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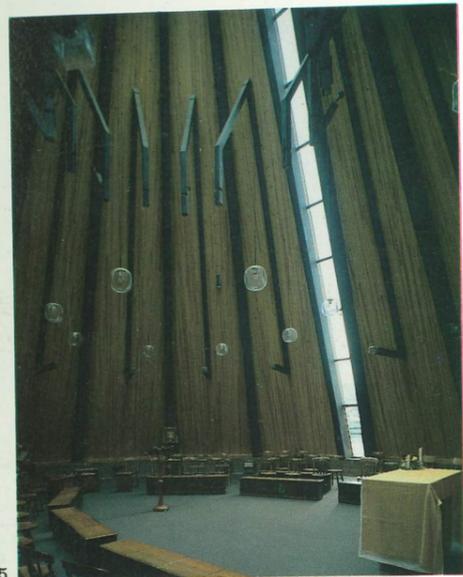
OUR LADY'S PRIORY, SAYERS COMMON, SUSSEX

3, the slate roofs of the old house, from the side of which the complex arcs off, can just be seen over tiles of the cloister curve.

4, the glass peaked chapel is a cone, split by vertical windows to form an ellipse in plan; adjoining it is the pyramidal blessed sacrament chapel.

OUR LADY'S PRIORY, SAYERS COMMON, SUSSEX

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DUNCAN McNEILL



5

5, inside the chapel, lights hang from crane-like structures between the black-stained laminated beams. Furniture, here and elsewhere, was brought from the previous convent.

6, looking from the common room to the refectory gallery. The fairfaced blockwork wall is typical of the structural cross walls which were set out from a caisson in the middle of the pond.

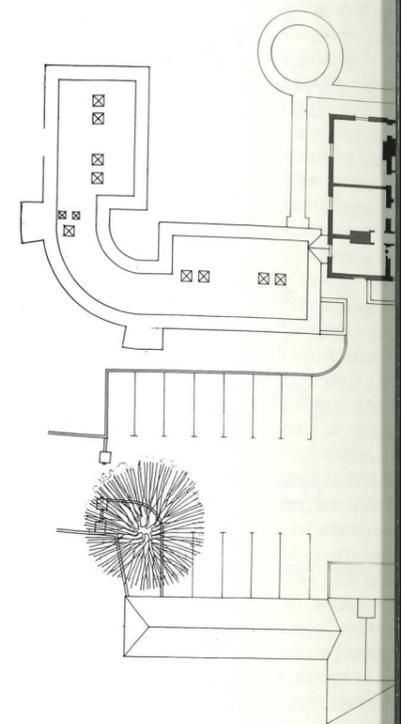
7, looking from the narthex towards the bridge over the archive area. Where there are no crosswalls, the black curved laminated purlins which carry the rafters are carried on posts.



6

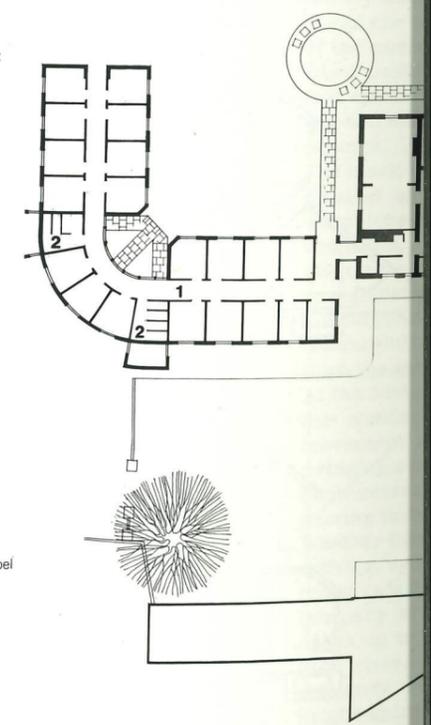


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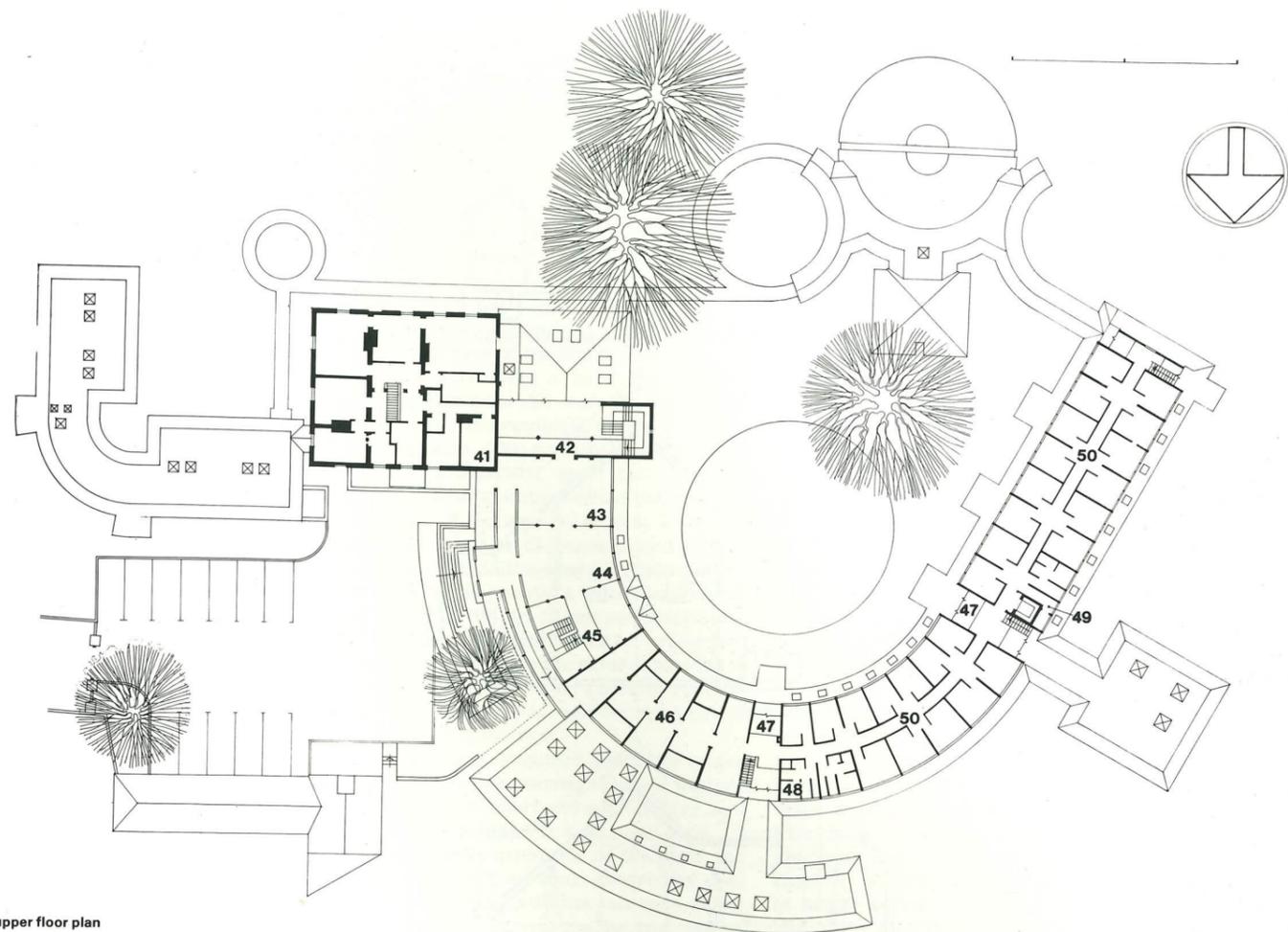


upper floor plan

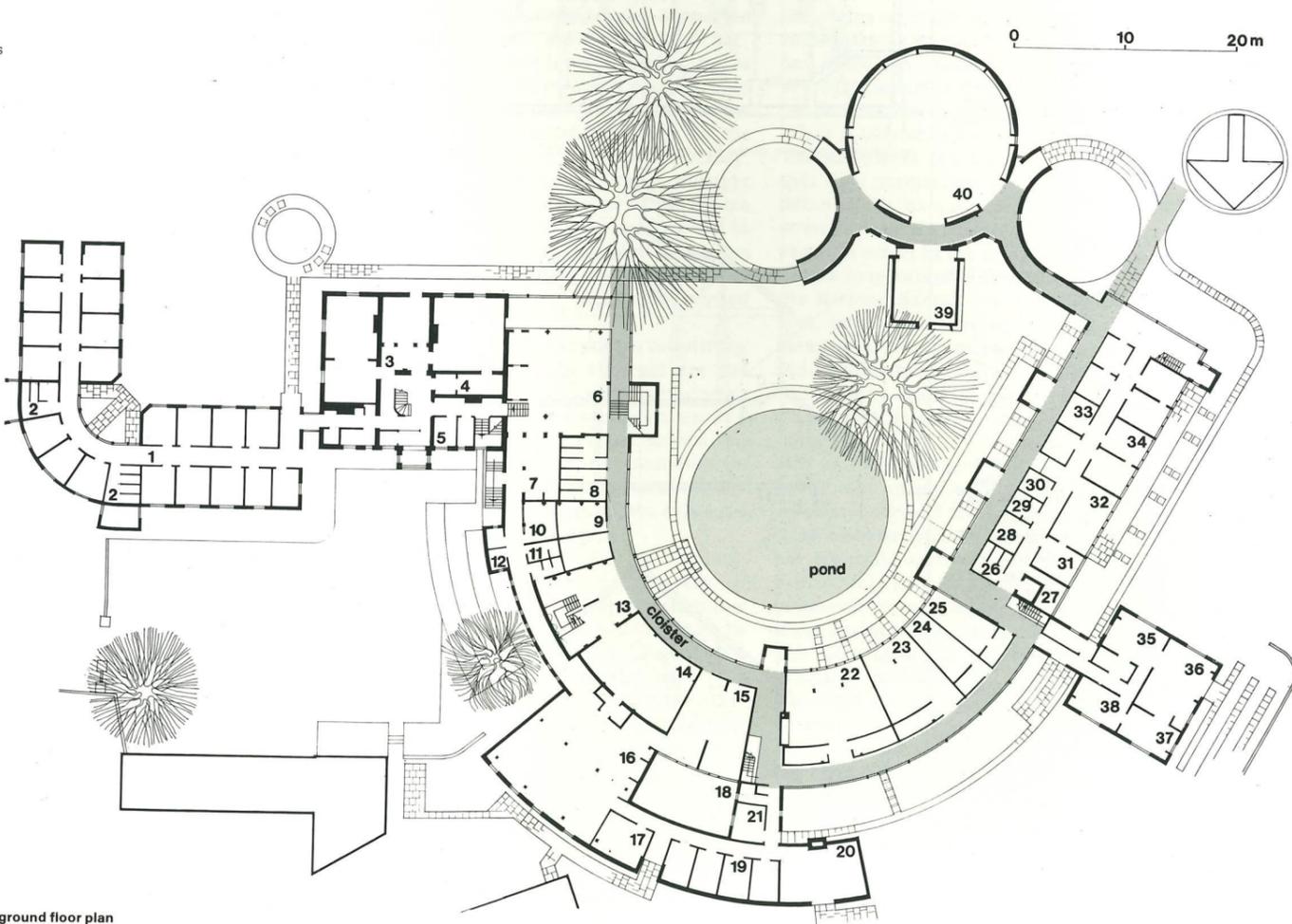
- key**
- secular wing:*
 - 1, guest bedrooms
 - 2, showers and toilets
 - Kingsland:*
 - 3, discussion/meeting rooms
 - 4, kitchen
 - 5, offices
 - secular accommodation:*
 - 6, refectory
 - 7, servery
 - 8, wcs
 - 9, parlours
 - 10, staffroom
 - 11, staff wcs
 - 12, store
 - monastic accommodation:*
 - 13, archives
 - 14, refectory
 - 15, novitiate
 - 16, kitchen
 - 17, carvery/preparation
 - 18, courtyard garden
 - 19, storerooms
 - 20, boiler room
 - 21, bursar's office
 - 22, community room
 - 23, workshop
 - 24, discussion room
 - 25, Mother Prioress
 - infirmary:*
 - 26, wcs
 - 27, apothecary
 - 28, bathroom
 - 29, wc
 - 30, sluice
 - 31, kitchen
 - 32, guest room
 - 33, offices and stores
 - 34, cells
 - laundry wing:*
 - 35, washing
 - 36, drying
 - 37, ironing
 - 38, mending
 - 39, Blessed Sacrament chapel
 - 40, church
 - upper floor:*
 - 41, Kingsland: guest rooms
 - 42, refectory gallery
 - 43, common room
 - 44, narthex
 - 45, bridge above archives
 - 46, library
 - 47, speak cell
 - 48, baths, showers and wcs
 - 49, coffee area
 - 50, cells



ground floor plan



upper floor plan



ground floor plan

- key**
- secular wing:*
- 1, guest bedrooms
 - 2, showers and toilets
- Kingsland:*
- 3, discussion/meeting rooms
 - 4, kitchen
 - 5, offices
- secular accommodation:*
- 6, refectory
 - 7, servery
 - 8, wcs
 - 9, parlours
 - 10, staffroom
 - 11, staff wcs
 - 12, store
- monastic accommodation:*
- 13, archives
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 - 36, drying
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 - 44, narthex
 - 45, bridge above archives
 - 46, library
 - 47, speak cell
 - 48, baths, showers and wcs
 - 49, coffee area
 - 50, cells

Right: sectional transformations (scale 1:200)
Generated from the aedicular unit of the cloister the section is elaborated through the length of the building (shown here in a counter-clockwise direction) to accommodate the various spaces and give them appropriate character, the free-standing columns and pitched roofs articulating the space as vaulting once did.

Architects
Michael Blee Whittaker Partnership.
Project partners: Michael J. Blee and H. Roderic Whittaker.

Consultants
Quantity surveyors: Widnell & Trollope.
Structural engineers: Ove Arup & Partners.
Mechanical and electrical consultant: Malcolm R. Bridcut.

Main contractor
W. C. Hilton & Sons Ltd.

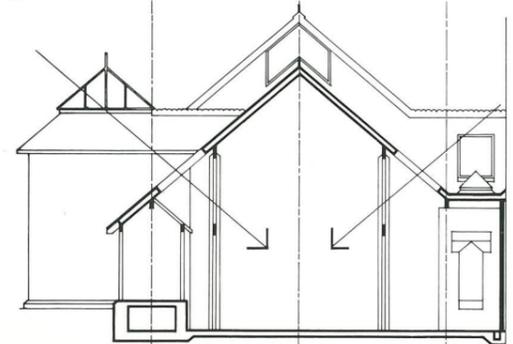
Acknowledgments
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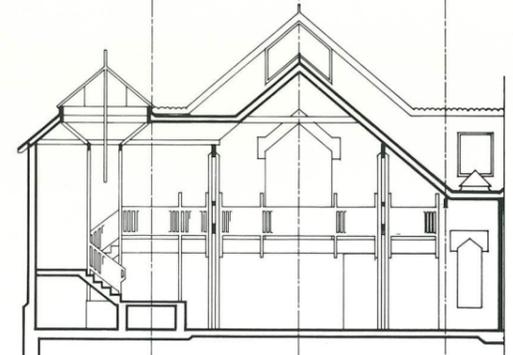
basic unit 1.7 m wide and 2 m to underside of laminated beams, with a 40 deg pitched roof; heating duct runs continuously beneath tiled floor



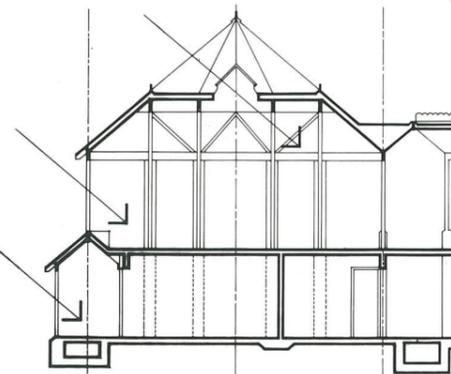
pair of units which, together with centre line, generate the three circumferential grid lines at 4.2 m centres



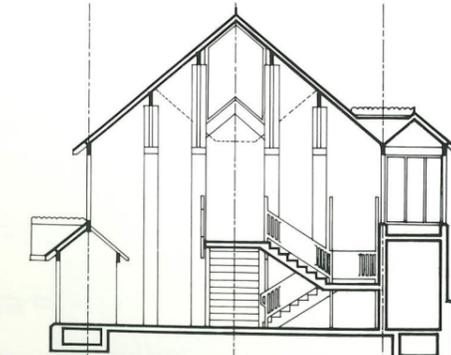
through the secular refectory



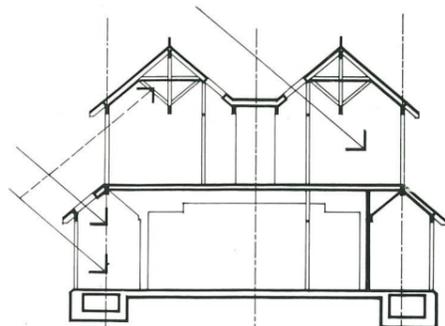
through stairs between secular refectory and common room



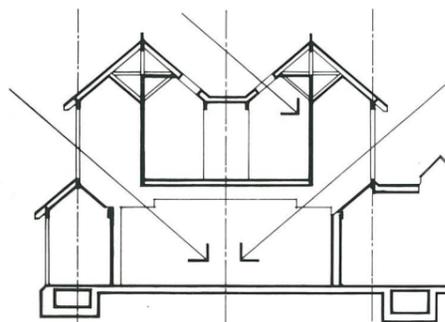
on entry axis



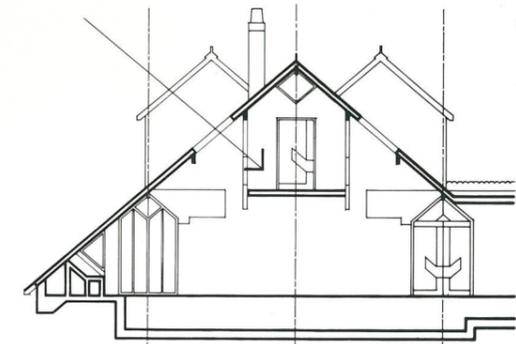
through archway bridge and ramp to library



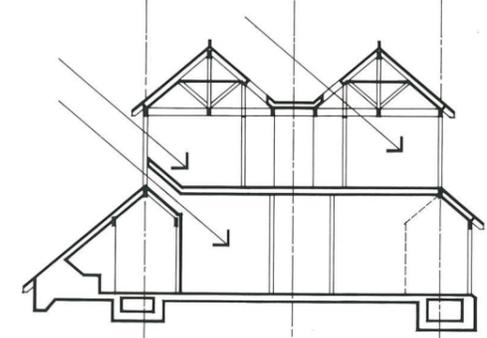
through library with oblique lighting to religious refectory



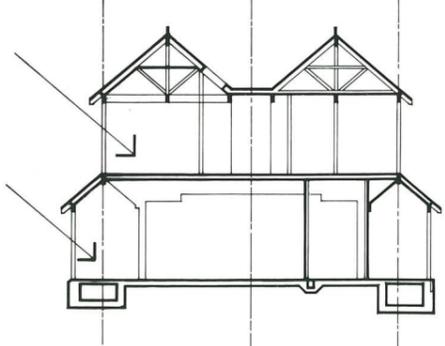
bridge between library and cells



at ground floor cloister link with speak cell over



first floor cells at entrances with rooflights



with slot light to infirmary service rooms

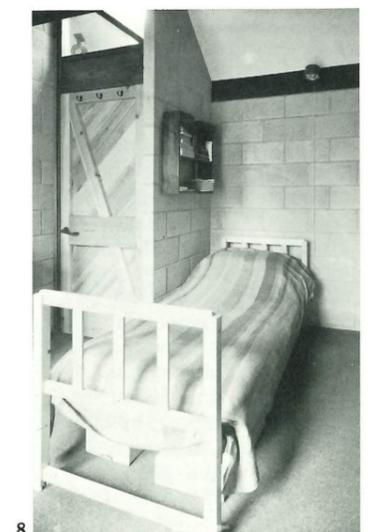
OUR LADY'S PRIORY, SAYERS COMMON, SUSSEX

CRITICISM BY PETER
ANSELL-EVANS

Many influences have influenced the architects of this immaculately detailed centre; Kyoto temple Summerson on aedicular place-making, all as The author of the *Journal of Architecture*, Kempis, was among the religious order for the English house for the Heath, and the redevelopment gave building a new pur countryside within v. The exercise of developing buildings, coinciding with Vatican II, involved the aims of the order closely in this process. During discussions with all the community's order was still to be centred on sisters, the more act out of sharing this Monastic community guests but it was now larger numbers in residential seminars and co have an ecumenical The site that was first an early-Victorian trees, with entrance an adjoining garden. Taking this pool as architects have loop eventual building round church standing almost the other secular end for seminar rooms v. From the entrance of a raised narthex, which the lay and religious gallery overlooking right the nuns' entrance library and living quarters ahead one sees the of the monastic architecture silent contemplation that one is always a sky and making rippling ceilings.

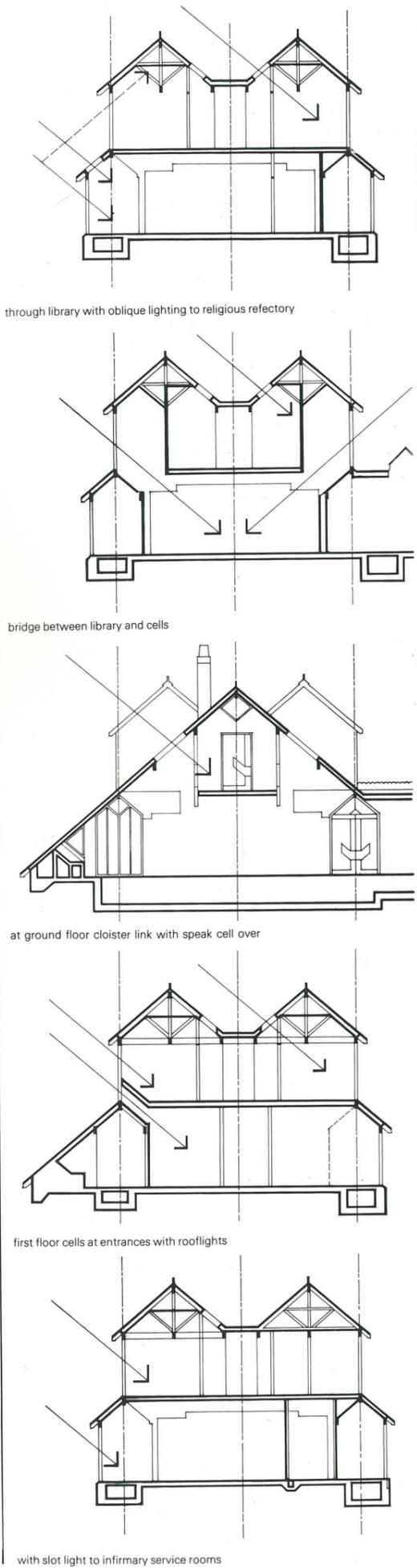
The black roof timber finished and fitted with warm tones of the gables and doors, and of the ubiquitous honey-combed, immaculately detailed almost primitive Romanesque the careful placing of from the reredos of At the lower level, the cloister walk movement around swinging away behind allow recreational passing under the Whether this stretch with any symbolic value however is that the intricacy of its section opens up to let light floor rooms under the refectory under the height staircase space the roofs sweep down No photographs can

8, one of the cells.



**OUR LADY'S PRIORY,
SAYERS COMMON,
SUSSEX**

**CRITICISM BY PETER
ANSDELL-EVANS**



Many influences have been acknowledged by the architects of this sensitively designed and immaculately detailed convent and conference centre; Kyoto temples, local Sussex barns, Summerson on aedicules and Charles Moore on place-making, all as absorbed experiences.

The author of the *Imitation of Christ*, Thomas à Kempis, was among the early members of the religious order for which it was built. Their first English house for women built in 1886 had been engulfed by the commuter town of Haywards Heath, and the sale of the site for urban redevelopment gave the nuns the opportunity of building a new purpose-designed priory in quiet countryside within view of the South Downs.

The exercise of developing a brief for the new buildings, coinciding as it did with the ferment of Vatican II, involved the complete reassessment of the aims of the order. The architects participated closely in this process and spent two years in discussions with all 40 members of the community. During discussion it became clear that while the community's ordered life of worship and prayer was still to be centred on the core of contemplative sisters, the more active apostolic work should arise out of sharing this life in Christian hospitality. Monastic communities had always welcomed guests but it was now proposed to extend this idea to larger numbers in retreats, study courses, residential seminars and conferences, and for this work to have an ecumenical dimension.

The site that was finally acquired had at its centre an early-Victorian house, surrounded by mature trees, with entrance forecourt and outbuildings, and an adjoining garden containing a circular pond.

Taking this pool as the generator of the plan, the architects have looped their main two-storey conventual building round it, with the tall cone of the church standing almost free at the far end, and at the other secular end, the existing house converted for seminar rooms with new guest-wing adjoining. From the entrance courtyard, steps lead up to the raised narthex, which is the common entry to both the lay and religious domains. To the left is the gallery overlooking the guests' refectory, to the right the nuns' enclosure, with their refectory, library and living quarters curving away. Straight ahead one sees the church, and below at the centre of the monastic arc, the pool; a compelling aid to silent contemplation. The circular layout ensures that one is always aware of the pool, reflecting the sky and making ripples of light on the white canted ceilings.

The black roof timbers are all exposed, beautifully finished and fitted together. In contrast are the warm tones of the golden-brown boarding of screens and doors, and of the heather-brown floor tiles. The ubiquitous honey-coloured concrete blockwork, immaculately detailed and executed, achieves an almost primitive Romanesque quality, enhanced by the careful placing of carved oaken saints, salvaged from the reredos of the former chapel.

At the lower level, threaded through the building, the cloister walk becomes the main artery of movement around the central garth, sometimes swinging away behind to the rear of the building to allow recreational rooms to overlook the pool, and passing under the window-sill of the narthex.

Whether this stretching of the cloister idea leaves it with any symbolic value is doubtful. What is certain however is that the success of the building lies in the intricacy of its sectional planning, in the way it opens up to let light down into the central ground floor rooms under the banks of cells and into the refectory under the library, and in the way full-height staircase spaces articulate the blocks, where the roofs sweep down to give small sitting areas.

No photographs can do justice to the experience of

moving through the spaces, sometimes curved, sometimes straight, the central first floor route becoming now a bridge and then a top-lit corridor with occasional bays, giving views up through diagonally-braced roofs. The section of the cloister is scaled for two nuns to pass. Its pointed roof (an 'aedicule' in the architects' term) is built up in multiples to form the varying cross-sections.

The exteriors generally are in mellow tones of local brick and tile, with woodwork stained deep brown. Mullions set closely at random intervals tie the different fenestration of the blocks together. White-painted external doors mark the individual cells and are set in pairs at entrances. The detail of their pointed tracery however comes close to carpenter's Gothic. Yet the decoration can be seen to be an extension of the aedicular elaboration of the pitched roof sections, though not nearly so effective as the playful diagonal boarding of the internal doors. Less successful in some respects are the church and its ancillary elements. The main worship space consists of two 20 m high half-cones separated by vertical glazed strips, with a completely glazed cap. This geometry produces at ground floor an oval, the two centres of which contain the altar and lectern respectively, with the nuns' seats grouped in two curves either side. This arrangement, which so naturally suits the building, was in fact arrived at experimentally. It is probably the ideal arrangement for small groups; its dual liturgical centres encouraging the feel of movement and participation. But the clarity of the oval has unfortunately been marred by the need to incorporate an over-large organ from the nuns' former chapel.

The interior of the church feels surprisingly spacious; one expects from the narrowness of the tapering section to find it smaller. The great feeling of height is accentuated by the converging black ribs of the roof, lined with mellow brown boarding, the strips of which give a rich effect of figuring, rather like a musical instrument. Between each rib, and of the same weight and colour as the structure, are long inverted brackets, from which are suspended relatively insignificant light fittings. The effect is obtrusive and unconvincing.

The architects felt that a foil was necessary and that they themselves would now perhaps have re-detailed the hanging corona in less cumbersome wrought iron, a material which they have used with abstract effect in the design of the external finial.

On the long axis of the church is a square chapel of the Blessed Sacrament with truncated pyramidal roof, into which have been carefully fitted, on the side walls, the old monastic carved stalls. Through full-length windows on either side of the tabernacle can be seen again the central pool.

Externally however, the counter-curves of the porches and covered ways produce an uncomfortable collision of forms, which the squareness of the pyramidal chapel only serves to accentuate. The circular swirls of the covered ways seem to stem from an over-elaboration of the ground plan and do not translate convincingly into three dimensions. Fortunately in most distant views, the soaring cone of the church in its sacred grove of trees rises free of these encumbrances.

The architects set themselves some formidable practical problems in the circular plan of the buildings, using curved window frames and glulam beams. Control over such things as switches, radiators and smoke detectors is masterly—they are invisible. It is however in the playful elaboration of the structure, in the ingenious sections, and in the scholarly adaptation of Japanese influences, where most interest lies. The architects have been particularly delighted to find the narthex used regularly by a group of Zen Buddhists for their meditations.

8, one of the cells.



Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990
Town & Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended)
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