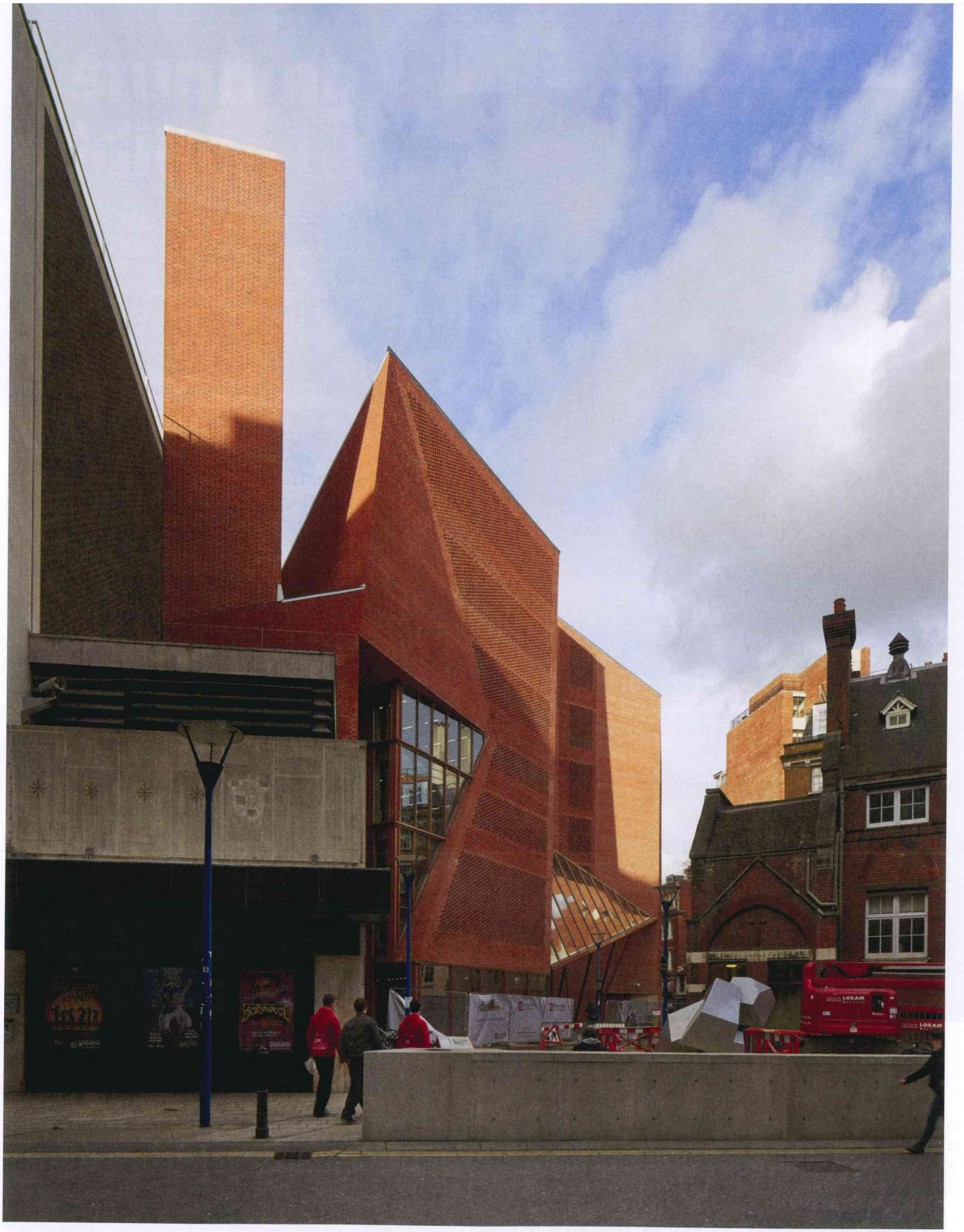
BUILDING

Saw Swee Hock Student Centre

O'Donnell & Tuomey's addition to the London School of Economics honours people and place, says ***Ros Diamond****. Photographs by Dennis Gilbert.*

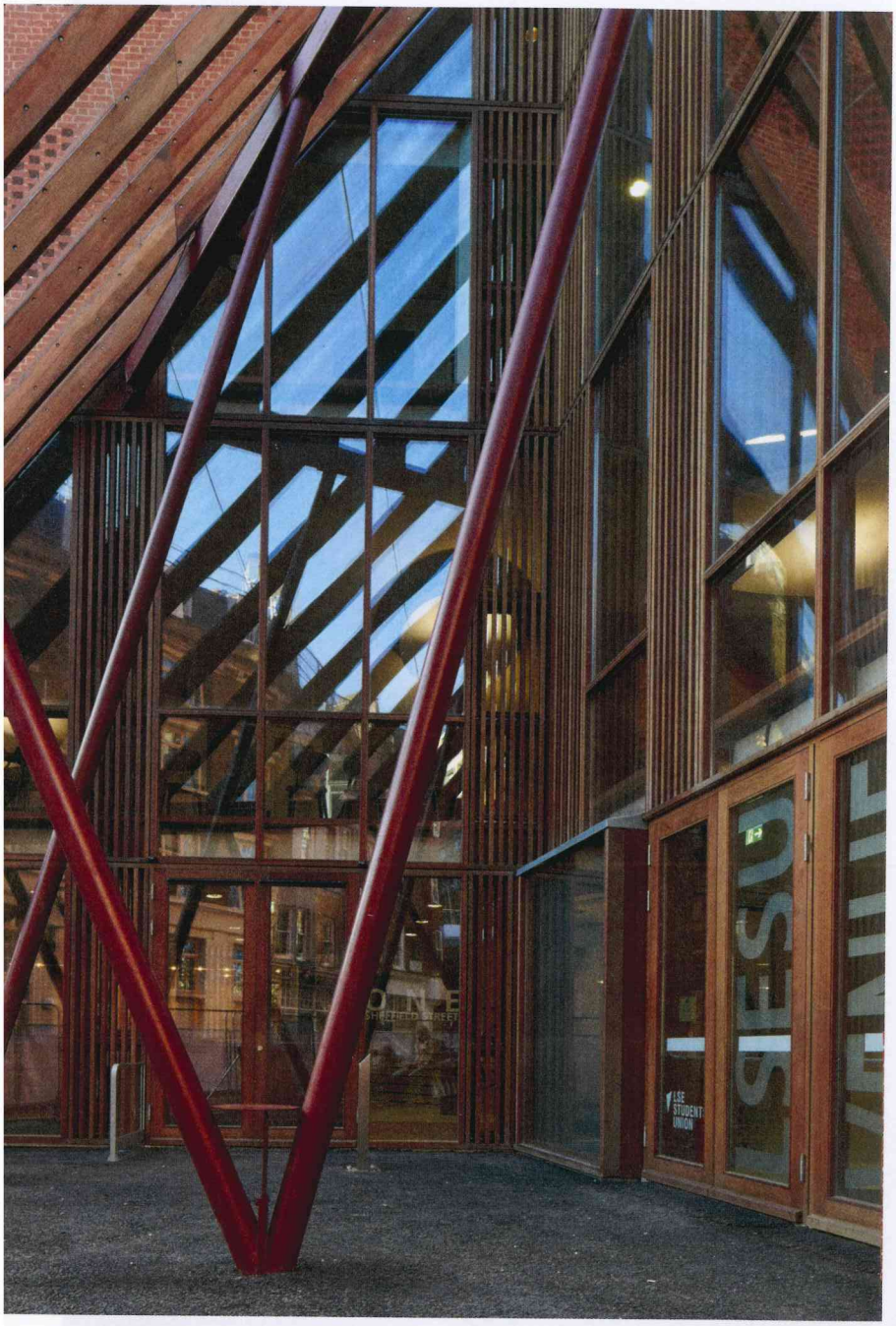
The London School of Economics inhabits an urban backland behind the busy thoroughfares of Aldwych and Kingsway. Until recently, its campus was largely hidden inside a growing collection of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century offices and warehouses. This growth has demanded a more strategic approach to its physical structure, now evident in the construction of the first building of its new era, the distinctive Saw Swee Hock Student Centre. The building



emerges unexpectedly as a sculpted outcrop of folded facades, at once autonomous and embedded in its context. Its architect, Dublin-based O'Donnell & Tuomey, explains the building as a design extruded from the geometries of the surrounding spaces and streets, tectonically amplified inside into 'one coherent volume', using London's ubiquitous material, brick.

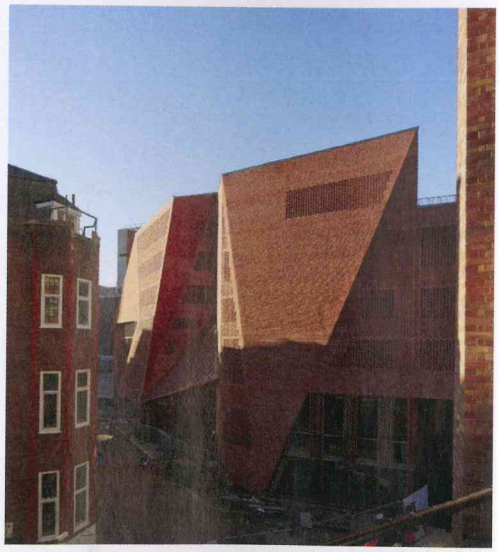
The Centre exemplifies the alternative to a purely ideological architecture, in which buildings are made from their contexts without compromising their integrity. Such projects embrace the constraints of their circumstances. Sometimes they are also developed from the ironies of their contemporary technical and cultural situations. The Student Centre's abstract form encloses a democratic social environment. It contains the many non-academic functions associated with student life, in a volume compressed by its tight footprint and the contingent rights to light

Above *O'Donnell & Tuomey's Student Centre was won in a competition that attracted 133 entries, against a shortlist comprising AHMM, Davd Chipperfield, 3XN, de Rijke Marsh Morgan and Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios. The next major completion on the LSE's central London estate will be a Global Centre for the Social Sciences, in 2018. Architect Rogers Stirk Harbour & Partners was selected from a shortlist comprising Hopkins, OMA, Grafton Architects and Heneghan Peng.*
Left *Aerial view of the existing site.*



of its neighbours. It includes spaces for collective engagement and individual thought, physical exercise and career development. Its simultaneous suggestion of lightness and weight is based not only on its constructed form but also on strategic approaches to its design, associated with its spaces and its social content as a building of multiple, potentially conflicting functions: a pub and a learning cafe, a prayer room and a media centre, a gym and careers offices, and an acoustically segregated basement events venue.

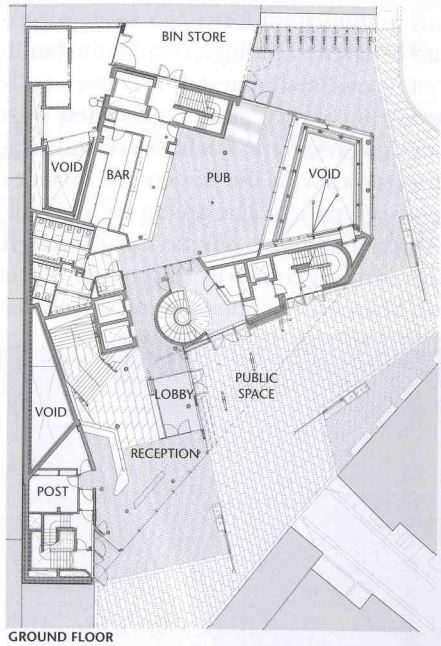
The building's complicated non-orthogonal layout promotes a strategy of openness by constructing an entirely free spatial territory connecting the functions, extended from the campus without barriers or fire door separation. This is something from which university buildings largely retreated after the student demonstrations of the 1960s and as a result of more recent security concerns. The centre constructs openness by collecting movement onto a wide staircase, with adjacent unprogrammed spaces, which would typically be



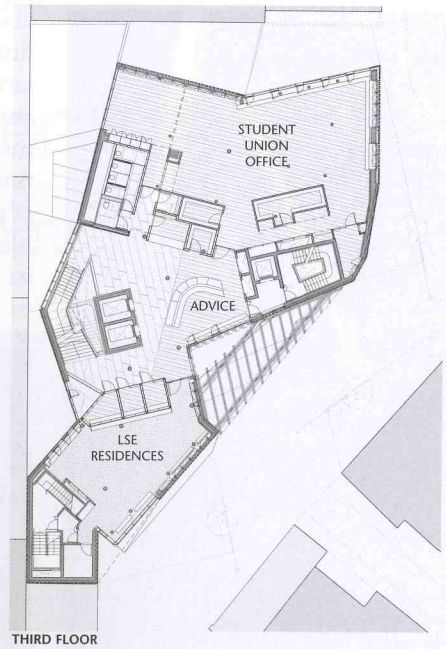
used as minimal circulation, enlarged for random encounter and loitering where the building's collective social enterprise is densest. By drawing lines from the context, the architects are using non-authoritative axes to define spaces which in turn govern the structural approach, eschewing an ideologically self-referential method of composing the architecture. The 'trapezoidal' plan arising from the intertwined axial geometries gives as much area to free space as to conventional rooms. Its unpredictable angles, like the twists and turns negotiated in London's non-orthogonal street patterns, recognise the social potential in slight shifts off axis.

The folded building has the solidity of a carved block, perforated in sections to admit light and air, the impression being of an

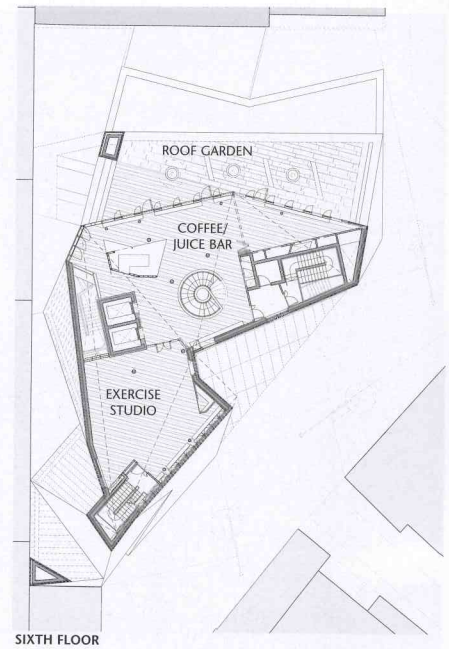
Top left, above *Glass and timber entrance canopy.*
Left *Sixth-floor exercise studio.*



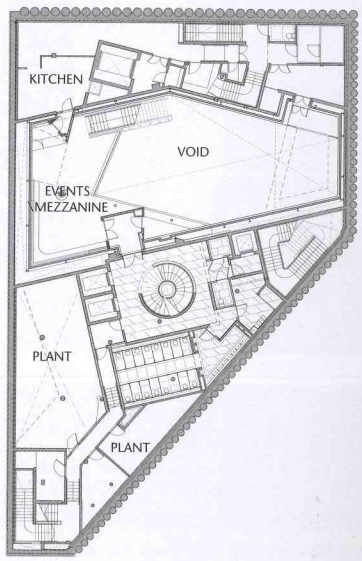
GROUND FLOOR



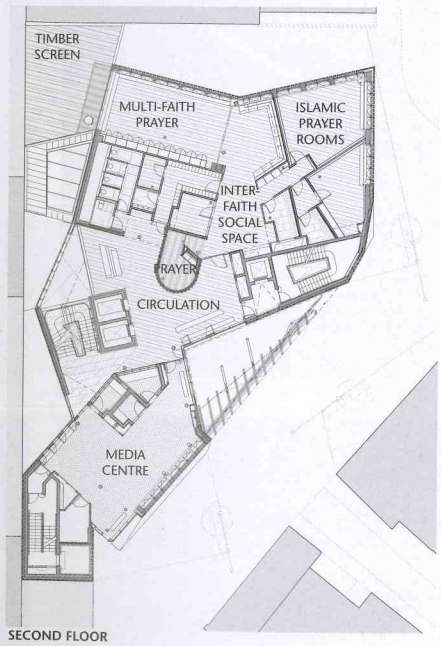
THIRD FLOOR



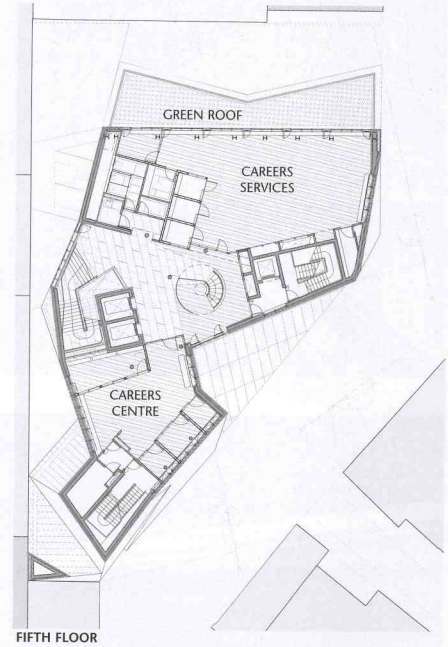
SIXTH FLOOR



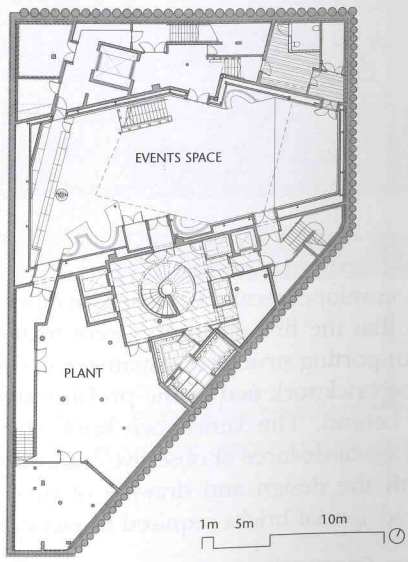
BASEMENT 1



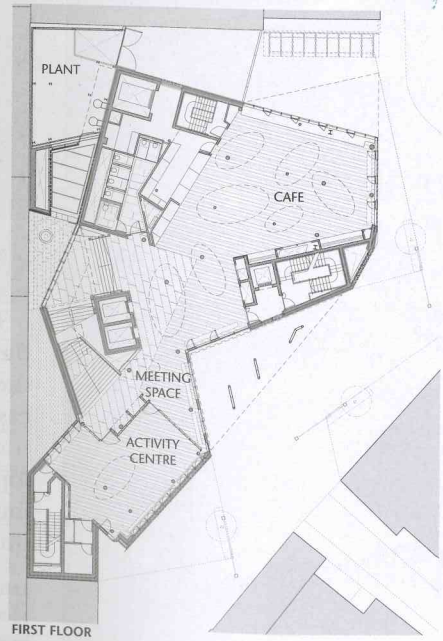
SECOND FLOOR



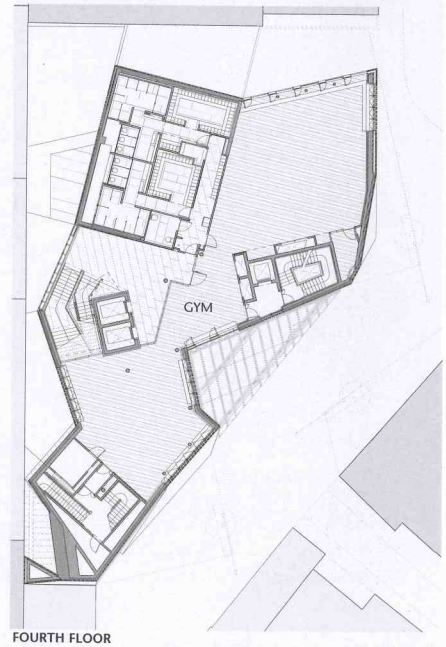
FIFTH FLOOR



BASEMENT 2



FIRST FLOOR



FOURTH FLOOR

abstract architectural form as a strange continuum of its surroundings, despite the familiarity of its essential material. The brick walls conveying the heavy gravity associated with masonry's stereotomic qualities are reconstituted tectonically in the screen-like qualities of their open panels. The architects' destabilising of the building's unique form through its precarious geometric nature connects to the Mannerist tendencies of an earlier

postmodern generation, particularly the work of James Stirling.

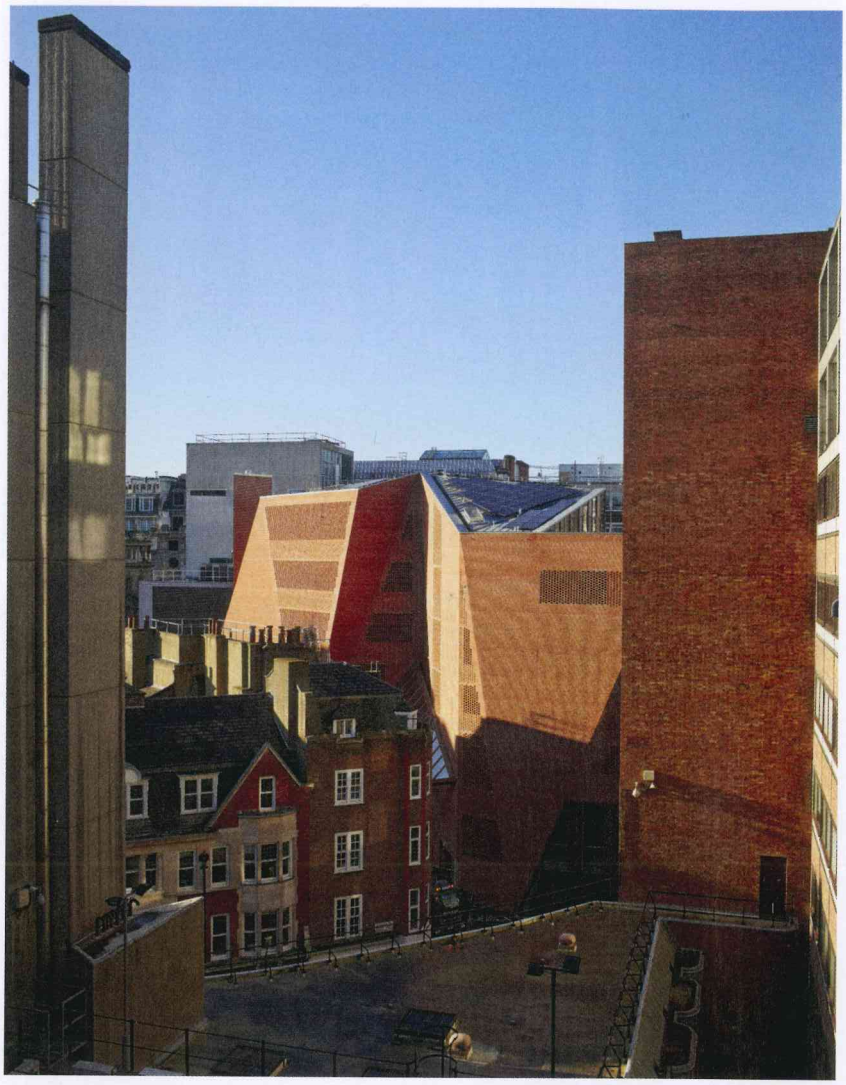
The envelope recalls Gottfried Semper's theory that the first enclosures were textile, their supporting structures armatures: in this case the brickwork tied to the prefabricated frame behind. The latticework brick envelope is a tour-de-force of obsessive craft, starting with the design and drawing of over a hundred special bricks required to fabricate

Left, above *The wide main stair wraps a lift core with stove enamelled cladding. Towards the top of the building its angularity gives way to a separate, gentler spiral staircase.*

the complex geometry of the meticulously folded hand-laid walls without on-site cutting. Delighting in the offset angle, the architects have substituted construction crafts such as gauged brickwork – which was often considered too labour intensive even in the early eighteenth century – with designing on computer. Technology has enabled a different version of hand craft to take place.

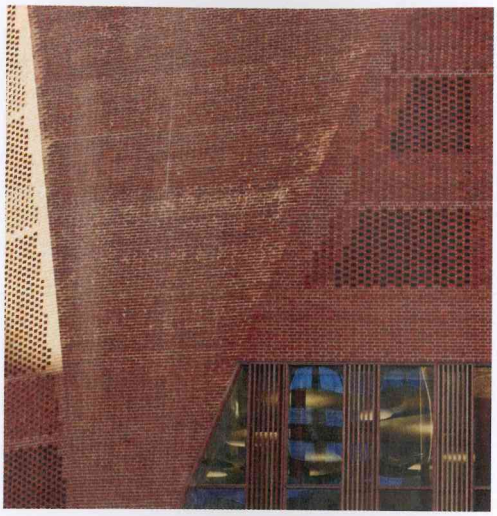
The impression of the building's lightness depends on its fabrication techniques but also on its internal design and its strategic transparency. The ceremonial staircase with built-in seats on its landings is suspended in a light void formed between the lift core and the site's straight rear boundary. The glazing at the back of its first flight allows daylight to penetrate the floors' centres, while the stairs' boulevard-like quality reiterates the fluid connections to the campus. It orientates the places of more individual action – offices, exercise rooms, prayer rooms

Above *Sixth-floor juice bar; first-floor cafe; circulation; union advice centre.*
Below *Basement events space.*



Left, below *Hundreds of drawings were made for the hundred or so special bricks alone, which were hand-made by Coleford Brick & Tile and hand-laid by Swift Brickwork Contractors to precise assembly drawings made by the architects. The bricks are of a type usually specified for paving, chosen for its water resistance.*

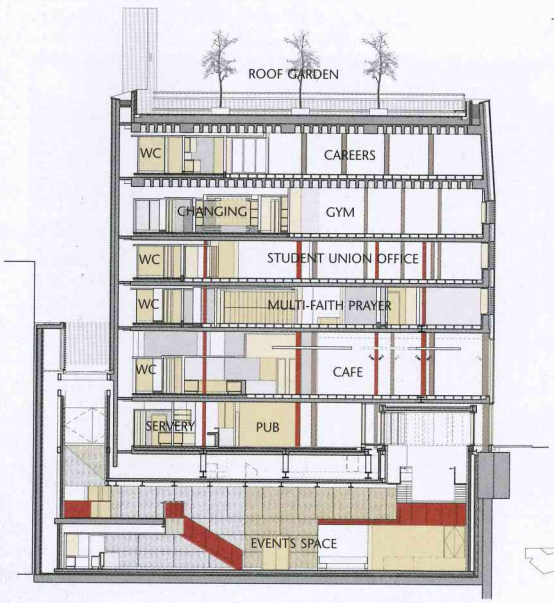
emphatic. This occurs above its elaborately canopied entrance forecourt, enclosing the pub and the learning cafe on the ground and first floors, and facing the campus. This functional disposition of open glazing reinforces an autonomous architecture, free-standing from the urban block and without a formal 'front'. The building's non-hierarchical character, in which social and office functions are equally distributed, liberates it from conventional formalities and a concomitant structural system. Deep transfer structures are used to

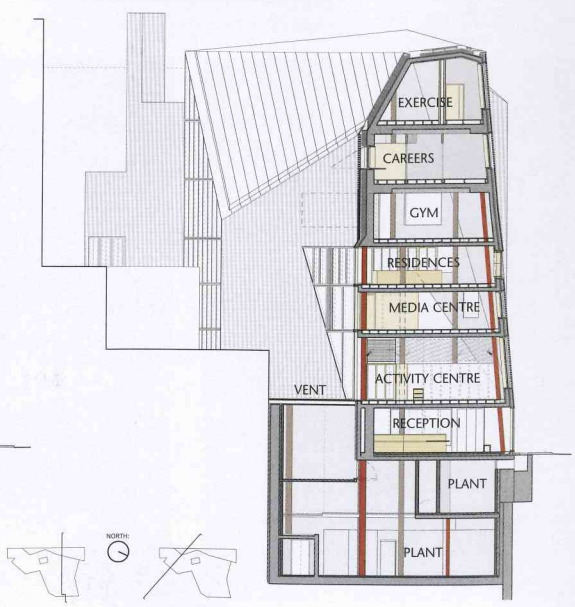


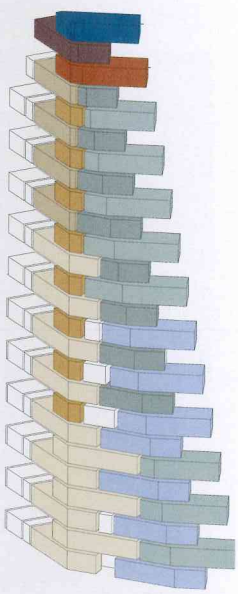
and the strip of workspace in the cafe – towards the building's folding peripheries, connecting students to views of the city beyond the campus. Daylight and air are admitted through perforations in the brick walls with opening glazing behind, and the inscrutable construction is disrupted by high glass and timber screens situated where the social purpose of the building is most

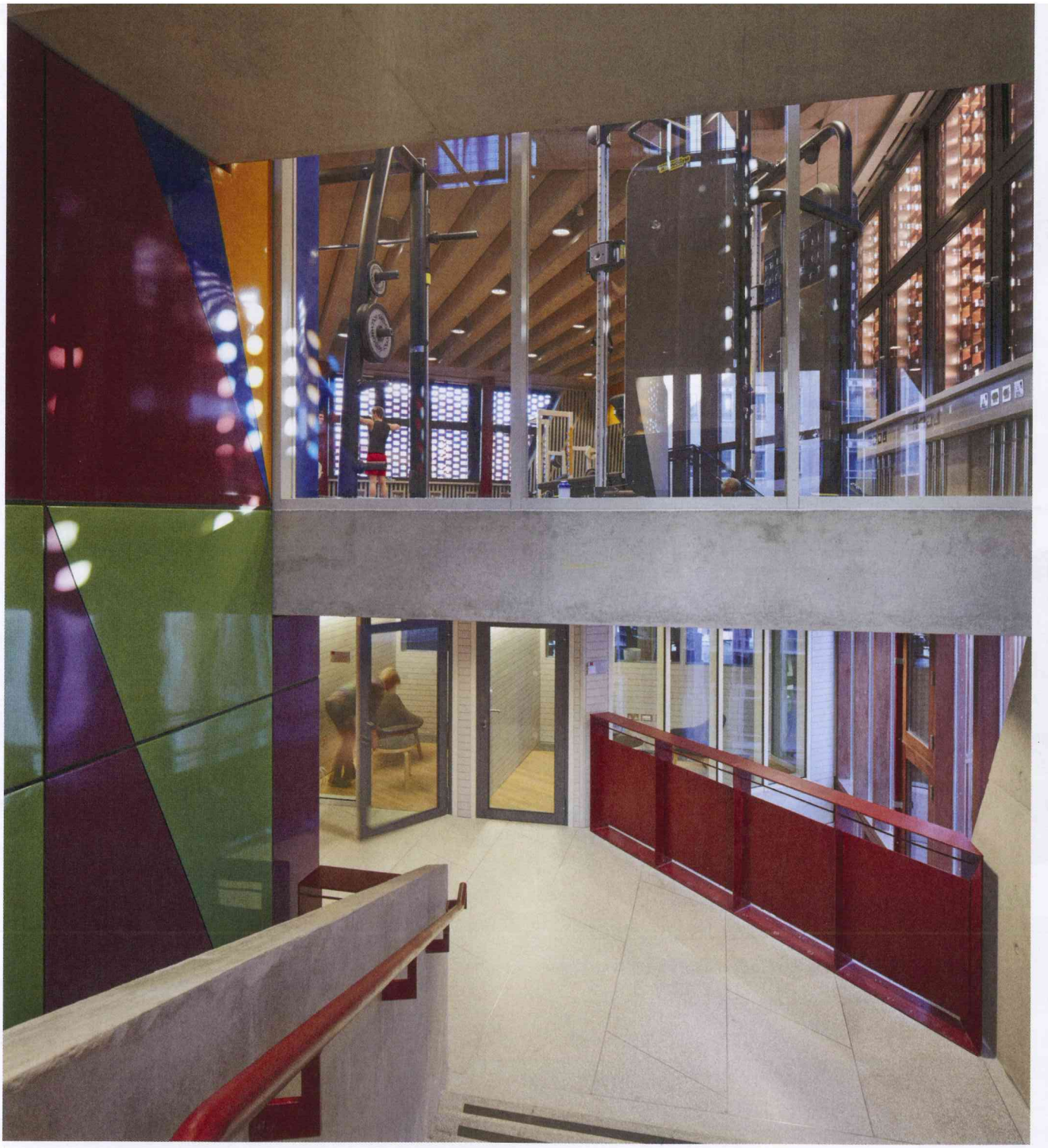
resolve the unobstructed spans needed for the gym and the basement events space, above which the upper floors float.

The interior spaces are made as an urban microcosm, dignifying student life with civic presence. Brick around the staircase and on the open hall and pub floors conveys a sense of the robust street, as do concrete stair walls and soffits. The brick wall and floor lining of









the multi-faith prayer room connects it conceptually to other ritualised spaces. Elsewhere, the bricolage of materials refers to the lively diversity of uses and experiences compacted in the building. They counter its warehouse-like tendencies through controlling its acoustics. At an abstract level the extended concrete surfaces also reference the greyness of local paving. The patterned, stove-enamelled lift core uses stepping colours as orientation devices, and references the picturesque urban context.

Since the heroic period which produced, for example, Denys Lasdun's Schools of Oriental Studies and Education, London's universities have had no prominent architecture, despite their presence as some of the city's fastest-growing organisations. The Students' Centre building validates the LSE's presence as a significant urban institution.

Ros Diamond is a director of Diamond Architects. She has co-edited a number of books and was an editor of the journal 9H.

Above *View into LSE Residences, the school's accommodation office, and the fourth-floor gym above.*

Project team
Architect: O'Donnell+Tuomey Architects; directors: John Tuomey, Sheila O'Donnell (pictured right, ph: Paul McCarthy); design team: Willie Carey (associate), Geoff Brouder (project architect), Laura Harty, Kirstie Smeaton, Gary Watkin, Anne-Louise Duignan, Ciara Reddy, Jitka Leonard, Iseult O'Cleary, Henrik Wolterstorff, Mark Grehan, Monika Hinz; structural engineer: Dewhurst Macfarlane & Partners, Horganlynch Consulting Engineers; services and environmental engineer: BDSP; security, fire, acoustics, transport and logistics consultant: Arup; catering: Tricon Foodservice Consultants; access: David Bonnett Associates; archaeology: Gifford; project manager: Turner & Townsend; qs: Northcroft; planning consultant: Turley Associates; party wall consultant: Anstey Horne; building control: Carillion; CDM coordinator: Gardiner & Theobald; main contractor (D&B): Geoffrey Osborne; client: LSE Estates Division.

Selected suppliers and subcontractors
Brick: handmade Saxon Tudor Mix by Coleford Brick & Tile; bricklayer: Swift; Jatoba hardwood windows: GEM Group; aluminium windows: Schueco; zinc roofing: Rheinzink long strip pre-weathered blue/grey; blinds: Labetts; vitreous enamel cladding: AJ Wells & Sons; European white oak flooring: Woods of Wales; terrazzo flooring: WB Simpson & Sons; sanitaryware: Armitage Shanks; bespoke lighting: Bega, Specials Lighting; steel balustrading: Structural Stairways; steel fabrication: D&R Structures; cubicles: Thrislington Cubicles; fitted furniture, timber wall linings: Houston Cox Eastern; specialist fit-out: Macai; paint: Dulux; terrace paviours: Marshalls.