



MORRIS+COMPANY

## KEY PROJECT INFORMATION

**Project Name:** The Ratan Tata Building  
**Size:** 700m<sup>2</sup>  
**Client:** Somerville College  
**Architect:** Morris+Company  
**Client Representative:** Bidwells  
**Structural Engineer:** London Structures Lab  
**MEP Engineer:** Skelly & Couch



## PROJECT OVERVIEW:

The Ratan Tata Building by Morris+Company represents a sensitive yet bold architectural intervention in one of Oxford's most prominent academic locations, Somerville College. Through a thoughtful balance of heritage, sustainability, and contemporary design, the project will provide a new hub for learning, collaboration and outward facing events, further enriching the academic landscape of the College's historic Radcliffe Observatory Quarter (ROQ).

Integral to the broader vision for ROQ, the building seeks to create a dynamic, integrated academic environment. Fostering interdisciplinary collaboration through state-of-the-art facilities and shared space for research and social interaction. Morris+Company's design embodies this vision by delivering a space that not only meets the functional requirements of a contemporary academic building but will also contribute to the wider architectural context of the ROQ as an open, inclusive and collaborative academic hub.

## DESIGN BRIEF + VISION:

Morris+Company were commissioned to design a new academic building within the historic Radcliffe Observatory Quarter (ROQ) of Somerville College, Oxford, following an invited design competition. Designed to reflect Somerville College's core values of Resilience, Inclusion, Sustainability and Excellence (RISE). Morris+Company have envisioned an "**interpretive and extrospective**" architectural solution that balances contemporary design with both the historical and academic context of the site.

The proposed 700m<sup>2</sup> building, the new permanent home for the Oxford India Centre for Sustainable Development, will enhance academic provision and amenity through a series of key programmatic building elements that include:

- + 10 tutor offices/teaching rooms
- + 2 seminar rooms
- + Shared study space
- + Flexible lobby
- + Flexible event space
- + An internal link connecting back to the existing College buildings within the campus

## **SITE LOCATION:**

The proposed building will be located within a 186m<sup>2</sup> empty plot positioned on the northwestern side of Somerville College, Oxford University and adjacent to the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter and surrounded by a series of celebrated buildings of key architectural merit, such as:

- + The Radcliffe Observatory (designed by Henry Keene, 1722)
- + The Blavatnik School of Government (Herzog & de Meuron, 2012)
- + The Somerville College Student Accommodation (Niall McLaughlin, 2011)
- + The Schwarzman Centre for the Humanities (Hopkins Architects, due to compete 2025)

Given its location, the proposed Morris+Company building has been designed with deep respect of both the site's heritage and local context asserting its own architectural identity and language. Creating a statement building that will integrate seamlessly with its rich architectural environment.

## **SUSTAINABLE DESIGN SOLUTION:**

Home to the Oxford India Centre for Sustainable Development, The Ratan Tata Building prioritises sustainability throughout, focusing on both reducing operational carbon and minimising upfront carbon in construction (embodied carbon). Designed utilising Passivhaus principles, the Ratan Tata Building aims to achieve net zero carbon in operation, with a fabric-first approach featuring a highly insulated and airtight envelope, all-electric systems, air source heat pumps, and on-site renewables including photovoltaic panels on the roof.

To reduce upfront carbon, the design incorporates a low-carbon, regenerative mass timber frame, with cladding that reflects the surrounding heritage buildings and is designed for longevity, lasting 100 years and beyond.

Through the building's quadruple-height entrance lobby, an additional route has been created into the college and quad. The ground floor includes a multi-use space for events within the college, with the added potential of being accessible to the public through the landscape it connects to via an opening façade at ground level.

The upper levels house eight tutorial rooms, two seminar rooms, the Chai Ideas Room, and accommodation for visiting fellows and academics, as well as a roof terrace.

The building is designed to harmonise with the diverse architectural and heritage context within the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter. The tight footprint of the building's location required a complex spatial solution to accommodate an intricate programme, driven by a series of curves that extends the building, sensitively, into its surrounding landscape and key vistas.

The building's façade takes inspiration from the architectural diversity of its historic backdrop and is expressed through a series of delicate mullions. Its architectural language is understated yet sophisticated, with subtle nods to its context. The design balances sensitivity to the historical environment with a forward-looking approach, ensuring the building "holds its own" without overpowering its distinguished neighbours.

## **Design Highlights:**

+ **Inspiration:** The building is located on the boundary of Somerville College. The concept looks to transform the site from a 'Wall' condition to a 'Node' - an outwardly facing, welcoming place which

reflects the progressive, inclusive values of Somerville College. The proposal will be a hub of activity and interaction bringing together people through a public face as well as a college face.

The Ratan Tata Building's design takes inspiration from the architectural diversity of its surroundings. The form and massing of the building have been carefully calibrated to complement, rather than compete with, the nearby historic and contemporary structures. The building form takes its cue from Oxford's curved façades, not least from the Blavatnik Centre directly opposite. The gently undulating proposal provides a distinctive silhouette and identity whilst bestowing a softness to the street edge. The form is welcoming - it leans out to announce a new entrance and curves subtly to gently enclose a landscaped area adjacent to St Paul's Nursery.

**+ The Oculus:** designed functionally to maximise natural daylight into the core circulations spaces, the large circular façade opening situated above the main entrance creates a distinguished visual identity - a metaphoric nod to 'examination and observation and openness' - providing bilateral viewpoints internally exposing the heart of the building whilst also providing a warm glow into the streetscape below.

**+ Sustainability & Passivhaus Principles:** The design prioritises sustainability, utilising Passivhaus principles to seek to achieve a Net Zero carbon building in operation. The building is designed to minimise environmental impact while providing comfortable, functional spaces for its users.

**+ Materiality & Contextual Sensitivity:** The façade detailing establishes a visual connection to local heritage setting (prevalence of limestone throughout Oxford) and the use of timber within the building's form has also been integrated to sensitively complement both the historic and contemporary buildings that form the College setting.

**+ Flexible and Collaborative Spaces:** The building will serve as a versatile educational hub, featuring flexible spaces for teaching, study, and events. These spaces are designed to adapt to various academic and social requirements, and foster cross collegiate collaboration, equity and inclusion. The ground floor hall and the landscaping create an open connection to the public space, fostering interaction between the community and the college.

**+ Connectivity:** The Ratan Tata Building provides a new connection between the public landscape of the Blavatnik Centre and Schwartzman Centre for the Humanities. This provides a prominent approach for the college which is to be of equal standing to that of the public entrance from the north.

**+ Design Challenges:** One of the key challenges was in the development of a design that harmonises with the diverse architectural context of the site. The tight footprint of the plot required innovative spatial solutions to accommodate the complex programme, ensuring that the building remains functional without compromising aesthetic quality. Additionally, the building needed to resolve key movement patterns through both the public realm and the building's interior while addressing security concerns for Somerville College.