# New architectural addition transforms Oxford skyline



A new architectural addition has arrived at Oxford, transforming the skyline of this historic city. Dominating the view from the Gradel Quadrangles at New College, a whimsical carved stone pangolin clings to the top of an unconventional 21-metre tower, which has garnered attention for both its unique design and its artistic representation of pressing contemporary issues. David Kohn, the architect behind this innovative structure, shared his thought process during its creation, stating, “I was thinking, ‘How do you mark Covid in a building?’” Notably, the pangolin’s presence reflects its association with the pandemic and the broader themes of climate change and species extinction.

This distinctive building is part of a £72 million development that includes student accommodations, teaching spaces, and a canteen for the adjacent prep school. Kohn describes his approach to the new complex as a narrative-rich addition to Oxford’s medieval fabric, indicating that it encourages viewers to engage with themes around the environment and cultural history. The design features various carved animals, each symbolising species at risk, including an octopus, a moth, and a golden mole. “Carvings of animals on buildings used to represent colonial expansion and the novelty of discovery,” Kohn highlighted, reflecting on how such representations have evolved with changing societal values.

Situated on a leafy plot at the outskirts of north Oxford, the Gradel Quadrangles intertwine with existing Edwardian villas, showcasing a curvaceous, snake-like architectural form. The structure wraps around mature trees and introduces three new quadrangles topped by a dynamic metal tile roof. The colour scheme of rhubarb and custard stonework, along with diamond patterns, has led some observers to describe the building as visually flamboyant. Miles Young, warden of New College, acknowledged the building’s polarising nature, stating, “It has been a bit of a Marmite building... When people first saw it, they couldn’t describe it. And if people can’t describe something, they become very uncomfortable.”

Kohn, who secured the commission over several high-profile competitors, has established himself as a prominent voice in contemporary British architecture by embracing colour, ornamentation, and a sense of playfulness—a departure from the frequently muted tones that characterise the nation’s architectural landscape. His prior works, including the award-winning Red House in Dorset, have showcased a penchant for eccentricity, although responses to his style can vary widely.

New College, founded in the 14th century, has a long history of architectural innovation, having previously built significant projects that have shaped its identity. Kohn's design is the first curved quadrangle within the college and introduces elements inspired by the architect’s appreciation for the fantastical, with references to figures such as J.R.R. Tolkien and Antoni Gaudí.

Visitors to the Gradel Quadrangles enter through a gatehouse that resembles a Japanese moon bridge, leading to an interiorscape that feels both fantastical and welcoming. Some features include oversized picture windows and playful curved corridors, which contribute to a fairytale-like atmosphere reminiscent of popular animated films. Students residing in the complex have expressed enthusiasm for its communal spaces, which include a bright shared study area and a subterranean performance venue that pays homage to the college’s rich literary tradition.

While the project has been generally well-received, some elements have been critiqued for prioritising aesthetics over practicality. Notably, the tower, which serves as a marker for the college, houses minimal functional space, raising questions about its utility. Despite these design criticisms, the quality of the craftsmanship, particularly the stonework by Grants of Shoreditch and carvings by Fergus Wessel, has been praised.

In summation, the Gradel Quadrangles represents an audacious architectural venture within Oxford's storied environment. With its intricate design and embodied narratives, this complex not only enriches the college’s heritage but also reflects contemporary themes of environmentalism and cultural evolution.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2023-02-17-operation-pangolin-launches-save-world-s-most-trafficked-wild-mammal-0> - This article discusses the significance of pangolins in conservation efforts, corroborating the mention of the pangolin as a representation of species extinction and its connection to the pandemic in the architecture piece.
* <https://www.new.ox.ac.uk/our-buildings-gardens> - This page provides an overview of New College's historical architecture, affirming the claim about its long history of architectural innovation and its unique building projects.
* <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/david-kohns-whimsical-new-architecture-at-oxford-university> - This source highlights David Kohn's architectural style, including the whimsical elements found in his designs, validating the description of the Gradel Quadrangles and the artistic thought process behind their creation.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/mar/01/oxford-new-college-gradel-quadrangles-david-kohn> - The Guardian's article covers the unique design features of the new building at New College and the discussions around its polarizing aesthetic, supporting the claims about the building's visual impact and community reception.
* <https://www.dezeen.com/2023/02/20/david-kohn-architects-oxford-gradel-quadrangles/> - Dezeen's coverage of the Gradel Quadrangles details the architectural narrative Kohn aimed to embody, reinforcing the article's assertion about the project's engagement with environmentalism and cultural history.