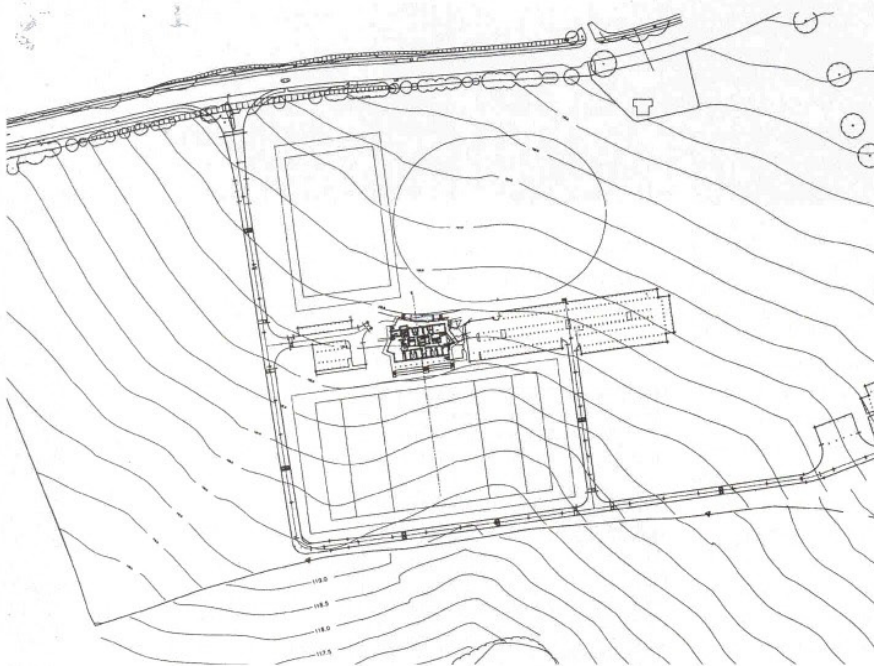




## Specifier's choice: Old Albanians sports pavilion

Sutherland Lyall talks to Annette Fisher about a project in St Albans where the architect saved the day when the main contractor disappeared at the eleventh hour

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADAM P WILSON



site plan

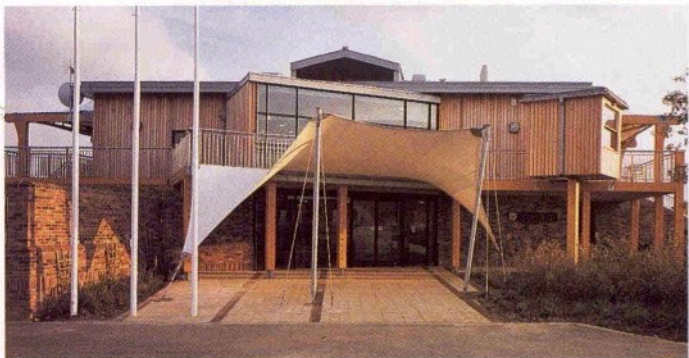
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Contrary to your first take on the name Old Albanians, it has nothing to do with the Balkans and everything to do with a lively and long-established rugby club that has an avuncular relationship with a private boys' establishment, St Albans School. The senior side seems to be performing well in the London Division 2 North league, having five years ago climbed back from relegation in the third division. There are six senior sides, plus colts, and 300 kids play mini rugby every Sunday morning.

Several years ago the old boys and the school decided their 7ha sports ground at Beech Bottom was too small and subsequently bought a 28ha site on farmland north of St Albans. The school occupies more than half the site, with extensive playing facilities and its own new pavilion. The Old Albanians occupy 11ha adjacent to the Harpenden Road entrance, with six rugby pitches, two cricket pitches, four tennis courts – and a pavilion designed by Fisher Associates. The combined development is probably the biggest of its kind in Europe.



Image courtesy of Fisher Associates. The building was designed by a local architect who has worked with Fisher Associates on a number of projects in the area. The building is a two-story structure with a prominent balcony featuring white fabric sails supported by yellow columns. The building has a mix of brickwork on the ground floor and timber cladding on the upper levels. A satellite dish is visible on the roof.



The white sails across the balcony of the pavilion have proved a hit with local commuters. Inside, Fisher designed the steel balustrades, which incorporate glass panels and can cope with twice the loads of conventional ones

Fisher Associates director Annette Fisher, outlines her commission: 'Our brief was to provide them with a building that would have adequate facilities for up to 12 changing rooms at peak times of the year, as well as supporting social provision for families and players during and after the match. They also expressed a wish for the building to be durable, easy to use for able-bodied and disabled alike, unique and of high architectural quality.' Although this was nondescript farmland, it is a sensitive location. Local commuters have expressed pleasure at the sight of the white sails across the balcony of the Old Albanians' pavilion, yet some locals are apparently grumbling about evening training floodlights in this rural setting.

### Go with the flow

The pavilion is on Green Belt land and the materials used by the architects are deliberately in keeping with the local traditions – slate roofs, bricks and timber. Fisher explains: 'Our approach was to utilise materials that were similar to those found in the

environment but reinterpret them in a modern way.' The need to keep a low profile influenced the form of the building and the configuration of the surrounding area. The site slopes diagonally from the north east to the south west, and the two-storey pavilion nestles on a flat area in an enhanced fault line between a cricket pitch to the west, half a level higher than the rugby pitch to the east. This difference in levels means that there is viewing for the rugby from verandas at ground floor and first floor and on the other side a first-floor veranda (which is half a floor above pitch level) for the cricket.

### Tweaked barn

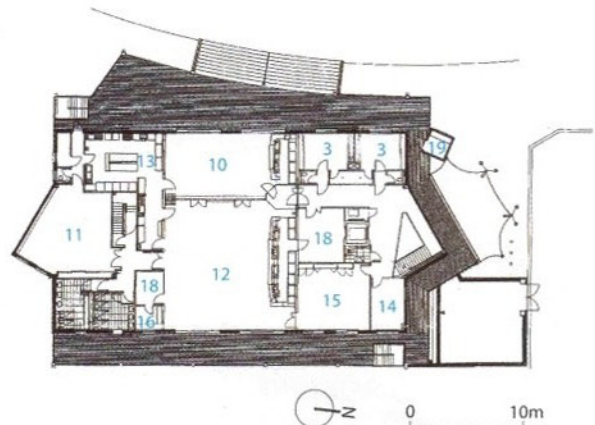
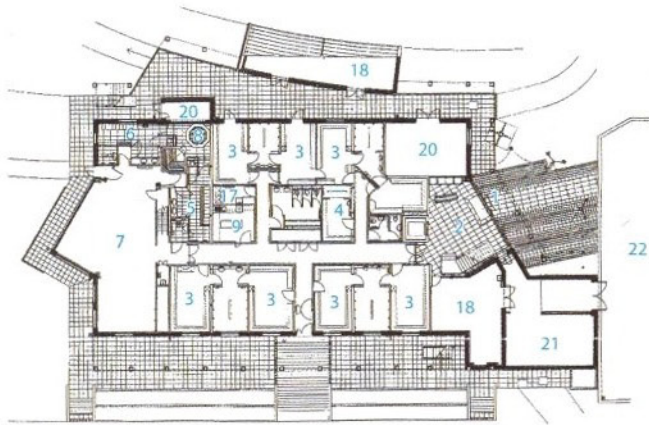
The building is basically a big two-level barn with glazed wedges attached to each end wall. The north wedge encloses the formal entrance, the other a first-floor family room with a fitness centre below at ground level. Generally speaking, the ground level is given over to the fitness centre which also has a spa and sauna attached, plus plant room and cellarage – but mainly for WCs and changing

facilities, which can be accessed straight off the pitches. There are eight separate changing rooms, pairs of them sharing a commodious shower room – plus an umpire's changing room with its own en-suite showers. Upstairs, the middle third of the space is given over to a big bar-lounge with a high rooflight along the ridge. There is a folding/sliding divider that can turn the cricket side of this part of the pavilion into a tea room. On the south third are the family room, the kitchen, WCs and a shop. On the north, over the entrance zone, are an open staircase, a club meeting room, a store behind the bar and two changing rooms.

The elevations have vertical timber cladding on the first floor, and horizontal brickwork at ground-floor level. The verandas/terraces wrap around the west, north and east elevations, with fabric sail roofs supported by timber columns to the first floor. A special feature is the score box at first-floor level, supported by a single timber column which was known affectionately on site as the tree house.

This was a standard JCT 98 contract and

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ground floor plan

first floor plan

- |                 |                            |                 |                 |              |                 |
|-----------------|----------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|
| <b>KEY</b>      | 4 officials' changing room | 8 spa           | 12 bar/lounge   | 16 kiosk     | 20 plant        |
| 1 main entrance | 5 male changing room       | 9 physiotherapy | 13 kitchen      | 17 laundry   | 21 service yard |
| 2 reception     | 6 female changing room     | 10 teas/cricket | 14 office       | 18 store     | 22 car park     |
| 3 changing room | 7 fitness centre           | 11 family room  | 15 meeting room | 19 score box |                 |



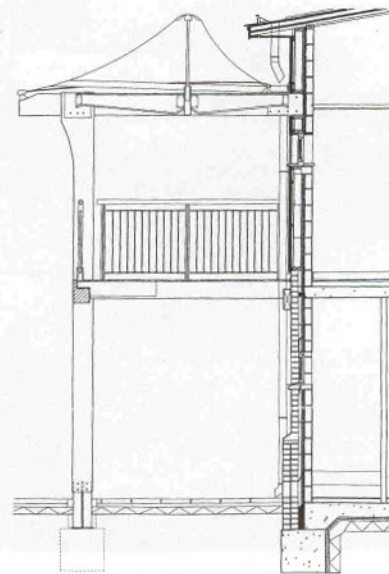
The bar is located on the first floor and leads onto a balcony. Windows/rooflights are by Solaglas

the specification was based on NBS. Because of the great scale of the whole development, with three major consultant design teams (an architect for each of the pavilions and landscapers for the pitches), a project manager, Osprey Project Management, was brought in during detail-design stage before tenders were let. The lead architect in the Fisher team, Annette Fisher, reported directly to the client. The quantity surveyor, Capita Property Services, produced monthly financial reports. These were important because the brief changed – not in its overall concept but in the details of materials. This meant, Fisher says, ‘we started off with tiles on the floors and walls but we specified a poured epoxy finish when the client had seen it used on another facility and suggested the change. Similarly the client asked for a harder hardwood for the terracing and we changed to bangkarai.’

Work started in April 2001. Three months into the project the main contractor, local firm Bickerton Construction, which had been taken over by a bigger group the previous year, was bought by another company. By the beginning of December, when work had slowed to a standstill, and senior management had resigned, the local paper reported a Serious Fraud Office investigation into this acquisition. With Bickerton about to go into voluntary liquidation, and subcontractors having walked off the job, the client decided it was time to determine the contract.

**Spectrum to the rescue**

Fisher had checked out a contractor, Spectrum, which could deliver and was proactive and willing. Faced with the need to move fast, Osprey rapidly found alternative bidders for a new main contract and set up a contest. Following interviews, Spectrum was



section



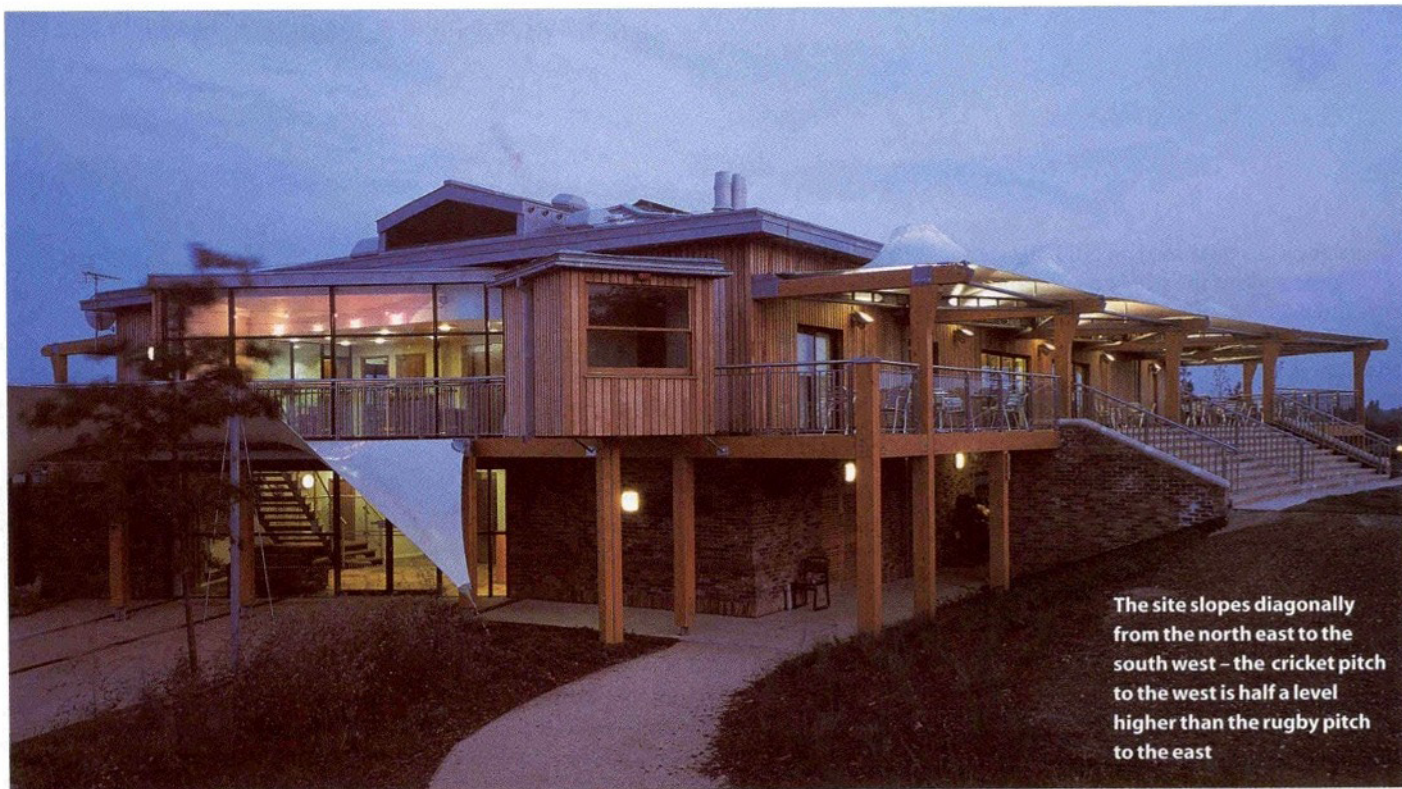
The timber-clad terraced balcony provides a good vantage point to watch all the action on the pitch

appointed. The company's previous track record had been in fit-outs rather than in conventional contracting but, Fisher says, the important thing was that the nominated man on the job from Spectrum had worked for one of the big contractors. She says: ‘He was excellent and had done a lot of construction. Some of the consultant team, including us, had worked with Spectrum before and in this interview process we all recognised that the best way to do the job was to have a man who was on our side. The best projects come when you have the best working relationships.’

Because all the tender packages were by then a year old, it was decided to retender everything. In the name of fairness, the tender lists automatically included the original tenderers – although the process also had the function of saving the client from being held to ransom. Fisher says: ‘It took a few weeks to do that, and in fact we got the subcontractors we wanted to have. By the end of February 2002 we had a clear view of the costs [now £4 million] and who were the subcontractors for the packages.’

**Keeping in keeping**

With every effort made to echo, though not necessarily replicate, the local vernacular of brick, timber, slate and white-painted window frames, Fisher made a good argument for a grey zinc roof – because slate requires a relatively steep pitch. Rheinzink was the selected manufacturer and Surrey-based Boss Metals was the successful installer. The Latchways safety system was installed by Safesite. Fisher points out that if you include the build-up needed for zinc roofs, the system had good thermal properties. The practice has a commitment to sustainability and the



The site slopes diagonally from the north east to the south west – the cricket pitch to the west is half a level higher than the rugby pitch to the east

client embraced the idea, especially when it meant higher durability in this heavily used building, low maintenance – and recyclability. Fisher says: 'We tried to use old flooring for the first floor but it was more costly than the oak we ended up specifying.'

On the very heavily trafficked ground floor Fisher specified a Conren resin floor. 'It's a hardwearing surface and has no seams because it's a poured finish,' she said. 'It's a grainy substance which first has a base applied and is trowelled on. We've used it throughout the changing areas on the ground floor and also for the shower walls.' For kitchens, bars and cellars the specified flooring was Altro. In the WCs the vanity fittings are, Fisher says, 'in a material called Avonite. It's a Corian-like resin which almost looks like glass. We used a see-through turquoise blue with mosaic wall tiles in a plethora of blues and white, with bluish grey cubicles and back panels in Amwell laminate. The only disadvantage with the see-through Avonite was that we ended up having to paint the back to hide the plumbing works.' The Spaform spa and sauna opposite each other in the fitness centre are both by Nordic, which had the advantage in the tender bidding because it could do both.

### On the inside

Automatic glass doors are by Kaba. Fisher says: 'Kaba has a very good weathering detail. With manual sliding doors the threshold gaskets perform the weathering function but it's more complicated with automatic doors because there is the automatic gear to cope with. Kaba has overcome the problem in a way which is rather like sliding over a knife edge.'

Internally the big crown ash-laminated folding wall by London Wall Design has an acoustic property. Fisher says: 'It works very well. You don't know when there's a function

going on on the other side.' The lift, ordered long before the contract was started, is by Kone and is an important element in the building's facilities for the disabled.

### Outer surfaces

The Fisher team selected a Hanson Heritage Blend brick for the ground-floor walls. 'What we wanted was a brick which looked handmade, and this was a manufactured brick whose variations in reddish blue colours and texture was what we wanted,' Fisher says. On the floor above, the cladding changed to the thermally better-performing western red cedar boarding. Stainer Construction installed it together with the shaped white oak glulam columns and straight beams supporting the terrace floors. These latter were laminated from Douglas fir by Moelven Laminated Timber Structures. Curtain walling for the wedges at north and south ends, and all the windows and rooflights are by Solaglas.

The canopies, designed by long-time fabric pioneer Buro Happold, are a coated polyester membrane with an acrylic topcoat from Mehler. This is a well-tried system, used first on the Imagination building in London.

The steel balustrades, some of them (on the cricket side) incorporating glass panels, were custom-designed by the Fisher team because the building control officer took the view that rigger crowds produced heavier loads than the conventional 1.5 kN rule had been devised for. He called for the design to cope with twice that loading. There would have been a delay had the steelwork fabricator, Satin Stainless Fabrications had to wait for the terraces to be finished before measuring up on site. So the balustrades are free-standing and cantilever up from the perimeter beams.

### READER ENQUIRIES

Altro <b>1600</b>	Mehler <b>1610</b>
Amwell <b>1601</b>	Moelven Laminated
Avonite <b>1602</b>	Timber Structures <b>1611</b>
Boss Metals <b>1603</b>	Nordic <b>1612</b>
Conren <b>1604</b>	RheinZink <b>1613</b>
Hanson <b>1605</b>	Safesite <b>1614</b>
Kaba <b>1606</b>	Satin Stainless
Kone <b>1607</b>	Fabrications <b>1615</b>
Latchways <b>1608</b>	Solaglas <b>1616</b>
London Wall Design <b>1609</b>	Stainer Construction <b>1617</b>

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### CREDITS

<b>ARCHITECT</b> Fisher Associates: Annette Fisher, Clyde Watson, Guy Parkinson, Katherine Dean	<i>canopies</i> Rubb TM; <i>balustrading</i> Satin Stainless Fabrications; <i>external carpentry</i> Top Notch; <i>M&amp;E services</i> Mitie London; <i>bar and general joinery</i> Valley Joinery; <i>specialist joinery</i> M2 Construction; <i>automatic doors</i> Kaba; <i>spa and sauna</i> Nordic Saunas; <i>windows and curtain walling</i> Solaglas; <i>resin floors</i> Conren; <i>roller shutters</i> Continental Shutters; <i>glass block wall</i> Luxcrete; <i>Latchways system</i> Safesite; <i>flagpoles</i> Piggotts; <i>lift installation</i> Kone Lifts; <i>WC cubicles</i> Amwell Laminates; <i>folding wall</i> London Wall Design; <i>steel frame</i> Betgate Structures; <i>roof trusses</i> Dover Trussed Roof Co; <i>precast concrete</i> Coltman Precast Concrete; <i>bricks</i> Hanson Bricks; <i>zinc supply</i> RheinZink; <i>timber decking</i> Heritage Woodcraft; <i>kitchen</i> Roland Alan; <i>high- performance floor</i> Altro Floors
<b>QUANTITY SURVEYOR</b> Capita Property Services	
<b>STRUCTURAL ENGINEER</b> Buro Happold	
<b>SERVICES ENGINEER</b> HBS Consulting Engineers	
<b>PROJECT MANAGEMENT</b> Osprey Project Management	
<b>FORM OF CONTRACT</b> JCT 98	
<b>GROSS EXTERNAL FLOOR AREA</b> With terrace 1,633m <sup>2</sup> ; without terrace 1,331m <sup>2</sup>	
<b>TOTAL COST</b> £4 million	
<b>START ON SITE</b> April 2001	
<b>COMPLETION ON SITE</b> September 2002	
<b>CAD PACKAGE USED</b> AutoCAD	
<b>SUBCONTRACTORS AND SUPPLIERS</b> Zinc roofing Boss Metal; glulam timber structure Moelven Laminated Timber Structures;	