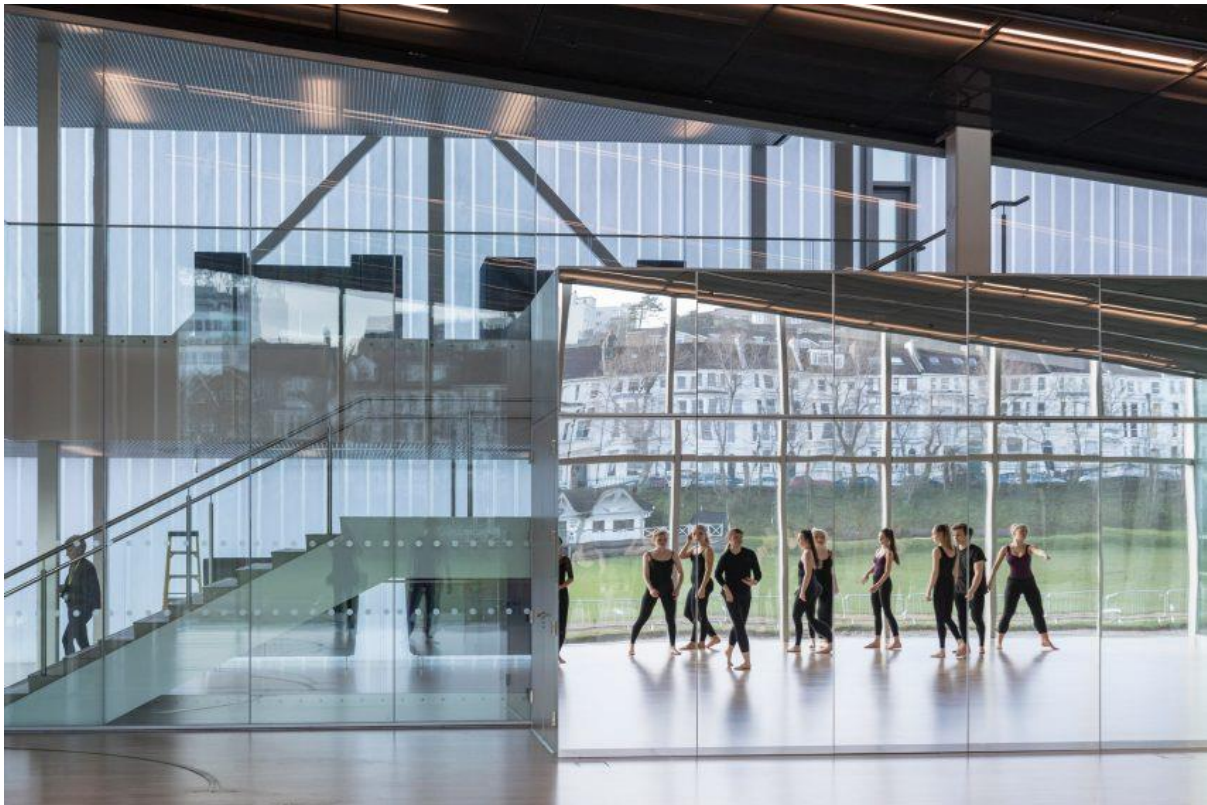


Brighton college's Sports and Science Centre review – Hogwarts meets George Lucas

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In a departure from the gothic image of English private schools, Brighton college's new building, designed by OMA, is an expression of global ambition.



Think of an English private school and you will probably think of somewhere gothic. Something like St Trinian's, or Nigel Molesworth's St Custard's, whose ogees and oak made habitats for bats and spiders, whose shadowy recesses harboured aromas of boiled cabbage and sodden socks. Something, probably, much like Brighton college, in which flint walls are pierced by pointed arches that lead into enclosed spaces reminiscent of Oxbridge colleges, which open on to an expansive greensward dedicated to the inculcation of illogic and injustice through the games of rugby and cricket.

What you would not expect is something like the college's new Sports and Science Centre, designed by the Rotterdam-based Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), the practice founded by the celebrated not-gothic seer Rem Koolhaas. You would not expect it because no English private school has built anything quite like this before. Long, dark, angular and machined, it's as if Hogwarts had been redesigned by George Lucas.

The £55m project is the largest, but not the first building in an ambitious construction programme under the current headteacher, Richard Cairns. Other notable architects have

been employed, such as Hopkins, Eric Parry and Allies and Morrison, their work meticulous and well-crafted and skilful in its use of flint, but bound as if by some secret oath to come up with contemporary reimaginings of the Victorian reimagining of medieval architecture offered by the college's original architect, George Gilbert Scott. With its exterior finished in glass and dark grey, glass-reinforced concrete, the Sports and Science Centre is as different as it can be. "We are not too good at pitched roofs," says Ellen van Loon, the OMA partner in charge of the project.



To see it only as a statement of stylistic difference, however, is to miss most of the intentions behind the design. Its abstracted frame is the means to several ends, in particular OMA's longstanding delight in mixing up apparently incongruous elements of a building's brief. In the case of the Brighton college building, the spark comes from the fact that it is for both sports and science, two activities that traditionally appeal to non-coincident sets of pupils – jocks and nerds, to put it crudely. One approach would have been to put the two into separate buildings. OMA's was to put one on top of the other, laboratories bridging over sports court, gym and swimming pool, with the levels manipulated so that you can both see and walk from one to the other.

Van Loon also brought to the project some straightforward good ideas. She wanted a high level of transparency, such that the splendid view over the playing fields could be experienced throughout the building. The flat roof created a rare opportunity to view the sea, which is barely a quarter-mile away. So it was made accessible, planted with sedum in the parts you can't walk on, covered with artificial turf where you can and furnished with a running track.

She and her team wanted to make the corridors and stairs places in their own right, part of the social life of the school, rather than mere conduits from one room to another. So they are much wider than pure function requires. They form part of a pattern of movement through the building, one that also takes in terraces stepping down from the roof, that allows you to enjoy the layered diversity of its spaces. There's a secret romance within the building's severity, one that connects it after all to its gothic forebears, based on the pleasure of exploring its complicated inner landscape.

There are other touches. The parquet floor of the internal sports court is level with the turf outside, just the other side of a glass wall, so that the two feel connected. The fume cupboards in the generally business-like laboratories are made of glass; passersby can see whatever exotic smoke a chemical experiment might produce. The apparent space of the gym and the swimming pool is doubled by mirrored walls. Combinations of clear and translucent glass cause the building to glow in the dark.

There are a few cavils. It remains to be seen how well staff and students will cope with the high levels of overlooking that go with the transparency. There is in places a harsh, just-stuck-together feeling that goes with both OMA's approach to detail and the form of design-and-build construction contract used to build this building. I'd also like to question the common practice of employing, as here, interior designers to install framed prints and discordant furnishings. If you're going to go to the trouble of realising the vision of a practice like OMA, why compromise it with the styling techniques of a Travelodge?

Mostly, though, the Sports and Science Centre is a celebration of the multiple energies it will contain, expressed externally with slopes and steppings that interrupt the regularity of its grid, and with overhangs at either end, one to make a grand porch and the other to form the indoor sports court. The same interruptions help the design to pull off the difficult task of inserting a 120-metre-long object into a context of much smaller buildings. They lighten and enliven the structure where it threatens to become weighty or monotonous. The slopes and shifts of level play nicely against a terrain that, in premonition of the nearby South Downs, rises quite steeply away from the sea.

To return to the central question, why a British private school should want to commission such a work, one clue is provided by the fact that Brighton college now has affiliated international schools in the United Arab Emirates and Bangkok, with one in Singapore due to open in August. It's a global brand, seeking fees from an international class of parents, for whom the picturesque shabbiness of yore, one might guess, may not hold much appeal. It wants architecture to match these ambitions.

Photography: Laurian Ghinitoiu/OMA