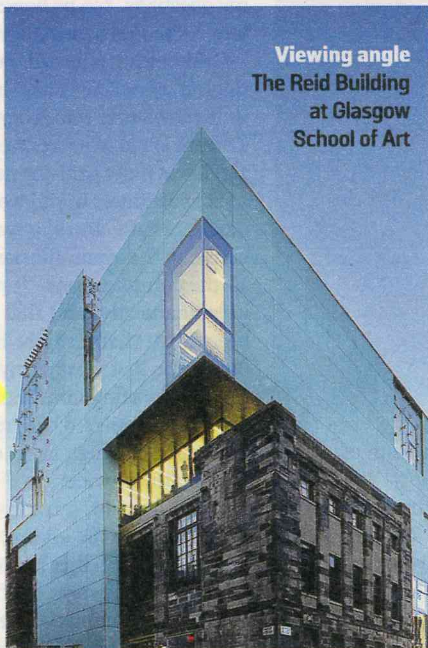
Top of the form

Britain's universities are in a class of their own when it comes to progressive new buildings. By Hugh Pearman

If you want a fast and friendly introduction to fashions in architecture, look no further than Britain's universities, colleges and art schools. They need to advertise their wares, to be seen as progressive, exciting or, at any rate, reasonably equipped with stuff students need, especially bars and warm, comfy places with wi-fi. These seats of learning are in fierce competition, and architecture is one of the ways they compete for visibility. Good buildings make good photographs in the prospectus.

You see this happening all over. Oxford Brookes is the most successful of the former polytechnics, but it used to be near-invisible, tucked away in a 1950s campus on the eastern outskirts. That has all changed with its eye-catching £80m main building and public square, just opened, by the architects Design Engine.

In London, the new £24m Saw Swee Hock student centre, at LSE, is attracting attention. Dropped into the side streets just south of Lincoln's Inn Fields, it's an object lesson in how to make a big impact in a tight space. The architects, O'Donnell + Tuomey, have made a tectonic fantasy of folded, angled, perforated walls in handmade brick, designed to draw students in from the Dickensian surrounding streets. It's sophisticated stuff.


Viewing angle The Reid Building at Glasgow School of Art

McATEER PHOTOGRAPH

For a truly startling juxtaposition of old and new, however, head for Glasgow. Its School of Art is an internationally significant building by an acknowledged genius, Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Built between 1897 and 1909, it is the glory of his too-brief career, not only combining Arts and Crafts with art nouveau, but the Scottish baronial style with the steel-frame construction techniques of modern industry. So, when the school ran a competition to build something big and new right opposite it, there was global interest, and (accompanied by gnashing of teeth from UK rivals) the job went to an American big name, Steven Holl.

He wisely took the line that it would be suicidal to compete stylistically with Mackintosh, so the exterior of his £30m Reid Building, which houses the school's design faculty, big refectory, lecture theatre and so on, is a muted, blocky affair of pale-green matt glass, with a long, set-back planted terrace from which one can regard the Mackintosh across the street. For Holl, this is the insubstantial negative of its forebear's stone-clad positive.

Well, OK: but it's a big building, and anything that bulky, so close, is bound to loom over its neighbour. This is exactly what it does, though let's not get too precious about it — the original School of Art, though a touch foppish in its day, is still as tough as a Glaswegian bouncer, and wins this architectural face-off with ease. Holl's new building may be simultaneously big and fragile-seeming outside, but it is all about the interior, and that is suitably tough and very good.

Too often with new buildings, the architectural striving (if any) ends at the door, whereupon you enter a world of more or less standard fit-out. Not in the case of Oxford Brookes, LSE and the Glasgow School of Art. In all three cases, the architecture intensifies as you move into it and through it.

Holl's particular trick in Glasgow is what he calls "driven voids of light". That's architect-speak for three big, angled concrete tubes that pierce the building from top to bottom, collecting daylight at the top and distributing it to the lower levels. Holl combines these with a looping route of ramps and stairs that takes you back and forward from level to level, in places passing through big cut-outs in the light tubes. Combined with tall spaces such as the refectory and some of the studios, this makes the building a pleasure to move around. Holl even provides a functionally useless but aesthetically satisfying little space — a kind of belvedere down steps from a corner of a studio, where you can sit and gaze south across the city.

That's the sort of thing the best architects do: make nooks and corners that become the character of the building. Holl, I think, understands Mackintosh very well.

ST DIGITAL

See more pictures of the Reid Building
thesundaytimes.co.uk/culture

DiCorcia's photographs toy with reality, but First World War portraits capture the terrible truth

On the face of it, the two shows I am writing about this week have nothing in common. Indeed, their differences are striking. Philip-Lorca diCorcia's photographs at the Hepworth Wakefield are separated from The Great War in Portraits, at the National Portrait Gallery, in London, by a lot more than 184 miles. Tonally, they may as well be on different planets. DiCorcia is "one of America's most important and influential contemporary photographers", whose work gets gobbled up at art fairs and biennales. The Great War, meanwhile, is a scar from another century that can never heal: an immovable reminder of the pointlessness of death. Two entirely different shows. What unites them?

The answer is "reality", or, more specifically, "the appearance of reality". Both these events are concerned with art's power to evoke reality and tinker with it. Both warn us, therefore, to doubt what we are shown.

DiCorcia's sneaky photographs of people and places are never quite what they seem. He works in clusters of linked images, and the Wakefield show sets out to encapsulate his career so far by flicking back through the best-known of these series. Interestingly, this encapsulation is done in reverse. The journey starts with his latest works, then winds back through his career to the first notable pictures he took, in 1975. The thinking behind this