

# Political Circles

David Kohn explores Herzog & de Meuron's Blavatnik School of Government at Oxford

**Photos**

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The University of Oxford is the oldest in the English-speaking world but has no precise foundation date. Young men went to the town to study in increasing numbers from the eleventh century. Tensions with the locals came to a head in February 1355, when two students attacked the landlord of the Swindlestock Tavern after arguing with him about the quality of his beer. A two-day riot followed in which around 90 people were killed, and a settlement afterwards gave the gown significant privileges over the town.

More independent and privately-funded colleges ensued, mostly consisting of quads — radical yet introverted buildings that set living, studying, dining and praying around courtyards. Today there are 38 colleges with as many as eight quads apiece.

**Below**

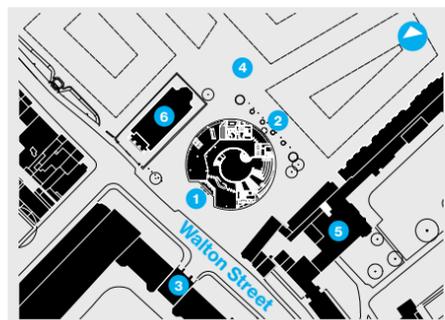
Site plan; detail of the double-skinned glazed facade. The inner skin, which makes the building watertight and provides its thermal envelope, is a prefabricated panelised system. The outer skin comprises 600mm-wide panes of single glazing separated by 30mm air gaps. The 750mm gap between skins creates a microclimate that assists with natural cooling and increases solar gain and acoustic protection. Offices are naturally ventilated via full-height openable panels in the inner skin (phs: IB).

Driven by the need to house collections and the practicalities of teaching, two city campuses of museums and laboratories were established in the nineteenth century. In 2003 the university purchased the Radcliffe Hospital, the largest remaining single site in the city, to make a new campus on which to centralise the humanities departments.

The Radcliffe Observatory Quarter is named after the adjacent octagonal tower modelled on the Tower of the Winds in Athens. John Radcliffe, a wealthy seventeenth-century doctor, funded not only the hospital and observatory but the 1749 Radcliffe Camera, a rotunda designed by James Gibbs to house a science library in Radcliffe's memory. The irony of Radcliffe's personal scorn for book-learning was apparently not lost on contemporary commentators. Today the building is used as a reading room for the Bodleian Library.

**Key**

- 1 Main entrance
- 2 Rear entrance
- 3 Oxford University Press
- 4 Radcliffe Observatory Quarter
- 5 Somerville College
- 6 St Paul's Church



The Observatory Quarter was the object of a controversial masterplan by Rafael Viñoly in 2008. Following Niall McLaughlin's 2011 range for Somerville College along its southern edge (AT226) and Viñoly's 2013 Mathematics Faculty to the east (AT244), the Blavatnik School of Government, or BSG, is the latest addition to the site. BSG is a finishing school for future world leaders, the first such institution in Europe and a competitor to Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Leonard Blavatnik, Britain's richest man, donated £75m, though not without controversy – seemingly another Oxford tradition – and in 2011 architect Herzog & de Meuron was appointed to design the building.

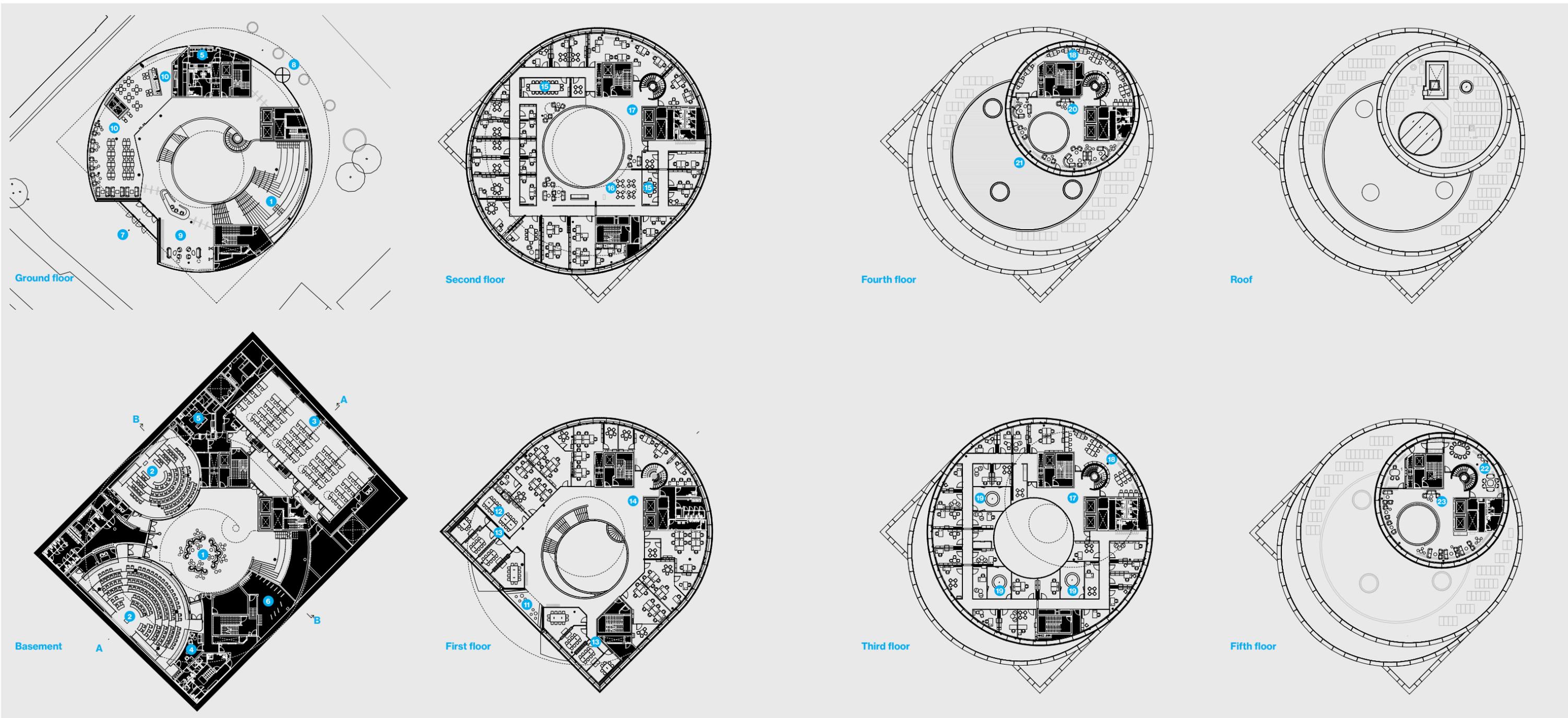
The architect's brief was to "facilitate the maximum exchange between people" in line with the institution's mission "to inspire and support better government and public policy around the world". A central cylindrical atrium creates a social space that connects all the floors and their different programmes, from teaching on the lower floors through academic offices to a library at the top of the building. Spiralling circulation and open balconies surrounding the atrium ensure encounters and long diagonal views before heading into the offices, meeting and lecture rooms towards the edge of the building. At the base of the atrium is the Forum, a central gathering space for the school, marked by a rake of seating.



**Above, right**

The Forum visually connects all the floors and is intended to represent the "values of openness, communication and transparency", says the school's dean, Ngaire Woods. It also informs the school's external appearance. "The building's circular shape is akin to government buildings around the world and at the same time resonates with some of Oxford's most iconic buildings, such as the Radcliffe Camera and the Sheldonian Theatre" (phs: JC, IB).





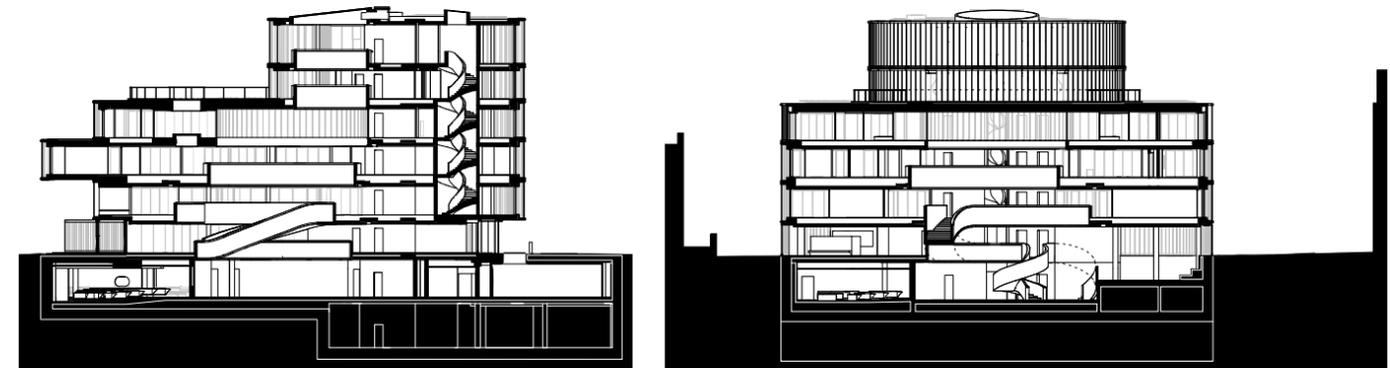
**Above**  
Floor plans (second basement, containing plant room, not shown).

“We saw the BSG as an opportunity to connect back to the traditional building typologies”, says architect Jacques Herzog. “The interior courtyard – so specific and unique in historic colleges – has become an internal forum inspired by parliamentary and governmental spaces.”

**Right**  
Sections A-A and B-B.

**Key**

- |                           |                              |                       |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 Forum/informal breakout | 10 Restaurant                | 19 External courtyard |
| 2 Lecture theatre         | 11 Exchange area             | 20 Junior Common Room |
| 3 Seminar room            | 12 Multimedia room           | 21 External terrace   |
| 4 Green room              | 13 Teaching/formal break-out | 22 Benefactors' rooms |
| 5 Kitchen                 | 14 Research centres          | 23 Senior Common Room |
| 6 Bike storage            | 15 Meeting/board room        |                       |
| 7 Main entrance           | 16 Multi-use/meeting area    |                       |
| 8 Rear entrance           | 17 Offices                   |                       |
| 9 Reception               | 18 Study room                |                       |





**Top**  
Internal courtyard on the third floor with views through to offices (ph: IB)

**Above**  
Precast concrete stair (ph: JC).

**Above right**  
Down- and up-views through the Forum (phs: JC, IB).

From the exterior, the building is remarkable for introducing forms and materials that are new to the city yet seemingly contextual. The continuous curving bands of glazing create ever-changing panoramas of the city and sky. The double layering of the glazing increases the surface's reflectivity while the use of narrow panes gives the elevation a perpendicular reading, as much Divinity School as corporate headquarters. The building's stepping section and concrete cornices align with its neighbours while effectively concealing the height of the structure, which was yet another contentious issue. The overall effect is monumental yet playful, both alien and familiar.

Once inside, the architectural mood changes. A restrained palette of grey concrete, white plaster, glass and timber is skilfully whipped into the Piranesian atrium space. Daylight percolates throughout the building with four smaller internal courtyards introduced at a higher level to refract light deep into the plan. The effect is cathedral-like, with an accompanying solemnity. The reverberant acoustic and resulting 'burolandschaft' soundtrack of beeping security gates and click-clacking heels jars, however, with both the brief and the institutional rhetoric. It makes one feel that the building would only achieve its potential when filled with people — and not only filled but heaving.

**Below**

At basement level, two lecture theatres seat 160 and 80 people.

The building is heated and cooled by a ground-source heat pump system, and features 107 photovoltaic panels and a 500-square-metre green roof. It is expected to achieve an 'Excellent' BREEAM rating.

**Bottom**

Above the main entrance, the 'window to the world' overlooks the entrance to Somerville College. It measures 10.5m by 3.2m — the largest double-glazed single pane of glass in Europe.

The architect intended the Forum to be used for "dancing and making music". This would either require an institutional programme or a degree of informality and provisionality that is currently absent, and the building appears to lack the necessary infrastructure to host an event, from a stage to lights to rigs. To use a theatrical analogy, the Forum is presently all front-of-house and no backstage.

An alternative reading of the space is that it offers the kind of emptiness one expects of an art gallery where the artist and curators choreograph the entire social experience. Tate Modern's Turbine Hall — Herzog & de Meuron's first UK project, completed in 2000 — for example, is just waiting to be occupied but requires a knowledgeable team to see the space brought into significant use.

In terms of Oxford's architectural precedents, BSG is a university school that is developing in reverse, and borrowing more from the canon of the city's monuments than its educational buildings. In this instance, the beginnings of the school have coincided with its architecture which, through its form, has established a metaphor for the institution.

It's then up to the school to realise itself, in part through how it uses the building as it grows. One hopes that the institution will use the architecture to discover its ethos through the making of new relationships, and through the active participation of its members and the public in events that complete the life of the building, beyond the passive reception of a sublime monument. **A**

**Project team**

- Architect**  
Herzog & de Meuron
- Design team**  
Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, Ascan Mergenthaler (partner in charge), John O'Mara, Marinke Boehm, Ben Duckworth, Simon Demeuse
- M&E engineer, lighting and acoustics**  
Hoare Lea
- Landscape designer**  
Townshend Landscape Architects
- Structural engineer**  
Pell Frischmann
- Cost consultant**  
EC Harris
- Sustainability consultant**  
AECOM
- Facade consultant**  
Murphy Facade Studio
- Planning consultant**  
Montagu Evans
- Project manager**  
Oxford University Estates Services, Gardiner & Theobald
- Security consultant**  
Horus Security
- Client**  
University of Oxford

**Selected suppliers & subcontractors**

- Design & Build contractor**  
Laing O'Rourke
- Carpentry**  
AC Flooring
- Ceiling**  
CG Reynolds
- Electrical subcontractor**  
Crown House Technologies
- Elevators**  
Kone
- Facade**  
Waagner Biro
- Fire Gates**  
Coopers Fire
- Flooring, subflooring**  
AC Flooring
- Metalwork**  
Gascoyne & Beever
- Mobile partition walls**  
London Wall Design
- Turnstiles**  
Meesons AI
- Toilet cubicles**  
Skirmett Supplies
- Furniture**  
House of Finn Juhl, Vitra, Modus, Verpan, La Palma
- Doors**  
Shadbolt
- Bespoke lighting**  
Wila

