

Building study

Walters & Cohen Vajrasana Buddhist Retreat



In 2013 Walters & Cohen won a competition run by the London Buddhist Centre to refurbish and extend its Vajrasana Buddhist Retreat Centre in Suffolk. The retreat's many guests include Buddhists, carers on respite, and those dealing with stress, addiction and anxiety. The client's vision was for a serene, beautiful centre that improves health and wellbeing, and enhances the spiritual life of the community.

Appraisal Laura Mark
Photography Jim Stephenson

The London Buddhist Centre's Walters & Cohen-designed Suffolk retreat in Walsham-le-Willows is a long way from the organisation's Bethnal Green home.

Founded by the Triratna community in 1978, the centre has been based in a former Victorian fire station on Roman Road ever since it began offering its spiritual teachings on Western Buddhist theology to Londoners. It has become a thriving hub of the community, running residences, yoga and meditation classes, and a vegetarian café.

Here, in the Suffolk countryside, away from the busyness of London, is a new rural retreat named Vajrasana. The centre has had an outpost here at Potash Farm since 2000, but it was never anything more than a run-down cluttered mass of old farm buildings.

The new purpose-built facility – one of the first of its kind in the UK – has been funded by the sale of a house in Primrose Hill, left to the Buddhist order when a longstanding member of its community died in 2008, along with other donations including a £100,000 gift from the late fashion designer Alexander McQueen.

'There were no real precedents for this type of project,' says Cindy Walters. 'We were designing a space where Western Buddhism could be practised but there were no examples. We found one centre in America and a few in Thailand aimed at contemporary Buddhist practice but they weren't comparable. The way we often design these days is to look at how someone has done it before. We couldn't do that in this case. It hadn't been done.'

The Walters & Cohen founder went on a retreat with project architect Lucrezia Vitaletti in 2013, just after the practice won the job, to immerse themselves in the process and understand what the client was looking to achieve. 'It mainly revolves around taking

your shoes off, not looking at your mobile phone and drinking a lot of cups of tea,' Walters tells me.

The practice was chosen through an invited competition after the client team, led by Dharmacharini Maitrivajri – herself an architect – went to the RIBA client advisory service for suggestions of practices that might be suitable. Despite its lack of experience designing Buddhist architecture or any other religious buildings, Walters & Cohen had built art galleries, and the calmness of space in these was something the client admired. Maitrivajri is certainly pleased with her choice.

'Walters & Cohen were so sensitive and rigorous about their questioning we had to do a lot of thinking about why we practised in certain ways,' she says. 'We had to think about the routes behind these and why certain things were important to us. It meant we could refine what we did and then something was designed for us that fitted that, rather than us having to fit into an existing space.'

The practice's design for Vajrasana evolves around three concepts or 'jewels' common to Buddhism but particularly closely adhered to by the Triratna community: Sangha, Dharma, and Buddha. These three ideas inform the spaces of the retreat – each distinct from the other – and provide a processional route based around the geometry of the spaces and the movement towards the final religious space.

Sangha – representing community – is the first space you encounter: a series of low-rise buildings placed around a lushly planted courtyard. These contain a large dining area, living spaces and shared bedrooms accommodating about 60 guests at any one time.

The buildings are simple and modest. A concrete portal frame creates the double-height space of the dining room and it is simply lined with painted blockwork and clad on the outside in charred timber. All the materials are expressed and it is a light and airy space.

From the Sangha courtyard a covered cloister-like walkway leads to a further two courtyards representing the Dharma, or path to enlightenment. In one courtyard sits a large white limestone stupa monument, while in the other a cast bronze Buddha sits atop a lotus flower, appearing to float in a rectangular pool of water. Separated from the Sangha courtyard by a perforated screen of bricks, these spaces are quieter and more introspective, though they still provide views out towards the surrounding landscape.

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Project data

Start on site February 2015

Completion May 2016

Gross internal floor area 1,050m²

Form of contract JCT standard building contract with quantities

Construction cost £3,700,000

Architect Walters & Cohen Architects

Client London Buddhist Centre and Pure Land

Structural engineer Price & Myers

M&E consultant Skelly & Couch

Landscape consultant Bradley-Hole

Schoenaich Landscape

Lighting consultant Speirs + Major

Ecology consultant Practical Ecology

CDM co-ordinator, project manager and quantity surveyor Holloway

Squire Partnership

Approved building inspector MLM

Building Control

Main contractor SEH French

CAD software used Vectorworks

Annual CO₂ emissions 63.8kg/m² (estimated)

These courtyards lead on to the final jewel – the Buddha – conceived of both as a historical figure and as the state of enlightenment in the Buddhist faith. Here, in what is known as the shrine room, a 3m-tall gold-coloured Buddha sits on a plinth. The room is a perfect 13 x 13m square with 6m-tall ceilings. Built from a dark, almost rust-coloured Belgian brick and with a timber floor, the space feels close to nature. The room is used for spiritual celebrations, meditation and yoga classes. High-level windows allow a view out to the sky but do not draw the gaze out to the landscape; the focus is on the Buddha.

While we are in this space the sunlight casts a dappled light across the timber floor; it is beautiful and calming. I'm not a religious person but I can understand why people might find in this spot a space to seek enlightenment.

'Every person who has used that shrine room has said it has become much easier to become relaxed,' Maitrivajri tells me. 'It is still and peaceful and the acoustics are brilliant.'

The three elements of the scheme work together while the scheme remains strongly rooted in its rural landscape. From each of the axial routes, views to rolling hills beyond open up. Although the building is small and minimal and to a degree inward-looking, these vistas allow visitors to gaze on the space beyond and gain perspective. You are a small part of something much larger.

Despite having no precedent, Walters & Cohen has created a building that perfectly fits its purpose. When you arrive in the first courtyard there is an instant feeling of calm. With its communal dining space and planted spaces it could be a large Maggie's Centre. As one person from the Buddhist community said: 'This is a step forward for Western Buddhism'. They have created a new typology.

Client's view

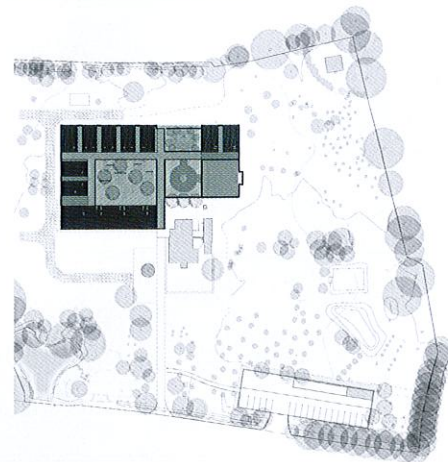
We at the London Buddhist Centre had never commissioned a bespoke retreat centre before. In fact, no one within the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community had done so in the UK. The whole project was a step into the creative unknown.

We knew what we wanted, and it was ambitious: a bespoke retreat centre, able to accommodate 60 people, which was not only simple and beautiful in its aesthetic but expressed Buddhist values as practised within the Triratna Order and Community – the importance of spiritual community, the significance of varying sacred spaces which would enhance devotional ritual, meditation and reflection – spaces with a strong connection to nature that would both provide and express a higher reality and way of being than the usual constraints of mundane life.

We wanted architects who would value working collaboratively. Fortune smiled on us. After a lengthy selection process, Walters & Cohen clearly emerged as the firm we wanted to work with. And, luckily, they wanted to work with us. The architects began their design process by going on retreat and experiencing first-hand the nature and requirements of both running a retreat and being on one. This was to herald a wholehearted and experiential orientation to how they work.

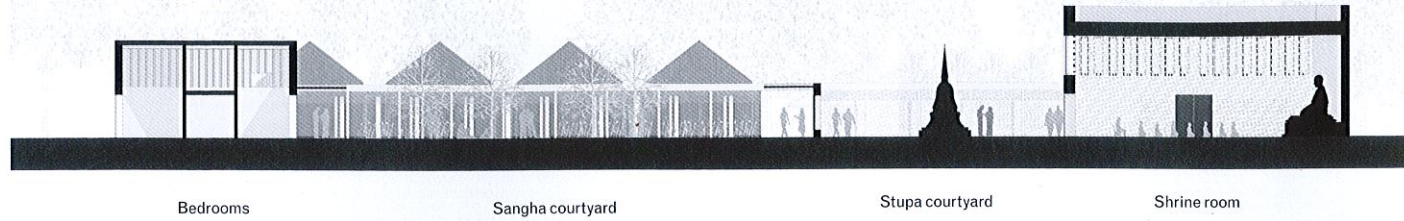
I am indebted to the architects for many things; their whole-heartedness for one. Each stage of the process has been characterised by their determination to do the best job possible and their commitment to a high level of architectural detail. The creativity and skill of the design team meant our imaginations of what was possible grew. We began to engage with possibilities we could not have imagined at the onset – the use of certain materials, the development of the 'temple precinct' that houses the sacred spaces and the stunning and various landscapes. All this has enabled the creation of a retreat centre shaped to hold our practice, which will now shape us.

*Dharmacharini Maitrivajri,
London Buddhist Centre*

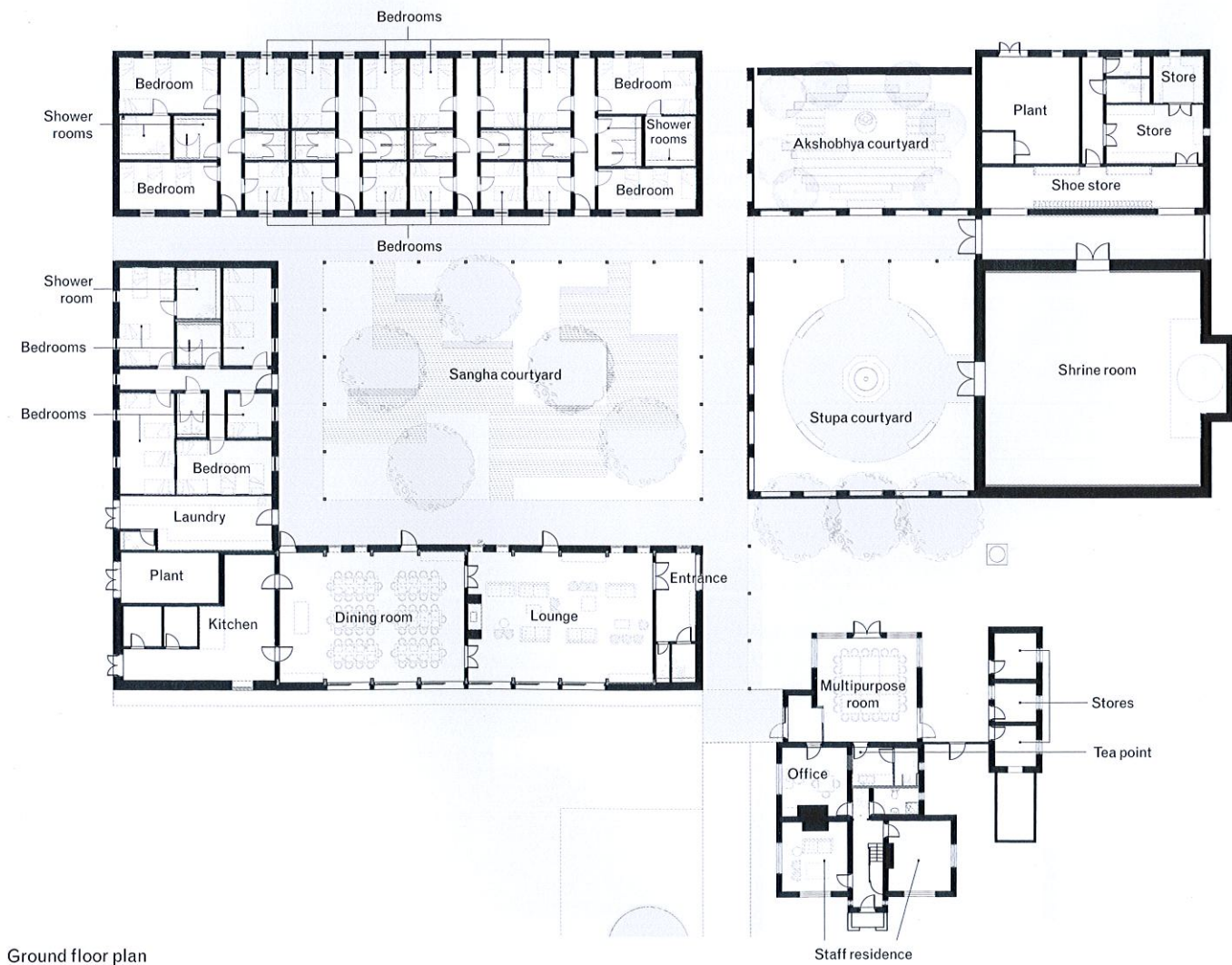


Above A cloistered walkway provides a route from the living areas to the shrine room Below The Akshobhya courtyard

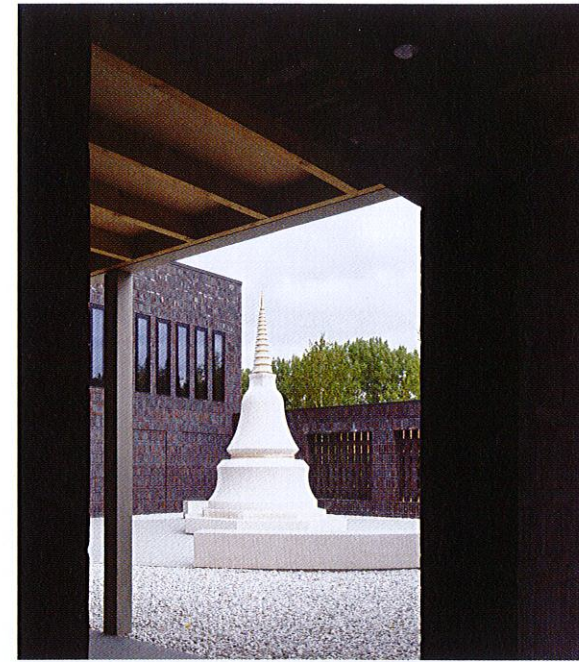




Long section



Ground floor plan



Above left The stupa courtyard Above right The communal dining room Below The shrine room



Landscape architect's view

Our task was to create a setting for the retreat buildings that was rooted in the landscape and worked as a series of outside rooms. The centre's grounds are on Suffolk's ancient clayland countryside, surrounded by hedges and small woodlands; a tranquil and

wide-open landscape with views across the plain and expansive skies.

We focused on two aspects. The outer areas were seamlessly connected to the countryside, with carefully planned views beyond the hedgerow enclosure. We chose native trees and hedgerows, local stone and gravel to convey a sense of place that was part of the wider landscape. The inner

gardens are for meetings and meditation; their spirit is not directly related to Suffolk, but is created by the Buddhist community and their own narrative. There was a particularly close collaboration between the client, architects and landscape designers; and carefully composed gardens and courtyards were set among connected dining, meeting and sleeping spaces.

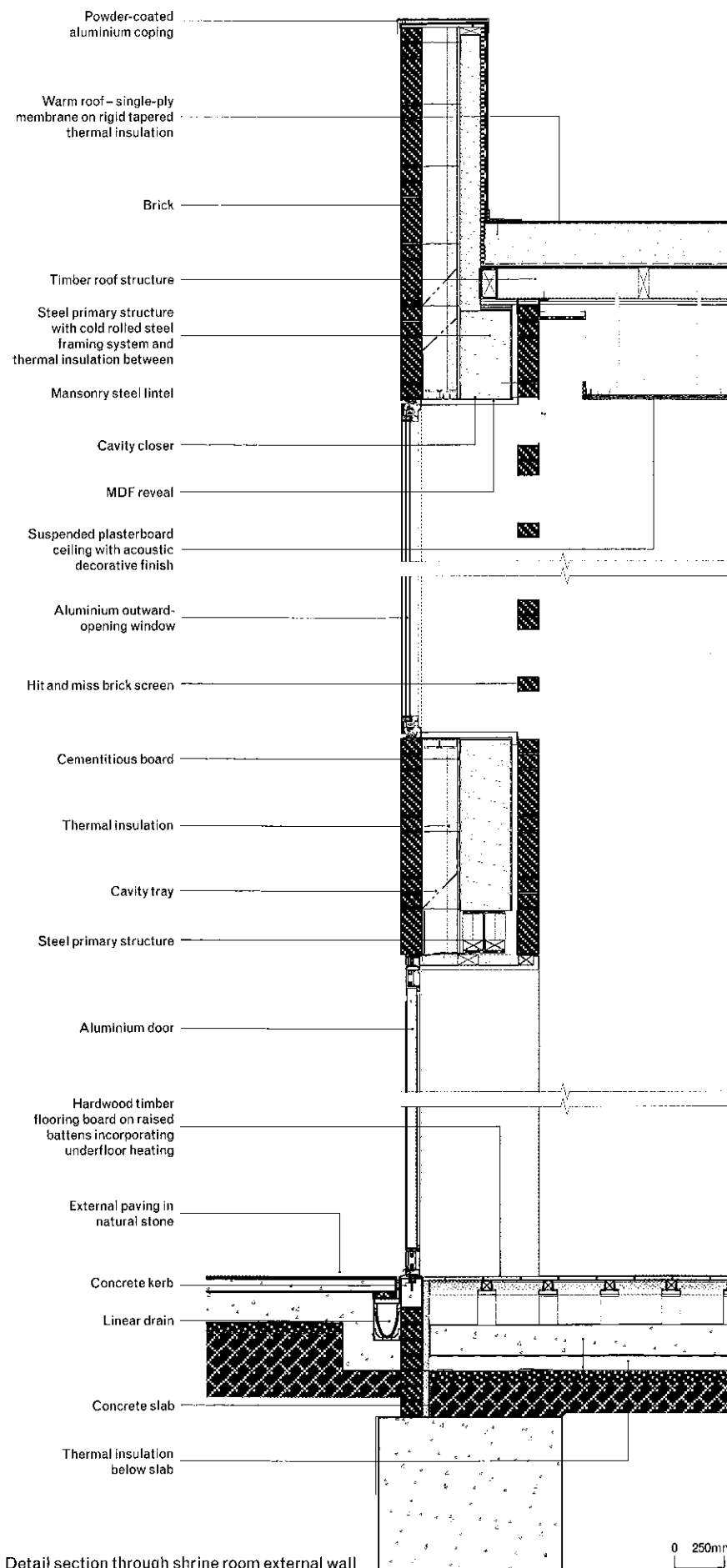
The building embraces three inner gardens, each with a distinctive theme and long vistas to the countryside. At the heart of the site is a garden for retreatants, framed by a colonnade walk with green oak seats and timber surfaces. This area is domestic and ever changing, with seasonal and scented plants, and forms a meeting place for the community. A smaller courtyard is set

around the Akshobhya Buddha sculpture, and symbolises a reflection of reality. The Buddha sits above a water mirror, and the space comprises four elements: blue-green granite, water, planting and dark terracotta bricks. Finally, the stupa courtyard is for walking meditation. It is a dry space, bare of vegetation and minimal in texture. The magnificent limestone stupa rests on pale

Pennant stone from the Forest of Dean and is surrounded by matching river gravels and circular stone seats.

None of our team is Buddhist, but we feel the design process was enlightening and are grateful for having had the opportunity to be part of a very special design team.

Brita von Schoenaich, principal, Bradley-Hole Schoenaich Landscape



Detail section through shrine room external wall

Specification

Brickwork to shrine room and to walls around courtyard Stack bond with soldier courses in between to internal and external wall of the shrine room and to the external wall of the external walkway, featuring a hit-and-miss pattern internally in front of the windows and on the recessed niches along the walkway

Timber cladding to the communal and accommodation building Charred Siberian larch timber, 19mm-thick board, rebate profile, planed all round and finished with Osmo UV-Protection-Oil extra

Structure Precast concrete portal frame to communal building and concrete frame (beam and column) along the walkway

Windows Skylight to the communal building: Schüco FW50+ SG SI thermally broken skylight system

Windows to the shrine room Schüco AWS 75.SI side hung, thermally broken, outward opening window system.

Windows to the accommodation block: IdealCombi Futura+ triple-glazed composite window

Zinc standing seam roof VM Zinc standing seam roofing including proprietary membranes, thermal insulation, flashings, fixings, profiles and accessories

Internal walls Internal painted concrete block with flush joints

Internal and external floor Slip-resistant, resin-bound gravel

Ceilings 18mm birch plywood ceiling board sanded finish, appearance under class II grade BB and with fire protection treatment

British Gypsum CasoLine MF suspended plasterboard ceiling on metal grid finished with a decorative acoustic spray coating.

Furniture Bespoke fixed furniture, made of grade 2 moisture-resistant birch plywood. Clear matt finish 30 per cent matt clear PU lacquer

Worktop and splashback Monolithic Resilica top from recycled glass