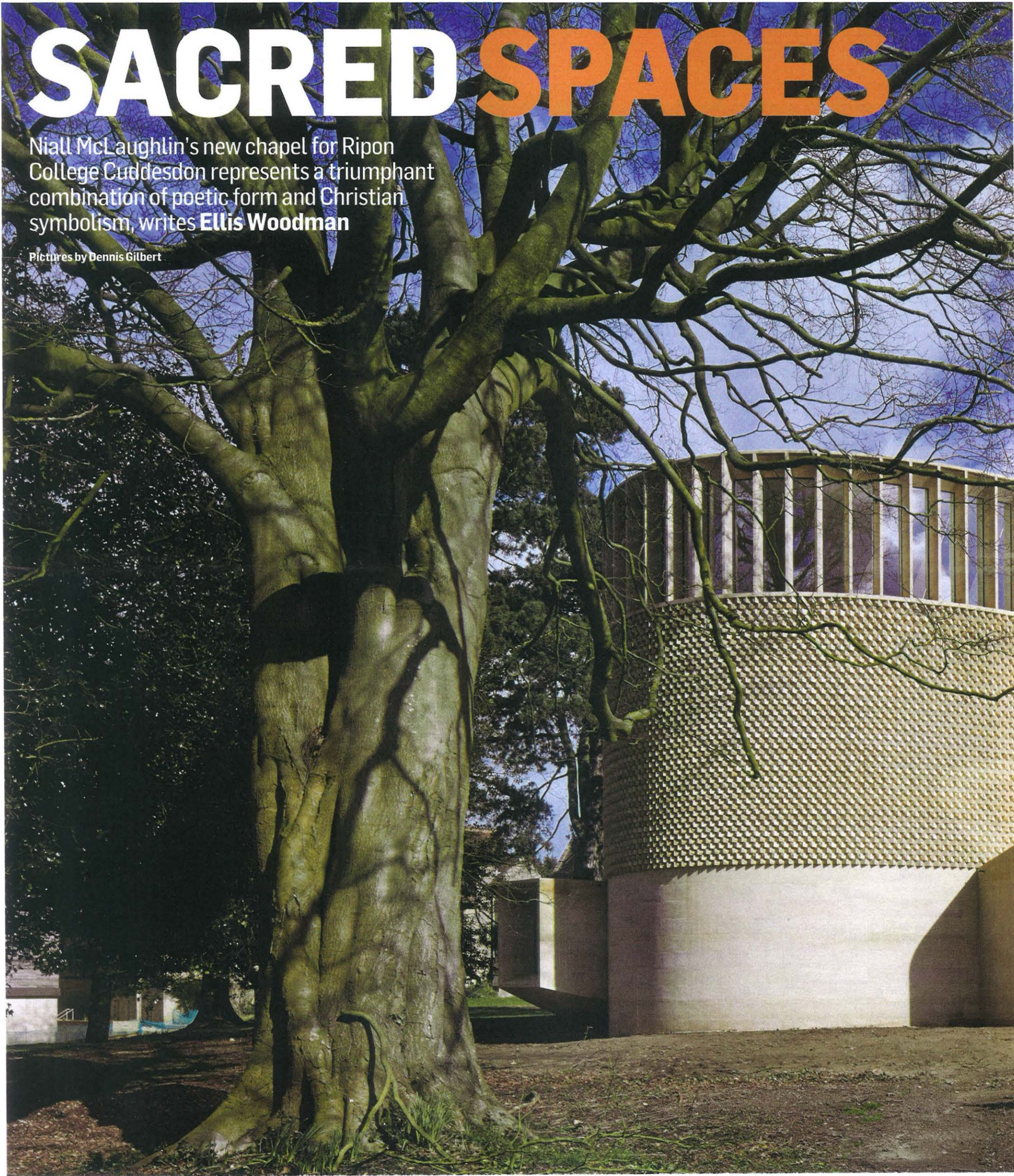


The chapel is set within a ring of encompassing trees.

SACRED SPACES

Niall McLaughlin's new chapel for Ripon College Cuddesdon represents a triumphant combination of poetic form and Christian symbolism, writes **Ellis Woodman**

Pictures by Dennis Gilbert





Among the first commissions that Niall McLaughlin secured on setting up his practice in 1990 was the remodelling of a Carmelite monastery in west London. Comprising scarcely more than two rooms — a chapel and its associated sacristy — it nonetheless offered ample evidence of McLaughlin's skill at mobilising light, space and materials to atmospheric and symbolic effect.

There followed a long-gestating but ultimately unrealised project for an ecumenical church in Peckham, but it is only with the completion of the new chapel at Ripon College Cuddesdon that the architect has succeeded in adding a second religious building to his oeuvre. One has to hope it is not the last, as this marvellous building makes clear that the challenges of an ecclesiastical brief bring McLaughlin's talents into particularly sharp focus. If a more architecturally accomplished church has been built in Britain since the heyday of Gillespie, Kidd & Coia, I fail to bring it to mind.

That achievement has been aided in no small part by a remarkable site and client. Ripon College Cuddesdon is a Church of England theological college

The challenges of an ecclesiastical building bring McLaughlin's talents into sharp focus

in rural Oxfordshire that dates from the 1850s, when its site was chosen — in part on account of its distance from the fleshpots of Oxford — as the location of a seminary. The work of GE Street, the college's original buildings are ranged around a wide expanse of open ground, liberally populated by mature trees and enjoying magnificent views towards Garsington, which lies a kilometre to the west. The college community has recently been expanded through the introduction of the members of an Augustinian order of nuns, the Community of St John Baptist, who were previously based at nearby Kidlington in accommodation that had become too large for their present numbers.

In relocating, they have initiated a substantial building programme at the college. An education block has recently been completed by architects Hopper Howe Sadler and there are plans to build a convent in the not too distant future. The sisters conceived the chapel, however, as a facility that would be shared between themselves and the members of the college: a gift that would effectively cement the two communities into one.

Standing opposite the main entrance on a site defined by the root protection areas of

SITE PLAN



closely encompassing trees, the chapel enjoys a privileged location within the campus. Its design responds very directly to the character of that site, adopting the image of a clearing in a wood as a generative metaphor. Its principal volume is elliptical in plan, with seats distributed around an altar and lectern located on this form's twin foci. The usual distinction between chancel and nave is therefore negated, reflecting the fact that, as a place of worship for a religious community, the building faces no requirement to demarcate separate territories for the clergy and laity.

McLaughlin cites Rudolf Schwarz's Church of St Michael in Frankfurt (1954) as an inspiration for his use of the ellipse, a debt that Peter Zumthor has also acknowledged in relation to his similarly formed St Benedict Chapel, Sumvitg (1989). The tectonic logic of the three projects also bears comparison. In each case the enclosing wall is tracked by a ring of slender piers that ultimately rises above it to support the roof. In the case of Schwarz's building the piers are external to the wall, whereas in Zumthor's they stand hard against its internal face. McLaughlin introduces a third variation by pulling them still

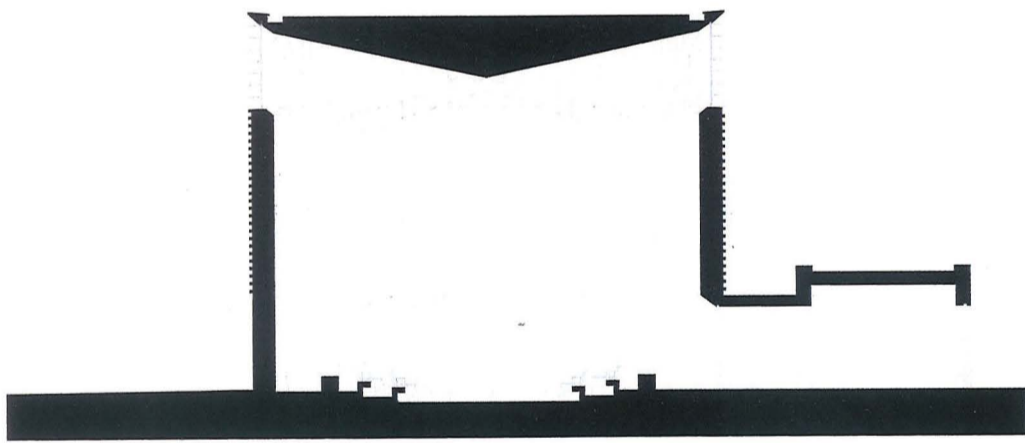
further into the plan so as to establish a continuous ambulatory. The threshold to the space of worship that results is further strengthened by a level change between the peripheral zone and the lower central one. While permeable, the line is highly charged — an architectural embodiment of the choice the Christian makes in embracing faith.

The piers are constructed in a light-stained glulam timber and ultimately strike off to form an elaborate cat's cradle that engages with the roof both around its perimeter and along its central inverted ridge. This form echoes the surrounding trees — the upper branches of which are visible through the clerestory that crowns the encircling wall — but also suggests the image of an upturned hull. As is shown by the story of Noah's Ark — a vessel built by the faithful to secure their salvation — an association between ship and church is deep-rooted in Christian iconography.

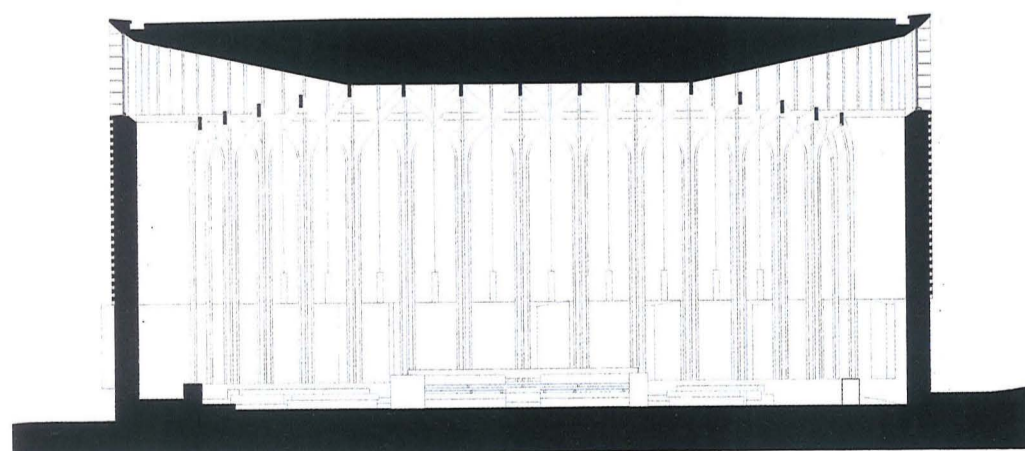
During the competition for the project McLaughlin referenced Seamus Heaney's poem, Lightenings, which describes the legendary appearance of an air-bound ship above the monastery of Clonmacnoise. The soaring, filigree structure

1 Education block 2 Chapel 3 Proposed convent 4 Site entrance

SECTION LOOKING EAST

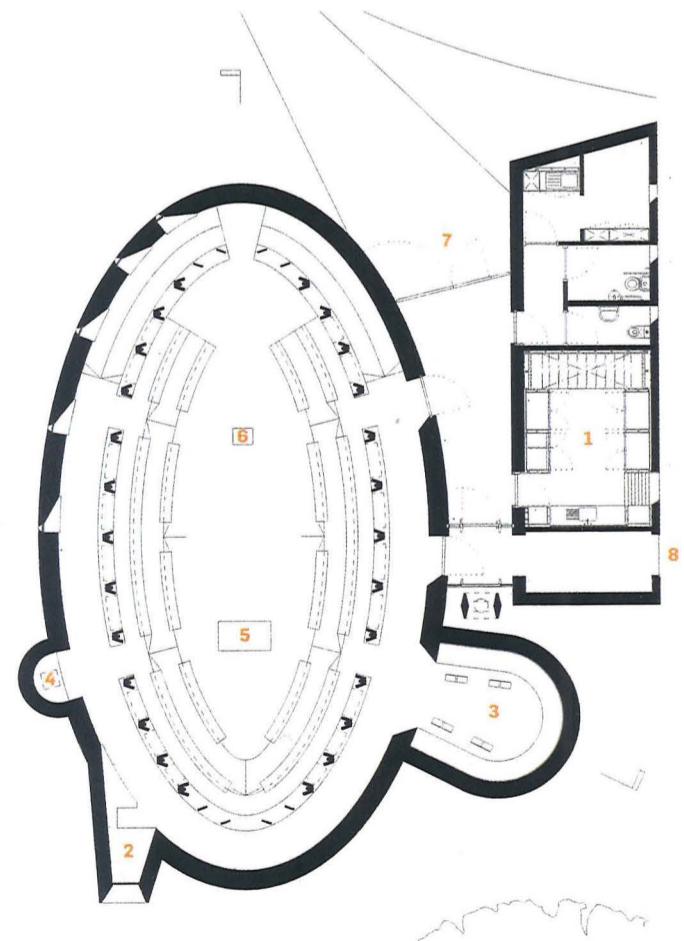


SECTION LOOKING SOUTH



CHAPEL PLAN

- 1 Sacristy
- 2 Private prayer room
- 3 Sisters' prayer room
- 4 Tabernacle
- 5 Altar
- 6 Lectern
- 7 Main entrance
- 8 Sisters' entrance



The bell tower rising above the entrance.



that he has set above the heads of the congregation at Cuddesdon certainly shares something of the poetry of that image.

As integrated as the timber frame is with the building's governing geometry, it nonetheless maintains a strongly autonomous reading. This is in line with McLaughlin's overarching attitude to the building's tectonic expression, which derives from a long-standing interest in the principles detailed in Gottfried

The plan allows each individual to find a place of worship best reflecting their own beliefs

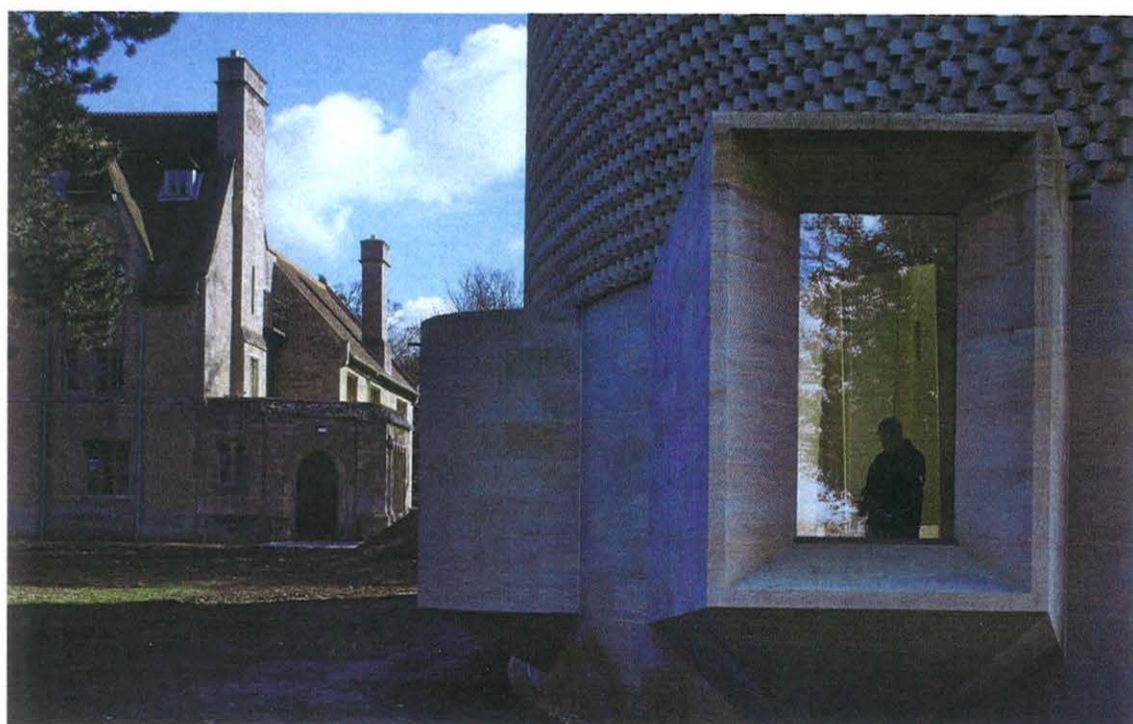
Semper's 1851 treatise, *The Four Elements of Architecture*. Semper's book offered a radical reframing of Laugier's primitive hut, locating the origins of architecture not in a mimetic re-enactment of nature but in the deployment of the four craft skills that he believed characterised "the primordial state of human society". The elements of the book's title, he proposed, are the constituent elements of any work of architecture: the hearth, the embankment, the roof and the enclosure. The origins of each he ascribed to a different handicraft: "Ceramic and later metallurgical works and art to the hearth, water technology and masonry to embankments, woodworking to the roof and its accessories." Most provocatively, he identified the enclosure's origins in the art of weaving — an association that would impact powerfully on the work of architects of the subsequent generation such as Louis Sullivan.

McLaughlin's design makes the distinction between Semper's elements overt, but arguably did so more explicitly still at the competition stage when its external wall was depicted as a

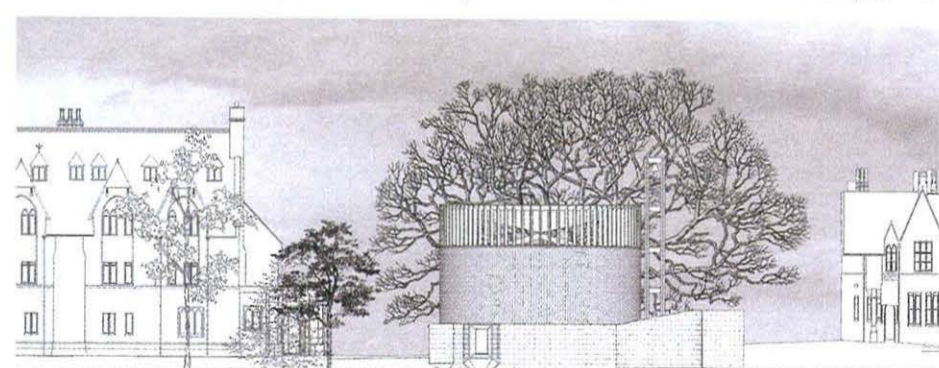
woven timber screen mounted above an ashlar base. English Heritage, however, stipulated that the facade should be entirely in stone — a frustratingly petty requirement but one that McLaughlin has answered without significant injury to the clarity of the building's conception. The tripartite composition of base, middle and clerestory has been retained but the middle element has now been transformed into a screen of dog-tooth bonded masonry rods. Of narrow square section, these are in the same Clipsham as has been used for the base but specified so as to present a broken surface on their leading face. It is an ingenious and captivating treatment, the combination of precision and roughness deftly maintaining the textile association that the original design sought to convey.

Four appendages are distributed around the church's primary volume. The two largest — a rectangular block accommodating back-of-house spaces and a horseshoe-shaped volume housing a prayer room for the sisters — lie to the south and are rooted squarely in the ground. In contrast, the two smaller bolt-ons to the north — a more intimately dimensioned space for private prayer and a niche housing the tabernacle — are cantilevered out as if flung away from the church by centrifugal action. The effect is to confirm McLaughlin's sense of the building as a structure aspiring to levitation while offering too an echo of the stone oriel windows of Street's opposing facades.

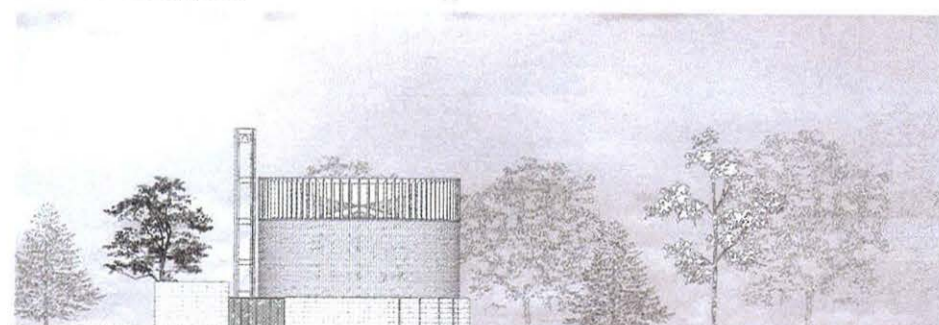
The back-of-house block, which incorporates an immaculately detailed timber-lined sacristy, is laid out parallel to the ellipse's main axis but detached so as to frame an entrance lobby in the gap between the two volumes. This arrangement establishes two ways into the chapel, a primary route for use by most of the college community and a more discrete one, set



The space for private prayer is cantilevered free of the main volume.

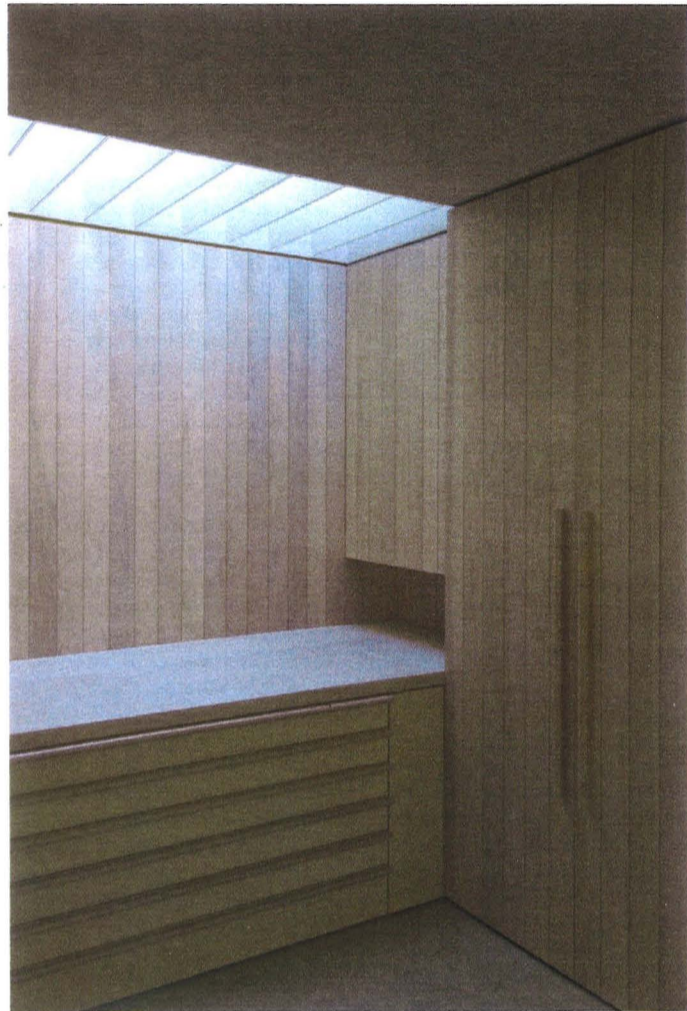


Elevation looking east



Elevation looking west

The timber-lined sacristy.



perpendicular to it, for use by the sisters. A slender timber bell tower set at the intersection of these routes effectively advertises the presence of both axes deep into the landscape.

The sisters' prayer room is a top-lit space that stands adjacent to their designated entrance, and from which they enjoy a carefully framed view towards the altar that extends beyond to the niche housing the tabernacle on the far wall. This orientation reflects the order's high church leanings but that affiliation is not shared by all the members of the college community. The elliptical

The roof piers suggest a ship's hull: a vessel built for salvation, as in the story of Noah's Ark

plan tactfully enables each individual to find a place of worship that best reflects his or her beliefs.

In his Semperian conception of the building McLaughlin identified the altar, tabernacle and lectern as belonging to the family of hearth elements and hoped to realise all three as metalwork items. His clients, however, were not fully persuaded, leading to the altar and lectern being designed in timber, save for a brass floor-plate located below each one. This represents no disaster, but to see the architect's ambitions more fully embodied by the tabernacle — a vertically hinged box which opens to reveal a brass-lined interior — is to regret that he was not extended a freer

hand. That the objection arises at all is testament to the fact that the building has been developed so determinedly as a totality. Few projects built this year will offer as convincing a claim to be considered a *gesamtkunstwerk*.

The sisters' entrance is not currently in use, having been provided in expectation of the construction of their convent immediately alongside the chapel. This is not yet a live commission but McLaughlin has produced a schematic design comprising a single-storey, three-sided cloister, which would share the language of its neighbour's ashlar base. Offering a ground-hugging counterpoint to the chapel's verticality, it promises to bind the building still further to its landscape setting.

That is an exciting prospect, but fragmentary as it may be, the built work represents a highly convincing performance in its own right. McLaughlin has risen to the challenge of a remarkable brief, creating a building that mediates between the earthly and the celestial to unique poetic effect.

PROJECT TEAM

Architect

Niall McLaughlin Architects

Building contractor

Beard Construction

Client

Ripon College Cuddesdon and the Community of St John Baptist

Structural engineer

Price & Myers

M&E engineer

Synergy Consulting Engineers

Quantity surveyor

Ridge & Partners

Stone consultant

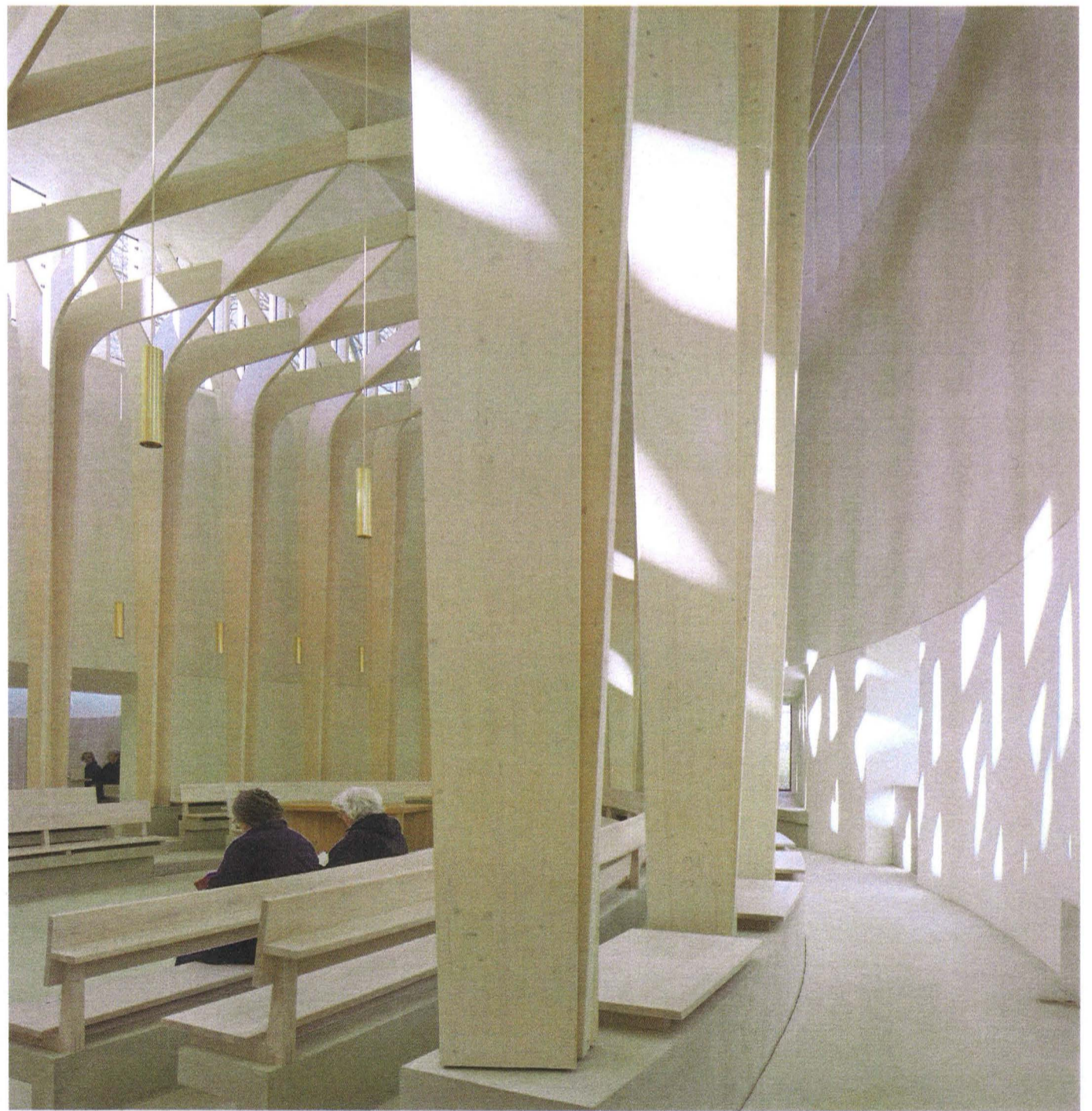
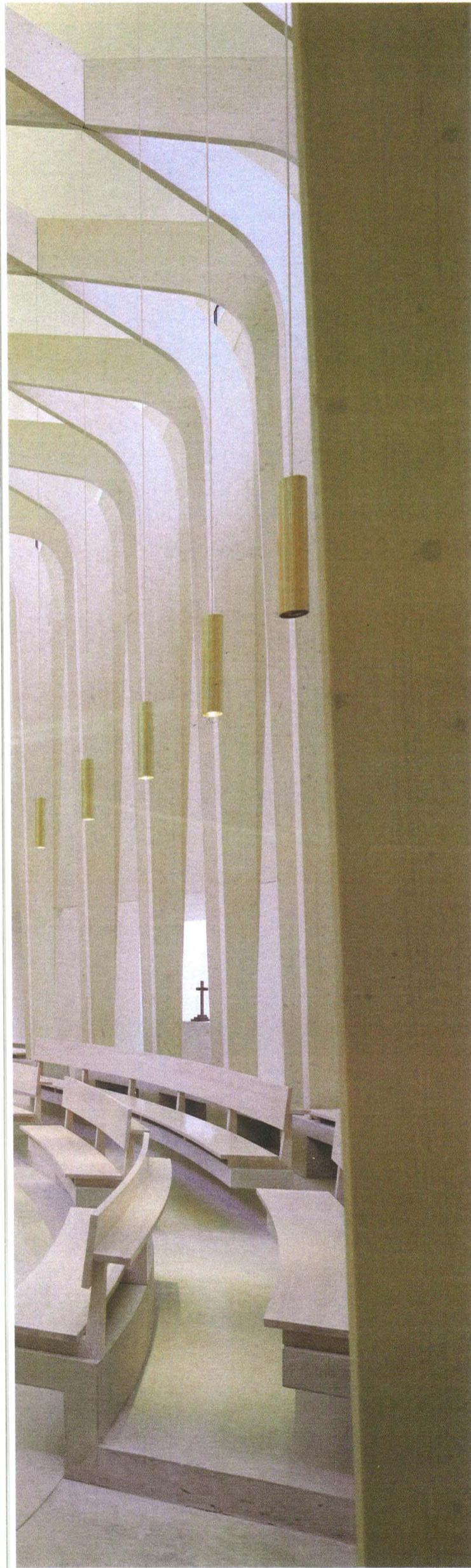
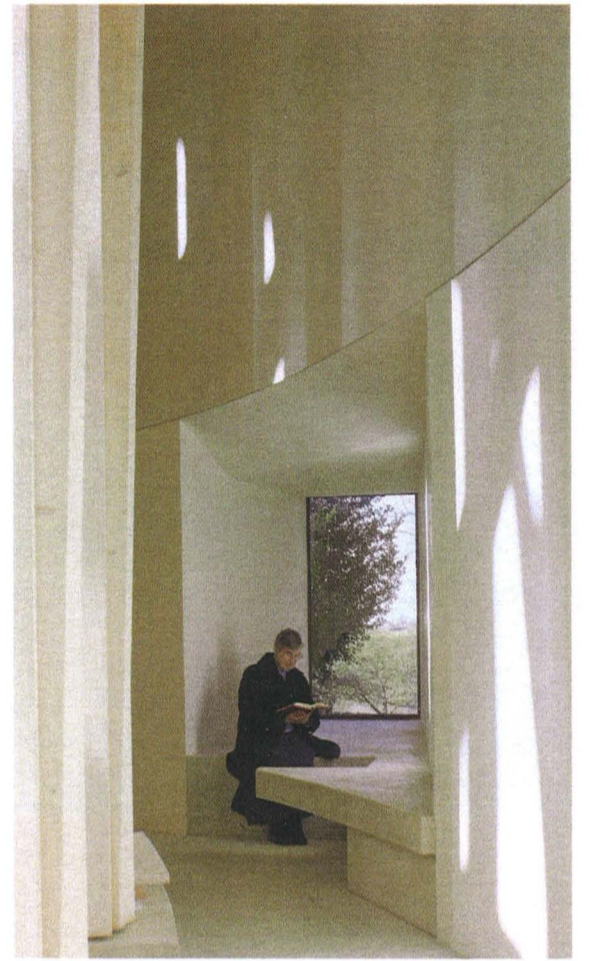
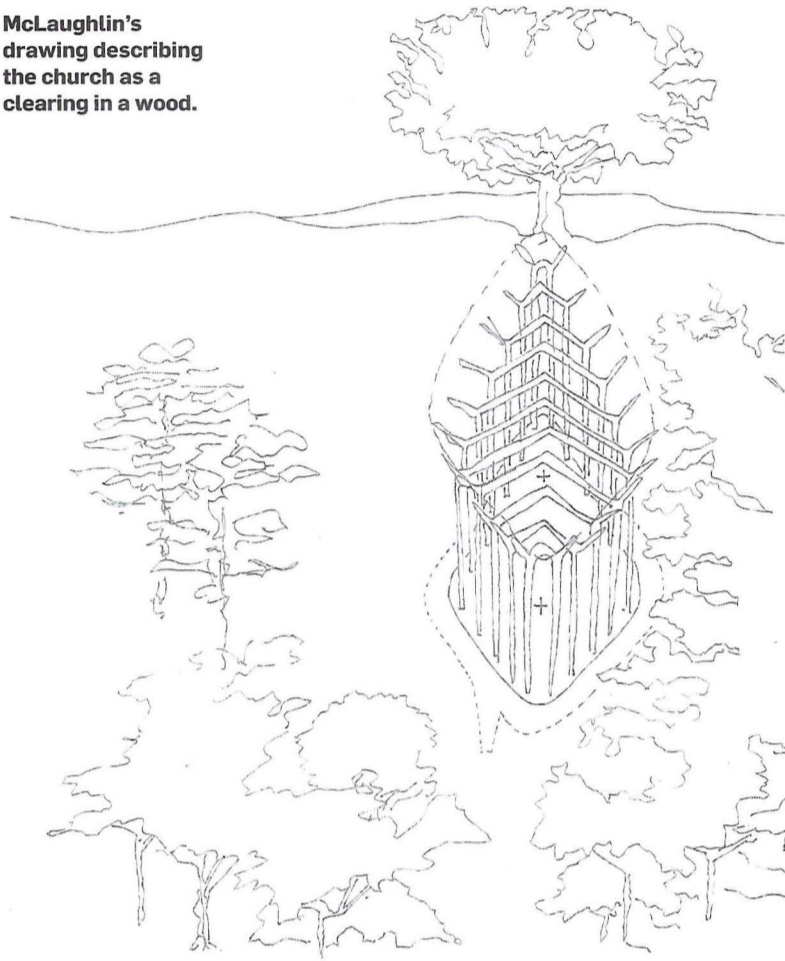
Harrison Goldman

The space of worship is set lower than the surrounding ambulatory.



A niche for private prayer.

McLaughlin's drawing describing the church as a clearing in a wood.



The piers are detached from the enclosing wall, forming a continuous ambulatory.