

01.11.07

'His pencil never slept'  
*Selections from the  
Basil Spence archive*

Open house  
*William JR Curtis visits  
Alto's legendary Maison  
Carré in France for the  
first time*

Glazing  
*Barkow Leibinger's  
curtain wall for  
manufacturing  
firm Trumpf*



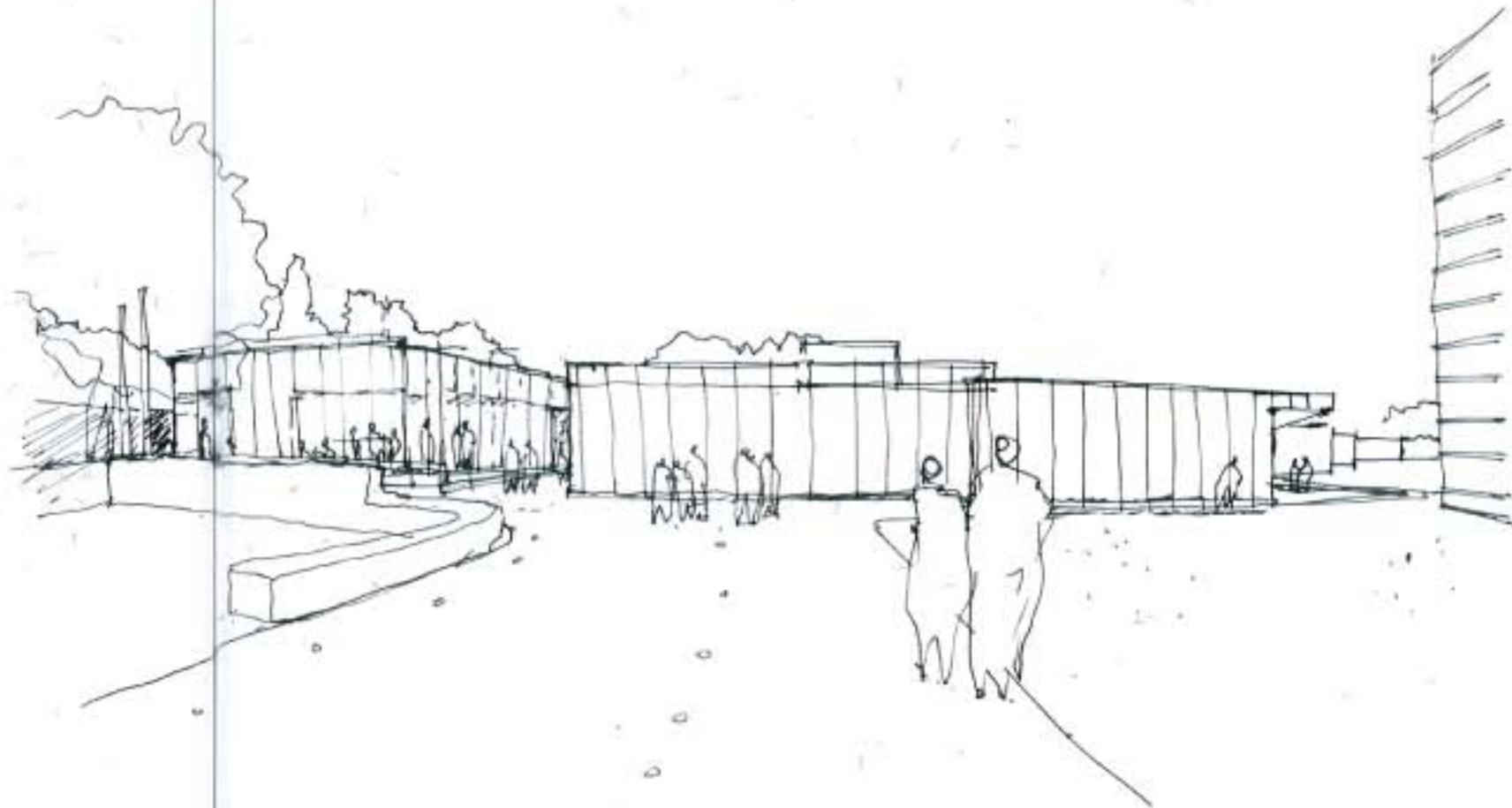
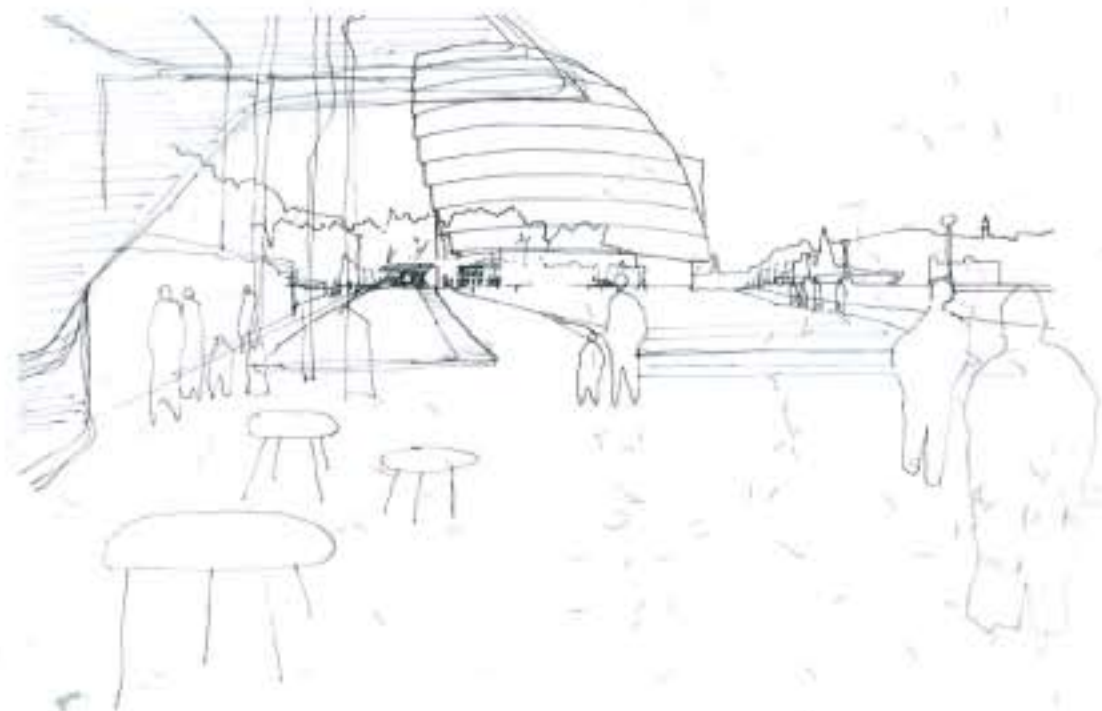
# THE MØLLER CENTRE

*A look at DSDHA's music hall in Cambridge and  
the practice's two kiosks in Potters Fields, London*



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# THEORY IN PRACTICE

Two very different projects by DSDHA both demonstrate a commitment to research techniques pioneered by Australian academic Leon van Schaik. *Jaffer Kolb* sees the results. Photography by *Cristobal Palma*.

At a recent symposium at the RIBA entitled 'Reflections on Practice', Deborah Saunt of DSDHA presented her kiosks at Potters' Field Park – one at the base of City Hall, one next to Tower Bridge. She described how, early in her career, she went to Australia with fellow practice founding partner David Hills to write a magazine piece about young practices. 'We arrived in Melbourne and phoned up five or six firms,' she said. 'Within hours we were sharing drinks with a group who were all combining research and practice.'

'Again and again we heard about the impact Leon van Schaik was having in the city', she tells me. Van Schaik, a once-practising architect who now runs a research masters program at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, has become increasingly important in architectural circles as his rigorous research program is adopted round the world.

The programme, established in 1987 seems potentially simplistic – researching a project, you might be thinking, is hardly novel. But van Schaik's work is specific in both its realisation and in its goals. Firms that have practised for between five and 10 years study their own projects and submit their work to a semi-annual peer review.

The idea is that introspection and conversation will encourage practices to explore new ideas and, ideally, innovate. Drawing from research done in the US by Howard Gardner at Harvard University and Ernest Boyer at the Carnegie Institute, van Schaik established a kind of network model of collaborative learning.

Two recently completed projects by DSDHA – studied in detail over the following pages – reveal a dedication to intensive research that parallels van Schaik's values. Working with students at the AA, the

architects devised projects around mapping movement, focusing in particular on how pedestrians use space.

In both the Møller Centre in Cambridge and the Potters Fields kiosks, the practice used this research and the work it had carried out with students to analyse each site in order to react to and frame the surrounding landscape. Though the focus remained constant, the two projects are quite distinct: the rough, angular Potters' Fields kiosks contrast strikingly with the slick, black-glass-glazed Møller Centre.

Van Schaik told me recently: 'After Deborah's lecture [at the RIBA], a colleague asked me how a practice so obviously engaged in its work and research could produce such very different buildings. But conditions change every time, and so it almost makes sense for a practice to produce quite different work.'

# THE MØLLER CENTRE

At first impression, the Møller Centre looks like a run-of-the-mill Midwestern glass box. But it's a building designed to minimize glare perception, and that's important to the University. In July of this year, the building is a 70,000-sq-ft addition to the existing 1952 and 1970s buildings designed by Harold Ellingsworth, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The design team consisted of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Department of Architecture and the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Department of Architecture.

collaborative learning centers in 2004. DSDHA utilized a multi-strategy approach to design a building that would meet the existing building with a single glass facade. The building's design was a result of the collaborative learning centers in 2004. DSDHA utilized a multi-strategy approach to design a building that would meet the existing building with a single glass facade. The building's design was a result of the collaborative learning centers in 2004. DSDHA utilized a multi-strategy approach to design a building that would meet the existing building with a single glass facade. The building's design was a result of the collaborative learning centers in 2004.

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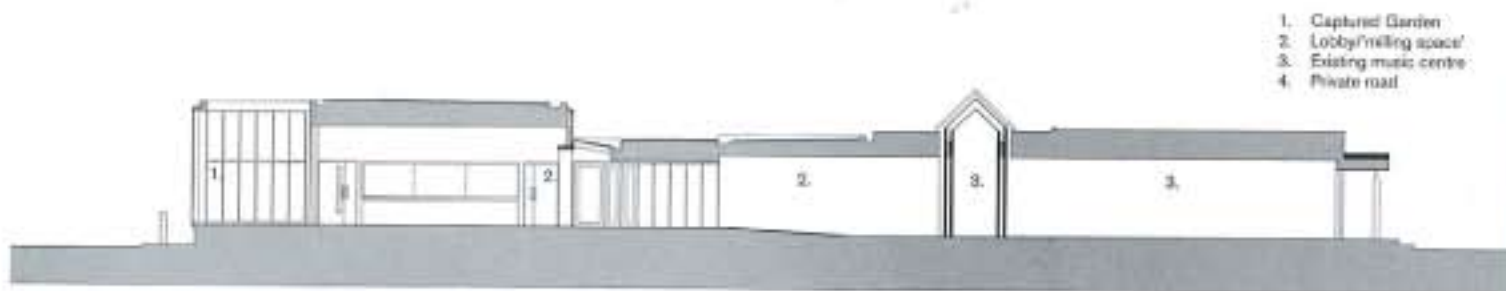
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Above and above right the reflective cladding reinterprets the building's surroundings, creating ambiguity  
Below section



encouraged to look outside – it's good for students to let their attention wander and not focus on one thing exclusively.'

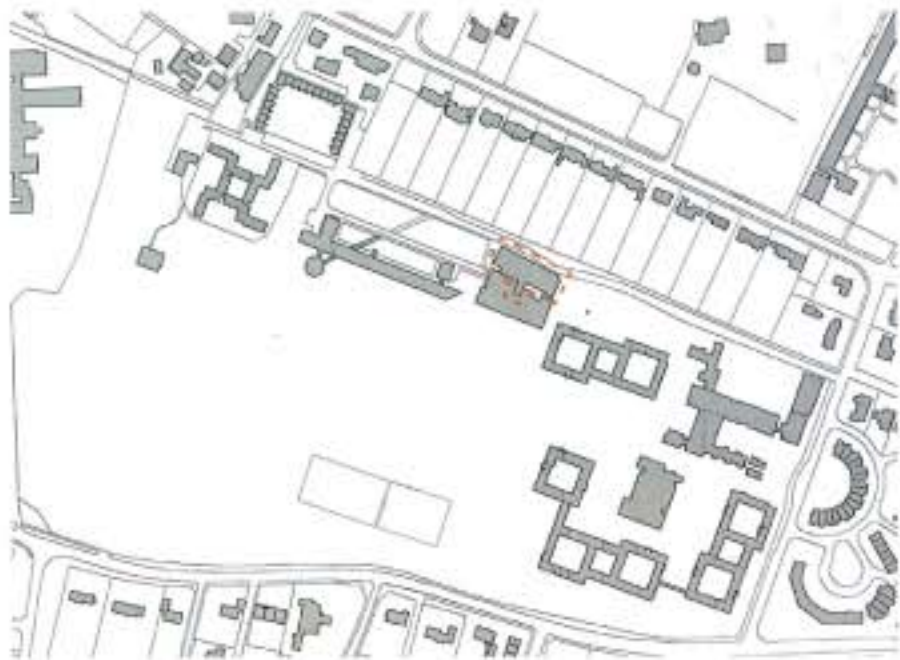
'This type of non-traditional pedagogy represents the ideas that the centre and Garrik Jones had about creating a learning environment rather than institutional structure. DSDHA realised another spatial manifestation of these aims with the inclusion of 'milling spaces' – areas for students to meet. How these differ from standard lobbies or common areas in most university buildings I'm not sure, but both the architect and client use a descriptive lexicon that suggests they aspire to something more worthy: these areas are about exchanging ideas and informal learning rather than pedestrian conversation.

Like the Potters Fields Park kiosks, DSDHA had a particular interest with

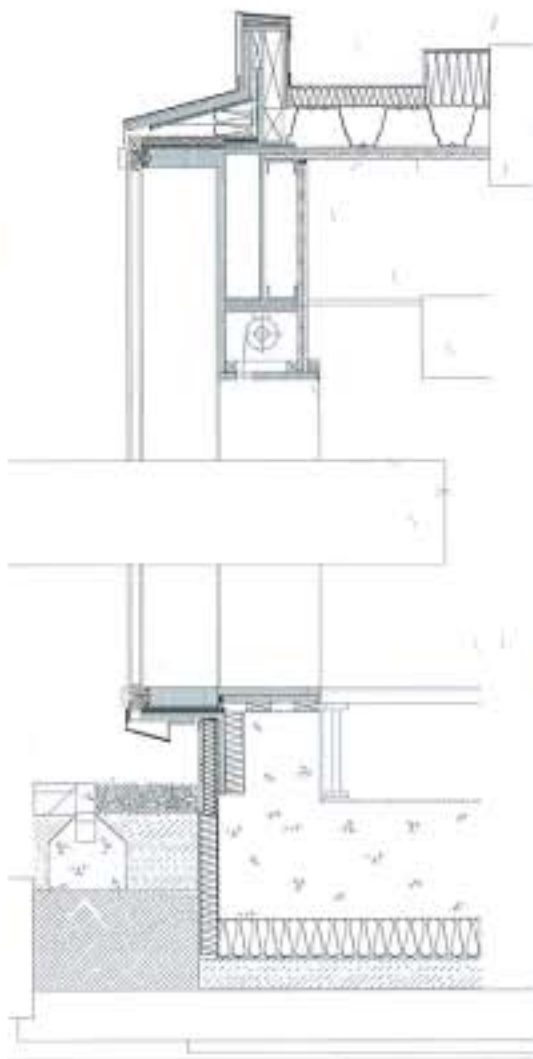
mapping sightlines and movement patterns around the site. Where in that project there was a particular importance in framing views to the landscape of historical and contemporary buildings, here the goal was to keep the natural landscape the centre of attention. Says Saunt: 'At any college, you're always aware of the landscape; here we wanted to create a whole journey described by light and views.' Thus windows and rooms were designed to optimise views both outside and through the building.

Additionally, as a means to elevate the role of the surrounding landscape, the designers tested out numerous reflective curtain wall panels, finally settling on a mixture of black ceramic-fritted panels and semi-reflective transparent glass. The firm used 1,200 x 4,350mm panels from system >>

*Saunt describes the intended effect of the building as melting into the landscape*



This page, clockwise from above site plan; detail section of curtain wall, DSDHA used engineered timber curtain walling with flushed glazed vertical joints and pressure plates to horizontal joints



*'Students are encouraged to look outside – it's good to let their attention wander'*

manufacturer Seufert-Niklaus, which, when paired with the dark colour, render the scale of the project ambiguous.

The Moller Centre's structure and materials lend a distinctly Modernist tone, but the glass itself seems to mark a meaningful departure from the Modernist discourse. If Modernist architects used transparency to advance a kind of metaphorical agenda, here the use of black glass and reflection suggests an interesting reinterpretation.

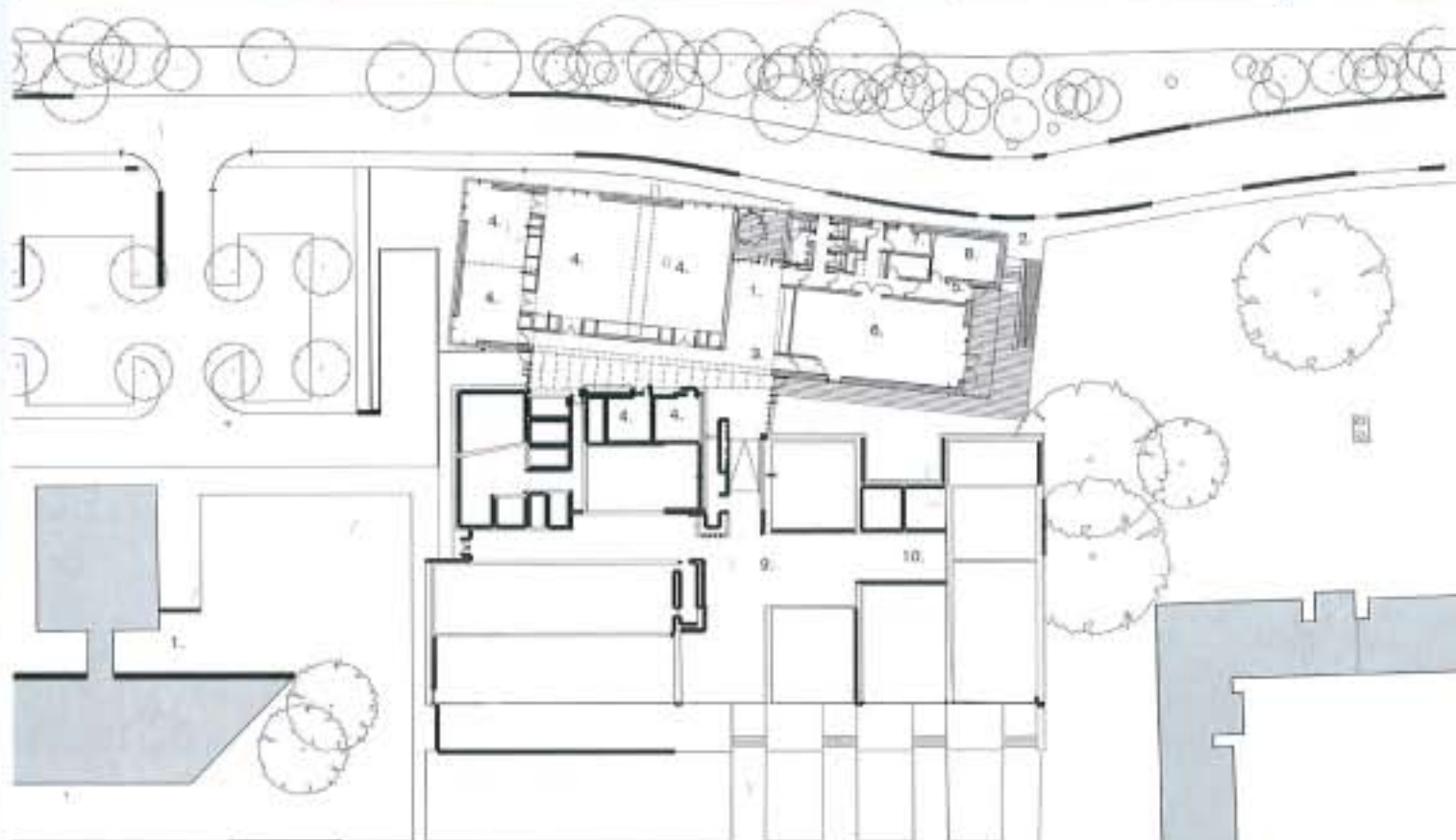
Concluding *The Architectural Uncanny* (MIT Press, 1994), Anthony Vidler explains how shifting from transparency to translucency and reflection moves beyond the basic idea of the Modernist ideology. By manipulating perspective, the interface between the subject and the building becomes alien. The Moller Centre reinterprets its surroundings

through the very act of reflecting them, and doubly so as that reflection is distinct and impure, tainted by the coloured glass.

While Saum describes the intended effect of the building as 'dissolving' or melting into nature, I think it does something even better. By reflecting its surroundings through a dark lens, it reformulates the landscape. Vidler refers to a particularly creepy moment of Guy du Maupassant's novella *Le Horla* (1887) where the narrator looks into a mirror and can't see himself until 'suddenly I saw myself in a mist in the center of the mirror, through a sort of watery veil'.

The Moller Centre's effects might be far less dramatic, but when the light is right, it reacts to the landscape, becoming a kind of kaleidoscope that simultaneously redirects sightlines and reframes nature. ■

**Client** The Moller Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge  
**Architect** DSDHA  
**Structural engineer** Jane Warrick Associates  
**Environmental engineer** Max Fordham  
**Quantity surveyor/project manager** Gardiner & Theobald  
**Acoustic consultant** Arup Acoustics  
**Contractor** Haymills  
**Annual CO<sub>2</sub> emissions** 40kgCO<sub>2</sub>/m<sup>2</sup>. Typical lecture theatre 50kgCO<sub>2</sub>/m<sup>2</sup>. Typical concert hall 150kgCO<sub>2</sub>/m<sup>2</sup>



Above left Interior spaces look out on to Cambridge's lawns  
 Above right Students can meet and share ideas at 'milling spaces'  
 Above site plan

1. Captured garden
2. Music centre entrance
3. Lobby/milling space
4. Training room
5. Music centre lobby
6. Recital room
7. Rehearsal room
8. Studio
9. Existing music centre
10. Pivotal road
11. Moller centre