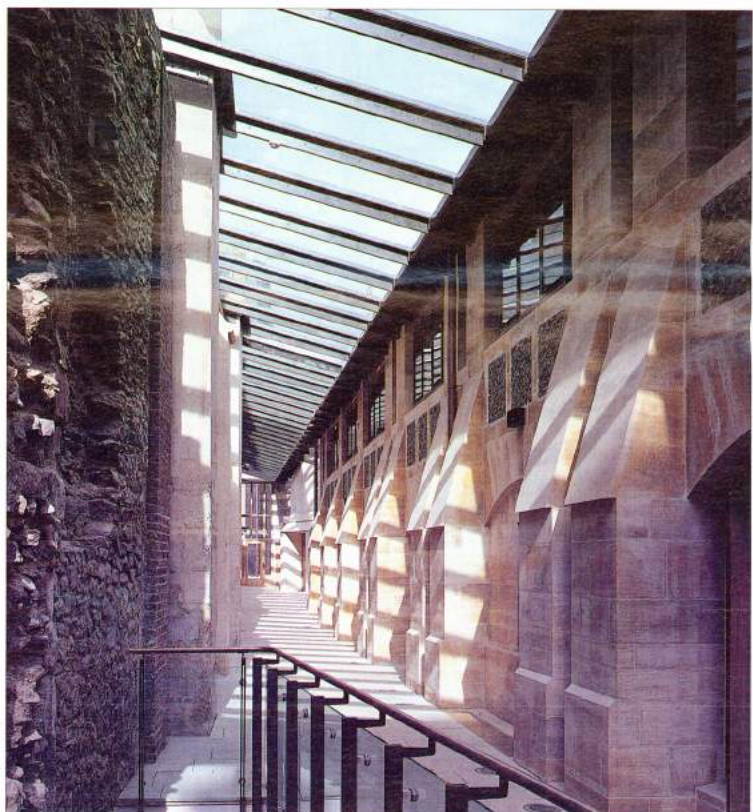
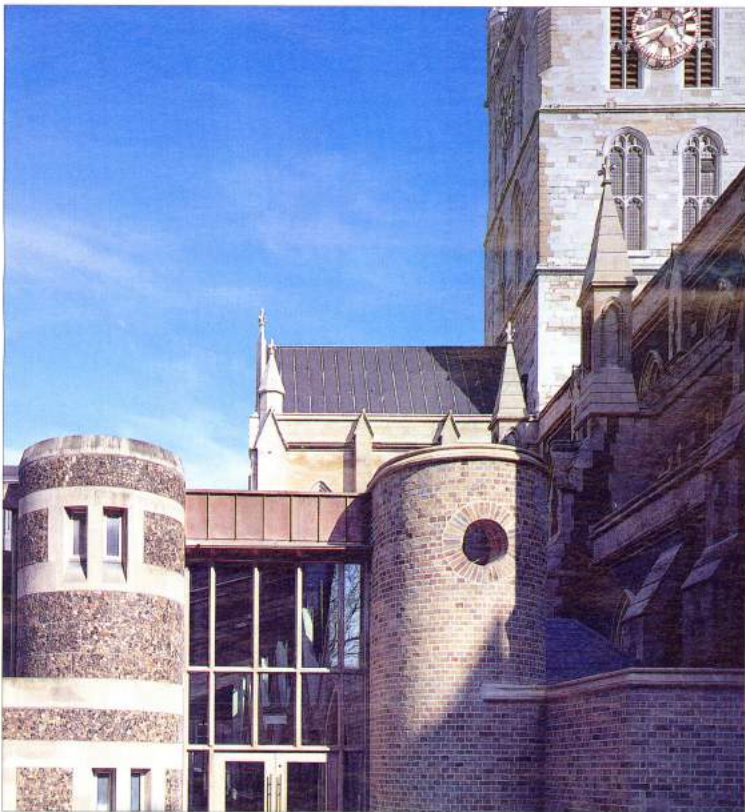




# A match made in heaven

Richard Griffiths Architects' new buildings for Southwark Cathedral mix the traditional and contemporary, complementing the original while adding character of their own, writes Kieran Long. Photographs by Morley von Sternberg





Conservation architects are perhaps a bit out of fashion at the moment. In this design-conscious and novelty-obsessed Blairite age, the idea that things are worth preserving exactly as they are seems fusty and associated with too much facial hair and open-toed sandals. However, there is no doubt that there are some architects who are just better qualified to work on or around historic buildings. In architecture schools, students are not taught about the range of natural and historic materials available to them, and the idea of sticking a glass box to the side of a cathedral with a mastic joint would not seem unreasonable to some practices. Contemporary intervention versus preservation in aspic (that old heritage chestnut) is in the news again, as the Millennium Lottery Fund enables long established but cash-strapped institutions to add to their estates.

Southwark Cathedral is one of the institutions that is now on the crest of a wave of regeneration initiatives, lottery

money, and renewed interest in London's assets south of the river.

The city had almost forgotten about Southwark until the end of the nineties. It was not just taxi drivers who refused to go south of the river late at night – unless you lived there, you would be hard pushed to find a reason to venture southwards, and to most it meant the concrete jungle of Elephant & Castle or the badlands of Lewisham.

Now the situation has transformed. With Tate Modern, the Greater London Assembly and the resurgence of areas such as Borough Market and Bermondsey, along with a whole rash of smaller projects and initiatives, it seems that Southwark's moment has come. The Diocese of Southwark, whose headquarters at Southwark Cathedral is a stone's throw from London Bridge, sensed this mood, and found it the ideal opportunity to resolve its long standing problems with lack of facilities and space.

The brief was to include a range of

facilities that could form a new main entrance to the cathedral complex on the north side of the building to take the pressure off the cathedral itself, while providing the facilities expected of a high-profile visitor attraction. The new facilities include a refectory and library, a new exhibition telling the story of the cathedral and diocese, a shop and a new chair store. As well as this, the cathedral itself was to be cleaned and restored, and the gardens re-landscaped. The church also acquired Montague Chambers, a Victorian office building to the east of the cathedral, which now houses its offices and administration.

Richard Griffiths was appointed surveyor to the fabric of the cathedral in January 1997. The cathedral is a complex collage of styles and layers of history and archaeology – the sort that Richard Griffiths Architects always relishes getting involved with. Its work on Lambeth Palace, completed last year, took its involvement with religious buildings

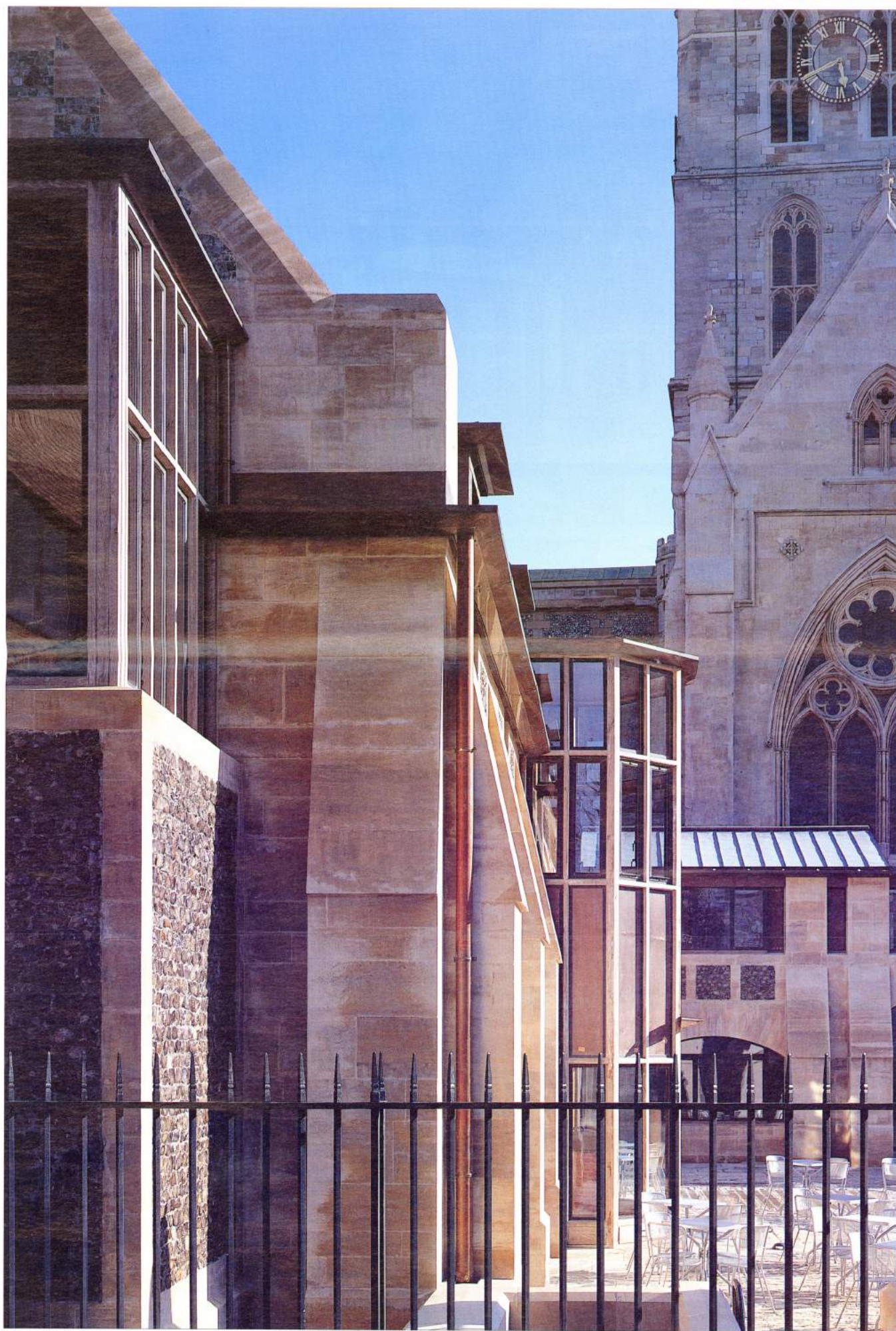
into the top division, dealing with the country's most distinguished historical structures.

Southwark Cathedral's building programme was underway then, and shows a slightly different sensibility. The project at Lambeth was characterised by lightness of touch – unmistakably contemporary materials and a rational treatment towards issues of circulation and historical display. Its work at Southwark Cathedral displays a different side of the practice's personality. This is a substantial and solid building, which uses a very wide range of materials and construction techniques. This can seem bewildering when one is used to seeing contemporary statements that try to retain a formal integrity of their own – one thinks of the work of Stanton Williams at Compton Verney. These are respectful and take their inspiration from context, but the primary aim is to create something identifiably contemporary that augments the existing buildings.

Richard Griffiths Architects responds to context in a way that creates a new layer to an already multi-layered building. There was a conscious decision to make a building that felt as if it had always been there. While this does not imply that the building has to be pastiche, it does mean that a more polite solution has emerged. A very heavy and diverse set of construction methods and materials has been used to create an arts & crafts building seeking freedom within tradition and trying to use a seamless but dense mix of references.

Project architect Ptolemy Dean says: "The setting had been completely destroyed, and the cathedral needed something reassuring. Above all it was our responsibility to be well mannered." The new buildings are "well mannered" in the most obvious of ways – they use the flint and stone of the cathedral walls, a pitched slate roof on the main refectory building, and copper roofs on the rest. But there are other clearly ►





Previous page:  
View from the north - Southwark Cathedral is unique among London cathedrals in having a facade visible from the river. The Southwark river walk runs by the new gates of the cathedral precinct.

Far left, top:  
The refectory and library block is clad in the same stone and flint as the cathedral itself, and an oriel window forms a lobby to the refectory.

Below left:  
West entrance, with a new brick turret containing a staircase which gives maintenance access to the roof.

Below right:  
The glazed street between the cathedral and the new build creates a covered route from the education facilities into the cathedral, and also provides views of archaeological remains uncovered as part of the works.

Near left:  
Ornamentation such as the flushwork on the eaves stands up admirably to the cathedral. The use of natural materials such as copper for the roof gives a sense of permanence to the buildings.





contemporary materials and methods – the precast concrete vaults that form the roof of the library are very beautiful. The concrete ceiling of the shop, too, is unashamedly modern. The composition and massing of the building also recall and arts & crafts approach, creating a lively facade with a brick turret at the west entrance, and the oriel window facing the entrance courtyard. Details, too, such as the flushing on the north gable of the refectory block, reflect a joy in recreating the opulent and luxurious details of previous centuries.

It is a strange mix – it magnificently fulfils all the requirements of the brief, without ever quite making an overall statement. It is all beautifully made – a level of craft seldom seen on a contemporary building – but the variety of references, such as slate lintels to recall the Roman history of the site, and the Soanian detailing of door frames, is a rich dish that, at times, ends up feeling a little too much like a theme park. The fake door, put in to retain the symmetry of the refectory, is a case in point – one can only admire the chutzpah.

There are other moments, though, that are sheer pleasure. As you exit the cathedral itself, reliefs on the wall ahead of you catch the sun, which shines through the glazed roof creating a wonderful play of shadows and light. The richness means that one is always curious to see what is around the next corner. The detailing of the two spiral staircases – one which leads to the roof, the other to a first floor meeting room – is also a joy. It is a building unafraid of ornament, and where it succeeds it is refreshing and good.

The most successful part of the scheme is the new sanctuary and entrance to the cathedral complex. This will reinstate a sense of calm to an area that is expected to see a huge increase in tourists and passers-by in the next few years. It will be the main point of access for visitors walking along the river.

Dean says that the priority was to create a sense of place in what had previously been used as an overflow car park

for the surrounding offices. "The space needed to be defined," he says. "There was no place here, and the 1987 [Ron Simms-designed] chapterhouse was very non-urban. The new buildings needed a presence themselves." Two sides of the new court will be defined by the new buildings, and the other by a line of Yew trees. Benches on one side and tables from the refectory will make this a lively but ordered space. If the rest of this area, including the clear space that overlooks the river, can be kept clear of the cars that currently clog it, it will be one of the most special outdoor spaces on the South Bank.

This is a fascinating complex. The multi-layeredness of the new building, and of the cathedral itself, makes the visitor feel like a detective with too many leads. Above all, though, it functions well, creating a couple of great places along the way. The best of these are the library, the courtyard and the new glazed street between the cathedral and shop.

Also, its treatment of the archaeological remains is exemplary, and should be applauded. The practice remains a fascinating anomaly – amazing expertise in conservation and construction allied to a modernist commitment to the honest use of contemporary materials. It would be fascinating for it to break free of the conservation label and see what it could do with a decent new-build commission. For now, though, go and look around Southwark cathedral – I can guarantee a lot of fun.

#### Project team

**Architect** Richard Griffiths Architects: Dick Blight, Ptolemy Dean, Wendy Dellit, Richard Griffiths, Ifiti Khan, Tony Ives, Amy Asper, Ben Slee, Liz Tylton and Mark Wray.

**Quantity surveyor, planning supervisor, project coordinator** Citex.

**Structural engineer** Alan Baxter Associates.

**Services engineer** Max Fordham Associates.

**Landscape architect**

Elizabeth Banks Associates.

**Lighting consultant** Sutton Vane Associates.

**Exhibition designer** Myriad.

**Main contractor** Walter Lilly.

