

Not playing to the gallery

Long & Kentish is interested in place, light and subtlety rather than grand gestures - as its work on one of Chichester's finest buildings

You would think that all would be well in the world of Long & Kentish, after it was critically lauded for its British Maritime Museum in Falmouth, completed in late last year (*Building Study* November 22). But partners Rolfe Kentish, and New Englander MJ Long are beginning to get frustrated with their attempts to follow up this success.

The practice recently missed out in a library competition in this country: "We keep not getting on shortlists because we don't have a house style," says Long. "Clients say they want a landmark building, and we keep saying that the great landmarks all have a sense of where they are and whom they are built for. We don't seem to be able to get that across."

That one of our finest and most subtle practices should be struggling to make shortlists for public buildings even after the completion of a major national museum project is sad, but all too common. In fact, many of the practices that

Long & Kentish quote as contemporaries and kindred spirits have suffered the same problems in the UK, while in many cases finding themselves better able to build overseas. Long quotes names as diverse as Tony Fretton, Cullum & Nightingale, Caruso St John and Richard Murphy, but these all share an interest in an architecture rooted in place, and in ideas of the banal, vernacular and domestic to make buildings intimately connected with their locations. Long & Kentish belongs on this list, its architecture understated but essential, forming an alternative tradition of which Colin St John Wilson can reasonably claim to be godfather. Long, Kentish and Wilson worked together on the British Library, and are collaborating closely on the Pallant House Gallery project in Chichester, which is about to go on site.

This project has been running for around 10 years, but became a serious proposition in 1999 when the Dutch-

man Stefan van Raay took over the gallery as director. Colin St John Wilson decided to donate a large part of his highly significant personal collection of modern art to the Pallant gallery. The project will transform the existing Pallant House Gallery, which occupies the distinguished Georgian Pallant House, built in 1712 for Henry Peckham.

Van Raay was a vocal advocate of the project, stressing the need for hanging space for the two thirds of the collection that is currently in storage, and the need for facilities to accept touring exhibitions. Wear and tear on Pallant House was also an issue, and the new building will provide an alternative entrance, saving the ornate but deteriorating interior. The house is one of Chichester's finest, and is situated in a conservative and wealthy town that values its heritage.

The facade of the extension, for example, has gone through dozens of versions, including Georgian pastiche, try-

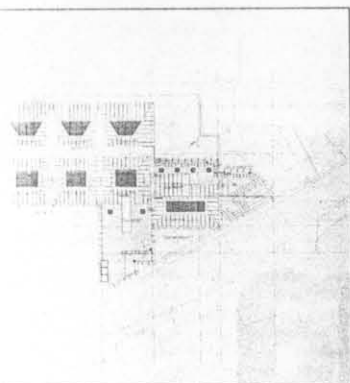
ing to marry the concerns of vocal residents, the architects, and Van Raay. While the new facade to North Pallant was the most controversial aspect of the scheme, the architects have been allowed to concentrate on the plan and parti. A subtle and beautiful plan has developed, arranged around a formal courtyard (which will be designed by Christopher Bradley-Hole) with a reception, restaurant, library and courtyard gallery on the ground floor, and cellular gallery space in the first floor. The old and new are visually united by a lift and stair tower expressed externally through glazed terracotta cladding.

Light is key in Long & Kentish's work, and the system devised for the galleries is an intelligent synthesis of systems from Louis Kahn, Alvaro Siza and Moneo's Stockholm Museum, resulting in naturally lit galleries that remain flexible and intimate. Skylights in the roof bring in light, which is filtered to the

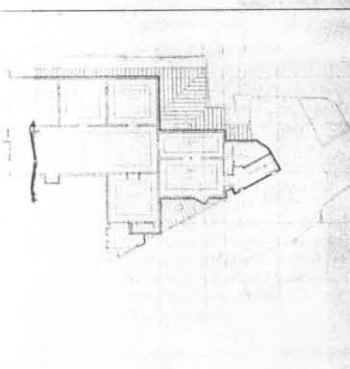
edges of the galleries by large sections of suspended ceiling, also concealing mechanical services. The lux levels will be low enough that track-mounted luminaires can be set to highlight particular paintings, while uplighters will throw light on to the pitched ceiling.

Louis Kahn's Yale Centre for British Art "was an inspiration", says Long. "But the objective here was to have no interruptions to the light. At New Haven, mesh panels are used as shade, and this emasculates the light to the point where it might just as well be artificial. We didn't want to lose the character of daylight."

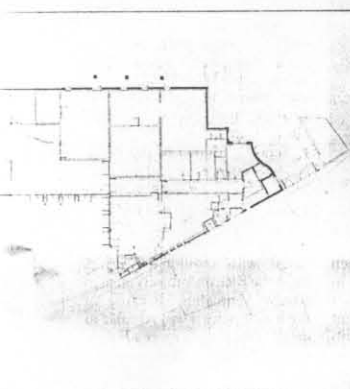
In plan, though, it is far from Kahn. The project will retain a country house gallery atmosphere, with small units to maximise wall space. This is not a barn for contemporary art installations, but emphatically a picture gallery. "Aalto's Aalborg Art Museum is a very important precedent here, especially in terms of the small scale of the spaces," says Long.



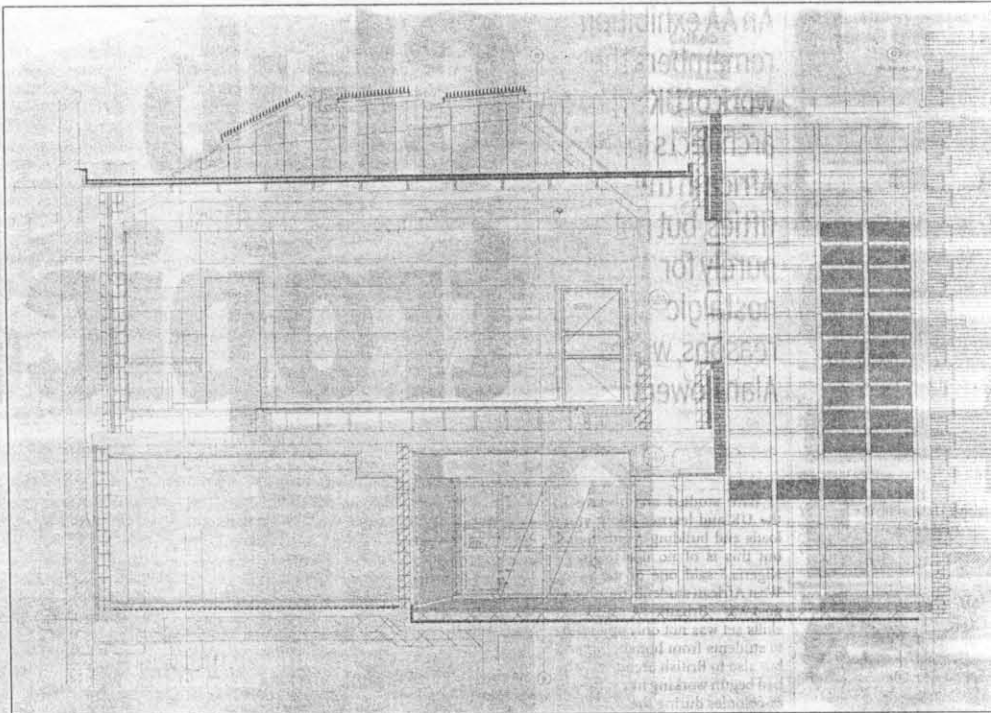
Far left, top: North perspective.
Far left, bottom: Aerial view of model, showing courtyard.



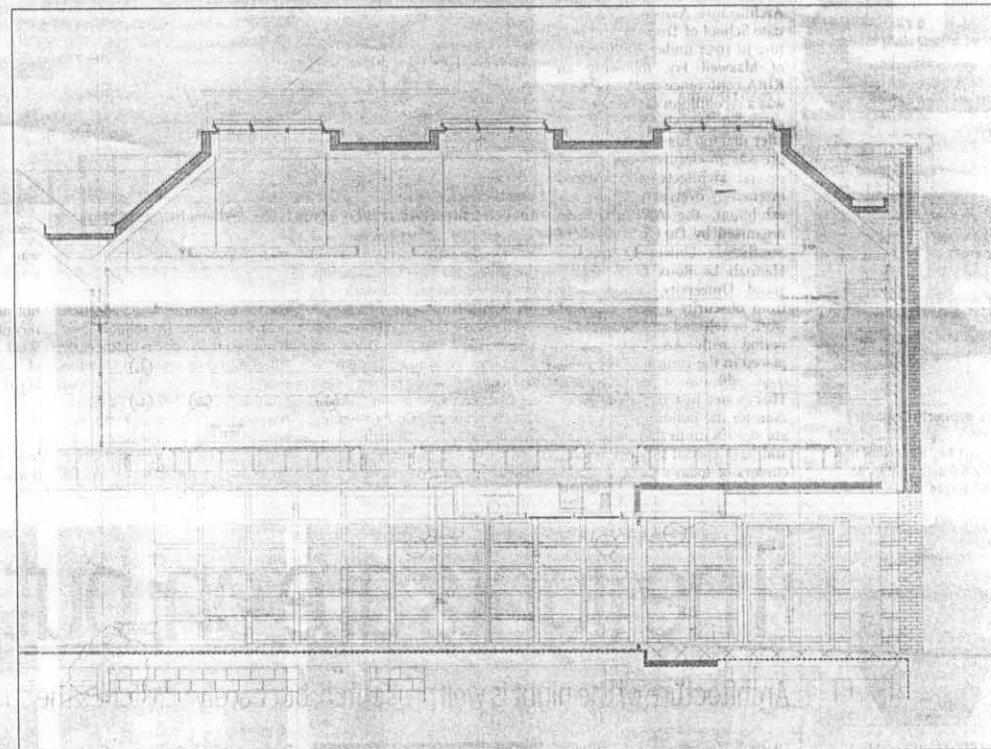
Middle left, top: North facade.
Middle left, bottom: Main entrance.



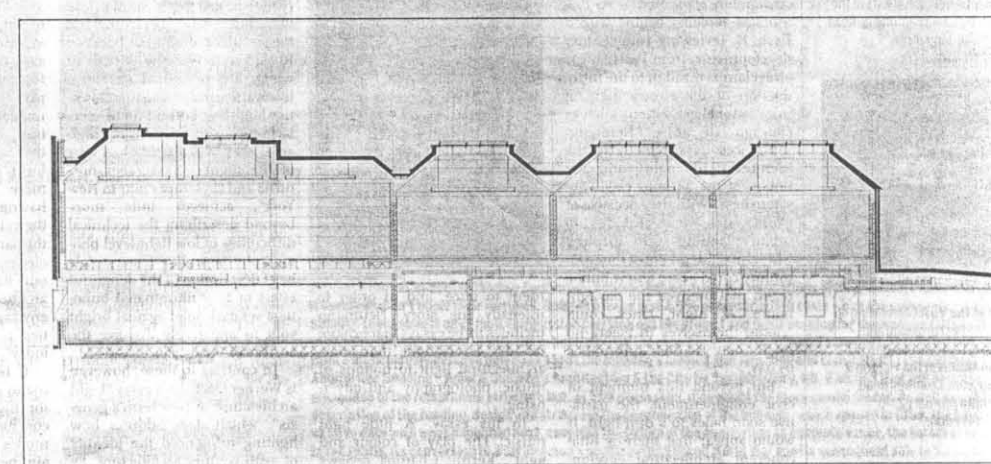
Near left, top to bottom: Roof plan, first floor plan, ground floor plan.



Right, top: Section showing gallery 1 above shop and portico.



Middle: Main entrance section.



Bottom: Long section, showing galleries 1, 2, 3 and 4.

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ngs shows, writes Kieran Long

It will also be like a more genteel version of New Art Gallery Walsall, with small spaces connected by doorways.

Long & Kentish are among the most important architects in the UK at the moment, forming an alternative to the mainstream of British architecture, along with many of the architects who came out of Cambridge University around the time Kentish did – Eric Parry, Hugh Cullum and others. Their work feels richer, more considered and more profound than that of their superstar contemporaries, and is made contemporary by a younger generation of architects who are also more interested in the intangible stuff of architecture – space, light, plan and section – than arbitrary gesture.

Pallant House is a small but historic project and one that will be seen, in retrospect, as a key collaboration between Long, Kentish and Wilson. One hopes that it retains the sense of quality that has clearly informed the project so far.