

The Architectural Review

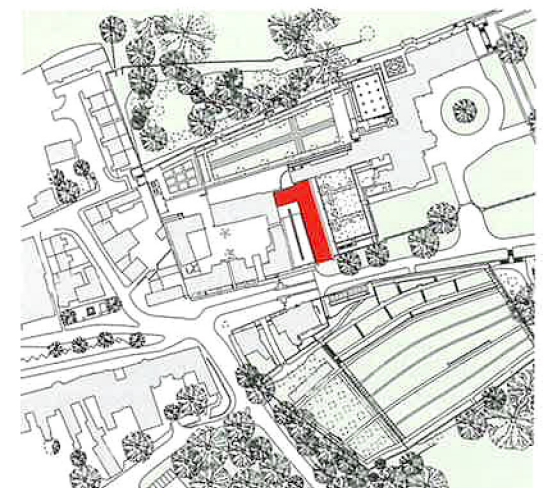




MJ Long Prize shortlist
Jacqueline Stephen

Faith Museum

The Faith Museum by
Níall McLaughlin Architects
in Bishop Auckland, UK,
combines the godly with
the profane, writes
Nile Bridgeman





NICK KANE

Found at the confluence of the River Wear and the River Gaunless, Bishop Auckland, in County Durham in the north of England, has a rich but unsung history as a meeting point of the sacred and the civic. Since the 11th century, the bishops of Durham have been central to the town's legacy. Centuries of conquest and religious ceremony laid further layers of history; industrial revolution and decline shaped the Victorian character and grain of the town centre. Auckland Palace - the home of the bishops of Durham until 2012 - has similarly been subjected to many transformations since it was built in the 12th century. The bishop of Durham's private chapel on the site, built in 1665, is constructed from stones reclaimed from the 12th-century mansion, which had themselves been salvaged from demolished buildings.

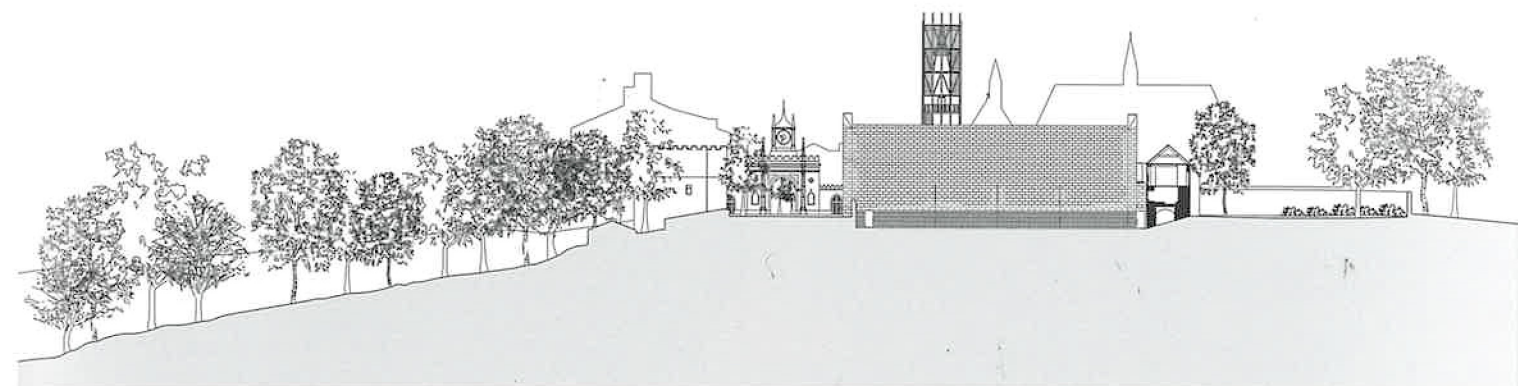
In 2012, the palace and its contents were

purchased by the Auckland Project, a regeneration charity founded by Jonathan Ruffer, a financier and philanthropist; as a collector of religious Spanish art, Ruffer had a particular interest in the palace's collection of Francisco de Zurbarán paintings. By 2020, Ruffer had invested more than a third of his considerable wealth into the area in a bid to establish Bishop Auckland as a must-visit cultural destination. An ambitious 25-year plan was undertaken to transform Bishop Auckland into a centre of art, history and culture, where the lines between spiritual and secular are readily blurred.

From the upper floor of the palace, evidence of an ever-expanding cultural offering can be surveyed, alongside the significant archaeological excavations taking place within the site and the surrounding square mile. In 2014, Niall McLaughlin Architects (NMA), in collaboration with Purcell, won the

Auckland Palace (opening spread) was bought in 2012 by investor Jonathan Ruffer. Since then, two buildings designed by Niall McLaughlin Architects have opened in the complex: Auckland Tower in 2018 (above, left of image) and the Faith Museum in 2023 (above, centre of image)

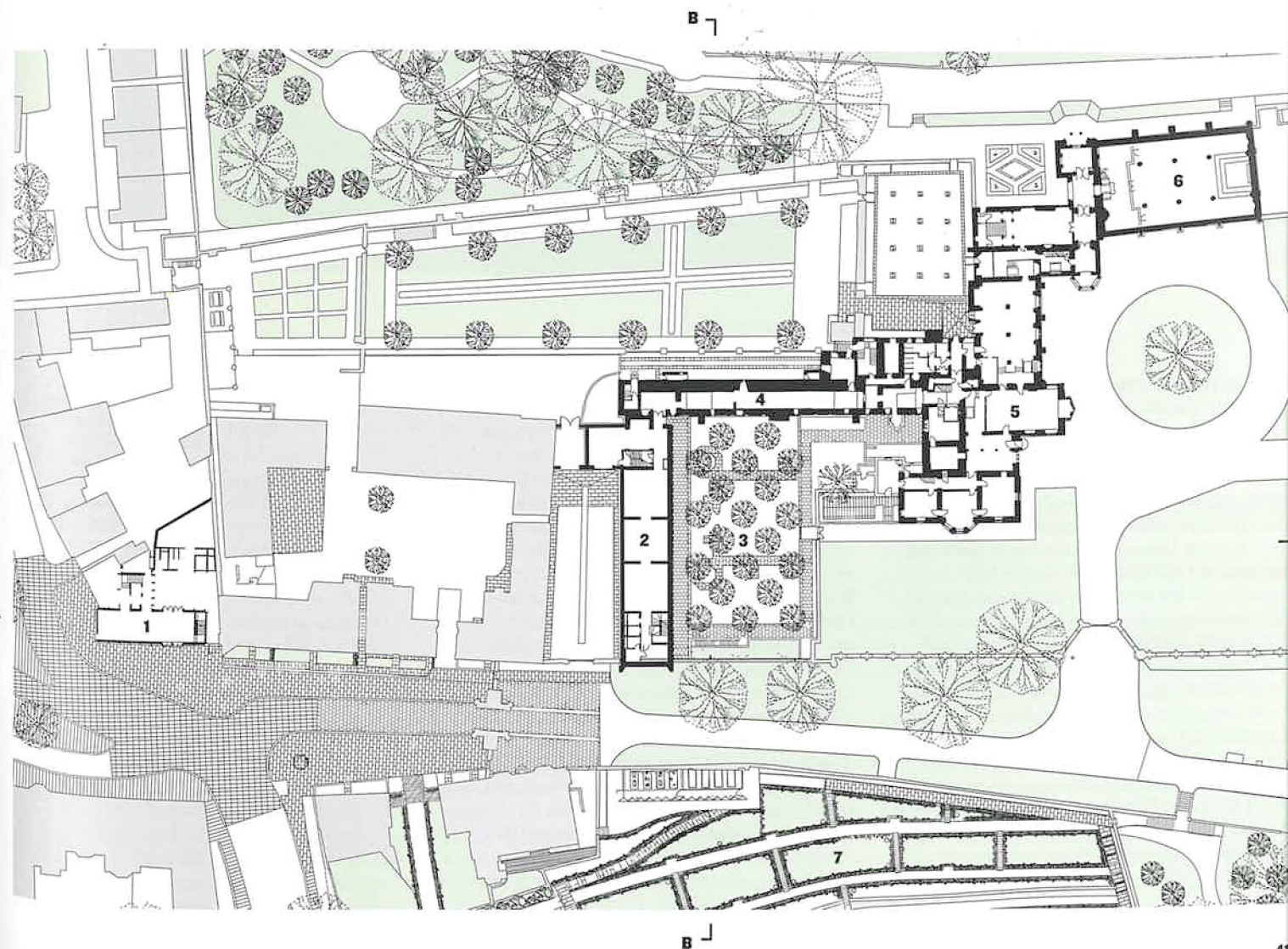
- 1 Auckland Tower
- 2 Faith Museum
- 3 Faith Garden
- 4 Scotland Wing
- 5 Auckland Palace
- 6 chapel
- 7 walled garden



section BB



section AA





NICK KANE

competition to transform the Grade I-listed Auckland Palace and its grounds into a national museum of religion and religious art. The 35m-tall Auckland Tower at the tip of the town's high street opened in 2018; reminiscent of a medieval siege tower, the structure offers a viewing platform overlooking the castle, town and parkland beyond. A two-storey, monopitched building at the tower's base houses an information centre, ticketing office and the Auckland Project offices. As part of the wider Bishop Auckland development, neighbouring farmhouses were carefully repaired and now contain galleries, a restaurant, a hotel and facilities for the groundskeepers and gardeners. And in October 2023, almost a decade after its inception, the Faith Museum opened its doors to the public – an extension to Auckland Palace housing a permanent exhibition showcasing 6,000 years of British faith.

Echoing adjacent activities, the architects' designs for the museum began with an archaeological study, uncovering the presence of a building that formed a courtyard garden with the palace. This discovery, confirmed by archival drawings, dictated the location of the new museum and the proposed Faith Garden. The palace grounds and Faith Museum lie beyond Robinson's Arch, a squat stone entrance that is part-crenellated castle wall, part-triumphal arch and part-clocktower. Once through the arch, the layers of history unfold. Two walls, parallel to the path, stitch together the varied typologies and eras found within the palace curtilage. To the south, a 17th-century walled garden sharply falls away; its beds and orchards provide food for the palace's café. To the north, a stone wall is intermittently interrupted by elevations of adjacent buildings – an agricultural yard, timber loading-bay doors, the Faith Museum

Local Cop Crag sandstone was cut into large-format smooth ashlar for the front facade of the Faith Museum (above), and assembled into an open-jointed rainscreen to form the roof. The lower floor of the museum is artificially lit to protect the fragile artefacts within (opposite)



FAITH MUSEUM, BISHOP AUCKLAND

proudly stepping forward, the palace's grand entrance – and finally disappears from view towards woodland.

The size and sharpness of the Faith Museum silhouette are imposing, but its simple form, deft details and singularity lend a quietly assured presence. 'We wanted a bold piece of contemporary architecture from the start,' explains Clare Baron, head of exhibitions at the Auckland Project. 'We wanted to signal that there is a renewed future for the site, through the creation of a destination for art, culture and faith.' The monolithic museum's design considers themes of 'monumental and ordinary, secular and sacred, contemporary and historic', says NMA associate Jacqueline Stephen, who led the project between 2016 and 2023. A combination of the 'monumental and the ordinary' informs the references used by the architects, ranging from utilitarian tithe barns used by medieval farmers for

their church offerings, to the exquisite detail of reliquary boxes – containers for sacred relics. 'The building is secular in its function as a museum, but because of the nature of its contents and the religious associations of the site, we sought to give it a heightened sense of the sacred, by elevating certain details.'

This 'elevation' is discernible at every scale, across every surface, from the locally crafted finials at the roof's apex, to the stone-lined drains where the museum meets the ground. Locally quarried Cop Crag sandstone is used to 'create a monolith full of depth and interest', in Stephen's words. The material specification balances consistency and variety, allowing the assorted tones to neither cluster nor create a clear rhythm. The stone was cut by local masons in different ways: at ground level, split-faced to 'bring out its richness and depth'; cut into large-format smooth ashlar for the first-floor walls, which

expresses the variation and patterns; and assembled into an open-jointed rainscreen on the steeply pitching roof. Ageing is part of the composition, as the different stone formats weather in different ways; an elegant concealed gutter subtly highlights the contrast between the pristine facade and the roof that has developed into a deeper shade.

At first, the museum appears to be a standalone building; however, the extension is in fact accessed from Auckland Palace via the 16th-century Scotland Wing. The lower level is partially sunken and the enfilade of galleries are artificially and dimly lit to protect the works on display. On the floor above, however, the main gallery is radiant and weightless. Delicately formed steel trusses carry the faintly stippled acoustic ceiling above; the soaring pitched ceiling engenders an ecclesiastical feel. As elsewhere, everyday details are elevated: floor vents necessitated by the

'References range from tithe barns to the exquisite detail of reliquary boxes'



THIS SPREAD: DAVID VALINSKY

In contrast to the lower floor, in the main gallery on the upper floor a sizeable window in the gable wall allows natural light to flood into the interior (above). The steeply pitched roof is carried by slender steel trusses (opposite). The heavy external shell belies the weightlessness within

strict environmental conditions needed to display such fragile objects reinforce the cadence of patterned parquet floors, popping out to reveal services below. Otherwise, none of the innumerable security and environmental controls are apparent. Sliding timber screens conceal goods lifts with effortless grace. Wooden finishes and parchment-coloured walls give the gallery warmth. Walls are intermittently broken by deep arrow-slit openings, with predictably perfect reveals.

NMA made for fitting collaborators. The London-based practice's portfolio is typified by its expressive and exquisitely crafted architecture in challenging contexts often steeped in history. From its 'mending' of a listed west London monastery in the early 1990s, to their more recent student halls, auditoriums, sports pavilions and libraries for Oxford and Cambridge universities, the practice often blurs the line between divinity and the everyday

in their work. Top-lit, lofty volumes pair with humble materials, and revered finishes fuse with quiet, familiar details.

Stephen shares that she has 'a particular interest in the technical and construction stages of projects' and notes the scarcity of female voices among contractors. 'We wanted the project to have an inherent simplicity, but knew its success would hinge on the detailing and delivery. This required working closely with the main contractor and specialist subcontractors to ensure the execution matched the project's aspirations, even when that meant having difficult conversations.' With a scheme so seemingly simple, there is nowhere to hide. From concept to completion, Stephen has guided the process with an extraordinary level of care. Despite its significant scale and tight tolerances, the finished Faith Museum does not feel weighed down by any of its constraints. Instead, it is light: sacrosanct.



- 1 open-jointed sandstone rainscreen
- 2 support channels
- 3 standing seam aluminium sheet
- 4 insulation
- 5 profiled metal deck
- 6 acoustic plasterboard
- 7 steel hollow section truss
- 8 concealed gutter
- 9 raised floor with service void
- 10 sandstone cladding
- 11 reinforced concrete

0 500mm

