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NEW LONDON

QUARTERLY

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ISSUE EIGHTEEN
SPRING 2014
£10





Putting down roots

O'Donnell + Tuomey's striking new student centre for the London School of Economics adds a new identity to the school's urban campus. Peter Murray talks to director of estates Julian Robinson about the transformation of this key estate

We talk a lot about placemaking these days; about how it's all to do with the spaces in between rather than the buildings. The LSE's higgledy-piggledy campus off Kingsway provides an interesting case study on the subject. Not long ago you would have been hard pressed to know that a world-class educational institution occupied the area: an amorphous collection of rather down-at-heel buildings with students and traffic competing for the surrounding road space.

Over the last few years all that has changed. Today there is a greater visual coherence to the campus. 'It's the small things,' says Julian Robinson, 'like signage, branding, putting window boxes down Houghton Street, and at very small cost. All the buildings used to be covered in posters and you'd get Blu-Tack marks on all the stones. Now they put posters on vitreous enamel panels, which then double up as information boards. The uplighting on the underside of the bridge over Houghton Street gives more of a sense of arrival, a sense of place, and the red is a very distinctive colour. We are now using that within the entrances

of all our buildings to try and pull the campus together.'

Last October, Robinson agreed a new public realm strategy for the School with Westminster. 'I had the pleasure of working with Graham King on that. The pedestrianisation of Sheffield Street outside the new student centre is very important for us. We will be looking to Westminster for further upgrades, shared surfaces and traffic management improvements so we can reinforce this as a university quarter.'

And there's much more to come. The opening of O'Donnell + Tuomey's (ODT) new Saw Swee Hock Student Centre this term kicks off a spate of development which includes the refurbishment of the old Land Registry building by Jestico + Whiles, the new Centre for the Social Sciences, won in competition by Rogers Stirk Harbour, and the redevelopment of a major site overlooking Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Robinson cut his teeth in the world of higher education at Queen Mary University of London on the Mile End Road. 'I arrived there at the end of the construction of their library, which

Colin St John Wilson had designed. It is an exquisite piece of Modernist architecture, much better than his British Library, much purer. I established the projects office, set up a design office and employed architects. We did quite a lot of the low-level work in-house, but whenever there were larger projects they would go out to different architectural teams. Will Alsop did the new Medical School at Whitechapel; a fantastic job to work on, really complicated but one that you would want to have on your CV. MJP did the first phase of a student village for us. We then appointed Feilden Clegg Bradley for the second and third phases.'

'I like to bring on smaller and rawer talent, so I employed a small firm called Surface Architects. The first thing they did was a disabled access scheme in a Grade II* church which had been deconsecrated, then they then did the lock keeper's cottage extension at Mile End Lock. That gave me great pleasure.' Then, in 1998, Robinson moved to the LSE.

'The School brought me in to project manage the new academic building by

Grimshaw. That was very successful and gave them the confidence to go on with a much more ambitious redevelopment programme.

‘Since then I’ve acquired a property a year, which has enabled the school to grow and provide some decant space as well. The problem with this site is that it is very constrained and working here is a bit like solving a Rubik’s cube. You have to shuffle a lot of stuff around just to get the main move established.’

Quality of buildings and environment has become a key issue in higher education today. Another part of Robinson’s role is as deputy chair of the Higher Education Design Quality Forum and he commissioned research to find out what today’s students want.

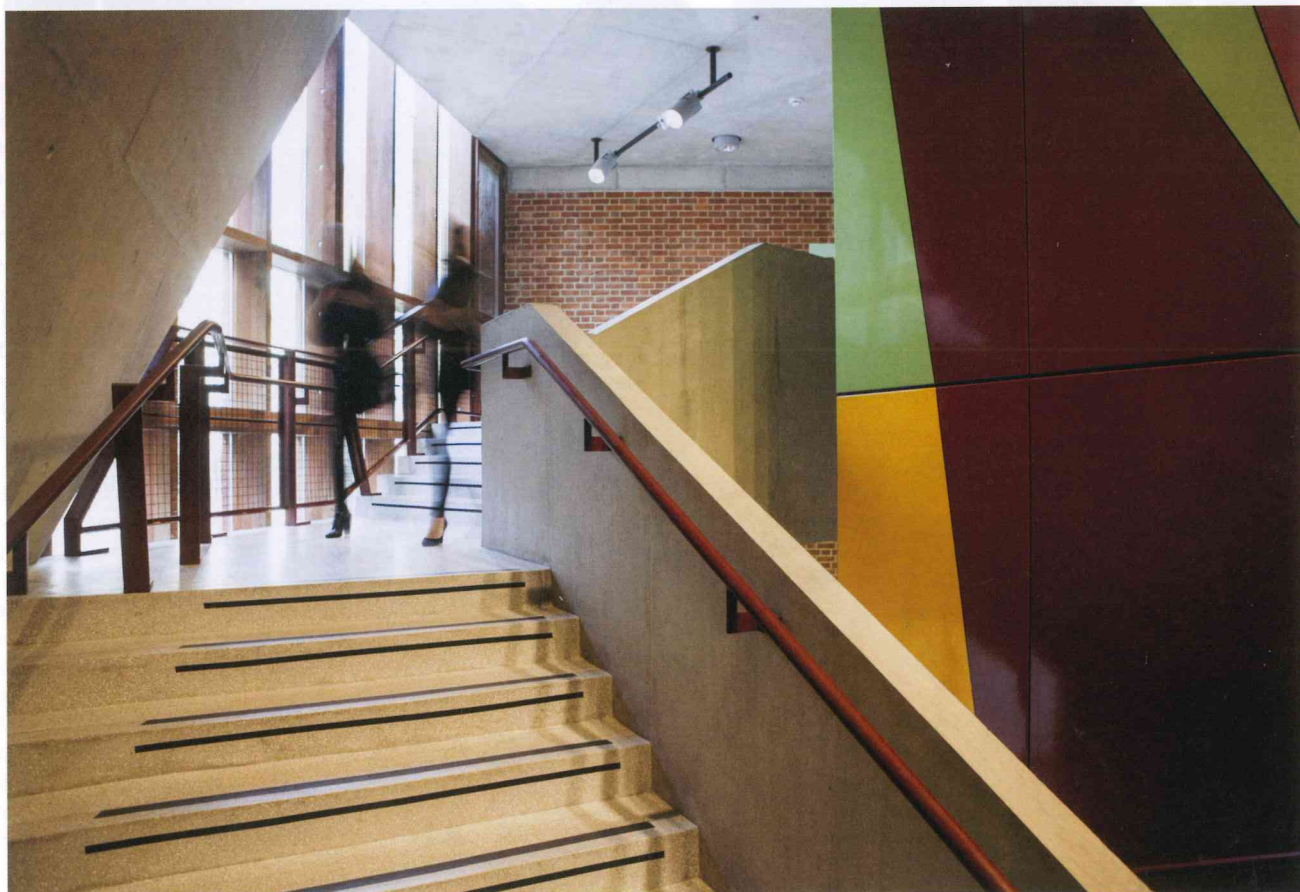
‘We found out that 36 per cent of students actually rejected a university because of the quality of its buildings and estate, which is a staggering percentage. I think universities know this, as there has been an unprecedented investment in the HE estates over the last 10 years. It dipped a bit around 2008/09 but now all my competitors like University College and King’s have massive programmes of expansion. Manchester, Bristol, Newcastle – they are all at it and obviously Oxford and Cambridge never even stopped.’

The new Student Centre is a top quality building with a price tag to match. Every brick of its intricate geometry was drawn up; in spite of its Deconstructivist form, it is a contextual building sitting neatly in

its tight site. Robinson is clearly proud of the angular structure and enjoyed the process of delivering it. ‘Because we were working with a small firm, we were working directly with John and Sheila. If John wasn’t happy about something he would give me a call. Significantly more often than not I would say “You’re right, John, I agree!”, and would have to find some extra money. If I didn’t agree about a design change, he would get rid of it.’

The quality of the finishes and internal details, as well as the exotic form, would suggest that this is not a cheap building.

‘My finance director couldn’t believe that I got him to agree to the costs. We kept a tight rein and a realistic budget is around £3,600 per square



Inside story – the LSE's new O'Donnell + Tuomey-designed student centre

metre. For a university building of that type, that is top quota. When I drew up the brief of the building we said we wanted it to be the best student building in the UK.

'We did some benchmarking and took the Tate Modern extension by Herzog and de Meuron as one of the benchmarks. That's £7,000 per square metre, just to put ours into context. We see ourselves as an international institution, we rank ourselves alongside Harvard and MIT and we are not going to do that on a couple of grand a square metre!'

The proposed social sciences building is much larger than the student centre with a price tag of £100 million plus.

'It's right in the middle of the LSE campus. It involves the demolition

of '30s and '60s buildings and the creation of at least 50 per cent extra floor space. We had an exhibition of the five designs in the competition and the Rogers' scheme was voted the favourite by the staff, students and alumni. We have a lot of work to do before we submit the planning application, which will probably be during the summer. Then, lo and behold, we will be announcing the design competition for the next major building which is the redevelopment of the Cancer Research site, another £100 million-plus project.'

The purchase of the building at 44 Lincoln's Inn Fields is Robinson's biggest ever deal.

'That was a breathtaking battle because we were up against the Candy

brothers. They wanted to use it for high-end residential which clearly generated some very high land values, but we got it! We had to think very long-term. Our standard spec is that we build for 100 years. We are an owner-occupier, I have about 1.6 million square feet of space here at Aldwych and residential stuff all around London.'

Robinson sees the new buildings as an important part of the branding of the school. The ODT building has a very strong visual element.

'We were very conscious of that. Virtually everyone has heard of the LSE, but nobody knows where we are. There is no obvious front door. What we wanted from ODT was a building that gives an outward expression of the LSE. We have said the same to RSH. A building in the centre of our campus really has to express the values of LSE and what we are about. In a few years the very large frontage at 44 Lincoln Inn Fields will be incredibly powerful and important in projecting the image of LSE.'

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In spite of the constraints of Aldwych, Robinson has no plans to seek sites for expansion in outer London, like UCL and Imperial College have done.

'No! We are the London School of Economics! And that's an incredibly powerful element of our brand. You come here and you know you are in London. We are a key stop-off point for world leaders and finance ministers. With great respect they are not going to come out to Ealing or the Greenwich Peninsula. That is why we have spent such a lot of money in buying real estate around here to set down our roots.' NL



Going up in the world