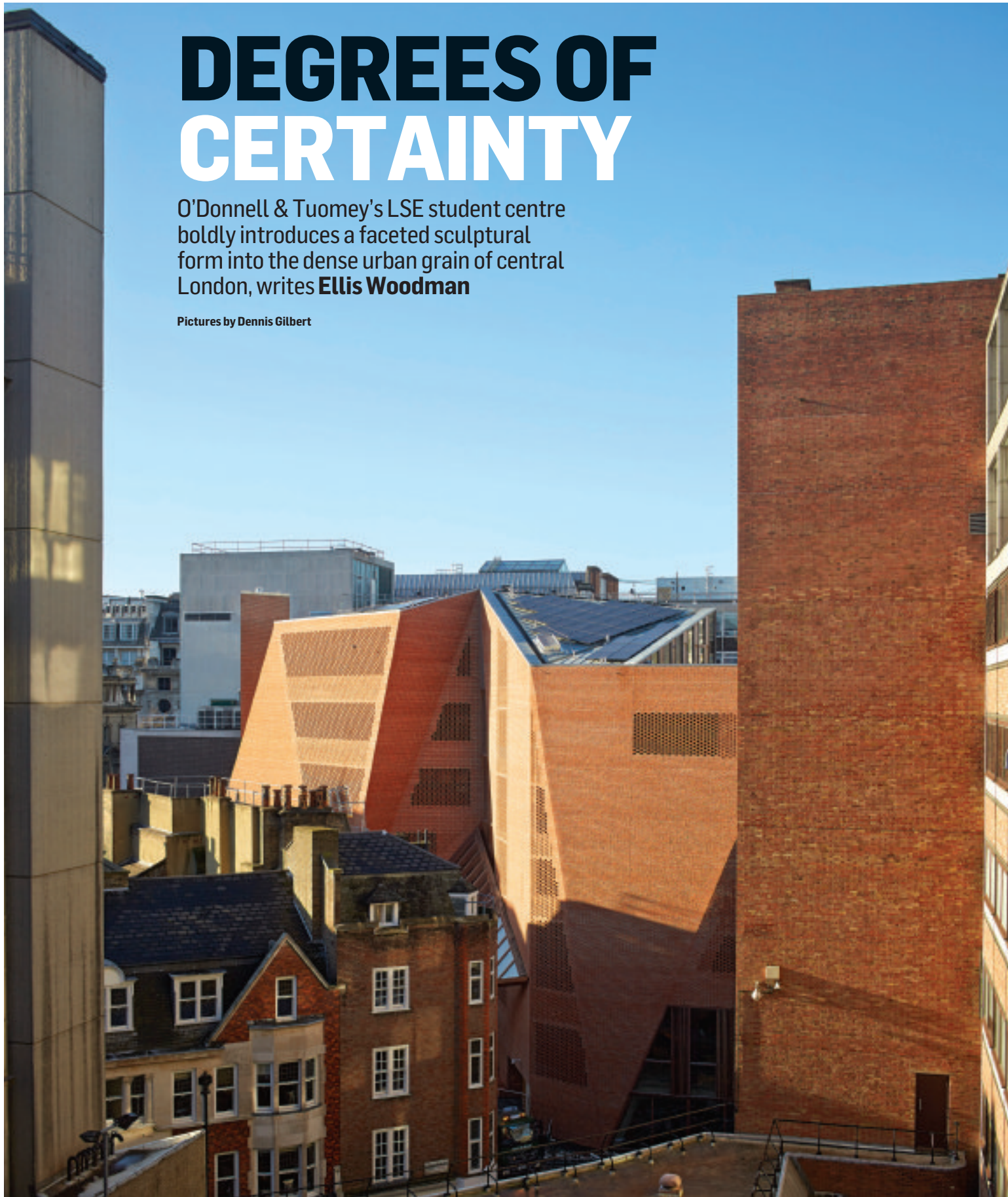


View of the  
Sheffield Street  
elevation.

# DEGREES OF CERTAINTY

O'Donnell & Tuomey's LSE student centre boldly introduces a faceted sculptural form into the dense urban grain of central London, writes **Ellis Woodman**

Pictures by Dennis Gilbert





**W**ith every respect to the exemplary work of Dennis Gilbert that illustrates this article, I do wonder if the London School of Economics & Political Science's Saw Swee Hock Student Centre might not be the least readily photographed building in the capital. The only views in which the highly particular massing of O'Donnell & Tuomey's design can be understood in anything like its entirety are from upper windows some streets away. Approaching via the narrow, pedestrianised lanes that form the immediate context, we discover the building only when hard upon it: a tightly framed and towering expanse of brick, its flexing form rendered all the more cryptic by a startling paucity of windows. There are three such views: one from either end of Sheffield Street, the street that the student centre addresses, and a third down the intersecting St Clement's Lane, which is now terminated by the new building's entrance.

As it has risen over the past 18 months, I have found myself returning to these views repeatedly and, I must confess, still struggle with the question of whether this entirely singular building represents a convincing urban proposition. Certainly O'Donnell & Tuomey's past work can be more confidently located within one of two lines of formal enquiry: an urban mode, broadly characterised by rectilinear plans and punched windows (Cherry Orchard School, Timbervard

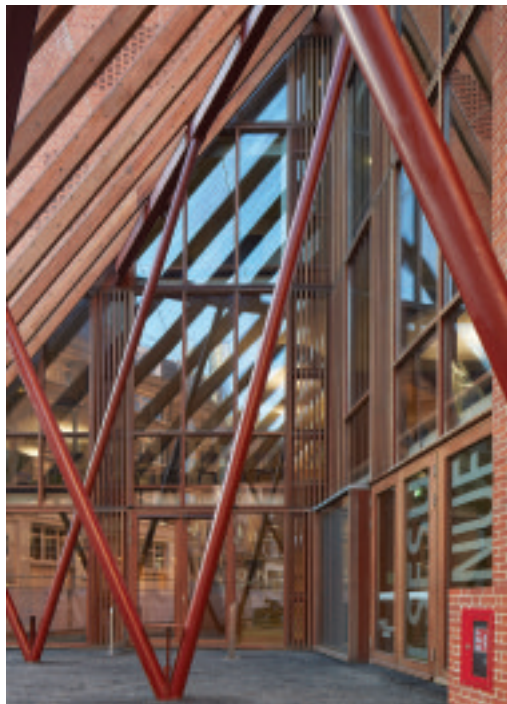
## The building's presence comes close to that of a geological outcrop

(Housing) and an altogether more sculptural expression suggesting an affinity with landscape (Killiney House, Lyric Theatre). The central curiosity of the LSE design is that despite an intensely urban setting, it feels so strongly related to that second lineage. It comes as no surprise that the early scheme development was undertaken almost exclusively with models. This is a building that has form in abundance but effectively no elevation.

If I suggest an explanation rooted, at least in part, in the client's desire for a landmark, that is not to dismiss such an ambition as misplaced. The LSE has occupied its square kilometre of central London for over a century but its campus is still notably lacking in architectural definition. It has adapted the majority of its buildings from other purposes, the student centre being the first new one in 40 years. Its brief demanded nothing less than "the best student centre in the world" — a goal that says much about the mounting competition to attract international students and researchers — and so a landmark, in a very literal sense, is what has been designed: the building's presence in the city comes close to that of a geological outcrop.

Comparison with the other shortlisted entries reveals quite how radical a strategy the Dublin practice's design represented. All five of its competitors chose to build across the entirety of the plot, establishing a frontage that ran parallel to the buildings on the opposite side of Sheffield Street and approximated their height. The formative move in O'Donnell & Tuomey's design was the introduction of a substantial notch mid-way down the principal facade: a gift to the street that enabled the creation of a dramatic covered entrance while allowing the building a ▶

Looking east down Sheffield Street.



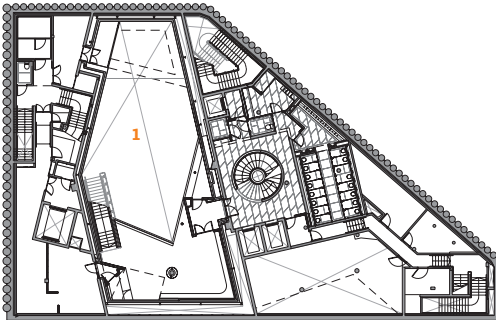
The entrance canopy.



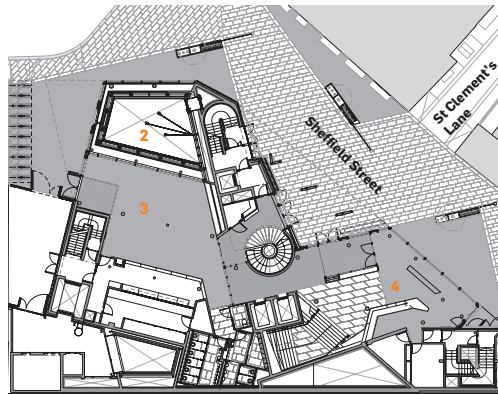
Model showing the relationship to Sheffield Street.



**LEVEL -01**



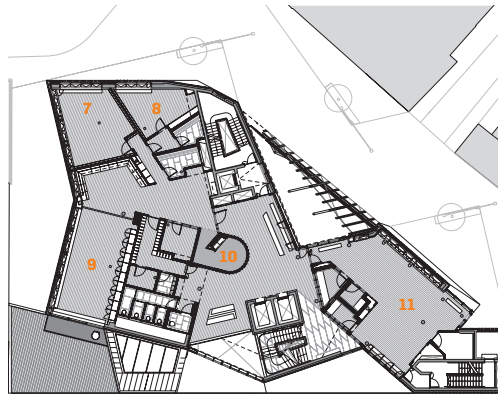
**LEVEL 00**



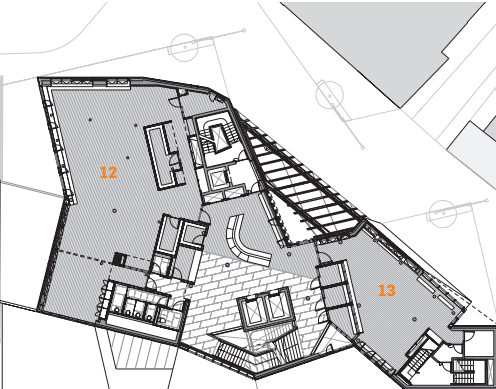
**LEVEL 01**



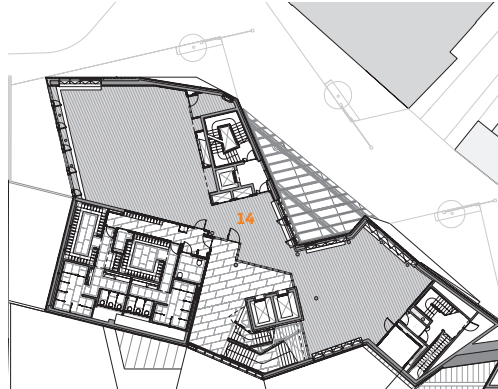
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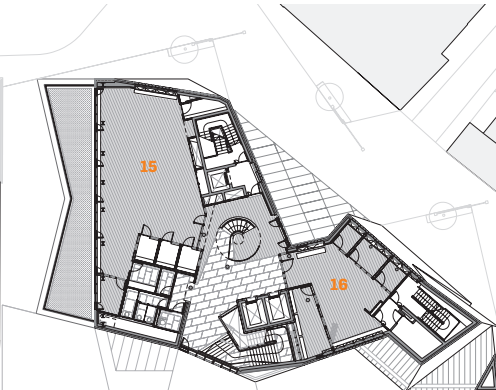
**LEVEL 03**



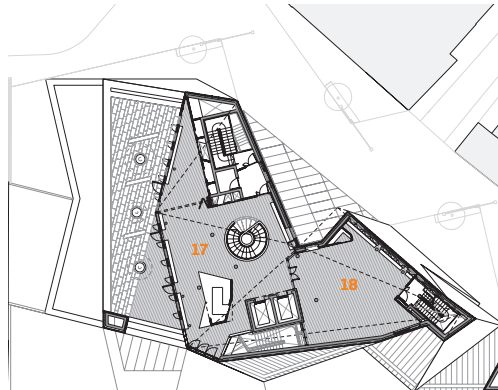
**LEVEL 04**



**LEVEL 05**



**LEVEL 06**



The upper level enjoys a tent-like roof.



#### KEY TO PLANS

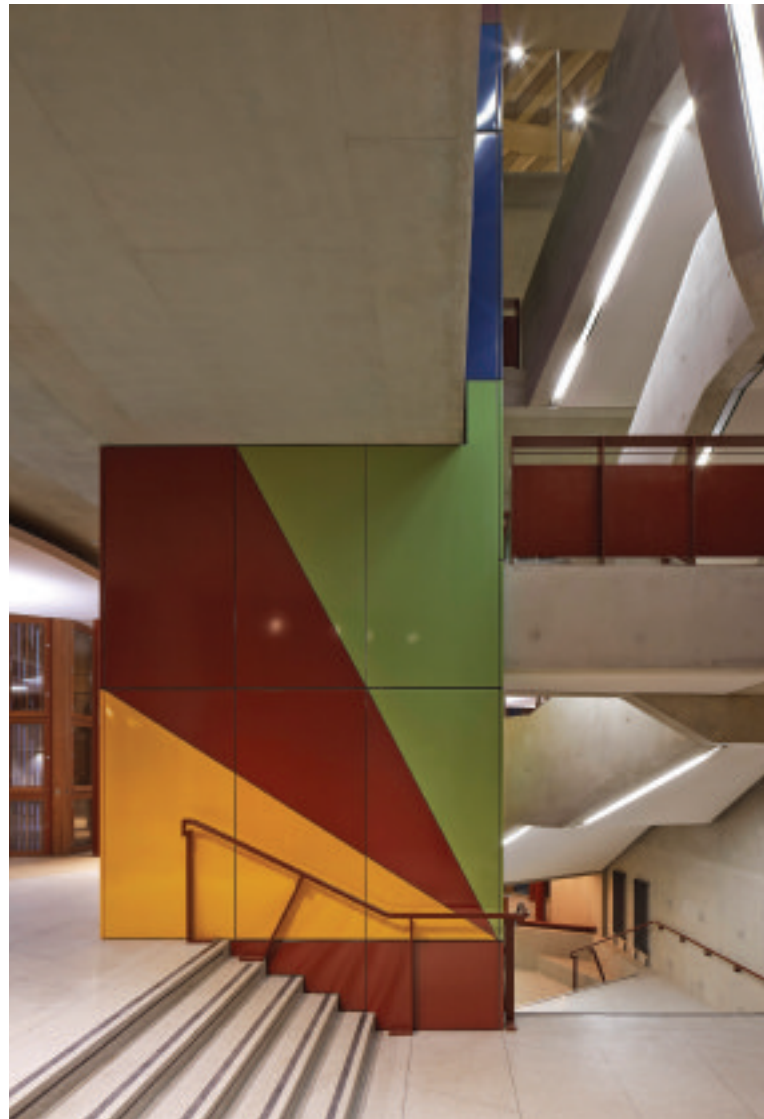
- 1 Nightclub
- 2 Void over nightclub
- 3 Pub
- 4 Reception/entrance foyer
- 5 Activity centre
- 6 Café
- 7 Male Islamic prayer room
- 8 Female Islamic prayer room
- 9 Multifaith prayer
- 10 Private prayer
- 11 Media centre
- 12 Student union office
- 13 LSE residences
- 14 Gym
- 15 Careers services
- 16 Careers centre
- 17 Exercise studio
- 18 Coffee/juice bar

more emphatic presence in the tangential views by which it is generally experienced. The loss of floor space necessitated an escalation in height, which caused a potential overshadowing of the neighbours across the road. The LSE now owns these buildings but the design was developed with the aim of avoiding an infringement of their rights to light. That impulse may have represented the genesis of the building's faceted morphology, but its form is also a product of efforts to engage the context. Looking down St Clement's Lane, for example, we find the view sliced across by an eight-storey corbelling brick plane, its lowest point aligned precisely with the left hand side of the street, its upper point with the right.

The architect describes the use of brick as an obvious response to the opportunity to build in London. It has employed a mix of six different colours of a hardness that allows the same treatment to be employed for the repaving of Sheffield Street. Yet the facade's relationship to the ground is ambiguous. Skirt-like, it maintains a more certain line at



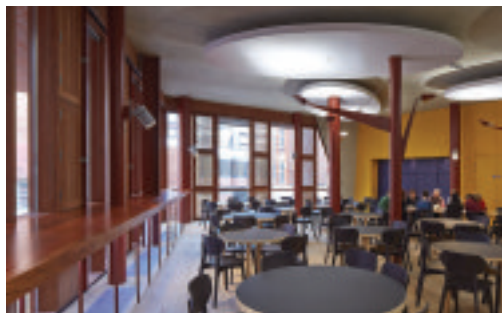
The stair seen from the first floor.



the top, being seemingly hoiked up, or slashed to reveal expanses of glazing below. These areas of glass admit views of the public circulation and the larger shared spaces distributed on the lower storeys. However, the building owes its commanding sculptural presence to the bold decision to suppress the windows on its upper reaches by extending the brick wall in front of them in perforated form.

The results are dramatic but come at some cost. Denied any larger-scale articulation of the facade, the eye is drawn to a series of uncomfortably prominent expansion joints: the only vertical lines punctuating these determinedly non-orthogonal walls. A still more problematic consequence is the inscrutable cast that the facade has inevitably acquired. What are those upper storeys? A multi-storey carpark? Even if you know otherwise, it is hard to imagine what kind of environment they offer. The fear is, a dark one: while the plan is narrow and enjoys significant glazing from the rear, there is no means of knowing so from the street.

If you have shared these awk-



The first floor café.

ward first impressions I can, however, guarantee that they will be dispelled once you make your way under the monumental timber and glass entrance canopy. The interior is a lucidly arranged and thrillingly inventive triumph and having finally experienced it I found I could enjoy the exterior with far less reservation.

The scale of that canopy reflects the fact that it is required to accommodate two entrances. The first serves a ground-floor pub and a nightclub ranged across the two basement levels:

an arrangement made much more spatially exciting by the opening of a view between these upper and lower areas. Above the stage, the volume of the nightclub extends into that of the pub in the form of an acoustically glazed box. It sits inboard of the encompassing facade but this too is heavily glazed so the activities of pub, stage and street are afforded a visual simultaneity. Walking past on a January night with light from a subterranean mirror ball bouncing on to the street and progressively attired

smokers sheltering from the rain under the huge cantilever at the building's east end was to be reminded of why one lives in a city.

The neighbouring entrance leads to a less bacchanalian world distributed over six storeys. As in the Lyric Theatre, its arrangement is driven by a public stair that charts an unregimented course up the height of the building. It is partnered with a free-standing lift faced in colourful vitreous enamelled panels: the one feature that remains constant from floor to floor. The stair dances alongside this totem pole, the first broad flight sweeping fully around it before contracting into a switchback arrangement and then, on the last floor, into a spiral.

Fulfilling the promise of an enticingly wide-ranging brief, the sense of spatial transformation is unstinting. Every floor supports both a new function and a distinct configuration. The complexity is exacerbated by the diversity of the internal surfaces. Floors are variously in oak and terrazzo while there are walls in insitu-concrete, brick and timber. Iron oxide-coloured steelwork completes a palette that is

deployed rigorously but to very graphic effect.

Principally given over to a café, the first floor enjoys a piano nobile-like expansiveness both in its internal arrangement and in its relationship to the wider world. Every view feels charged. To the north, we look down a street towards Lincoln's Inn Fields and discover that thanks to an intervening rise in ground level it lies almost at our height. In the opposite direction, we find the space caught beneath the entrance canopy – a multiple layering highly characteristic of the building.

On this level, the columns are a source of utility and enjoyment: fitted with branches, they double as a means of supporting uplighters. The use of level 4 as a gym, however, required that it be column-free: a feat achieved by hanging the slab above it off a Vierendeel truss. These larger spaces are interspersed by facilities ranging from a radio station to a multi-faith centre. All are accessed directly off the main staircase so we encounter an intoxicatingly diverse range of activities as we climb. The smaller

spaces tend to be the ones whose windows have been screened in brick and I am happy to report they largely survive the treatment. Most also enjoy areas of unobstructed glazing, the one notable exception being a rather gloomy careers centre.

This may not be a perfect building but it is a fantastically individual one that offers proof of its architect's readiness to take heroic artistic risks. It fulfils the LSE's ambitions for a landmark but resists reduction to a reassuringly iconic image. It is architecture that demands to be experienced at first hand and I urge you to make a visit.

#### PROJECT TEAM

**Architect** O'Donnell & Tuomey  
**Client** London School of Economics & Political Science, Estates Division.

#### Structural engineers

Dewhurst Macfarlane & Partners / Horganlynch Consulting Engineers

**Services & environmental engineer** BDSP

**Main contractor (D&B)** Geoffrey Osborne