



## ELLIS WOODMAN ON ARCHITECTURE

**S**wingeing cuts to government spending introduced in 2010 made their impact felt this year, with the commissioning of new schools, libraries, sports facilities and arts buildings all but grinding to a halt.

Praise be then for higher education. Uniquely among public sector clients, universities have not only maintained but also escalated their building programmes. Over the next five years, the 24 Russell Group universities alone are planning to spend £9 billion on capital projects, a figure comparable with the cost of the 2012 Olympic Games. And not only is the quantity increasing. As was suggested by the presence on this year's Stirling Prize shortlist of two major university buildings, quality is improving hugely, too.

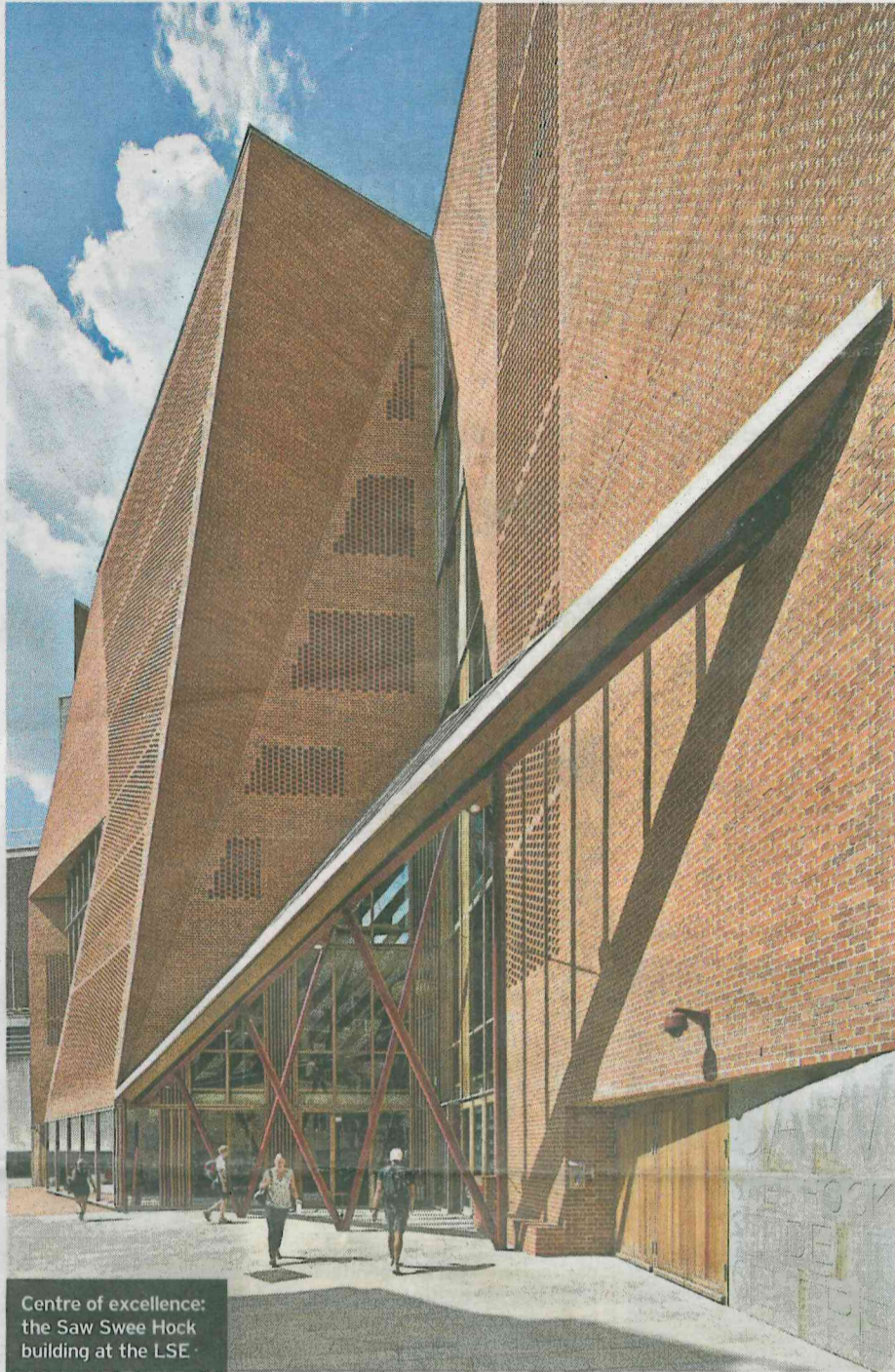
The motivation for this sudden wave of patronage is not complex. Increasingly reliant on income from student fees, Britain's universities are operating in a highly competitive market where, for better or worse, architecture serves as a key brand differentiator. A recent survey by RIBA's Higher Education Design Quality Forum revealed that more than a third of undergraduates had been put off applying to an institution by the quality of its buildings.

In light of the fact that UK students now typically pay an annual fee of £9,000, Britain's universities are beginning to accept that they can no longer afford to operate academic slums. Indeed, those with ambitions to attract the still higher fee-paying foreign students – a market that now accounts for more than one in 10 undergraduates – are realising that their campuses have to match the most attractive in the United States and continental Europe.

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge continue to maintain their long-established cultures of architectural patronage. The former is currently developing a School of Management designed by the Swiss stars Herzog and de Meuron, while Cambridge has embarked on a £1 billion development to the north-west of the city that represents the most ambitious building project of its 800-year history.

However, many UK universities whose campuses are notably lacking in architectural distinction are also raising their game. The University of Durham has enlisted Daniel Libeskind to design its new Physics Centre, while the University of Kingston is developing a particularly ambitious flagship building designed by the Irish practice Grafton.

No recently completed



Centre of excellence: the Saw Swee Hock building at the LSE

VIEW PICTURES / REX

# University challenge

project better exemplifies this cultural shift than the Saw Swee Hock Student Centre, the London School of Economics' first newbuild in 40 years.

When it issued the competition brief for the design, the LSE insisted this was to be the best student centre in the world and the

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winning architects, the Dublin-based O'Donnell and Tuomey, have delivered a project that more than satisfies that ambition.

Rising at the heart of the university's central London campus, it looks more like a geological outcrop than a conventional work of architecture. Faced in brick, its facades rake back sharply

so as not to overshadow the lower buildings across the street. Inside, an extraordinarily diverse set of functions is accommodated over nine compact storeys ranging from a nightclub to a multi-faith prayer space, a radio station and a gym.

**L**inked by a gregariously meandering staircase, they combine to give the building the character of a city in miniature. The LSE is following up this bold piece of commissioning with a £90 million social sciences centre designed by Richard Rogers's practice and plans to launch another competition for a building of equivalent scale in the new year.

The student centre was joined on this year's Stirling Prize shortlist by Feilden Clegg Bradley's expansion of Manchester School of Art, while the new building for Glasgow School of Art, designed by the American architect Steven Holl, looks

certain to secure a place on next year's list. Its completion this summer was overclouded, all too literally, by the fire that consumed the art school's principal building a couple of months later. As the sorrow felt throughout Glasgow at that disaster made clear, higher education buildings have the capacity to embody the identity of not just universities but whole cities.

Indeed, at a time when universities face considerable pressure to find alternative funding streams, there is an increasing trend to design new buildings with the aim of meeting the needs of the wider community, doubling up as venues for conferences, weddings and a range of educational outreach programmes.

It has taken an economic crisis to awaken Britain's universities to the value of investing in architecture and bring a welcome change not just for students but for the rest of us, too.

## BEST OF 2014

- 1 DRDH in Bode**  
Two of the best buildings by British architects were a library and concert hall 60 miles north of the Arctic Circle.
- 2 Haworth Tompkins' theatres**  
The Stirling Prize-winning Everyman and expansion of Denys Lasdun's Royal National Theatre were triumphs.
- 3 One Pancras Square**  
This diminutive office block designed by David Chipperfield is the standout among the redevelopment behind King's Cross Station in London.
- 4 Maggie's Lanarkshire**  
Now in its 18th year, the charity Maggie's continues to work towards realising a cancer care centre to support every oncology department in the country. Its latest building by Edinburgh's Reich and Hall is among the strongest yet.
- 5 Tony Fretton in Pewsey**  
In the Wiltshire village, Fretton's six new houses present an exciting alternative to the suburban character of much new rural development.

## WORST OF 2014

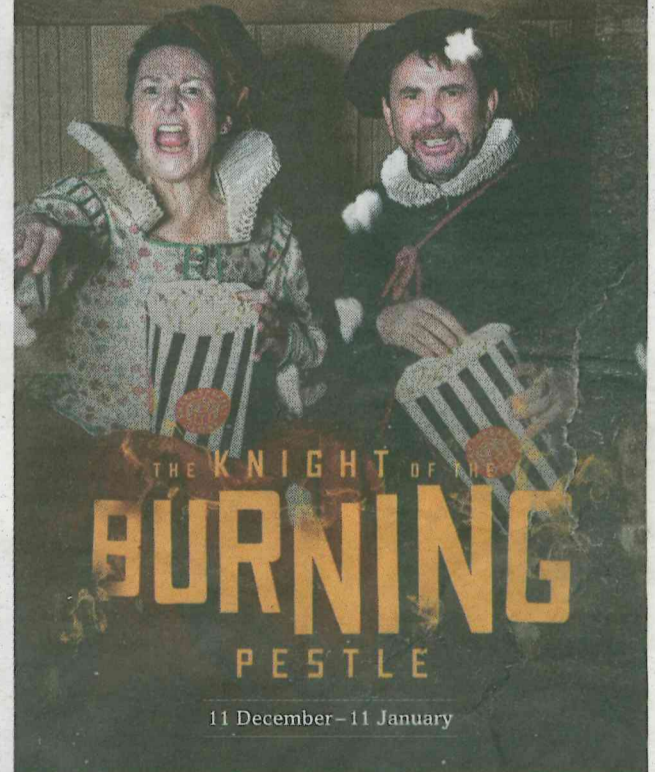
- 1 Glasgow School of Art fire**  
Charles Rennie Mackintosh's 1909 masterpiece was spared complete destruction, but the damage was still extensive.
- 2 Walkie-Talkie**  
The City of London skyscraper's unfortunate habit of melting cars has now been remedied, but there are still plenty of reasons to object to this overbearing monstrosity.
- 3 Garden Bridge**  
The budget of Thomas Heatherwick's planned Thames crossing rose to an eye-watering £175million. In addition £3.5million will be needed each year to cover running costs.
- 4 Library Walk closure**  
One of Manchester's most characterful public spaces has been blocked off.
- 5 Mayoral rubber stamp**  
In his eagerness to encourage building in London, Boris Johnson has taken to overruling local authorities' objections to some particularly awful developments.



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