

NEW LUNCH ROOM

ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, OXFORD

MARY MIERS describes the new Senior Common Room extension designed by Sir Richard MacCormac, which is full of space and light

LIGHT-FOOTED, arboreal and filled with light, Sir Richard MacCormac's new fellows' lunch room at St John's College, Oxford, is a far cry from the standard image of an institutional dining room (Fig 4). An elegant glass box that uses concrete, steel and glass with considerable refinement, it combines high-tech elements with a spatial complexity and cantilevered form that bear strong affinities with the architecture of Sir John Soane and Frank Lloyd Wright.

A former president of the RIBA, Sir Richard is a luminary among architects, who has shown that even an Underground station (Southwark, on London's Jubilee Line) can be transformed into an unexpectedly uplifting place. His new building at St John's, which overlooks one of Oxford's finest college gardens, is a sophisticated essay on a number of themes that preoccupy him: the relationship of old and new, the interplay between interior and exterior, and the ambiguous definition of space.

It was prompted by the need to double the size of the existing lunch room to cater for the college's growing fellowship—now numbering nearly 100. A replacement for David Booth and Judith Lederboer's somewhat gloomy predecessor of 1955, the lunch room occupies the first floor of a building that has been carefully tucked in behind late-17th-century fabric in the North Quad to form part of the group of senior members' rooms known as the Senior Common Room.

The site is a challenging one: on one side, it shares a party wall with the Baylie Chapel of 1662, a fan-vaulted extension north of the main chapel built to commemorate Richard Baylie, twice president of St John's in the 17th century. On the other is the Sadler Room, a sitting room with Soanian references of a different character designed in 1980 by college fellow Sir Howard Colvin, and, behind it, a smoking room with Arts-and-Crafts detail, a remodelling of 1936 by Sir Edward Maufe.

Founded in 1555 on the site of a Cistercian college by the London merchant Thomas White, St John's was so well endowed with lands that it became one of Oxford's richest colleges. It is also one of the most architecturally diverse. The Front Quad incorporates part of St Bernard's College, dating from 1437; to its east is Canterbury Quad, unsurpassed among Oxford's early-17th-century buildings for its refined Baroque detail. Later layers include the largely 18th-century hall, various 19th-century additions by architects such

as Edward Blore (who remodelled the chapel in 1843) and George Gilbert Scott the younger (whose New Building in the North Quad dates from the 1880s), followed by E. P. Warren's and N. W. Harrison's work of 1900 and 1909 in a Tudor-Gothic style.

The 20th century was a particularly significant period for St John's: Sir Edward Maufe's restrained neo-Classical additions of the 1930s and 1940s were followed in the 1950s by the university's first major Modernist collegiate building—the polygonal Beehive by Michael Powers of the Architects' Co-Partnership, which completed the east range of the North Quad. This bold experiment in concrete and glass was followed in the mid 1970s by Sir Philip Dowson of Arup Associates' L-plan Sir Thomas White Quad.

There can be few more challenging architectural briefs than one involving the design of a new building within the historic setting of an Oxford or Cambridge college, and no architectural practice working today can rival Sir Richard's firm, MacCormac Jamieson Prichard, for experience in this field. Over the past three decades, it has completed a string of projects for colleges at both universities: the Sainsbury Building at Worcester College, the Bowra Building at Wadham and the Jowett Walk Building at Balliol, all in Oxford; and in Cambridge, the New Court and Chapel at Fitzwilliam College, and Burrell's Field and Blue Boar Court at Trinity have all set out to 'civilise' rather than 'institutionalise' their users. Complex and innovative, yet responsive to historic precedent, these buildings are widely admired both by the public and the architectural press.

The firm's involvement with St John's began in the early 1990s, with the award-winning Garden Quad on the north-east side of the college gardens. The new lunch-room extension was completed in 2005, and the firm is now working on a third project, the Kendrew Quad, a large complex including students' accommodation, teaching facilities, library, cafe and arts centre, which will occupy a site to the north, fronting St Giles. At a time of crisis for university funding, it is encouraging that new developments are still being commissioned on this ambitious scale. It is heartening, too, considering the current dearth of strong-minded clients in Britain prepared to fight for good architecture, that St John's has proved itself so thoughtful a patron, returning again to a practice



1—Two oak-and-glass staircases lead up from the ambulatory

(Facing page) 2—A giant peristyle of pivoting oak shutters defines the outer boundary of the lunch-room extension





3—Suspended on tremendous cantilevers, the glass extension projects into a canopy of leaves

with which it has enjoyed amicable relations and a fruitful exchange of ideas, confident that it will result in another scheme of high quality.

The new building takes the form of a glass box projecting beyond a pair of 'portal frames' to within feet of the president's garden (Fig 3). Suspended from the cantilevers of its great concrete roof beams, it appears to float unsupported, barely touching the garden, yet at the same time merging into it. The concrete portal frames carry added significance, for they emphasise the important lines of the existing building—one marking the chapel's east wall, the other the slightly advanced line of the Sadler Room's bay window.

The architect has challenged conventional expectations by creating ambiguous boundaries, using voids as well as solid walls to define space. The perimeter of the dining room is suggested by the edge of the cantilever, but there is no junction of horizontal and vertical planes here; instead, the space extends into an ambulatory formed by the glass-roofed bay and enclosed externally by an almost invisible membrane of glass with no obvious supporting frame. Beyond it is a third layer—a screen of slatted oak shutters supported on an oak-and-steel frame—and it is this that provides the most emphatic boundary, reading as the outer edge of the building even when the shutters are pivoted open to resemble fins (Fig 2).

This spatial fluency and layering, or suggestion of rooms within rooms, is deeply redolent of Soane's work, in particular his breakfast room at 13, Lincoln's Inn Fields, where the side walls are pulled out from the boundaries defined by the saucer dome to create a curious spatial effect that gives a sense of being drawn outdoors. A similar effect is experienced in the drawing room, where the windows are pulled out beyond the main wall plane to the secondary loggia front.

Another Soanian trick is the use of borrowed light, which enhances the enigmatic spatial qualities of the building. In the lunch room, roof lights are hidden up between the portal frames, and, in the darker inward half of the room (the part within the original fabric of the building), light slots inset into



4—The lunch-room extension. A broad shelf serves as a balustrade, emphasising the horizontal and drawing the eye outwards

the solid ceiling illuminate the side walls from above.

A broad shelf with inset stainless-steel detail serves as a balustrade along the edge of the cantilevered room. It is wide enough to avoid the need for a higher division, which would have interfered with the free flow of space out into the ambulatory, and creates a strong horizontal element level with the dining tables that draws the line of vision out beyond the glass box into the garden. This outward pull is accelerated by the line of the shutters when they are open at right angles to the room—it is the first time Sir Richard has used shutters in this way. 'If I look for precedents, which I tend to do,' he says, 'I would cite Frank Lloyd Wright's earlier Chicago houses, which have casements opening out at right angles, exploding away corners with a very dynamic effect.'

The idea of using the shelf to serve as a visual transition between the room and the garden, and of dropping daylight into the glass-roofed ambulatory space from above, is another echo of Lloyd Wright. The living room at Fallingwater, for example, which also projects into a canopy of trees, has a glass-roofed edge, which gives the illusion that part of the room

is outdoors. There is also a shared interest in the idea of prospect and refuge, explored here through the play on openness and enclosure. When the shutters are closed, they protect and shade the lunch room, turning it into a warm, box-like inner space; when pivoted open, the sense of a physical screen is removed and they draw the eye outwards through the glass so that the room seems to merge with the garden.

The internal fittings by Edmunds and furniture designed by the architect use wood (combined with steel frames for the furniture and leather for the chair seats) to give the room a quiet warmth which, again, relates it to the garden. The suspended ceiling, masking acoustic material between the beams of the cantilevered roof, is made, like the shutters, of slatted oak.

Two staircases, one on each side, are designed with highly engineered detailing, using oak for the treads supported between glass (Fig 1). They rise over an area covered with polished pebbles, within which ventilation grilles suck cool air in from outside in summer, to be circulated up through the building. There is no air-conditioning, and in this sense the building is very

Green, obtaining its cooling through the thermal flywheel effect of the structural mass and ventilation from air movement through the ambulatory.

A new kitchen, sitting room and lobby occupy the ground floor. On the second floor, set back, above the inner part of the lunch room, is a sitting room for visiting fellows, opening onto a terrace. From here, a good view of the cantilevered structure below is gained before the eye is drawn out to the wider city roofscape of finials, gables, chimneys and towers.

At a recent architectural forum, Sir Richard said: 'The idea of architecture as an art that can be beautiful has preoccupied me for over 20 years. But creating that kind of architecture is only possible for a client who really understands the aspiration.' His new building at St John's admirably fulfils that aspiration. It also lives up to the more cerebral role of the common room as a place for the exchange of intellectual conversations and ideas. ↗

Photographs: Clive Bournnell.

NEXT WEEK: Norwich Cathedral