



## LSE's new Centre Building review - a study in shades of Pompidou

Into the cramped hive that is the London School of Economics, Rogers Stirk Harbour and Partners have inserted a bright, shared space designed to lure students and staff alike out of their rooms

**Rowan Moore**

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**A** square. We all like squares, orderly places of public enjoyment, signs of civilised city-building, agents of urban harmony across the centuries. Architects especially like squares, their being both conspicuous symbols of a commitment to the public good and geometric figures. Architects like to do good and be seen to do good. Geometry is a tool of their trade. A square neatly wraps symbol and instrument up in one word and four lines.

The London School of Economics, unusually among institutions of higher education, has had, until now, no squares. No quads, no courts either. It occupies instead a dense tissue of narrow streets squeezed between the semi-circle of the Aldwych, the rectangle of Lincoln's Inn Fields and the ramrod of Kingsway. All available regular shapes having seemingly been used up by its neighbours, this world-famous seat of learning has patched its campus together from a morphology of crookedness, grown from spores seemingly scattered by a wonky 16th-century

cottage in its midst, on whose front large gothic letters wrongly proclaim it to have been the Old Curiosity Shop that inspired one of Charles Dickens's novels.



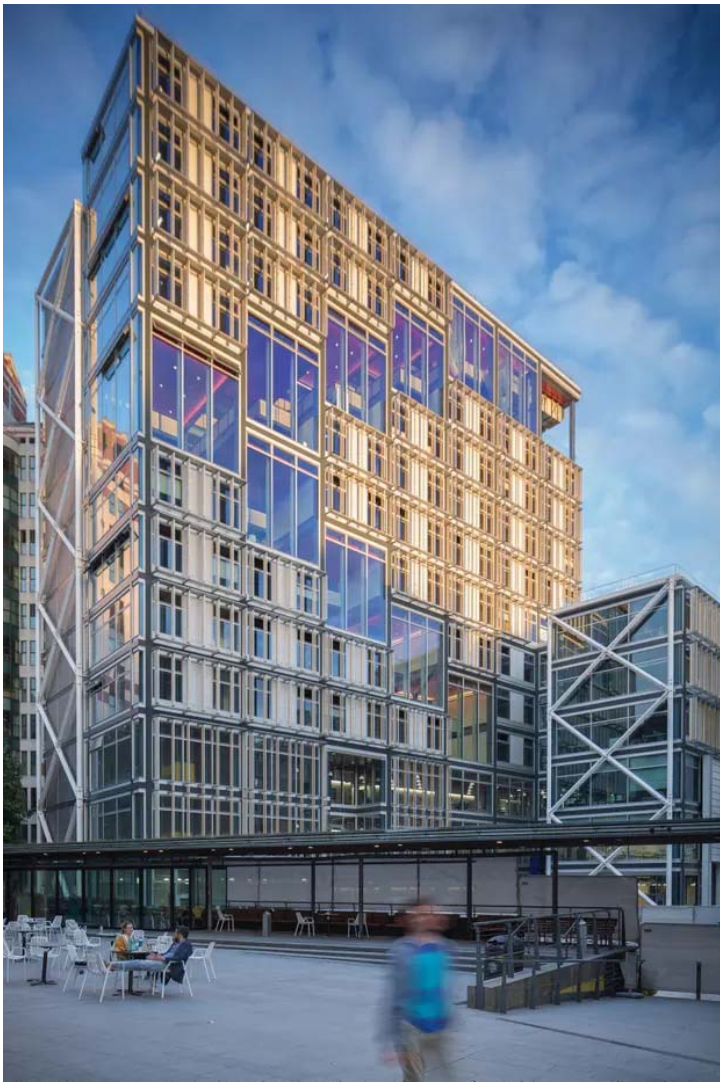
A plan showing how the new Centre Building fits into the tight surrounding streets. Photograph: Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners.

Students, like starlings, occupy whatever ledges and crevices they can find between seven or so storey blocks that are themselves intensely used. It's a sort of studios and cleaned-up Naples, a unique multistorey fusion of civic and academic space. It's a hive, an anthill, a rookery... insert your zoological metaphor here.

Into which moderate disorder the architects Ivan Harbour, Tracy Meller and Andrew Morris of Rogers Stirk Harbour and Partners have inserted two linked steel-framed blocks, one six storeys and the other 12, regular and mostly right-angled. Centre Building, as the project is called, contains lecture theatres, academic offices, meeting rooms and places to lure students to the campus away from their electronically connected bedrooms. Its stated aims are flexibility and communication, the breaking down of the silos into which academic life tends to sort itself.

So broad stairs, made visible from the exterior through large stepping windows, plunge through the floors on which different departments sit, inviting their users to run the risk of meeting someone from another discipline, or at least to feel connected with the rest of the LSE, spread out before the gaze of staircase-users as they move between the upper floors. Stairs at lower levels come with stepped terraces in their middle, in the hope that students will sit on them. The glass-walled ground floor aims for maximum connection between the students at work in something called a "teaching and learning commons" - essentially an agreeable place to plug in a laptop and work - and a street running past outside.





The view from the LSE Centre Building's library plaza. Photograph: Mark Gorton/RSHP

RSHP, as they often do, here remix the ingredients of the building their founder Richard Rogers helped design almost a half-century ago, the Pompidou Centre in Paris. Both works make their structure visible and celebrate vertical movement, both make a thing out of ventilators and the steel Xs that stiffen the frame, both splash primary colours about. But where the older one was the impossible dream of some young tearaways, achieved with blood, sweat, tears and testosterone, the new building is proficient, efficient, crisp, well-modulated, a manifestation of the avant garde become mainstream.

You can see the shift in the colours. What was strident cobalt on the Pompidou has become a dustier, more mauve kind of blue. Yellow is sparingly used, more visible in some oblique views than others. You can see the shift in the pipes and struts - less declarations of war on convention than moments of refinement and relief. Air-handling ducts and acoustic baffles are arranged on the ceilings with exceptional precision. There are slivers of stone in the elevation, out of respect to the older neighbours. The design does sensible things with sunshades and natural ventilation. Wherever there is a chance to make a roof terrace out of a flat roof, it is taken.

And there is a square, formed in combination with some of the older buildings, the space for it liberated by pushing one of the blocks relatively high. This too is a Rogers staple, going back to the lively “piazza” in front of the Pompidou, continuing by way of the less convincing “public space” at the base of RSHP’s 225 metre-high Leadenhall building, better known as the Cheesegrater, in the City of London.

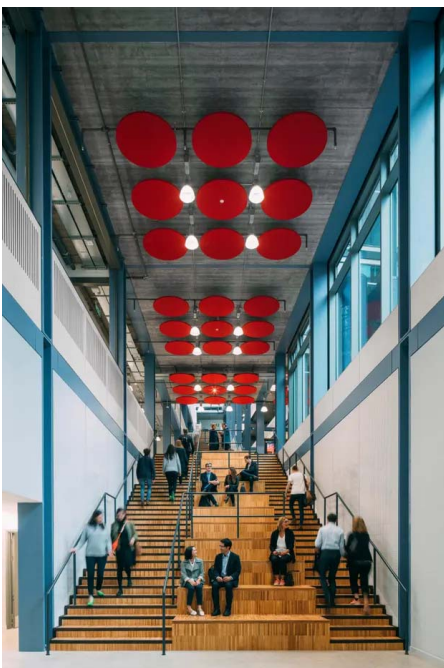


The diagonal staircase moves across the facade of the building in a series of double-height spaces. Photograph: Joas Souza

There are dangers here. To draw a quadrilateral on a plan and call it a public square does not necessarily make it so. Public space is made by more than geometry, as many an arid office plaza will attest, and it's made by the people who use it more than the ones who design it. And, if the accidental multistorey maze of the LSE has made it one of London's more remarkable public places, as it has, why regularise it?

Although they haven't at the time of writing finished installing the pleached trees and granite pavements of the landscaping, designed by the landscape architects Gillespies, there's a feeling that this might be on the generic side. And although the student population hasn't yet taken full possession of its new playground either, there's reason to believe that this square will work.

Its success would partly be a function of the intensity of the campus: make a space and it will fill with life. It's also to do with the design of the building, the ways in which it celebrates upward movement and keeps returning views back towards its surroundings. Shared space becomes three-dimensional, multilayered and dynamic. It is reciprocal between inside and out and between older buildings and new. Centre Building won't make the same impression on the history books as the Pompidou Centre, but it taps its ancient energy, as if of some past cosmic explosion, to positive and thoughtful effect.



Red acoustic baffles above stairs designed with stepped terraces 'in the hope that students will sit on them'. Photograph: Joas Souza