

PRESS RELEASE - 24 September 2019

**Wright & Wright Architects unveil a new Library for St John's College, Oxford**

*St John's College Library and Study Centre by Wright & Wright Architects © Dennis Gilbert*

Wright & Wright Architects has completed a new Library and Study Centre for St John's College, Oxford which will be opening on Saturday 12 October 2019. Adding to the historic continuum of St John's, the new building is an outstanding academic library for the digital age. Set on a challenging site, its elegant, contemporary architectural language abstracts the College's Baroque heritage, while achieving new benchmarks in sustainable design.

Wright & Wright Architects was commissioned by St John's College's in 2015 to remodel and extend its library estate. The College's existing libraries are housed in the Grade I-listed Canterbury Quadrangle, one of Britain's most significant Baroque ensembles. Set within the President's garden and bordering the Groves - a Grade II-listed garden - the new Library and Study Centre is linked to the 16th century Old Library and 17th century Laudian Library, establishing an active connection between Canterbury Quad and the College's northern precincts, strengthening links between different eras and reactivating the heart of St John's.

Conceived as a series of overlapping planes of masonry and glass, the Study Centre resembles a stone casket, with a complex section and thick-skinned walls that sculpt and moderate light, giving each space a distinct character. Responding to the Baroque architecture of Canterbury Quad, the building is characterised by geometrically pronounced axes, layered spatial sequences and elaborate stone reliefs.

Wright & Wright collaborated with artist Susanna Heron to create 'Stone Drawing', a cut stone bas-relief across the west facade of the building, which had to be blank in order to preserve the privacy of the President's garden. The intricately textured elevation in creamy Clipsham limestone overlooks a shallow reflecting pool, bringing depth and animation to the exterior and interior. The modelled surface catches the light, casting an atmospheric shadow over the wall, amplified by the shimmering caustics generated by the reflecting pool, which acts like a small moat, separating building and landscape.

In the Otranto Passage leading to the Study Centre's main entrance, a 15-metre-long sculptural glass wall panel by architectural artist Kirsty Brooks further enriches the interior. Responding to the architectural setting, the work abstracts the first 200 years of the College's history, from 1555 to 1755, through a combination of texture, light and layering.

Wright & Wright's collaboration with artists explores ideas around materiality and craftsmanship, of conveying a powerful sense of how things are shaped, made and put together. But it is only one part of a meticulous approach to design and detailing, creating architecture that is built to last and will age as gracefully as its historic surroundings.



*St John's College Library and Study Centre by Wright & Wright Architects, 'Stone Drawing' by Susanna Heron © Hufton+Crow*

As well as adding to the College's architectural narrative, the 1940 square metre Study Centre sets new benchmarks in sustainable design, achieving a zero-carbon strategy through the use of renewable energy sources, such as a ground source heat pump and photovoltaics, and passive means of environmental control, including natural ventilation and generous roof glazing to admit ample natural daylight.

Housing three levels of library space, the Study Centre positions readers either under, within or over the leafy canopies of the Groves, with each study space designed to engage with the surrounding gardens. Within its wider College context, the building is a modest presence. As Canterbury Quad is approached from St John's Great Lawn, the Study Centre is at first completely screened by landscape and then emerges from the Groves. The building's modulating stone mass, which runs along the historic Sprott's Wall, is emphasised by two towers housing the circulation cores. These act as bookends to the composition. The southern tower forms the connection to Canterbury Quad with a lightweight glazed link, containing the new reception. The Study Centre defines a new route through the College, connecting Canterbury Quad with the lively residential fringes of Thomas White, Garden and Kendrew Quadrangles.

The state-of-the-art library combines access to hard copy media, digital media and special collections, as well as spaces for peer-to-peer learning. Each of the library's 120 new reader seats are tailored to different forms of study, accommodating individual or group configurations. A combination of level access and adjustable desks for wheelchairs or standing users are on offer, each fitted with power, data and adjustable lighting.

Library facilities are augmented by an oak-lined seminar room, which can accommodate up to 50 students, plus pocket courtyards for informal study, relaxing and socialising. The Study Centre also includes 2,300 linear metres of open access shelving, a librarian's office with dedicated space for researchers to view special collections, a four-person reception desk with cataloguing space, self-issue points and provision for lockers, refreshments and network terminals plus an exhibition space. New archive storage in the Study Centre's basement for the College's Special Collections contains 2,700 linear metres of shelving.

Wright & Wright was also commissioned to upgrade facilities across the historic library estate, through the provision of 700 linear metres of storage for the Laudian Library and 30 reading seats in the existing libraries. A third phase of work will include refurbishing Old Library and reinstating teaching rooms in Canterbury Quad. Planning for the project, which involved consultation with English Heritage, Oxford Archaeology, the Oxford Preservation Trust, the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society, the Victorian Society and the Oxford Civic Society, was granted in 2015 and construction commenced in 2016.

Professor Maggie Snowling, President of St John's College said, *"When St. John's College decided to build a new Library & Study Centre, it had a long list of requirements. Since it would be the first time in the College's history that it had built a library specifically for its undergraduates and graduates, it had to cater for the diverse study needs*



*of current and successive generations of students, and it was also important to consider the impact of the library on the environment. In short, it had to be an awe-inspiring building at the heart of College. It was with these criteria in mind, that we selected Wright & Wright as our architects. The Library & Study Centre that they have created, working closely with the College's team, stands as a symbol of the core values of St. John's. It will be a fitting space for students and scholars now and for centuries to come."*

Clare Wright, Founding Partner of Wright & Wright said "Our work for St John's builds on a deep awareness of how to integrate contemporary buildings within historic settings. We are fascinated by connections across time conjured by place, which we strive to understand and reinterpret in a modern idiom. Studying in a library is at the very heart of the student experience. A space to think is a space with a beauty that inspires learning.

"Our architecture is characterised by a sense of depth, solidity and permanence", said Sandy Wright, Founding Partner of Wright & Wright, "We enjoy playing with the ambiguities of depth in walls, to bring in light and impart an element of surprise. We are also builders. We relish the process of making buildings, working with the inherent richness and qualities of materials, how materials are connected, and how elements are formed and detailed, creating architecture that is intended to last."

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#### **Notes to editors:**

#### **Project Team**

Architect: Wright & Wright Architects  
Client: The President and Scholars of St John's College, Oxford  
Structural Engineer: Price & Myers  
M&E Consultant: Max Fordham LLP  
Acoustic Consultant: Max Fordham LLP  
Quantity Surveyor: Peter Gittins & Associates LTD  
Project Manager: AA Projects  
CDM Coordinator: Goddard Consulting  
Approved Building Inspector: Oxford City Council  
Main Contractor: Stepnell

#### **Wright & Wright Architects**

An award-winning practice based in London, Wright & Wright Architects has a particular interest in working with historic buildings and enjoy researching the meaning and evolution of sites over time. Its buildings are always a considered response to context, adding to and enriching the historical continuum. As the latest chapter in the development of St John's College, the new Library and Study Centre adds to the existing ensemble of buildings and landscapes. This requires acute sensitivity shaped by an intimate understanding of the site and its history. Wright & Wright has excellent relationships with heritage bodies such as Historic England, as well as local planning authorities. With a reputation for imaginative responses to significant historic settings, the practice excels in creating contemporary yet sensitive architecture for museums, libraries, archives and educational institutions. Its list of distinguished clients includes St John's College, Oxford, the V&A, the Royal College of Art, the National Gallery and Lambeth Palace. Recent projects include a new library for Magdalen College, Oxford, which was opened by HRH The Duke of Cambridge. Wright & Wright's new Library and Archive for the Church of England at Lambeth Palace is due to be completed in 2020.

<https://www.wrightandwright.co.uk/>

#### **St John's College**

Established in 1555 as a constituent college of the University of Oxford, St John's College fosters excellence in education and research and is committed to equality and diversity. It is one of the largest among Oxford Colleges and offers tuition in nearly every subject studied at the University. Today, St John's is home to approximately 390 undergraduates, 250 graduate students, 100 fellows and 25 College lecturers. A vibrant international community, it fosters intellectual rigour, creativity, and independence in its students, teachers, and researchers. The College

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Oxford

supports a range of research activities including discussions, seminars, workshops, public lectures and visiting scholar schemes. While scholarly publication is naturally at the heart of the College's research endeavours, the Fellowship is also committed to informing policy and public debate, and to teaching that is informed by research findings.

<https://www.sjc.ox.ac.uk/>