

# Rooms with a view

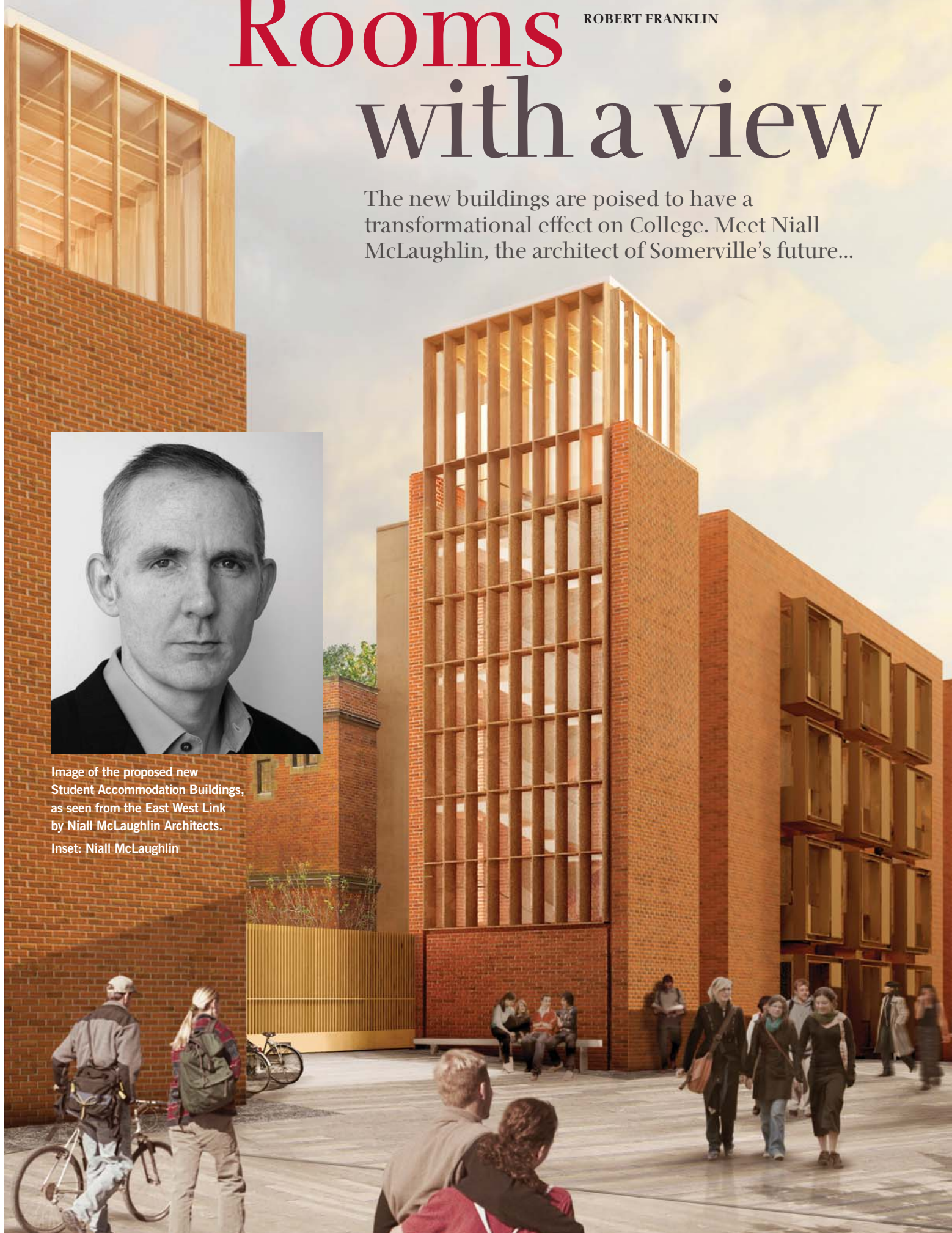
ROBERT FRANKLIN

The new buildings are poised to have a transformational effect on College. Meet Niall McLaughlin, the architect of Somerville's future...



Image of the proposed new Student Accommodation Buildings, as seen from the East West Link by Niall McLaughlin Architects.

Inset: Niall McLaughlin



There has, naturally, been a great deal of interest in the new buildings which are to be erected on the Northern boundary of the College, which is the Southern perimeter of the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter (the ROQ). So, in early November, I talked to Niall McLaughlin about them, in order to gain a clearer idea of their form, their purpose, and the architectural thinking behind them.

There will be two residential buildings, providing accommodation for students and academics, and a third which will contain teaching rooms and an extension to the Library. Niall explained that his brief was to find a form for them which would extend the College outwards, joining it to what will be a very important new entity within the City of Oxford, and at the same time link back firmly to the existing College buildings.

Although the exact form of the buildings on the ROQ site is not yet known, Niall has made sensible guesses about it, and has also taken his cue from a number of existing listed buildings along the line of the east-west route which will run immediately to the north of the new Somerville building, including the Outpatients' Building and the main block of the old Infirmary Building, and the portico of the Oxford University Press to the West. He has aimed to give the new route what he calls an episodic, accretive structure. This will echo older street patterns in Oxford, where narrow vistas are closed by a gable or a minor point of interest, but the street direction changes when that point is reached, leading the spectator on and unfolding like a dramatic narrative. In particular, the stair towers of the new residential buildings will reflect the typology which he perceives in very many Oxford quadrangles, of basically horizontal buildings interrupted by vertical accents, not necessarily at their extremities. As he says "Looking at the city and what it's giving us, we made a grammar of vertical projections, beginning with the most modest and going right up to the spires, and tried to understand where what we're doing sits within that".

Also, he is very eager to integrate the new buildings with the seam of brickwork which crosses north Oxford. The wall at the lower level will have a feeling of real substance about it, and will lead the eye both along the route and back into the main spaces of the College. It will bind together other elements of the buildings which are expressed

structurally. Niall likes the "little shifts and shimmies" which this kind of design creates, and looks forward to lovely diagonal views of the Radcliffe Observatory itself and the Press. In many ways his taste for unexpected views and spaces is reminiscent of Hawksmoor, one of the greatest architects who have worked in Oxford and one of Niall's heroes.

He has put a very great deal of thought into the form of the residential rooms themselves. The exigencies of the site require them all to be north-facing, and, at first sight, that might present a problem. But, as Niall points out, the expectation that such rooms will be south-facing is a relatively modern one. In Victorian architecture views of sunlight seen from the shade were valued as much as views of shade seen from sunlit rooms. In any case, by giving the rooms projecting windows Niall has ensured they will catch as much sun as possible, especially in the morning and evening.



**It's as though the College was a room that's making a new window.**

The projecting window embrasures will also have aesthetic advantages, from two distinct points of view. They are one of the features of the new buildings which will link back towards the existing College buildings, especially Wolfson and Park. The building will be, as Niall says, "...something like a chest of drawers, where each room is expressed very clearly and given its own identity". Also, they will be given solid and well-carpentered bespoke timber frames, which will be beautiful in themselves, and also provide variety of texture for the buildings as a whole. Niall claims Louis Kahn as one of his principal inspirations and rejoices in bringing back to England the delight in fine timbering which Kahn gained from his visits to this country. The stair-towers, too, will have oak ceilings in their glazed upper storeys, creating warmly-lit features when seen from without.

The plan of the rooms has been equally carefully calculated, as well as their disposition within the buildings. Each room will, effectively, have two different areas. The window area will allow students to look out, and, in a sense, take part in the life of the street below. But behind that there will be an area with a deep reveal,

almost a withdrawing room in the true sense of the word, which will offer a greater degree of privacy. The main entrance to the residential rooms is going to be from the gateway, which opens out on to the North-South route. So they will be entered from within the College. However, this entails quite long corridors – these will be broken up into slightly smaller ranges by kitchens, common-rooms, and other non-residential spaces.

Provision has been made for disabled students by having level access from the remainder of the College, and by specific design features in a designated set of accessible rooms, which have been kept close to the lift. As the number of disabled students in the University is increasing steadily, and their needs are often complex, this is a particularly valuable feature of the project, though the need for level access does mean that the roofline of the new building will be visible above the library from the main path in the quad.

Inevitably, in times of stringency, there has been a need for economy. As Niall says "Cost is always important, and in a good project the conversation with the client about cost is a reasonable one, which it has been here. There are relatively scarce means, but people want to do a very good job. We've been careful about cost where necessary, but when it's appropriate, we've spent money on decent things."

His aim has been to design not "look at me" buildings, but buildings which are "quiet in a positive way, and substantial, and which speak in a very simple way about what they do, which is that they're rooms and windows overlooking streets in the City." The windows have a broader meaning. "The important thing about this building, more than anything else, is that it's going to open Somerville College out, to what will be a very important new part of the City of Oxford, and it's going to put Somerville College effectively at the centre. It's almost making a new window, it's as though the College was a room that's making a new window, a window that's overlooking a very important part of the City."

Niall is a thoughtful architect, and these are thoughtful buildings.

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