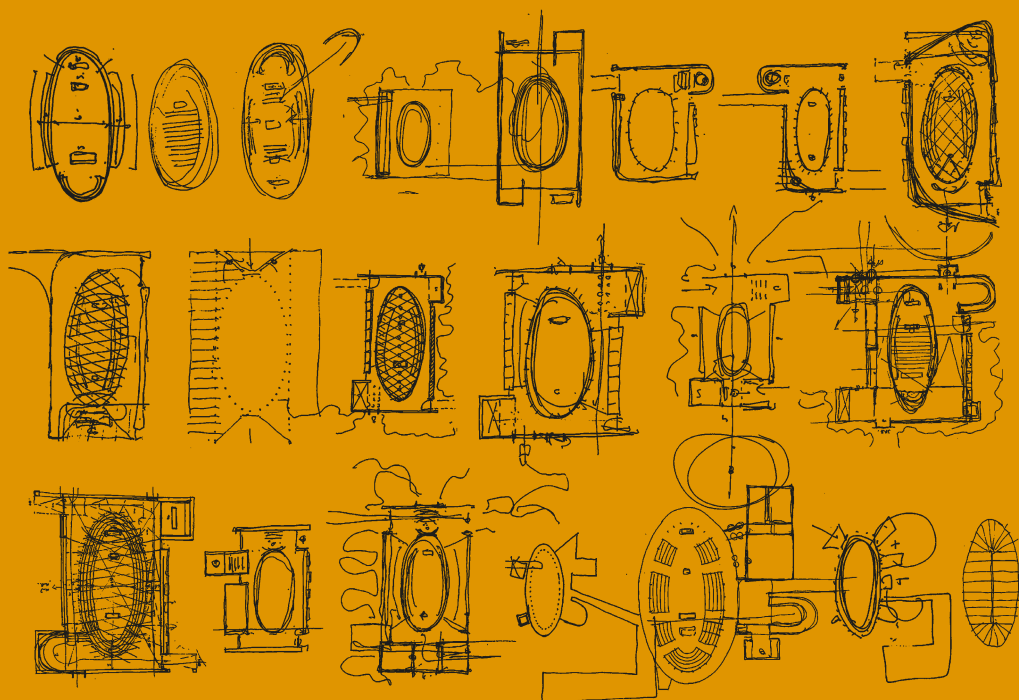


Bishop Edward King Chapel



by Níall McLaughlin Architects

Project Details

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Practice: | Níall McLaughlin Architects |
| Designer: | Níall McLaughlin |
| Title: | Bishop Edward King Chapel |
| Output type: | Building |
| Function: | Place of worship |
| Location: | Cuddesdon, Oxfordshire, UK |
| Client: | Ripon Theological College and the Sisters of Begbroke |
| Practical completion: | March 2013 |
| Budget: | £2,034,000 |
| Area: | 300m ² |
| Building contractor: | Beard Construction |
| Structural engineer: | Price and Myers |
| M&E engineer: | Synergy Consulting Engineers |
| Acoustic engineer: | Paul Gillieron Acoustic Design |
| Quantity surveyor: | Ridge and Partners LLP |
| Stone consultant: | Harrison Goldman |
| Access consultant: | Jane Toplis Associates |
| Planning consultant: | Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners |
| CDM coordinator: | HCD Management Limited |
| Approved building control inspector: | HCD Building Control |
| Construction consultant: | Richard Bayfield |





Statement about the Research Content and Process

Description

The Bishop Edward King Chapel is a new chapel for Ripon Theological College in Cuddesdon, Oxfordshire. The chapel replaces the existing 19th-century one, which had become too small for the current needs of the college and the Sisters of Begbroke, a small community of nuns resident on the site. The brief asked for a building that would accommodate the range of worshipping needs of these two communities within a collegiate seating arrangement.

Questions

1. To investigate the relationship between space and liturgy.
2. To examine the creative use of natural light and geometrical form as an expression of the divine.
3. To consider Semper's search for origins and recreate the notion of the primitive hut.
4. To explore the use of innovative structures and sustainable design principles in the context of contemporary liturgical design.

Methods

1. A study of the etymology of liturgical terms and their poetic use in literature.
2. Analysis of the site through video and sound recordings.
3. Research through making in the form of site-specific tools to explore the acoustic and luminous conditions of the site.

4. **Text-based research to explore the geometry of the ellipse, the history of its discovery and its use in public buildings.**
5. **Design development through public, collaborative drawing.**
6. **Experimentation with structural/material principles and building methods.**
7. **Working through prototypes to refine the skin of the building.**

Dissemination

Presented in two lectures and an exhibition, *The Tracing Floor*. Extensively reviewed in the architectural press, including in *Architectural Review* and *Architecture Today*.

Statement of Significance

Won a two-stage RIBA competition from among 126 international applications. The other shortlisted practices were Massimiliano Fuksas Architetto, Sarah Hare Architects, Terry Pawson Architects Ltd. and Ushida Findlay Architects. Won a RIBA Regional Award (South), RIBA National Award and RIBA South Building of the Year (2013). Shortlisted for the RIBA Stirling Prize (2013).



The annals say: when the monks of Clonmacnoise
Were all at prayers inside the oratory
A ship appeared above them in the air.

The anchor dragged along behind so deep
It hooked itself into the altar rails
And then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill,

A crewman shinned and grappled down the rope
And struggled to release it. But in vain.
'This man can't bear our life here and will drown,'

The abbot said, 'unless we help him.' So
They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back
Out of the marvellous as he had known it.

Seamus Heaney, 'Lightenings viii' (*Seeing Things*, 1992)



2
Chapel ceiling

3
Christ asleep during
the storm on the Sea
of Galilee from Abbess
Hitda's Gospel Book
(978-1042)



4



5

4
A place for
personal prayer

5
Interior view

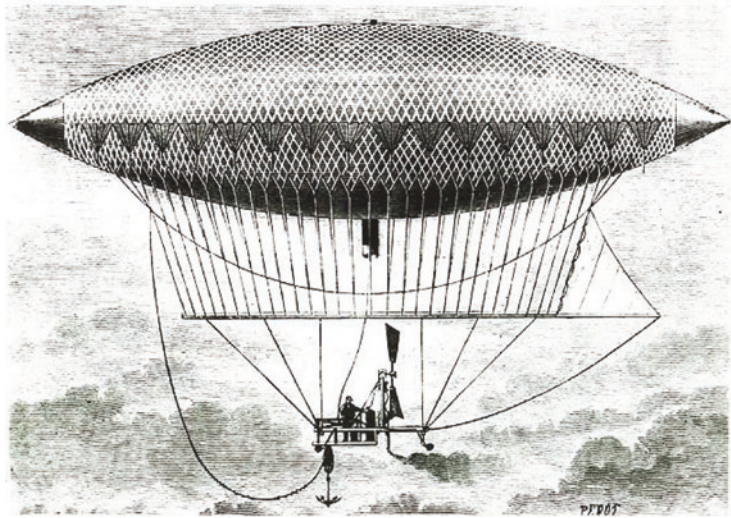
Introduction

The practice was commissioned to design a new chapel for Ripon Theological College in Cuddesdon, after winning an invited RIBA competition in 2009. The new chapel was built to serve the two interconnected groups resident on the campus in Oxfordshire, the college community and the nuns of a small religious order, the Sisters of Begbroke. The chapel sits alongside the existing listed college buildings, designed by George Edmund Street in the late 19th century.

The brief asked for a chapel that would accommodate the range of worshipping needs of the two communities and would be suitable for both communal gatherings and personal prayer. In addition the brief envisioned a separate space for the sisters to recite their offices, a spacious sacristy and the necessary ancillary accommodation.

Over and above these outline requirements, the brief set out the clients' aspirations for the chapel, foremost as 'a place of personal encounter with the numinous' that would enable the occupants to think creatively about the relationship between space and liturgy. They asked for a building that would be an exemplar of forward-looking liturgical design that would link the past with the future. The client summarised their aspirations for the project with Philip Larkin's words from his poem 'Church Going': *'A serious house on serious earth it is ... which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in ...'* (Larkin 1989).





7



8

7

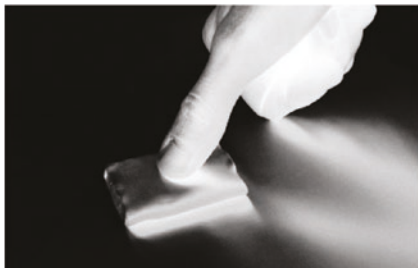
Henri Giffard's Airship. The first to use powered flight
LTA, Airships, France, Giffard (Henri), 1852
Design. Woodcut by Perot depicting left side view of Henri Giffard steam-powered airship of 1852 in flight. B/W. Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum (NASM 73-5535)

8

'Hub of a Wheel' carving on the base of the Sun Temple of Konark, India
Image in the public domain via Creative Commons



9



10

9
Kite flying
Henry Patton
(henrypatton.org)

10
**Making a hollow
in the ground**

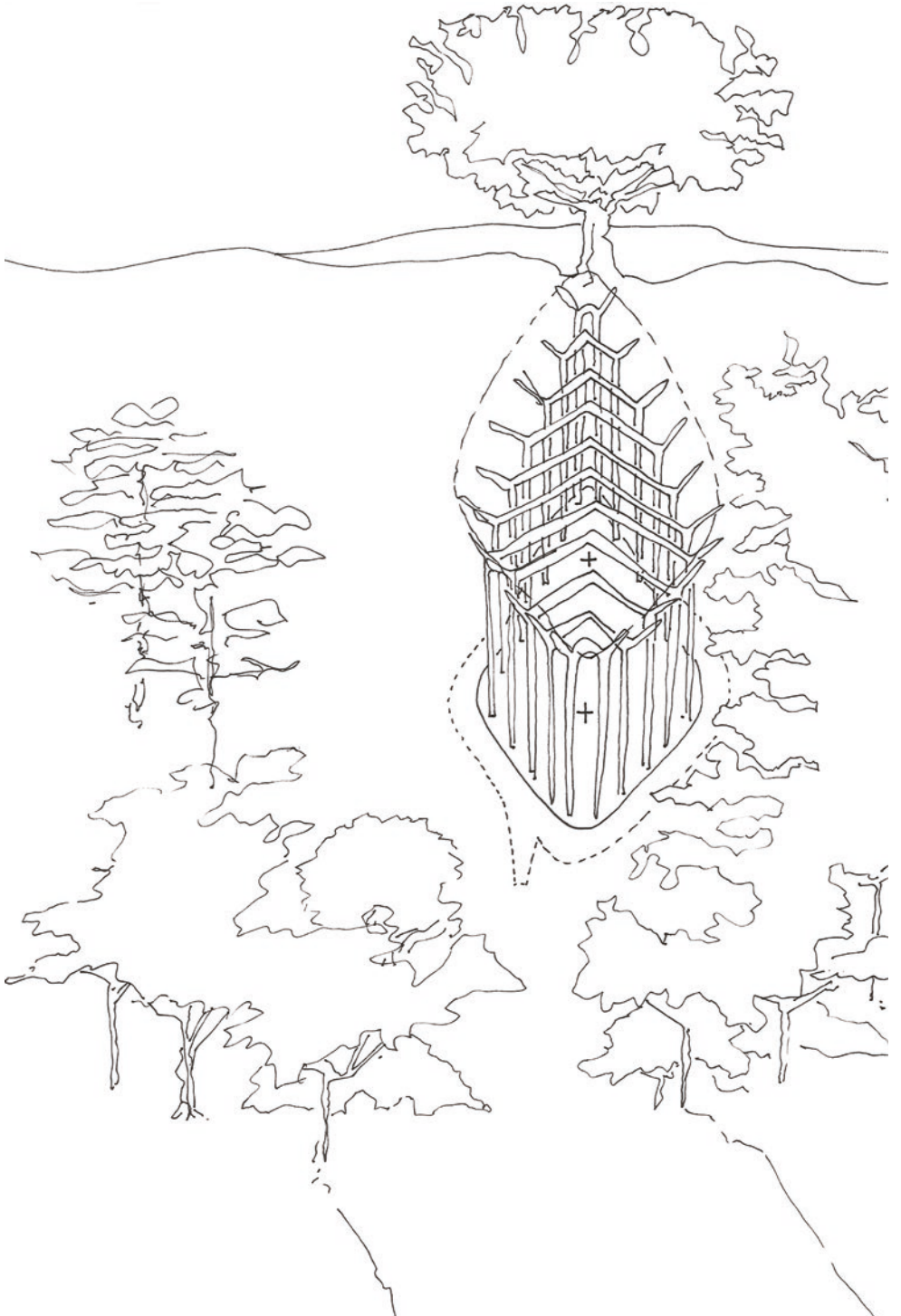
Aims and Objectives

Our aim was to investigate the relationship between space and liturgy through a reflective and research-related design process. We asked if and how the innovative use of materials, building techniques, geometrical form and natural light could lead to an architectural expression of the divine. This aim to explore architecture as an expression of the divine was made specific to the conditions of the site and the users' aspirations for the chapel.

Our work for the chapel began with the word 'nave'. It is the hidden word 'nave' at the centre of Seamus Heaney's poem 'Lightenings viii' (Heaney 1992). The word nave describes the central space of a church, the place for the congregation, but shares the same origin as 'navis', a ship. It has four common and deeply interlinked meanings. Nave can mean the still centre of a turning wheel, the body of a church, the navel (omphalos)

or a ship. The image of the wheel hub speaks of stillness amid movement. The navel speaks of origins, of things that grow out from the middle. All of these go back to the oldest idea of making, or finding, a hollow place at the centre. From these words, two architectural images developed.

The first is a gentle hollow in the ground as a meeting place for the community. The second is a delicate ship-like timber structure that rises into the treetops to gather the light from the leaves. The first idea speaks of ground, of meeting in the still centre. The second idea suggests an uplifting buoyancy, rising towards the light. We wanted to use the way in which these two opposite forces work off each other to give the building its particular character.



Questions

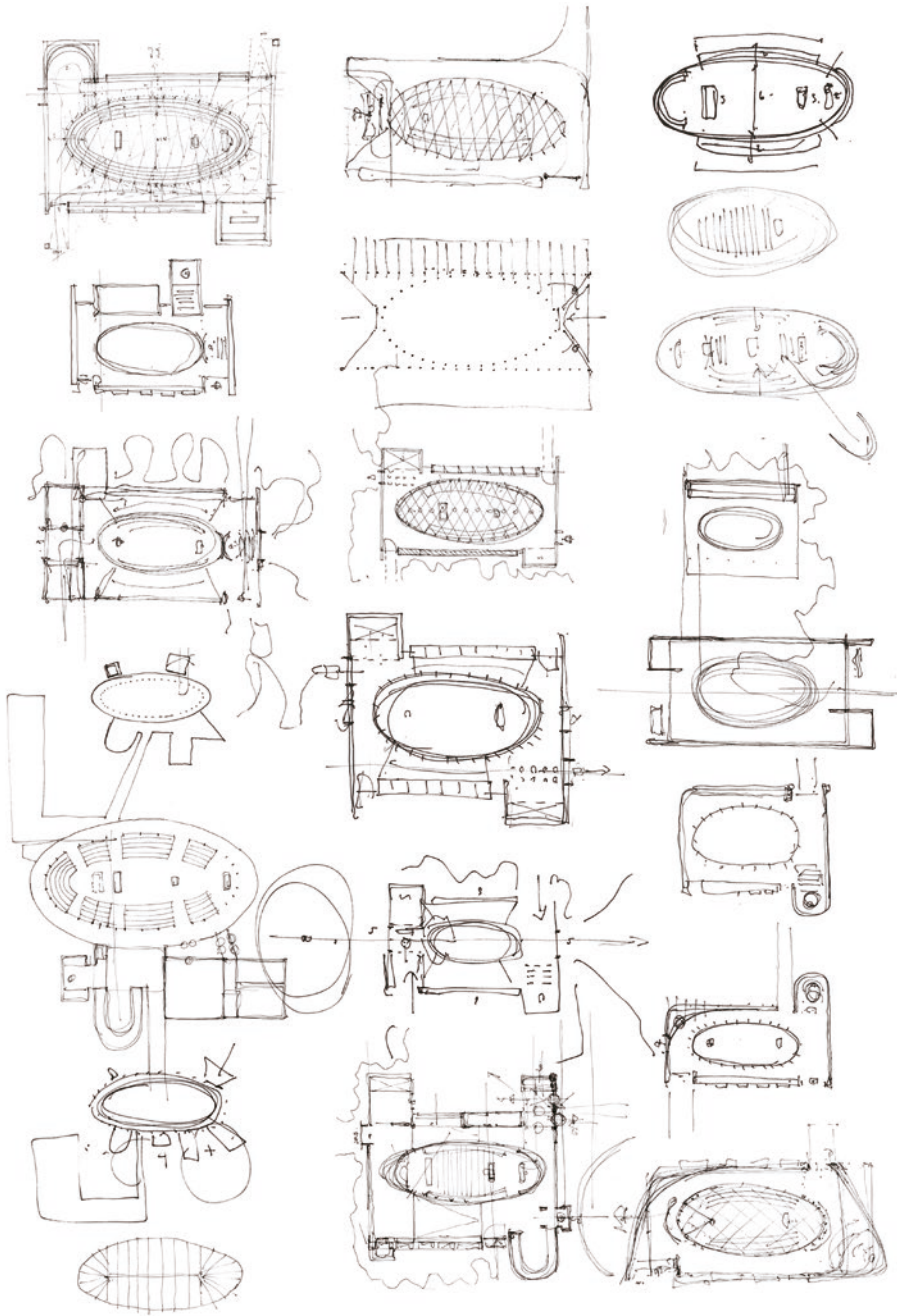
These questions were all framed by the landscape of the college grounds. On the site is an enormous beech tree on the brow of the hill. Facing away from the beech and the college buildings behind, there is a ring of mature trees on high ground overlooking the valley that stretches away towards Garsington. This clearing has its own particular character, full of wind and light and the rustling of leaves. From the outset it was our intention to capture these qualities of light and sound within the building. These main objectives and initial observations set the direction for the fourfold line of inquiry that progressed the project. Within this overall context our research questions were:

1. How might an architectural project investigate the relationship between space and liturgy?
2. How might the creative use of natural light and geometrical form lead to an expression of the divine?
3. How might a close study of Semper's search for origins, combined with design practice, lead to a contemporary recreation of the notion of the primitive hut?
4. What innovative structures and sustainable design principles should be developed in the context of contemporary liturgical design?





13



Context

The project is situated within a rich context of religious themes and buildings, which we researched in detail. Our design decisions are described below thematically in relation to these contexts:

The ellipse

The chapel is organised around one pure ellipse containing an antiphonal arrangement of seating and surrounded by a narrow ambulatory. The pure central geometry is focused on the lectern and the altar. Outside the ambulatory, the singular form is broken down into a collection of attached structures that contain spaces for individuals or groups to pray in intimate settings. In many of our buildings, the plan has a particular antecedent. Here, we acknowledge our debt to Rudolph Schwarz's church of St Michael in Frankfurt from 1954. In our case, we moved the structure to within the surrounding walls, making a perimeter ambulatory. [fig. 16, 19 & 20]

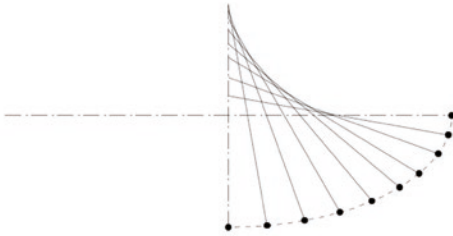
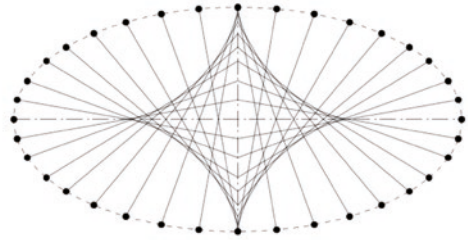
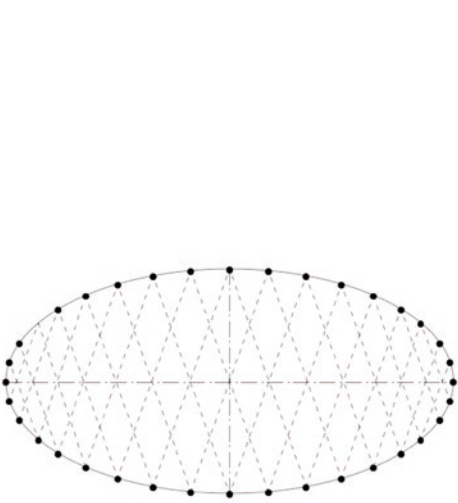
We chose the particular geometry of the ellipse. It was a straightforward solution to the desire for a collegiate layout and the bow of the seating expressed a communal gathering space. To construct an ellipse the stable circle is played against the line, which is about movement back and forth. For us this reflected the idea of exchange between perfect and imperfect at the centre of Christian thought. The movement inherent in the geometry is expressed in the chapel through the perimeter

ambulatory. It is possible to walk around the chapel, looking into the brighter space in the centre. The sense of looking into an illuminated clearing goes back to the earliest churches. Looking towards the light from the shadow symbolises the narrative of conversion, as suggested in Richard Sennet's description of the Palatine Chapel at Aachen (Sennet 1994). We made a clearing where the community can gather in the light. [fig. 21]

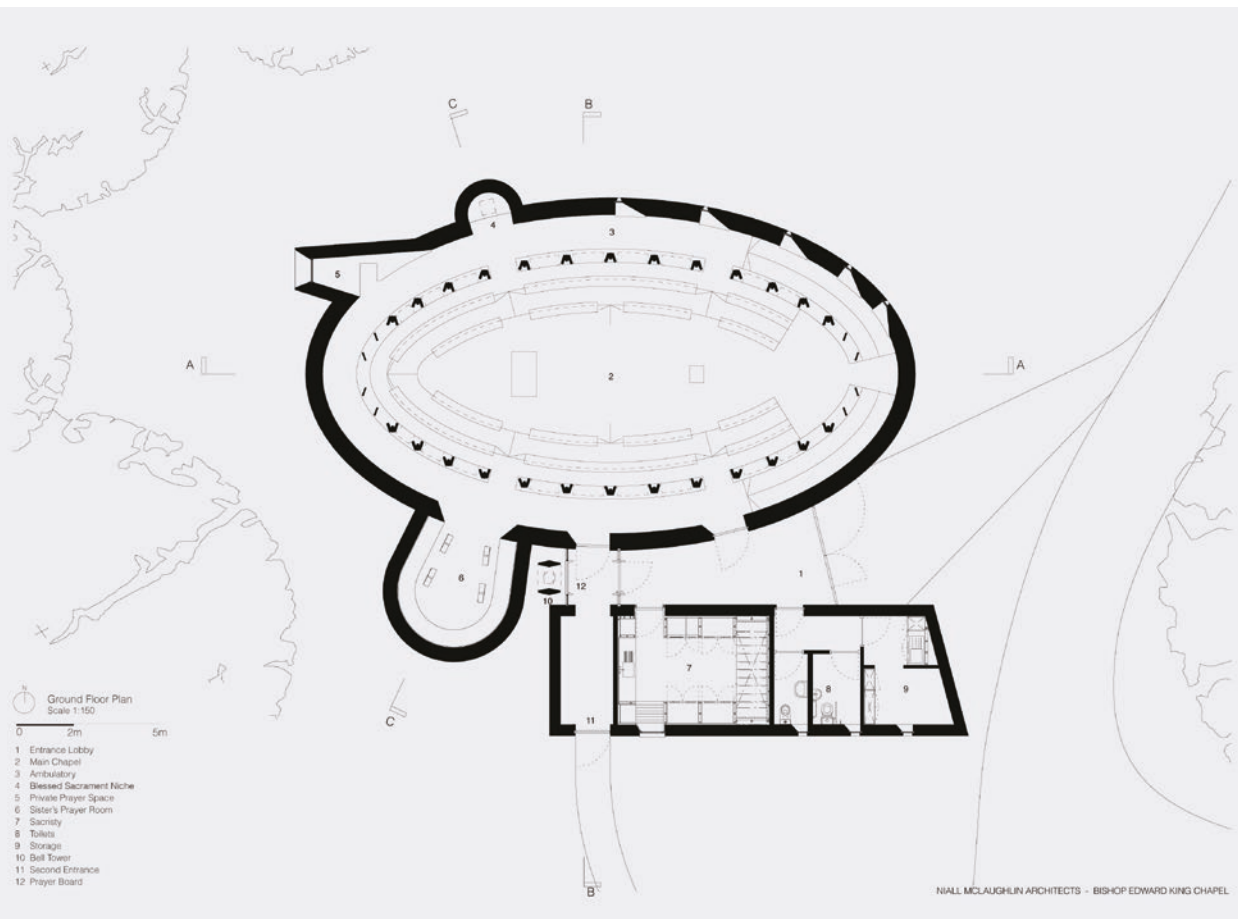
Space and liturgy

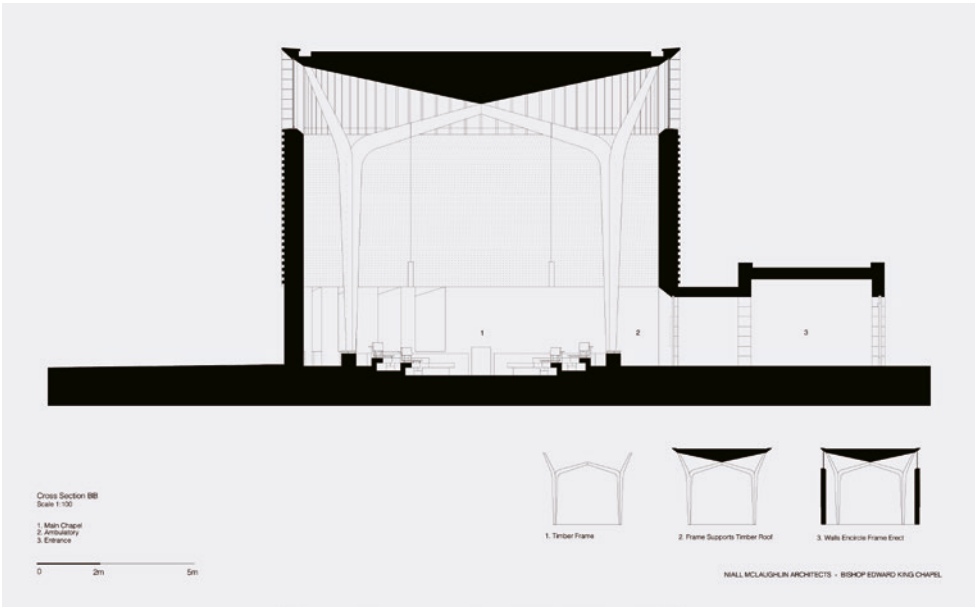
We chose to make an enclosure that steps down slightly towards a central space. The difference in level is slight but we considered it to be very important. Older churches often have a slight build-up of ground level around them. The act of stepping in and slightly down is very grounding. This goes back to the oldest meaning of the word nave. In Sanskrit 'nabhis' is a slight hollow. This must be the primary act of making a place and setting it apart from its surroundings. The move allows people to see over one another's heads towards the centre and perhaps, more importantly, it diminishes the perceived distance between participants sitting opposite each other. The slight vertical extension makes people feel closer to each other. This perception is important in an antiphonal arrangement. [fig. 22 & 23]

The roof is held up by a thicket of lightweight plywood columns that stand on the masonry rim of the central clearing.

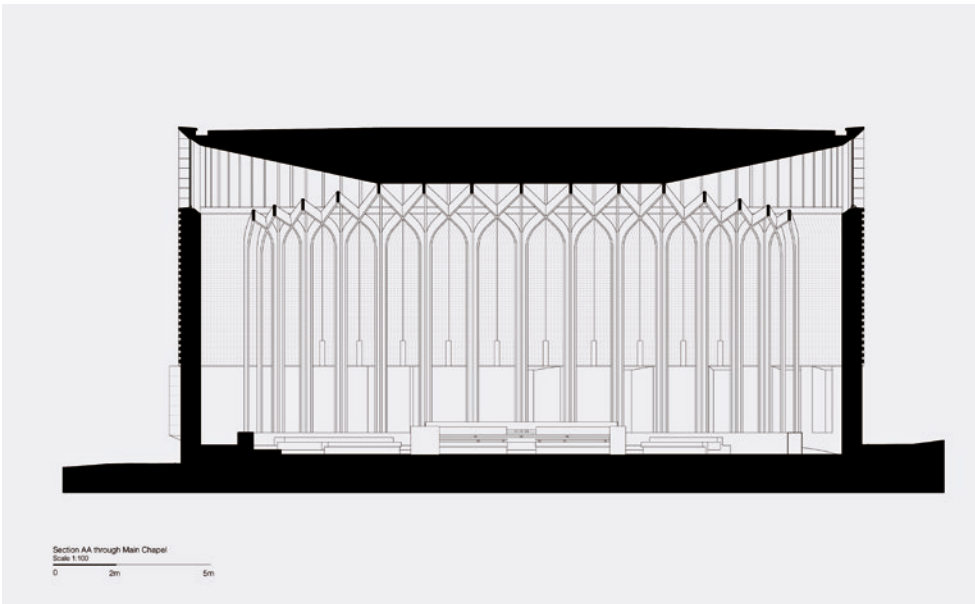


15





17



18

17
Cross section

18
Long section

They rise up to the level of the trees and are knitted together to enclose the space like the timbers of a boat. By clustering the columns together we increased their ability to carry lateral loads and to resist bending. Visually, this also associates them with clustered soaring Gothic columns. The leading edges of the plywood create soaring lines that run parallel and then splay out to become part of the roof matrix. The plywood sections are knitted together using invisible metal connections. This allows us to create a complex 3D form using very simple, affordable 2D means. We had used this principle before on our De La Warr Pavilion Bandstand project in Bexhill-on-Sea (2001) and developed it further for the chapel. [fig. 17, 18 & 24]

The inner skeleton of the structure supports a 'V' shaped ceiling. The centre of the roof is designed like a keel and is completely flat between the lectern and the altar. This underpins the primacy of the space between the Word and the Eucharist. Beyond these points, the ceiling rises out towards the outer walls. The image of a keel in the roof remembers the Venetian carinated church roofs of the 13th century, where boat builders from the Arsenale would make the timber structures. By tilting the ceiling up we can catch half-tones of light from the high windows. This decreases the luminous contrast between ceiling and window wall. It bounces light into the space and it increases the sense of buoyancy. We would like it to feel as if the roof structure

is about to float away. As you move around the chapel there will be an unfolding rhythmic interplay between the form of the structure and the simple elliptical walls beyond. The nave can be understood as a ship in a bottle.

Semper

The formal development of the chapel is an outworking of a longstanding research interest in Godfried Semper. There is a strong strain in English architecture from Arts and Crafts to High Tech where truth-telling is the central operation. This notion that architecture has a truth-telling capacity, and that in turn there is a moral imperative for architects to build buildings that literally tell the truth about themselves, can be traced back to Pugin and his analysis of the Gothic Cathedral. Semper breaks with this notion to suggest another origin for architecture that he elucidates in *Der Stil*. He suggests that architecture imitates human practice and that the basis of architecture is the act of weaving. He uses the example of the knots made in maypole dancing as a primitive identification of the way in which architecture makes concrete human activity. These knots turn into weaving and therefore architecture is conceived as the way in which space is enclosed by the woven screen. From this premise, he asserts that the basic elements of architecture each relate to ways of making – the earthwork, the woven screen, the tectonic frame and the hearth.

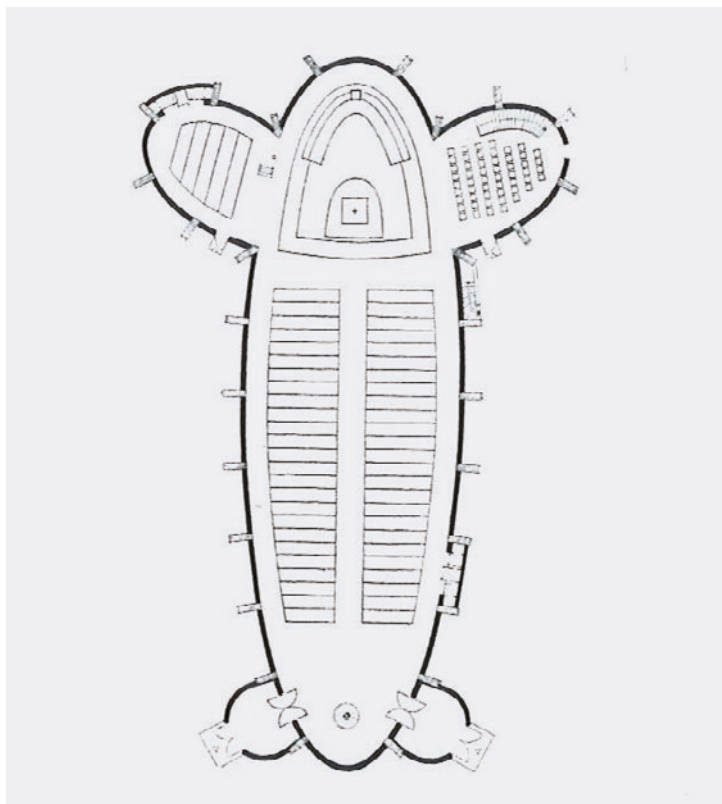


19

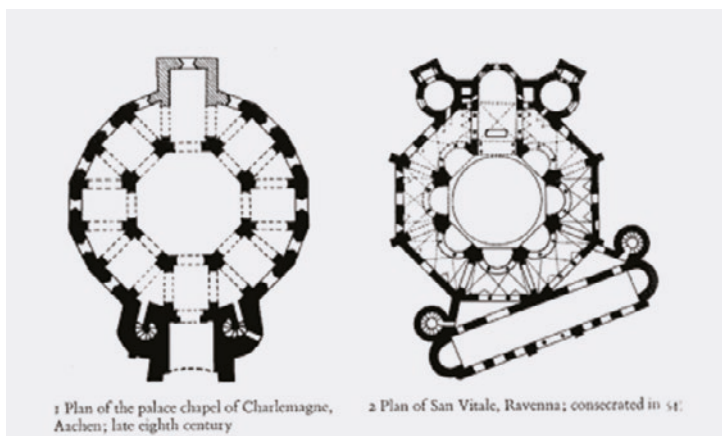
19
**Rudolf Schwarz,
Church of St Michael,
Frankfurt**
(c) DACS 2022

20
**Rudolf Schwarz,
Plan of St Michael,
Frankfurt**
(c) DACS 2022

21
**Plans of the Chapel
of Charlemagne,
Aachen, and
San Vitale, Ravenna**



20

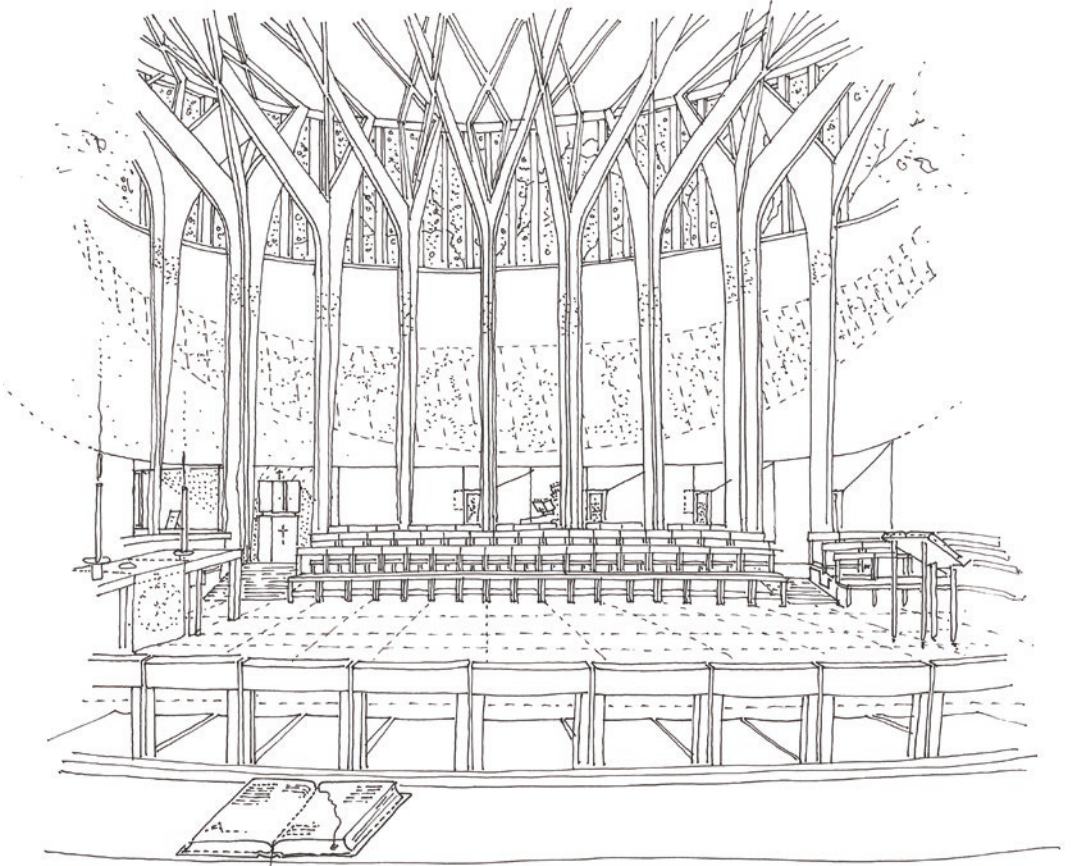


1 Plan of the palace chapel of Charlemagne, Aachen; late eighth century

2 Plan of San Vitale, Ravenna; consecrated in 547

21

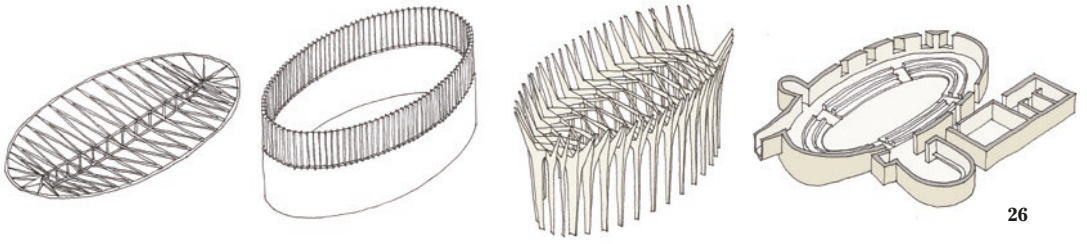




Looking across the short axis of the Chapel, you see up into the tree canopy.







26



24 (previous page)
Clustered soaring
Gothic columns

25
Glulam timber
columns

26
Axonometric sketch
showing building
elements

25

We were interested in making a building that links to these ideas of origins and potentially recreates the notion of the primitive hut. The chapel can therefore be read in such terms, with a plinth that establishes the building base, an independently expressed tectonic frame supporting the roof, a woven screen separating the inner space from the outer space, and the hearth expressed in this context as the altar. These elements relate to Semper's different material practices. The competition entry for the chapel shows a woven basketwork of timber based on fencing. This developed into masonry screen where long rectangular strips of stone, which are broken off, are then laid in a dog-tooth bond that alternates a broken and a cut face. The screen remembers the idea of a textured/woven fabric based on Semper's 'material metamorphosis'. Likewise the heavy mass of Semper's stereotomic earthwork is expressed in the concrete base and the structural lattice of CNC cut plywood is a contemporary interpretation of the carpentry of Semper's structural frame. The tabernacle, which breaks open to reveal a gold interior, provides the metaphorical fire of Semper's hearth. [fig. 26 & 27]

Sustainable principles

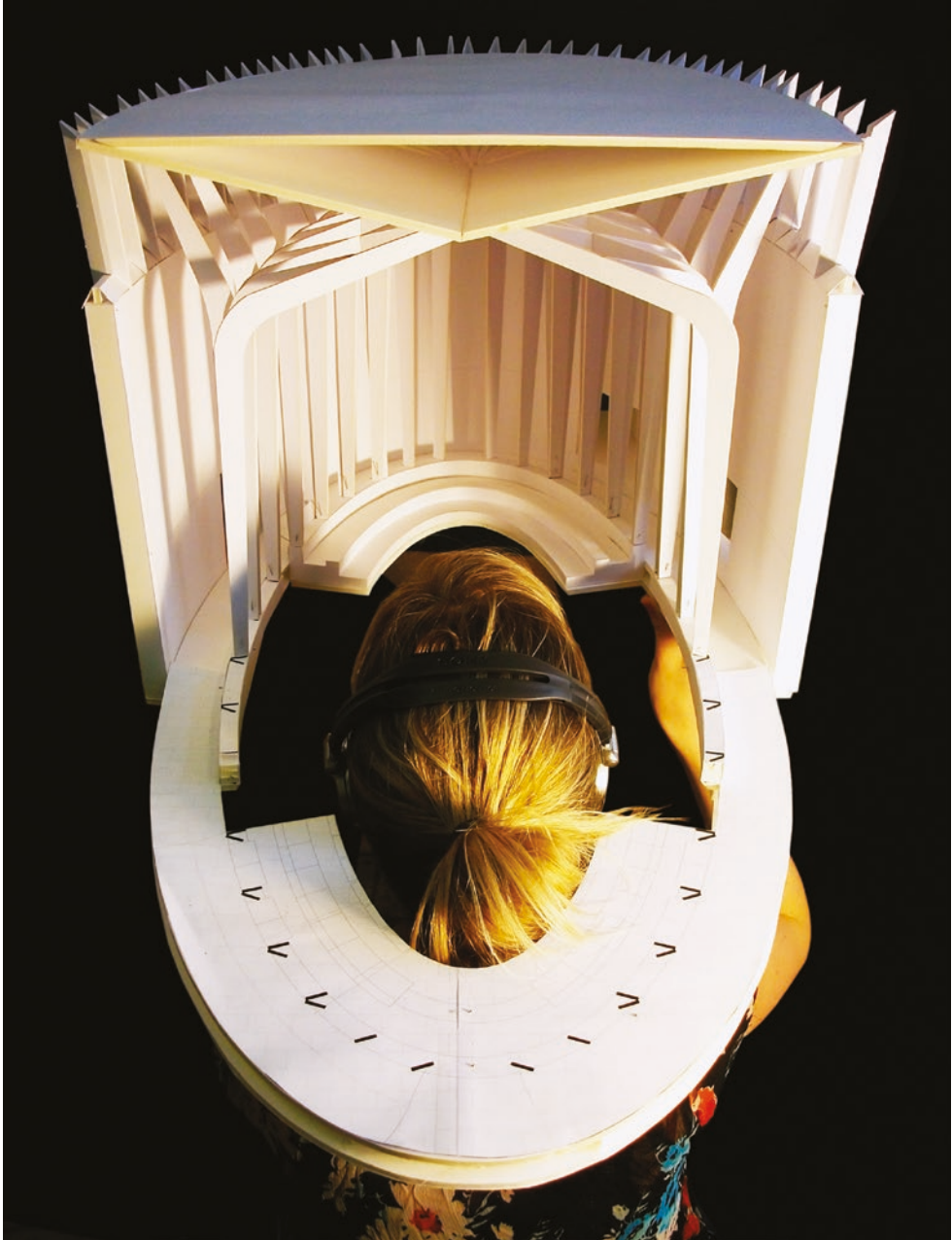
The design of the chapel was also driven by the principles of sustainable design, not as a means of compliance (places of worship are exempt from normal energy

requirements under Part L) but as an appropriate response to the client's brief of 'an exemplar of forward-looking liturgical design'. We aimed for the project to demonstrate the effectiveness of a simple, passive design philosophy, without recourse to bolt-on technologies.

Project research therefore focused on adopting passive solar principles and making careful use of natural resources. The chapel's orientation allows for south-facing windows down the long axis of the chapel and the stone walls and screeded floor give the building thermal mass. The chapel is twice as well insulated and has three times the level of airtightness required under Part L. Natural ventilation was used instead of mechanical cooling, with high-level automated louvres and actuators. Clerestorey glazing achieves a daylight factor of around 3.5 in the main seating area. Under-floor heating was chosen in preference to radiators for its ability to achieve comparable comfort levels at a lower space temperature. These energy conservation measures translate into low NO_x levels and reduce the CO₂ emissions to around 20kg/m², half what one would expect for a modern well-insulated building. The external materials of the building, timber and stone, have a low embodied energy and a longevity in order to maximise the lifespan of the building. The off-site manufacture of the main structure ensures less wastage of materials and greater recycling of any waste created.







Methods

The methods of research for the project encompassed several strands:

1. A study of the etymology of liturgical terms and their poetic use in literature.
2. Analysis of the site through video and sound recordings.
3. Research through making in the form of site-specific tools to explore the acoustic and luminous conditions of the site.
4. Text-based research to explore the geometry of the ellipse, the history of its discovery and its use in public buildings.
5. Design development through public, collaborative drawing.
6. Experimentation with structural/material principles and building methods.
7. Working through prototypes to refine the skin of the building.

Sound and video

During the competition process we had struggled to use our default model-making techniques to explore our ideas. These difficulties prompted new research methods to develop. As part of our initial site analysis we used sound and video recordings to present to the client.

Models and prototypes

We also used site-specific models at a large scale to explore and convey our ideas. At later stages of the project we refined the particular bond of the stone cladding using a series of full-scale prototypes built on site. Most importantly we were given the opportunity to create a public installation work, the Tracing Floor, to explore and develop the geometry of the project. [fig.28–33]

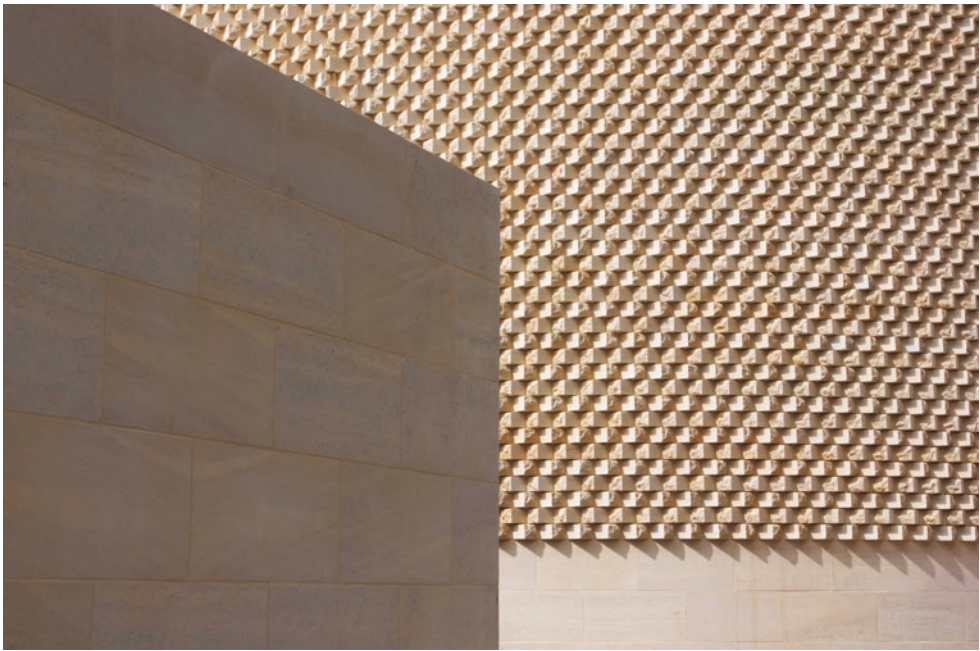
**27 (previous page)
Tabernacle**

**28
Model worn as a hat**





30



31

31
The woven screen

32 & 33
Cladding prototype



32



33



34



35

The Tracing Floor

The Tracing Floor was made in response to a request from the School of Architecture at University College Dublin to create an exhibition that would accompany Níall McLaughlin's lecture on the research for the chapel, as part of the 'Into Practice' series being held there. It was decided to make something that would stand beside, rather than duplicate, the content of the lecture.

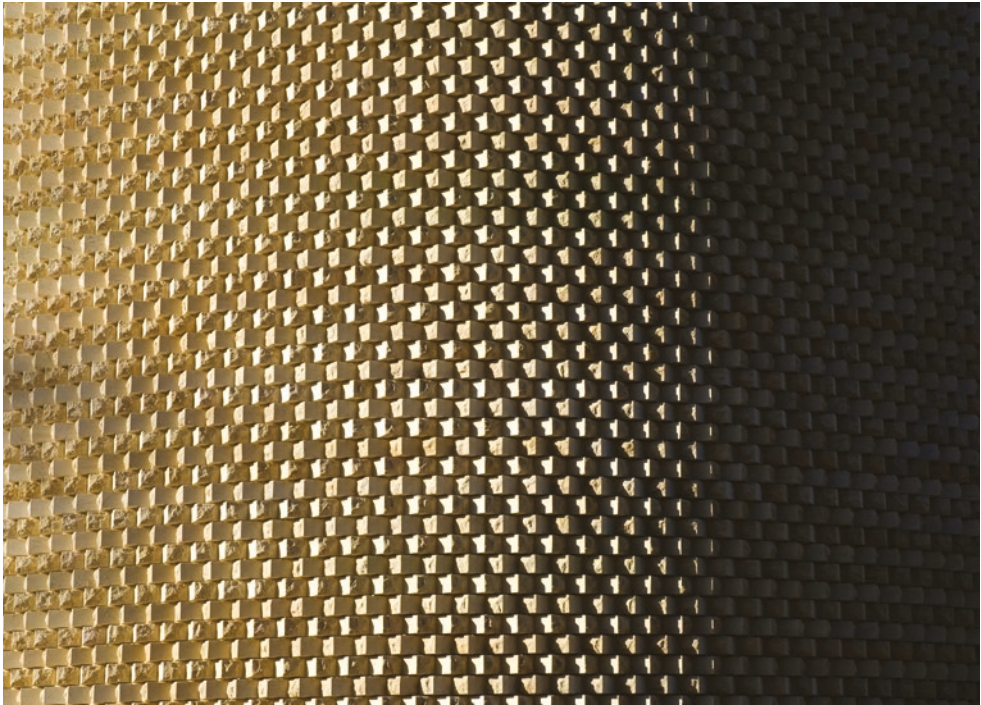
In conceiving this piece, we reflected on a desire to communicate the contemplative and communal activity of drawing that is practised in the studio. We found a reference to the old English tradition of the tracing floor used by medieval masons to set out jigs for vaulting. Remnants of these can be found in cathedrals such as York, Wells and Hereford. They were made of plaster and they show the marks of drawing and cutting. By covering the floor in lime plaster we intended to create an inversion of the natural light in the space. We wanted to fill the whole floor of the room. We hoped that foot traffic might gradually erase the drawing, enhancing its fugitive quality.

We made a time-lapse piece from the ceiling recording its emergence and dissolution. We edited the film so that it has a drawing-like quality. [fig. 34–36]

The drawing was a plan, showing many layers at once. The status of the drawing could not be justified as a depiction, an instruction or a cutting jig. We instead considered the manual repetition of the original setting out of the ellipse as a meditative or ritual activity more akin to beating the bounds. The project team carried it out at a liminal moment in the life of the building; the design had been completed and the construction was yet to commence. The research method was in the slow, rhythmic act of making the piece. It allowed us to dwell in it in a way not permitted by deadlines and drawing software. We moved apart and came together on the same floor over four days. We talked about how we got here and what the chapel might become. The marks on the floor are the record of a contemplative activity. So, the act of drawing the nave was itself a still point, reflecting the double meaning stored in the origin of the word.







Dissemination

The chapel was opened with a service of dedication attended by the Bishops of Oxford, Gloucester and Dorchester and was published in the local and national press. The building work and design have been reviewed extensively in the architectural press and online, most recently with regard to the project's shortlisting for the RIBA Stirling Prize, 2013 (see Appendix). The research forms the basis for one chapter of a sole-authored book by Níall McLaughlin, entitled *Trial Pieces*, due for publication by Ashgate in 2014.

Níall McLaughlin has spoken on themes of space and liturgy as part of lecture programmes at the RIBA in London, University College Dublin and the University of California, Los Angeles. He is also due to speak about the project as part of an event at the RIBA entitled 'Stirling Prize Stories', alongside the other five shortlisted architects.

Níall McLaughlin, 'Tapestries', University of Bath (Apr 2013)

Níall McLaughlin, 'The work of Níall McLaughlin Architects', University of California, Los Angeles (Mar 2013)

Níall McLaughlin, 'Soundings - Semper and Street and a Search for Origins', RIBA Melvin Debate on 'The Architectural Uneasy: Relationships Between Old and New', Royal Institute of British Architects, London (Mar 2011)

Níall McLaughlin, 'The Tracing Floor', University College Dublin (Feb 2011)

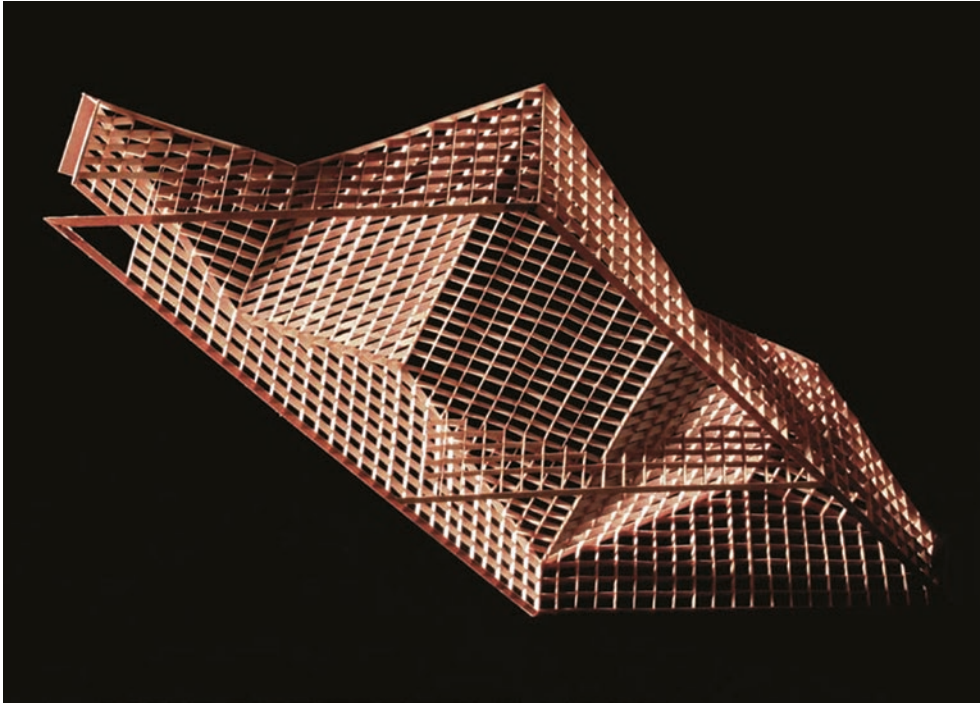
Níall McLaughlin, 'Figures', University College London (Feb 2011)

Níall McLaughlin, 'Situations', University College London (Feb 2011)

A related exhibition, *The Tracing Floor*, was installed at University College Dublin in February 2011.

The investigations undertaken for this project are part of an ongoing project of design-led research, developing complex geometries using timber construction. The project can therefore be seen as part of a wider body of research, which includes the design for a pontoon on Loch Ness, the bandstand at Bexhill-on-Sea and the Deal pier café.

The practice's enquiries into the relationship between space and liturgy is also an ongoing theme of research for the practice, with the Bishop Edward King Chapel part of a wider group of ecclesiastical structures designed by the practice including a Carmelite Chapel in Kensington, the Church of St James in Peckham and currently the Carmelite Monastery in Dublin. [fig. 38–43]





39





41



42



43

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The research process relied on the following texts:

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- Fernand Hallyn (1993). *The Poetic Structure of the World: Copernicus and Kepler*. Trans. D.M. Leslie, New York: Zone Books.
- Seamus Heaney (1992). 'Lightenings viii', *Seeing Things*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Mari Hvattum (2004). *Gottfried Semper and the Problem of Historicism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Philip Larkin (1989). 'Church Going', *Collected Poems*. Ed. Anthony Thwaite. New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux: 97–98.
- Harry Francis Mallgrave (1996). *Gottfried Semper: Architect of the Nineteenth Century*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Peter Salter (2011). 'Architect Peter Salter records the English innovation of the fan vault, a pragmatic and romantic alternative to the Gothic arch that has challenged his thoughts on contemporary skins'. *Architectural Review* 229.1367: 70–75.
- Rudolf Schwarz (1958). *The Church Incarnate, The Sacred Function of Christian Architecture*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company.
- Gottfried Semper (2004). *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications.
- Richard Sennett (1994). *Flesh and Stone, the Body and the City in Western Civilisation*. London: Faber and Faber.

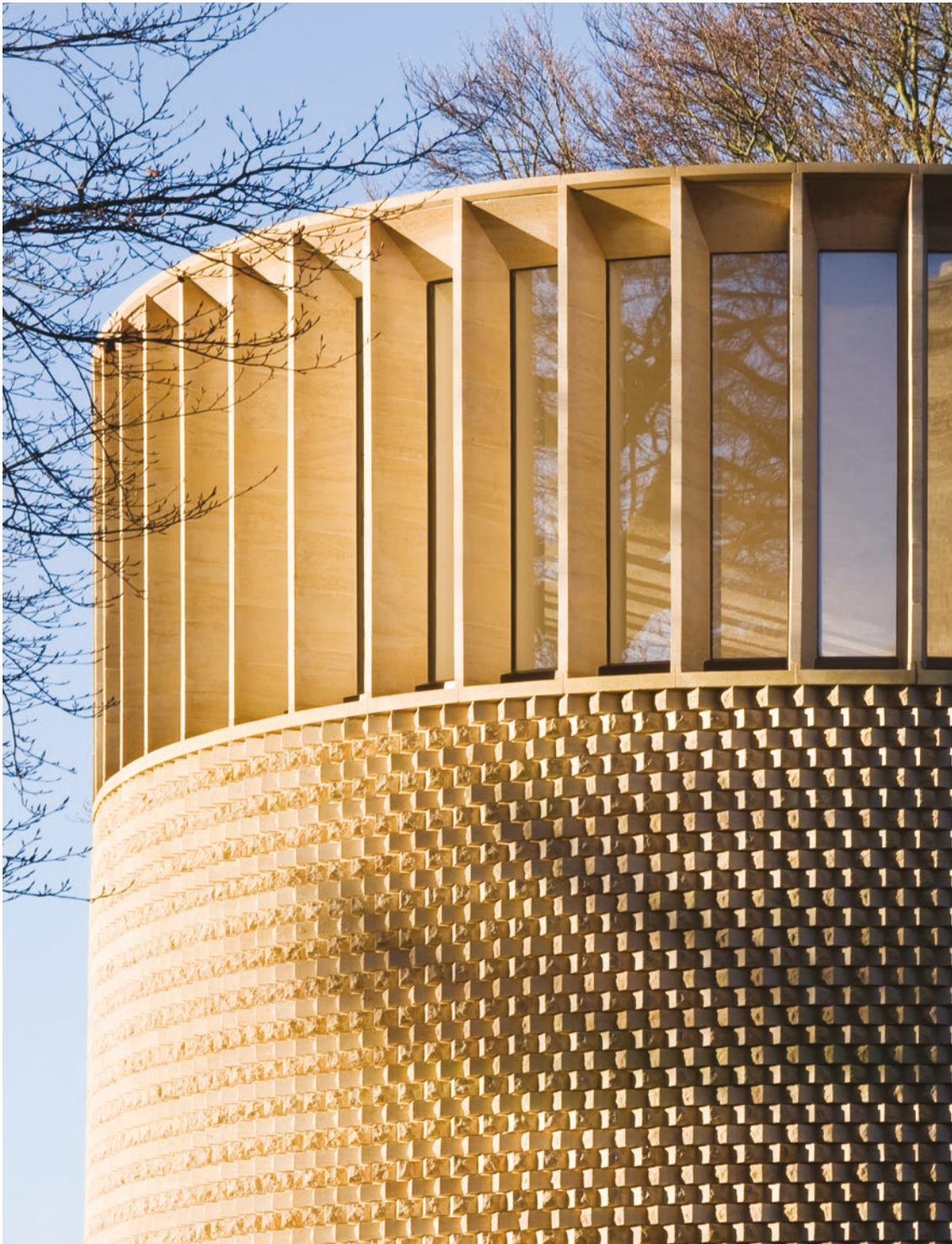
42
Bandstand under
construction,
Bexhill-on-Sea, 2001

43
Café on the pier,
Deal, 2009

44 (overleaf)
Structural timber
lattice









45
Clerestory and
woven screen

46 (overleaf)
Chapel alongside
the existing college
buildings







Related publications by the researcher

Testimonials

p. 53

Selection of statements about the Chapel's design.

Journal articles

pp. 54–55

Hugh Pearman, 'Beyond the obvious'. *RIBA Journal* (Aug 2013): 8–9.

p. 56

Andrea Klettner, 'Stirling Prize: Shortlist bypasses London schemes'. *Building Design* (19 Jul 2013): 6–7.

p. 57

'Drawing to a close: Bishop Edward King Chapel, Cuddeston, Oxfordshire'. *Architects' Journal* (Jul 2013): 94.

pp. 58–61

Richard Waite, 'RIBA Stirling Prize shortlist announced: Bookies favour Niall McLaughlin chapel'. *Architects' Journal* (18 Jul 2013): 8–11.

pp. 62–65

Jan-Carlos Kucharek, 'Happy ending'. *RIBA Journal* (Jul 2013): 52–54.

pp. 66–81

'Structured to capture light: Bishop Edward King Chapel'. *Architecture + Urbanism* 514 (Jul 2013): 62–77.

pp. 82–87

Ellis Woodman, 'Sacred Spaces'. *Building Design* (26 Apr 2013): 10–15.

p. 88

Paul Finch, 'A talk at the RIBA highlighted our obsession with history, and how we sometimes misunderstand it'. *Architects' Journal* (24 Mar 2011): 22.

pp. 89–103

Peter Salter, 'Ark of light'. *Architectural Review* 223.1394 (Apr 2013): 32–45.

pp. 104–111

Mary Ann Steane, 'Lightenings: Niall McLaughlin's Bishop Edward King Chapel'. *Architecture Today* 237 (Apr 2013): 20–31.

pp. 112–113

'Week in pictures'. *Architects' Journal* (11 Apr 2013): 6–7.

pp. 114–115

Catherine Slessor, 'Chapel for Ripon College'. *Architectural Review* 230.1375 (Sep 2011): 62–63.

Newspaper articles

p. 116

Rowan Moore, 'Taking the bling out of building...' *Observer* (21 Jul 2013): 33.

p. 117

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Selection of statements about the Chapel's design

David Morely, chair of judging panel and RIBA architect adviser for the two-stage competition, said, "The relatively small scale of this project contrasts with its major significance as an opportunity to set new standards for liturgical design... McLaughlin's proposal stood out because of the depth of understanding and inspiration it demonstrated from a strategic to a detailed level."

The donors for the project, the Sisters of Begbroke commented, "From a remarkable field, Níall's design not only stood out for its intrinsic merits but also showed that in him we would have an architect who understands our language and our dream for this chapel."

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