



Kinsella's way

The LSE's director of capital developments, Ken Kinsella, is poised to make his mark with a new student centre

Words Ruth Slavid Portrait Ed Tyler

Left Ken Kinsella, pictured inside the LSE's Grimshaw designed teaching building.
Right O'Donnell & Tuomey's student centre which recently won planning permission.



The London School of Economics is a paradox as an institution. A highly respected university, it is known around the world yet has remarkably little physical presence. Although it is slap in the centre of London, it is tucked away behind Kingsway, the Aldwych and the Strand, mostly in old buildings originally intended for other uses. Slowly, this is changing, and the man tasked with responsibility for the changes is the LSE director of capital developments, Ken Kinsella.

Appointed in October 2007, Kinsella's first role was completion of the teaching building designed by Nicholas Grimshaw & Partners on the corner of Lincoln's Inn Fields. Housed within the carapace of an existing building, this cleverly carves out lecture theatres, offices and informal spaces and creates a building that is far from the down at heel aesthetic all too common in academic institutions.

Now he is working on the new student centre, designed by Irish practice O'Donnell & Tuomey, due to open in March 2013. Costing "£37 million gross", this will house everything from a nightclub to a prayer room, as well as a gym and offices for the student's union.

On the Grimshaw building, the university organised its own competition but, Kinsella says: "we learnt from that and went to the Riba". The result was tremendous, with 135 responses whittled down first to 20 and then to a shortlist of six: O'Donnell & Tuomey, 3XN from Denmark, De Rijke Marsh Morgan, David Chipperfield Architects, Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios and Allford Hall Monaghan Morris.

Kinsella was concerned that the list should not just be of signature architects, but a mix of international practices, superstars and the up and coming. All of the last six produced great solutions but he says O'Donnell & Tuomey's was "head and shoulders above the rest in the way it addressed the site. John [Tuomey] is a bit of a poet, in the way he described the analysis he did with his team."

This is the third university at which Kinsella has worked and his views about process are as strong as his feeling for design. For 11 years he was at Queen Mary, University of London, under Julian Robinson who, as director of estates, is now his boss at LSE. Projects delivered there included Alsop Architects' Blizzard building, Surface Architects' Lock-Keeper's Cottages, and the Westfield Student Village by Feilden Clegg Bradley. Three years at the University of East London followed, which was not long enough to see projects all the way through.

So LSE is Kinsella's chance to make his mark. One of the difficulties in such a complex institution is determining the exact needs of the users. For the student centre, Kinsella tackled this with a "sacrificial brief", commissioning Design Engine to produce a rough layout that the university then tore apart. The result was a very detailed brief. This, coupled with a design workshop part way through the final stage of the competition process, resulted in a winning design that has stayed essentially the same.

Construction will be through a two-stage design and build contract, with the architect

novated to the contractor but also retaining a specified relationship with the client. This is the nearest Kinsella can get to a traditional contract "which I would love if we had enough money and enough time".

At the same time as this major project, he has been concentrating on a wayfinding strategy, with signage by FWD Design, and on improvements to the public realm. He is also planning navigation points and "gateways" to the university, to give it a stronger identity.

Unlike many universities, LSE would like to develop more of its own student residences but, says Kinsella: "We haven't been able to find a site. We have bid on 30 or 40."

There are other buildings in the pipeline. LSE has bought the grade II listed former Land Registry office on Lincoln's Inn Fields and plans to refurbish it as academic offices and teaching space. Selection of an architect from an invited list is imminent. And the 1960s buildings occupied by the current student centre will be released for redevelopment once the new building is complete.

Government spending cuts are a concern but, says Kinsella: "There will be no knee-jerk reaction in terms of capital development. We are paring back but not stopping. Our overall strategic requirement is to improve the quality of the estate."

Student numbers at LSE are capped at around 9,000, with nine applications for every place. The university wants to keep it that way, and Kinsella evidently has a role to play in helping.