

BUILDING ■ Fit for purpose: van Heyningen & Haward in Oxford

John Pringle on the marriage of new and existing buildings in Oxford's Stelios Ioannou Centre for Classical & Byzantine Studies. Photos: James Brittain.

Not all of Oxford University is dreaming spires and college quadrangles. The site for the new Classics Centre was typical of much of the old faculty accommodation that the university is now redeveloping and upgrading. It consisted of a collection of unloved sheds and scruffy backyards that had been the fiefdom of the building maintenance department for many years.

The site was more difficult than most in that it was sandwiched between the oppressive back wall of the Ashmolean Museum on one side and the equally oppressive but invisible rights of light angles imposed by the windows of Blackfriars College on the other. To the front were three forlorn listed buildings that concealed what went on behind. The reason for redeveloping this complicated site was that the classics faculty had to be close to its main resources in the

Ashmolean and the Sackler Library and this counted for much more than any desire for more spacious accommodation. The department proclaims itself 'the flagship of all humanities' and it feels its identity is closely associated with these key university institutions and this part of Oxford.

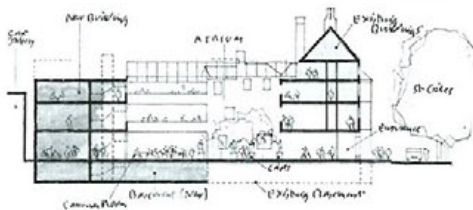
The new building has hardly any elevations that can be appreciated from a distance and the few that are visible are deliberately low key. The task for van Heyningen & Haward was to find some breathing space within this congested site. By squeezing in through the cluttered front and by metaphorically sticking their elbows out sideways, they have carved out a magnificent internal space. This central court has a calm atmosphere and a simplicity that could not be guessed from the outside.

Birkin Haward's initial sketches set out

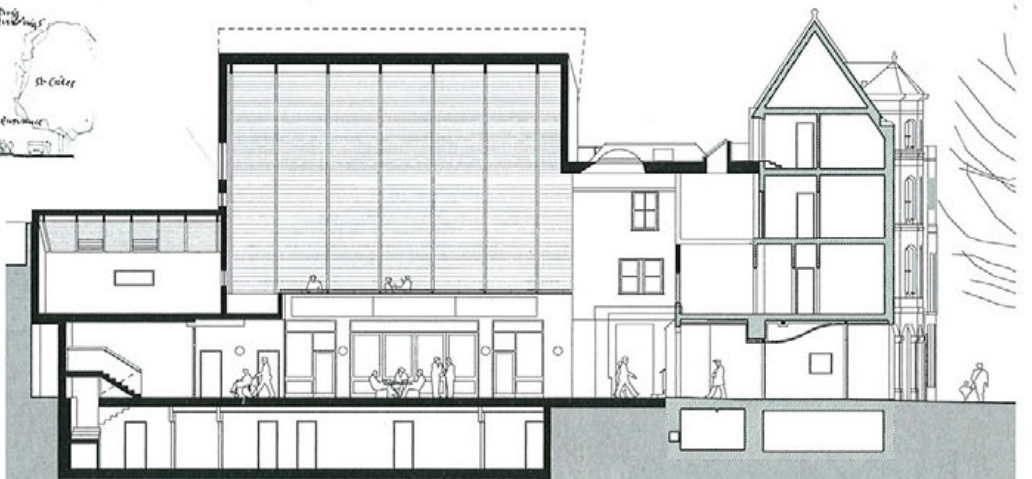


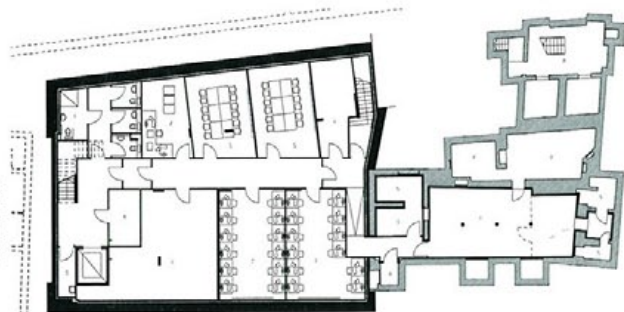
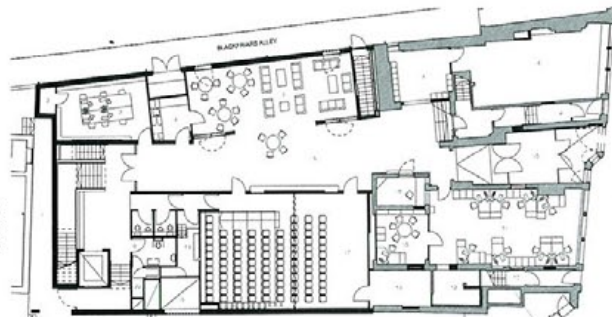
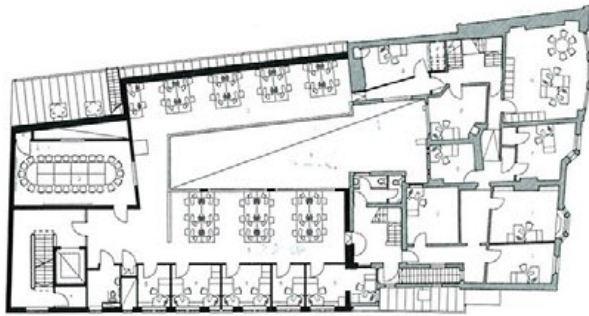
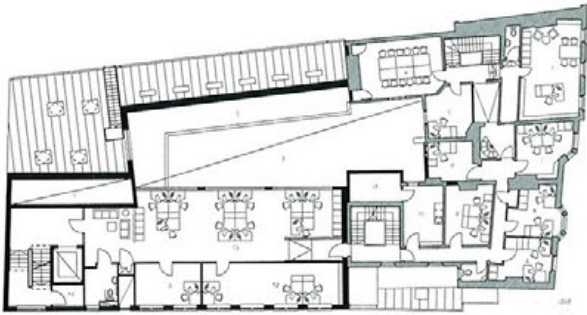
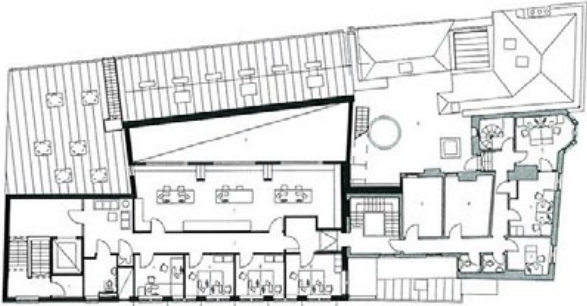
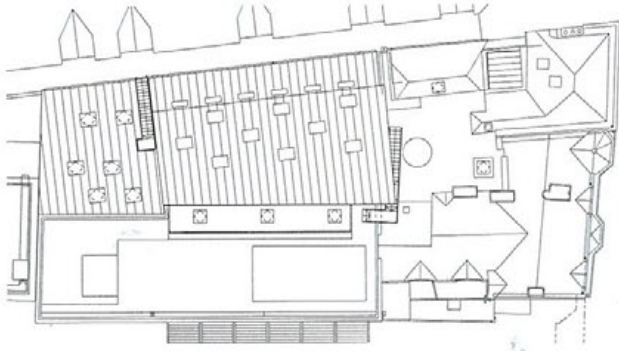


Above Existing buildings facing St Giles have been retained in the redevelopment, and a new entrance formed; old meets new in the central atrium.
Right Concept and final long section.

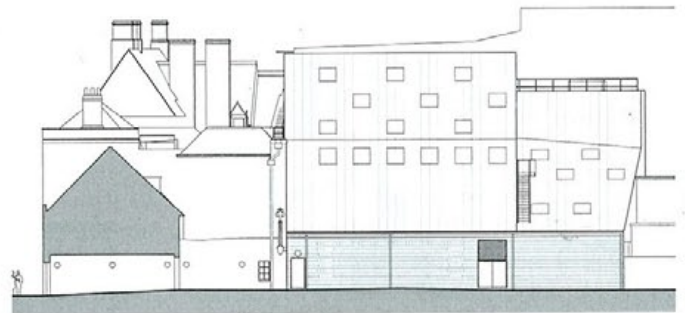
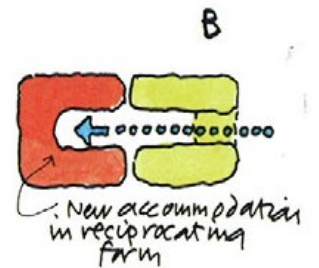
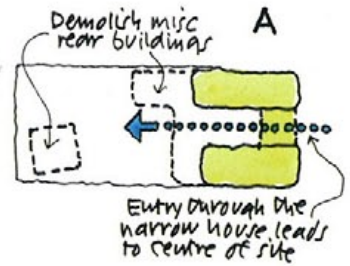


Opposite The atrium is screened by internal timber louvres to preclude much direct daylight and prevent overlooking of the neighbouring college buildings; the form of the zinc-clad roof is generated in part by rights of light to the adjacent college; location plan showing the Asmolean Museum to the south, currently undergoing a £60m redevelopment by Rick Mather.



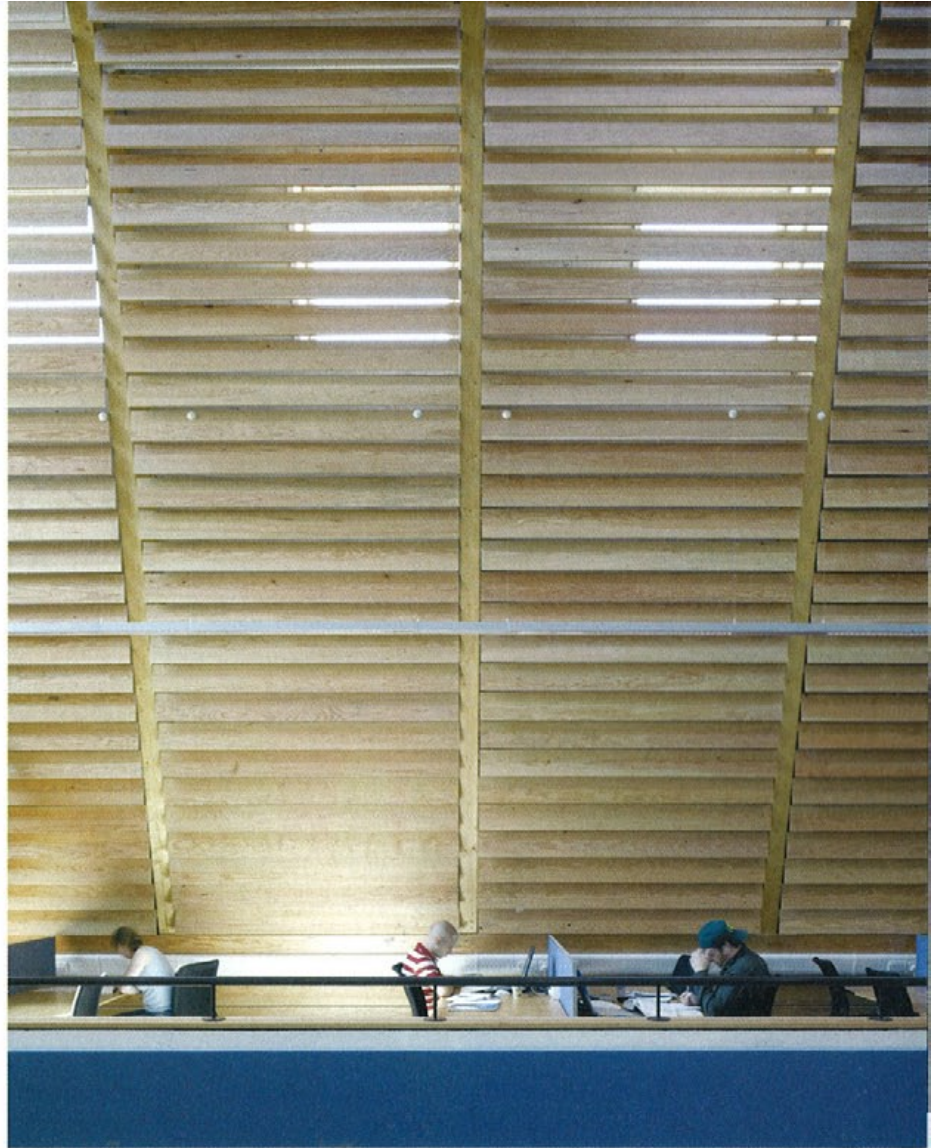


Plans The £8.7m Stelios Ioannou School for Research in Classical and Byzantine Studies at Oxford University provides high quality modern research and teaching facilities for the whole faculty. The site is on St Giles in the city centre, squeezed between the Ashmolean Museum and Blackfriars College. The old subsidiary buildings to the rear of the site were demolished to build new accommodation while the significant parts of the existing buildings facing St Giles were retained. The new central atrium brings natural light and ventilation into the deep plan, organises the circulation and provides a communal heart to the building, joining old and new.



the strategy, which starts from the inside and works outwards. The main move was to introduce a daylit atrium into the middle of the site with the retained buildings wrapped around one end and a reciprocal C-shaped form for the new building at the other end, which carries the existing floor levels through. In this way the building creates its own outlook over the new internal space and frees itself from the ban on overlooking Blackfriars and the unattractive blank aspect towards the Ashmolean. As the design developed however a degree of informality crept in, which helps the new building settle comfortably into its surroundings. Some of this informality was imposed by the various raking planes of rights of light angles, some was in reaction to quirks of function (rooms popping out from the general building line) and some was generated by the warped geometry of the site. Project partner Josh McCosh calls it 'going with the flow' of red-brick Oxford back extensions. It works.

The most dominant feature of the new extension is the sloping roof of the atrium that traces the rights of light lines from the party wall with Blackfriars College. Slightly



Above Timber louvres prevent overlooking of neighbours.
Below Administration, study spaces and library.





'our carapace has a soothing effect' – and this sense of a protective shell certainly provides a calm environment for the largely research-based activity within.

In van Heyningen & Haward's buildings the quality of the acoustic environment is given particular emphasis. Here it was a priority because most of the upper floors are open to the atrium, creating the sense of a research community working calmly and quietly. However the absorbent wall panels and quilt ceiling linings above the louvres provide a slightly uncomfortable contrast with the tactile 'external' quality of the



Above The open atrium incorporates galleried study spaces; the St Giles facade has been refurbished to provide a main entrance.

Below External louvres protect south-facing windows in the principal new facade that faces the back of the Ashmolean Museum.

Project team

Architect: van Heyningen & Haward; design team: James McCosh (partner), Claudia Murin (project architect to tender), Ayesha Nicholas (project architect post tender), Birkin Haward, Felix Flobson, Eva Huld Fridriksdottir, Tim Lynch, Monika Oravcová, Sira Warneke, Elizabeth Wilson; structural engineer: Price & Myers; services engineer: Foremans; qs: EC Harris; planning supervisor: HCD; approved inspector: HCD; project manager: PDCM; acoustic consultant: Arup Acoustics; rights of light consultant: Schatunowski Brooks; party wall surveyor: Ridge; client: Oxford University Estates Directorate; contractor: Mace Plus.

Selected suppliers and subcontractors

Substructure and frame: Lancsville; glulam beams: Finnforest Merk; cold rolled steel framing: Metsec; damp proofing: RW; facing bricks: Ibstock; roofing: NDM, Samafil, RheinZink; windows: Scandinavian Window Systems, Vellac; rooflights: Velux, Coxdome; brise-soleil and clerestory louvres: Naco; screeds: Cylvon, Isocrete; drywall partitions and ceilings: British Gypsum; glazed partitioning: MHR Designs; custom-made douglas fir joinery: Specialist Joinery Projects; wc fittings: Armitage Venesta; ironmongery: Allgoods d-line; wall tiles: H&R Johnson; floor tiles: Capital Marble Designs; timber floor: Junckers; carpet tiles: Interface; fabric: Bute Fabrics; acoustic quilt: Lamaphone; stone work: Putney & Wood; bleacher platforms: Audience systems; bleacher seating: Howe.

awkward from the outside, this is expressed as flat planes of standing-seam zinc roofing with punched windows, in contrast to the spiky roofline of the dormers of its neighbours. Much more convincing is the interior, clad with douglas fir louvres that drive the light down to the floor of the atrium while preventing the neighbours from being overlooked from the upper floors.

The fully glazed roof that featured in the original sketches may seem a more obvious solution but the predominantly solid roof as built, with better insulation and solar shading, is both more appropriate and sustainable. The sense of daylight is not diminished in any way and the space has a calm, warm feel. Professor Donna Kurtz, Beazley archivist at the centre, puts it beautifully –



retained facades and exposed concrete finishes. The use of natural ventilation and exposed thermal mass is deployed with ingenuity, with hidden plenums feeding air to the central spaces. The only reservation is that the consequential surface-mounted pipes and conduits are rather heavy-handedly spread across the plain and robust exposed structure.

The alterations to the retained listed buildings are sensitively executed and the rear extensions were judiciously removed with surgical precision. The missing shopfront has been carefully restored and the main entrance takes up the entire middle bay of the building, providing an understated yet recognisable route to the atrium beyond. This strategy was the result of a constructive dialogue with Oxford conservation officer Nick Worledge in the face of reservations from a conservation group.

The real achievement of the new classics centre however is the way it has carved a strong architectural identity out of an unpromising and jumbled infill site that had for so long been so hemmed in by its overbearing neighbours.

John Pringle is a director of Pringle Richards Sharratt whose current work includes projects at the Pitt Rivers Museum and Radcliffe Science Library in Oxford.