

An Introduction to the Ratan Tata Building

Somerville College is proud to announce its proposals for a flagship building at the heart of the University of Oxford's new Radcliffe Observatory Quarter.

The Ratan Tata Building represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to expand Somerville's teaching and learning space, support research with global impact and articulate our College's vision of a sustainable and forward-looking academic community.

True to Somerville's founding principles, the plans envisage a space that is both inclusive and equitable. New seminar rooms and offices will exist alongside spaces for shared study, events and interdisciplinary collaboration. The interchange of ideas and model of collegiate working will be facilitated by the space itself.

The Ratan Tata Building is made possible by the largest philanthropic gift in our College's history. The donation was made by The Tata Group in honour of the decade-long friendship between Somerville College and Chairman Emeritus of the Tata Group, Mr Ratan Tata (1937-2024).

Location

The location of the Ratan Tata Building is unrivalled. Standing opposite the internationally renowned Blavatnik School of Government, Somerville's new building will occupy the last remaining plot of land available for development on the prestigious Radcliffe Observatory Quarter site, directly opposite the new Schwarzman Centre for the Humanities.

The Oxford India Centre for Sustainable Development

The transformational generosity of the Tata Group will also enable the creation of a permanent home for the Oxford India Centre for Sustainable Development (OICSD) within the new building. The values of Mr Tata and The Tata Group align closely with the work of the OICSD, which you can read more about on Board No 8.

SOMERVILLE
COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD



MORRIS+COMPANY



Indicative landscape design

The Design Philosophy

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.

Inspired by Somerville College's core values of Resilience, Inclusion, Sustainability and Excellence (RISE), Morris+Company have envisioned an "interpretive and extrospective" architectural solution. Balancing contemporary design with both the historical and academic context of the site, the proposed 700m² building will enhance academic provision and amenity through a series of key programmatic building elements. These include:

- 8 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
- A new permanent home for the Oxford India Centre, including offices and break-out spaces

The Design Team



Planning, Townscape and
Project Management



Engineering (M&E) and
Sustainability



Structural Engineers



Landscape Architect

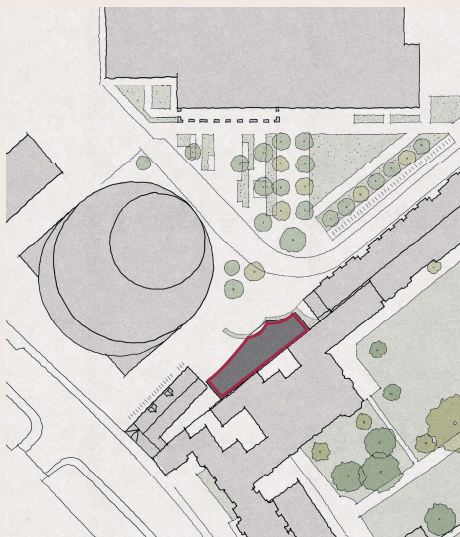
MORRIS+COMPANY

Architecture

Nestling into the Site Context

The building is located on the boundary of Somerville college. There is an opportunity 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.



Drawing on Oxford's Rich Architectural Legacy

We undertook a broad 'architectural taxonomy' of Oxford buildings old and new to determine the architectural language of the ROQ3 building. Distinctive features commonly seen include stone stringers providing strong horizontal datums; vertical fluting and columns providing rhythm and relief to façades; and circular window apertures as well as circles in plan, seen in the shape of prominent buildings such as the Radcliffe Camera and more recently the Blavatnik Building.

The stone detailing of the Divinity School provided inspiration for the proposed facade: the tapering profile of stone vertical fins combine with elegant proportions, resulting in a proposal which is fine and light.



Architecture to 'Hold its Own' in the Local Context

The new building allows the College to address the ROQ site with prominence and poise. With large and high-profile contemporary neighbours, this proposal is designed to hold its own, whilst responding sensitively to neighbours and the wider context of historic Oxford.

External Design

Site Constraints

The site includes challenging constraints such as abutting college buildings to the South and adjacent buildings ROQ West and St Paul's Nursery. The massing is sculpted to maintain views of both ROQ West and St Paul's Nursery from longer East and West views respectively, in-line with the original ROQ masterplan. The height of the building has been determined to maintain sensitivity towards these views - as a result, typical floor-to-floor heights are limited between 2.5m to 3m.

Massing

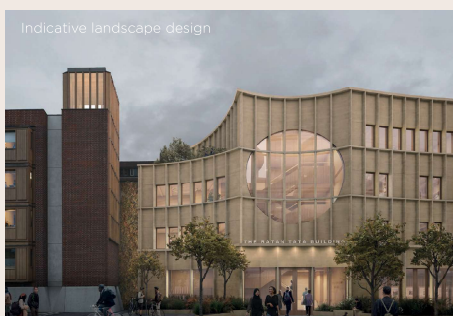
A significant number of massing iterations have been tested to inform the final building shape. The form-making moves are derived from observations of buildings in the locality and in the centre of Oxford, including 'stepped' massing, chamfered corners, 'scooped-out' recesses and gentle crescents.

The final sequence of form-finding is as follows:

1. Step away from the ROQ West and push out North to maximise area.
2. 'Scoop out' an area of the North facade to denote a public entrance.
3. Angle the geometry of the Eastern corner to harmonise with orientation of the Schwarzman Centre and Blavatnik School of Government.
4. Carve away the massing to allow breathing room in long views towards ROQ West and St Paul's Nursery.



Indicative landscape design



Building Design

The building form draws inspiration from Oxford's curved façades, particularly the Blavatnik Centre directly opposite. Its gently undulating design creates a distinctive silhouette and identity, while softening the street edge. The form is inviting, leaning outward to highlight a new entrance and subtly curving to enclose a landscaped area adjacent to St Paul's Nursery.

The vertical articulation of the mullions echoes the neighbouring buildings of ROQ West and the Blavatnik School, ensuring the public-facing elevation harmonises with its surroundings. Stone is employed to reflect Oxford's rich architectural context, emphasizing the building's robustness and timelessness.

An oculus window acts as a focal point, marking the building's entrance and offering a view into its core, a ribbon stair connecting the various floors. The entrance doors, aligned with the ROQ, establish a prominent gateway to the public realm and introduce a new public face for Somerville College within the Quarter.

The west-facing façade, the primary elevation along Walton Street, offers an initial glimpse of the building. An oriel window provides a playful and distinctive feature, adding a unique moment to the streetscape.



Indicative landscape design

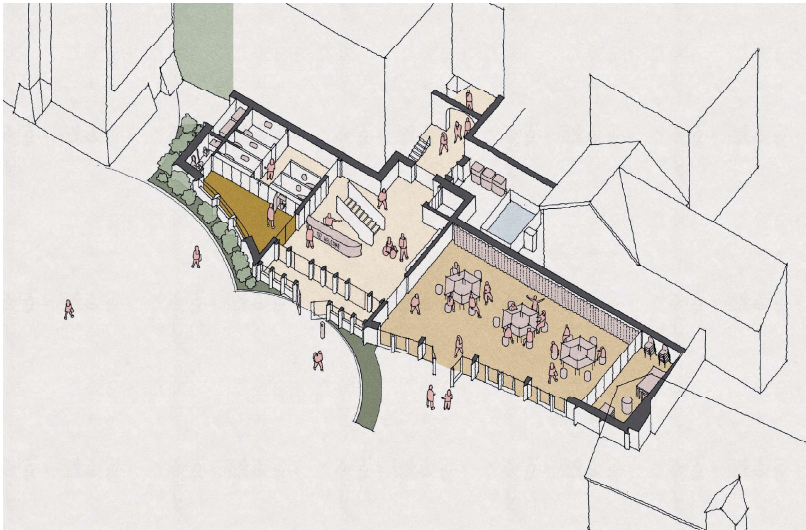
Inside the Building

Building Flow

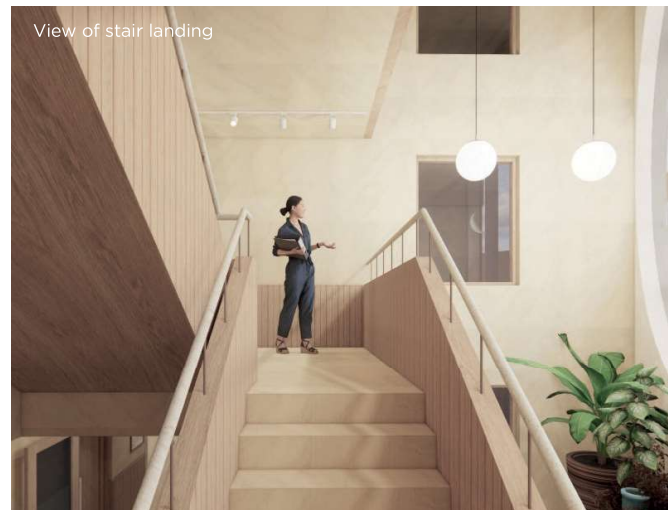
The building entrance from the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter (ROQ) is clearly announced by the façade design. Visitors and members of the public are likely to enter from the ROQ side and college users are likely to enter via the Park building through an internal link. There is a symmetry between the two entrances and clear visual communication between them. Both sets of users arrive at a central node, celebrated by a feature staircase and a quadruple-height space.

The feature stair takes users up through the three storeys above, connecting to a series of areas as described below:

1. Events Space
2. Teaching Rooms
3. Seminar Rooms
4. Chai Ideas Room (Shared Study Space)



Indicative Ground Floor Layout



Building Function

ROQ3 maximises Somerville's perimeter to the ROQ and enhances the educational provisions within the College. The building's uses are logically laid out across four storeys, with functions which become more private as the storeys ascend.



Precedent example (Morris+Company Studio)



Visual of events space

Ground Floor

The ground floor hosts an events space, which is physically and visually connected to the public domain, designed to be a transparent and welcoming street frontage, physically enhancing ties to the local community.

1st and 2nd Floors

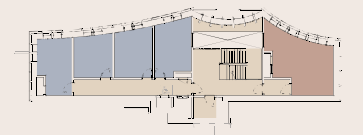
The first and second floors host a variety of teaching and shared study spaces. Teaching rooms are designed to be flexible for personalisation, providing private space for tutors with the ability to accommodate up to six students for a tutorial. Seminar rooms host up to ten students. These are also designed with flexibility in mind: a multi-use space with fantastic views across the ROQ.

3rd Floor

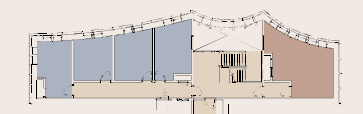
The top floor contains a meeting room, ideal for group work and seminars. Window desks are also provided to maximise on views out and to provide variety in work settings. The external terrace space is designed to be accessed by all building users from the staircore. The terrace offers attractive views out over the ROQ towards the Observatory and alongside opportunities to boost local ecology, provides users with a pleasant outdoor environment, to work and socialise.



Ground floor



First floor



Second floor



Third floor

The Landscape

Early concept presently under review with the Blavatnik School of Government, The Schwarzman Centre for the Humanities, the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter, The University of Oxford and Oxford City Council

The landscape design concept is rooted in the idea of creating a “green connection” that extends from the Somerville Quad, through the Ratan Tata Building, and into the public realm at its front.

Given the site’s predominantly hardscaped condition, our proposal aims to soften the environment and introduce a landscape at a more human scale.

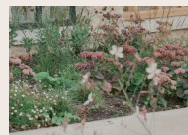
An intimate terrace, adorned with lush planting, provides a peaceful retreat for rest or private and small group study. Elsewhere, we have drawn inspiration from the existing circular geometries present in both the natural and built surroundings to create a proposed landscape design currently under discussion.

By integrating these geometries with key pedestrian routes, we hope to craft a series of “outdoor rooms” that echo the transitional experience of moving between quads in the traditional college gardens of Oxford.

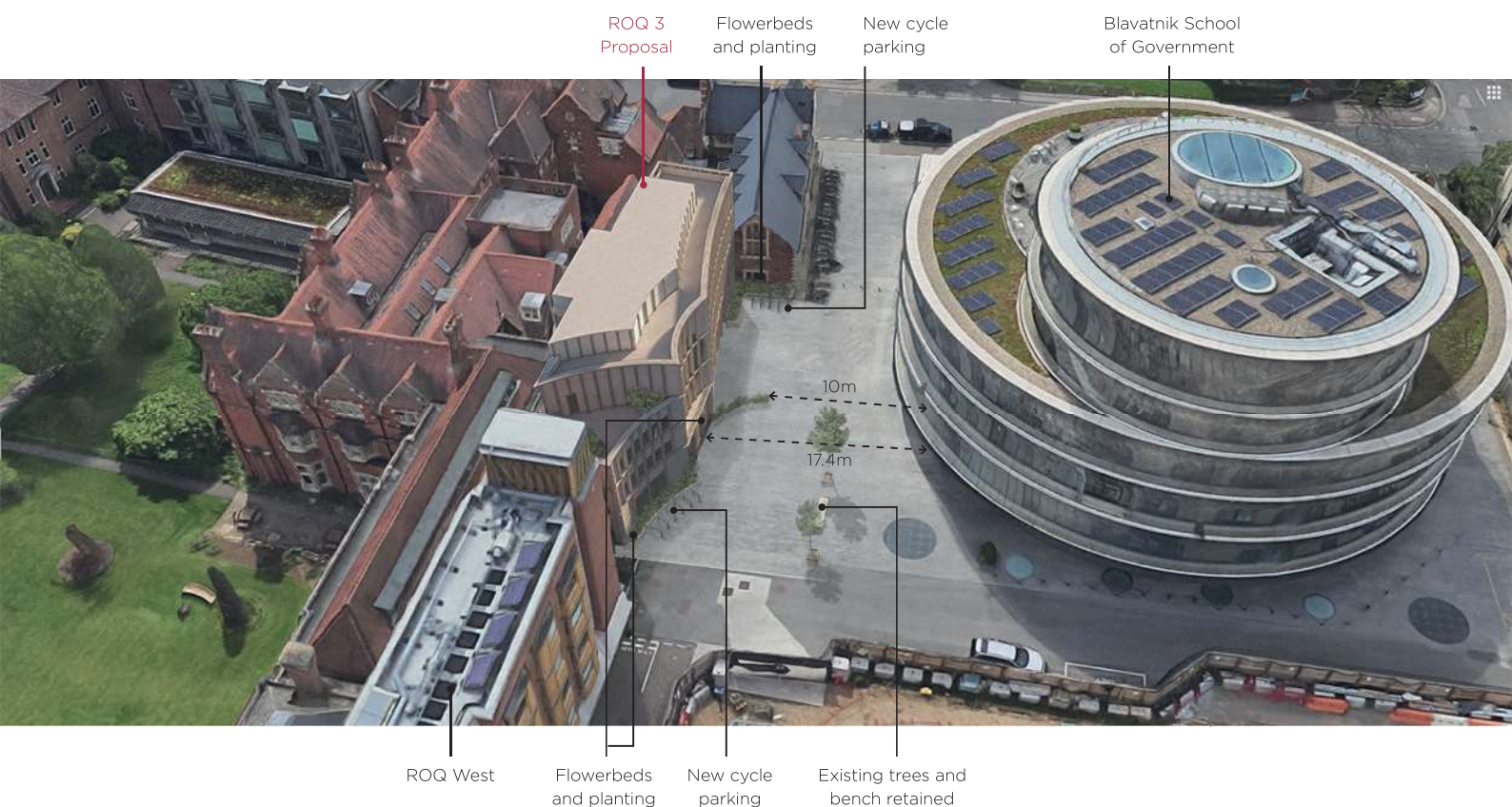
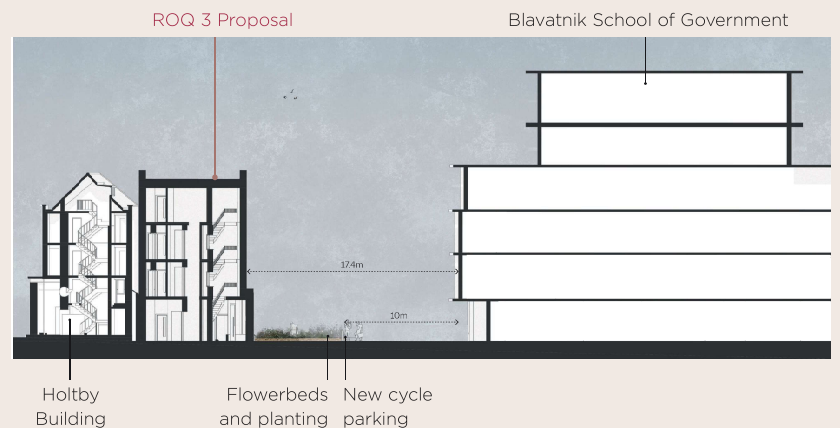
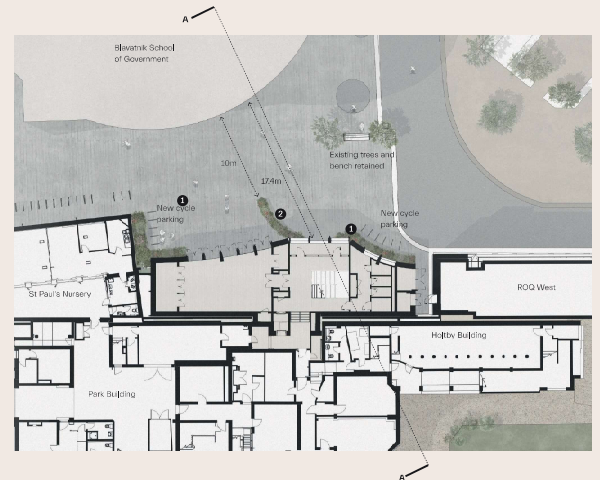
The curved forms invite users to meander through the space, fostering a sense of being enveloped by nature. The small scale of the building is mirrored in the landscape, with the creation of intimate pocket spaces that offer a garden experience and promote a seamless flow between indoor and outdoor areas.



1. Stone edging to provide robust area next to cycle parking



2. Low level flower beds to soften the edges of the building



Sustainability

Skelly & Couch have been appointed to ensure that the proposed building contributes towards a sustainable built environment for future generations.

Key design objectives for the College and the Design Team include:

- To incorporate flexibility into the buildings to meet the client's future operational needs;
- To provide an attractive, high quality internal and external appearance;
- To produce a building that is environmentally sensitive and responsive;
- To maximise passive design where possible;
- To achieve carbon reduction targets in accordance with the adopted Oxford Local Plan 2036;
- To achieve a bespoke solution with a high level of sustainability.

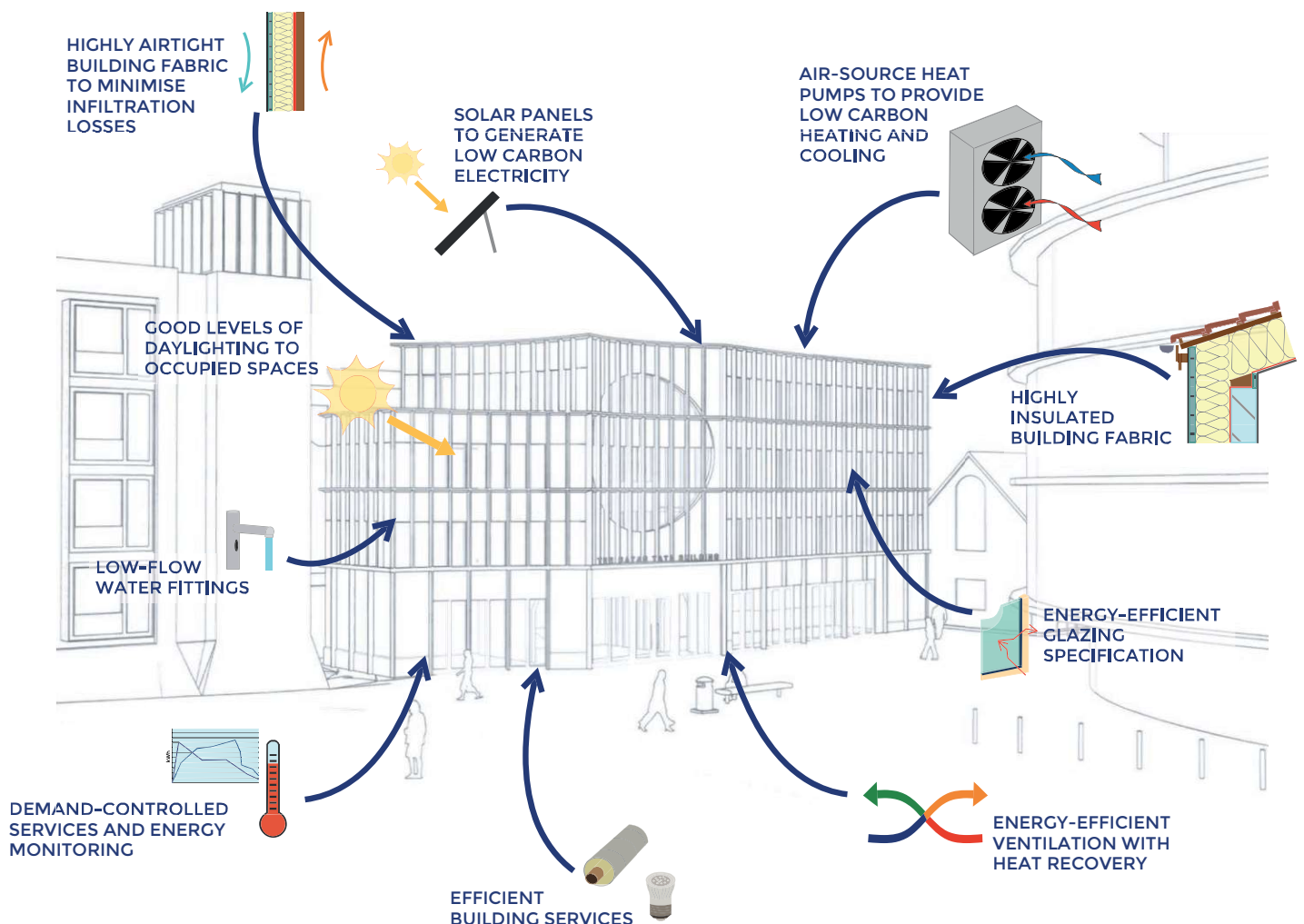
Proposed Targets

The following energy and carbon targets are proposed:

- Heating energy demand target: 20 kWh/m²/yr
- The project scheme will avoid the direct use of fossil fuels

The following measures are proposed for incorporation in the building to aid with achieving the proposed targets and contribute towards a sustainable and healthy building for users:

- Water efficiency measures e.g. low flow water fittings
- Energy efficiency measures e.g. low energy LED lighting technology
- Heat Pumps
- Passive Design Measures aimed at optimising the building envelope, maximising daylight and limiting overheating.



A Unique Oxford-India Partnership

Founded in 2013 through a historic partnership between Somerville College and the Indian government, the Oxford India Centre for Sustainable Development is today the largest scholarship-granting body for Indian students in the UK. Under these plans, the OICSD will gain a permanent home in the Ratan Tata Building to support its community of scholars and empower cutting-edge research.



Somerville and India

Somerville College's ties with India can be traced back to the college's early years. Cornelia Sorabji from Pune was the first woman to study law at the University of Oxford and many brilliant Indian scholars have studied at Somerville since then, including the country's first female Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Mrs

Gandhi's speech at the UN Conference on Human Environment in 1972 is still one of the first to highlight the need for sustainable development: *"It is clear that the environmental crisis which is confronting the world, will profoundly alter the future destiny of our planet. No one among us, whatever our status, strength or circumstance can remain unaffected"*. The OICSD roots its objectives in the same ethos.



Dr Aavika Dhanda studies how climate change affects birds in the Himalayas, with far-reaching insights into how local communities engage with nature and various ecological factors interact.



Dr Divya Choudhary works on anti-microbial resistance. Her research on how bacteria evolves under antibiotic stress is inspiring new departures in both biochemistry and medicine.

Research with Impact

The OICSD comprises a community of more than 70 scholars, 21 of whom are current students. Together, OICSD scholars are driving interdisciplinary research on some of the most pressing issues facing India and the world.

PIONEERING A MULTI- AND INTER-DISCIPLINARY APPROACH



Gabriella D'Cruz is pioneering a model of seaweed harvesting in her native Goa that is boosting sustainable food production, marine biodiversity and the economic livelihood of local women, winning her a BBC R4 Global Youth Champion Award.



Dr Aradhana Cherupara Vadakkethil studies the adjudication of sexual violence in India, South Africa and the UK, and her work has informed two UN Special Reports on Sexual Violence and Academic Freedom.



New Horizons

The OICSD's new home within the Ratan Tata building will provide a space for the OICSD scholars to think, collaborate and share their research on a wider stage. The creation of this exciting, interactive hub will also launch the next stage in the OICSD's evolution, attracting future generations of scholars and securing our place as the recognised home of Oxford-India research on sustainable development for years to come.

