



Impressive try

An imaginative use of timber has made what is essentially a rectangular, glorified barn into an elegant addition to the St Albans landscape which is appreciated by users and the community alike, writes Karen Glaser. Photographs by Adam Wilson

St Albans is chiefly known for three things: the late Stanley Kubrick's voluminous manor, Britain's oldest boys' school and the well-heeled locals who can afford the annual fees of £9,000 it costs to educate their sons there. But now, this London dormitory is home to something else: Europe's largest independent sports complex.

But though it is a new building, the Old Albanians Sports Pavilion is very much part of the social landscape, and wouldn't exist without the public school and its flush alumni. For the scheme's client is the Old Albanian Sports Association; an active rugby and cricket club run by former pupils who sold their former nearby facility, Beech Bottom, to pay for the new one.

It cost them £4 million, a significant sum even, presumably, for the commuting City types of St Albans. But it was money well spent. For this building by Fisher Associates – run by thwarted RIBA presidential candidate Annette Fisher – is quite striking and rather elegant. And, being neither a stadium nor, as it is wrongly called, a pavilion, but a

little bit of both, the project is also something of a first as a building type.

The reason for this was a very specific brief. As well as wanting a building that would serve the club's six senior and 11 junior rugby teams as well as its two cricket teams, the association also wanted a facility that would be used by the "wider community" – and though it is debatable whether there is such a thing as a wider community in this corner of Hertfordshire, the scheme certainly tries to do more than appeal to just the players and their wives and girlfriends. For as well as housing 12 changing rooms, the pavilion – which has very good access for people who are disabled – also has a gym with adjacent therapy and beauty rooms, two bars, conference facilities and space for social functions. It is, therefore, a commercial venture as well as a sporting one.

The pavilion's setting should certainly encourage people to part with their money, located as it is on a stretch of greenbelt land, for which it was amazingly easy to get planning permission. It must be pleasant to look out on to a field



Rugby captain Mike Peters: mildew worries.

as you burn off the calories on the treadmill as opposed to the usual vistas you get from a gym window. And, as some 28ha of this land is cricket and rugby pitch, you also, on some days, get to watch a match.

The site itself slopes down from the north-west corner to the south east and the practice has worked with this change in level by designing a building that cuts into the slope rather than protruding into the landscape. Indeed, as you approach the pavilion from the road it looks like a raised single-storey building, not the two-storey one it is. You need to get really quite close to appreciate the cleverness of the design.

The idea behind the scheme and the materials chosen to realise it also work hard to sit comfortably with the site and its surroundings. The central idea, says Fisher, was to create a "contemporary barn" that was reminiscent of the St Albans barn vernacular and a glorified building is. A rustic outbuilding feel is created through the use of cedar cladding, which covers the main body of the building in the upper ground floor, and through the use of glulam columns and beams, and ledged, braced and framed doors. The vertical timber slats certainly look good, but one of the centre's users, rugby team captain Mike

Peters, who is also a contractor, is unconvinced that they will stand the test of time. "Come back in 10 years and they'll be covered in mildew," he told *BD*.

Meanwhile, the lower level of the building, which will suffer the most wear and tear, is made of brick. When first seen, it doesn't seem quite to work with the timber, but makes sense when you visit the surrounding area where most of the 19th and 20th buildings are of traditional brick construction.

The pavilion's roof also helps ensure that the building is not too obtrusive on the sight line. The traditional roof material in the area is slate, but the need for a low pitch prohibited that, so the practice used zinc to emulate the colour instead. Designed in sweeping lines, the roof is made of three different angles, which become gradually steeper until they meet at the ridge where, at one point, there is a skylight letting on to the main function room below. It's a nice touch which is spoilt by the optional division of the area into the main bar and cricket high tea room. Fisher agrees, but stresses that spatial flexibility was

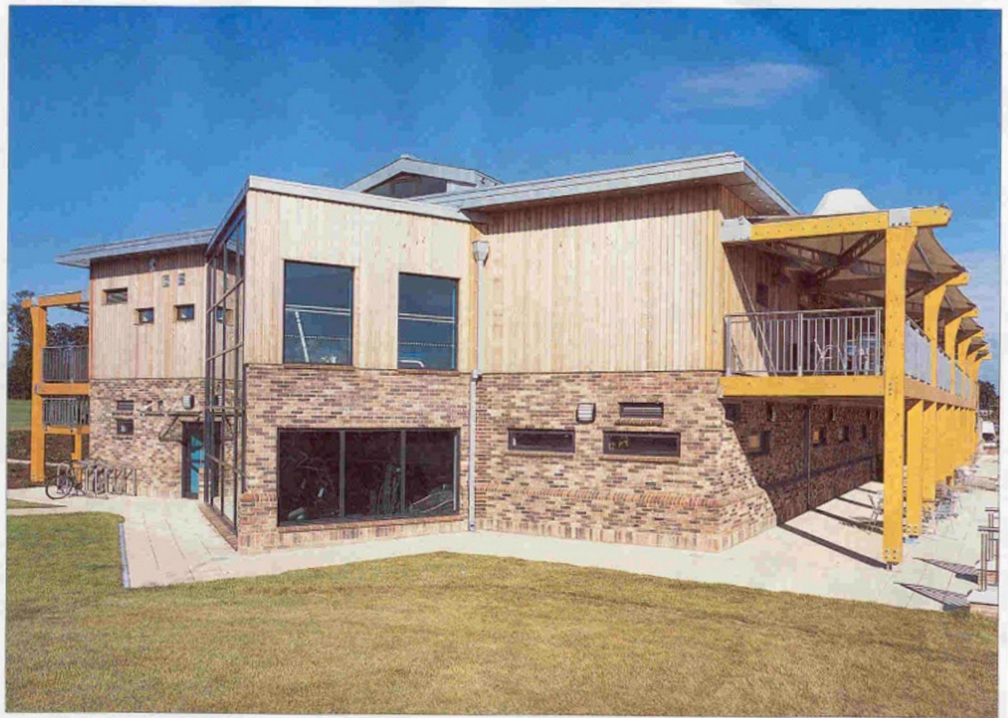


Left: north-west elevation.

Right, top: south-east elevation.

Right, middle: west elevation.

Right, bottom: south elevation.



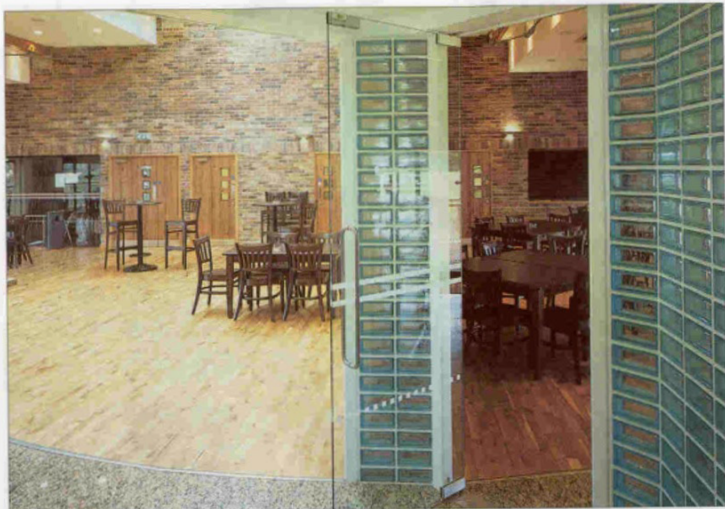
one of the client's primary concerns.

The design of the building allows for a natural split between activities. The lower level accommodates all the changing facilities – easily accessible from outside to keep the transfer of mud from the pitches to a minimum – the fitness centre and the service area. Upstairs houses the bars, function and so-called family rooms, the Old Albanians meeting room and the office.

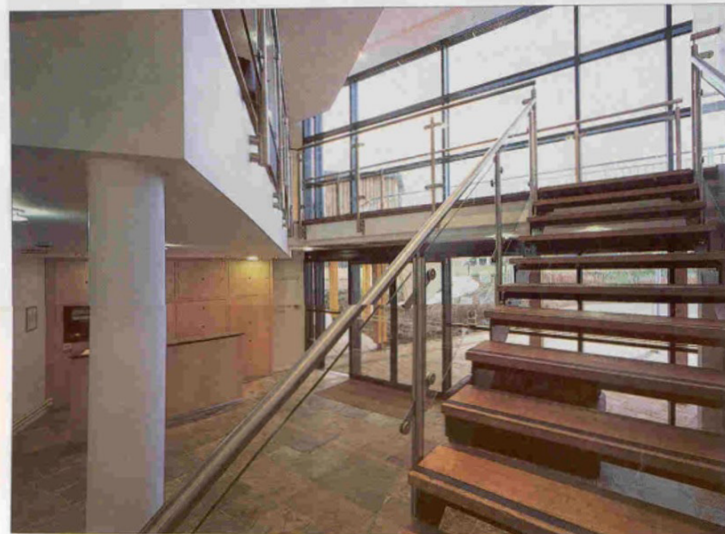
The lower ground floor also accommodates the entrance areas on the north and south sides, which turn outwards and have projecting fabric canopies, to indicate the points of entry. The pulled-out corners make the building seem almost bird-like and also help to disguise its rectangular shape. Timber terraces on three sides of the building also deflect from the crate look. Topped with fabric canopies that give shelter on this exposed site, the veranda to the cricket pitch sweeps down; its graceful curves repeating those of the field below.

So, does it work? Is the Old Albanian Sports Pavilion the social and civic focal point the client envisaged, as well as ▶

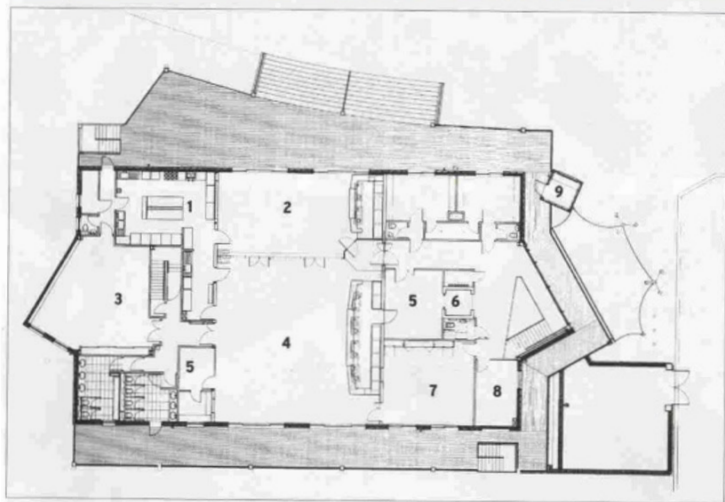
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Left, top: main bar with cricket high room to the right.



Left, middle: reception area.



Upper ground floor:

- 1 Kitchen
- 2 Teas/cricket
- 3 Family room
- 4 Bar/lounge
- 5 Store
- 6 Lift
- 7 Meeting room
- 8 Office
- 9 Score box

being a pleasant place in which to play sport? Peters, who was initially against the scheme, thinks it is. "The great thing about this place is it's not tack," he says. "Most sports clubs, if they have any social facilities at all, are like plastic theme pubs. Here there is character. People get married here and hold birthday parties and businesses see it as somewhere prestigious to hold meetings."

Fly-half John Long is also enthusiastic about the facility, pointing out that club attendance has risen dramatically. "We get about 40 people coming in to train mid-week who didn't bother before, which makes us stronger in depth," he says. "The increase is not surprising really. The drainage of the pitch is better,

and when you finish there's a lovely club to come and eat and drink in instead of an old damp one."

Their words were borne out by the horde of people swilling, munching and enjoying themselves at the centre after the match in which the Old Albanians beat Portsmouth 30-28. But though the bar was swarming, the fitness centre, on this occasion, was surprisingly quiet with only two people working out. Assistant manager Jody Hammond assured BD that with 373 people signed up, gym membership was almost at full capacity. So, for some reason, 371 had decided against stretching their hamstrings that Saturday.

One who had pulled on his tracksuit and trainers was retired City investment

manager Peter Baker. He was pretty upbeat about the centre, though he did have a gripe about the jacuzzi. "There are no modesty screens. When you are sitting in the pool in a certain place and a woman opens the changing room door to enter, for a moment you get a direct view of the ladies in the changing room. It's a definite design fault." Though some, of course, might view it as an inadvertent plus.

Architect Fisher Associates.
Structural engineer Buro Happold.
Landscape architect Teasdale Environmental Design.
Cost consultant Capita Beard Dove.
Mechanical & electrical engineer HBS Consulting Engineers.

Sports for all

Public sports centres that are also a strong social and civic focal point for their local communities are on the increase. Here are some examples of recently completed and on-the-drawing-board schemes:

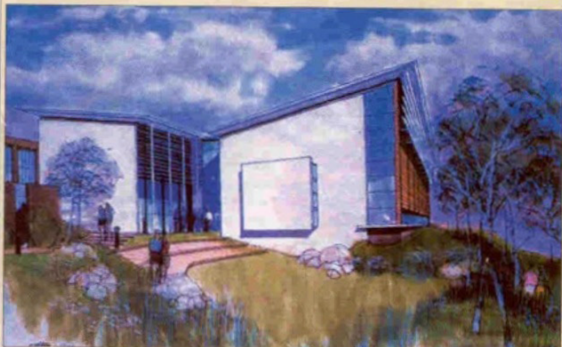


LA Architects' lottery-funded £4.2 million Louisa Centre in Durham is a refurbishment and extension of an existing sports building. New facilities for the local community include a six-lane competition pool with seating for 200 spectators, a new teaching pool with mobile floor, a fitness suite and a range of support facilities. It is due for completion next June.

Feilden Clegg Bradley's £4 million Chipping North Leisure Centre, completed this July, includes a sports hall, fitness suite, dance studio, three squash courts and a swimming pool, and is located next to a secondary school on the edge of the town. The practice said it aimed to create a "public building which would also make a positive contribution to the surrounding area."



Hodder Associates' £2.85 million swimming pool in Grange-over-Sands, Cumbria, will be linked via a glazed promenade to an ancillary block containing a health suite, gym and two meeting rooms for the local community. Bounded by trees, the scheme is on a gently sloping site with views to Morecambe Bay. It will be completed this February.



ORMS's Beau Sejour leisure centre for the people of Guernsey will be the largest covered public space on the island and will be completed in time for the Island Games in June 2003. It will include a 25m-long pool, five squash courts, a gym, dance studios, three tennis court-sized multipurpose halls and a 400-seat theatre and cinema. The reception, brasserie and public exhibition spaces will be one multi-level space with through views to the sea.