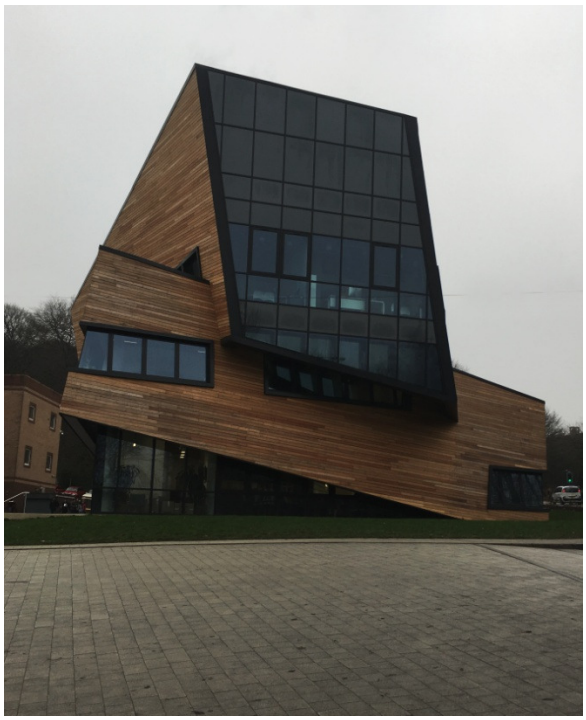
The Ogden Centre

The de Laszlo Collection of John Robinson Sculpture Maquettes at the Daniel Libeskind building for the Ogden Centre for Fundamental Physics, Durham University.

The new building for the Ogden Centre for Fundamental Physics houses Durham University's leading researchers in astronomy and cosmology, providing a state-of-the-art hub for pioneering research in this field. The building has been designed by renowned architect Daniel Libeskind, creator of the Jewish Museum Berlin, the One World Trade Center and the Royal Ontario Museum, among others.

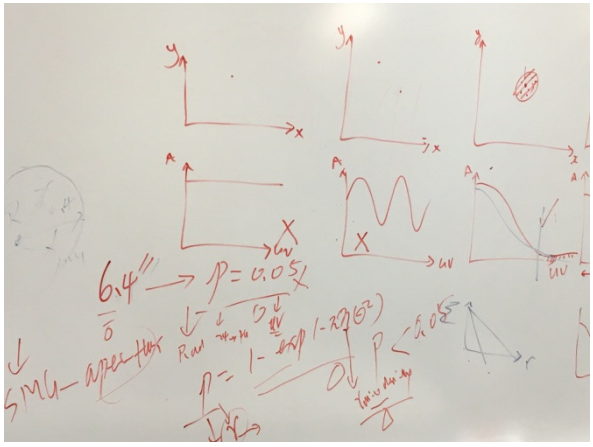
In 2016 ‘The de Laszlo Collection of John Robinson Sculpture Maquettes 1976 – 1996’ was gifted to the Ogden Centre by Damon and Sandra de Laszlo for permanent display. This group of maquettes had been a component of the collection of life-size sculptures that have been placed at Pelham in Hampshire, the residence of Damon and Sandra de Laszlo.

The Ogden Centre for Fundamental Physics is headed by Professor Carlos Frenk FRS, whose main areas of research are in the field of cosmology, galaxy formation and computer simulations of cosmic structure formation. He won the Gold Medal of the Royal Astronomical Society in 2014.



John Robinson and Damon de Laszlo befriended Carlos Frenk in 1995, following a lecture at the Royal Society in London. Out of this meeting grew a long friendship, and their

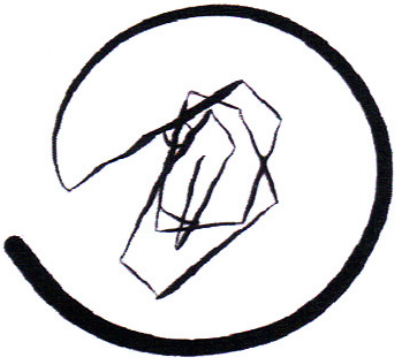
subsequent discourse over the years explored many realms, often radiating from the synergy and balance between science and art.

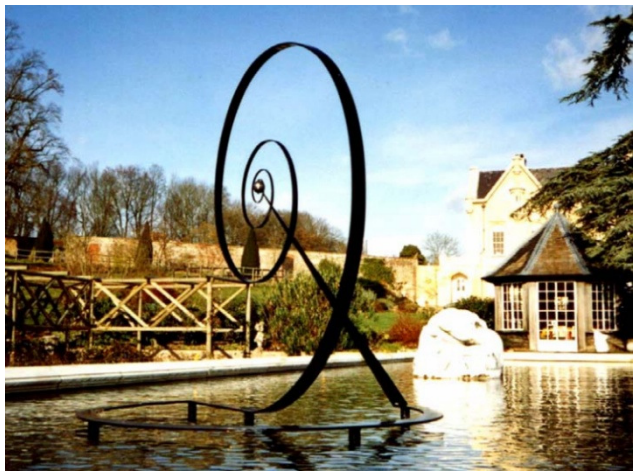


Scientists and artists are driven by ‘form’ and the evolving relations of forms, but more often than not these 2 disciplines approach this from opposite quarters; one from logical analysis, the other from visceral intuition. It is said that this synergy can open alternative ways of thinking and ‘express’ knowledge that transcends either of their boundaries. Many of John’s sculptures express intangible and theoretical concepts; theory manifested by form. Scientists, and particularly mathematicians, were now able to see and touch forms that had been purely theoretical. In 1976 when John began creating his ‘Symbolic’ sculptures – sculptural forms that arose from his experience which honoured salient themes of life and evolution – the group was entitled the ‘Universe Series’.

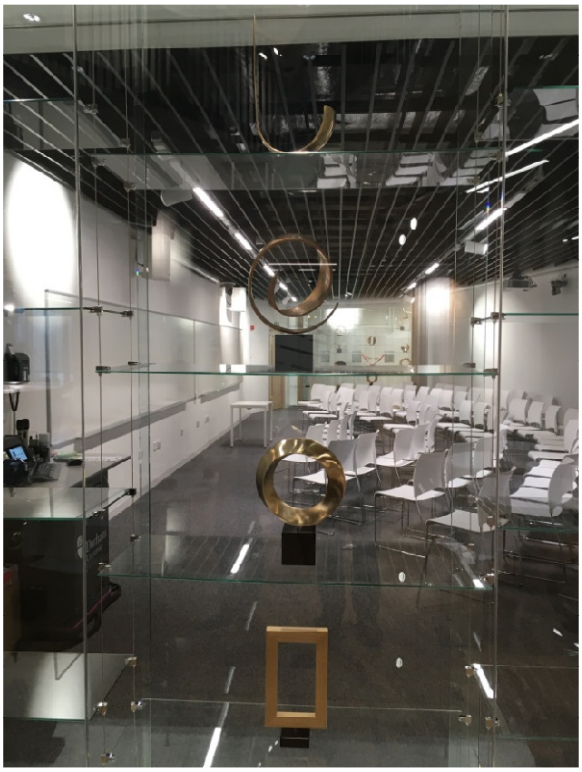
From the outset, the union of the Libeskind building with the sculptures seemed to be entirely compatible in terms of form and line; as Susan Frenk, the wife of Carlos, observed “The relationships the sculptures establish with the building are as though it was imagined with them”.

This synergy was reinforced during an initial meeting at Albany in London with the Libeskind team. The architectural drawings were spread out, displaying a multitude of aspects of the building and its construction. One aspect in particular stood out; the Libeskind graphic logo for this particular project, a logo which began as a ‘doodle on a napkin’, based on Libeskind’s personal reaction to Durham and its place in the landscape. This doodle [below, left] was to become the inspiration for the form [and interacting spaces] of the building itself. Twenty years earlier, Damon had commissioned John to create a sculpture based on their visit to the pyramids of Egypt. ‘Point Omega’ [below, right] represents a spiral within a pyramid.





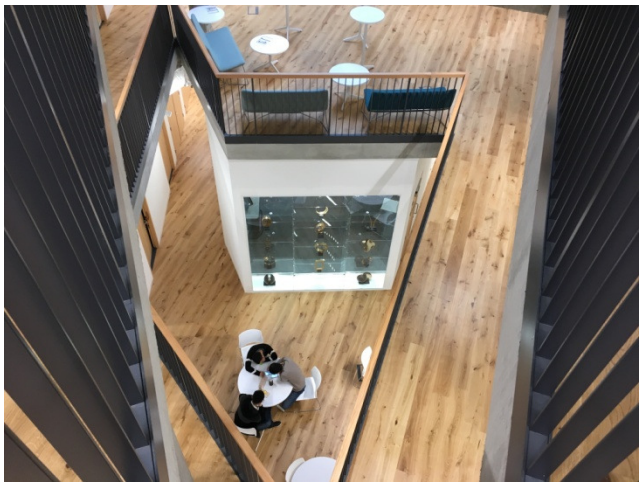
Given the uncanny resemblance of the two designs, the Point Omega sculpture is to be located in the main foyer of the building with a framed print of the logo.



Design proposal for the sculptures' integration into the building: the team then considered the integration of the 46 sculpture maquettes; 29 in bronze, 16 in stainless steel and 1 in oak [crafted by John's grandson Samuel].

It was agreed that 3 glass vitrines would be designed to house the smaller pieces, whilst the larger ones – 'Culture' and 'Earth Time' - would be placed on plinths on the building's balconies.

Two of the vitrines 'bookend' the conference room on the ground floor. Given the open nature of the internal space of the building, views of these vitrines can be seen from all levels.



The third glass vitrine is located on the top floor of the building, containing sculpture exclusively fabricated in stainless steel.

As to the placement and grouping of the sculptures in the vitrines, certain themes were followed; the earlier pieces in the collection are predominantly bronze, and these represent the elemental symbols of humanity – ‘grounded, humankind’. The later pieces are predominantly stainless steel, representing humanity within a ‘universal’ context – ‘infinite, spatial’.

Another issue regarding placement was visual balance. The number of factors involved meant that the arrangement of sculptures was becoming a game of 3-dimensional chess!

Ultimately, the team agreed that the arrangement should be ‘fluid’ and, if possible, relate to the Centre’s research. During the initial installation, a member of the faculty approached to observe the scene; on seeing one particular sculpture, he exclaimed “This sculpture represents two galaxies interacting!”, or words to that effect.

The new Daniel Libeskind building – the Ogden Centre for Fundamental Physics - was completed towards the end of 2016.