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Client interview: How to impress Julian Robinson

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The LSE's director of estates tells David Rogers why good architecture is important to universities – and how architects can catch his eye

Julian Robinson likes buildings.

The former town planner and surveyor is, increasingly, becoming one of architecture's most important clients.

The London School of Economics' director of estates will spend £500 million over the next six years and this spring will help pick a winner from a star-studded shortlist for a new £100 million building at a site in Lincoln's Inn Fields.



Robinson has outlined plans to build two student resi schemes in the next few years which will cost more than £150 million

"I love good buildings," says the man in charge of O'Donnell & Tuomey's award-winning – but not Stirling Prize-winning – Saw Swee Hock student centre. "The built environment is incredibly important. It's in your face all the time, you can't walk away from it."

When Saw Swee Hock's rival, the Everyman Theatre by Haworth Tompkins, won the 2014 Stirling Prize, Robinson was so surprised he eventually went up to Liverpool to look at the building that walked off a winner.

“Do I think the Saw Swee should have won? Of course I do. I had a look at the Everyman. It’s a good piece of architecture but can I see it as a seminal piece of theatre work? No – this [Saw Swee] is a seminal piece of university building.”

Robinson cares – he recently completed a book on the Saw Swee and how many clients do that? – and he is clearly not from the “that will do, I suppose” school of clients.

“We want our buildings to project our values and how we see ourselves,” he adds. “A challenging and forward-thinking architect is the outward expression of that.”



Source: [Alex Bland](#)

‘Of course it should have won,’ Robinson says of the Saw Swee Hock student centre which missed out on the 2014 Stirling Prize

Among the firms O’Donnell & Tuomey beat were AHMM and Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios – Stirling Prize winners both – while Rogers Stirk Harbour & Partners is on site with the LSE’s largest scheme in its history – the £123 million Centre Buildings redevelopment in Aldwych.

RSHP beat OMA, Hopkins and Heneghan Peng among others – a shortlisted Steven Holl was forced to pull out because of work commitments – while its latest scheme has seen architects of the calibre of

David Chipperfield, Amanda Levete and Niall McLaughlin shortlisted.

Robinson is the deputy chair of the Higher Education Design Quality Forum (HEDQF) which was set up to promote better design in a sector which, according to the most recent figures produced by the Higher Education Statistics Agency, spent £3.4 billion on premises in 2013/14.

Increasingly, the quality of estate is mattering more and more to students.

A report by the HEDQF produced in 2013 found that 36% rejected certain institutions because of the quality of buildings.

Robinson isn't surprised by the figure. "Universities could get away with it before the advent of fees. But once students became the main funder of HE then we had to raise our game."

The LSE is a case in point, he says. "For many years, the LSE was able to get by on its reputation. The student centre before Saw Swee Hock was embarrassingly bad. It was built in the 1960s and hadn't changed. It was a warren of rooms. It wasn't shabby chic, it was just shabby. It was an academic slum."

Robinson adds that it's not just students that universities have to impress. "We have to impress others like mums and dads who might be helping out financially. We have to create a memorable environment for our students. We want them to fall in love with the place."



Source: [Alamy](#)

In its report, the HEDQF said: “Universities have always operated a quasi market for students but the changes in funding have significantly changed the dynamic; students have become paying customers rather than grateful beneficiaries of higher education and now consider much more closely just what they are getting for their money.”

As a result, universities are upping their game. HE establishments in Manchester and Birmingham are spending millions and Robinson says he knows why.

Before he joined the LSE, he spent 17 years at Queen Mary University in east London and was in charge of its building programme, overseeing the transformation of its site in the Mile End.

Four years ago, the university joined the Russell Group – the organisation which represents the leading universities in the UK – and Robinson says: “If it had stood still, it wouldn’t have been able to get into that league.”

Universities get that their built estate matters now. “It’s not universal, though,” Robinson adds. “I look at some buildings and wonder if they will stand the test of time.”



RSHP’s winning proposal for the Global Centre for Social Sciences at its Aldwych campus is the largest scheme in the LSE’s 120-year history

The HEDQF report said that more than three-quarters of those students questioned wanted repair and maintenance to be the one thing that could be spent on university buildings. “This could suggest that while students respond positively to shiny new buildings, these should not be pursued at the expense of the rest of the estate,” the report added.

Such is the LSE’s allure for practices nowadays that he admits he is inundated by architects wanting the

chance to work with it. “I get loads of emails a day,” he says. But he has some advice. “I don’t have the time or the capacity to look through them all. I never get round to it. Send a powerful image in an email that’s easy to open, that’s fine.” Instead, he suggested aspiring firms should get their work published in the architectural press – and get building.

For smaller practices, joint ventures are a good way into a scheme and he cites an example of what might be called an odd alliance a few years back between Amec Design and Will Alsop, which came up with a new medical school in Whitechapel during his time at Queen Mary’s.

“Neither of them would have got the job on their own but the two produced a fantastic result. It all worked and had some real flourishes, ballsy proposals that Amec in a million years wouldn’t have come up with. Joint ventures can be greater than the sum of their parts.”

Under Robinson’s watch, the LSE won’t be allowed to stand still. He is planning on spending at least another £150 million on two new-build schemes – both residential as the LSE aims to get the number of its students living in accommodation it owns and runs close to two-thirds, close to where Oxford and Harvard are.

He is expecting those who worked on the 2012 Olympic village to show interest, although both jobs are some way down the track. But Robinson says new buildings are important for all sorts of reasons, not least that they are a magnet for would-be students. “Newness does have a superficial cache,” he admits.

“After that we’re working to improve the rest of the estate, improving buildings, internal refurbishment, a couple of conversions.” The work goes on.



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