

Up close and personal

Orms and Walters & Cohen in a squeeze at the American School

The American School in London, a private school teaching the US curriculum, has been developing a masterplan for its constrained St John's Wood site over the past 15 years. These two buildings – a swimming pool and fitness centre by Orms and an arts building by Walters & Cohen – are the final pieces in that jigsaw puzzle.

Appraisal Laura Mark
Photography Marcus Peel & Dennis Gilbert

The American School in London was founded in 1951 and offers the full American curriculum from kindergarten to 12th grade to more than 1,350 boys and girls. More than 53 languages are spoken at the school and there are pupils from 60 different nationalities. Many of its intake are children of parents working at the US embassy or in senior positions in businesses with bases in the city.

The school's original building was pretty radical – a series of open-plan hexagonal hubs. But as class sizes have grown and teaching methods changed over time, most of these have had to be sealed off. The school's constrained site hasn't made any development or change easy. It sits within the St John's Wood Conservation Area and abuts two Grade II-listed villas on Grove End Road. It has developed gradually to fill its plot as pupil numbers have grown. In the 1980s plans for a swimming pool on the site were denied and since then the school has been transferring students to an off-site facility at Cannon's Park for sports lessons. Some 1,100 students take part every other day in a physical education session – a key part of the American curriculum. To enable this to happen on site, a good indoor sports facility was a fundamental requirement.

About 20 years ago the school brought in architectural practice Orms to look at a masterplan for the school's future development. The 15-year plan was aimed at providing more sports facilities, more science teaching space and better facilities for the arts. These two projects – a swimming pool and sports centre by Orms and an arts building by Walters & Cohen won via an invited competition in 2011 – complete this masterplan, marking the final chapter in this phase of the school's development.

For the £10 million sports centre, Orms carved out a space between the school





playground above and a live London Underground line beneath. By excavating to a depth of 10m and erecting a long-span concrete roof the practice has managed to accommodate a 25m swimming pool, fitness studio, multipurpose room and changing facilities within the school's existing footprint.

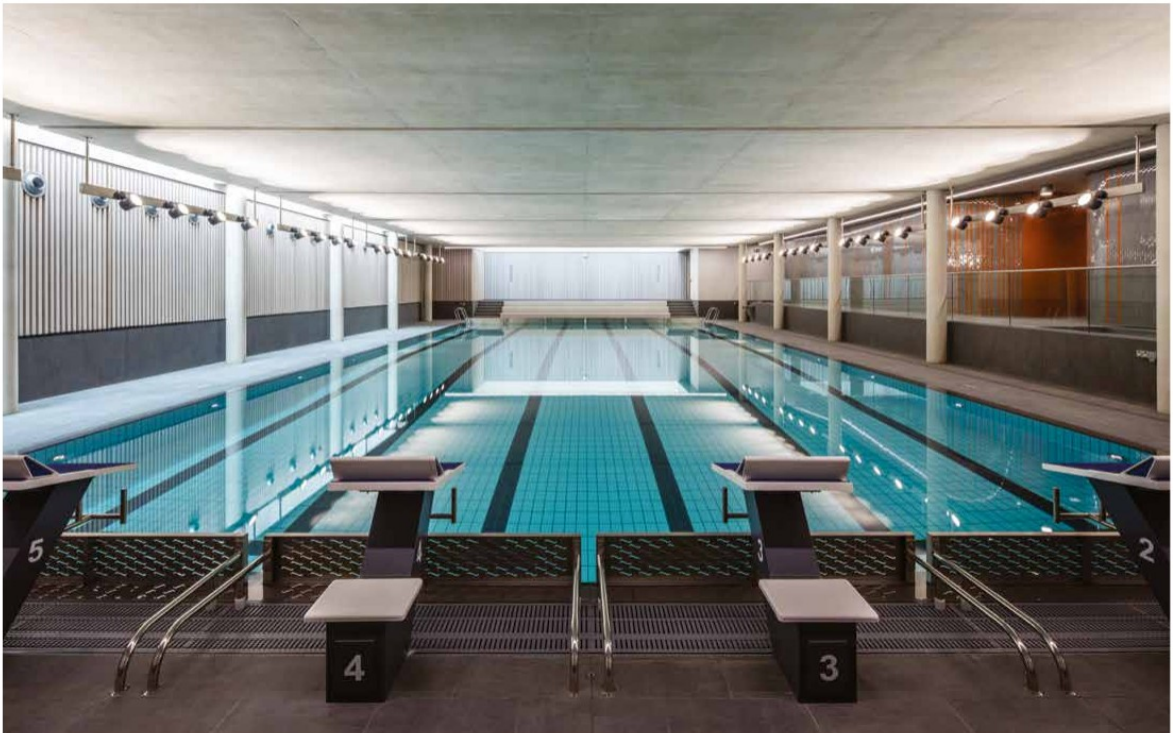
Below ground level, curved changing rooms with brightly tiled walls reflect the available light, while voids allow natural light into what might otherwise have been a dark, unwelcoming space. By using these corridors as a main connection to other parts of the school Orms also prevented this area feeling like an isolated space where you only get to swim or play sports.

The underground sports centre contrasts markedly with Walters & Cohen's arts block, which sits prominently at the corner of the site and is accessed through the sports centre. This four-storey building, which takes its cue from the mass and footprint of the listed villas on the adjacent site, is large and, from the road, seems almost impenetrable. But on the school side an expansive glass façade faces the campus's other buildings. Fronting a new sunken courtyard intended for use as an outdoor exhibition space or sculpture plaza, this connects the art facilities with the more academic spaces in the rest of the school and displays what is going on inside the art block.

Being in the St John's Wood conservation

area and on a prominent corner plot, the art block development came in for a lot of attention. Walters & Cohen's first proposal – for a glass box – came under fire from local residents opposed to any development on the site. With the support of the St John's Wood Society the practice finally won planning for the stone-clad block we now see constructed. 'We had to rethink something more in keeping, that was linked to heritage and

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history without being pastiche,' says Walters & Cohen director Giovanni Bonfanti.

A large exhibition space occupies the ground floor of the arts building, while photography, sculpture, ceramics and art studios are located in the floors above. The studios are column-free and can easily be reconfigured to suit whatever is being taught in the space. Windows on both north and south elevations flood the rooms with daylight, while the bare concrete walls and ceiling soffits have a robust quality.

The outstanding feature of Walters & Cohen's art block is its stone façade, with its concave indentations recalling the fluted columns of the Classical orders. The flutes were CNC-cut into the façade's Portuguese

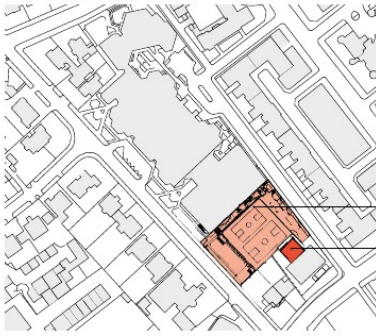
limestone panels and hand-finished on site. Computer manufacturing meant each stone element could be cut to an individual pattern, and here the depth of the flute changes as it moves up the building, tapering away as it reaches the top. The way light falls on the façade at different times of day, and in different seasons, means sometimes the patterning appears to disappear and the façade looks flat, while at other times shadows make it more pronounced.

At about £28,000 a year, an education at the school doesn't come cheap and the budgets for the two schemes reflect this. The spaces are larger than would be expected in a state school and the quality of materials noticeably higher.

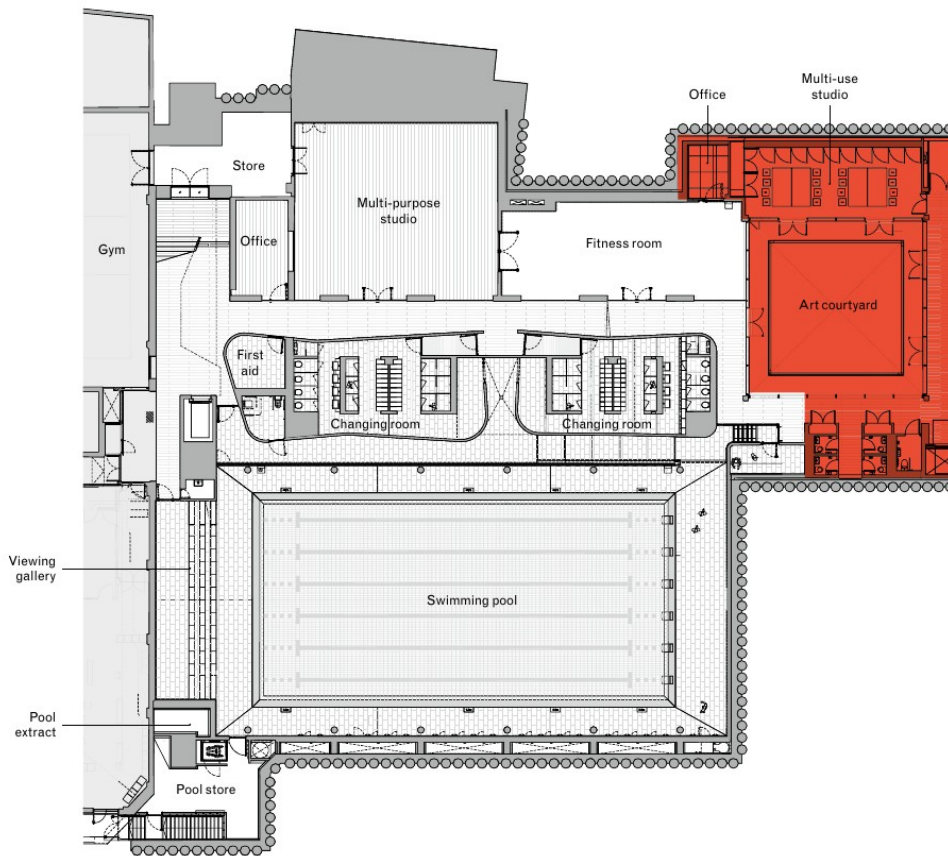
But, even with higher budgets, this was never going to be an easy project. It had to be completed with as little disruption to the school as possible while bridging a vital railway line with a tricky structure. Its success depended on close collaboration between Orms and Walters & Cohen. 'We had never worked with another architect before. It was interesting,' Bonfanti says. 'There has to be a different level of communication.'

That is especially true on a site as built-up as this one and where the two buildings were set to connect. This project shows how the work of two very different practices can complement each other. The school, meanwhile, has gained two very different spaces which should see it into the future.

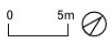


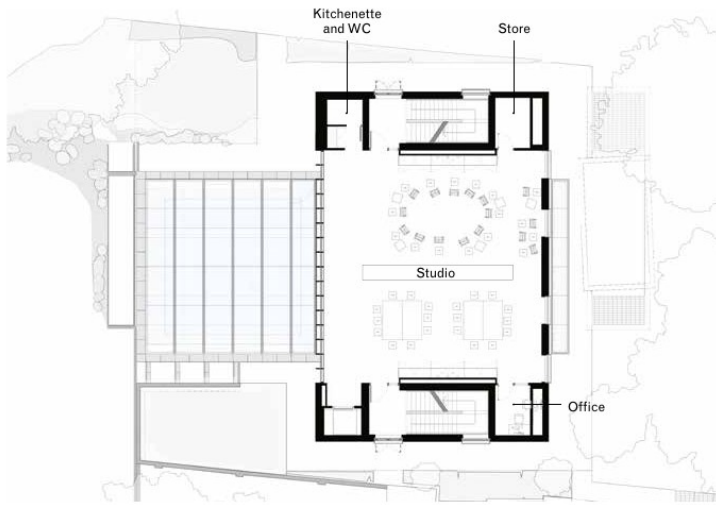


Location plan

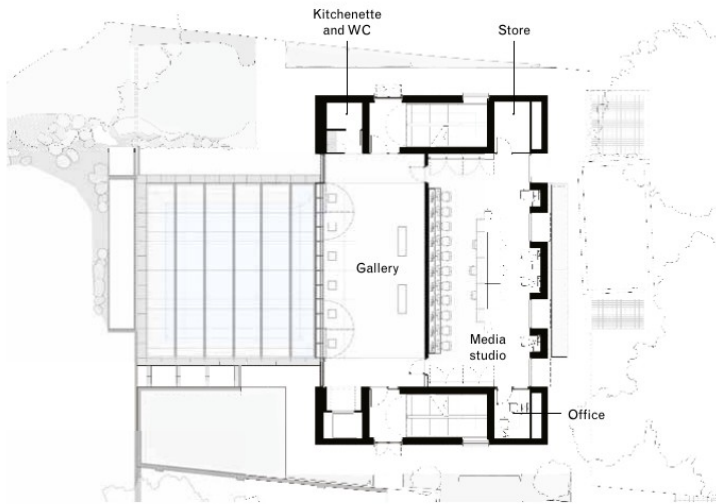


Lower ground floor plan,
Swimming pool and sports facility

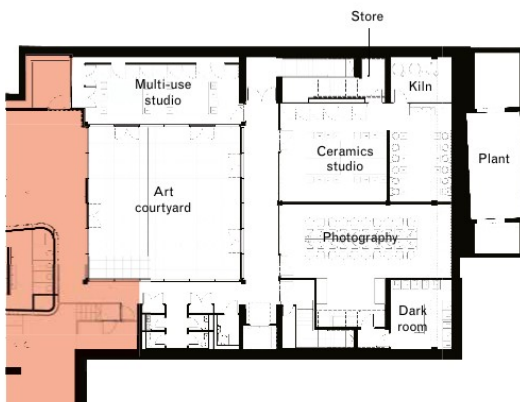




Art block upper floor plan



Art block ground floor plan



Art block lower ground floor plan

Specification

SWIMMING POOL AND SPORTS FACILITY

Floor tiles to pool surround and changing rooms Domus Tiles

Glass tiles to changing rooms Solus Ceramics

Timber flooring to corridor and multipurpose room Junckers

Curtain walling to main façade Schüco UK

Ironmongery 3V

Waterproofing Mapei

Lighting Zumtobel

ARTS BLOCK

Stone façade S McConnell & Sons with Stone Cladding International

Concrete Whelan & Grant

Roofing Bauder with Richardson Industrial Insulation Kingspan

External glazing OAG with Drawn Metal Group

Doors Shadbolt

Sanitaryware Duravit

Steel stairs Structural Stairways

Timber flooring Junckers Oak with Pica Flooring

Ceramics Johnson Tiles with E P Ceramics

Project data

Start on site 2011 (sports building), 2014 (arts block)

Completion 2016 (sports building), 2015 (arts block)

Gross internal floor area 1,430m² (sports building), 1,200m² (arts block)

Form of contract Traditional

Architect Orms (sports building), Walters & Cohen (arts block)

Client The American School in London

Structural engineer Price & Myers

MEP consultant Ernest Griffiths Consulting Engineers

QS Gardiner & Theobald

Planning consultant dp9

Landscape architect Katy Staton Landscape Architecture

Project manager TGA Building Consultancy

CDM co-ordinator TGA Building

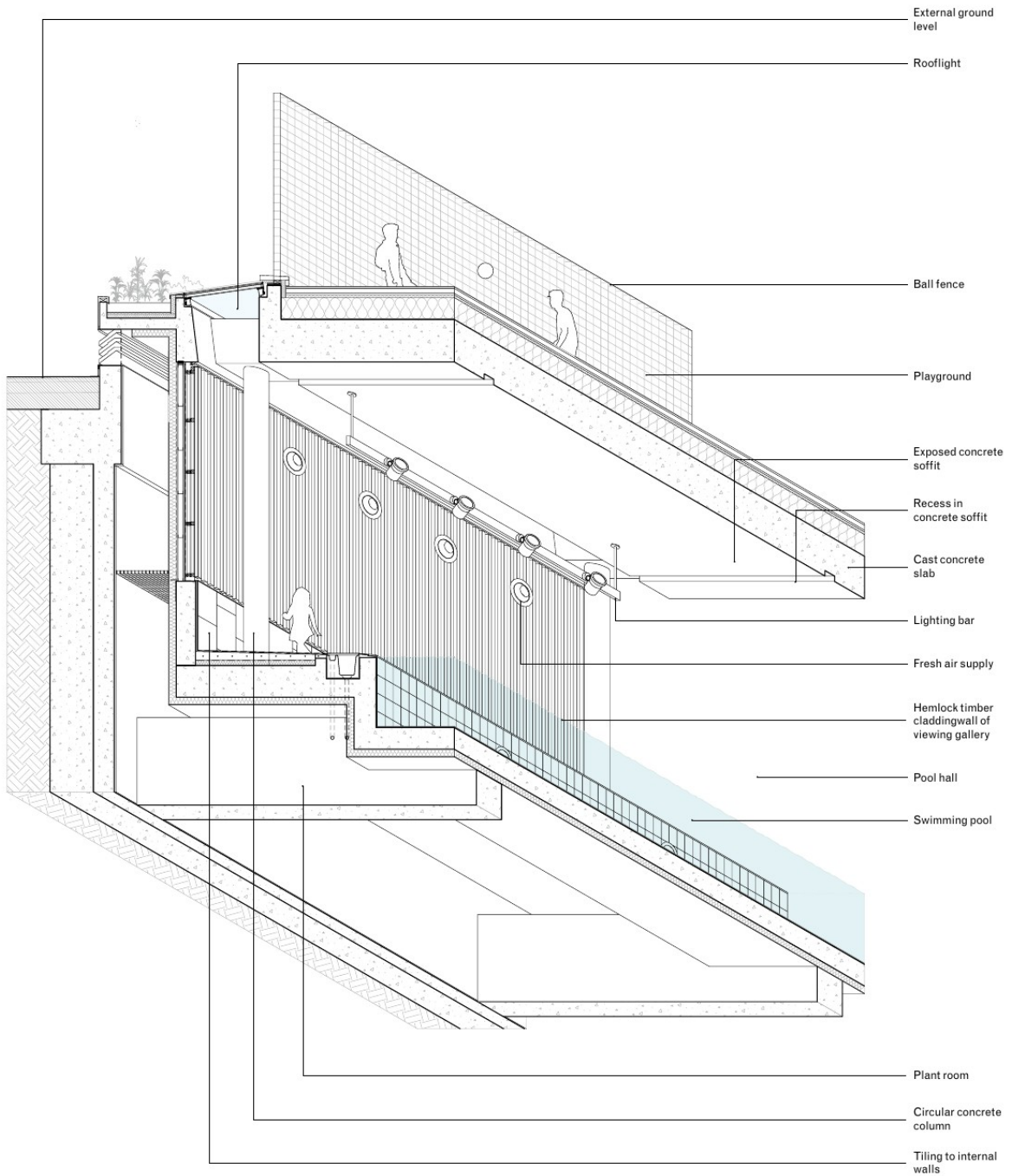
Consultancy (sports building),

Synergy (arts block)

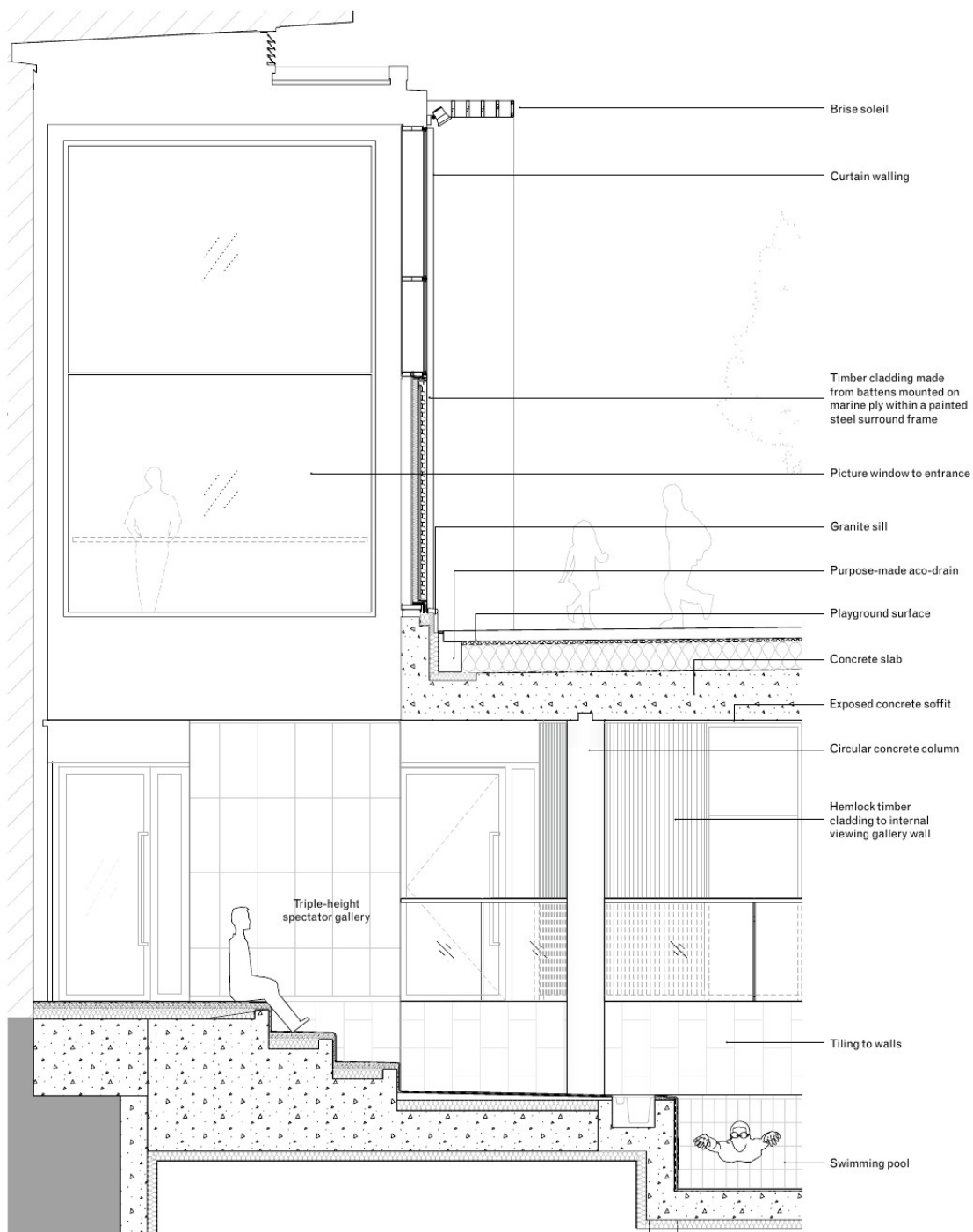
Approved building inspector Building Control Approval

Main contractor ISG

CAD software used 2D and 3D Microstation (sports building), Vectorworks (arts block)

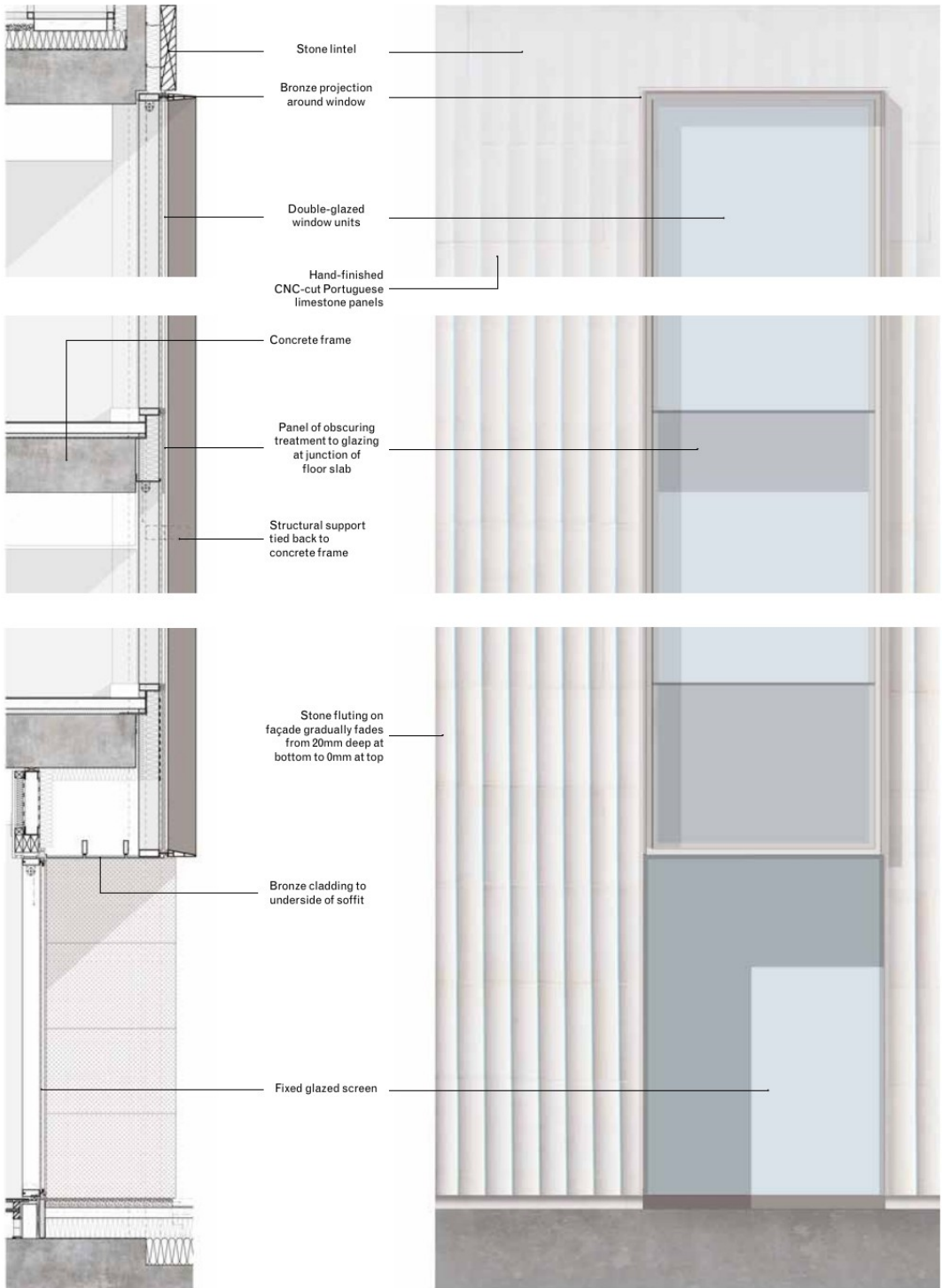


Isometric detail through
pool hall and playground



Section through playground, spectator gallery and pool hall

0 0.5m



Detailed façade section and elevation of art block

0 0.5m