

# In praise of shadows

Niall McLaughlin's contribution to Worcester College  
Oxford proves worthy of its privileged milieu

Words: Eleanor Young Photographs: Nick Kane

Opened door leaves fold into slim,  
deep pillars, making the auditorium  
a remarkable flow of spaces.



The curving crown of the Sultan Nazrin Shah Centre is a theatrical gesture in the luscious grounds of Oxford's Worcester College. Here the spiral-mown grass is untouched by the hot summer drought and the Sultan Nazrin Shah Centre exudes a similar feeling. A lecture theatre, seminar rooms, dance studio and break-out space in Clipsham limestone, with high ceilings, curvaceously simple oak furniture, light and dark; the pressures under which other projects operate seem happily distant. Over the last 70 years particularly, the privileged milieu of Oxbridge has allowed many architects to build compelling architecture that will outlast much contemporary output. They are also rare examples, in our time, of buildings driven by lasting values, in this case of a college which has stewardship of them for the next century or more.

The college's neoclassical main entrance opens up into a set piece of communal spaces primarily designed by George Clarke with Nicholas Hawksmoor, the dining hall on one side, the chapel on the other and the traditional form of the quad dropping away on its far side to the marshy edge of Oxford. The water is now contained in a curving lake and the edge of the city pushed out beyond the train station. Architect Niall McLaughlin saw the chance to echo this composition on

**Above** Slender timber columns reach up beyond the dappled light of the pergola. Grids and vanishing points all seem to take you somewhere beyond the cool interior.

**Right** Orthogonal plan meets curving cut-out. Light from above and the sides illuminates indirectly.

**IN NUMBERS**  
 £8.897m  
 construction cost  
 £9372/m<sup>2</sup>  
 construction cost  
 (ex demolition)  
 846m<sup>2</sup>  
 gross internal floor area



**Left** Read face on, from the cricket pitch, the openness of the facade onto the seminar rooms and loggia is very apparent.

**Below** Seen obliquely it looks more solid, and the stepping profile chimes with that of the student rooms of MacCormac Jamieson Prichard's Sainsbury Centre.

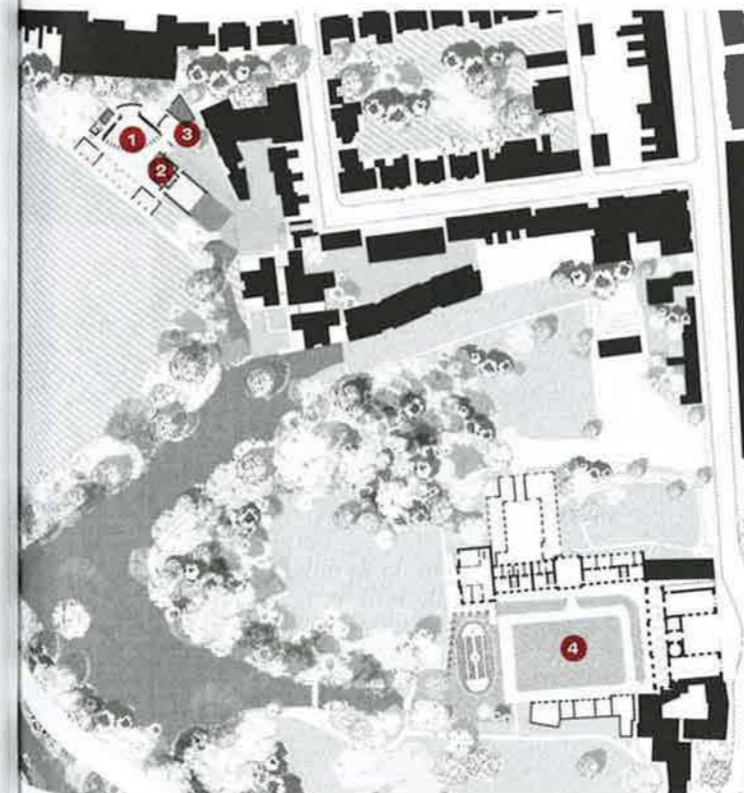
The pressures under which other projects operate seem happily distant

Site plan

- 1 Sultan Nazrin Shah Centre
- 2 Sainsbury building
- 3 Worcester College's new quad
- 4 Worcester College's historic quad
- 5 Lake

the more fractured north side of the college. Here grand architectural gestures gave way to a cricket field and small-scale student rooms, hiding in a canopy of trees. There was, however, an entrance gate, opening directly into the delicate brick terraces of the Oxford suburb of Jericho – topped whimsically by bedrooms designed by MacCormac Jamieson Prichard, like the Sainsbury building alongside. Could these be two sides of a three-sided 'quad' onto the cricket pitch and the new centre bringing order by making a third side? Taking down a few trees and drawing the lake into angled pools spanned by a bridge started this process, but it is the enclosure of the new Sultan Nazrin Shah Centre that brings it all into focus.

The centre also provides a powerful edge to the cricket ground, facing off the cricket pavilion, even as it draws the college's serpentine lake softly into itself. There is something gently gawky about this large scale building in this setting, like an awkward teenager. It is taller than it might be, one storey elongated by the need to contain its own area of flood water underneath. But more significantly the long eyes of the lecture theatre





**Left** Oak benches are subtly curved for comfort. Writing flaps fold down from the back of each bench with the elegance of tiny bureaux.

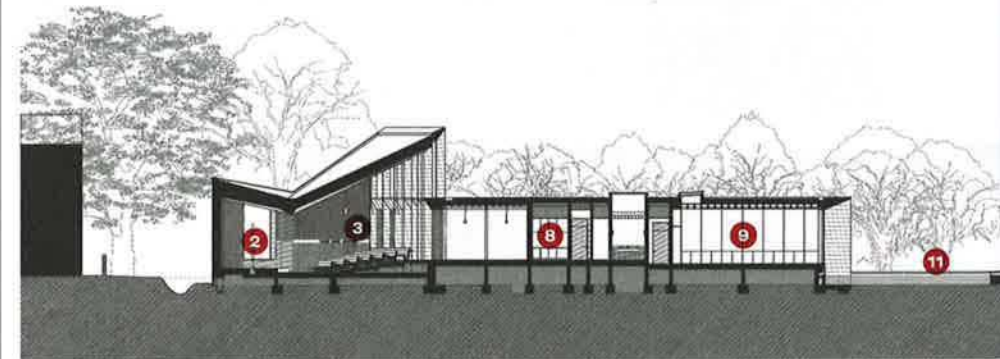
**Right** The GRC ceiling fans out from above the stage to clerestory windows over the doors.

- 1 Green room
- 2 Stage
- 3 Auditorium
- 4 Seminar room
- 5 Loggia
- 6 E-hub
- 7 Plant
- 8 Kitchen
- 9 Studio
- 10 Cricket field
- 11 Lake
- 12 Sainsbury building

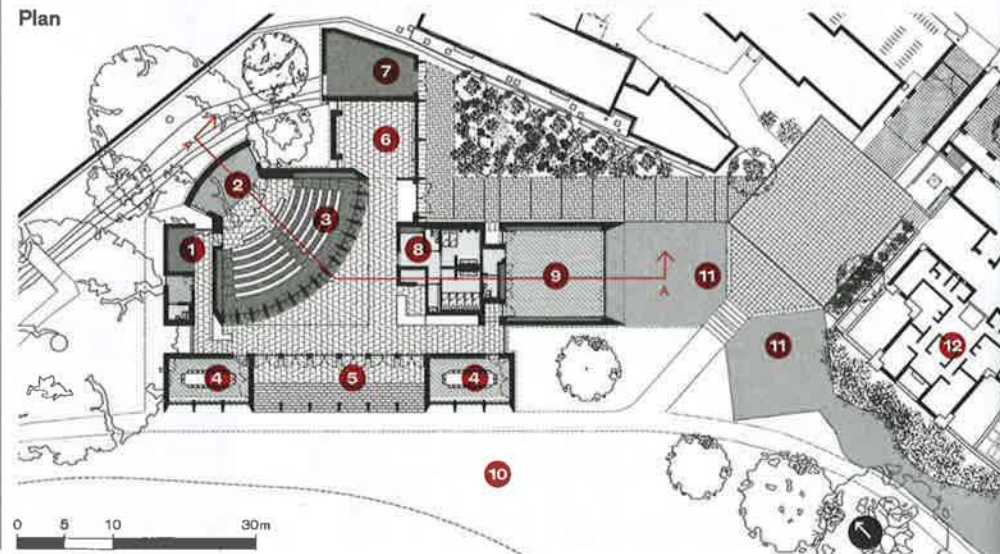
clerestory windows look out rather dolefully. Where many would have designed a black box with a solid wall, this building has deep limestone reveals onto tall thin windows. McLaughlin plays close attention to windows; they are often unusually bold. 'I am extremely aware of directions of regard,' he says. But as in many of his buildings the top-lights are not about the 'regard' of any person, they are unreachable. Instead they are about setting up an ethereal and beautiful light.

One could say that inside this whole building is about light. But it would be more accurate to say it is about shade, or the interplay of light and shade. You enter into subdued light, a forest path of timber columns and layers of canopy formed by the cross-cutting layers of timber grids in the ceiling. Seminar rooms and the dance studio sit as stone-clad pavilions in their own right. A deep pergola over 10 steps into the sports field awaits a leggy cloak of wisteria so it can join the circulation of shadiness and more softly frame the green of the view. But it is the auditorium you are drawn to, like a clearing with light streaming in. The deep reveals of the clerestory become columns into which the 30 doors fold, making the whole centre remarkable as it drops down to the stage with the pale oak benches and the radiating floor tiles. The ribs of the GRC ceiling fan out and up towards the clerestory – McLaughlin thinks of them as spreading branches. From the side-lit stage, as if standing by a canopy-supporting trunk, you have a perfect view as the controls smoothly shut the blinds and doors, closing the lecture theatre down into a more typical – and far more ordinary – black box for AV mode.

Section AA



Plan



**Right** The lake is drawn under the extended proscenium arch of the studio alongside the main entrance.

**Below** Glulams in the studio give a sense of enclosure despite the large expanse of glass and mirrors.



- Credits
- Architect** Niall McLaughlin Architects
  - Client** Worcester College, Oxford
  - Structural engineer** Price and Myers
  - M&E consultant** King Shaw Associates
  - Quantity surveyor cost consultant** Gardiner and Theobald
  - Acoustics** Gillieron Scott
  - Stonework** Szerelmey
  - Lake** Wallingford Hydro Solutions
  - Landscape** Simon Bagnall
  - Seating** David Colwell
  - Project manager** Bidwells
  - CDM coordinator** Gardiner and Theobald
  - Approved building inspector** Aedis Group
  - Main contractor** Beard Construction

It is the theatre you are drawn to, like a forest clearing with the light streaming in

The loose conglomeration of spaces in the centre has a rare openness and flow. Full-height glass at the ends of the closest things to corridors draw in significant trees, and the informal work space, or e-hub, is enveloped by more trees and planting alongside its cool slice of calm.

If this seems too whimsical and theatrical a reading, the centre can also be seen as a geometric and rational design. As McLaughlin sketches out the plan a square emerges, the lecture theatre knocking a corner out of this pure geometry with its clashing form, making a flipped Aalto diagram. The rake of the lecture theatre is sunk into the space under the building that primarily functions as a void for holding flood waters. The smaller spaces mark out the edges of the building in neat rectangles; even the dance studio terminates with the strong geometry of a proscenium arch as it pushes out over the water.

Mediating between the geometry of the plan and the flow of the experience is the high ceiling – a plane often sidelined, but regularly celebrated in McLaughlin's work. Here, at 3.67m high, it is imbued with extra depth by a double-layered oak grid, reminiscent of the layers of traditional Japanese ceilings. There are no harsh shadows here but an accumulation of darker layers – occasionally sharply reversed, for example in the toilets where a rooflight above the basin spills filtered light onto sparkling hands.

This building abounds with references – Schinkel, Louisiana, Aalto. But here, notwithstanding a design and build contract, it stands for something more; a chance to build for centuries to come. ●

