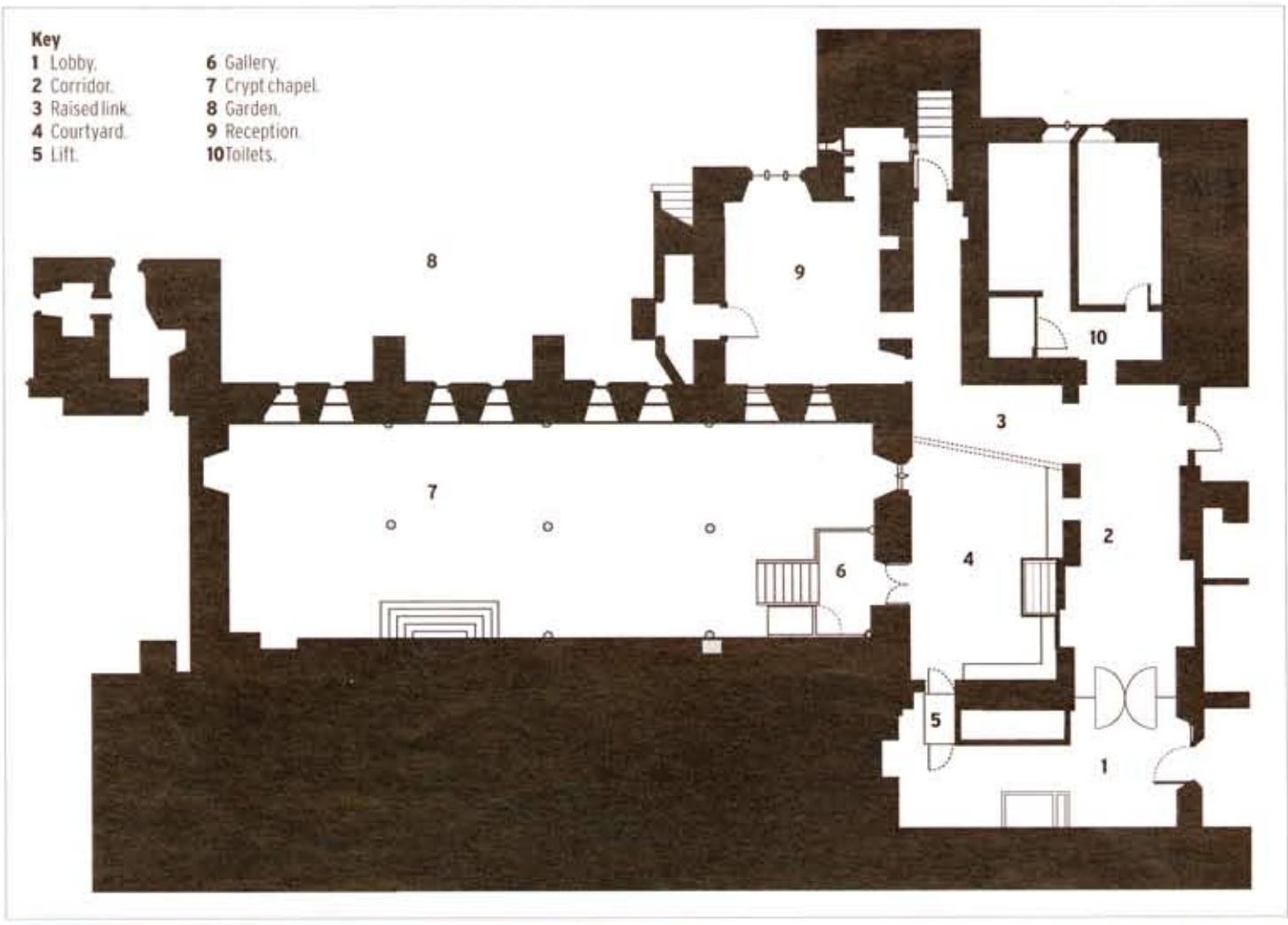
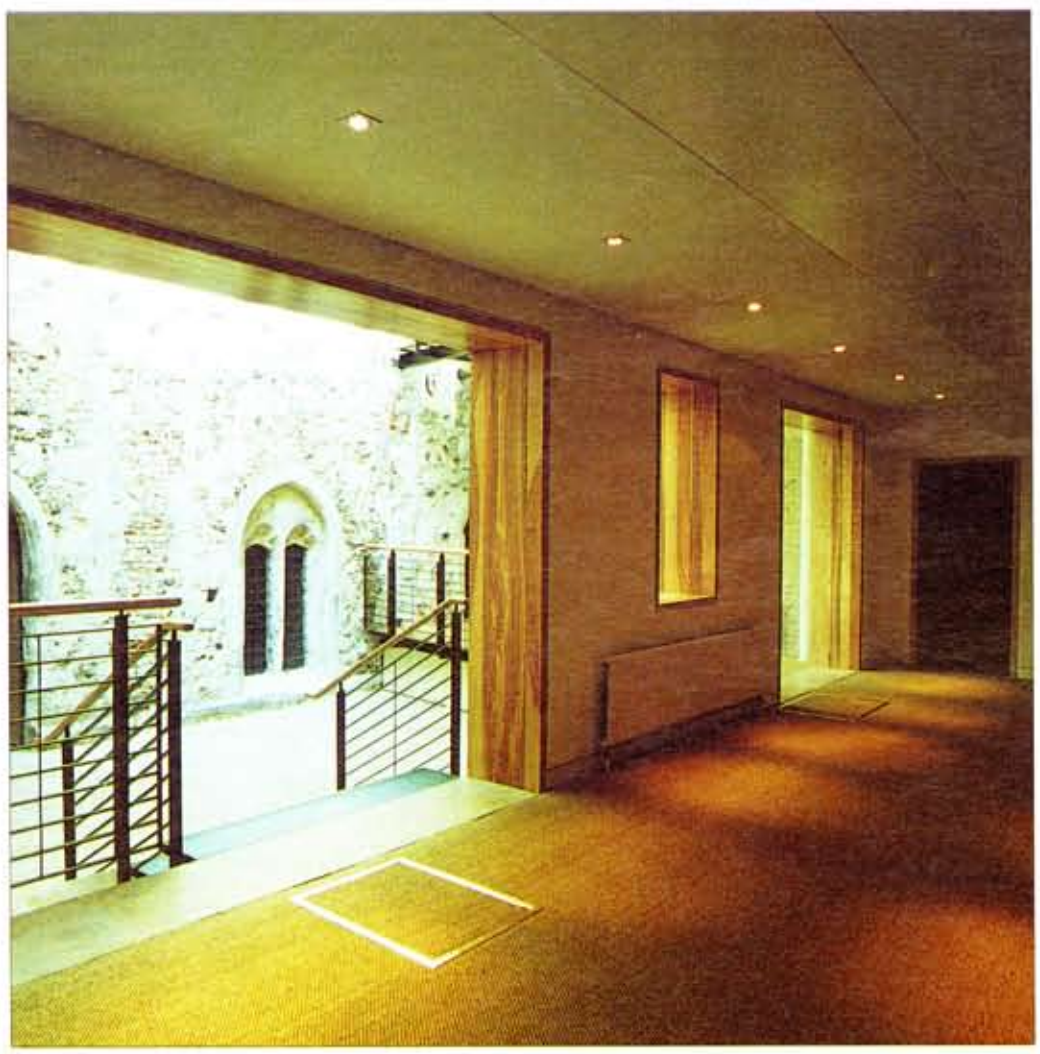
Divine intervention

Lambeth Palace, the Archbishop of Canterbury's London seat, now includes improvements by Richard Griffiths Architects to cater for the 75,000 visitors who are expected this year. Kieran Long reports





If you haven't taken the trip along London's South Bank for the area's millennium-inspired "String of Pearls" festival, it is quite possible that you have never seen the inside of Lambeth Palace, the London seat of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The palace complex is a collage of buildings dating from the 13th century to the 1950s, and now includes a 21st century addition, courtesy of Richard Griffiths Architects.

The practice was recruited last year to provide a new circulation space at the heart of the palace and access for the disabled to the crypt and the first floor. Access was particularly important to cater for the 75,000 visitors expected during the millennium year.

To achieve this, the practice demolished two 1950s buildings that occupied the space between the chapel, Cranmer's Tower and the main palace. This opened out what was a lightwell for the main east-facing window of the chapel into a courtyard, which now forms the circulation space. This is augmented by a glass and steel bridge, connecting the Safe Corridor and the Polish Corridor at first floor level.

The first aim of the brief was to improve access to the 13th century crypt – the remaining part of a medieval monastery and the oldest part of the palace. The crypt has had various uses throughout its 700-year history, and had recently been brought into use as a place of worship.

The four-bay, vaulted crypt chapel was in a poor state. The space had a crude plywood stairway, no disabled access, and a series of metal uplighters that had damaged some of the pillars. Also, the services had been routed in metal pipes fixed to the medieval walls, which had also harmed the fragile structure.

These were replaced with conduits fixed to the less historically sensitive floor of the crypt. Lower level uplighters now light the atmospheric room. These are freestanding to minimise impact on the building's fabric.

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Cementitious repairs to the remaining areas of the original 13th century plaster were removed, as were extensive areas of black mould. Salt attack had dissolved much of the lime mortar in the walls, leaving crumbling aggregate where mortar should have been.

The architect considered rendering the walls to preserve them, but decided to repoint them, retaining a neutral background to show off the remaining areas of 13th century, ashlar-marked plaster. The only major addition to the crypt is a new glass and steel staircase leading down to floor level, and a scissor-style lift to enable disabled access. A requirement of the brief was to provide access for the disabled to the crypt, courtyard and first floor, which meant installing two lifts – the scissor-style lift in the crypt, and a platform lift providing access from the courtyard to the first floor of the palace.

The creation of a new courtyard is the main aspect of the scheme. The ground level of the area was excavated by an archaeological team, to form an intermediate level between the ground floor of the palace and the crypt.

Reinforced concrete was used to underpin the shallow foundations of the 1830s structure. This was then clad in Ancaster beige stone to form a perimeter seat. The new roof, a planar frameless double-glazed system, is supported on spider brackets on slender steel powder-coated trusses.

The tradition at Lambeth Palace is for any archbishop making an addition to the structure to add a copy of his heraldic arms to the new building as a signature. This serves as a visible symbol of the history of the building, which has been repeatedly extended and reduced during its 700 years.

It is also appropriate, somehow, to the way Richard Griffiths Architects has treated this building. The desire to show the archaeology of the palace has paid dividends, and the subtlety of the details is such that the repairs are clear but not patronising. Repairs to the windows at the east end of the crypt have replaced

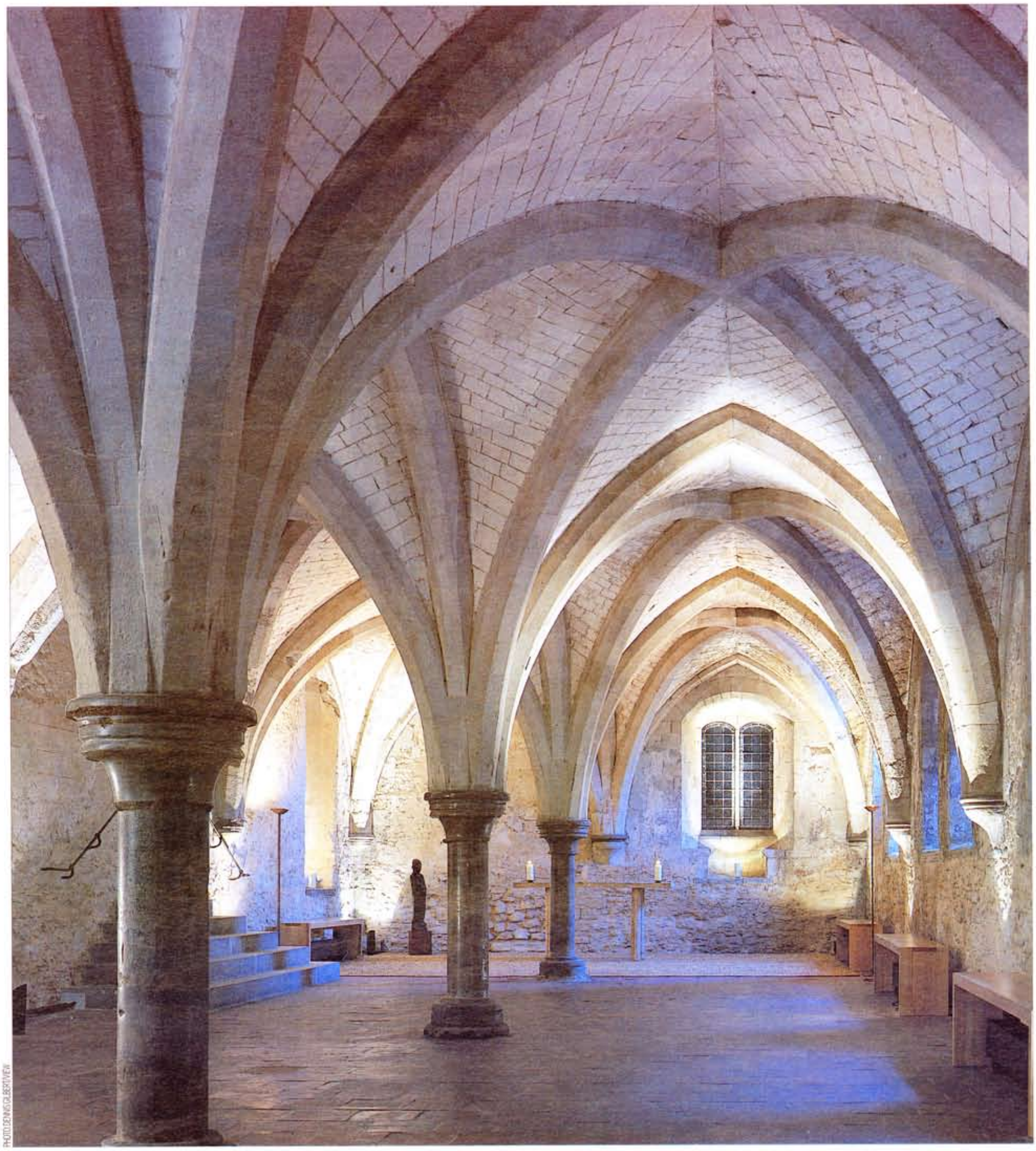


PHOTO: DENNIS GILBERT/VIEW

Overleaf: Richard Griffiths Architects' contemporary courtyard at the heart of Lambeth Palace. Photo by Dennis Gilbert/View.

Far left, top: plan.

Centre left, top: The spider brackets and slim steel beams support the glazed roof.

Far left, bottom: The entrance corridor, with steps down to the excavated floor of the courtyard.

Centre left, bottom: The glazed roof of the courtyard.

Left: The 13th century crypt chapel, looking west.

Bottom left: A glass and steel staircase with a scissor-style lift provides access to the crypt. The original plan had been to build a gallery all along the east end of the crypt to minimise impact on the historical fabric.

ugly and imposing cement repairs with more subtle colours but can still be identified as new. This, as the architect asserts, is repair not restoration.

The practice has also been bold enough to make its own contribution to this layering. The contemporary additions touch the existing structures as lightly as possible. Padstones for the roof are only 200 x 250mm and care has been taken at every stage to fix new features to the least historically sensitive parts of the building.

Despite this, the modern additions do not apologise for their presence, nor do they feel temporary or insubstantial. All the railings have satisfyingly chunky ash handrails, and the canopy has a nice hi-tech feel, with spider brackets and supporting cablework.

Project architect Simon Ablett says: "You can read in the palace the evolution of the building, and we felt that any intervention should be of the 21st century. We wanted it to be contemporarily detailed, but lightweight in the detailing."

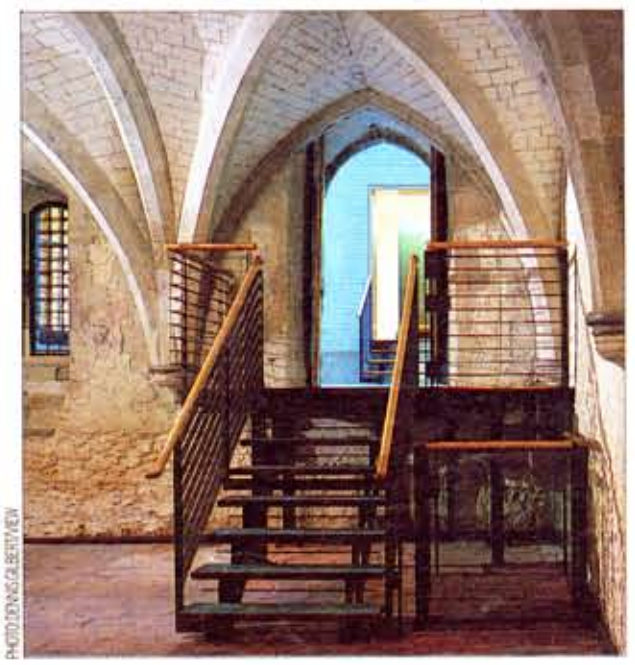
Resident architect at the Palace, Richard Scott, says: "So often the new does dictate to the old uncomfortably or vice versa. We were looking for a happy marriage between the two. We didn't want pastiche, but we wanted it to be nicely new – not with that public building opulence."

> "We wanted it to be contemporarily detailed, but lightweight in the detailing."

The detailing of the new additions is a substantial statement about building within a living, working historic monument. It contributes to the coherence an accessibility of the existing buildings as well as adding a new layer itself.

The archbishop is pleased, apparently, and so he should be.

Project team
Client The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Church Commissioners for England.
Architect Richard Griffiths Architects: Richard Griffiths, Simon Ablett.
Structural Engineer Price & Myers.
Quantity Surveyor Sawyer & Fisher.
Consultant Engineer James Joy, David Bailey Partnership.
Archaeologist Cambrian Archaeological Projects.
Consultant Archaeologist Tim Tatton-Brown.
Contractor Simons Construction Ltd (Lincoln).
Glass Roof and floors Solaglass.
Metalwork Cook Fabrications.
Conservation (Medieval Work) Anne Ballantyne.



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