choice. ‘There was an awful moment as we were all set to go when the insurance company said “that’s not a building material”, and we contacted the suppliers, who then said they weren’t going to guarantee it. But we realised if we just changed the detail, so that all the film would be able to just fall off the building [ie not be considered integral to the structure], it would still be a perfectly viable residential unit – which satisfied the insurance company. It was a really interesting issue, because you had to solve a non-technical problem in a technical way.’

At the memory of this McLaughlin lets out one of his appreciative chuckles, which pepper his conversation, dissolving the slightly dour impression he projects on first meeting. It points to a rich enjoyment of the process of architecture, which becomes all the more apparent as we speak. It comes through in the relish with which

Auckland Castle
Visitor Centre and
Faith Museum, 2018-19

This vertical, timber-framed visitor centre with 30m viewing tower, together with a stone-clad gallery building intended to house a Faith Museum, are the two main new-build elements in the new visitor attraction and heritage site being created at Auckland Castle, the 900-year-old former home of the prince bishops of Durham.

The castle was bought by investment banker Jonathan Ruffer in 2013 and placed into a trust, complete with its rare set of 17th century paintings by Spanish artist Francisco de Zurbarán, which it has housed for 250 years. The intention was to increase visitor numbers to the castle and the surrounding town to 100,000 people a year.

Other elements of the plan include a major renovation of the historic fabric of the castle and its grounds, a gallery of Spanish art and related study centre run in collaboration with Durham University and a new hotel, all occupying existing structures in the town.



he relates the history and symbolism of the Auckland Castle site (the visitor centre’s shape is actually inspired by a siege tower) and in his accounts of exploration of materials, of politics, and of process, practice and making. It is an enthusiasm that has made him one of the most respected yet idiosyncratic architectural practitioners of recent years in the UK. Handing him the Jencks Prize in 2016, Charles Jencks praised McLaughlin’s qualities as an architect in his ‘commitment to architecture as an art and professional practice’.

The Jencks Award has been just one of a series of accolades his practice has attracted since the Silvertown project, including two Stirling Prize shortlistings. A portfolio of outstanding projects ranges in variety from the cloud-like Bandstand at Bexhill (2001); to the deep, brickly reveals of the Darbshire Place housing scheme in London, also for Peabody (2009); the calm orthogonal pavilions of the Alzheimer’s Respite Centre in Dublin (2011); and the latticed timber oval of the Bishop Edward King Chapel in Oxford (2013).

McLaughlin’s is an architecture that plays with elemental geometries and simple palettes of materials, and is not afraid to draw on nor to echo in its forms past models of Classicism or historical precedents – witness the siege tower. Some commentators have noted that it plays an almost Postmodernist game, synthesising idea, form and material. A notable example is his housing block in the Olympic Village in Stratford – where the practice was one of several to design to the same basic model. McLaughlin chose to cover the façade with clearly repetitive reliefs cast in reconstituted stone of Greek athletes from the Parthenon frieze – used to draw attention to what McLaughlin calls ‘the abstraction and deracination of the design task itself’, at the same time baldly referencing the history of the Games. It’s something that could have seemed crude pastiche in less assured hands but gives the block a texturally rich façade and light-hearted feel that marks it out today from its neighbours. This is a thinking architect and one unafraid of history.

For all the distinctive quality of his architecture, McLaughlin is dismissive of the idea of the architect’s authorial ‘signature’. He says: ‘There is sort of a hysteria around authorship that’s dispiriting. Originality in building is rarely the way in which it is packaged and sold. A project



can be incredibly original and beautifully built on account of the way the brick is bonded. Sometimes it’s the quiet thing within a project that’s original.’

This might seem surprising from someone whose profile is one of the most respected name-on-the-tin practitioners in the business. But he adds that, before setting up his practice in London in 1990, ‘if you’d asked me, I’d have said my preference would be to work for a practice I admired, rather than having my own practice’.

He’d come to the city after graduating from University College Dublin in 1984, then working for Scott Tallon Walker, first in Dublin and later transferring to its London office. The early 1990s were not an auspicious time to set up a practice in the teeth of the gathering recession and in a city where he had few contacts. But during this lean time financially, he now sees there was a freedom that clearly shaped him as an architect.

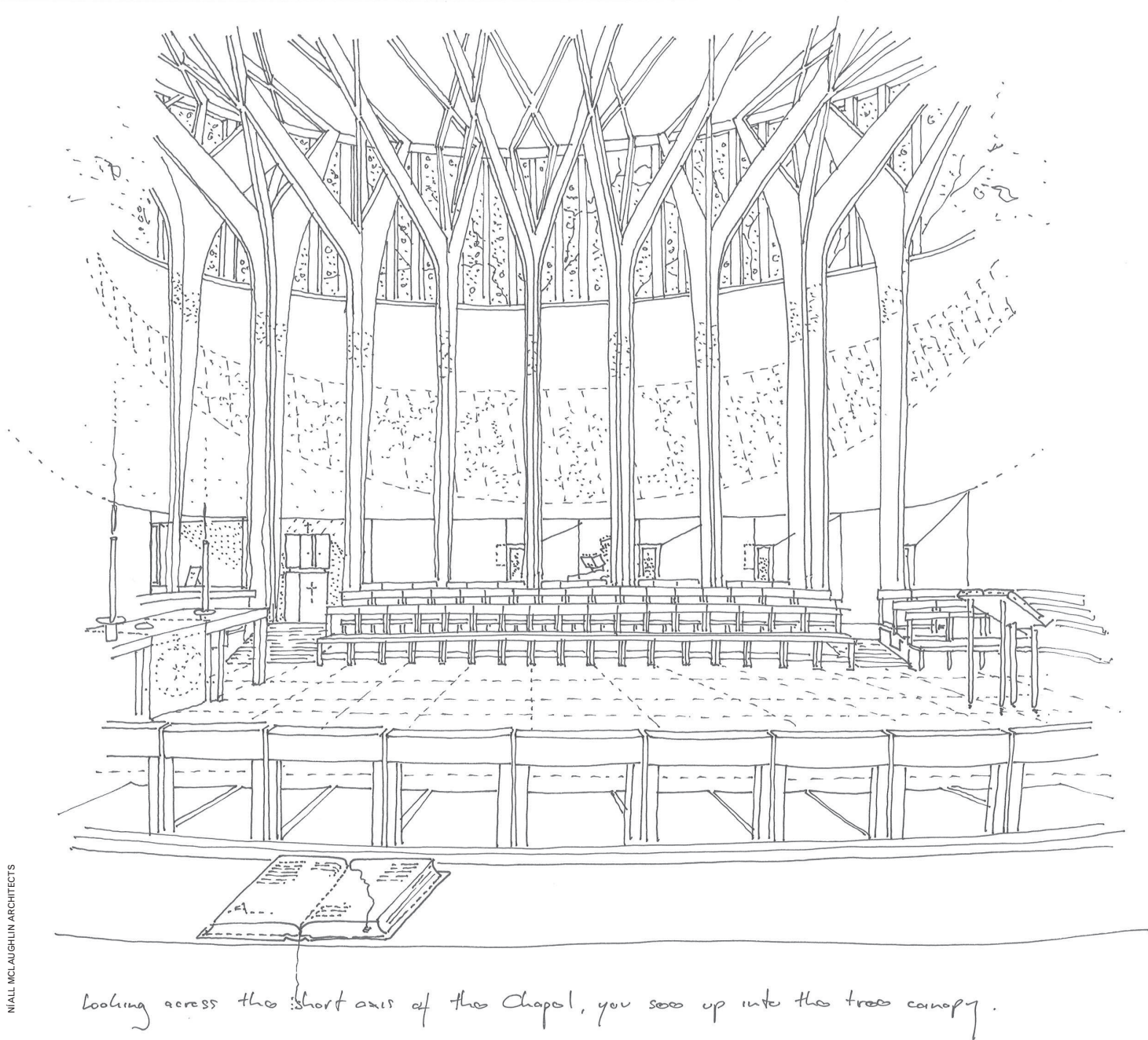
‘There was nearly a decade of working by myself from a room. I think I took on my first employee in 1999. It slightly allows you to “make yourself up”. You can kind of invent yourself in your own terms in a way that I wouldn’t have been able to if I were part of a more coherent or mono-cultural scene. Probably the first project that came to any kind of significant public attention was a building we did called The Shack in 1996. But in fact we invented the project and then persuaded someone to build it for us, rather than having a client’.

Teaching was also integral to his practice from the start: ‘My first proper teaching job was at Oxford Brookes. I had a really nice time there: Chris Cross was head of school, and he had a very good group of people there. Murray Fraser was there. FAT were there, and so was Ros Diamond. There was a very lively scene. For me this was very nice, as it was my first introduction not just to the teaching scene but to any coherent architecture scene in the UK.’

Teaching has remained important to him; he is now professor of architectural practice at the Bartlett – and views studying, practice and teaching as very much a continuum of learning and education.

His own educational experience at University College Dublin is a constant referent when he discusses his approach to design – and underpins the intense ideation of materials in his projects.

He says: ‘The way I was taught had a strongly Miesian accent to it. I was taught by people like Robin Walker who are extremely important to me. I always refer back to a lecture he gave on the Lakeshore Drive Apartments. He showed a corner detail section in plan and was really exercised about the fact that here you had a steel section



Looking across the short axis of the Chapel, you see up into the tree canopy.

OPPOSITE-TOP
Iridescent façade,
low-cost housing,
Silvertown,
London (2004)

OPPOSITE-CENTRE
Façade detail,
Olympic Village
housing, Stratford,
London (2011)

OPPOSITE-BOTTOM
The Shack bird
photography hide,
Northamptonshire
(1996)

ABOVE
Development
sketch for interior
of Bishop Edward
King Chapel (2013)

holding up the building, which for fire-proofing reasons was then wrapped in concrete, but then wrapped in steel again. What Robin couldn't process was what Mies intended by that. He read Mies through an Anglo-American tradition, from the Arts and Crafts, the idea of the perfect conceptual transparency of construction materials: showing the truth of what they are.

'But later I went back to other readings of Mies which come from German ideas: like those of Gottfried Semper. Semper says the beginning of art is the destruction of material in favour of the idea – that the destruction of the material properties of things in favour of something else is the ideal of what architecture is.

'I'm not interested in the slavish structural truth but in the semblance of a structural ideas being represented, so that when you enter a building it feels as though the whole of the structure stands for a singular idea.'

Alongside its distinctive approach to materiality, his architecture is informed by ideas around the individual perception of space from his own experience. He says: 'I'm terrible when I go to restaurants, because I have to sit in about three places before I can sit still. The idea of the individual wanting to situate themselves and achieve a kind of openness, of possibility around their own place in the world, that's the start of architecture.'

At the same time he is dismissive of the notion of architects 'making space'. He says: 'I'm always against this idea. I think we make a space between ourselves and things. Architecture is either framing that space well, or it's not. Its primarily a qualifying or framing activity.'

This interest in space both clearly informed and was developed through his work on the Alzheimer's Respite Centre in Dublin, which was later reflected on in the exhibition Losing Myself for the Irish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2016. McLaughlin says: 'I spent 10 years trying to think about what people with dementia are losing: this idea of something we call space, that we experience the world through, but never think about. You get very close to the heart of architecture and the unique human capacity to experience the world through an idea of space.'

Turning to the topic of the marginalisation of the architect in the construction process, he sees this as more of a challenge than a problem: one requiring architects to bolster their own still unique position in the process by skilling up accordingly.

He says: 'As a practitioner, one is constantly engaged with the questions: What is the authority of the architect; what is the role of the architect? Architecture is a weak discipline. I think with architects generally, our authority comes from our skill – and the ability to synthesise all of the multitude of skills of other people, whether it be cost or programme management or really knowing about the details, to me that's the beginning of the architect's authority. You have got to learn up, to be at the centre of the process.'

Certainly, observing him on site at the Auckland Castle project, clambering up scaffolding, discussing his inspiration for the project and then down to inspect the piling with the contractor, his own ability to synthesise the needs of both the 'art and professional practice' of architecture, is clearly evident.

With a slew of schemes completing over the past year, such as the Tapestry apartments for Argent at King's Cross, the LAMDA, Jesus College and Sultan Nazrin Shah higher education projects reviewed in this issue and a new country house in Hampshire, as well as a series of other projects currently completing or on site, there seems to have been a step-change in the scale, number and range of the practice's projects.

McLaughlin says: 'I'd get quite bored just repeating. What one is looking to do is try to make the world anew.'

Níall McLaughlin CV

- 1962 Born (in Geneva)
- 1984 Graduated University College Dublin
- 1984-9 Worked for Scott Tallon Walker in Dublin and London
- 1990 Established Níall McLaughlin Architects

Key projects

- 1996 Carmelite Monastery, London
- 1996 The Shack, Northants
- 2001 Jacob's Ladder, Oxfordshire
- 2001 Bandstand, Bexhill
- 2004 Low-cost housing, Silvertown, London
- 2004 Dirk Cove, Clonakilty
- 2006 Centre for the Built Environment, Hull
- 2008 Deal Pier, Kent
- 2009 House at Goleen, Ireland
- 2009 Alzheimer's Respite Centre, Dublin
- 2011 Olympic Village housing, London
- 2011 Somerville College, Oxford
- 2013 The Bishop Edward King Chapel, Oxford
- 2013 Carmelite Chapel, Dublin
- 2014 Darbshire Place, London
- 2015 The Fishing Hut, Hampshire
- 2016 Tapestry, King's Cross, London
- 2017 LAMDA, London
- 2017 Jesus College, Cambridge
- 2017 Sultan Nazrin Shah Centre, Oxford
- 2017 Private House, Hampshire

Current projects

- 2018-19 Auckland Castle, County Durham
- 2019 International Rugby Experience, Limerick
- 2020 Magdalene College Library, Cambridge
- 2020 Balliol College Masterplan, Oxford
- TBC New entrance, Natural History Museum, London
- TBC Camden Goods Yard, Camden, London
- TBC Song School, Trinity Hall, Cambridge

Awards

- 1998 Young British Architect of the Year
- 2005 Stephen Lawrence Prize: House at Dirk Cove
- 2013 Stirling Prize shortlist: Bishop Edward Chapel
- 2015 Stephen Lawrence Prize: Fishing Hut
- 2015 Stirling Prize shortlist: Darbshire Place
- 2016 Charles Jencks Award





Building study

High ordinary

Raised above a flood zone over a porous undercroft, the Sultan Nazrin Shah Centre at Worcester College, Oxford, combines graceful Classical lines with practicality

Following a design competition in early 2013, Worcester College, Oxford selected Níall McLaughlin Architects to design the Sultan Nazrin Shah Centre. The brief called for a new auditorium, dance space, seminar rooms, and ancillary facilities on the site of a tennis court overlooking the spectacular college sports field. The building nestles into the tree line, providing aspect over the field while forming a new three-sided 'quad' to the east. The designed form carefully respects the neighbouring MJP-designed Sainsbury Building, with which it shares a new square and extension to the college lake.

Words Rob Wilson
Photography Nick Kane

The cover of the 7 September 1983 edition of the AJ featured the then new Sainsbury Building at Worcester College by MacCormac Jamieson Prichard, the subject of the issue's main building study written by Robert Voticky – and the same building that now faces the new Nazrin Shah Centre across a common courtyard. The latter's architect, Níall McLaughlin, keeps a copy of the issue in his office and, walking through the college with him, it becomes clear how important the architectural context of the college's newer buildings – particularly the MacCormac building, which he calls 'superb' – has been to its design development.

The thrust of critique in Voticky's appraisal is around the then current reaction to the 'fuck context' tendency in Modernism, and the duopoly of what he calls 'High' and 'Ordinary' design traditions, crudely: form-making Beaux Arts-type architecture versus architecture more determined by function and use. He reviews the Sainsbury Building favourably as a clever synthesis of both and, seeing it today, it remains an interesting mix of contextual modernism gently tipping into Pomo. Its symmetrical plan splays out from a sunken corner common room, sitting prow-like on a paved promontory out into the college lake, its floor level delightfully that of the depth of a punt. From this, the building banks back in twinned clusters of student rooms, designed to be approached obliquely, looking more vernacular picturesque than symmetrical set-piece.



NÍALL McLAUGHLIN ARCHITECTS





Worcester College indeed appears almost an exemplar of mixing what you could call 'high' and 'ordinary' architecture from when you first enter its main gate. Passing on axis under the massive Hawksmoor Library block, the entrance court is a beautiful study in contrasts. To the left, a grand wing continues Hawksmoor's language, while to the right, where you'd expect a matching one, there is a row of medieval cottage-like buildings – remnants of the earlier Gloucester College that survived when the money from Worcester College's original benefactor ran out.

MacCormac's composition has an equally unfulfilled air, ending in its most Pomo element: a symmetrical back 'gatehouse'

to the college, its roofline like a broken pediment – an implied centre point to a larger complex that was never built. Instead, two lumpen linear 1990s student accommodation blocks sit to the north of the gate. To the west of these on the site of an old tennis court, facing on to the college's playing fields and backing onto the Oxford synagogue, the new Sultan Nazrin Shah Centre provides much more active dialogue with the Sainsbury Building across the shared courtyard.

Most striking is a huge portal/proscenium window, framed in fins of Clipsham stone (the classic stone of Oxford). Water bubbles out from beneath its base into a basin of water, which is connected to the college lake. The jump in scale of its architectural

elements compared with the surrounding buildings is akin to that of Hawksmoor in the front court. This window fronts and floods with light a large mirror-lined studio space for dance, yoga, or even, if the huge glazed panels are rolled back, for impromptu theatre performances (student theatre being a Worcester College tradition). This portal combines uncompromising contemporary detailing with Classical echoes, not least in appearing to be a fanciful source or spring like a nymphaeum, here animated not by carved figures but by the figures of people using the studio space. With this light-touch mix of practical function, form and delight, utilising distinct architectural language while echoing and drawing on the context



of the site, McLaughlin's building reprises beautifully threads of thought that earlier informed MacCormac's.

As well as this studio space, the new building – named for the deputy head of state of Malaysia, a former alumni and the building's main funder – consists of seminar rooms, more informal study spaces and an auditorium-cum-lecture theatre, laid out as a quarter-circle on plan.

The auditorium is expressed in the external composition by a curved clerestory element of vertical stone fins alternating with glazing. This sits above a similarly stone-arcaded west façade on a stone-faced base, opening out west onto the games pitches. The west façade is symmetrical in composition

with a central set of steps leading up to a loggia flanked by the windows of the two seminar rooms. As the building's main set-piece frontage, it is saved from being too orthogonally static by the interplay, echo and changing rhythm of the radial elements of the clerestory above, off-centre but always suggesting a total symmetry that is never compositionally achieved.

The rhythm of vertical repeats gives the whole a Classical air from afar, but any impression of a portico of stone columns is soon dispelled. The elements of the façade on approach appear more like sinewed bones than columns: finely tooled and tapered fins of stone framing space or glazing, solid yet lightweight, they express as much as cover

the steel frame to which they are attached. Equally, the stone-faced plinth, which covers structural blockwork, is peppered here and there with holes.

Its role is no grand podium-like gesture but a raising-up of the whole ground floor of the building for the practical reason that it sits on ground liable to flooding. The holes allow for ingress and egress of flood water into and out of a sacrificial basement hollow beneath the building.

The main entrance is set back on the south side, almost suppressed to the right past a blank flanking wall of the studio block and service core. You enter a lofty, fluid foyer space where materials are kept minimally simple: stone flooring with some exposed

Abstraction and tension in its structure and its formal play with axis and symmetry are balanced by its richness of material and surface

stone walls and other elements alternating with timber joinery and columns.

To the right is a so-called 'e-hub', furnished with a mix of chair, desk and table set-ups for a range of informal, self-directed learning.

Ahead and to the left, a curve of internally expressed stone vertical fins marks the back of the lecture auditorium. Full-height oak doors can be folded back flush into them, allowing the auditorium and foyer to form one seamless space outside of events, a nice democratisation of the hierarchies of the space. Equally, blinds are integrated into all glazed openings, allowing for the black-boxing or flooding with light of the auditorium and other spaces, depending on need. Inside the auditorium, curved banks of tooled oak benches with pull-down desks descend to a small, shallow stage, the whole reminiscent in layout of an Ancient Greek theatre. The ensemble underlines the sense of theatre inherent even in a simple lecture or event, while providing a space that, while formalised, does not feel prescriptive.

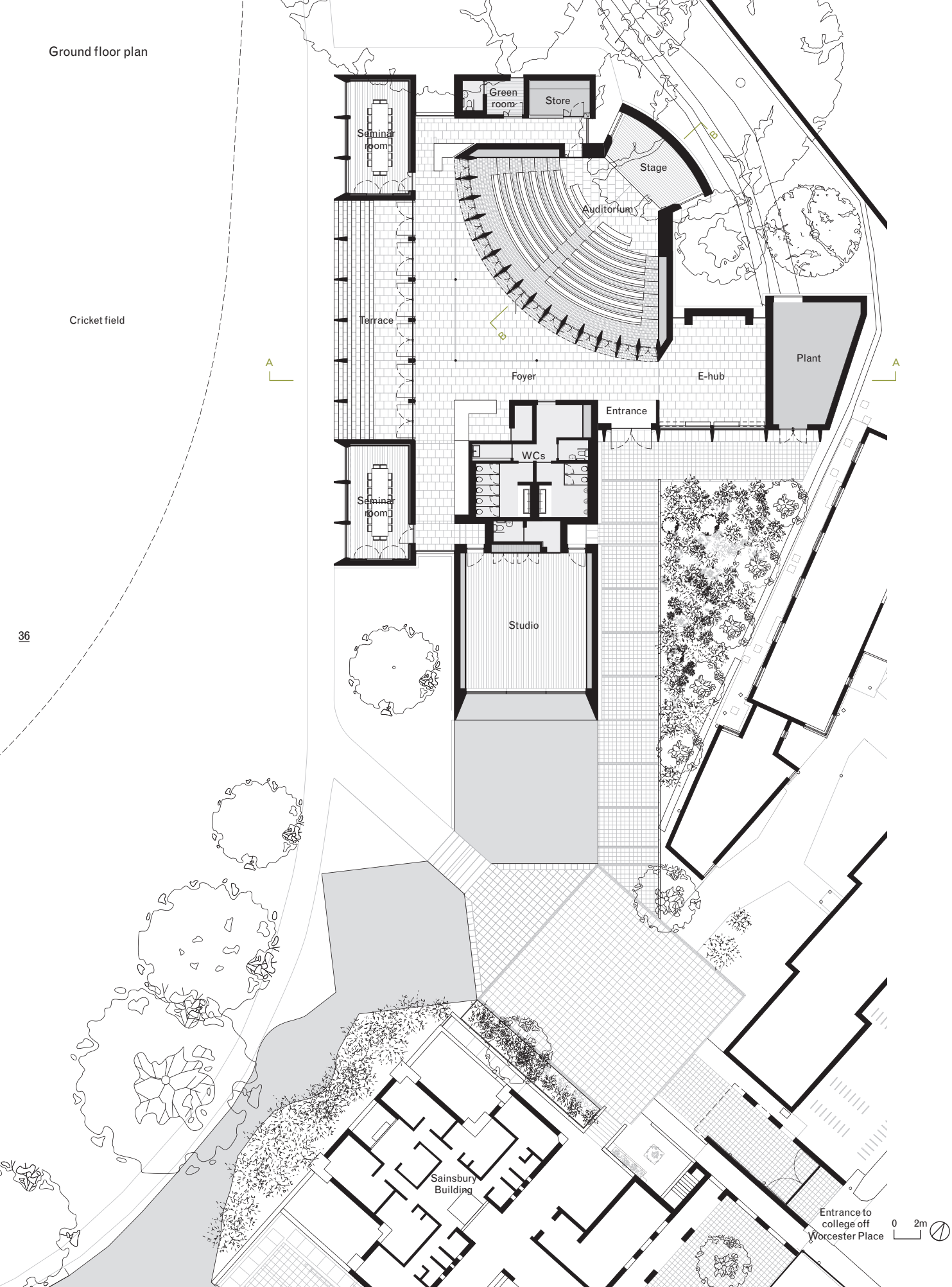
The foyer opens out to the west, folding around the auditorium to a green room and service rooms, while to the left it leads down to the entrance to the studio, past the service core and toilets. These are flanked by generously robust built-in oak counters and cupboards designed for the paraphernalia of catering and events. Everywhere there is full-height glazing, enjoying views to the playing fields through the central loggia area, or just framing a particular tree. From the loggia, which is flanked simply by the two seminar rooms, steps lead down to the grass outside, providing an impromptu outside seating or pavilion space from which students can watch cricket matches in the summer.

The ceilings are formed of grids of timber joists and beams, giving the whole the air of an internal verandah. The light, airy yet formal uprightness of the spaces have more than a touch of Schinkel to them – and McLaughlin mentions the Charlottenhof Palace in Potsdam as a referent – a pavilion in a park.

While a building like this with its rich benefactor will serve as the realm of a limited number of lucky students, its architecture is still doing the universal business of providing good spaces for living: ordered but open, orchestrated to enable movement and flow, not direct it. Abstraction and tension in its structure and its formal play with axis and symmetry are balanced by its richness of material and surface: the poised heft of the building belied by a sense of lightness and its use of daylight. The whole layout has an easy, functional formality to it: high and ordinary architecture.



Ground floor plan

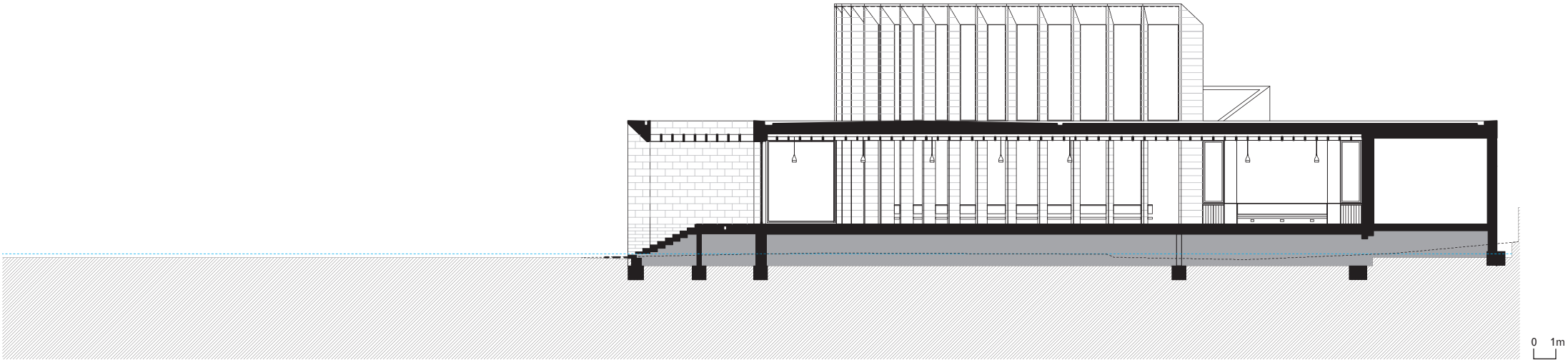


Client's view

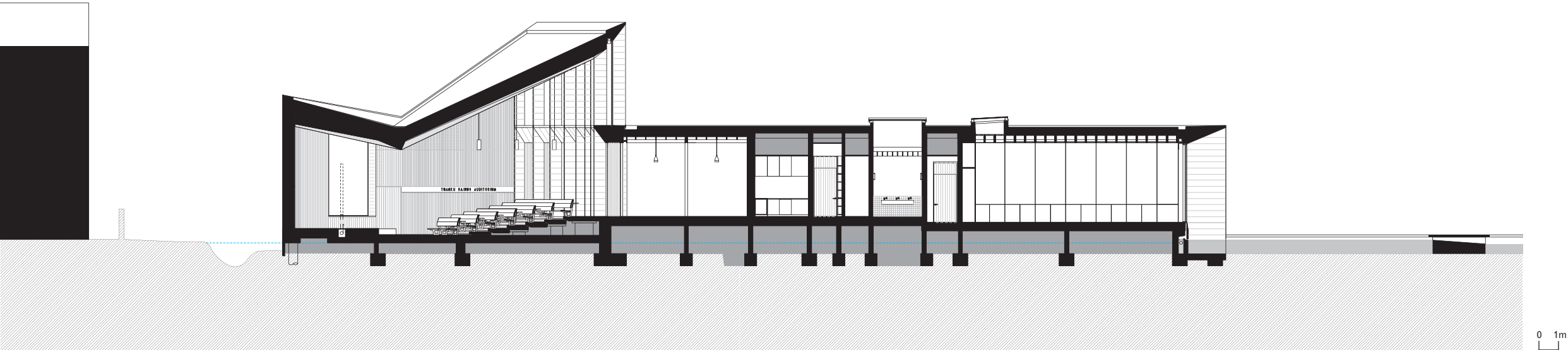
At Worcester College we are most fortunate in our setting: our large estate, our beautiful gardens, our lake, our on-site sports field. We also have a wonderful mix of buildings, from the medieval cottages of Gloucester College through to the 18th-century range designed by several of the greatest Georgian architects, to the award-winning 20th-century Sainsbury Building.

But, until now, we have never had an auditorium in which a full year's worth of students can gather, public lectures can be delivered, the Buskins Dramatic Society can perform a play and the Music Society a recital, and academic conferences and summer schools can offer their plenary sessions. All this is now possible and more, since this magnificent centre also offers two seminar rooms looking out over the cricket pitch, a spacious foyer for socialising, an e-hub where students can work on their laptops, and the Smethurst Studio, overlooking the extended lake, in which students can book dance, yoga and pilates classes, play rehearsals and other activities.

The auditorium is already being hailed as the most beautiful space of its kind in Oxford. The setting of the building takes everyone's breath away. We are so grateful, so privileged, and we offer our thanks above all to Sultan Nazrin, but also to our visionary architect, Niall McLaughlin and his team, and our main contractor, Beard, which has seen through a highly complex and challenging building project with remarkable good humour and dedication to quality.
Jonathan Bate, provost, Worcester College



Section A-A



Section B-B

Architect's view

The Sultan Nazrin Shah Centre project involved not simply the provision of new facilities, but also the development and enhancement of the setting of this significant part of the college site. While the relationship between the new buildings and the listed parkland is important, it is only one part of a complex arrangement.

The building has been designed as a theatre in a garden. It is raised on a podium. A curved stone auditorium opens directly onto an oak-ceilinged foyer that extends out to pergolas and terraces overlooking the cricket pitch. The theatre is framed by a high stone screen that rises to allow clerestory light into the space. It is surmounted by a pleated ceiling sweeping down to the stage. It can operate either as a fully enclosed, darkened environment or as a bright, daylit space surrounded by gardens on all sides. The dance studio stands at the end of a long, serpentine lake that connects it back to the ancient heart of the college.

As you arrive through the gatehouse from Worcester Place, you are presented with a new open court that frames a view out over the lake to parkland. We use this square to connect MJP's superb Sainsbury Building to our new proposal and to link them both to the surrounding courts and gardens.
Niall McLaughlin

Working detail

The site is within a flood zone, which required the design to follow strict guidance from the Environment Agency. As a result the building has been lifted above the ground to allow water to pass beneath through perforations within the façade in the event of a flood. Although it is hollow beneath, the building is intended to be read as a solid construction of stonework. This was achieved through ground beams supporting a network of dwarf walls beneath the ground floor, on which precast concrete floor planks are supported. The blockwork and steelwork structure rises from this deck.

This raising of the structure facilitated an innovative M&E servicing strategy, with the ventilation ductwork for the auditorium located within the floor void and supplying the plenum beneath the amphitheatre-style seating of the auditorium.

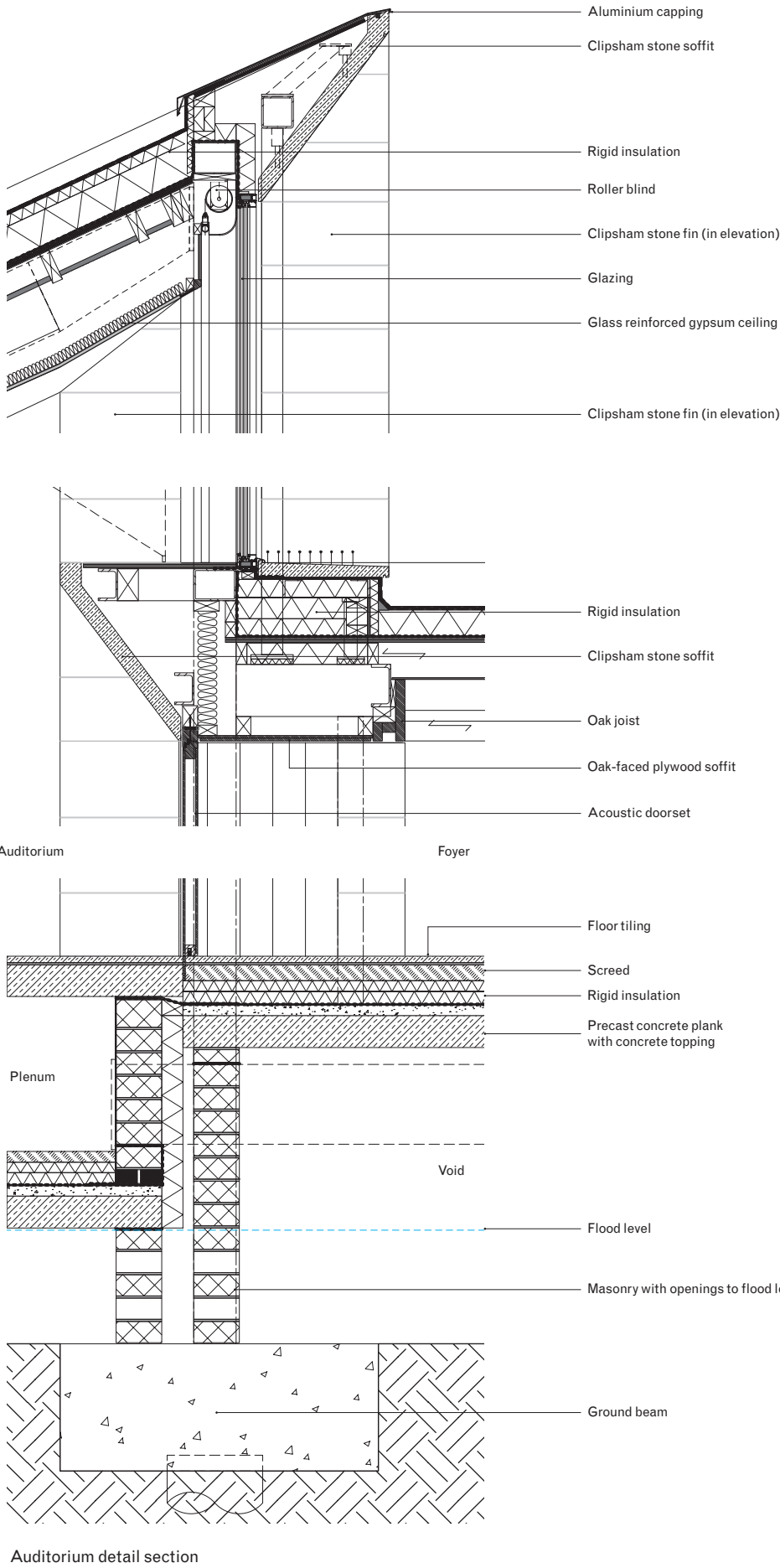
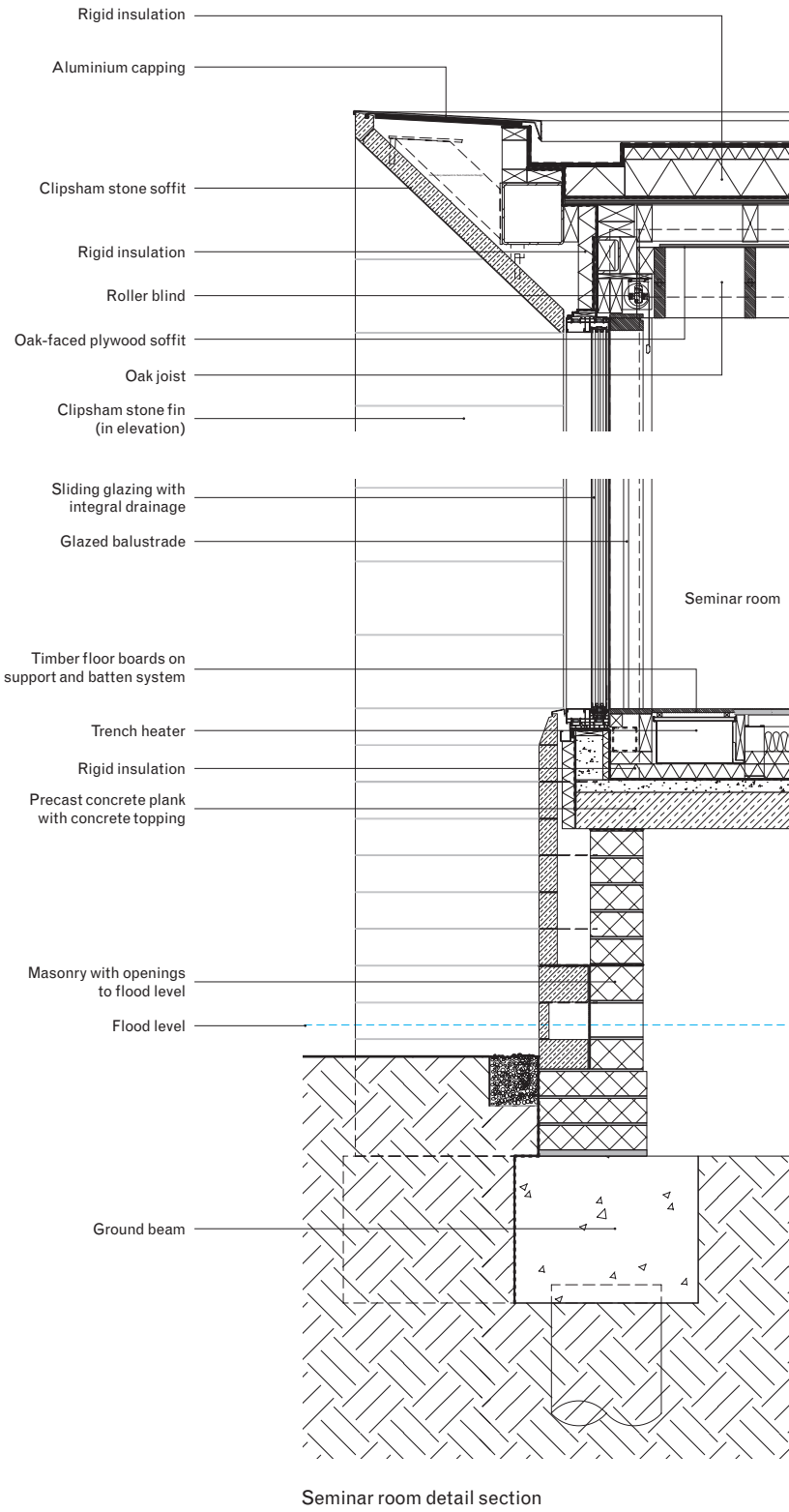
Along the façade facing the cricket pitch, a proscenium contains two seminar rooms which bookend an open loggia. The stone fins are capped by a sloping stone soffit, which we wanted to appear as solid, despite the requirement for supporting steelwork to the rear. The subcontractor-designed supporting bracketry cleverly achieves this, extending from a series of square hollow sections that stretch between the vertical rectangular hollow sections that provide restraint to each of the stone fins.

Circulation from the foyer into the auditorium is intended to be fluid, as the two spaces merge when the 15 sets of full-height doors are opened. The radially-arranged rising stone fins around the edge of the auditorium signify the heart of the building, moving from internal to external conditions in both vertical and horizontal planes. At ground level, the fins incorporate pockets for the doors so that they can disappear, and appear at the push of a button to separate the spaces when the auditorium is in lecture mode. The use of thermally broken steel support structure allowed the upper level external fins to sit above their equivalents at lower level while maintaining the high thermal values required.

Alastair Crockett, project architect,
Niall McLaughlin Architects



KEITH BARNES





Costs

	Cost/m²	% of total
Substructure	£1,059	10%
Superstructure		
Frame	£675	7%
Roof	£382	4%
External walls	£1,635	15%
Windows	£491	5%
Internal walls and partitions	£116	1%
Internal doors	£182	2%
Internal finishes		
Wall finishes	£80	1%
Floor finishes	£248	3%
Ceiling finishes	£561	5%
Fittings and furnishings	£384	4%
Services	£1,196	12%
External works	£811	8%
Preliminaries insurance	£1,542	15%
Other (incl. demolition)	£815	8%
Total	£10,177	100%

Project data

Start on site January 2015
Completion January 2017
Gross internal floor area 846m²
Form of contract JCT Design and Build 2011
Construction cost £8.9 million
Construction cost per m² £9,372.00
(excluding demolition and supplementary works)
Architect Níall McLaughlin Architects
Client Worcester College, Oxford
Structural engineer Price & Myers
M&E consultant King Shaw Associates
QS/cost consultant Gardiner & Theobald
Project manager Bidwells
CDM co-ordinator Gardiner & Theobald
Approved building inspector
Aedis Group
Main contractor Beard Construction
Acoustics Gillieron Scott
Stonework Szerelmey
Lake Wallingford Hydro Solutions
Landscape Simon Bagnall
Seating David Colwell
CAD software used Vectorworks 2014



Building study

All together now

In July last year Níall McLaughlin Architects completed a 15-year commission to gather the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art's dispersed facilities onto one site



In 2002 the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA) decided to move its school and theatre to a new site in Hammersmith and purchased the old Royal Ballet School situated between Talgarth Road and the Piccadilly Line. Already working on the masterplan, Níall McLaughlin Architects won an architectural competition in 2004 to help plan the phased transfer to the new site. The 5,600m² building houses 10 new flexible drama/dance studios, a 120-seat black box studio theatre, a 200-seat training theatre, foyer, meeting rooms, offices and ancillary accommodation with projecting fly tower.

Words Jon Astbury
Photographer Nick Kane

The genteel run of Arts and Crafts and Victorian buildings for which Talgarth Road in West London is known, such as the 1885 Colet House and a series of eight studios for bachelor artists added six years later by Frederick Wheeler, feels rather adrift between an open Underground line to the south and an A road to the north, having once been a cosy colony of pre-Raphaelites and later a ballet school. Similarly, it is a setting in which Níall McLaughlin Architects might seem a curious choice, more likely to conjure thoughts of delicate, quiet structures in more bucolic surrounds. Here, there is little choice but to face head-on the context and all of the challenges it throws up (there are plenty). The uncompromising blocks that the practice has created for LAMDA do exactly that and with the academy it is bringing a new sort of cultural cachet to this illustrious stretch.

‘When they appointed us we’d built nothing of this scale,’ says project architect Tim Allen-Booth about winning the project after a competitive interview in 2004. ‘It was a bit of a leap of faith.’ The new space was intended to be a single home for all of LAMDA, which had previously been scattered across various spaces in London, some more suitable than others: sword fighting practice allegedly used to take place in the nearby Margravine Cemetery.

What is now the main entrance was designed by John Salmon Quilter in 1894, originally as a school for training teachers until the Royal Ballet School pitched up in 1947. In the ‘50s and ‘60s it built extensions to both the east and west. When in 2003 the ballet school moved into its purpose-built space in Covent Garden, LAMDA snapped up this jumble of Victorian institution and later additions. The spaces that had been used to teach dance were a relatively good fit for drama, but needed work. Níall McLaughlin Architects had already been engaged to devise a masterplan for LAMDA and in 2003 performed a ‘light-touch refurbishment’, making these spaces usable while the broader masterplan could be carried out. The latter comprised a black box performance space with bar, offices, teaching spaces, and a common room in a former boiler house, all

abutting one another like a terraced block formed by slotting in additions over time. Circulation and spatial organisation is understandably a little confusing here, and something that the entirely new building to the west sought to rectify.

The LAMDA project is essentially apprehended from the inside out, rather than being a project with a driving form or idea that you can grasp from its exterior. It fits like the missing piece of an urban puzzle that has been born out of programmatic requirements into its unforgiving setting. Unless you are visiting a public performance, the new areas are entered seamlessly via the original Victorian building, with the new exterior presenting little more than a series of anodised aluminium fins, designed to appear like a film reel as the view unfolds to countless cars or trains speeding past.

The design was arrived at through what Allen-Booth terms a ‘productive tension’, with Níall McLaughlin Architects wanting to make circulation around the already tight space as generous as possible and LAMDA looking to squeeze in as much teaching and studio space as possible. Put simply, two gable ends were defined: one quite literally the brick gable of the original Victorian building, the other one of concrete blockwork. Between these runs a top-lit, double-height corridor that slowly tapers as it heads east, lined with studios facing the train tracks (interference from sound on this side was deemed less of an issue) and offices, examination rooms and a library facing the road.

These cellular spaces are divided by small areas that draw light into the corridor and maintain a visual connection to both sides of the site, as well as housing toilets, services and ventilation ducting. Most of these nooks, as well as the corridor itself, serve as spaces for the students to socialise or rehearse, padding up and down in their socks.

The new concrete ‘gable’ acts to sever these defined spaces from the looser theatre space that bookends the eastern end, all connected by an open foyer, a bar and what serves as an entrance during public performances. Here is where the key organisational gymnastics occur: while the small studio theatre nestles under



the upper-level studio spaces, the main auditorium is raised up to second floor level, the only way that ancillary spaces could be added, due to the proximity of the Underground line's retaining wall. Here the design's ability to provide orientation is key: while the theatre sits on the east-west axis, visitors enter on the north-south axis, and to make this rotation feel as natural as possible, stairs are kept visible and the form of the theatre, hanging like a curved wooden fan, is left exposed, housing an additional bar and a small seating area to act as something of a secondary foyer during performances.

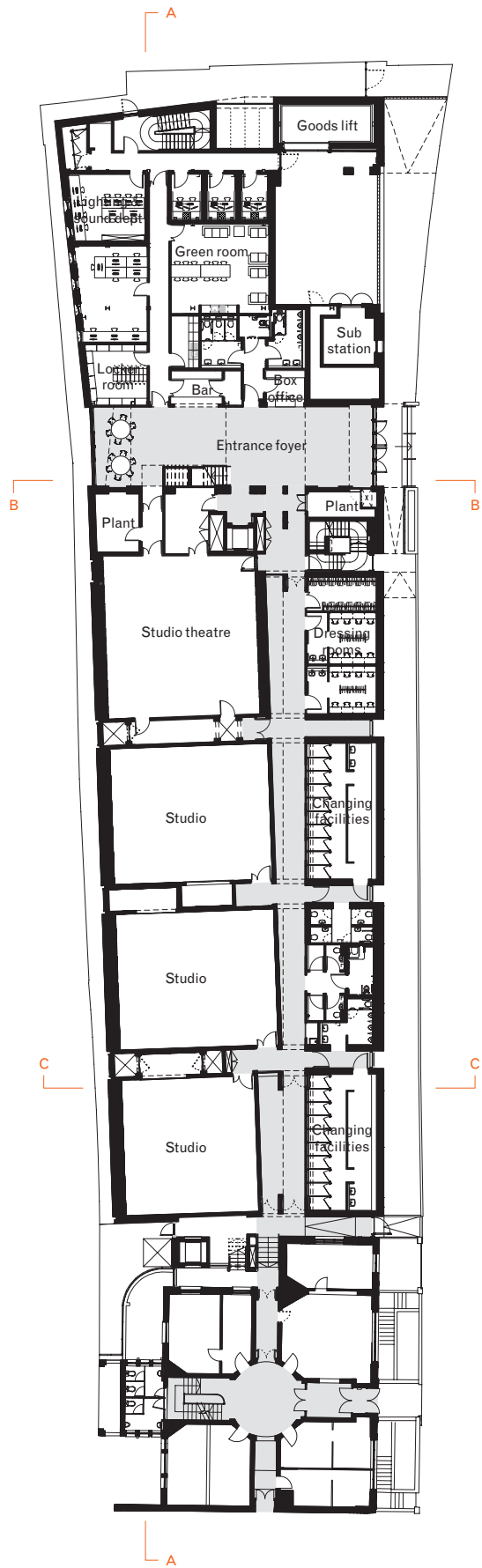
This is all an excuse for a little more expression and, for a school that has done a fair bit of moving around, there was anxiety around the provision of a pristine, purpose-built space, one that could end up having ‘too much architecture’, as Allen-Booth puts it. Not only will students be used to spaces with some history of prior usage, but they will be used to spaces that feel a little rough around the edges and forgiving of wear and tear.

Although brick was originally specified, the concrete blockwork that has been used brings this roughness, and feels permanent without being untouchable. The size of the blocks, too, provides a far more suitable unit scale for the vastness of the circulation spaces than brick would have, as well as clearly defining where the new addition unceremoniously butts up against its 19th century neighbour. A few nice moments such as original round windows now serve to visually connect the two spaces.

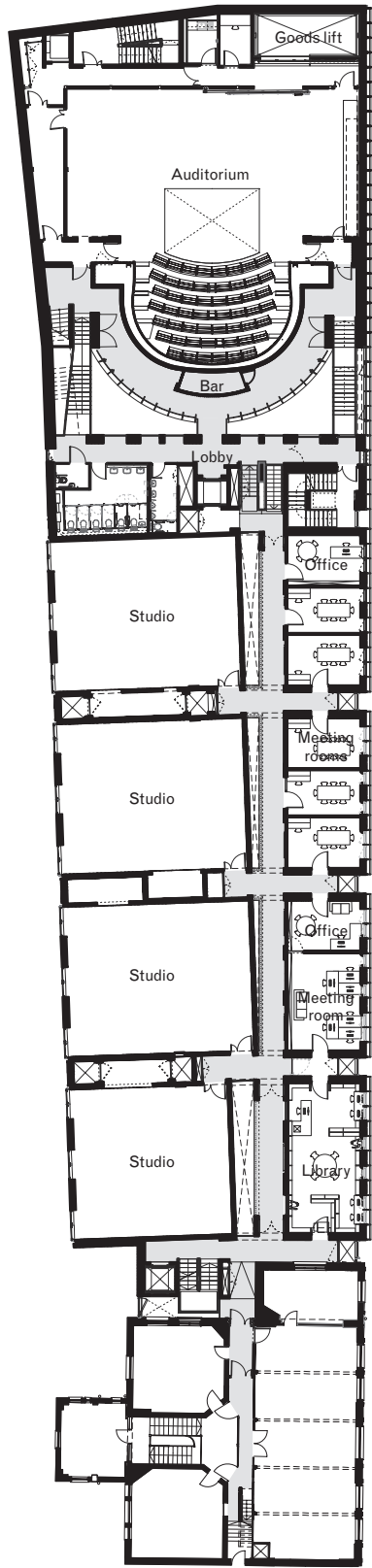
The main auditorium, lined simply in wood, has the feel of a working space rather than a world-class auditorium, but this visual modesty belies how well provisioned it is. The fly tower in particular, allowing students to train for working in Edwardian or Victorian theatres, was a real coup for the school. This operates as an effective teaching space not only for performers but for those working in the worlds of sound, lighting and set design. Underneath and behind the theatre sit what would usually be ‘back of house’, the most rigorously programmatic spaces constituting a warren-like series of sound and lighting studios where, again, we are back in the realms of provision, rather than legibility. These are, after all, spaces that will almost exclusively be used by those who know their way around.

So, for all its apparent simplicity, starkness and restraint, when it comes to those Níall McLaughlin touches of materiality and light, this project, some 15 years in the making, shows a different string to the firm's bow: that of ingeniously resolved organisation; some of it obvious, some of it only seeming so now it has been accomplished. Balancing the space-intensive demands of the school against effective architecture and maintaining that intangible quality of a building that is able to be ‘owned’ by its students is no easy feat, but here what could have been constraints have been embraced as virtues to great effect.

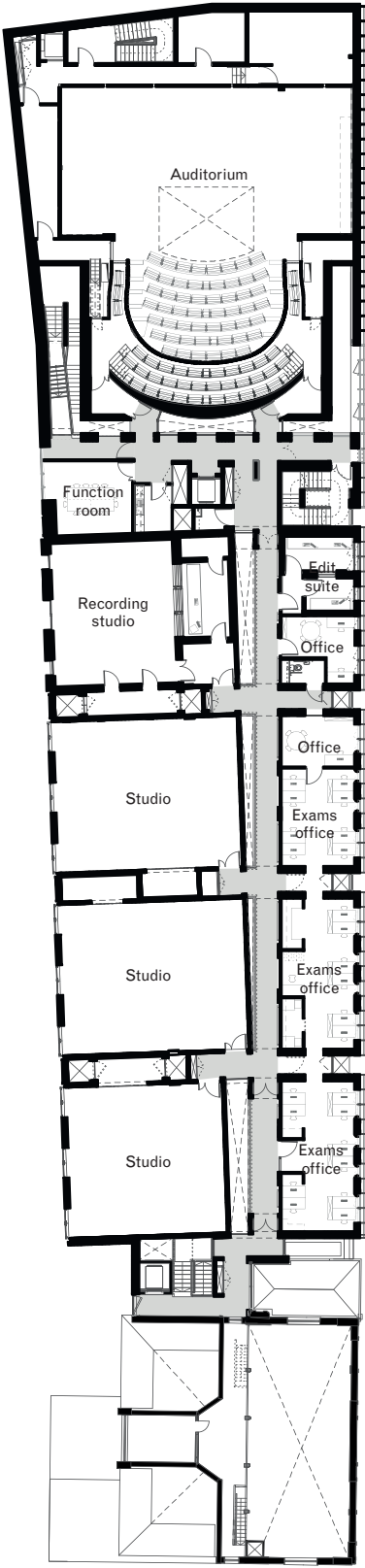




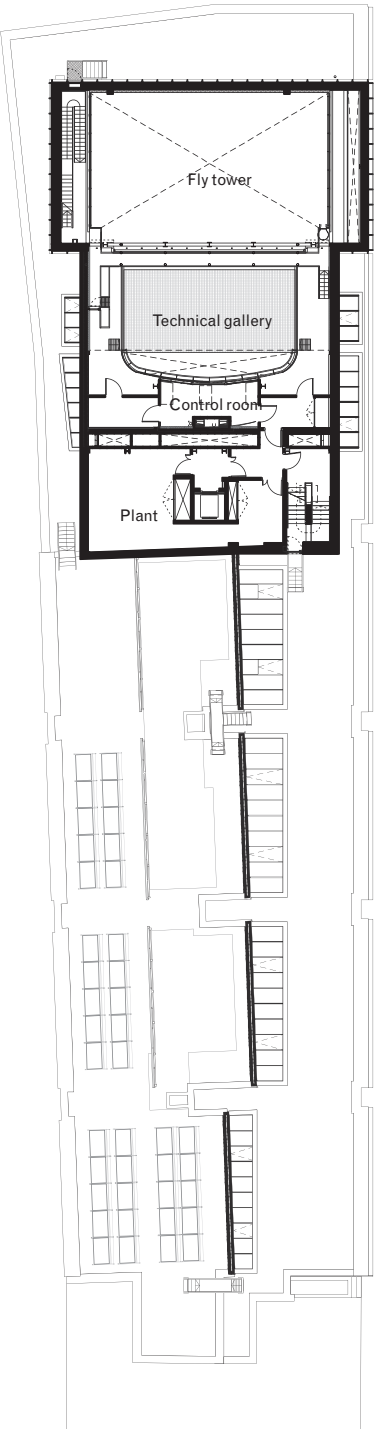
Ground floor plan



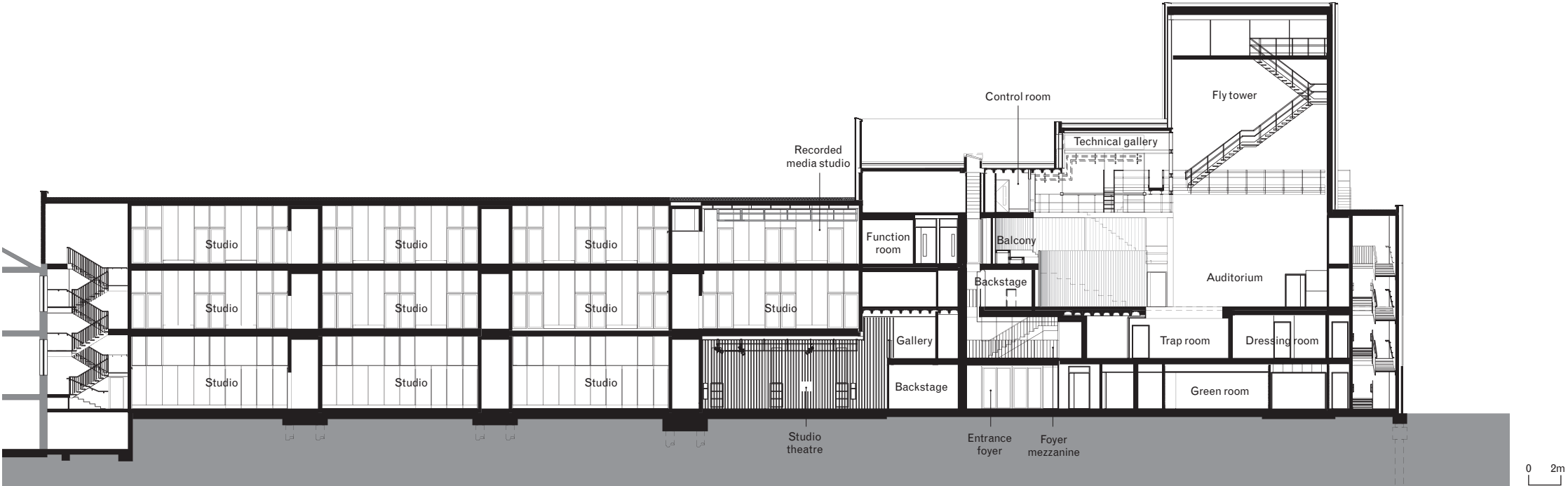
First floor plan



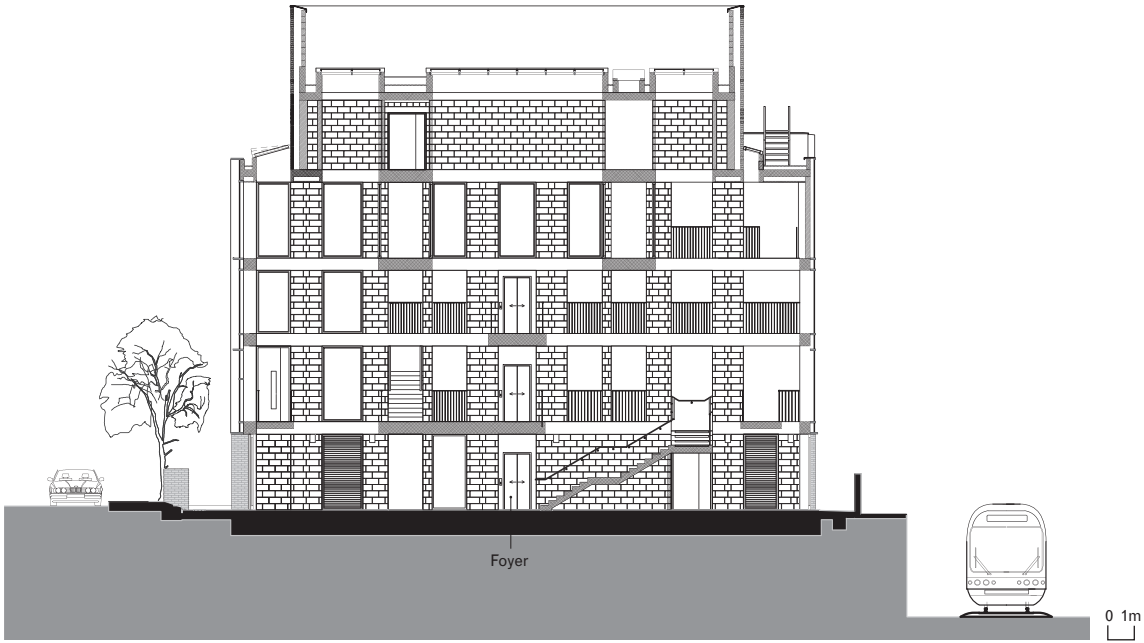
Second floor plan



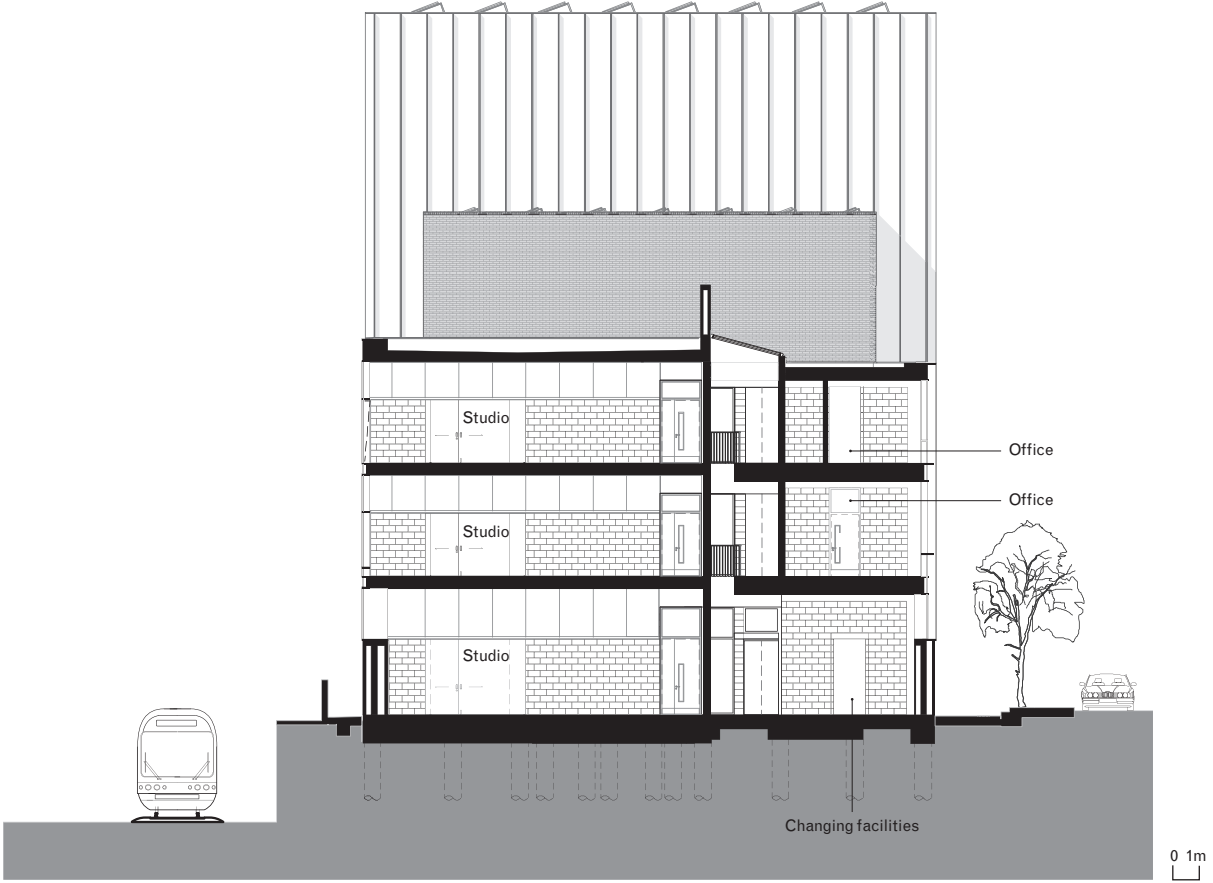
Third floor plan



Section A-A



Section B-B



Section C-C



Architect's view

LAMDA moved reluctantly from its old buildings on the Talgarth Road. The unforgiving external environment contrasted with the rich inner life they had created there. Between classes, corridors were full of singing and Shakespeare. Sitting in reception, you could hear a tap dancing class above your head. Part of the challenge of the new project was to make the new building functional without losing the spirit of the place.

The setting presents considerable problems for a teaching environment, including traffic noise, railway noise and pollution. At the same time, it is an extraordinarily high-profile location with great visibility. The clients said they would have liked to take over an old warehouse; a place with a history and no self-conscious architecture to pre-empt their own creative inhabitation of it. Our proposal relishes the gritty urban qualities of its location and produces a robust, calm shed for learning.

To LAMDA's enfilade of existing buildings, we have added a three-storey teaching block and a four-storey theatre volume. The teaching block contains studios, tutorial rooms and offices and is bisected by a top-lit circulation route. Due to the constrained site, the back-of-house facilities were placed below the theatre, lifting the stage two floors above the entrance level. The foyer is carved from the narrow space between the teaching block and the theatre. It is designed around the vertical journey from the box office to the auditorium. The timber fan of the auditorium, stairs and landings play against a masonry

wall pierced with regular openings. A tough material palette of blockwork and concrete is leavened by timber and brass.

Externally the building is a simple factory-like container. The teaching block is composed of four identical metal boxes, each placed on a brick plinth. The theatre is treated as a fifth, elaborated version of these boxes. The flanged metal construction of

the upper volumes unites the matter-of-fact arrangement of glazed and solid elements. The ribbed boxes provide rhythmic animation to a façade experienced predominantly at an oblique angle, moving past at speed by car or train. The brick plinth frames inviting openings for pedestrians to look into the inner world of the school.

Níall McLaughlin



Client's view

LAMDA's new building is the culmination of a 20-year vision to house all our activities on a single site. We train actors, stage managers, technicians and directors for careers on stage, screen and radio. Alumni include Benedict Cumberbatch, David Oyelowo, Patricia Hodge, David Suchet and Dame Janet Suzman. Around 225 full-time students study for undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, with another 400 taking single semester programmes and short courses each year.

The former Royal Ballet School premises, acquired in 2003, offered us existing dance studios, a studio theatre and administrative offices and, crucially, scope to develop one end of the site.

Níall McLaughlin Architects worked with us from the outset, initially on minor refurbishment of the original Victorian building and subsequently with trustees, staff and students to design a building suitable for 21st-century professional training.

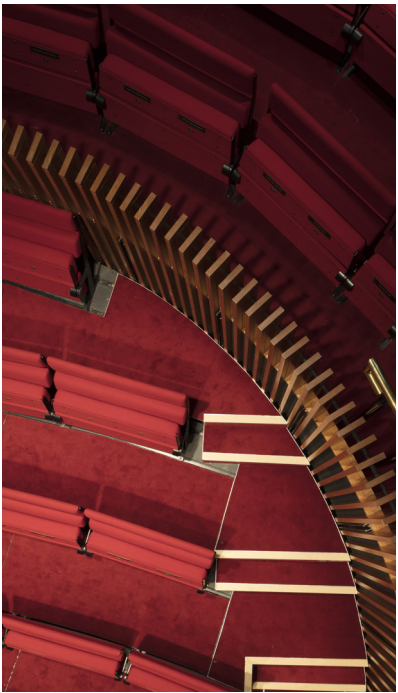
Our requirements were exacting – 10 flexible studios to accommodate everything

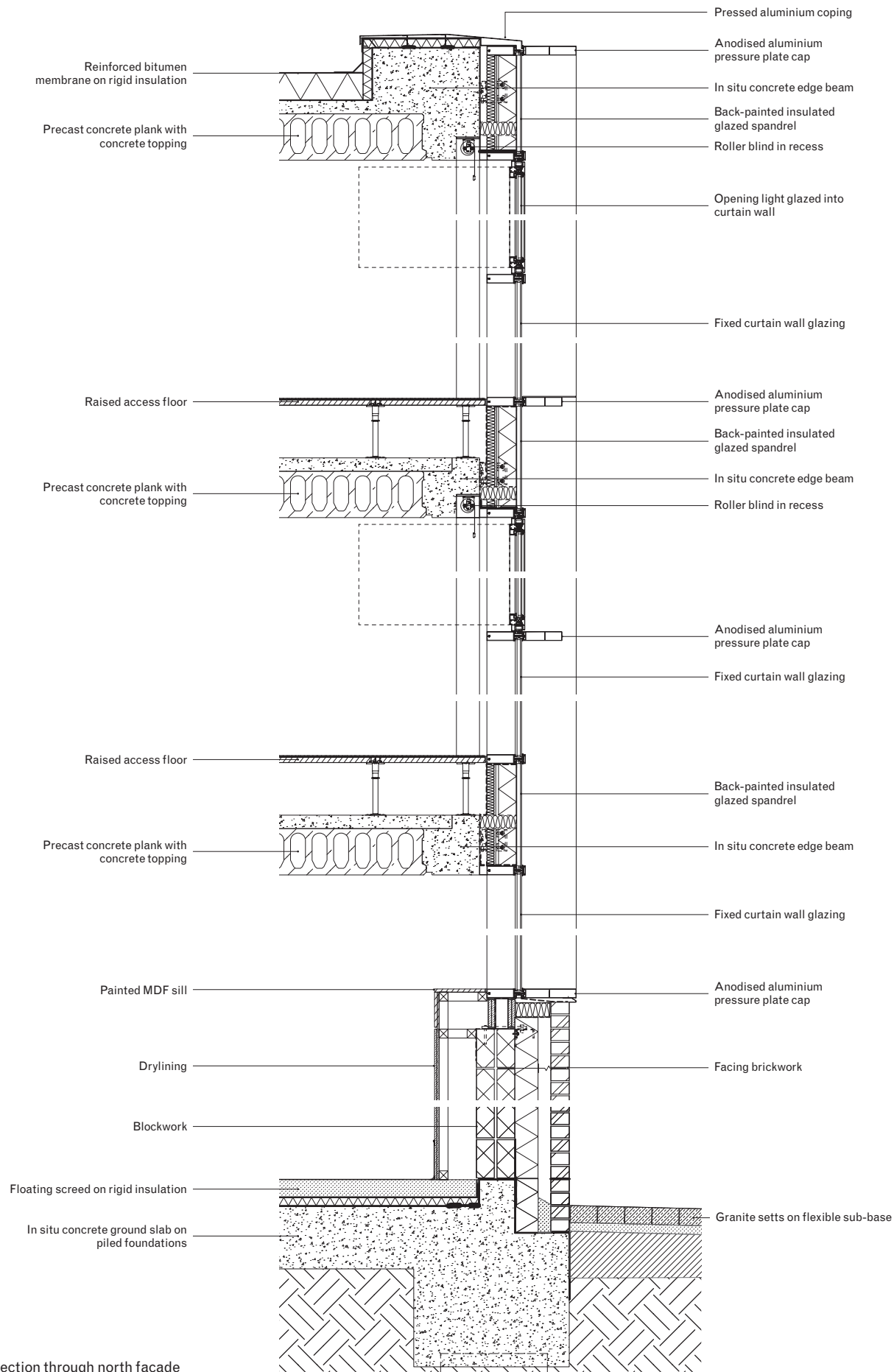
from stage combat to flamenco; meeting rooms and offices; student changing facilities; a library; a screen and audio suite and two professionally equipped theatres with technical, backstage and front of house facilities.

Performance spaces have particular requirements and, although NMA had not designed a theatre before, they rose to the challenge, working with specialist theatre and acoustic consultants to give us not only the Sainsbury Theatre, which blends the contemporary with the traditional, but also the flexible 'black box' Carne Studio Theatre.

The site is long and narrow, at the edge of a conservation area and squeezed between one of the busiest roads in Europe, the Tube and a large electrical substation. NMA has utilised every inch of this unforgiving plot, using light, ingenious design and clever choices of materials to deliver a spacious, hard-working, stimulating and welcoming teaching environment, which has been embraced and animated by the energy and creativity of our staff and students.

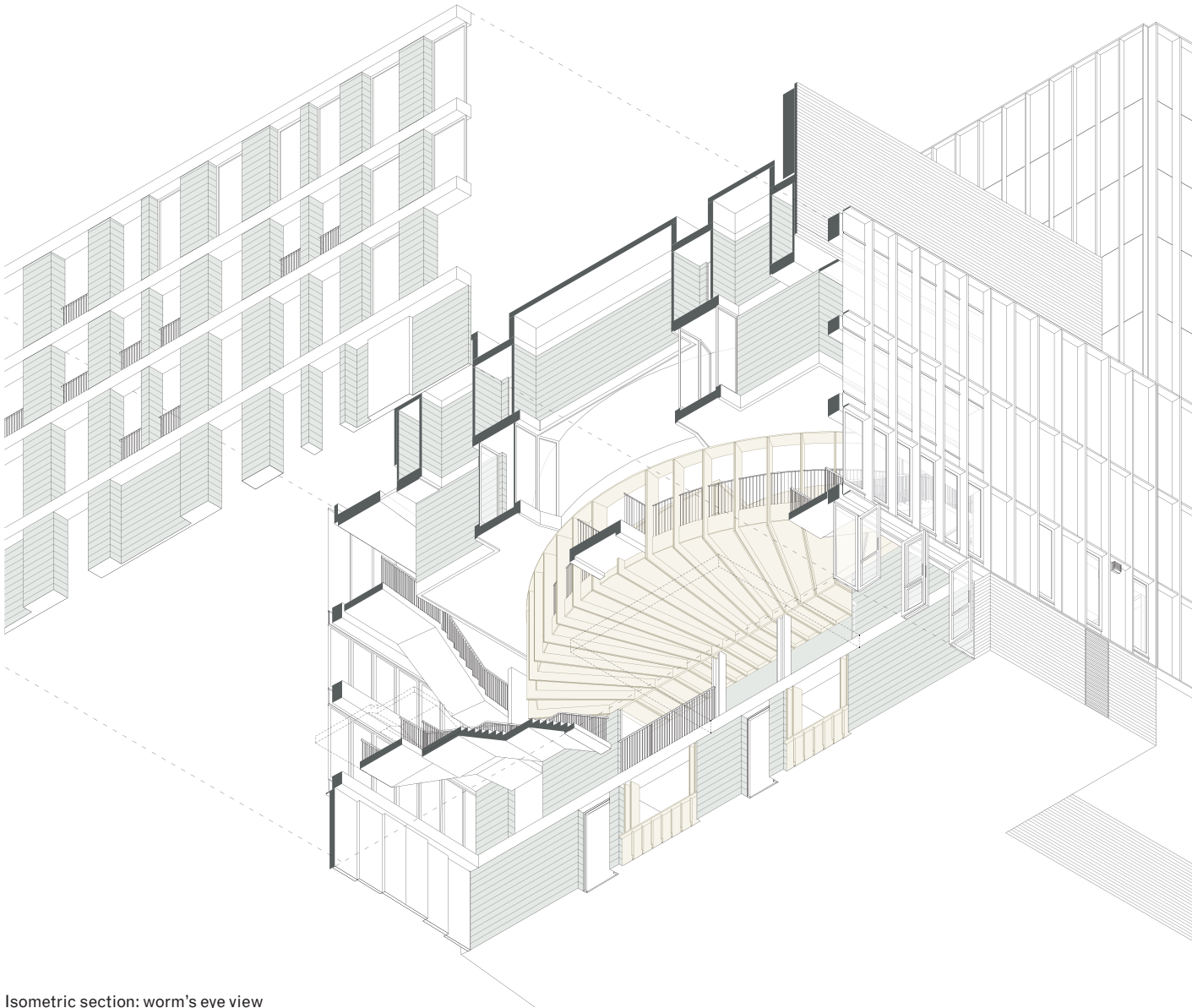
Sheila Benjamin, general manager, LAMDA





Detail section through north façade

0 200mm



Costs

	Cost/m²	% of total
Demolitions	£16.54	0.48%
Substructure	£329.16	9.56%
Superstructure		
Frame	£366.14	10.64%
Roof	£81.47	2.37%
Staircases	£25.72	0.75%
External walls	£335.68	9.75%
Windows	£171.42	4.98%
Internal walls and partitions	£240.16	6.98%
Internal doors	£100.83	2.93%
Internal finishes		
Wall finishes	£45.81	1.33%
Floor finishes	£95.61	2.78%
Ceiling finishes	£50.06	1.45%
Fittings and furnishings		
	£41.39	1.20%
Services		
Sanitary appliances	£12.56	0.37%
Disposal installations	£6.93	0.20%
Water installations	£23.69	0.69%
Space heating and air treatment	£237.27	6.89%
Electrical services	£223.78	6.50%
Lift installations	£71.26	2.07%
Protective installations	£31.70	0.92%
Communications installation	£35.85	1.04%
Stage engineering	£112.76	3.29%
External works		
	£43.81	1.27%
Preliminaries and insurance		
	£742.34	21.57%
Total	£3,441.95	100%



Project data

Start on site February 2015
Completion July 2017
Gross internal floor area 5,500m²
Form of contract Two-stage tender JCT Design and Build
Construction cost £18.9 million
Construction cost per m² £3,442.00
Architect Níall McLaughlin Architects
Client London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA)
Structural engineer Pell Frischmann
MEP consultant Max Fordham (stages C-D), Pell Frischmann (stages E- L)
Quantity surveyor/cost consultant Baqus
Project manager Baqus
CDM co-ordinator Baqus
Approved building inspector Bureau Veritas
Main contractor Volker Fitzpatrick
CAD software used Vectorworks
Annual CO₂ emissions 21.8 kg/m² (predicted)
Acoustic consultant Gillieron Scott
Acoustic Design
Theatre consultant Charcoalblue



Building study

The fabric of college life

The first phase of Níall McLaughlin Architects' development for Jesus College, Cambridge, gives its disparate elements remarkable coherence



In early 2014 Níall McLaughlin Architects won a competition for the development of Jesus College, Cambridge's West Court. The proposal entailed a masterplan for the site with works to be delivered in three phases. Phase 1 was completed in April 2017 and included the refurbishment and extension of the Grade II-listed Webb Building with new café pavilion and basement bar, and the remodelling and extension of the 1970s Rank Building fronting Jesus Lane.

Words Owen Hopkins
Photography Nick Kane, Peter Cook

'There's always a point when as an architect you come back to a building and it isn't yours,' says Níall McLaughlin as I join him for tea before exploring the first phase of his practice's project for Jesus College, Cambridge. We meet in his new café which abuts the rear of the former Wesley House, a Methodist theological college built in 1921 to designs by Maurice Webb in a neo-Tudor style, acquired by Jesus in 2014. The other side of the café looks out onto a playing field, which, when I visit, lies deserted on the cold winter's day – in stark contrast to the quietly bustling café.

As stipulated by the planners, the café stands distinct from the old building as a kind of pavilion, separated by a corridor of glass, thus maintaining the integrity of the old façade. As McLaughlin half-jokingly notes, the café is like a mini version of Mies's Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin; a single-storey structure, with flat, overhanging roof, supported by an undercroft on one side. Here, however, Mies's steel is replaced by timber and brick, while the undercroft contains a bar. There are a number of clever and elegant touches: the way the timber columns thicken out in the centre to express the natural stress on the structure; the acoustic ceiling that allows for quiet conversations; the barrel-vaulted ceiling

of the cellar bar, which opens out on to a sunken courtyard facing away from the part of the Webb buildings still occupied by the (teetotal) Wesleyan community. The café is one component of a three-phase project, with the current first phase also comprising common rooms, teaching and study spaces, a lecture hall, and 24 hotel-standard rooms plus three serviced apartments for visiting scholars. Later phases will yield a performing arts venue, gallery and archive. These are the project's set pieces and were much publicised when the practice won the work in a 2014 competition. However, as far as phase one is concerned, much of the project is about working within the confines of the existing fabric – a series of individual components that will in time add up to a significant shift of the focus from the historic quadrangles.

ABOVE View of the café pavilion from the north

BELOW The basement bar

OPPOSITE Looking north through the café



In addition to the Webb buildings, the first phase has also dealt with the Rank Building, which was built in the 1970s to enclose the original three-sided courtyard along Jesus Lane. The college wanted to retain the building in some form, and the architect's approach was to strip it back to its frame. But rather than a simple reclad, elements of the original façades have been kept visible in the thin vertical piers of brick and stone cappings that rise up through the building's four storeys.

These piers set the overall rhythm on both the courtyard and Jesus Lane sides of the building, with the new additions taking the form of timber boxes inserted into the existing fabric. On the road side, which is most often seen obliquely by drivers or pedestrians, the rhythms increase in tempo: from the two beats of the recessed balconies that look across the road to the gardens of Sidney Sussex College; to the eight beats of the ground storey's rough-edged stone fins.

On the courtyard side, which is typically viewed front on, the rhythms of the bays are consistent, and with no traffic noise, the windows of the upper storey rooms open out directly to the courtyard. The timber on both sides of the building has been left untreated – currently a rich golden hue that almost radiates warmth in the cold winter light. The colour will, of course, change over time, and will do so differently on the north and south sides, so that each will acquire its own colour and even more distinct character.

The final bay of courtyard façade, which contains an existing staircase, is enclosed by brick and topped by a timber-framed, glazed lantern, which neatly marks the boundary between Jesus College and the part of the courtyard still occupied by the Wesleyans. This idea of using a tower to demarcate a threshold in the college type is explored even more explicitly in the entrance on Jesus Lane. Rather than occupying the end bay of the Rank Building, here the tower is set back as the road bends; and rather than being of brick, it is a wholly timber frame, allowing





one to see right into the building and, in the case of the lantern, through to the sky beyond, in a way that appears both grand and understated at the same time.

Upon entering the building, however, it is not the tower that one comes to first, but a galleried hallway. The palette is brick – following the Webb building that provides one interior face, timber, and the now familiar vertical fins, the only notable exception being the patterned tiles set between the four supporting columns, denoting this as the nodal point of the entrance building.

The ground and first-floor levels provide access to the double-height lecture hall, both directly and via axial corridors, which run the length of the courtyard side and allow for 'breakout space' that is not just for networking over a cup of coffee, but having the time to pause and reflect. The lecture hall itself occupies the space formerly devoted to a car park. It has a galleried arrangement with stalls seating that can be arranged in the round or lecture-style. The extensive use of timber again sets the tone of the space

OPPOSITE
View of the
Rank Building
from the corner
of Jesus Lane
and Park Street

LEFT The new
entrance
building provides
access to West
Court and the
Rank Building

BELOW
View of the
Rank Building
and the tower
from the
West Court

and also provides acoustic separation from the noisy street beyond. The timber also conceals the various drainpipes from the hotel rooms on the floors above. In a clever touch, the doors to the hotel rooms are clustered in little hallways carved out of the corridors, which also connect vertically with lightwells, helping to foster the temporary intellectual community that will reside there.

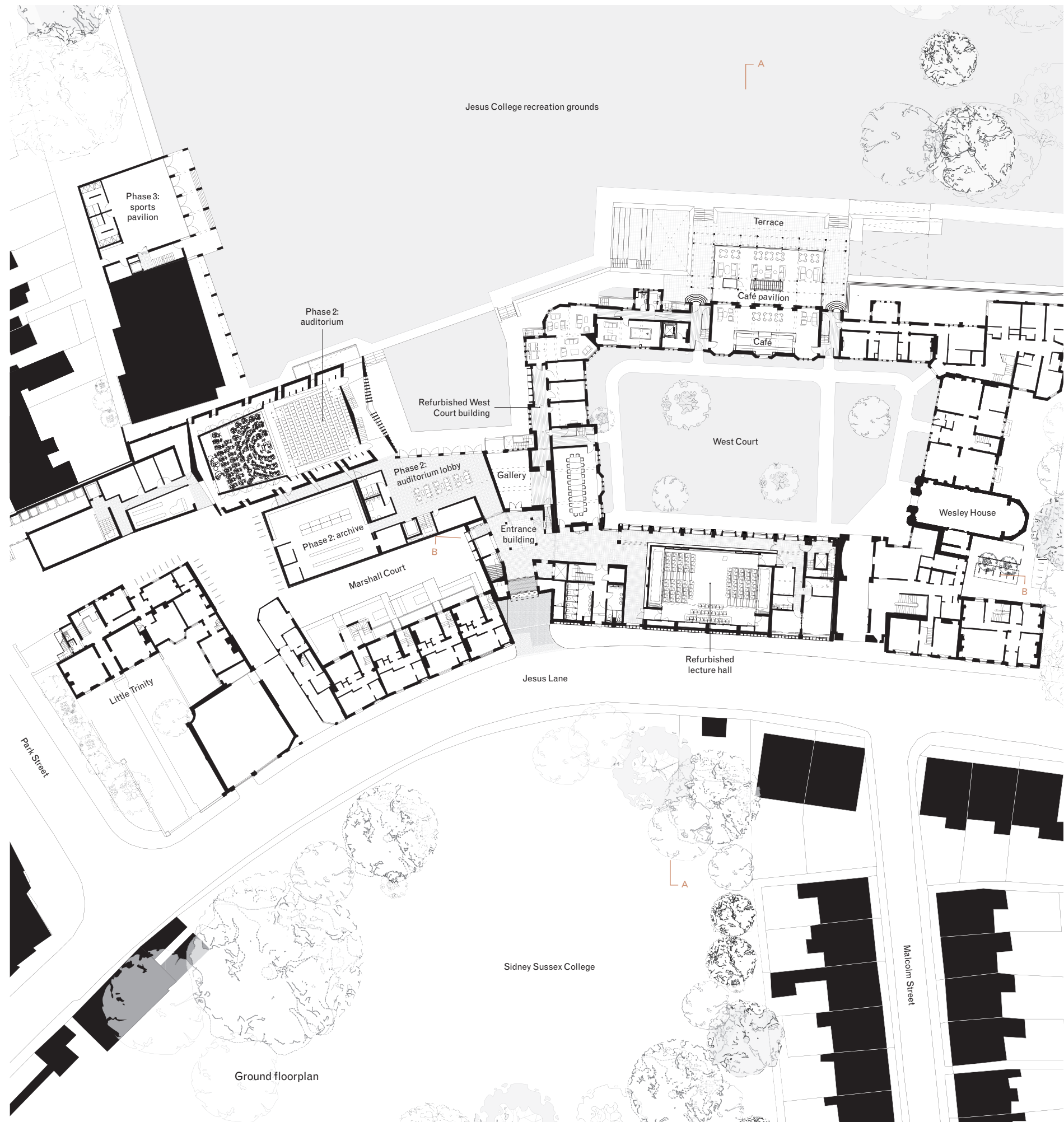
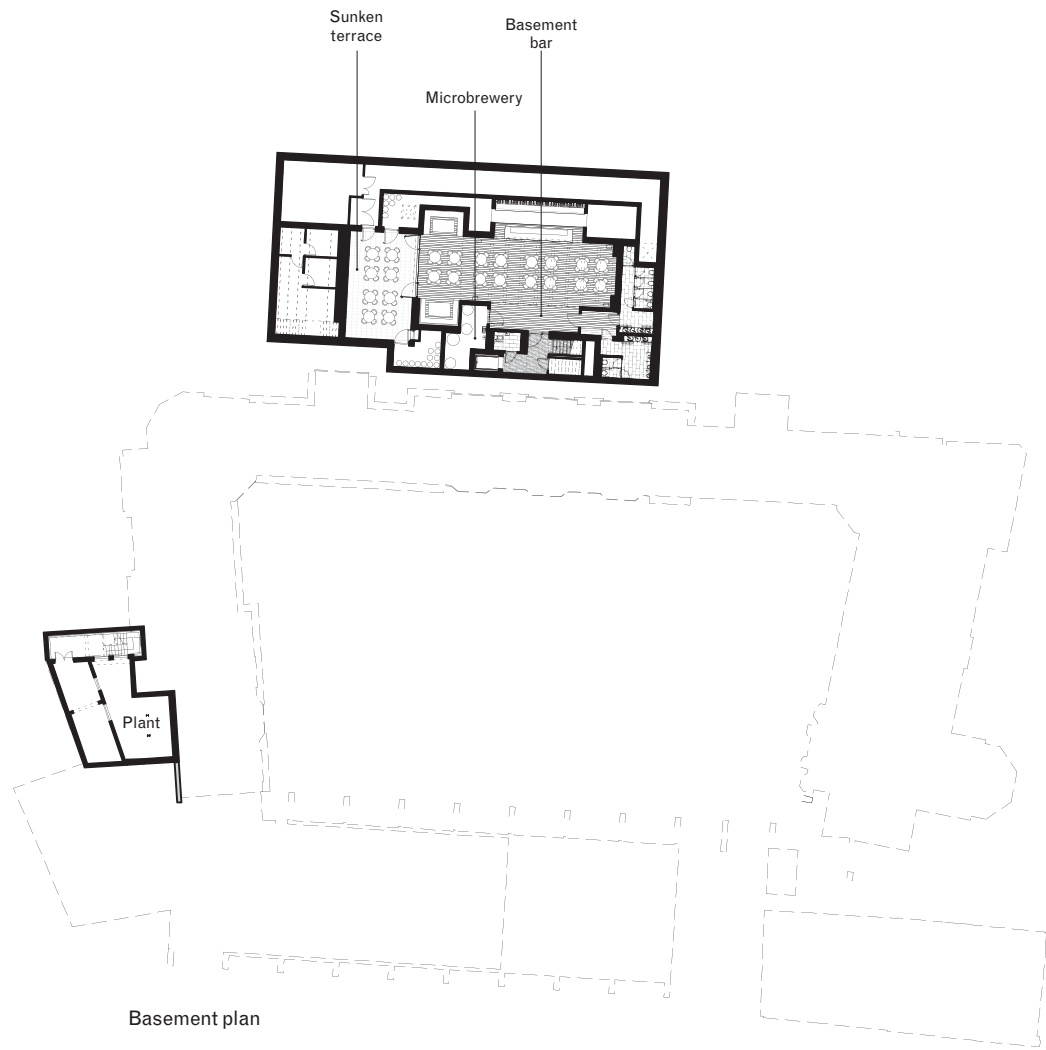
Faced with a complex, multiphase project that comprises working with two existing buildings and creating several new ones, the tendency for many architects might be to treat each component essentially as an individual project. Here, however, Níall McLaughlin Architects has imbued the project's disparate and disconnected parts with a remarkable sense of coherence; each component working in near perfect harmony.

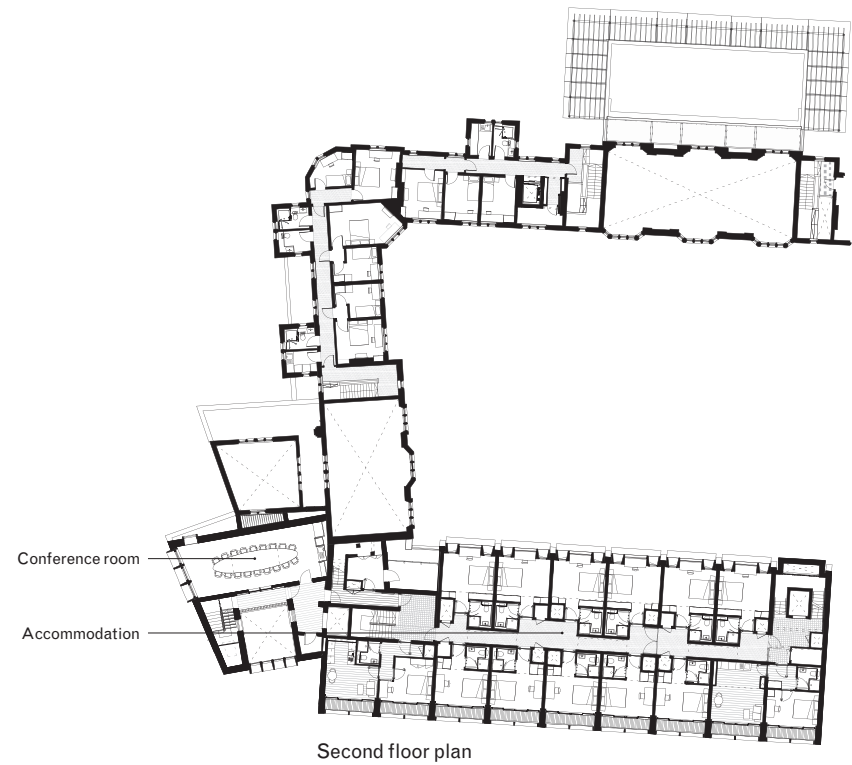
As McLaughlin observed when we first sat down, the new and refurbished spaces already feel woven into the fabric of college life – a testament to their success. Yet there's also a feeling of anticipation and potential, not just in what later phases will realise in a physical sense, but in what the project as a whole will do for the intellectual and creative life of the college.

Owen Hopkins is a writer on architecture and senior curator of exhibitions and education at Sir John Soane's Museum

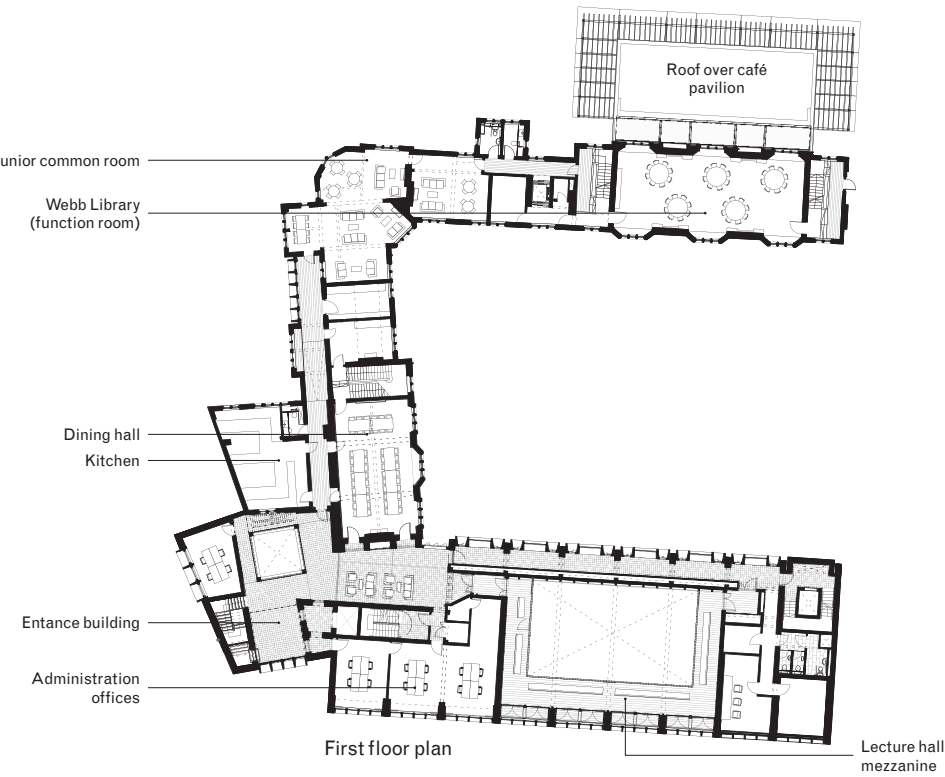


OPPOSITE: PETER COOK



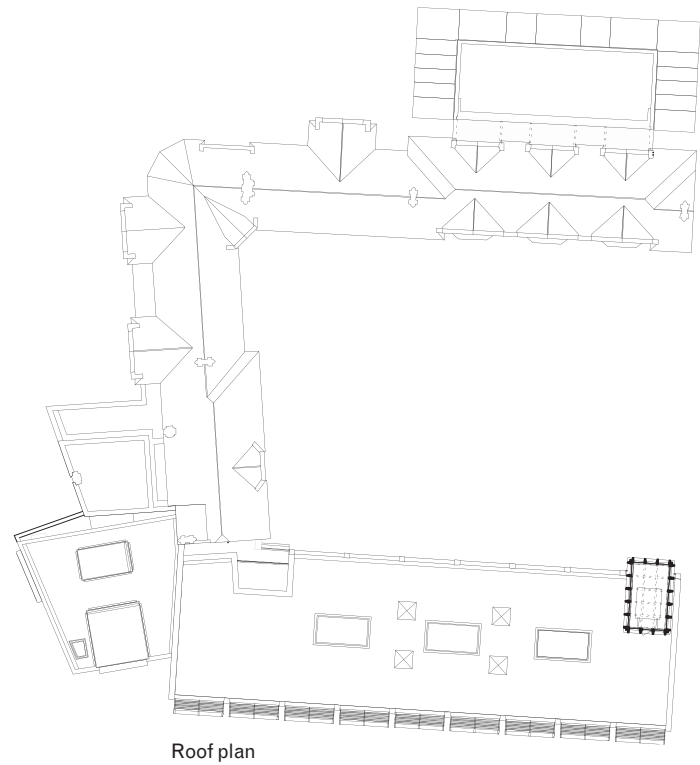


Second floor plan

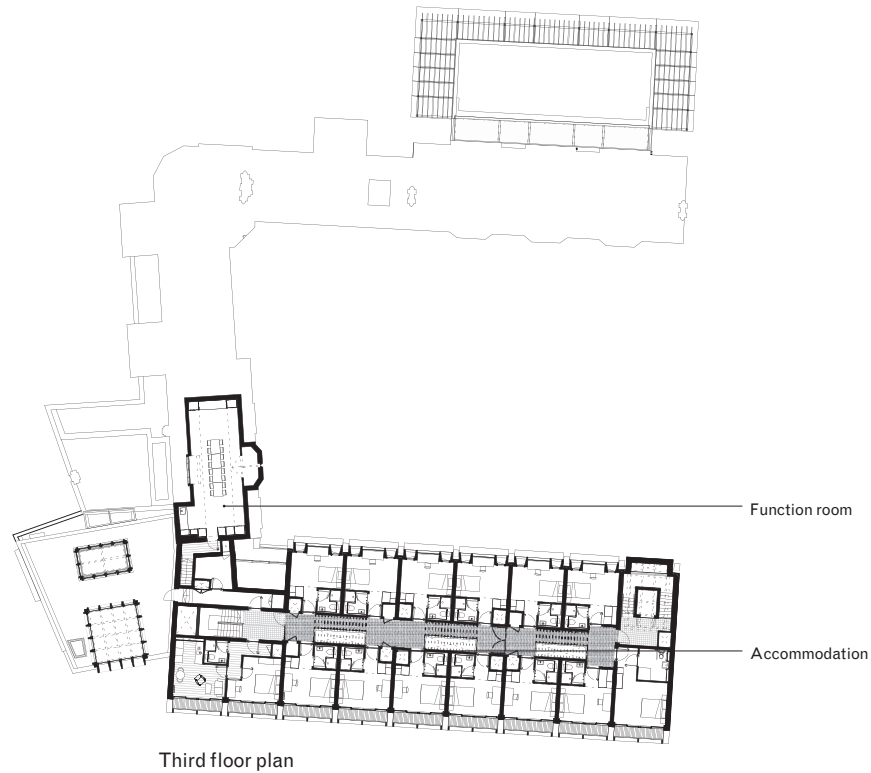


First floor plan

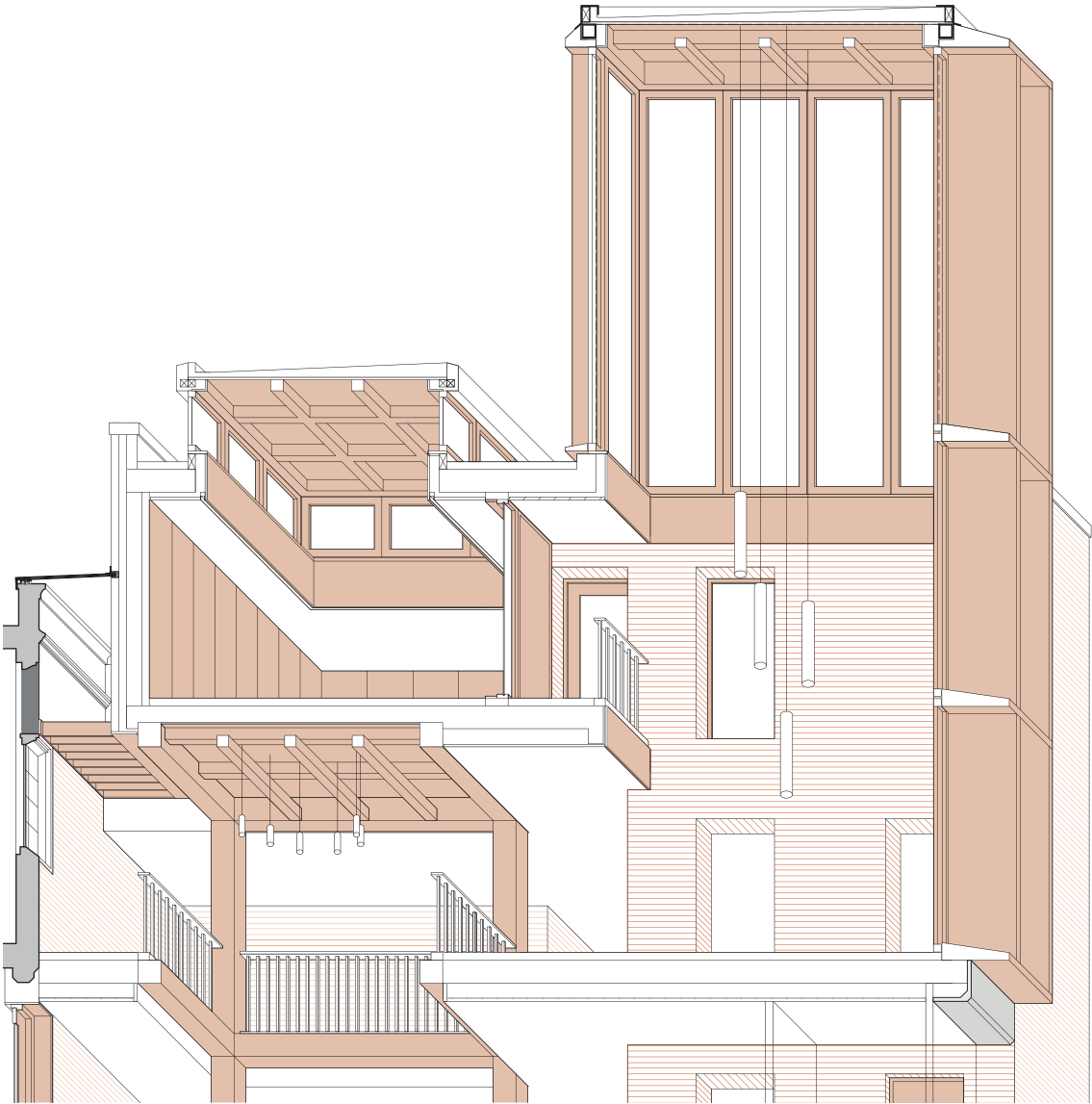
Lecture hall mezzanine



Roof plan



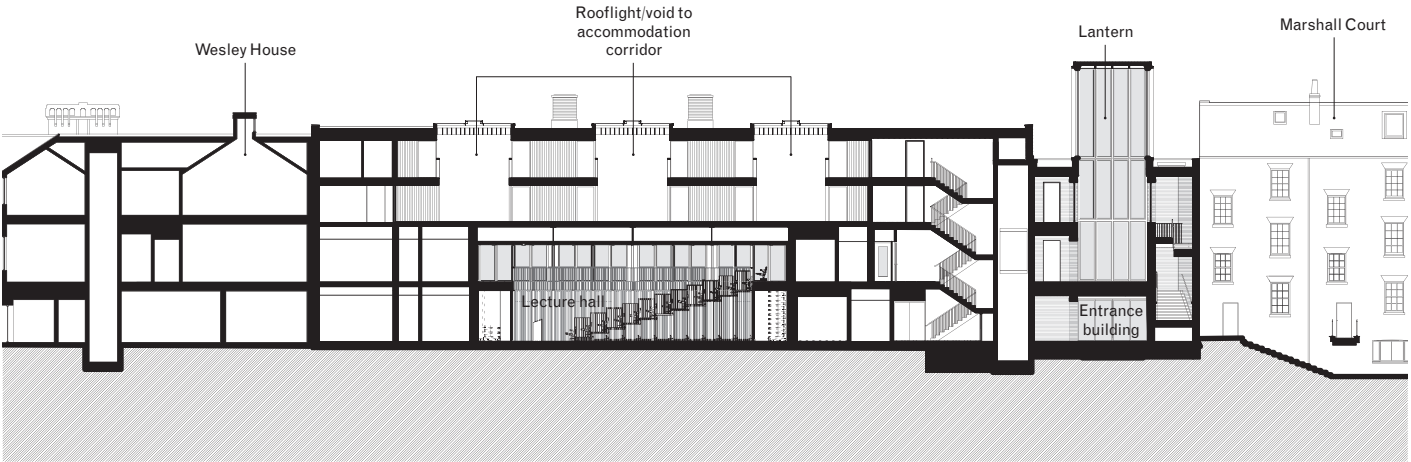
Third floor plan



3D section through lantern



Section A-A



Section B-B

Architect's view

The West Court project, the first of three phases, presented a wonderful opportunity to incorporate these old buildings into a new heart for the college within its historic footprint. It was delivered in sequential parts over 18 months, with the refurbishment of the Grade II-listed building completed first, followed by the new café pavilion and basement bar, and finally the remodelled 1970s Rank Building and a new entrance building.

Our designs had to respond to the variety of building stock and site conditions, and the wide range of construction types from renovation to new build. The lightweight glazed timber pergola of the café pavilion differs from the substantial brick and oak entrance building, which differs again from the balconies and profiled stone walls of the remodelled Rank Building.

In terms of detailing, there was limited opportunity for repetition. Instead the various elements were unified through a consistent palette of high-quality traditional materials including oak, stone, brick and quarry tiles. Detailing responds to existing features and local opportunities. Untreated oak glulam framing around glazing was given a chamfered profile to echo the existing stone window surrounds. We hope, in time, the two materials will weather in harmony. New stone walls addressing the street have a scalloped texture to give relief, reinforce the façade's verticality and deter graffiti. The pavilion's timber structure is conceived as a pergola in the landscape, held on slim cigar-shaped columns and delicate cruciform connection details.

The project's many challenges included stringent planning constraints, a demanding programme, a constrained site and delivering a state-of-the-art lecture theatre with good acoustics in an existing building next to a busy road. Its success might be measured by the extent to which it has drawn this disparate collection of buildings back into the vital life of the college community while also providing an outward-looking public presence in the centre of Cambridge.

Niall McLaughlin



Client's view

Our West Court development marks an exciting new chapter in our historic community by not only providing us with the opportunity to restore the college site to its original boundaries, but to offer much-needed extra space and up-to-date facilities to all our members.

Following the college's purchase of the neighbouring Grade II-listed Webb Building in 2014, Níall McLaughlin Architects' design and concept of West Court offered us a phased masterplan that would see the sensitive refurbishment, transformation and extension of that building, and provide

us with a selection of additional spaces and amenities at a new level of excellence.

Since the completion of phase one earlier this year, our students, fellows and staff have been able to enjoy the impressive facilities West Court has to offer. These include a multifunctional lecture hall equipped with the latest communications technology and flexible seating for up to 180 delegates; a dedicated events space; a modern café-bar with outside terrace area; as well as a suite of meeting and interactive rooms, all equipped with state-of-the-art video communication systems. An additional

feature is the creation of 24 hotel-standard bedrooms and three serviced apartments offering guests the opportunity to relax amid the surroundings of our magnificent college.

Simon Hawkey, domestic bursar, Jesus College

ABOVE
Hotel-style accommodation on the third floor

OPPOSITE-TOP
Atrium space on the first floor of the new entrance building

OPPOSITE-BELOW
The lecture hall was formed from a car park on the ground floor



Working detail

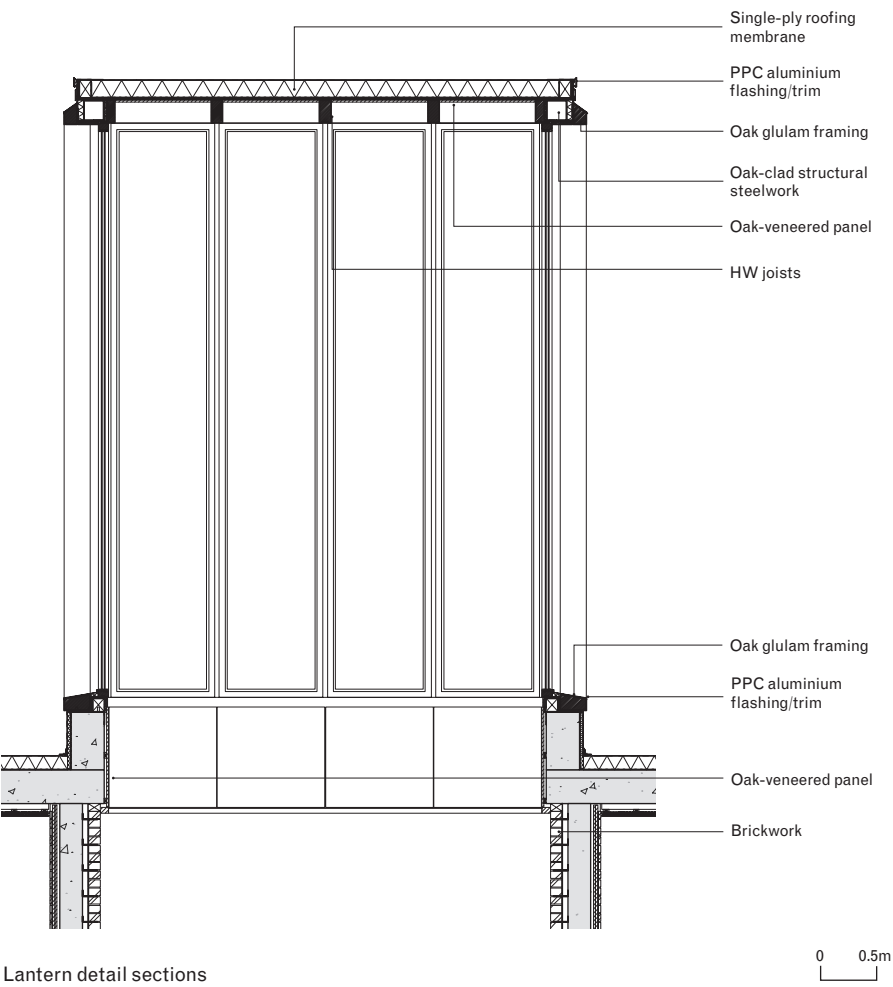
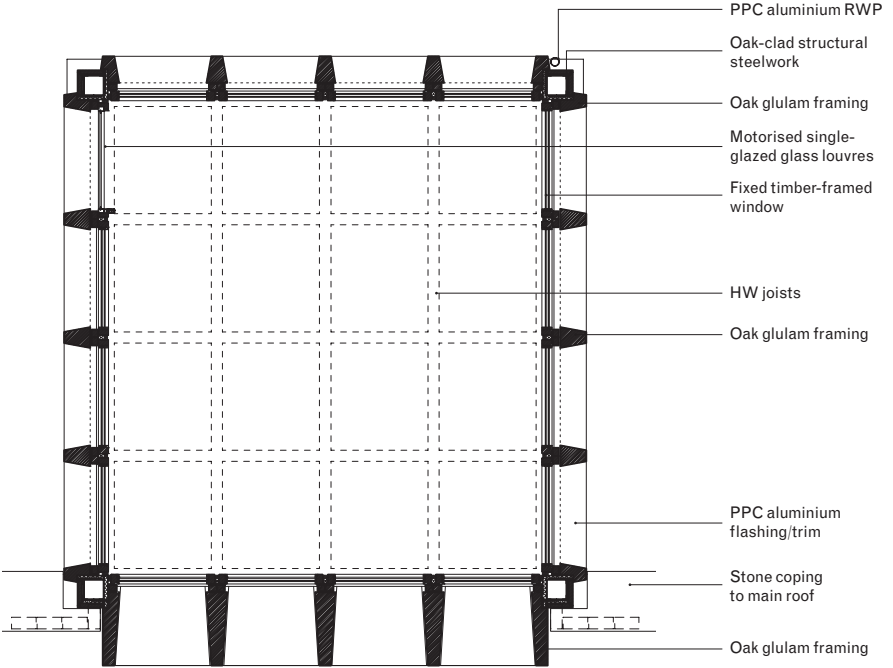
The two primary façades of the 1970s Rank Building address two very different outlooks. To the south, the building faces Jesus Lane, a busy road in the centre of the city with the gardens of Sidney Sussex beyond. The hotel rooms on this side enjoy full-width glazing and sunny balconies with views across Cambridge. Solar shading is provided by oak brises soleil. Stone with a scalloped profile gives relief to the solid walls at ground level. Secondary glazing at first floor provides acoustic insulation to the lecture theatre while allowing daylight in. Working from 8 to 4 to 2 as the façade ascends, each bay is given a vertical order that chimes with the historic streetscape.

To the north, the building addresses the Grade II-listed Webb Building and its tranquil courtyard. Here the rooms enjoy a central window desk and two shutters providing natural ventilation. The lower two floors contain circulation and have full-height windows with integrated bench seating. The new façade bays are presented as two two-storey timber-framed volumes slotted between existing brick piers, the top one stepping back in line with the existing building. This brings the new north façade into proportion with the surrounding Webb Building windows.

Both façades use oak glulam. Prefabricated sections were delivered to the site and erected into position in a matter of days. The oak is treated with preservative but will be allowed to weather naturally, greying down to a tone matching the stone and buff brickwork. *Tom McGlynn, project architect, Niall McLaughlin Architects*

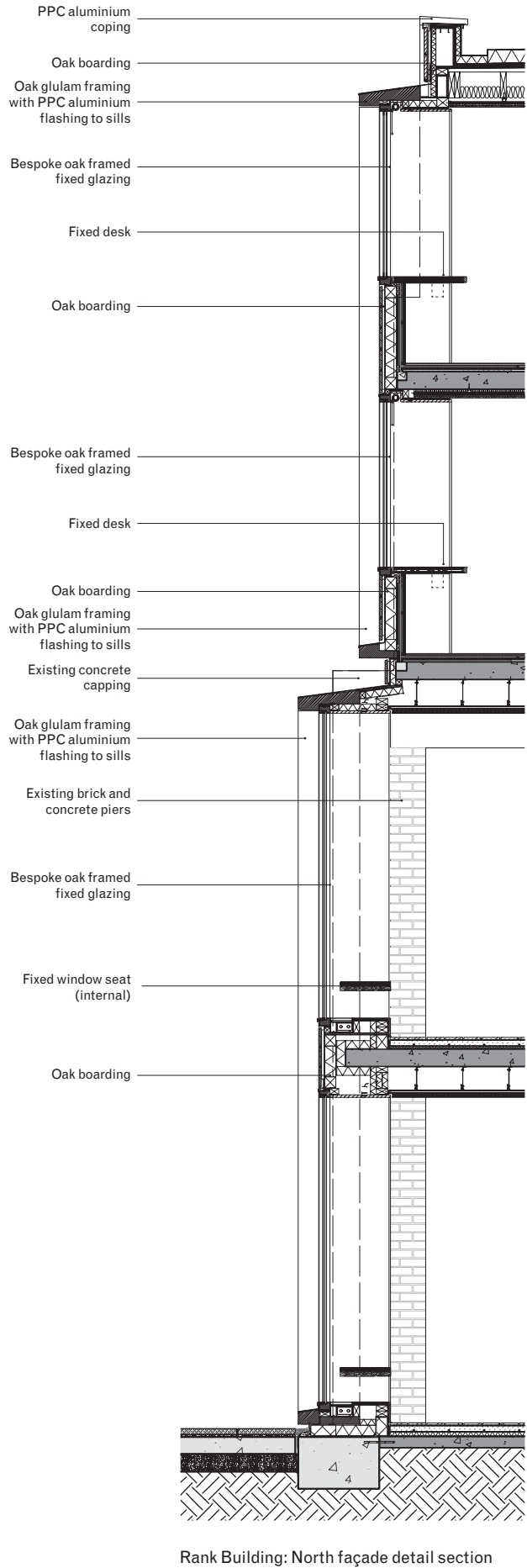
Project data

Start on site February 2015
Completion April 2017
Gross internal floor area 4,140m²
Form of contract JCT Design and Build 2011 with amendments
Construction cost £12.5 million
Construction cost per m² £ 3,000.00 (average rate covers mix of refurbishment, extension and new build)
Architect Níall McLaughlin Architects
Client Jesus College, Cambridge
Structural engineer Peter Brett Associates
M&E consultant David Bedwell & Partners
Quantity surveyor/cost consultant Edmond Shipway
Acoustic consultant Gillieron

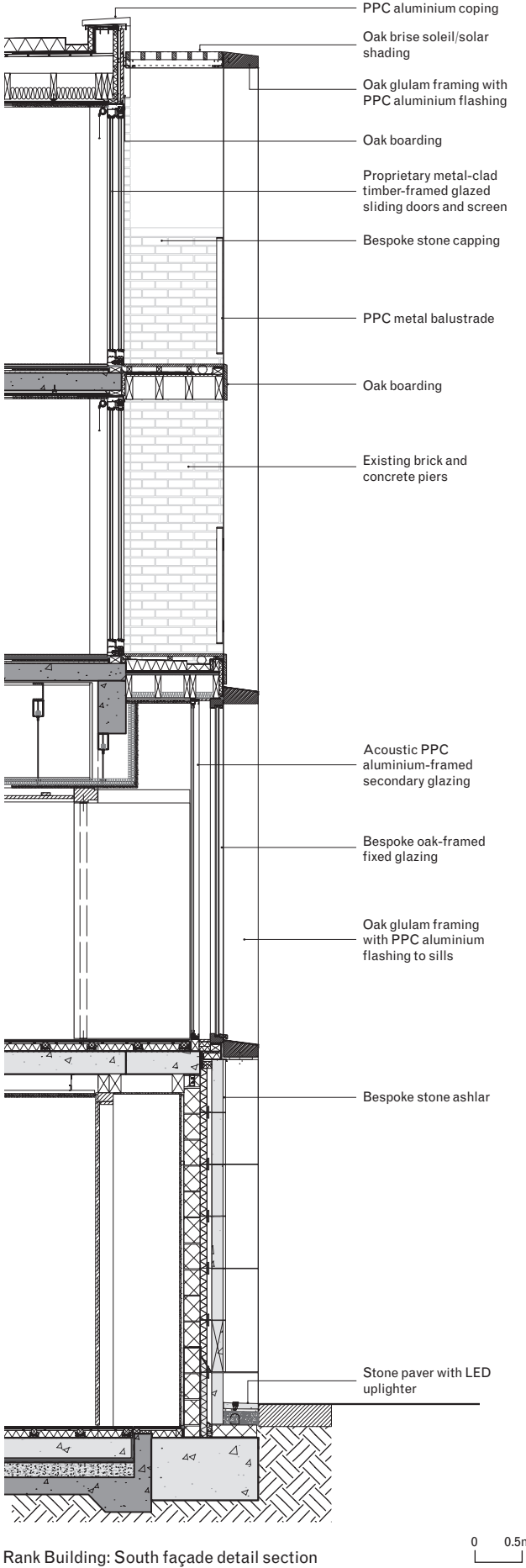


Lantern detail sections

0 0.5m



Rank Building: North façade detail section



Rank Building: South façade detail section

0 0.5m